

ANTIGONE + MAUDE

"I don't care," she said. The bridge was still burning. Maude flipped the tape over while Antigone strained through the windshield to see their father, still conferring with his coworkers. He was taller than the other firefighters. "He's never going to notice." Antigone popped the glove compartment and extracted four double-A batteries for their knock-off Walkman. They'd been sitting there for three hours. Waiting for him to finish.

THEIR FATHER

Bill just wanted to get paid. The township honored invoices for every run he showed up for, whether or not he bothered to suit up, and they paid a bonus if a run exceeded four hours. Bridge across the creek was still on fire, so it was fair he was trying to milk this one for all it was worth. Stood up on his tip-toes to check on the girls back in the car. They seemed all right. He wondered what they were talking about.

EUROPA

The hand on his shoulder. The hand removed. We'll talk about that later.

THE DERELICT

Some corny old song, slowed down. Pink and teal. Camera pans from the entrance across potted plastic palms and fountains, introduction to a derelict mall. But the girls were home. Antigone's room in the hollowed-out shell of a pretzel shop. Maude with a whole Sears men's department to herself. Their father occupied the administrative offices of the mall itself, random stacks of his stuff piled up on top of random stacks of mall junk. The skylights were leaking, and on a cold day you had to watch out for stray puddles of water in front of the Radio Shack. The electricity inexplicably still on.

This was fine.

ESME

There wouldn't be room in her bag. It was too full. Esmé tried several obtuse configurations before giving up and stuffing the thing into her jacket pocket. Nobody was paying attention, anyway. She probably could have just carried it out of the store. Fine, then.

THE DERELICT

"Dad's gonna be gone for two days," Antigone said.

"Three, but who's counting?" Maude was finishing up the dishes, her cardigan sleeves pushed way up over her elbows, poofed out comically just below her shoulders. "He'll probably sleep for three more after he gets back."

"Then why are we working so hard, sis?"

"You have a point," Maude said, and turned off the faucet.

BILL FOMO

Bill couldn't get the fucking screws unscrewed. His laptop was ruined. The other guys at work weren't paying any attention, thank Christ, but still he was starting to sweat. He took a swig of Pepsi, some of it spilled on the table. Tried again.

Nope, this screw was definitely stripped.

Not to put too fine a point on it but presently the alarm sounded. Another run. Bill wiped his forehead with the back of his hand and laid his screwdriver down on the table.

Nobody better touch this while I'm gone, he said to himself.

ORORO

Esmé was behaving recklessly. Two years her junior, she hadn't yet developed the patience Ororo worked so hard to maintain. She was impulsive, her judgement lacking. So much like Ororo herself in her younger days.

Placed her hand softly on Esmé's shoulder. Soft, but firm.
It was time to leave.

MAUDE FOMO

Yeah, her store had great light. Maude liked to stretch out on one of the checkout counters and gaze aimlessly into the translucent dust as it danced gayly in the wan artificial light. Her Chuck Taylors hung over the edge of the counter, occasionally kicking against a small stand of faux leather wallets. She wasn't overly concerned about knocking over the stand.

She suddenly noticed a man, tall, with long brown hair, standing over near a rack of dress slacks. Examining the price tag on a polyester number that obviously wasn't going to fit him.

This mall had been closed for years. How in the Hell had he gotten in here?

CASTILLO

Pink office, teal chairs. Metal shades drawn tight like the backdrop of Prince's 1999 stage set. Police Lt. Martin Castillo stood rigid in front of his desk and stared, ostensibly at the door in front of him.

It didn't budge.

ESME

Anyway, Ororo was probably right. Esmé trusted in the older thief's experience. She didn't *need* to be the best there was at what she did, herself—she just wanted the *stuff*. Shortest path between two points, and all that.

Esmé usually got what she wanted.

"We can't come back here for a while," Ororo said.

"Sure," Esmé agreed.

Now, there would be no point.

ANTIGONE FOMO

The mall was boring. Who knew why Maude never complained. Antigone traced the prompts around the food court, getting her steps in. At the end of the food court was the B. Dalton's. She wished that more of its stock had been left in place when the mall finally closed down. The place was a mystery. What were books?

Bill "Pops" Fomo would probably laugh. "That place went out of business before you were born," he would probably say. Which was true.

"Oh yeah? Then why's the store front still there, then? The lights are still on."

Well, Dad didn't know everything.

On, past the B. Dalton's, beckoned the Radio Shack.

There were computers in there.

GRANIT

He could lift. Whatever the trouble, he didn't have to deal with any of it while he was in here. Alone. Sweating.

He could lift.

Granit came to the mall even though the mall had been closed for going on ten years. Gym equipment still worked. And no one to harass him about his weight or his complexion, which in both cases lent him the appearance of a giant block of, well, *granite*.

The nickname given to him in grade three (1987) had been misspelled, and he kept it precisely on those grounds. Already a forty-two year old man, taking ownership of his own name represented one of the few personal victories in his life.

He was strong as fuck.

He could lift.

EUROPA

All together now, she had gathered them thusly.

UNKNOWN SUBJECT

Unsub studied himself in the reflecting glass of the automatic doors. How had he ended up here? The mall was closed.

