

DOWN IN IT

Looking down had been a certainty. No one could stare straight ahead forever. Looking down had started him falling. A point far below him that when seized upon drug him down, through the floor of the sky. He was helpless to resist, and he couldn't look away.

And now he was looking up.

The inhabitants of this place were better adjusted to its strange gravity. He couldn't follow their speech, and he couldn't understand their reasoning. Their prefab decisions seemed to be laid down haphazardly, strewn across the map in a random distribution. Poorly considered, perhaps, but still firmly affixed.

Haus rolled the dice.

To engage with their language was tacit acceptance of its assumptions. But avoiding the fray would make transacting business all but impossible. Haus needed money to get started. At length he signed the contract, inserting a special clause: He could quit at any time.

Much followed. Having accepted the base premise of textual exchange, he could build upon its foundation. Of course, he was good at building. He founded a publishing concern. Massive Fictions (stylized as MASSIVE FICTIONS). His private joke: "That'll leave a mark." He knew it wasn't funny, but such was his way. He wasn't going to squander his best material on *this* crowd.

He was conscious of the value of maintaining a mystique. He forbade the use of bylines, or, for that matter, any form of credits in his publications. His own name would never appear on any masthead. His special purpose motto: *If you know, you know*.

The revenue stream was meager, at first, but for the most part self-sustaining. The readership replenished itself at intervals, as older, maturing children moved on to cars and girls, and younger, less jaded replacements discovered his books on spinner racks in drug stores and grocery stores. As with the English language, his base was meager, but something to build upon.

Framing the scene had been key. Now he knew what to do.

The rest would prove inevitable.

Thomas A. Bright, Jr. spun around in his chair to stare out of his office window. After a few seconds, he spun around again. And again, and again. "Lay off that," Piro finally demanded.

Thomas blanched. "Stop fucking telling me what to do. I'm forty fucking years old."

"I don't give a fuck if you're fifty." Not to put too fine a point on it, Piro abhorred speaking in Tom's language. He folded his leaf and downed the last swig of his coffee. Scarfed down the last of his toast. "What are we going to do about these bootleg comics?"

"Fuck if I know," Thomas said.

The books had appeared on the market at almost the same instant the Actron team introduced their originals. Cheap, mimeographed copies of their own titles, circulated as wrapping papers for the competitor's disagreeably inferior product. Rock cocaine.

"It is imperative that our intellectual property be vigorously defended," Piro said.

"It's my pejorative," Thomas mumbled, dumbly, apropos nothing.

The Canadian Rockies. Raven sat. He hadn't moved his legs for what he now realized had been several hours. The useless stubs had long ago fallen asleep. Hadn't noticed because for all intents and purposes he was not there.

It was unclear even to himself where he had been, but upon returning he brushed the twigs from his trousers and stood up. Despite the tingling, his body seemed in good repair. It was the first time he could remember cogitating a positive assessment of anything in quite some time. "Fell to Earth," he muttered under his breath, which presently crystallised in front of his face. It was cold.

Raven was a loner, which suited his generally foul disposition. A black man in Canada, he was faced with an anachronistic set of obstacles. Dated humor, incessant bids by white liberals to appropriate his very existence for their own barely defined causes, regular attempts by illiterate hillbillies to disparage his mental health and base cognitive skills. He counted himself lucky there was so much empty space up here into which he could disappear. And the land was beautiful.

Out here on his own, he sometimes didn't bother to don the rubber mask that caused him to appear, to his teammates, as a white man in his early thirties.

Raven possessed no superhuman abilities, only a lifetime of extensive physical and mental conditioning, including intensive training in several historically verified, East Asian combat traditions. He maintained his workout regimen wherever he happened to travel, and whatever he happened to be doing, but he found that periodic trips to the mountains helped him clear his mind of the accumulated frustrations of daily life in the city. They would though, wouldn't they? It had not escaped Raven's notice that the practices he found most efficacious had originated in the mountain regions of China and Japan.

Or so he supposed.

