



**by Stanley Lieber**

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ACTRON v5

XVA

ANTIGONE + MAUDE

TEN THOUSAND CHANGES, NO SURPRISES







月



Where would you like to go today? The tone was flat. Cameron closed the book. She had spent the whole morning looking for conflict, but it hadn't been necessary to look; Andrew piled into the vehicle and away they went.

At certain angles the glass seemed to depolarize, and the glint of morning sunlight cut into her eyes, making her sorry she'd awakened for... this. Andrew was deep into his book, never looking up. She leaned back in her puffy seat, still not sure she was really awake.

Dapples of whatever on the dusty dashboard. She noticed house-keeping had skipped the car. Andrew, of course, couldn't care less. She tried not to touch the arm rests with her fingertips, as Andrew elbowed her absentmindedly.

Tried again to listen to her book but it was no use, she couldn't concentrate on the words. Her mind kept wandering to the scenery, swaying trees and bushes whipping by outside. She made her window dark and closed her eyes.

Thump. Thump. Thump. She was awake again. Seams in the highway.

Andrew had dozed. Nearer to the coast, now, she could begin to make out the island's visual effects. Mostly, the sunlight still disrupted the integrity of the images. That and its reflections on the water.

She was thirsty, but Andrew had finished off the last of the grape-fruit juice. She watched him sleeping, still annoyed.

The big curve around the mountain came right on schedule. The car banked, reducing its speed only slightly, and Cameron was tipped off-balance, momentum pressing her firmly into her door handle. The fluid in her ears shifted and she gritted her teeth at the familiar lurch in her stomach. She hated the car.



Andrew had awakened and moved on to another book. She decided to have a look at whatever he'd been reading before he fell asleep. There were crumbs in the pages, she realized, as breakfast debris rained onto her lap. She stared hard at him but still he didn't look up. Why would he care, she acknowledged.

The car wanted Andrew's attention but he told it to shut up. Finally he threw his book against the dash. Cameron tried to sink into her seat, ducking her head to avoid his flailing arms. Now he was trying to kick out the windshield, or something. She put her hand on his shoulder and said his word, which calmed him, for a while. He apologized.

It felt as if they would never arrive.

Finally they did. The boat was leaving, but they'd made it in time; the ramps were still unfurled. Cameron grabbed her bag and headed for the ramp while Andrew fiddled with his trunk. Their car pulled away and rejoined to the flow of traffic. Cameron waited at the top of the ramp for Andrew to slowly trundle aboard. "Do you really need to bring all those things," she asked, knowing that he did. He growled at her and trundled away, leaving her to wonder, again, why she had to put up with him. She'd have plenty of time to ponder the question during the voyage home.

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Over the years, as the voyages to and from America became familiar territory, and the peculiarities of each trip became less distinct, melting gradually into the overhead map of her childhood, it would come to seem that there had only ever been one trip. They were always returning from America.

Her brother would probably say that their ability to do so was a privilege. It sounded like their mother talking. Cameron knew she could do as she pleased. Roppongi beckoned.

The taxi set down and they disembarked. Andrew was anxious to hit up the parlors, while Cameron retreated immediately to her room to unpack her things. Housekeeping had gathered her mail into a neat pile on her writing desk. She sat down and began to sift through the stack one by one.

The letter she'd sent from America had arrived. She puzzled at at her own handwriting. She couldn't remember having written the letter, but she did remember addressing the envelope. Whatever she'd had to

say to herself would hopefully prove interesting.

It did not. She'd written a list of books to read, once she got home. Half of them she'd read on the boat, the other half she hadn't really been serious about. She was already boring herself.

School would start soon. She hoped to avoid the scoundrel Shinji bin Sony. He loitered, selling those t-shirts with the recent celebrity catchphrases printed on the front. Nobody bought them. Why would they; his family were criminals, nobody wanted to get involved. As she packed her backpack she tried to think of a way she could excuse herself when he inevitably set up shop in the hallway. She didn't come up with anything suitable.

Andrew bought Shinji's shirts every time he came around. He seemed to think they were funny.

It was snowing again. Cameron decided to take her coat. She finished packing her school materials and headed out for a walk. She'd have dinner down the street. Cook was fine, but sometimes she needed to get out of the apartment. She pulled on her mask and braced herself for the noise of the neighborhood below.

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Who could say why she wanted to go to America? Each time they returned home she promised herself, *never again*. Then, at the first opportunity she would change her mind. Even with her brother tagging along she found she could never resist. Her parents, if they were ever to become aware of her innermost thoughts, would probably find this amusing.

The next trip would continue through April. That was a long time to be alone with Andrew. This time, she'd have to take firm charge of his schedule. She was sure she could handle it.

She couldn't handle it. Andrew's drama ate up all of her free time. She told herself, *never again*. Even as she made the promise she knew it was a lie. America was where she went.

In Seattle they had searched for the book Andrew wanted. An import chain that stocked books from back home. The volumes in question were always sold out, except in America. The logistics were annoying to think about, but, Andrew insisted. He could run you into the ground.

For herself she would collect local histories, typically self-published, and perhaps only available at the offices of municipal governments. Andrew hated visiting the courthouses and small country libraries. Unless of course he happened upon a venue in which to gamble away his allowance.

Cameron would amass a substantial collection of the local histories, sufficiently unwieldy to transport back home. She'd have to ship them back to Japan in a separate compartment. Most of them would survive the journey. When one didn't, Andrew would grudgingly agree to help her track it down.

Sometimes he was not entirely useless.

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Cameron fried an egg. Cook encouraged her, always. She used too much oil, and she the egg in the frying pan for a bit too long. Breakfast didn't taste very good, but at least she had the toast. Cook beamed at her, gratified.

Shinji had actually showed up at their apartment. Without warning. When the sensors went off she even let him in. Of course, he'd brought the t-shirts. (Andrew obliged.) But what he had really wanted was to talk to her. *Her?* she had asked. *Her*, he had said, winking conspiratorially.

Shinji extended a proposal that seemed preposterous on its face. He wanted to sell his shirts in America. And who did he happen to know who frequently visited America? Cameron wasn't so sure about the idea. Andrew, obviously, was all in. Of course he was. Where would they begin?

After this, Cameron felt she needed to exercise some control over her life. She'd start with breakfast, and hopefully expand into more meaningful territory. Shinji's proposal would mean curtailing her book hunting; they'd need the additional storage for Shinji's shirts. She decided to go along with it, if only because at least this was something different from her usual pattern, stumbling around all tired and grumpy from arguing. And anyway, America was America. Right? Andrew could keep the money.

Five or six shipments later, even Cameron was sick of America. She wondered if it was really necessary to accompany the shirts on every single trip. Shinji insisted. Well, let's just have a look at these shirts, she



had said. Shinji froze, and she knew right then and there that something was wrong. She had had to choose her next words carefully. "I'll be the one to chaperone the shirts—this time, next time, and every time after that, for as long as this agreement continues," she said. Perhaps sensing that their enterprise dangled on the end of a slender thread, no one objected to her demands. And so it went.

She didn't want to know what Andrew did with his share of the money. In spite of their joint success, he remained broke.

It wasn't her problem.

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Joining the priesthood had been a mistake. Years he hated, but Shinji didn't know what else to do with his life. At his age, abandoning the security of the church was a risky proposition, and he didn't want to fall into a migration from scam to scam, burning bridges for firewood but somehow still just barely getting by. He didn't want to end up like his cousin, Carmine.