Good. He almost believed himself. He didn't need to check his wallet, he knew everything he needed was there. If he were to be searched, all that would be found were his bogus credentials and a twenty dollar bill.

He entered the derelict shopping mall, at once convinced that the structure was on the verge of collapse. Water infiltrated through the skylights, its assault accomplished in randomly distributed puddles throughout the facility. Wherefore art thou, building services?

Unsub had successfully insinuated himself into the hostile environment. No one had questioned his manner, or his attire. In point of fact no one was around at all.

Unsub set down his pack and began to set up shop.

"You can't set up there." Maude sipped her Orange Julius, coughed performatively, then gestured with her cup. "That space is rented to the Blanks."

So. Locals.

Unsub stopped what he was doing, tried to mirror Maude's body language, but he didn't have a drink. He slipped one hand casually into his slacks pocket. Stared.

"The mall's closed," he said.

Maude took another sip.

"Doesn't matter. The contract's still intact. All that stands between us and a loss of faith in our institutions."

Unsub sighed.

"Okay, then, how do I sign up for a kiosk space?"

Maude sat down her cup.

"Follow me."

GANBARU

Daisuke's neon sign was broken, and he was pretty sure he was not going to make rent. Nobody came to this mall anymore. He hadn't had a new student in years, and the *hombu dojo* in New San Francisco was still after him for their cut of his non-existent profits, even though he had quit and started his own splinter organization over twenty years ago. He was contemplating not naming an heir, letting his unique system of natural body movement die out with him, just like his teacher before him.

He ate another cold french fry.

Daisuke detected activity, somewhere at the other end of the food court.

New tenants?

ADMINISTRATIVE STATE

"Here, fill these out."

Maude let the big ream of paper drop solidly on her desk, just like a big ream of paper. Unsub was incredulous that so many signatures could be necessary, but gradually his training kicked in and he got down to business processing the paperwork.

The office smelled damp.

"Right here it asks for my social media handles. I'll tell you right now, I'm not giving you my social media handles," Unsub protested.

"Boilerplate. Corporate policy," Maude lamented sympathetically, but without budging. "Take it or leave it."

Unsub filled in all his social media handles. The ones with which he'd spent the last few years baiting randos from the opposition. There wasn't enough room on the form to list them all, so he limited himself to only those accounts with the highest visibility and the most followers.

Two full podcasts elapsed.

"All right, good," Maude said, when he was finally finished, and dropped the resulting ream of paper solidly into her waste paper basket, just like a big ream of paper. "Now, let's find you a space."

He followed her back down to the food court, where, counter to the logic of shuttered businesses, several of the restaurants had booted up their lighting, were preparing for the morning rush. He could smell the grease undulating, infusing the air all around him and mixing with the sharp tang of outgassing plastic facades. Mixed feelings.

On to the main gallery, Maude led him to a dilapidated space surrounded by potted palm trees and pink tiled trash bins. She stood in the center of what at one time must have been a fountain. Or perhaps the site of mass mall baptisms. He picked up a penny.

"We can remove the fixtures," she said, by way of apology for the unorthodox situatedness of his new digs. "It may not look like it now, but the place is filling up." She referred to the mall, not the fountain.

Maude pocketed Unsub's fee and made for her Sears.

The skylights wheezed, quietly.

KAERU

To Daisuke all of this was intolerable. New tenants were not being held to the same standards as those unlucky enough to have contracted early in the mall's life cycle. Nowadays they weren't even subjected to the strict credit checks and tough physical conditioning of his heyday. No more punching one's fingers into the chests of unruly customers in order to simultaneously strengthen the digits and gage customer satisfaction. Nowadays it was all online surveys.

Even the contracts probably just ended up in the trash.

As Daisuke knelt in *seiza* and stared, another of his *dojo's* fluorescent light flickered and sputtered out.

He sighed.

ESME + ORORO

Esmé figured the new guy had potential, but Ororo said not to steal from him too often. New tenants were always quick to complain. It wouldn't do them any good to get banned from the mall.

"Ha. They're setting him up in a fountain," Esmé mused.

It was as yet unclear what the man was selling.

DAD'S HOME

Bill Fomo was tired. He stopped to inspect himself in the reflecting glass before entering the food court. He hadn't bothered to shower after the fire, and now he wasn't sure he could muster the energy to stand up and wash himself off. Sweat trickled down his face from a reservoir somewhere under his meshback cap. Like a weeping skylight, or, I dunno, a tiny shower.

A wave of cold air as he entered the food court hit him like a fire truck, and for a moment he considered retreating to his 1982 Plymouth Reliant wagon out in the parking lot. He'd slept there before. But, the girls were expecting him back home.

Unfamiliar faces, here, and also in the main gallery. The girls had been doing good business.

Trudged to his makeshift bedroom in the Sears at the other end of the mall.

Made it.

Bill Fomo collapsed on the polished tile floor, releasing his grip on an unopened can of Pepsi, which, oblivious to his predicament, rolled in a straight line to an abrupt stop under the customer service desk.

He began to snore.

RENT SEEKING

It could never be enough. No matter how many tenants they packed in, Maude would always and forever demand more money. Antigone could feel it all going wrong.

