

1

A quarter million tons of concrete, steel and glass. Standing in sharp relief against the clouds, rude and obtrusive, its geometric regularity was impossibly perfect. Sixty stories and a blatant disregard for nature. Skyscrapers this tall are constructed not out of necessity, but rather to demonstrate our mastery over the environment. Look at what we humans can build.

“He seems pretty busy to me.”

“We have to wait for confirmation.”

Rico sat on the fourth-floor terrace. Over the edge he could see a man in his fifties through the glass walls of a coffee shop on the floor below. Laptop open, latte untouched. The man was deep in concentration. Most of the time Rico’s view was obstructed by the dense flow of shoppers. They were undeterred by the overcast sky, which seemed to loom close to the ground. The invisible sun fell behind the buildings as day transitioned to brighter day. Lights pointing in every direction marked the onset of evening in Shinagawa.

A voice issued through Rico’s earpiece.

“Permission to move in.”

“Denied. Don’t blow it. Keep your distance. Can you read his screen from your end?”

“Can’t make anything out from here.”

“Well, if that machine’s the match, he doesn’t appear to realize we have its address.”

“How long does it take them to track down one machine?”

“Be patient.”

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Raymond Zheng continued typing away. Rico and Katie had been tailing him around Tokyo for three days now, and Zheng had invariably stayed in heavily populated areas whenever he ventured into public. His hotel was in a noisy neighborhood as well. Rico had begun to suspect that he was aware of their presence.

Katie stood on another balcony on the opposite side of the fourth floor, a straight shot from Rico. She looked down to catch a glimpse of Zheng's back. Rico checked his phone.

"Confirmed. That's the machine."

"Finally. Permission to engage." Katie was particularly eager today.

"Denied. I'll go first, slowly. Sit back and don't make a scene."

Katie watched Zheng shut his laptop and stuff it into his backpack. "He's leaving!"

Rico was already on the escalator. He didn't rush. Zheng was one hundred feet ahead now. Rico maintained that distance as they walked inside, navigating through a sea of faces.

"Katie, I think he's headed for the station. Enter the mall and hurry west, but stay on the fourth floor."

"Sure thing."

Every flat surface was covered with an advertisement. Brand names on the walls and floors. Shoes, suits, electronics, perfume. Rivers of consumers spilled through hallways, converging and diverging. The disembodied echoes of conversation, the clicks of thousands of high heels.

"We're about to pass the Kinokuniya."

"I'm just ahead of you."

Zheng was quick but unhurried. He had positioned himself in front of a large group. The crowd morphed in front of Rico like a veil, and for a moment his line of sight was interrupted.

In the next moment, Zheng was running.

"He knows. Catch him at the spiral."

"Got it."

Rico weaved through the crowd. He caught sight of Zheng once again, who was sprinting at a breakneck pace. Rico had guessed

correctly—the chase led to a large space in the center of the mall where a spiral escalator of an impressive radius ran from the tenth floor down to the basement.

Zheng raced down the escalator, knocking into shoppers in his path. Rico remained on the third floor. He spotted Katie descending from the floor above, skipping steps and sliding past clusters of people. She was fast, but Zheng was simply too far ahead. The distance between them steadily grew.

Rico looked to the other side of the spiral cavity and judged the height between floors. About seventeen feet? Maybe sixteen? The basement was three stories below, or about fifty feet. Thirty-two feet per second, each second. A little under two seconds. Zheng would soon pass the first floor, and Katie was struggling to keep up. Rico climbed onto the railing and stood upright, the balls of his feet precariously supporting his weight.

He jumped. Half a second elapsed, forty-six feet remaining. Screams of shock sounded from the third floor. One second elapsed, another thirty-four feet. His velocity picked up. One and a half seconds elapsed, fourteen feet remaining. He bent his knees slightly to brace for impact. One and eight-tenths seconds elapsed.

A crunch. Not from his legs, but from the floor. The titanium rods in his ankles reverberated only a bit, though the silicon substrate cracked in several places. A few muscle filaments tore, but he was still functional. Rico straightened his knees. The impact left indents in the floor, the ceramic tiles chipped and fissured. He drew his handgun from a concealed holster and aimed it at Zheng, who had nearly reached the end of the escalator. Zheng turned around only to face Katie and her pistol a few steps above. He was cornered.

