

Hot Town

by Matthew Bennardo

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Because he was born on the first day of summer and because his mother happened to like the name Jack, she called him Summerjack. The Census Bureau would later record that eighteen thousand boys named Summerjack had been born on that day, but she only ever knew the one, her son.

He was an only child, a rare but not entirely unknown occurrence. More frequently, children were born in litters of three or four, and sometimes even more. Summerjack, however, had neither brothers nor sisters and so when his mother died the next day, he was left all alone in the wide-open country and nothing was there to guide him except his instinct and genetic memory. Giving himself over to them, he felt an odd but overwhelming urge; following this urge cautiously he began, on that second day of summer, to eat his mother. One week later, he licked his fingers clean and, whistling, set off to Town. As he walked, he accessed random portions of his mother's brain, reading the interesting parts and learning bits and pieces of what the world around him was like. He had, it seemed, another whole day of birth leave, but he was bored and so he decided to report early. Summerjack was a good citizen. And, besides, he wanted to make sure he got a good job.

Approaching Town, the first things that Summerjack saw were the airships, floating silvery in the sky and reflecting blinding sunlight in hypnotizing patterns. They hung over Town, moored by taut steel cables bolted into the ground. Searching his mother's brain, he knew that on the airships lived the captains, the friendly benefactors who made life in Town bearable for all citizens. Summerjack tried to learn a little more about the captains, but every time he even thought the word, it was immediately followed by the same mental phrase: "...the friendly benefactors who made life in Town bearable for all citizens." Summerjack decided that it wasn't worth the trouble to learn about them—especially since he didn't think he'd ever meet one—if it was going to be that much work.

Walking through the gates of Town, he dumped his mother's brain from his mental buffer and let himself experience the carnival of sensory immersion that spun around him. Summer was in full swing everywhere, refuse slowly crawling through the gutters, citizens crowding the white cobblestone pavements, sunlight bathing everything in immaculate whiteness. Head counters strode high above the rest of the population, picking through the crowds on stilts like herons in a pond. Hawkers waved their wares about on long poles draped in brightly colored paper streams, trying to attract the attention of as many people as possible. Merchants lucky enough to own shops had opened up their walls to let the air, which grew hotter every day, circulate through. On the rooftops, city employees with surveying equipment were planning out the courses for the summer breezes; others were refinishing some of the more worn surfaces with generous spreads of white plaster. Shaded restaurants sheltered those rich enough for leisure under canopies, hiding them in darkness as the world streamed around them in the brightness of day. Musicians on sunlit corners plucked or spun or whirled strange instruments that made alien, insectile music. Large beasts shouldered through the streets, carrying citizens on their backs or pulling rough carts behind them. Their huge, ugly faces showed what seemed to be a mixture of boredom and disgust for the tiny, fragile passengers they bore. No one seemed to guide the creatures; it was impossible to tell how long they had been shrugging along those same routes with the

same burden and what exactly they received from their work.

As Summerjack passed by one of the carts, he saw riding in it his cousin Rosean'clover, bloated with pregnancy, leaving Town to give birth and die. Recognizing Summerjack, she smiled, waved, and was gone. They had never seen one another before and never would again, but their ability to pick each other out of the crowd was immediate.

Moving into the throng of brightly dressed people—contrasted pleasantly by the clean whiteness of the buildings and roads—Summerjack began to wander towards the recruiting station, where he would be given a job. His spirits soared as he watched the people around him: they all seemed so festive and happy and looked as though they all knew exactly where they belonged. Laughter filtered through the air and the whole town felt like it was on the verge of dancing. Close by Summerjack's right arm, a cook blew fire out of her mouth onto a long stick of thick red meat. Doused in wine, the meat caught fire and she spun the stick quickly, cooking it, as she sang a wordless halting melody.