"What if we set hard limits in advance?" she said. "Let's decide how many spaces we want to fill and then let's rent only that many. I know there's nothing I hate more than a retail space that's oversubscribed."

Maude appeared to be considering what her little sister had said, but it turned out she was only staring out the window at a city bus as it ejected a fresh raft of abandoned mall walkers onto the sidewalk.

"Fifty-five hundred dollars a week," Maude said, hopping down off of her counter. "You and I both know we can do much better than that."

Antigone had to admit she liked having pocket money for new cassette tapes and giant pretzels. On the other hand, the mall was abandoned. It wasn't really their property. None of them were even supposed to be inside the place, much less performing historical reenactments of consumer transactions. Signing contracts.

And what would they do when Dad found out?

DAD'S DEAD

Antigone was beside herself with grief. They'd found him there, laying flat on his back near customer service. He hadn't even opened his Pepsi, which the girls agreed was unlike him. Maude was predictably cool, which made Antigone all the more angry.

She glared at her sister, who hardly seemed to be grieving.

"I get the hat!" Cute.

Maude plucked the meshback cap off of Dad's still warm head, placed it gently on top of her permanent. Hopped onto the counter and started kicking her legs back and forth absentmindedly, impacting the side of one of Dad's velcro low-top sneakers.

Antigone stared at her, hard.

YABAN

The *gaijin* were the reason he'd received *hamon* in the first place. Once, shortly after he'd opened his store front, he'd accepted a foreigner as a student, and inside of six months he had been contacted by *hombu dojo* with complaints about the student's behavior during his first trip to Japan. Then, Soke had cottoned to the *gaijin's* multi-level marketing scheme, and the foreigner had been promoted first to personal student, and finally to partner, leapfrogging his own rank.

Checkmate.

Daikuke wasn't bitter. But he was driven nearly mad by the injustice of it all. At one point Soke had promised him *he* (Daisuke) would inherit the whole show. All of the scrolls. All of the *ryu*.

Now, here he was.

He knotted his fingers into an improbable configuration and intoned the sacred mantra.

"*Fuck capitalism,*" he droned, still not doing it right, even after all these years.

DAD GENES

Bill Fomo regained consciousness slowly. He must have fallen down. But at least he'd made it home. The girls were right, he had to start getting more sleep.

Where the fuck was his hat?

Something kicked him hard in the foot. Again. Bill sat straight up, taking in the whole scene, instantly recognizing his two teenaged daughters. Showtime.

"Girls, isn't it time for bed? What are you even doing in here?"

"Dad!"

And suddenly Antigone was on him, smothering him, sitting on his chest, choking him out. He tried to accommodate her, then he tried to tap out, but still he couldn't steal a breath, and no, she wasn't budging. She was screaming, then sobbing his name into the crook of his arm, and he felt like he was going to die if he didn't pry her off.

What was wrong?

Maude shrugged, threw Bill's hat on the floor, and hopped off of the counter.

DAD'S MAD

Food court, his usual stool. Bill ordered a minced ham sandwich, Doritos, sweet gherkin pickles, and a Pepsi.

It wasn't enough.

He re-upped, this time noticing his surroundings as he ate. Business around here was picking up, although he couldn't begin to imagine where all these shop partisans were actually shopping. He was going to have to ask the girls some questions.

New guy in the fountain.

And there was Daisuke, looking forlorn (as usual) in his empty *dojo*.

But what was with all these other new storefronts? Natural Wonders. Waldenbooks. None of these companies existed anymore. And yet, here they were, viable businesses, once again enjoying brisk trade.

God damn it.

TAIDEN

Granit wasn't sure what to do with the rest of his afternoon, so he hit the mall. Sometimes coming alone was depressing, but today he honestly didn't care. He just liked the ambience of the big, empty space. The hustle and bustle of the scatterbrained shoppers. The weird smells.

Passed by one of those cheesy martial arts academies. The ones so elite they opened franchises in shopping malls. Backed up. Something about the sad little man kneeling in the center of the otherwise completely empty *dojo* pricked his conscience. That was the only way he could describe it. It certainly wasn't the decor that drew him in, in any case.

On an impulse, Granit clapped his big stone mitts and asked if he could sign up for classes.

"The conditioning has already begun," Daisuke murmured, and disappeared (rolling) into his backroom office.

Granit followed.

UNSUBSCRIBE

The contract was still intact.

Unsub considered the terms of his deal. A sizable advance against sales, the obligation to recoup at least the same amount of that advance, or find himself in debt to the mall. Worse, even if he defaulted, he'd still be signed, and prohibited from opening up another shop somewhere else.

Ubsub experienced enlightenment. Realized suddenly that this arrangement explicitly favored the venue.

But, he figured, it wasn't his problem. Uncle Sam was picking up the bill.

Unsub stood his ground in the fountain. He'd even begun to decorate the space. Midwestern corporate, nothing overtly literate, or otherwise expressing pretensions of self-worth beyond one's obligations to the collective. *Herd*-confidence, rather than *self*-confidence.

The customers began to pour in.

CASTILLO

Lt. Martin Castillo didn't like the mall, but it was too late in the day to drive across town. Besides, Daisuke's place offered a discount to law enforcement.

Facility maintenance seemed... understaffed. Safety hazards abounded. Strictly speaking, zoning and code violations weren't Castillo's beat, but someone should probably say something.