Zheng's confusion turned to desperation. In an instant, he pulled out a gun and raised it to his own head.

Three days of constant surveillance were about to go to waste. Katie was new. She wasn't unskilled, but it would take her a few years to develop the kind of decisiveness that comes only from time spent in the field. Rico was young as well, but there was a world of

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difference in his additional two years. He had often found himself in unusually demanding situations. Bad luck had made him stronger.

With no time to think, Rico reacted. He fired.

Zheng dropped his gun with a thud and clutched his wrist where the bullet had lodged itself. He writhed in pain.

Three hours later, Rico and Katie boarded a USAF plane at Haneda Airport and departed for Washington Dulles. Now in custody, Zheng underwent treatment for his wound as the TMPD hurried to process his extradition to the United States.

2

“Why are you still here?”

It was sunset. Faint echoes of barking dogs rang through the air. This town was in ruins. Charred remnants of buildings, no sign of any human life. Small wheeled robots rolled down the deserted streets, stopping by the occasional corpse to retrieve any useful belongings and gather skin and blood samples. Each robot extended and retracted its delicate metal arms, slowly adding to its collection as it continued along its route. Straight ahead, some twenty miles out, the half-destroyed skyscrapers of downtown Kiev stood like fossilized skeletons of long-extinct animals. Their dark, towering figures contrasted sharply against the red sky. Trieste imagined they were the thin fingers of a dying hand trying to reach something above.

“An evacuation order was issued two days ago. This is no place for civilians. So let me ask you again—why are you still here?”

The sound of a connecting punch came from the other room. Trieste’s orders were to stand guard by the open window. She scanned the nearby buildings in a mechanical but diligent fashion. The barrel of her fully automatic pointed out toward the street, her finger resting on the trigger. She felt exceptionally comfortable, losing herself in something like a meditative trance.

There were six of them, including Trieste. Another DIA officer also on the third floor stood behind a window along the opposite side of the building. The voice coming from the other room belonged to the squad leader, who was busy interrogating an unarmed Moldovan man in his fifties. The remaining three scoured the building for weapons and communication devices.

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Another punch. Trieste heard the civilian drop hard onto the floor. As far as she was concerned, the sounds from the other room might as well have been coming from a television. Trieste continued scanning the street with unwavering attention.

“I’m not hiding anything! This is my home, that’s why I’m here!”

“This is a war zone!” The squad leader lifted the man by his graying hair.

“I know that! I can see that!”

“Then you must have some business here. Are you working with the Chinese?”

“Why would I help them? They’re as friendly as you are.”

“Do you hold hostile intent against the United States?”

“I don’t hold anything. You soldiers took everything I had.”

“Answer the fucking question. Do you or do you not hold hostile intent against the United States?”

Their voices carried into the street. A few moments passed. Trieste saw the outline of a dark figure holding a rifle appear from an alley and sprint into the street about two hundred feet ahead. Hostile intent. Her response was immediate. With almost inhuman precision, she delivered a bullet to the target’s head and watched the outline cease movement.

“You okay over there?” asked Castor, the officer positioned by the other window.

“Just fine.” Trieste continued scanning the street.

She had spent the last three months here. Trieste had it better than most. Fortunately, she spent most nights on base in the city, and so far had only suffered a few all-night recon missions camped out in decrepit buildings. Those missions never led anywhere. No matter how noisy the intel was, the higher-ups always sent a team to investigate. Busy work.

During the day, she often got sent out alone. The ruins of the suburbs depressed her at first, as it would anyone, but soon she looked forward to these solitary excursions. There was a perverse beauty in the dilapidated landscape, the sprawling mess of abandoned

homes and shops, the haunting atmosphere. As she traveled through alleys, tunnels, or empty malls, sometimes her mind would wander, and in these moments she let her guard down and actually felt something, a peculiar emotion. She didn't know how to articulate it. Charm wasn't the right word, but something like nostalgia for memories she didn't have. She felt a quiet reverence for the vast expanse of brick, plaster, cement, for the toppled apartment buildings, for the bullet-strewn storefronts, for the broken glass that littered the streets, for the unspeakably deep isolation she felt when walking through sunken courtyards overgrown with weeds, the sunlight filtering through the trees onto broken statues.