"You know what's fun?" Shinji asked.

"I do not," Cameron allowed.

"Blowing through all this money." Shinji snatched a bale of cash from his roll cart and sent it sailing overboard. "Watch for falling prices!" he screamed over the deck rail. It wasn't clear if there was anyone walking below.

Shinji opened his community center every day at 06:30. There were always a few junkies waiting when he arrived. He would nudge them awake and ask if they'd had any breakfast, inviting them in for a free meal. Most of the time the junkies would roll their eyes. But they'd still come inside for the meal. He was happy to help.

"Lady, you look good in that shirt." Shinji had convinced Cameron, after all these months, to try one on. He had convinced her, but still she wasn't convinced. "I look like an idiot," Cameron said. Shinji frowned, hurt. "Why, you do not." She took off the shirt anyway, and tossed it back on the cart. "I don't want to do this anymore." A seagull took this opportunity to relieve itself, right on top of the cart. "Exactly," Cameron said.

Shinji had often thought about returning to Japan. New York didn't need him; he knew that, now. His extended family at the community center comprised an equinoctial procession of different faces, all with the same problems. He had to resist giving newcomers a rundown of all the many things that were (he knew, straightaway) going wrong with their lives before they'd even had a chance to speak. He was losing it; that state of grace from which all moral authority flowed. Shinji bin Sony would shortly resign his commission and leave the church, fulfilling his own looming prophecy.

"You can't just quit," Shinji said, matter-of-factly, and smiled. "We've a contract."

Cameron dipped her finger into a small patch of seagull shit, dug it around defiantly, and, before he could stop her, smeared a dollop across Shinji's smugly curled upper lip. He took a full step backwards, nearly tripping over Andrew.

"Th—This is an outrage. Why, I've half a mind to—"

"Can it, shitface" Cameron said, and stomped down the ramp to the docks.

This gave Shinji an idea.

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Drawn by morning to the glistening confusion of possibilities; awakening the self; conscripting the now reluctant, now impatient body in anticipation of the inevitable, predictably (yet nevertheless) violent shock to the senses; Shinji bin Sony places first one foot, and then the other onto the floor in front of him. He has overslept again.

He doesn't reach the community center until well after 06:30. Most of his regulars have already dispersed, off to their varying and various panhandling tracks. This is fine. Shinji uses the unexpected windfall of free time to tidy up the communal space. He tasks the ones who stuck around to help. He'll pay them. Something.

There are a handful of remaining matters that must be attended to before he can return to Japan. He believes he is resolved; once these loose ends are tied up, there will be nothing left to hold him here. That's when he will find out just how resolved he really—well, he's pretty sure he wants to go home.

He doesn't remember being this... indecisive? This certainly isn't America talking.

That had been this morning, during the present tense. Before he knew it it was growing dark outside. The day was gone. Shinji shooed out the stragglers still poking at the afternoon dishes and closed up shop for the evening. Tonight he would walk the several blocks to his apartment alone. Inadvisable even during daylight hours, but Shinji bin Sony needed the exercise.

Speed-lace boots crunching snow, the gray of the walls, passing taxis, flickering selves caught red handed contemplating murder in the reflective surfaces of retail displays. Shinji walked. There was nothing to stop him from doing it. He had the money. There was not even anyone he would need to say goodbye to. Just get on the boat, and go back where you came from.

Crossing over in the opposite direction had not been so easy. More than likely they'd never let him back into America once he was gone. But would that really be so bad? The point of leaving was to leave.

These were idle thoughts. Shinji climbed the stairs to his small apartment and sat down at his desk to write a letter to his cousin.

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The branches and leaves turn back on themselves, an uncertain autumn, folding into security, is it me, is it me, is it me?

The mail came and Shinji climbed out of bed to retrieve it. The stairs were steeper in the morning. And it was a big box. Cutting the tape with confident strokes of his pocket knife, green boards of Nabokov smiled up at him. He left the box on the table and went into the kitchen to make some coffee.

04:13. Just enough time to walk to work. He arrived with minutes to spare and greeted the early arrivals. It was always the same. Shinji switched himself off and got on with his day.

The smuggling business had proven hard to control. And now, Shinji was desperate. He flashed on his cousin, in New York. Here was a guy who'd always help out. Making sense of the details could wait for later.



Shinji didn't know how to say goodbye to Cameron and Andrew. Figured he wouldn't. That would alleviate the need to discuss his debts...

He'd simply not return to Japan.

The *real* Shinji was ready to return to Japan. All that was left was for him to set a date of departure. His uncle had made the arrangements. No slow boat for him, this time.

It was out of his hands. They'd cut off the tip of each index finger so he couldn't play the piano. He couldn't gamble. Shinji realized he couldn't visit his cousin while he was still using his name. He practiced calling himself Carmine in the mirror. It didn't feel very natural, anymore.

What did they expect him to *do*?

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Returning to Japan had been a mistake. Shinji was no longer a child. He didn't know this place, and everyone who had known him was long gone.

His cousin had left for America around the same time that he'd boarded the plane from New York. He'd still be on the boat. Ironical; maybe Shinji would even beat him back to America.

But that was unlikely. He'd forfeited his original travel visa by returning. It would take time to reapply for permission to leave. He hoped that Carmine would be comfortable, alone in his lonely apartment. Shinji had always been comfortable there.

This was great. What luck. Shinji (sorry, Carmine) made himself at home. His cousin had left the country, presumably for good, and he'd left all of this in place, just in time for Shinji (sorry, Carmine) to stroll along and assume control. He'd always suspected that Shinji had had a good thing going, here in New York, but now he could see it with his own eyes: the separate facilities, the free labor, the charitable cover—it was a ready-made operation, for which Shinji (sorry, Carmine) was a ready-made captain. Whatever it was Shinji had been up to, Carmine would take it over and make it his own. Fit himself right into place. This was going to be great.

Shinji's uncle had come through again. He always seemed to have solutions for bureaucratic problems. At least for the ones where members of his family were concerned. Shinji's flight launched within the hour.

Back in New York, Shinji splurged on a cab from the airport. When it set down on the roof of his apartment building, he immediately sensed that something was wrong. His plants. They were gone. He'd left New York three weeks ago, without emptying his apartment, without even terminating his lease agreement, and now his plants were gone. What could possibly explain that? Something was definitely wrong.

Carmine had big plans for the public space on the roof of Shinji's apartment. Permits and convention be damned.

This was going to be great.

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Shinji was gone and Cameron didn't care. The snow had come again, blanketing the evidence of filth out on the street. And Andrew was bereft. What now?

He'd saddled them with significant debt. Three shipments were en route, but the shippers might refuse to release their cargo if outstanding invoices were not paid in full. Classic cash flow roulette. Cameron just wanted to walk away from it all. And maybe she would.

There had been no word from that son of a bitch. He'd simply disappeared.

No such luck with her little brother Andrew. He could drive her crazy. He was already arranging some kind of insurance scam based on losses incurred from the three stuck shipments. If the shippers eventually relented, well, then, more money for the both of them.

Cameron just wanted out.

Shinji was tapped out. He'd spent the last of his savings on his ticket home to America (his uncle was generous, but perverse). If they'd already let his apartment, what could he do?

He unlocked the door on the roof and headed downstairs to his apartment. Well, *the* apartment, whomever it belonged to now. Maybe he was homeless. That would take some getting used to.