The truth was he didn't really know how he knew the things he knew. During his studies, most of the real insights had sprung from his imagination, fully-formed. All of his research had amounted to little more than an intellectual scaffolding for his flights of fancy. *Ex post facto* justifications, if you will. But whatever, the methods he invented seemed to work. Here *he* was on the mountain. *There* was the valley down below. It was all happening.

As he waited, Raven's next steps gradually resolved into focus. And just like that, he knew what he had to do.

Haus' publishing arm would fund the construction of a spacefaring vehicle. Cut off from his place of origin, Haus was left to his own devices when it came to rebuilding his collection of essential Earth artifacts. Consequently, some sort of space vehicle would be a necessity. Travel would be part of the job, and he was likely to run into trouble along the way.

His ship would need a crew.

This thought was left uncompleted as his Central Park apartment was consumed by a suspiciously outsized explosion.

No known survivors.

HAUS' WILL

The search for survivors had produced nothing. Still, Piro couldn't shake the feeling this would not be the last they'd hear of their boss. When the heroes arrived at their midtown headquarters, Plinth Mold was there, sitting quietly behind his desk. Their story did not amuse him.

"As you can see, I'm fine," he said, his stare boring a hole straight into Piro's eyes.

"We figured," Tom said, as if it had been obvious all along.

Piro sipped his coffee.

The other Plinth, for some reason still going by the name Haus, had not left a will. Piro reasoned he must have come from some other timeline. "Yeah, *our* guy has his shit together," Tom observed. "Something like that," Piro allowed.

If they only knew.

Returning to the timeline again and again was not easy. Plinth's visits would often overlap. He would see himself coming and going. The sensation was never pleasant—he didn't even like to look in the mirror.

He'd been born this way. Simple. But could that ever be enough?

Such questions were not helpful. There were so many of him running around that sooner or later he was bound to run into himself. And then what? Each of his selves looking out for their own self interest, the continuity would soon be a shambles.

But, no changes. Haus refused to abridge himself for the sake of mere humanity. The reader was on his own.

Raven beeped his key fob and climbed into his Mercedes coupe. He had just noticed a police cruiser pulling up in his rearview mirror when an outsized explosion rocked his vehicle, obliterating the automobile and himself along with it.

The police officer exited his cruiser, drawing his weapon and aiming it approximately at the smoldering wreckage.

"Request backup," he shouted into his collar mic, as bits of the Mercedes slowly rained down on his police hat and vest.

Unbeknownst to him, a piece of debris had damaged the antenna on his vehicle. There would be no backup, no answer to his following queries.

It was a sting. Piro and Thomas had set up a fresh sales operation to draw out loyal customers who might also have recently patronized their competitors. Evidence might be found in their pockets.

The very first customer into the barrel produced a hit. Piro searched the body, pulling its pockets out of its pants like rabbit ears. A bootleg comic wrapper bounced off the pavement and started to roll away, propelled by the rising wind. Thomas lunged forward and stepped on it, flattening it under his shoe. Piro scooped up the wrapper and turned it over in his hands, frowning.

"It's worse than we thought."

Sonic Boom leaned back from his microscope, allowing it all to sink in. He had rushed down to the lab, not even bothering to change out of his hero costume (he had simply thrown the lab coat on over his distinctive black and orange uniform), to examine this lately acquired sample from the distinguished competition's new fall line. A few moment's work confirmed his greatest fear: Somehow, someone had duplicated the Actron team's formula for rock cocaine.

The thought itself was unthinkable. The repercussions would be catastrophic—how would this ultimately affect crack sales in New York? The loss of revenue to the Actron team would set back their superseding program of halting the spread of illegal drugs by... years, if not decades.

Time stood still as Sonic Boom cleared his mind of distractions. He would bring all his powers of concentration to bear upon this, the most important task of his short career.

Eva never like to interfere with Tom's relationship with his father. Whatever had gone on between them during Tom's childhood had left it's scars. Whenever the subject came up in conversation, Eva would simply let Tom speak until he ran out of steam, until he had gotten it out of his system. She never interrupted, never interjected.

This time was different.

"You *know* he's involved with this, somehow."

"Yes."

"What are you going to *do* about it?"

Tom seemed to consider his response, spreading his hands flat on the kitchen counter as he stared down into the sink.

"I'm going to kill him."