He put out his cigarette before ducking through the reflective doors, his thin coiffure puffed flat against his scalp as he passed under the blowers.

Inside, a lot had changed. Did the place seem busier? (Busier than when?) It was difficult to order his thoughts. After a brief flash of sensory overload, his awareness gradually adjusted to the new normal.

He didn't like what he saw.

UCHI-DESHI

Granit's stone body already conformed to the *ryu*'s most stringent conditioning. Daisuke feigned indifference, but privately he was astonished. He had transmitted the scrolls to his new student on his first day of training. A cavalier gesture, to be sure, knowing somehow that this was his last chance to pass on what he had learned. Incredibly, it seemed that his impulsive action had been precisely correct. This young man might actually succeed in carrying the art forward and translating it to the next generation.

Granit shifted slightly under the weight of Daisuke's body, who presently reclined balanced on a small folding chair perched atop Granit's back.

"How are we doing down there?" Daisuke asked, and sipped his tea.

"*What* pain?" Granit laughed, grinning from stone ear to stone ear. A regular laughing Buddha.

Enter Castillo.

COUNTERINTELLIGENT DESIGN

Europa deplored the bullheaded stubbornness of her subjects. Well, they were only human. The perimeter of the mall was a sufficient delimiter of human desire. Each shopper tracing a personal Koch snowflake of infinite pointless migration. They'd even returned to the scene, long after the place was condemned. A continuing downward spiral.

But now that she had them all safely in the bag again, what to do?

A few of her favorites had developed minds of their own. "Minds" might be stretching it, but suffice to say they were generating novelty through their mindless yet entertaining self-actualization. A guilty pleasure, for the deity. And this was counter to plan.

Remedies included: closing the mall, flooding the mall (lava, or otherwise), burning down the mall (as distinct from lava damage), converting the mall to residential housing, somehow driving out the big box stores, or some combination of the above, fearfully and meticulously devised and implemented.

But it seemed unlikely the humans would really go away. An age-old irritant for a god.

UNFORCED ERROR

Castillo gripped his *katana* lightly, staring straight through Granit at his master, his brother in arms, his friend, his... What was this bizarre statue propped up in his way?

Low synth pads.

Castillo glared.

Granit was caught somewhere in the middle, which was precisely how Daisuke had planned it. His new personal student, who happened to be physically and psychically invulnerable, versus his ex-personal student, who happened to be short, middle-aged, and armed only with an antique sword which had been a truck stop modern replica even when it was new.

Castillo moved out of *seigan no kamae* to strike.

MOSS GARDEN

Instrumental track from David Bowie's 1977 album. On repeat, for some reason. The sound system had been installed first. They were still working on the lighting.

Jason had found out about the mall reopening from scuttlebutt on social media. He had used to come here as a kid, looking for direct market titles on the plexiglass and pressboard spinner rack at Waldenbooks. And now he was moving his comic store here. Full circle.

He called his shop the Floating World. (Europa was not amused.) Focusing on titles he actually enjoyed himself, but still willing to stock mainstream fare, he didn't pass judgment so long as his customers were buying and enjoying comics.

The lights dimmed in sync with the perimeter chimes at the entrance to his shop, and Jason straightened his fuzzy green cardigan.

Customers.

NINTAI

Granit's enormous body was almost entirely covered with moss. Probably to mitigate the smell, Castillo deduced. Not that it was really working.

He shifted his grip on his *katana*, twisting the blade just so, reflecting a stripe of fluorescent light directly across Granit's eyes, something like the dramatic trope from STAR TREK: THE ORIGINAL SERIES, a solid white rectangle across Kirk's otherwise deeply shaded face. Granit winced, blinking repeatedly.

It was at this moment that Castillo removed Granit's left arm, separating stone from stone, moss from moss, in one fluid movement, moving the blade with his entire body before returning the shitty sword to its equally shitty scabbard.

Granit looked to his master, who remained, if you'll forgive the pun, stone-faced, and then he looked back at his attacker. This stranger. This...

Granit picked up his severed arm and advanced towards Castillo, who hadn't expected this—at all—swinging it like a club. Castillo backpedaled.

Daisuke rose at once, clapping his hands in approval, and retired to his backroom office.

Now, Castillo had only come to the mall to get his sword sharpened. He hadn't planned on a mall brawl with his apparent replacement, a giant concrete teenager too eager for acceptance into this ancient, though sparsely documented tradition. Clearly, Daisuke was still sore that Castillo had stopped coming to training.

The Lt. stepped aside and Granit crashed headlong into the security barrier at the front of the *dojo*. Daisuke had activated it shortly after Castillo entered from the gallery, to prevent bystanders from being injured. Now his golden boy was sitting on the floor, a pile of broken rocks and dust.

"We're closed," Granit finally said, and dropped to the floor. His severed arm was not far behind him.

"You need to take a shower," Castillo whispered, coolly.

BATTLES WITHOUT HONOR AND HUMANITY

Esmé slipped the book into her MP3.COM branded messenger bag. At this point shoplifting was merely habit; she hadn't even looked at the title. Across the aisle, Ororo was staring her down.

