

Zen was on the roof, deep in his colorful hammock, with a travel mug of limeade in a hanging drink holder he'd rigged up, writing on a lap desk under a dramatic cloudy sky. He'd already done some serious writing that morning: an article interpreting the latest fad vampire novels as a sort of capitalist manifesto; a book review of a recent literary novel, *The Pendulum's Dilemma*; a third revision of his short story about a man who forgets how to read; and a few recipes for a cookbook he was starting to assemble. His three query letters for the day sat on the rooftop under a brick, ready to be mailed.

Now he climbed out, ruffled his pale blond hair in an absentminded way, and started pacing the roof, mumbling to himself, trying to figure out a concept that had been yanking at his innards for weeks now. He clattered down the fire escape and wandered out to go see Summer and Sushi.

A few burly guys in black t-shirts were moving books and boxes and cushions out of the building, leaving them in a big pile on the sidewalk. Zen waved vaguely as he drifted by.

"What's going on?"

"Guys in 3A got evicted."

"Oh, interesting, interesting. Say hi to them for me."

Three blocks down the street, he rang the doorbell for Sushi and Summer's apartment. Sushi slammed the door open.

"What?"

"Hey, you have any of that good pondering tea left? Put some on. There's ponderings afoot."

"Not now, Zen." She was already back at her easel, painting furiously.

"Cool, cool." He trundled into the kitchen, preoccupied with his thinking, and started making the tea.

From the next room Sushi yelled at him. "Go home!"

"Sure. Here's the thing. Why do we have jobs? Anyone, I mean? We complain about them so much. What do they even do?"

"Damned if I know. I say we just torch the place and go home."

"You ask anyone why they work if they hate their job so much, and they'll say they need the money, right?"

Sushi kept painting like she was hoping Zen would disappear if she ignored him. Zen continued.

"But all you get for the money is stuff. What if you could get the stuff without the money?"

"That's burglary. Hard jail time."

“No, if you just had fun making whatever you like making, and you traded it with people who wanted it.”

“That’s a medieval peasant system of barter. Plague. And overlords.”

“What about living together with the other people and working together to make the stuff, everybody does the part they want?”

“Hippie commune. Funny-smelling deadbeats. And possibly plague again.”

“Ooh, and sitars! I love sitars!” Zen strummed a huge air-sitar. “Brauuunmm.” He flopped onto the ground, cross-legged, and took a thoughtful sip of his tea. “What if we made it deadbeat-free?”

“Pfff. With hippies? Good luck.”

“Not with hippies. With us. We figure out crazy brilliant ways to have fun and make stuff we need, or money, or whatever. We could pull it off. Look, what are we all busting our butts at work for? Retirement? Why not just have the fun now?”

“Hmph.” Zen could tell Sushi was growing interested despite herself. “What kind of fun?”

“All the stuff nobody does because they have to be back at work by Monday, or they’re too tired from all the meetings and paperworks, or too nervous because they’d get fired.”

“Or because their unprintable bosses are soul-sucking bastards who can’t recognize real talent with two hands and a flashlight, especially when those hands are busy ogling—” She whacked paint at the canvas. “—blond—” Whack! “—wench—” Whack! “—interns!”

Zen was slightly taken aback. “Yeah. Or that.”

“OK.” Sushi stepped back, suddenly calmer. “Let’s do it.”

“What?”

“Do it. Make a commune. That’s the thing, right? Everybody’s always talking about how awesome it would be to do something awesome. Do it. I’m in. Let’s go.”

“Huh.” Zen took a long sip of tea, pondering this. “We’d have to get the others in on it.”

“Summer’s in. She’s always trying to do this kind of thing.”

“Dude! We should get Otto, too. He could be our official technomage!”

“What about Alex?” asked Sushi.

“Harder. He’s all responsible. We’d have to find something that would really shake up—Wait a minute.”

“What?”

Zen grinned and finished his tea in a great gulp.

“3A is us. Brilliant!” He turned to Sushi. “By the way, would you mind helping me move some things? I think it’s starting to rain.”

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Alex leaned against the wall, despite his better judgment. Steve walked into the back room.

“Professional bearing, Alex,” Steve reminded him.

“Sorry.” Alex straightened up and tried to look somehow busier.

“Have to set a good example for the underlings,” laughed Steve in a corporate attempt at camaraderie.

Summer exploded into the back room, a tangle of backpack and visor and blushing apologies. Steve eloquently raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll—” Summer hesitated, stowed her backpack under the coat hooks. “Go wipe the tables? Sorry to interrupt.”

She brushed past them to go out behind the counter. Steve spoke up.

“Time card?”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Summer turned back to punch in, avoiding his eye. She flashed a pleading glance at Alex as she went back out. He returned it, sympathetic but pained. *What can I do?*

“She may have to go,” observed Steve once Summer was out of earshot.

“Nah, she’s all right most of the time.”

“Seriously? I mean, did you see her there?”

Steve laughed, and the disrespect in his tone annoyed Alex.

“What? Late? That happens to all of us sometimes. No big deal.”

“Not you. See, what I like about you is that you really understand what it takes to run a successful business.” Steve’s attempt at flattery was jarring, too transparent.

“I guess. But Summer’s a good worker. She cares about people.”

“Right.”

“I’m serious. She’s made friends with practically every customer who comes in during her shifts. She generates incredible brand loyalty.”

Putting it in those terms made Alex feel a little dirty, as if the real point of good relationships was to generate business and not the other way around. But he had to use whatever was most likely to get through to Steve. One glance at his boss’s sympathetic grimace showed him it hadn’t worked, though.

“Look, I know she’s your friend, Alex, but she’s got to go.”

“No, it’s cool, man. I’ll work with her. You know, give her a warning, make sure she straightens up. I’ve handled this sort of thing before.”

“We’ve tried that already. She’s just not working out.”

“Steve, I can—”

“Sorry, Alex. If you’re going to advance here, you need to show me you can put the store first. I’m telling you, as your boss. You need to fire Summer.”

“Really? Just like that?”

“She had her chance.”

Alex felt himself getting angry.

“Don’t give me that, Steve. You can test me all you want, but don’t bring a perfectly good worker’s job into this.”

Steve sighed.

“I’ve already made my assessment of her. She is going to lose her job, Alex. The only real question here is how much you care about yours.”

“I see.”

“It’s not so bad after you get used to it. Firing people is just one of the necessities of the job. You’ll understand once you’ve been in higher management for a while.”

“How did you get into this line of work, Steve? Is it what you planned for in college?”

Steve laughed.

“No, I studied to be an architect, if you can believe it. Guess I was just in the right place at the right time. Corporate kept moving me up in the ranks, salary, benefits, the whole thing, and I certainly wasn’t going to turn down a living like that. Pretty much the same as you, really.”

“Wrong,” said Alex. Steve glanced up, uncomprehending.

“What?”

“You’re wrong. I’m giving my two weeks’ notice.”

“Over Summer? Alex, she’s already gone.”

Alex shrugged. Steve smiled his broad, ingratiating smile.

“OK, you know what? Don’t even worry about her. I’ll take care of that myself.”

“No, Steve. Sorry. I’m going to head out. Mandy’s got this shift under control.”

Alex hung up his apron and found Summer wiping tables furiously.

“They’re going to fire you,” he said. “Just thought you should know.”

Summer looked up sharply.

“What?”

“Sorry.” He held her eye for a long moment, then smiled sadly.