Farther along the road, Summerjack looked up in wonder as a man ran lightly along a rooftop and then leapt off the side into the great chasm of the street. As the man fell, a pair of thin lines, as slim as fishing wire, drew out behind him. Halfway down to the ground below, he suddenly opened his arms and great sheets of purple fabric unraveled and caught the air, slowing his fall to a gentle floating. Summerjack could not hide his excitement at watching the man's stately descent through the air down to the road. After landing safely, the two thin lines that had trailed all the way down snapped and attached themselves to the pavement below. Summerjack walked over to them and, by the time he arrived, they had already thickened and solidified. Other lines reached across between them, forming what would become a strong, sturdy ladder. Turning to ask the man about this, Summerjack saw that he was already gone, leaping like a squirrel off another high white roof.

At the recruiting station, a cool wide office of many pillars and columns, Summerjack reported his name, age, and mother and they found everything extremely suitable. Town was preparing for the onset of high summer, and so there were many good jobs available. Despite the wide selection, Summerjack had no problem choosing to run bridges across Town and, from the moment he first received his cool green wings, he knew that he would love his job.

The job was similar to the man who laid the ladders, except that Summerjack flew the breezes from rooftop to rooftop instead of simply floating gracefully to the street. His long spool of gossamer steel unwound from one end of Town to the other, creating an interlocking network of bridges that would eventually connect every rooftop. The job was an important one as well, for by the third week of summer everyone would permanently move to the rooftops to escape the heat, and so the bridges were needed to connect this world together. In autumn, the people would return to their street level homes, the rains cooling Town to a comfortable temperature. As the rain fell on the thin bridges, they would quickly rust and fall apart until, for a week in mid-September, it would snow red flakes of rust into the streets. The bridges and the ladders would dissolve and wash away and would not go up again until the first week of the next summer.

Summerjack did indeed love his job, leaping above the heads of the people in the streets below like a wondrous bird with brilliant green wings. He pulled the bridges taut behind him, weaving his way across Town in a ballet of flight acted out on the cool, breezy rooftops. Sometimes Summerjack would even continue working after his shift had ended, jumping and soaring into the night under the vault of bright summer stars. It was a good job.

It could not last, of course. In two weeks, all the bridges had been laid and Summerjack was

cut from the department's roster. They only needed to keep two bridge runners during high summer to run repairs and annexes; there wouldn't be enough work to keep anyone else busy. So, Summerjack turned in his cool green wings and bid farewell to his days of jumping from rooftop to rooftop like an emerald rainbow.

Summerjack returned to the recruitment office, positioned, by now, high up on the roof, away from the shimmering heat of the baking cobblestones. Applying for a job, Summerjack soon learned how slow a time high summer was for work. The only job he could get at all was toting refuse down in the gutters during the hot, bright day. He would have to push the trash along and keep the water from stagnating with a long wooden oar. If the trash was permitted to build up in the summer heat, it would begin to breed all kinds of foul smells, diseases, and filthy insects. It was now Summerjack's job—and others like him—to make sure that this did not happen. Truly, it was another important job, but not at all one that seemed likable in the least.

And it was not. While the rest of Town was high and cool, laughing in their bright clothes and walking on the bridges that he had made for them, Summerjack was sweltering in the streets between streams of boiling garbage. He swept the gutters with his oar, slopping trash and waste down and out of Town. Much of it was heavy and did not flow along well and on many occasions Summerjack needed to actually wade into it to get it moving. The sun beat down on his back, hanging high overhead, never casting a shadow large enough to rest in. The white pavements hissed at him, the putrid smells hung on him and would not be washed off, the blood flies congregated over his eyes and in his ears, nipping through his skin with their sharp little mandibles. Summer drew on, only growing hotter.

The unbroken whiteness of the streets reflecting the oppressive sunlight gave Summerjack awful painful headaches and caused him to hallucinate and become disoriented. Once, he fainted into a gutter and another worker had to fish him out. Summerjack had lain half immersed in filth for several hours and was covered with welts from the merciless bites of the blood flies. When he awoke, lying in a hammock above the rooftops, he was told that he had also suffered heat stroke and severe dehydration. He easily could have died.