This new comic shop was okay, she guessed. "The Floating World." Ororo had said it had something to do with *Shinto*, some kind of Japanese religion. Whatever, Esmé didn't even like comics, much less religion.

"There are no Marvel comics in this store," Ororo said.

"*Fuck the X-Men!*" they screamed in unison, and laughed.

WANING MONTAGE

Castillo was never actually seen driving, but somehow he appeared in different locations around the city. It had been the same in Miami. A mystery to everyone that knew him.

Jump cut.

On his way out of the mall he'd ignored obvious signs of loitering, shoplifting, and even drug use. Not like himself, but then, after the confrontation at Daisuke's, he was tired. Even after disassembling the rock-boy, he'd somehow managed to impale himself (during egress) on a broken spire of the security barrier. No doubt to Daisuke's great amusement.

Jump cut.

Driving, now, Castillo glared at himself in the rearview mirror.

He pushed in the cassette adapter for his phone, thumbed over to his audiobook. Rolled down the window and lit a cigarette.

Bleeding all over his seat.

He hadn't even bothered to engage the cloaking device.

LOW OBSERVABLE

Not that it would have mattered. Unsub was still able to track Castillo in either mode. In this case, by purchasing location data from the vendor of Castillo's audiobook app. The whole thing was automated, he only had to check in every hour or so. Which left plenty of time to operate his business.

Unsub felt invisible there, standing in center of his fountain. Foot traffic was minimal. Nobody seemed interested in what he was selling. Nobody even protested.

And what was he selling?

Unsub consulted his tablet. It said here that he was the proprietor of a pop-up privacy shop. Bootleg Fendi Faraday bags, N95 respirators with particulate filters that doubled to defeat facial recognition technology. Nobody upon nobody wanted this stuff. He was sitting on a lot of inventory.

He concluded it made for a decent cover.

MA-AI

The *dojo* was saved, thanks to Granit. His dues alone would cover operating expenses. And with ever-greater rank would come ever-greater dues.

Fortunately, his arm had been easily reattached.

Daisuke probed the folds of the *kokoro* membrane, subtly. Beyond the next few days he could sense nothing, which was troubling. At intervals his concentration was disrupted by the dull grinding of Granit's limbs as the poor boy ran through the fundamental movements, over, and over, and over again on the other side of the room. Evidently without making much progress.

Rock scrapes rock.

There were trade-offs in every relationship.

Daisuke let go.

DAD, RELAX

Bill Fomo was not about to let this go. If money was coming in from some scheme, whatever it was, then the girls were going to have to contribute to maintaining the household. They might have been squatting in this abandoned mall, sure, but there were still bills that had to be paid. For example, their dues down at the *dojo*.

As he walked through the gallery, nearly every retail space and kiosk appeared to be occupied. Some of the shops looked interesting. Others slid in and out of his field of vision without registering in his conscious mind. Well, Bill had his tastes. He smelled pretzels baking.

Whatever, if Maude was collecting signatures, all of them would have to pay.

Aw, who was he kidding. Bill didn't have it in him to badger anyone about money.

He wanted to take a shower.

He wanted to talk to his wife.

SAKKI TEST

Something was wrong.

BILLS, BILLS, BILLS

Bill Unsub was ready to go.

LIKE, FOR SURE

Europa descended the escalator, presumably resplendent, but refracted through the cubist effect of the surrounding mirrors, it was difficult to tell where she ended and the ambient lighting began.

Stepped over the threshold. In this mall, there were believers. Was her step a little lighter? She wasn't telling.

The old gods avoided the mall, for the most part. Convenience was one thing, but mostly you were paying outlandish prices in order to see, and be seen. And quite obviously they'd let anyone into a place like this.

What was in it for her?

YO-NIN

Where was she?

Esmé waited for Ororo at a table in the food court. Just running over to the Radio Shack for some capacitors, she'd said. That was half an hour ago.

Mall sushi was anything but.

Ororo plopped her plastic shopping bag down with uncharacteristic carelessness. It was full of Chick tracts. Religious comics by Jack T. Chick.

"Isn't that guy dead?" Esmé asked, munching on rancid sushi.

"Precisely," Ororo said. "So who is profiting from the distribution of this material?"

The little pamphlets were given out for free at the Radio Shack, and presumably at Radio Shacks everywhere. Ororo had taken them all.

"Us, I guess," Esmé said, and almost barfed.

REPRIEVE

The roof of the building was far away from the internecine squabbles of the mall. Endless civil war amongst factions who weren't even supposed to be operating businesses within the condemned structure in the first place. The relentless bickering was bad enough, but couldn't they all see that stooping to property damage and violence against the customers only proved to endanger their business model?

Granit sat on the bare roof. He'd already destroyed one lawn chair (far too fragile), and now he was concerned that his great weight was damaging the weather sealing under his giant stone ass.

Everyone assumed he was a teenager. Why?

The roof sagged. He wasn't sure if it was his fault.

Daisuke had just named him *Soke*, inheritor of the mall *dojo*.

KINDLING

Ororo came back with a whole cup of chopsticks, dumped them on the table. Started erecting a complicated looking structure, elbowing condiments and napkins out of her way as she worked. She took the Chick tracts and wadded them up one by one under the base of her wooden shrine. Snapped her fingers and a tiny bolt of lightning set the whole thing ablaze.