Carmine answered the door. He spoke abruptly, acted without thinking.

"Oh," he said, in apparent shock, and closed the door again.

Andrew was beside himself. The whole thing had come apart in his lap. All his carefully laid plans spilling onto the floor. How was he going to pay off the—No, something would work out. It always did. He flashed on the real estate Shinji had left vacant in Japan. Shouldn't be much trouble taking possession. He had the papers of incorporation. It would just be a matter of convincing the property manager, and that guy was already on the payroll. Sometimes, family connections had their benefits.

Carmine had to think quickly. Much depended on what he said next. His cousin was a patient man, but even family ties could be stretched to their breaking point. He scanned first one, then another elaborate explanation through his mind, rocking the tape back and forth, searching with the knob of his tape machine for that sweet spot where the natural compression of the tape medium maximized the apparent quality of the signal it carried—he'd know it when he heard it.

But nothing sounded good.

Finally, Carmine opened the door again, but this time he just stood there and said nothing. Shinji remained planted on the same spot in the hallway, just outside the door to his own apartment. Carmine's eyes darted left, then right, craning his neck for a better view down the hallway, then he leaned forward and kissed his cousin on the cheek.

Smiling, he stepped back and watched to see how Shinji would react.

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Sleep was no longer an option. So he stood up and walked to the front door. Outside was winter. He opened the door and inhaled the freezing air, his bare legs recoiling from the cold. He wasn't awake. He wasn't sure he would ever be awake.

No discipline. Watch yourself watching this pass. You will insist that you see it; this is a lie, for there is nothing. There is nothing left. You choose to renew from the source. What you ignored is now animate, in motion. Dare yourself to name it. You cannot refrain. Stop, now.

He knew all of this already. There was no newspaper on the front step, so he closed the door.

The radio didn't work. Rather, there were no broadcasts to tune in to. He turned it on anyway and listened to the randomly generated dead air. It didn't really sound dead. And what did that say?

Already, he had broken discipline. He started the water on the stove and opened a packet of tea. Chewing up the packaging, he spit a small piece of it into the frying pan. Gradually, his orders came bleeding through... He accessed the relevant materials, committing the important bits to memory, and then destroyed the remainder with fire. Breakfast was concluded.

There was a new wrinkle: Permission had been withdrawn for him to move on the target while he was still in Japan. He would need to follow him out of the country, perhaps all the way to America. Fine. He wasn't known there.

He resumed discipline, watching his mind drain itself away.

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He completed the job and moved on to his next assignment, walking back a hostile takeover of the previous target's assets—such as they remained. It was common to chain related jobs together in this fashion. Some found the interconnections challenging to keep track of, but he wiped the slate clean after each payoff, only calling up details as the mission demanded it. Really, there was no other way to work.

Second job completed, he contemplated a short break. The frenetic pace of these past few months was, finally, beginning to catch up with him. Normally it was easy for him to spin more plates. But this time, he told himself, he'd get a little rest before he headed back out there.

It was not to be so.

Wedge into the future was a recurring client he couldn't quite shake loose. If it wasn't the money, it was the access that came with the jobs. Hand in hand with the devil, he'd happily leverage one job to dislodge another. See also: job chaining. He didn't spend a lot of time analyzing the structural elements of his practice.

It was a rush order. Make sure the girl didn't discover the truth about her brother. Okay... The requirements were open-ended, but still he had to account for his time in the measuring system. Charge too much time and it would kill his efficiency. Charge too little and either they would commission a new time study or else they would slash headcount. Neither was desirable. The best strategy was usually to match his reported time against the big matrix of time values he kept hidden in a locked file, then fill in the rest of his timesheet with some innocuous work units that boasted an open-ended time requirement. That way, he could spend as long as he needed on the real job. Everybody happy.

It turned out he didn't need much time for this job. The hostile takeover had been poorly executed, with the principals not even bothering to file the proper paperwork. The assets had been reclaimed easily. He had only needed to prevent the sister from finding out the cost. Since his services had been hired through a cutout, and the brother had been dispatched in a deniable telephone accident, he needed only to rely upon the sister's habitual lack of curiosity about the details of running their family business. And that was a relative certainty.

Sometimes a job worked out just this well.

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Back in Japan, things remained quiet. Between jobs he would shop for texts. He couldn't read the language, but he liked to move his hands over the pieces of paper. His collection was by now immense, impossible to store in his tiny apartment, but he never let his hobbies interfere with work.

From time to time he would notice the presence of others in his line of work. Usually just at the periphery of whatever job he was immersed in completing. He always assumed they were alternates, ready to step in and take command if ever he appeared to falter. He never did, so he was never able to find out for sure.

He began to notice them skulking around the periphery of his downtime, as well. It was true that sometimes he found it difficult to relax, but somehow he doubted they had arrived to help. After a while he would set up little tests. He'd purposely fail to let go of his tension, bearing down on the natural frustrations of the day, and watch to see how they would react. Results were inconclusive.

Discipline continued to elude him. He could feel his grip on the controls slipping out of his... grasp? He even lost his temper, once, during the last job. The sister had distracted him with questions, and he had found himself actually enjoying the conversation. When he noticed this he flew off the handle. It wasn't her fault. He was still mad at himself, now. Anyway, she was dead.

And the vacation wasn't helping. The alternates just followed him around, never bothering to step in and offer advice, or even to force the issue and take command. He guessed that their options were limited when he wasn't actually working.

He decided to take on another job. Maybe something out of the country, another change of scenery, a place where he could stop being reminded of all the things that he hated about himself. He pulled up the public listings and searched for a match.

Things fell into place. He completed another job. Afterwards, returning once again to Japan, he recognized a familiar sense of disappointment as it descended over his mood, the big let down after a massive expenditure of effort. So, work wasn't helping, either. It made him angry. Everything seemed to make him angry, these days. It was almost as if he had no control over his mind, and by extension, himself. That would eventually pose a problem for his work, and so he could not simply stand by and watch as the sequence of events played out to its logical conclusion.

He retraced his steps, searching for the root cause of his problem. He traversed smoothly over the majority of data points, but the tape kept getting stuck on the sister. Something about her manner, the dry assertiveness of her voice, had lodged in his mind.

Belatedly, he got some rest.

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Perhaps a month later he was still thinking about her. This couldn't continue. He tamped it down and got on with his life.

A dog whined in the kitchen. He knew that he didn't own a dog. It was curious; where could the sound be coming from?

He'd been on his own, what? Seventeen years? He'd lost track. That man who was not his father had given him the go ahead, in his way. From then on it was solo work. He realized now that the sound in the kitchen was the dead dog that had followed him home from the test site, all those years ago. She came to visit from time to time, and he always forgot who she was until she was gone again.

He needed to pull himself together.

He thought about visiting T's parents in New San Francisco. They were always ready to welcome him. But was *he* ready for *them*? They couldn't possibly understand the nature of his problem, but their nature was conducive to trying. And then there was Sonja.

He thought about this for at least twenty minutes. Then he decided to put off his decision until the following week. Right now, he had work to do.

New York was lousy with t-shirts. That should have been his first warning sign. When he concentrated on them they would go away. So he knew for sure something was up.

New San Francisco was looking more and more attractive all the time.

By the next day he had decided to pack it up and go. He finished his current job and filed the paperwork. The business would have to survive without him, at least for a while.