After recovering from his brush with death, Summerjack felt that he could make a case for getting a new job. The recruitment office denied his request, saying that in order for Summerjack to get a new job, someone would have to fill the one he already had. No one wanted to do that.

"I'm very sorry," said the recruiter when Summerjack pressed the issue. "But we don't really have the authority to make assignment decisions. The captains have complete control over who gets which job."

Summerjack didn't say anything, but he left the office feeling very angry and frustrated at no one in particular. He knew that he would have to return to work the next day, and above all he wanted to prevent that if possible. After walking nowhere specific for a long time, he found himself suddenly and mysteriously at the house of a friend—the other worker who had rescued him—by the name of Frank Lymydear.

After listening to Summerjack's story Frank Lymydear shook his head and shrugged. "Forget about it. You can't change it; they're not going to give you another job, so forget about it. Your problem is that you never got married; you were too busy jumping across the streets in your wings. If you had a wife, then you'd have a different perspective on all of this." Frank bent down and scribbled something on a piece of paper. "Here," he said, handing the slip to Summerjack, "I know a girl like you. Take this and go find her. I'm sure that she'll marry you. You really ought to have a wife." Summerjack nodded mechanically as he walked

out of the folds of the tent house, wondering for less than an instant what Frank had meant by people "like him".

Summerjack read the paper. It said, "Newyorknewyork". It was, he admitted, a pretty name. As he took a step from under the awning, Summerjack really did intend to go find the girl, but the sun was hot that day and it blinded him by surprise, even up on the rooftops.

Summerjack, still weak, stumbled on from tent to tent, disoriented and frightened until the powder faeries came to comfort him out of the fifth sun. Or at least that was how he saw it.

The powder faeries led him to the edge of the roof and, cooing peacefully in his ears, reminded him that he could fly. Summerjack squinted out across Town and somehow he thought that this was incorrect information, but he couldn't remember why over the pulsing in his brain. All he could remember was that he had indeed flown and that he had once had cool green wings that took him on the breezes. Sighing, he remembered how wonderful it had felt to fly and he wondered why he had stopped doing it.

The powder faeries nodded at him, agreeing that all these things were so, that they were as he remembered them. The powder faeries would not lie to him, would they? And he jumped.

Down he plunged, but Summerjack was not aware of any of it as it happened. He knew that something was not quite right, and he was trying to figure out exactly what and how he could fix it. Then it suddenly struck him. Summerjack laughed at the simplicity and opened his arms. Cool folds of green cloth spun out behind him and ballooned into his wings and Summerjack was floating down to the street. That was the last thing he was able to recall before the powder faeries woke him up on the ground.

Summerjack stood up, the crushing pain in his head only getting worse. Looking down, he could no longer see his wings, but by then he had forgotten why he should have them in the first place. Looking around, he saw that he was in a part of Town that he had never been to before. It certainly wasn't anywhere near Frank Lymydear's house. It seemed to him that Frank had told him something...

But the powder faeries would not let Summerjack think of what it had been. They pulled him forward and there, right in front of him, were cables, thick steel cables reaching straight up into the sky. There were hundreds of them, all bolted into the ground with huge metal rings embedded in concrete. Summerjack knew without looking up that the airships were floating directly over his head. The powder faeries moved him closer to the cables and gave him a large pair of metal-cutting shears. Working together, the powder faeries showed Summerjack how to use the shears, and then placed them in his hands.

Summerjack was unsure of what to do. He looked at the cables again. The airships were moored to them. In the airships lived the captains, the friendly benefactors who made life in Town... Who had made his life horrible! Summerjack stepped back, startled. Something inside his head had just called the captains horrible. The same captains who were the friendly benefactors who... Who had almost killed him! This time, Summerjack recognized what was thinking those thoughts. It was not instinct or genetic memory; it was himself. He hated the captains. He really and truly hated them. He wished they would go away.