Ororo was a mutant, weather witch, worshiped as a goddess amongst her tribe. She had grown up a pickpocket on the streets of Cairo before at last returning home to her ancestral village in Kenya.

And now she was here, wasting time at the mall.

"Geeze, Ororo," Esmé said.

There was a rumble of thunder as a tiny rain cloud appeared above their table, followed by a tiny rain storm that doused the flames.

"Hush, child," Ororo said.

SENTIENT SLIME

Ten years of litigation had finally decided the status of the mall. Its debts had been acquired by Mold Industries, Inc., an (among other things) predatory lender out of New York. Reps incoming.

Bill Fomo learned about all this via a legal notice taped to the glass doors at the front of the building. His first thought was that this might alarm the customers. He was still groggy. Shaking out the sleep, he slid his hand over his face and headed inside, searching for Maude.

Jason at Floating World was already hosting a fundraiser.

Antigone and Maude were having breakfast down at the Sbarro. Bill thought that was just gross, but he trekked down anyway to tell them the news.

"Dad! We're fucked!" Maude announced, and burped.

Scooped again.

ELVIS HAIR

Daisuke's son had been promised an inheritance that included all the family scrolls, a few antique swords, and of course the mall *dojo*. This last was most important to him because he intended to renovate the space into a comic shop.

Nothing was working out quite how Daisuke, Jr. had planned.

His dad still wanted him to take over the family business, sure, which included the *dojo*. But *as a dojo*, meaning that Daisuke, Jr. was expected to carry on training with an eye towards eventually passing on the school to his own son, who had yet to be born.

First of all, Daisuke, Jr. wasn't planning on having children. Second, he hated physical activity, so training was out. This left the comic books. Check and mate. Only, his father didn't see things that way...

And now there was this kid, Granit, soaking up all his dad's attention.

Daisuke, Jr. combed back his impressive *coiffure*, an enormous, archaic pompadour in the style of 1950s rockers. His red *gi* with gold trim stood out, to be sure, particularly the fishnet arm and leg gauntlets, his clear cane filled with glitter and air bubbles, and the metal flake gold guitar he carried around with him everywhere he went.

His fellow students were entertained, but uniformly not intimidated.

Another problem: There was already a comic shop in the mall.

But Daisuke, Jr. was a problem solver.

He was playing a show at the other shop tonight.

QUARTERS

The machine was only producing slime. Insert a coin, turn the crank, and receive a plastic egg. Inside every egg was a uniform portion of glow-in-the-dark slime.

"Aw, I wanted the candy bracelet," Esmé said.

Ororo hit the machine with her palm like Arthur Fonzarelli. Spun around. Another egg of slime fell out. She tried again and got the same result. So, it wasn't the quarters.

"Let's give the children a chance to clear some of these out," Ororo said, and started off towards the food court.

"Do kids still buy these things?" Esmé asked.

It was a moot point.

ACCESSING

Unsub cased the back hallways where workers entered the mall. Loading docks. Maintenance tunnels. Smoking nooks. He was surprised at the intricacy of the complex (he'd never had the pleasure), but he supposed all this compressed pretzel smell had to snake its way towards the aerosol dispensers somehow.

The *wa* of this corridor was seriously off.

Unsub rounded a corner and through a small window in a dilapidated service door he was confronted with a career-altering view of Europa, daughter of Agenor, descending an escalator, resplendent in whatever the *Hel* that was she was wearing. He had to put on his sunglasses.

It was that much.

This would do. If she was already to the stage of making public appearances, she'd almost certainly use this same route again. It was easier than carving new channels.

The persistence of audiences.

Unsub scanned the area surrounding the escalator, began calculating. The angles looked good.

This would do.

ENTERING THE MALL

SL wasn't sure if he was ready. There had been no mall in his little home town. Walking here had already been quite an undertaking. But all of that was prologue. Here was a chance to trace his circuit within the (relative) safety of a firmly established commercial tradition. Here was a place where people had already seen a man dressed head to toe in white, carrying a walking stick inscribed with *Sanskrit* vowels. Here was a place with a Waldenbooks.

He entered.

Reliably, the Waldenbooks had stocked numerous titles normally reserved for direct sales market comic shops. Titles he'd read about in COMICS SCENE magazine but that had remained forever unobtainable from grocery store spinner racks.

One hand holding open his small backpack, SL transferred every single comic book from the Waldenbooks rack into his bag. Because this was the city, no one noticed him, or cared what he was doing. The store would treat shrinkage as a matter of course, part of the cost of doing business.

"You know," Esmé said, suddenly appearing from over SL's shoulder, "Shoplifting raises prices for everyone."

SL regarded the young woman, young enough to be his daughter, but also inarguably correct. He sensed instinctively that this must be some sort of test. The kind of test he'd come here to pass, to walk through, to carry on and pass down to the next generation, for the benefit of the whole world.

"Not for me," he said. "I never pay."

Esmé smiled.

FOUR MILES

SL found a payphone and made his call. Then it was time to walk. He'd obtained a map from Esmé, and planned his route according to a circuit designed for mall walkers. There were even arrows painted on the floor, and mile markers at various points along the circuit, if one knew where to look.