And this was exactly why she always worked so hard to never get involved.

The RAGNAROK parked silently in orbit, monitoring the events presently unfolding in NYC from a safe distance. Whatever it was her boys had decided to do about the pending copyright conflagration had altered the surface of the future as she could perceive it. Things might never be the same.

It figured. Her boys always made a splash. She was proud of them. Mostly, she kept that to herself.

Plinth Mold had a problem.

Someone was picking off his men. But whom? It was hard to tell.

He'd task Piro and TAB2 with getting to the bottom of the mystery. His boys could handle just about anything. It was why he had let them live, after a series of unnecessary setbacks caused mainly by their inept responses to novel challenges. That, and a prior obligation to their mother.

Oh, he was well aware of the RAGNAROK, slowly orbiting the Earth. He'd deal with her as time allowed.

Plinth depressed a switch on his desk and a holographic display resolved slowly into view. The master map of his overlapping selves, superimposed upon the timeline in which he currently resided. It would be tricky, yes, but he would find a way to wind a path out of this mess.

Or something like that.

He was starting to lose interest.

MEME MAGIC DOESN'T WORK

There was no time like the present to investigate wrongdoings of the past. Thomas' vantage point was safe from observation by the observed. These notions, false as they might be, comforted him as he reminisced about all the bad things he had done so far in his young life. At least those days were over. He realized that the only one holding on to this peculiar point of view was himself.

He let it go.

Here was the relief he had sought, so easily accessible from his current frame of mind. He could simply forget what he had done.

No, really, he could *forget*. Thomas' gifts of memory had degenerated to the point where he could scarcely remember his own name. This predicament offered its advantages.

Each day was an entirely new world. Thomas would wake up every morning, amazed by his own ingenuity, as the new world constructed itself around him with a complete history already intact—there was nothing for him to consider, nothing for him to add. And nobody actually had to live through it all because they had already done so, in the alleged past he could no longer remember.

Every morning.

Building up the past in this manner was as easy as pulling on his trousers and imagining what it must have been like to be himself during some other, arbitrary circumstances. Namely, the continuity leading up to today. It had all come from his imagination anyway, right?

Now, where was he?

A caption appeared beneath him:

One day at a time.

And next to the caption, a blinking sigil.

What did it signify?

Thomas had decided to kill Plinth Mold.

These past few years had proven that Mold was out of touch. With the times; with the styles; with everything, really. Missions that didn't make sense. Marketing that was a mess. Orders issued that flatly contradicted what the man had just said, only moments before. He'd tried following the orders to the letter but he had run smack into the fact that

Plinth Mold really didn't make mistakes. Therefore, responsibility for any failure in the field fell squarely upon his own broad shoulders.

Strong as he was, that particular conundrum just couldn't stand.

On the other hand, Plinth Mold didn't make mistakes. Killing him would be tricky. Any move Thomas made would potentially give away his intentions. Sometimes Thomas wondered if Mold was telepathic. The man seemed to anticipate his every movement, seemed able to read every thought that entered his mind as if it had been printed across his forehead like an involuntary ticker tape confession.

Hmm...

But what if the thoughts simply stopped entering his mind?

Piro lit a stick of incense and leaned back in his swivel chair. Tom had been acting strangely. In and of itself this was not unusual—Tom was a strange and unusual man—but lately he had seemed... erratic? Off, somehow. Piro inhaled, deeply, and was immediately rewarded with a prolonged fit of coughing.

He snuffed out the incense.

Maybe it was nothing. But ignoring his instincts was contrary to Piro's practice. It would be impossible for him to pretend he hadn't noticed these... irregularities... in Tom's behavior.

Whatever. Now it was time to go and wake Thomas up. He would find some way to broach the topic at breakfast.

The RAGNAROK's orbit had become irregular. Subtle perturbations an uncomfortable part of her routine. A downward spiraling malaise she felt unable to escape.

The source?

Her son had discovered Earth culture. For years now she had observed passively as he absorbed the humans' toxic proclivities, at times seeming to actually enjoy this full immersion in their unfathomable insanity. This abrogation of detached objectivity was as surprising as it was shameful. But what could she say? She had never broached the topic with him. He was fully grown, now, and she did not believe it was her place to second guess his methods.