And then Summerjack understood why he was holding the shears and why he had come to this place that he had never been before. Opening the shears wide, he engulfed a cable in them and, pushing as hard as he could to close them, he heard several twangs and a zip, like a bullet rushing by his head. Summerjack, falling to the ground in a sudden wave of nausea, saw the loose cable fly up and cut through the powder faeries, dispersing them into thin air. As Summerjack felt the light bleed out of his eyes, he saw the other end of the cable,

lying severed on the ground next to his hand.

When he awoke, he was lying on a blue couch in a cool room. Large fans turned lazily on the ceiling and everything in the air had the taste of water and mint and pine trees. The pain in Summerjack's head had gone and now he felt only a soft coolness all across his forehead. Summerjack smiled.

Sitting up, he saw a bowl of fruit sitting on a table across from the couch. Thinking that he had been transported to some kind of magical dreamland, he took a bunch of dripping purple grapes in his hand and began to eat them one at a time. He found them very satisfying. Then he looked up and saw, with a start, the man sitting at a desk, watching him.

The man was a heavy, rounded person who wore a white shirt with thin pastel green stripes running down it. He also had on a nondescript necktie with some sort of generic paisley design. The man smiled slightly, indicating that he had indeed been watching all along and then sat up in his chair so that he could lean forwards over the file that was on his desk. It was, of course, Summerjack's file.

"Five weeks," said the man. "I don't see how anybody in the world could develop antisocial homicidal tendencies in only five weeks."

"What?" asked Summerjack, wishing that he knew what the man was talking about.

"I'm sorry," the man said. "I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Captain Excited. You are Summerjack. In case you haven't figured it out yet, you're on an airship moored two miles above Town." He raised a single eyebrow. "Moored by a series of thick steel cables."

Summerjack looked down at his toes. The implication and the tone were enough to remind him of what he had done as he wandered around the heat haze following the powder faeries. Whatever those were.

"You tried to cut the airships loose, Summerjack. This is an extremely serious offense. It is about as severe as they get. Fortunately, you lost consciousness after cutting only one cable, so no irreparable harm was done. Now, what we—the captains—want to know from you is why. If we can figure out why you did this, maybe we can understand how your case got so dangerous in only five weeks."

"I don't like my job," Summerjack said simply. "You gave me a bad job."

Captain Excited furrowed his brow and made a brief note. "You've only had your job for two weeks. You can do an unpleasant job for two weeks, can't you?"

Summerjack shrugged. "It was hot."

"It's summer," said Captain Excited, unimpressed with this argument.

"I couldn't stand the thought of working in those awful hot gutters for the rest of my life, or even for the rest of the summer. It's not fair that I only got to run bridges for a couple weeks and then have to spend my whole life down in the sewers."

"Most people don't get to run bridges for any time at all."

"And," said Summerjack, "most people don't tote refuse in the middle of summer either."

Captain Excited sighed. "I don't have to sit here and argue with you, Summerjack. That's not my job; that's not why we're here. You got a bad job. I agree with you on that, but how could

that drive you to try and cut loose the airships?"

Summerjack's face darkened and he spoke in a low, almost guttural voice. "I hate the captains."

Captain Excited nearly fell out of his chair. "That's not possible. Tell me, Summerjack, who are the captains?"

"The friendly benefactors who make life in Town bearable for all citizens."

Captain Excited nodded encouragingly. "And?" he asked. "What else?"

"They gave me a bad job. They almost killed me. I hate the captains."

Captain Excited shook his head. "No, no, Summerjack. That's not really what you think. You got the first part right very well, but you left out the whole second half. The captains are fair and just and every decision that they make is for the best interests of each individual citizen. Don't you remember that, Summerjack?"

Summerjack shook his head. He had never heard that in all his life. He was not in the least familiar with it.

Captain Excited made a little note on the file. "You read your mother's brain, of course?"

"I ate it."

"Yes, of course. But after you assimilated it, didn't you read the contents of it?"

"Some of it," said Summerjack.

"Some of it? Summerjack, you were supposed to read the whole thing! No wonder you got angry at the captains." Captain Excited shook his head. "You had plenty of time to read the entire brain. It only should have taken you about a day."