This would be easier than the trek here. Winding over ridges, through yards, across parking lots.

The four mile track inside the mall went by in a flash. SL wasn't even winded. Maybe it was his training. Five years ago this might have killed him.

Something he read in a book.

It had drawn him into the mall.

THE LAST MILE

"You see, language itself is theft," SL was saying. Esmé didn't see. She rolled her eyes at Ororo, who was for the most part not paying any attention to the old man with the walking stick. His little *tokin* cap dotting his forehead like an swollen cartoon bruise.

"I don't see," Esmé repeated.

"Yes," SL allowed. He frowned.

Some mall walkers passed, oblivious.

"I seem to be stuck," SL confessed, glancing at Ororo for moral support. She returned his gaze, holding it slightly longer than he could handle. He finally dumped the comics out of his bag onto the (food court) table, and shrugged.

It was time to move on.

SOMETHING FELL

Plinth Mold stared out of his limousine window and remembered his past. Phoenicia, Rome, the British Empire. The comic book direct sales market. Each constructing itself from the consensual delusion of a shared vocabulary, bolstered by a near monopoly on graphic violence. Plinth had seen them, conquered them all. In some cases by seizing control of their dictionaries.

This derelict mall would be no different.

He had wrested control of the complex from a teenage girl who claimed title after the previous owners dissolved into bankruptcy. Her claim had been dubious, of course, but paper covers rock. His lawyers would untangle the rest.

In fact, there was no reason for him to explain all of this to the reader. It was simply that he liked to set his thoughts in order before embarking on a new project.

Plinth noted the parking lot was far from empty. Not bad for a place that originally had to close because nobody wanted to come there anymore. But this also meant that there was no place to park his limousine.

Well, that was his driver's problem.

Plinth's coat hung over his shoulders with his arms out of the sleeves, his fedora cocked at a sarcastic angle. He could stand to put on some weight. All of this was reported without judgement by the reflective doors at the front of the mall.

Sighing, he threw his scotch glass onto the pavement (it shattered) and entered.

Plinth lurched into the mall, allowing himself to feel the effects of the alcohol. It did nothing to improve his mood, or the decor, which seemed to be all original. He'd never liked this style the first time around.

Members of his family would no doubt regard this new venture as a downgrade. Would that any of them were around to see it.

He found himself reduced to move.

Unsub was just getting up to clear his tray when he caught sight of Plinth gleaming the cube between whatever had constituted his old life and... this. He sat back down again, quickly, and covered his face with his hands.

Oh, no.

PRIVILEGE ESCALATION

Completely stupid.

Plinth Mold relaxed in the back office of Daisuke's *dojo*. He hadn't been invited; in fact, he had no idea who these people were. He'd simply noticed the neon lights advertising instruction in "classical martial arts," and immediately barged in.

Plinth rubbed his eyes.

Granit brought in the tea, bowed, and then exited backwards out of the tiny office into the training area for more reps. Silently.

"Beginner classes are usually held on Tuesdays," Daiskuke was explaining.

"What's the story with these scrolls?" Plinth inquired, gesturing too casually to Daisuke's various *menkyo* licenses hanging around the office. Of course he could read them. But could his host?

"Oh, the language is somewhat archaic," Daisuke explained. "I have been authorized by my teacher to share the techniques of our tradition in perpetuity throughout the known universe."

Plinth arched an eyebrow. Intellectual property!

"Were these written before or after 1868?" he asked, bemused.

"Actually, 1983."

OCCAM: SWITCHBLADE PUNK

Occam was born in 1983. His adoption of the Los Angeles hardcore punk lifestyle, circa 1983, had something to do with self-love/loathing, and a general fascination with the world as he imagined it must have been around the time he was born. He congratulated himself on this, as people usually didn't latch onto this kind of self-referential nostalgia until they hit middle age.

Wait, Occam was forty.

Enough with the introspection, Occam was late for work.

He washed the glue out of his mohawk, combing it down over one side of his head and spraying it thoroughly with Aqua Net to hold it in place. For safety. Long sleeve shirt to obscure his many tattoos. His trusty switchblade split hairs as he scraped it across his face, removing the

salt and pepper stubble that shaded his chin and cheeks.

A job. Staring into the mirror. This was the truth.

Bus to the mall.

WOLVIE

Logan hated mall sushi. But he also hated Sbarro. He sat down at the mall sushi bar just as Occam was coming on shift. The counter was a little too tall for him.

Logan slicked down his weird hair.

Occam slicked down his weird hair.

Snikt.

Occam retracted his switchblade comb, disappearing it into a hidden compartment in his mall *kimono*. The two men locked eyes briefly.

"Heard the billionaires have started sniffing around," Logan said.

"Yeah, this whole complex was apparently bought by some Internet weirdo," Occam confirmed.

Both men assumed the same sagging posture, lost in thought.

ALLEGORY OF INNOCENCE

"There's no smoking in here!" Esmé scrunched up her face, punching Logain hard in his hairy, stubby arm. He dropped his cigar into his soy sauce. Ororo was staring straight up at the elaborate glass ceiling over the food court.

"Yeah? Then why are there ashtrays built into the tables?"