But here she was confronted with a situation that threatened the success of their mission. And Earth's future. Soon, she would find a way to stage the conversation that would not offend his pride.

High above the Earth, the RAGNAROK's orbit stabilized.

Tom concentrated on the triangle, but nothing happened. It was still flat. It was still pink. He no longer had any idea how long he'd been sitting there, staring at the shape in his hands.

His legs had fallen asleep. So, he'd allowed his body to fail him as well. Thomas got up off of the floor and tossed the apparently faulty sigil into his desk drawer.

Maybe he'd have better luck next time.

Caption: *Or not.*

There was no use forcing the issue.

GRISHAM'S FORMULA

The Chrysler Building was destroyed at precisely 21:27 Monday night. An explosion that could be seen from space.

There were no survivors.

"I honestly don't know what you want from me, anymore."

Pause.

"I mean, I'm here."

Piro stared out of the viewport.

The RAGNAROK maintained her orbit, in silence. What could she say? Her son was unhappy. Of Course, that made her unhappy, too.

"We'll have to figure this out later," she said. "Right now we need to get ready for your father to come home."

Then she saw the explosion.

Someone or something was killing off the Actron team. There were so few of them left.

Piro was one of the few remaining team members. He took it upon himself to investigate the murders. It might have been wise for him to call in backup, but, who was he supposed to call?

Being older than most of the team, Piro figured that he himself must know best. Most of the time this worked out fine, but the odd scenario in which the formula fizzled out inevitably led to bigger problems than if Piro had simply stopped and asked for help.

On this summer evening he decided to attend a gathering of his favorite fraternal organization, the Brotherhood of Adult Published Airport Fiction Authors (BAPAFAs). It had been some time since he'd bothered to show up for one of their meetings. He couldn't be certain that he was current on all of his dues, fees, and obligations, and thus if he would even be welcome. Nevertheless he strode into the meeting hall projecting his usual relaxed (some would say smug) demeanor. Nobody seemed to mind his presence. In fact, it was far from clear that they'd noticed him at all.

A solemn oath to Grisham's Formula was intoned as its thick substance was squeezed oozing out of its tube, into the waiting hands of the assembled congregation. Each writer accepted his helping greedily and worked the milky pomade into his scalp, careful to avoid contact with his eyes.

The formula worked.

Each writer's sales presently advanced to an artificially inflated peak, ostensibly guaranteed by tonight's obscure working. It was a sure thing, as simple as falling off an office chair, and Piro was more than ready to throw his pirate hat into the ring. It had been ten (thirteen?) years since he'd sold a story. Even his blog statistics had fallen off precipitously.

This time, for sure.

At length, the other writers began to take notice of him.

The wreckage of the building was absolute. Seventy-seven stories, all collapsed to dust. Piro had been out, attending a meeting of suspense writers when the blast hit. Everyone else had been claimed by the disaster.

Almost everyone.

Tom was working on his hair when an unknown force shook the room. Gazing wistfully into the mirror, he had failed to notice the sound, or, indeed, even the fact that the building was rattling on its foundations. He brushed the accumulating concrete dust from his shoulders and got on with the task of studying himself in the strangely still-intact mirror.

In truth, his vast powers of concentration were seldom acknowledged. It was one of the things about himself he most wished to express to the world.

Upon exiting the men's room Tom noticed that something was definitely wrong. None of the telescreens were working. The halls were strangely devoid of commercial messaging. he checked the reception area on his floor and discovered to his surprise that none of the staff were at their regular posts.

What could explain this?

Alix Graves didn't trust the washing machine with his laundry. He certainly didn't trust it to accurately record the events in progress around him. He folded his slacks and made observations of his own. Still, the facilities were being provided gratis by his employer. A perk.

New New York had changed. This went without saying (except for the fact that he'd just said it). New textures were suggested, experienced, felt. Perhaps they were brought on by the name change. In any case, such questions were beyond the scope of his contract, and therefore of little immediate interest.

The washing machine hummed along, picking up perhaps more than Alix had intended, so to speak, to lay down. It was all sadly audible to anyone who happened to be passing by. Alix was speaking aloud.