Telegraph Hill was a tougher slog than he remembered, but he persevered. His reward at the top of the hill was a locked door to the compound, with no way to contact the inhabitants. He didn't want to just break in. He tried once again to raise them on the phone. This time, Sonja answered.

"Hey, handsome," she said.

"..." he said.

"You got away once. Not this time. I got us assigned as partners. And you know what else?"

"..." he said.

"You've been chosen as the new Chief. Mom and Dad are getting too old to hold field positions..."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" he said.

"...So we decided that since T was already the leader in New York, you'd make the best replacement."

"This is great," he said.

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The Bay Area was too expensive. He'd planned on finding an apartment in the city, but it had quickly become apparent that this wasn't going to happen. He'd made a promise to himself that he wouldn't touch any of the New York money while he was in New San Francisco. He ended up with a room in the compound. No rent.

Sonja visited him often. Her room was just down the hall, so presumably no one would notice as she came and went. He'd lived through worse.

Taking on the family's assignments gave him time to think. The relative anonymity was a relief. These weren't prestige jobs, where his reputation hung in the balance of every minute decision made under fire. Mostly he just did as he was told. The money wasn't great, but, again, no rent.

Maybe a month of this and he was ready to think about what had happened back in Japan. When he'd taken on that last job he realized immediately that there was less preliminary data than he was accustomed to. He figured he'd have to work a little harder. It hadn't occurred to him that he was being set up for failure. And why hadn't it occurred to him? It troubled him that he had missed even the most obvious clues. He needed to pull himself together.

He carried on in this fashion for some months. The mindless work allowed him much too much time to stew on his own failures. By the time the family was ready to make his interim position permanent he was well and truly ready to leave. But for some reason he stayed on. He hadn't quite sorted it all out, and in any case they needed his help. He couldn't just abandon them to the lions. He settled into his role as the chief. They even called him that: The Chief.

The Chief wanted discipline. Minds tended to wander. He knew from his naval experience that this was bad for propulsion; focus must be sustained. The first step would be to eliminate (or at least, curtail) distractions. He banned non-work media from the compound. Networking had long been outlawed, but he replaced the honor system with active countermeasures; devices would simply no longer work.

Uniforms would now be required during shifts. His own brown jacket and fatigues would serve as a model. Fright wig optional.

Revisions would continue until morale improved.

Before long, the family business was running just like a real business.

Maybe that was the problem.

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The business was failing. His standards were too high. Profits turned to steam and evaporated under the intense pressure of map revisions, course corrections, arbitrary edits, and total do-overs. To be fair, the staff were hardly equal to the task. Blood from a turnip, and so forth.

So, another failure. He couldn't take much more of this. He sensed now that the blunt Earth could not accommodate his thundering footsteps. Maybe he was just clumsy. What was there to measure himself against?

New York. But he wouldn't go back there and look at that sky.

"Chief, what's next?" an underling asked. The Chief stared straight ahead.

Born of the pink triangle, rolling to his feet with the plan still fresh in his mind, he'd lost the plot somewhere along the way. Coming to Earth had been one mistake. Coming to New York had been another. Coming to 1986 had been the worst mistake of all. His efforts to prevent the inevitable had perhaps only hastened its arrival.

And now New San Francisco. The whole arrangement had been displaced, transplanted a full century forward into a future it could never have otherwise known. Megatokyo was not his Japan, and New San Francisco resembled the Bay Area of his youth only in its bare geographic contours. Everything else had shifted unpredictably. It never even got foggy here.

He didn't know what to do. He was certainly not going to call and ask T for help.

He'd have to consider taking on venture capital. This was an avenue he had scrupulously avoided, and for good reason. He had to keep control of the ship. Investors meant a board, and a board meant even more perceptions to manage. This, too, would be bad for propulsion. It was no way to get from Point A to Point B.

He'd just have to find another approach.

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Nah. He shut down the business and liquidated its assets. On to the next gig. Which was... what? The ship stood by him, always. They would find something meaningful to do with their time.

Not calling T.

Each befouled arena narrowed the field of possibilities. Some locales he wouldn't touch as a matter of pride, which was nonsensical. What was he doing to himself? This he couldn't sustain. His reputation would be ruined, and he'd have to start over from scratch. Again.

He set these thoughts aside and moved on to the next item, which he highlighted presently. A couple of stops in the midwest, and then back to New York. Not for himself, but for the job. he made another promise to himself to concentrate on the task at hand, to try and pull himself together. If for no other reason than the fact that he was tired of saying the words, "never again."

The midwestern locations in his file were nondescript, rural. The targets never even became aware that they were being stalked.

New York would be trickier. T always expected him, even when there was no real reason to expect him. They were brothers, and, besides, the Chrysler Building was keyed to his biometric signature. Upon entry, ambient lighting and temperature would adjust themselves to his preferences, alerting onlookers who knew what to look for to his presence.

And then there was T himself. Killing his twin brother would be complicated by the (slightly) younger man's physical invulnerability, class 100 superhuman strength, powers of flight, ingenuity, and sheer dumb luck. He would have to be exceedingly careful.

This job couldn't have come at a better time.

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He smelled solder. Something in his room was burning. But he had already checked out, removed his belongings, so nothing of his could be burning because there was nothing there to burn. He pulled on his jacket and walked out of the building.

His ship crossed the country in a handful of minutes. It wasn't in the manual, but he and the ship went way back, their mutual



understanding transcending any supposed laws of nature. Mother and son, they were meant to be.

The sky was fluid mercury as the ship set down in New York. Docked with the Chrysler Building's airship terminal and disembarked for the gift shop. He'd pick something up for the ship before continuing on with his task. His brother could wait a few extra minutes while he shopped.

Waited in line longer than he had planned, but he was certain now that he'd been spotted. The building, at least, had recognized him, and flickered the lights in the gift shop accordingly. He'd have to work around it.

T never showed up to greet him. It turned out the elevators were out of service, again. Perversely, T had moved his office to the 61st floor observation deck, so it was up, up, up, many flights of stairs to the family reunion. Okay.

"Brother," T said, as the former chief of the west coast branch of the company strode silently into his office.

"I'm not your brother," he said, staring directly into T's visor.

"Fine. But do have a seat," T said.

He remained standing.

"Please. You're making this more difficult than it needs to be."

Conceding the point, he raised his weapon and squeezed the trigger.

—

His brother's death affected him more than he expected. Beyond the fact that T was not *really* his brother was the reality of their shared history, their unique perspective as time-traveling entrepreneurs, and the commonality of their interests. This hole in the black inkwell of his heart would not be so easily filled, "even by the mightiest of pens," he surmised.

Honoring the plan of succession, he would of course assume command of the New York operation. The real estate alone was of staggering value. After slashing headcount and streamlining his operating costs, he was confident that he could turn things around in time to avert catastrophe. Something good could come out of this tragedy, yet.

The job had set things right, but it had also set many things wrong. Just one of the many examples he was now prepared to cite: Was he, himself now a target? The burgeoning line of thought set him on a course he found difficult to steer. Why had T been assassinated? Where would the money trail ultimately lead? In the short term, he allocated considerable company resources to finding the killer, even as his instincts told him the investigation would run into a dead end. He owed it to his brother to at least try to get to the bottom of this.