"A day?" asked Summerjack, remembering how he had reported to the recruiting station early.

"Do you know what was in your mother's brain? Genetic memory. Lots of it. It explains the entire world and everything about life in terms that you can understand. We spent quite a long time creating the template that contains all that information and, when one of you doesn't read it, there's a great deal of trouble. If you had read all of it, you would be very happy right now and you would believe that the captains are the greatest, kindest, most caring people in the entire world. That's what your mother's brain is supposed to tell you. Instead, what did you do? You ignored hundreds of years of genetic memory and tried to be happy by living a normal life without instructions. It's not possible, Summerjack. People weren't designed to live the way you do. You could never be happy like that without some kind of preparation telling you to be happy."

"People aren't designed to live how?"

"How long," asked Captain Excited, "do you think you are going to live?"

Summerjack stared blankly at the captain. "I don't know. I never thought about it."

"Let me give you an idea. You were born five weeks ago. In one week you would have retired. In another, you would have died. Seven weeks."

"Seven weeks? That doesn't seem very long at all to be alive."

Captain Excited's face remained stony. "I am forty-three years old. In all likelihood, I will live at least that long again before I die."

Summerjack was confused. "But why, then..."

"We made you this way, Summerjack. We altered all citizens, hundreds of years ago, so that they would live for extremely short periods of time. We were, you see, having a slight problem with unrest and rebellion. Citizens opposed our rule over them, demanded equality, et cetera, et cetera. In order to show their displeasure, they resorted to violence, much like you did. That was unacceptable.

"It seemed that the best way to curb the rebellion was to make it impossible for anyone to grow dissatisfied with their life. That, Summerjack, is why your lives are so short. Anybody can do anything if it's only for seven weeks. There's no time to get disgruntled. Unless... Unless, of course, somebody comes along who doesn't understand the world he lives in. It doesn't happen often, thank goodness, but when it does, it gives us quite a shock." Captain Excited leaned forwards ominously. "You see, Summerjack, we're not used to hearing people say that they hate us. We don't like it. We find it uncomfortable."

Summerjack was in shock, not entirely hearing everything that was told him. "I would only have been totting refuse for another week?" he asked. "I could have done that. Why didn't they tell me that I was going to retire in a week?"

Captain Excited snorted. "Because you were supposed to know that already. It is an elementary fact of life." He motioned out the wide window that overlooked the world below. Pale blue sky faded lazily down into soft shades of misty green. It was hard to find a horizon from this height. "Every other person down there knows that their life span is seven weeks and that they need to work for five of them. They are happy, Summerjack. We have told them to be happy. We told you to be happy, too, but you ignored us." The captain's face became a mask of disgust. "You could have been exactly like them, Summerjack, living out your short, meaningless life in perfect, ignorant bliss. In one week you would have retired. You would have been home free."

"But now..."

"Yes," agreed Captain Excited. "But now..." He shrugged. "That option is no longer available to you." Reaching under the desk, Captain Excited pressed a small button. Summerjack opened his mouth to protest, but a sudden rush of wind cut him short. Turning and looking toward the window, Summerjack saw that it was slowly opening, sucking the air out of the room in a powerful vacuous rush. Captain Excited sat perfectly unmoved by the great wind as Summerjack felt himself jerked off his feet and tossed into space, experiencing all at once a sensation of sky and sun and unbelievable speed. His eyes overflowed with tears immediately and all he could see below him as he plummeted down was an expansive sheet of pure white, spinning and reeling. Silence roared in his ears and his lungs had long stopped working. Blood still pounded somewhere in his head, but numbness had spread across his entire body. Then, for one second as he dropped earthward, he had a familiar and almost nostalgic feeling. Surely the last conscious feeling he would ever experience, it was so close and so powerful that it was almost tangible. Summerjack tried to remember what it was and why it was so full of life and what it meant to him. He thought that perhaps he remembered flying, but then suddenly, as he felt the solid mass of ground rush up right to his face, he knew what it was, and he knew with all his heart and being that it was—

Heat.

The End
