

Since the previous day, a sharp northwesterly wind had been blowing down from the hills, cutting through the stale stench of the decaying city and enriching it with a spicier scent—something like fields, or forest, or wet topsoil. For weeks, an inversion layer had sat over the city like a greasy glass lid, and today there was a collective exhale. People lifted their noses a little higher, as if those few millimeters and a slightly different air made the difference between misery and “well, not so bad after all.” At least during the day, the usual hectic hostility had eased. The habitual jostling on the sidewalks flowed more smoothly, almost like a kind of modern expressive dance—performed by amateurs, full of goodwill, yet clumsy, superficial, and, well... awkward. The usual near-collisions sparked less aggression than they had the day before.

Half a century ago, Sam thought, this place must have been unbearable—trapped in the stench that once drifted down from those same hills that now delivered fresh air. Back then, flies, maggots, and beetles had reduced the remnants of human fears and hopes into more manageable biological units. With the help of oxygen, bacteria and fungi transformed the leftovers of failed political speculation into useful enzymes, breaking down complex molecules into water, carbon dioxide, phosphates, and urea until everything was fully oxidized. Biogenic amines, carried by the ever-present wind, had reminded what remained of civilization down here what decay smelled like—and that nothing, absolutely nothing, lasts forever. Not that the city had ever smelled much better before. The consequences of those policies had been widespread. And yet now, a few stray aromatic molecules were enough to stimulate dopamine, or serotonin, or endorphin transport—or whatever it was that traveled from nose to brain. Two things fascinated Sam: how a tiny amount of matter could produce effects across vast distances, and how easily people altered their behavior in response to supposedly external stimuli.

Deep in the darkness of an alley, she crouched on a piece of corrugated cardboard, leaning against a stack of empty beer crates that cluttered the back entrance of a small restaurant. Her internal clock read just past half past midnight, and she expected no more activity—neither from the staff nor from suppliers. And since the alley ended at a high brick wall, there was little risk of unexpected visitors from the street. Unless, perhaps, some late drunk needed to relieve himself and, out of a shred of decency, chose not to use the nearest corner. Decency, at this place and hour, was not something Sam expected.

All in all, it was a fine spot. She had an unobstructed view of the meeting point, while she herself remained almost invisible, outside the cones of light cast by the streetlamps on the square. She had even unscrewed the naked bulb above the pub door and set it on the trash bin, making the darkness nearly perfect. She loved the dark; city life, on the other hand, was far from her preferred environment. She had developed various theories as to why people, contrary to popular belief, did not love the dark but feared it—like the danger lurking in the nocturnal jungle, or the association of light with crowding together as compensation for the loss of familial security. The same applied to silence, which these people could not bear and felt compelled to fill with noise. Silence forced confrontation with oneself—with unspoken problems, conflicts, and the deep vaults of the mind to which one had lost, or believed one had lost, the key—only to suddenly find it again.

Such thoughts occupied Sam as she bridged the time from one event to the next. Not that she grew bored or tired—those states had been trained out of her. Her conditioning as a perspective agent focused heavily on self-reflection, on understanding and strengthening her inner capabilities. Almost Zen-like. It included refining situational analysis, mastering self-

control, and cultivating the patience to wait for the right moment to act—essential components of psychological resilience in a hostile environment. Physical capability had been ensured long before, through DNA selection, controlled embryonic development in a highly advanced artificial environment, and postnatal enhancement with cutting-edge cellular technologies. But battles were won in the mind, not the legs—that had been a core mantra of her training.

Even while thinking, Sam never took her eyes off the meeting point. As on the previous three nights, she had remained here until nearly dawn. The odds of another wasted night were roughly one in four. But what else was there to do besides sleep? The use of the dead drop by someone else signaled either escalation or imminent change. If someone knew its location, there were two possibilities: either she had been observed setting it up and the enemy was laying a trap, or—more optimistically—someone else on her side was operating in the area. The latter seemed likely to her. Someone like Akiro—her intellectual twin—might be out there. Whatever the case, she would minimize risk. She would not simply stand in the doorway across the square as suggested. She would wait and watch.

Her escape plan was simple. The brick wall—three and a half to four meters high—was no obstacle for her. Beyond it lay a patchwork of small garden plots leading to the river. From there, improvisation. Ordinary soldiers or police would turn the climb into slapstick. Unfortunately, she would not be there to enjoy it. There was a real chance the opposition might deploy specialized units. That would complicate things—but not excessively. Even in close combat, she would outmatch them. Gunfire was unlikely; she was more valuable alive. A confrontation would raise unwanted questions higher up the chain—questions that might trigger stricter controls, even among the homeless population she had infiltrated.

Special units did not operate without preparation. They followed checklists—A and B analyzed entry points, C through E examined escape routes, F and G planned the strike. Hours of groundwork for minutes of action. But Sam had surveyed the area thoroughly. Any large-scale operation would have left traces. If there was a trap, it was amateur.

Then the car appeared. Dark. Expensive. Moving at walking speed across the square. Unusual enough to note. The police could not afford such a vehicle, and it lacked the typical antenna arrays of plainclothes units. Either a drunk driver—or someone with a plan. It disappeared into a side street, returned, crossed her field of vision again, then stopped somewhere out of sight. She heard the soft click of a door—high-end engineering. Not a slam, but a muted, precise closure. Old luxury. Rare. Reserved for the very top.

A figure crossed the square. Not running. Not sneaking. Purposeful. Upright. A commander, not a subordinate. Long cloak. Hooded. No uniform. No rags. Something... stylized. A ghost? A monk? Unlikely—but not impossible. The figure passed the meeting point and disappeared. Sam did not move.

Moments later, the figure returned, paused, bent as if searching. Sam flicked her small flashlight once—brief, controlled. Then she slipped deeper into the shadows.

The figure approached without hesitation. As it entered the last pool of light, Sam saw the patterned cloak—geometric, almost artistic. The hood concealed the face, but there was a mask beneath. Unusual, but not unheard of among higher ranks shielding themselves from the city's stench.

“Sam?” the figure said, removing the mask. “Good disguise. Still—I found you.”

Sam didn’t move. “Wrong. I found you.”

The game had begun.