Inside the Chrysler Building was heaped an intimidating inventory of T's belongings. Seventy-seven stories, most having been used for storage at one time or another. One of the elevator shafts was completely filled with loose baseball cards, the result of a failed venture into the speculator market. Excavating the various piles of collectibles was complicated by the need to employ the talents of experts from various fields related to the contents of the piles. Who knew what treasures might be hidden amongst the duplicates, rejects, and lames. A proper checklist needed to be created and appraised.

Within a month of his brother's death he was settling into the indignity of his new routine. Paperwork, paperwork, and other, new kinds of paperwork. He began to understand why he had always preferred working in the field. He preferred to keep his hands free of bureaucracy and his eyes on his own paper. ("I'm allergic to your text," as the man who was not his father had said.) It was no great surprise that T had become deranged. Trapped here, as he was, toiling behind this desk in this office where he had probably had to raise his hand before getting up to use the restroom. All of it in flat contravention of their legacy, and he was glad that his brother hadn't lived to see himself in this light. The final dissolution of their partnership, affected not through any kind of direct action by their enemies, but through the slowly proceeding degeneration of the self. Self-inflicted.

Whatever came next, things would be different.



J



Stan had always self-identified as a stork, but he had come to realize, in his old age, that he was more than likely descended from the *Threskiornis aethiopicus* species of ibis—the African sacred ibis. This transmigration of his soul from one species to another made no great difference to him; he'd still collect his pension.

Stan had passed the civil service exam online, with help from a contract hacker. He figured that exhibiting the resourcefulness required to pull something like that off had to count for something. Anyway, no one had ever complained about his work after he got the job.

He liked to drive the mail truck.

He wore the hat, and the weird socks, pulled up over his long, slender legs. His beak checked the windshield as he rolled over potholes, or turned too quickly inside the tiny cabin. His articulate wing tips quickly sorted the mail. The families on his route always smiled and waved when they saw him ambling down their street. He had become a neighborhood fixture.

Stan glanced in his rearview mirror and inched back onto the road, rolling slowly toward the next mailbox. His next package was too large to fit in the box, so he extricated himself from the vehicle and made his way up to the residence's front door.

"What in the hell are you supposed to be?" asked the resident after he'd unlocked the deadbolt.

"A bird, sir," Stan sighed, leaving aside for the moment the question of his precise, accurately identified species. The debate was all too familiar.

"Fucking liberals," the man said.

"Indeed, sir," Stan replied, and walked back to his mail truck. He didn't feel much pride as a bird on a normal day, so it was hard for him to get worked up over verbal abuse. If the man tried to assault him it would be a federal crime. And Stan was more than capable of defending himself. Anyway, this was his job.

Stan's tall knees bucked against the underside of the truck's dash as he pulled back onto the highway towards town. He adjusted the small fan mounted over the mail tray and hummed to himself an original composition that he planned to commit to tape some time in the following week.

Friday was payday.

So be it.

—

Stan never tampered with the mail. He did his job. It was the same every day. Mostly he kept his head down and avoided fraternizing with the other mail carriers. After some bad experiences early in his career he'd come to realize this was best.

On a typical day he would go home after work and hit the Doritos pretty hard. Often he'd just sit there in his La-Z-Boy until it was time for bed. Sometimes he'd even find himself still there in the morning. No big deal; most of what he needed when he did wake up was easily within reach.

It wasn't strictly necessary to speak to anyone at work. Most days, he didn't. Most of his conversations occurred between himself and the people who lived on his route. These conversations were by necessity short. The mechanical aspects of the business dictated that soon Stan would have to move on to the next house. Still, he remembered most of their names, most of the time.

Stan thought that there must have been a lot of people out there living their lives in a similar fashion. Maybe, sometimes, they got lonely. He'd never know, and he didn't particularly need to.

And he didn't really feel lonely. It was true that he was unique. Most storks (ibises?) didn't bother to live to his advanced age, never grew to his size, nor for that matter ever acquired human speech. He wasn't sure he'd want to talk to them anyway. He found that he didn't have much in common with other members of his species. It was better to keep to himself, to keep at a remove from the goings on of the greater stork world.

That was what he told himself as he drove the mail truck down the street every day.

—

No, he was serious. There had been another stork he had tried to be friends with, before college, but it hadn't worked out. Part of why he left town. He didn't like to think about that time. Nowadays, it was Doritos and the mail truck.



And his music. When he wasn't snacking or asleep he tried to set down his ideas. His equipment was primitive, but he found he had no aptitude for operating complicated machines. He pressed the record button and played his guitar.

He didn't talk to anyone about this. It wasn't for them to know. Something happened when he played that he wouldn't have been able to explain, anyway. The recordings themselves were superfluous (though they did comprise a record of the experience); it was primarily the process that gripped him.

In his bumbling way he was transported.

On the other side of the musical divide, the man he had come to know as the Chief presently resolved into view.

"Report," said the Chief, swiveling in his chair to face Stan and his guitar.

"Slow week," Stan said. "Three tracks, none of them mixed. I'm... not sure where to go from here."

"Don't worry about it," said the Chief, and broke the connection. Stan set down his guitar. What was *that* supposed to mean? He stopped the tape recorder and opened another bag of Doritos.

Thirteen years into his career as a mail carrier, Stan still didn't know what he wanted to be when he grew up. Spying with his guitar was okay, but, he had always assumed he'd get famous for something... else. He still had no idea what that might be. His current pay was sufficient to finance his lifestyle, so he was free to follow his conscience during his free time. He wasn't even sure that his career needed to encompass his interests.

Whatever, it was time for work.

—

The team was coming together. A delicate job in Japan. The Chief had hand-picked them all:

Stan, communications. Mild and reserved, Stan was a newcomer to the field. With his guitar always in hand, he hoped he could live up to his billing as the team's messenger and oracle. If not, well, how would anyone know?

Alix Graves, recon scout. Point man, so far out in front of everyone else that he was pulling up the rear. Private investigator and New San Francisco native. Weird sports glasses. His imaginary friend was along for the ride, at no extra cost. This netted him all the capabilities of a two-man team, but at a fifty percent savings.

Raven, hitter. Not really a bird, which led to some awkwardness with Stan. (Stan mostly deferred to the younger man's superior costuming). Raven's contempt for his teammates was evident. He didn't say much, but when he did speak it tended to make people uncomfortable. The target of his professional attentions would surely be made to feel worse. Raven's training mirrored the Chief's, but he was definitely (maybe?) human.

Dimension Man, transportation. An early skateboarding accident had triggered the onset of latent superhuman powers, namely the ability to transport people (including himself) and objects over great distances using only the power of his mind. The implications were obvious. Nearing forty, he still skated whenever he got the chance.

John Ratcliff, enforcer. Sometimes known as Super-Sonic, though the name had little to do with his skills. Class 100 superhuman strength, physical invulnerability, prolific anti-establishment mythopoetics. Another refugee from the vintage New York team.

Finally, the Chief himself. Still wearing his favorite brown jacket with skull and crossbones eyepatch. Still carrying his ancient, somewhat controversial sidearm. Sporting a consistently wooden expression, only seen to crack a grin by those taking their final bows as they prepared to exit the stage. Something was up with him, but you couldn't tell what it was. That was the Chief, for you.

The mission would kick off in three days time. The men would fly to Japan aboard the Chief's peculiar pink aircraft (the Chief having thought it would be wise to reserve Dimension Man's equally peculiar talents for the main event). Once in-country, the Chief would conduct his big symphony from behind the big board in front of his big captain's chair.