The other three officers searching the building returned to the room where the squad leader stood. They saw him next to the collapsed Moldovan, who gripped his belly where he had been punched.

"There's nothing. We've gone through the whole place, ripped up all the drywall, everything."

"You're sure?"

"We're sure."

Silent, the squad leader glared at the civilian.

"I told you there's nothing."

"Shut up. You're illegally occupying this building. Either you're aiding the enemy, or you've got a death wish. It's hard to believe you're simply living here all alone."

"I'm alone because of you. Your firebombing killed the last of what little family I had. There's nowhere for me to go."

The squad leader narrowed his eyes coldly. "Trieste! Castor! We're leaving."

Trieste took one more look at the skyscraper skeletons protruding from the horizon. The sky was a deep maroon. It was getting dark.

The squad leader turned to the Moldovan before leaving the room. "Then this place will be your grave."

The six officers descended from the third floor and left the building. The man lay motionless on the floor, still clutching his belly,

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staring at the dirty floor with lifeless eyes. A large crow appeared and perched on the windowsill where Trieste had been earlier. It cocked an eye at the man, examined him for a few moments, and let out a series of loud caws. It was an unsettling sound, almost threatening. Met with no response, the crow took flight again and vanished.

3

Fluorescent light and white tile floors, long rows of cluttered desks, bursts of hurried conversation, rolling chairs, ringing phones. Soft taps of fingertips against organic screens, the sounds of shuffling papers, the clicks of heels and dress shoes. The two of them paced down a narrow aisle through the enormous room. They passed officer after officer, each dressed in black business attire, each adorned with excessive regalia, each holding their head high and back straight with an air of contrived professionalism. Rico and Katie were no exception.

Reaching a dark hallway at the far end of the room, they opened a door with the digital letters ERIC VENEVSKY glowing across its window.

“Quite the showoff, aren’t you?”

Feebly leaning against his desk, a sickly man faced the room’s large, glossy window. Outside, a mess of cars and pedestrians covered the street. He stared at the traffic as he reached into his collar to scratch the dry skin of his neck.

“Sorry. We were chasing him for a moment, and he led us into very crowded surroundings. I think what I did put a swift end to the task,” offered Rico. He stood motionless with perfect posture, his arms neutral at his sides. Katie stuffed her hands in her pockets and seemed more captivated by the scuffs on her shoes than by the conversation.

“You know the Japanese public has mixed feelings about prosthetics, not to mention the spectacle you made by blasting that bullet into his hand.”

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“That was necessary. He held up his—”

“Relax. I’m teasing.”

The Chief turned away from the window to face them. He pulled his leather chair close and sat down. Bags lay under his eyes and gray strands were scattered throughout his thinning hair. He let out a weak smile.

“You both did a great job. Rico, you’re one of the few here who can react so quickly and decisively.”

Rico continued to stand still, impassive. He was reluctant to accept praise, or at least wanted to appear so.

“I apologize for any rash behavior. I hope it hasn’t caused you any —”

“Stop, stop. You’re fine. You know I trust your judgment. I’m just preoccupied by other things. You know how it is. Twenty years later and the office politics never end.” He looked at Rico intently. “This place is filled with careerists. To be fair, I guess I used to be one, too. So many in middle management spend more time overinflating the importance of their work than actually doing important work. And who suffers? People like me, people who are done vying for stupid titles and decorations.”

“I’m glad to be shielded from that drama by you, sir.”

Venevsky raised an eyebrow at him. “I never imagined I’d spend so much time fighting the rest of the agency. All I ever wanted to do was analysis. You’d be appalled at how many hours I spend each week in budget meetings.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Chief. You’ve assembled a great team of analysts here.”

Katie looked over at Rico questioningly as their boss continued.

“*Chief* is a bullshit role, as you’re both aware. It’s not called *DCS Director* for a reason. I’m given full responsibility for your performance, but no control over funding, and more often than not the agency director steps over me and directly assigns tasks to my operatives. That happened to Katie once.”

Katie broke her silence. “It was confusing, sir, to say the least.”