He'd been coming to this mall for decades, as time allowed. Even now, years after it had closed for good.

Occam could remember a time when tobacco smoke hung over the food court like a bedsheet tent pulled taut between two pieces of living room furniture. He, too, was a lifer. But Esmé had a point. The old rules had changed.

Occam emptied the ashtray.

LINEAGE

Plinth had quit smoking some time ago, and said so. Logan actually extinguished his cigar out of respect. Esmé was baffled, humbled.

Occam brought out Plinth's sushi, covered the ashtrays.

"This man..." Plinth hesitated, gesturing towards Occam with his eyes closed. "...Is your great-grandson." Eyes snapping open on the final beat.

Esmé stared at Occam's silver roots. Then at Logan's thick black sideburns and the carpet of fur covering the backs of his hands, leading a wide trail up into the sleeves of his flannel shirt.

"Makes sense," Logan said, without explaining.

Daisuke suddenly appeared and pulled up a chair, instantly engrossed in this developing family drama.

"Oh, it's you," Logan said, finishing up his *miso* and wiping his chin with his forearm. "They finally kick you out of Japan?"

Daisuke bowed his head, slightly.

"Let's talk business," Plinth said.

NINGU OF THE KUNOICHI

"You see, I don't want her killed."

Plinth was referring to Europa, Phoenician princess, lately a regular at the mall. Only Logan (a Santana buff) recognized the name, but Daisuke understood instinctively that Plinth was talking about a Goddess. Naturally, he would do whatever he could to help.

"Elements within the U.S. government disagree. Over and above my objections, an operator has been dispatched to eliminate her, here, at the mall." Plinth leaned forward, smiled. "I've bought the place, so at least now we have the home court advantage.

Occam scoffed. "What do *you* care, bub?"

Plinth smiled again, and Logan winced visibly as Mold's lips receded from view, exposing the copy and multipurpose paper white of his perfectly installed veneers.

Gleam.

"We have history."

ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE

Saito showed up at the mall, somewhat embarrassed that he'd forgotten to take off his white lab coat. But he'd also forgotten his sister's birthday, and he needed to pick up a gift, stat. In any case, no one seemed to notice him trying to blend into the crowd.

That's when he saw her, radiant and unignorable, descending the escalator at full vibrant volume. Somehow he knew this was Europa. Saito forgot all about his sister's birthday gift. Forgot even who he was. Moved towards the escalator in a straight line, knocking over several autonomic shoppers in the process. His senses enveloped in rotating, rearranging cubes of multicolored light, there was only one thing left for him to contemplate. Her.

Europa stumbled slightly at the bottom of the escalator. Perhaps the hem of her gown had gotten caught up in the works?

She went down.

NOT QUITE MEANWHILE

Daikuke had heard enough. He probably had no business sitting at this table, anyway. Whatever Plinth was talking about, it was well beyond his means. Even with the new income stream represented by Granit's not inconsiderable patronage, his mall *dojo* was not in the same league. This guy had just bought the entire mall like he was spending pocket change.

To be fair, property values had seen better days.

Granit. The injury to his arm had opened again. The boy's healing abilities were as yet poorly understood. Daisuke took the opportunity to tuck the *densho* of his school into a crack between Granit's arm and shoulder, preserving its teachings for future generations.

He hoped the boy would heal, but even if not, he figured his sturdy stone body would protect the scrolls until some later date when the material could be retrieved and reconstructed by some canny martial arts entrepreneur.

Preferably back on the west coast.

EVERYBODY OUT

Unsub's mission was coming undone. Some cretin (no pun intended) in a white lab coat had blocked his shot just as Europa was entering the kill zone, and now she had... disappeared? He pocketed his weapon casually, utilizing only small movements, nothing that might trigger a response from docile shoppers, and retreated through the service tunnels to his fountain kiosk. Tried to stand perfectly still, hoping no one would notice him staring hard, straight at Plinth's table in the food court.

A short, stalky man with hairy arms and a truly bizarre hairstyle had just lunged across the table and impaled a younger man with his... claws? The younger man's wounds had healed instantly.

Plinth, for his part, merely observed, seemingly on the verge of boredom.

"Everybody out!" someone shouted over a loudspeaker.

What?

ALMOST AS AN AFTERTHOUGHT

Nobody moved.

Logan was stretched across the food court table, wrist deep in Occam's chest, which had grown back around his hand presently. Occam was as surprised as anyone. Due to his prodigious sweating, his own weird hair had divested itself of product and was starting to stand up again, this time completely under its own unexplained power. Impulsively, he produced a pocket lighter and relit his great-grandfather's dead cigar.

All around the food court, other patrons had noticed that their own shopper's flames had quietly extinguished. The rush was over, and silence reigned. Until it didn't.

Plinth Mold's chair scraped loudly against the tile floor as he got up to leave.

Almost as an afterthought he stopped and tossed a #10 envelope full of large denomination U.S. currency onto the table in front of where Daisuke had been sitting.

"For *Sensei*," he said, evidently to Logan, and lit a thin European cigarette, one he had rolled himself, decades ago, as he made his way casually over to the big glass doors at the entrance to the mall.

"Smooth flavor," Logan allowed.

"Hold it!" Maude Fomo shouted again over the intercom.

But he was already gone.