All that remained for Stan was to read the spec for the job.  
He figured he was ready.

—

The job did not go as planned. Discipline had broken down almost immediately. Or at least it had seemed that way; it was never really clear what anyone else was doing at any given time.

First, they had materialized in the wrong place. The initial disorientation led to several unauthorized weapons discharges, each of which would have to be accounted for in the paperwork. Civilian bystanders were caught in the crossfire. Members of the team had mistaken the misfire as an incoming attack and responded in kind. This expanded the mishap's reach exponentially. By the time the smoke cleared the streets had been painted red.

Ignoring all signals to abort, Raven advanced to the objective, with John Ratcliff laying down suppressing fire. Stan was impressed, he'd never seen anything like it. Well, in real life. He aimed his guitar at the action, ensuring that the Chief would enjoy a clear view. He guessed that this was what they wanted him to do. Nobody had explained his duties to him, or told him anything at all.

The general disorganization was exacerbated by the team's failure to locate their target. This had hardly slowed Raven down. He proceeded to carve a crimson path through the civilian-clogged street. At least now the rest of the team could follow. Stan tracked their progress with his guitar. When Raven rounded a corner, Stan realized that he'd have to move forward as well. The crowd closed up behind them like a self-healing wound. Everyone just stepped over the bodies.

At some point Raven returned with the target in tow. John Ratcliff again encouraged the crowd to disperse. Dimension Man was ready with his portal, and Stan nearly missed the doorway as it closed up behind the team.

The first thing Raven did once they had returned to the ship was to stomp onto the bridge and pin Alix to a bulkhead, his hand stapling the taller man's frame to the wall like a thick sheet of tan, muscular paper.

"You. Said. No. Mission. Logs." he rasped through clenched teeth.

"W-what?" Alix managed to get out, totally confused.

Nobody had paid any attention to Stan, standing by the door, absentmindedly strumming his guitar. Suddenly they all realized he was there, what he was doing.

"Turn that thing off," John Ratcliff said quietly, laying a hand on his shoulder. Stan immediately complied.

"Turn it back on!" the Chief cried, rising to his feet and raising voice. "I love this song."

—

None of it was real. Stan imagined himself participating in... whatever this was supposed to be. But that was as far as it went. The other players may or may not have existed, and Stan may or may not have really known they existed. Certainly, none of these characters resided along his mail route. And who could he tell? He'd take long breaks from playing his guitar.

Stan didn't know this was all being recorded.

The team relied on him more than he knew. There had to be a conduit between the Chief and his men in the field. Experiments with Dimension Man's portals had failed; information must be transmitted by an alert, engaged consciousness (Dimension Man, distracted as he was by his other duties, could not fulfill this requirement). Stan might be inexperienced, but he was *there*, and he could just about do the job. Anyway, the Chief believed in him.

This all left Stan in an uncomfortable position. On the one hand he was happy to help, but on the other hand he had been telling himself for some time now that none of this was real. Well, maybe it didn't matter. Maybe the unreality of the situation need not impede his performance. Stan resolved to maintain a positive attitude. He decided to keep his head down and forge ahead. Forward, like.

Next day, when the Chief called Stan into his office, he was relieved. Now he'd find out what this was all about. Maybe he'd even get a new assignment.

"Have a seat," the Chief said.

Stan did so, automatically performing a quick site survey of the objects displayed around the office. Not much to speak of. He wondered how long the Chief had been operating out of this location. "Nice chairs, boss," he said.

The Chief paused long enough for Stan to become worried he'd said something irretrievably stupid. Then he began to speak, which to Stan's way of thinking was worse than the wondering.

"A periodic review of your performance records has revealed that your presence on away missions is literally more trouble than it is worth. Effective immediately you shall remain aboard ship and relay mission data to me that has been transmitted to *you* via telepathic means by the newest member of our team..."

The Chief depressed a small switch on the side of his desk and the narrow door in the wall behind him slid open. Foley: [SCHLICK]

"...Cy-bra."

The Chief leaned back in his swivel chair and made a tent with his hands. Seeing that Stan had noticed the affectation, he doubled down on the oblique gesture, substantiating the master/servant relationship. Place it in your memory.

Cy-bra emerged from the Chief's small closet and nodded to Stan. Unsure what to do, Stan nodded in return.

"Since the two of you will be working together closely, I imagine you'll appreciate this opportunity to get acquainted."

The Chief stood up, exited, leaving them to settle the question between themselves.

Stan was more confused than ever.

—

Muted colors shifted slowly, or maybe it was just the intensity of the light. Red and silver tones on nothing. Stan wondered if storks (or ibises) could even see color. Somehow, *he* did. Cy-bra lay next to him, still asleep. How had it come to this?

The Chief had put them together, working side by side on various jobs, and one thing had led, improbably as it might seem, to another. He liked to wake up this way, with no need to dwell on the things he wanted to avoid. Instead of himself he could talk to her.

But she was still asleep. He had to work out the reasons why she should be there, why he wasn't just crazy. He couldn't come up with anything convincing. She hadn't just walked out of his guitar... but how *had* she arrived in his bed? He scratched himself, wishing he hadn't finished off that last bag of Doritos. Presently, Cy-bra awoke.

"We shouldn't have done this."

Stan was taken aback, but of course he'd wait to hear her out.

But, that was it. Cy-bra climbed out of bed and stepped purposefully into her clothes and shoes. Without another word she left the apartment. Stan figured he'd see her at work.

Work was less satisfying when he knew what he was missing. All along his mail route he could think only of Cy-bra, co-worker/lover from his other job. He probably put some envelopes in the wrong mailboxes. This kind of preoccupation wasn't like him at all. Pretty soon customers would start complaining, which could lead to a poor performance review.

In the evenings he would sit and plink away at his guitar. Frustrated by his inability to resume the Chrysler Building, he would thrash about randomly, not even really *trying* to play one of his own songs. He felt old and ridiculous. Underemployed. Didn't they still need him out in New San Francisco?

The answer was not forthcoming. He hadn't expected much, but this was... nothing. In the weeks that followed Stan went through a lot of Doritos.

"Oh, there you are," the Chief said, late one evening just as Stan was about to give up. "We thought we'd lost you."

Stan didn't know what this meant, but he took his guitar out of the trash can and got back to work.

—

He kept the big box of tapes under his bed. It would not be long until he would need a bigger box. He wondered sometimes if he should digitize the lot. He put it off and put it off. Someday, he thought, it would be difficult to get a hold of a working cassette player.

Stan recorded as the mood struck him. It could, and did, happen at the most inconvenient times. He had to set the ideas down as quickly as possible; once they were gone, they were gone. He operated the little 4-track machine with the unshakable confidence of a self-taught expert. Tape hiss was his enemy. Superior inspiration was his ally.

At some point he realized that the Chief was probably keeping recordings of his own. He wondered if the Chief's equipment was primarily digital, thus avoiding generation loss and tape hiss. This somewhat lateral insight set him on a cycle of acute obsession, pondering the higher fidelity recordings that must exist in the Chief's vault. Stan was

his own biggest fan, so of course he had to get his hands on them.

Cy-bra was not willing to participate in any mission that would violate the Chief's trust. Raven told him to fuck off and hung up the phone. Dimension Man had to pick up his kids. John Ratcliff didn't reply to his e-mail, telephone calls, or forum posts. So much for teamwork. This meant Stan was on his own. Eventually he decided to just ask the Chief for the tapes. Discs? Whatever.