At 21:27, he ceased to worry.

"Nobody's going to believe this shit," Tom said, leaning over the veranda and taking in the New San Francisco dawn. "It's not a pitch we can sell."

When his partner didn't react, Tom repeated himself, this time slightly louder. "I said..."

"I heard you the first time," Piro whispered, plaintively. "Let's get out of here."

Tom did as he was told, grumbling under his breath as usual.

"Bullshit."

Over the haze of the New San Francisco dawn hovered the RAGNAROK. She was ready to pick up her boys and return them to base. Or what was left of it, anyway. But one of her boys was not quite ready to go.

"Look, I'm just not ready to go back there, yet, okay?"

No response.

"I'm not, like, scared, or anything. I'm just not ready."

"Of course," Piro said, laying a hand on Tom's broad shoulder. "In any case, our checklist is still incomplete. We've more work to do before we can return to Manhattan."

The RAGNAROK could understand unfinished business. She would wait for her boys to finish up whatever it was they were working on that was so important. In reality, she had no choice.

She rarely did.

Neither of her boys were especially sensitive to such issues. They'd simply never had to be.

"I wonder sometimes what your mom thinks about all this," Tom suddenly said.

"Never really considered it," Piro admitted, and let the matter drop. He was somewhat distracted by the task at hand, not paying close attention to Tom's usual stream of disconnected, half-formed observations. He started to change the subject.

Here, the RAGNAROK interjected.

ALIX GRAVES IN MIRACLE WORLD

A thin pink line. Wider. Dividing the horizon from itself, ready to suggest new possibilities in Piro's field of vision. He resisted the urge, declined to acknowledge the expanded percept capability, even for his own edification. He would not be distracted.

Not that anything about this had been easy, he would readily concede. Distractions, technical and otherwise, had nearly carried him away. Nothing in his wide experience had prepared him for the day when his mother would finally die.

Now how would they get home?

Of course there would come no reply from his companion of so many years. The woman was dead. Unresponsive. And now he would have to find his own way. It had been much the same when his father had abandoned him to her care in the first place. What had he been thinking? What was Piro supposed to do with all this pink?

Whining about it was not going to change anything. Dead was dead, and pink was pink. At least where her kind were concerned. It was actually rather remarkable that she had survived as long as she did, up there in the Earth's atmosphere. In this economy.

This soliloquy was going nowhere.

Alix retraced his steps. He'd left the laundry room and wandered into reception. He'd taken the stairs all the way down to the first floor. Everyone was gone. Half of the building was gone. What was going on?

He was going to have to figure it out on his own.

Just how he liked it.

He liked to feel he was earning his money. While it was true most of his clients could barely articulate what they wanted from him, he made it a point of pride to secure their approval of his work. This approach also cut down on lawsuits.

Standing in the rubble of the Chrysler Building, Alix was no longer sure what he was doing. Had the client even survived?

Tom spotted Alix, still standing there, obviously not knowing what to do. He walked over and said hi.

"Alix... my main...number one... guy..."

"I don't know what you want me to do here, anymore. The building's gone. What's left to surveil?"

Five years later. Not much had changed. Some of the rubble had been cleared away. The Actron Team was now based primarily out of New San Francisco. Alix maintained his mostly silent vigil at the scene of the crime.

Most days were pretty slow.

Aside from the occasional text he rarely heard from his employers. He was starting to think he should look for other work.

"You what," Tom said, instead of asking. Their mom was making him mad.

"I took a leave of absence."

"We thought you were dead."

"I might as well have been," was all she would say.

"I think we all need a bit of time to process this," Piro suggested. Clearly the only level head in the room.

"I don't care what anyone says, I need to get reimbursed for travel expenses." Now she wanted to be *paid* for her mothering.

Piro shook his head as Tom stormed out of the room.

"Mom, he's right. Our budget was thrown completely out of whack. First Plinth, then you. We didn't know what to do. And now we're broke."

The RAGNAROK had half a mind to take off again. This time for good.

Alix knew his services were costing Actron, Inc. more than they could possibly hope to recoup.