"It's complicated," the Chief began. "But we could probably get you your songs."

The Chief winked at him, and motioned for Stan to step back behind his desk. He depressed a switch inside one of his drawers and a panel dissolved to reveal the largest collection of bootleg stork/ibis recordings Stan had ever seen. CD-Rs that Stan assumed must contain at least some of his tracks in perfect digital quality.

"Straight from the soundboard," the Chief confirmed.

Stan had to have them, and the Chief knew that Stan had to have them.

They could do business.

—

Part of the deal had been to surrender his position on the team. That was fine with him; this whole thing had been a confusing time sink from the start. He had never really understood his role in the first place.

After the papers had been signed he never heard from Cy-bra, Dimension Man, or anyone else on the team again. He figured it was just as well. These people had never seemed to like him, anyway.

It didn't take long for him to settle back into his old routine. None of the last few years had seemed real, and maybe they really hadn't been. Stan picked up more or less where he had left off, delivering the mail and not speaking to anyone unless he was spoken to.

All of this was in service of getting on with his real work. He couldn't continue paying his material into a system that denied him ownership (and access to clear recordings) of his songs. Whatever success the Chief had helped him attain, the spoils could never be equal to simply doing the right thing. Each of his songs was an insurance policy against old age, poverty, madness... He couldn't just turn them over to the



enemy in exchange for a little temporary security... Comfort. He placed the box of CD-Rs under his bed with his cassettes and affirmed that all of this had been an expensive figment of his desperately impoverished imagination.

For some weeks he came up with no new material, just practiced and refined his fingering on the trickier passages of old favorites. He had started to worry something was broken inside of him, but soon enough the familiar flow of bland, underdeveloped melodies once again began to trickle into his consciousness. It felt like taking the slow boat home. *This* was the work he had dreamed about. This was the work he would do.

A light had flipped off inside of his head, forever. He noticed, but he didn't care.

Thirty years later he died.

5



—

## YOU CAN'T GO TO AMERICA

The legend hung above the Hidden Door English School like a taunt. Daisuke didn't care, he was going to get some of that Disney money even if it killed him.

The program was not all that expensive, really, but even the first payment had been more than he could afford. It was all he could do to stay current on his tuition at the English School. Hidden door, indeed. How would he ever get out of this place?

All day and all night he thought about getting rich. Trite aphorisms washed over him. "What is the sound of one hand getting money?" And: "Why ask why?" And: "A hard man is good to find." None of them were any help. He was still flat broke.

Daisuke stuck with his training. Every day he learned new, inane American phrases. He was able to follow TV and movies now without subtitles. He was less confident in conversation. At the end of each lesson he would cut the *kuji* and seal up his notes.

Daisuke had dreamed about leaving Japan for his entire life. He wanted to get rich. Somehow, the two goals had gotten tangled up in his mind. One seemed like a prerequisite for the other. And how could that work?

He thought:

EARTH

You endure. Obstacles shatter against your hull. The water parts as you continue on your course unabated.

WATER

You react. Your insight flows around the problem, addressing it from several angles at once. You extinguish the troublesome flames sparked by the problem with your own final solution.

FIRE

You experience. You enjoy the conflagration. It amuses you to observe the opposition as it consumes itself with useless resistance. Oxygen fueling your fire, you burn through the problem on your way to the ultimate victory.

WIND

You engage. You contemplate the myriad possibilities inherent in tackling the problem, mindful of potential pitfalls and traps. You stay clear of the edge; after all, the winds are high, and you don't want to topple over the side into the abyss.

VOID

What is the sound of one hand getting money? No, seriously.

His will exhausted, Daisuke retired to his futon. He opened and closed several games in his emulator before finally falling asleep. Nothing was helping.

—

Daisuke gave up on giving up. He got out of bed and went through his *juman taiso* fitness routine, which caused his calves to hurt. So what.

It kept coming back to the money. He had to get out of Japan. He remembered suddenly a friend of his brother's, Carmine bin... something or other, whose cousin lived in America, operating some sort of charity for those too poor to fend for themselves. He supposed that he fit into that category, and wondered if the charity would assist him. It couldn't hurt to ask.

But he wasn't speaking to his brother. He had no idea how to reach Carmine... whatever his family name was. Another dead end.

It would be several hours before anyone he knew would be awake. He decided to study his English School supplements. He skimmed the videos at 10x, defeating the purpose. Nothing lodged in his mind. He could only observe helplessly as the sense data skittered into and out of his consciousness. He couldn't muster the will to interpret, to retain, to reflect.

After an early breakfast he walked to school, reciting in his mind the rhyme of the week.

God damn  
Another fucking payback with a twist  
Them motherfuckers shot but the punks missed

It sounded better with the music. Daisuke had memorized the whole piece, for whatever that was worth. The other students didn't seem to

like the material, but he was like, whatever. It scanned.

He checked his messages for work. No alerts. Twice in the past week he'd booked a job only to have it canceled at the last possible minute. Of course, he still had to pay the access fees. It cost money to make money, which seemed perverse.

It started to rain. Daisuke pulled on his hood and hailed a cab.

—

Something was no closer to happening. Daisuke tabled his ambition and tried for something more realistic: graduating the English School.

He noticed then that his life was all plot. There were no descriptions in the text even of what he looked like. He watched as the thought came and went, his awareness transitioning even as he considered what it mean to be thus described. And then it was on to something else.

At length, Daisuke graduated from the English School. Work picked up and then slowed down again. His thoughts returned to form: He had to get out of Japan. The monotony of the cycle was grinding him down.

Daisuke plucked raisins from a *tobe* ware bowl as he carefully considered his options. He could stay. He could leave. He could stay and enjoy the perks of his current work. He could leave and starve to death, or worse. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't do both.

This had not been the plan.

Daisuke took refuge in the knowledge that he was not the first to suffer this dilemma. Young people were always leaving Japan, failing, and then returning home, embarrassed, never wanting to talk about what had happened abroad. He wished he could afford to fail like that, but he knew that there was no safety net for him and his kind. There was no one at home to take him back.

For several months he gave piano lessons to the children of dignitaries. This went well until disagreements inevitably arose as to what sort of material he would cover. Daisuke refused to teach anything written after 1995.

But he made money. He saved money.

For a year he worked as a custodian in an Internet cafe. The antiquated hardware and anachronistic uniforms demanded near-constant maintenance. He finally quit, again over discrepancies in the timeline offered to customers; the presentation didn't really make sense.

But he made money. He saved money.

For some indeterminate amount of time he managed the social media accounts of a public relations firm. He considered this a personal failure and never wanted to talk about what had happened in the office. It was bad enough that some of his clients had gone on to dominate the entertainment cycle; he would be unable to forget them if he tried.

But he made an awful lot of money. And he saved.

At the end of five years he was ready to move to America.

—

Daisuke's marketing plan was to franchise the skills he had learned as a child. He preferred to license married couples, for the stability they brought to the finances of his schools (the lazy occult symbolism was never discussed). Candidates could train for their own trips to Japan while simultaneously operating cram schools targeted at students further down the chain. Everybody got what they wanted and the money flowed uphill.

He hadn't asked for permission. Whatever the license holders in Japan might have preferred, this was America: Freedom of speech!

Graduates of his program valued their investment, and tended to supply public relations gratis, effective at roping in yet more of the kind of people who sought out this sort of thing. Inside of a decade he had taken the operation global, licensing franchises in nearly every country recognized by the United Nations.

Except for Japan. *There* remained the question of who ultimately owned (or rather, controlled) the intellectual property that comprised his techniques. Daisuke had no solid claim on his style save for his improbable success. The Japanese had never tried to monetize the material overseas. To his way of thinking this meant that what he was doing was okay. For the most part, so far, the courts had tended to agree. But he wasn't comfortable that the tacit arrangement would last if the Japanese started to raise objections.

He had to find a way back into Japan.

Back when he had been working contract hits for the Americans, he'd been hired to understudy for an aging, but unusually reliable operator out of New York. It turned out that he'd never had to step in, but he'd taken notes (strictly against protocol) on the operator's Japanese connections. Searching through his notebooks he located the entries he remembered jotting down. The operator had moved freely between New San Francisco and New York, and pretty much anywhere else that he wanted to go. This lack of paperwork was ostentatiously suspicious, and Daisuke had made it a point to follow up on the item and find out what was going on.

What he discovered made his jaw drop. The operator was being manipulated directly by a *god*.

Which could turn out to be a valuable connection.

—

It was a dumb way to think about it, but the signs were all there. The operator's orders were coming from inside his own body. Daisuke knew the setup well: Interpret thyself.

He examined his motivations and realized that he'd already traveled some distance towards sympathy with the operator's goals. Yes, he would follow this thread. The operator's mind opened to him and he extracted the required information. On his way out he left behind the patterns that would attract the attention of the *god*. Careful...

He boarded his corporate jet, headed for New San Francisco. These days he traveled light, taking with him only what staff would be necessary to facilitate his mission. And what was that mission? Daisuke wasn't yet sure. This was no way to run his business but it might yet yield the results he was after.

Once he touched down in New San Francisco, he traveled by motorcade to the operator's compound. The single file line of cars was bound to attract attention, and that was intentional. The operator would know he was on his way.

"I'm here about the job," Daisuke said, maintaining eye contact with the operator even as he settled into one of the plush leather seats in front of his desk.

"Ah, yes," said the operator.



Arrangements thus settled, Daisuke retired to his quarters. Thirty-six hours until he shipped out. He reviewed his orders and then tucked them into the secure pouch he carried on his person.

It had been a long day.

—

Daisuke did not particularly miss the business. In recent years, the demands on his time had become more of a nuisance. None of the trappings, none of the people, were essential to his purposes. The operator provided him with direction, and, consequently, his internal monologue had ceased.

When a ticket did come in he would place it in TAKEN status, then consider the best way to respond. Often he did not need to leave his chair. The operator's organization had established a policy of minimizing unnecessary travel. He left the compound only when circumstances demanded manual intervention.

One such situation obtained. Daisuke started his mission, exiting the compound via his usual means, and affecting travel via public transportation. He browsed a magazine to pass the time. Once the bus arrived at his stop, Daisuke resumed the street and hiked on foot to his destination. He found that the mechanical aspects of his present employment agreed with him. Every modular action fitted snugly alongside the next. No daylight was visible between modules.

At the end of his employment term Daisuke decided not to re-up. He still found the work agreeable, but perhaps it had distracted from his ongoing goal of gaining access to the Japanese market. In the years since he'd surrendered control of day-to-day operations, little evident progress had been made. It figured.

At any rate, the boss was back.

"I'm the boss, I can *be* late," Daisuke announced at the inaugural board meeting of the New Era.

No one present disagreed.

—

But, there would be no New Era. Daisuke stopped pretending; there was no company for him to return to, no way he could return to his old life. Japan or no, he was much too busy with each day's fresh

batch of problems at work.

The operator had moved him to a desk inside his own office. Sitting there, watching his boss breathe, Daisuke found it difficult to concentrate on his work. It didn't seem to matter. The operator liked having him within earshot, just in case he decided to say something that required an immediate response. Daisuke had faced more challenging work in the past.

Listening to the operator talk on the phone. He spent much of his time chatting with one particular fellow, Slate, or Snake, or something like that. Very deferential. Totally unlike the manner in which he spoke to his own subordinates in real life. Daisuke could only imagine what the other guy must have been saying during all those calls.

Daisuke worked in that office for five, maybe six years. He began to forget what it had been like, out in the field. The moment-to-moment hustle and bustle conspired to grind all the reflection out of him. He was left a smooth, matte surface. Blank. By the end of each day he wanted nothing more than to lay down on the floor and never get up again. That, he imagined the operator covering the phone with his hand and saying to him, could be arranged.

Daisuke had begun corresponding with former employees. One in particular, a man named Stan, who had returned to his previous job as a mail carrier, had become a good friend (or at least someone who would answer Daisuke's frequent letters). From Stan he gradually pieced together a clearer picture of the events that had taken place shortly before he was hired. Daisuke was surprised at what he learned.

—

The boy on the skateboard had attracted attention not because skateboarding was inherently interesting, but because he had wandered into a restricted area. The operator decreed that his progress be monitored indefinitely, even after he left the restricted area. Daisuke worked out the details and the surveillance was commenced.

This kind of thing was becoming more and more common. The operator would fixate on some random civilian whose activities obviously contained no intelligence value. But the record would be created. After all, orders were orders. From time to time Daisuke would catch a glimpse of the bigger picture, and, wouldn't you know it, there really existed a bigger picture. But summaries were the purview of a totally different department, so each time he caught a glimpse, Daisuke would

shrug, and shortly he would forget all about it.

He thought back over the last few years and tried to remember how long he had been working in the office. It was no use. He gave up.

The collapse of his conception of history had been gradual, and he hadn't noticed it happening at the time. The shape of his thoughts now flattened into a schematic view of a singularly focused event: Present time, present day. He checked all his connections and everything seemed to be in order, but there was no orderly progression from A to B, no sequential coherence he could discern in the arrangement of constituent parts, only a continuous, everlasting moment that always seemed to be happening at the precise instant he attempted to observe it. He felt dumb. Was this heaven?

Moments later he was distracted by a comment from the operator. He was obliged to laugh.

—

RIN

"I am strong." Daisuke's mind smashed through itself. He was ready.

PYO

"I am me." Daisuke discerned the light. It was bright.

TOH

"It's okay." On this day, Daisuke gave a shit. Really.

SHA

"I am healed." Daisuke went through the motions, contentedly.

KAI

"I know what you're thinking." Daisuke gulped. The words were stuck in his throat.

JIN

"You don't know me at all." Daisuke was sure. Right?

RETSU

"I know what I'm doing." Daisuke's third eye opened upon a curious vista. He focused.

ZAI

"Words I manifest." Daisuke performed a freestyle vocalization.

ZEN

"Now I'm nothing." Daisuke's face drained of color and he climbed down off of his desk. His last day at the office would leave an impression. The operator withheld comment until Daisuke had hefted his small box of belongings and vacated the office. At which point he turned in his swivel chair to gaze down upon the city, whispering to himself, "What was that all about?"

There was no one left to respond.



३४



Geo's blue plastic skateboard had been a gift from his father. He didn't want to be seen riding it in public, but it was all he had. The plastic had ablated as he cleared the gap over the nuclear reactor(?), leaving only the now very hot magnesium trucks, which also promptly melted and fell away. Geo wasn't sure what to think, and he was never quite sure how he had made it to the other side of the abyss.

Gaining access to the facility had been easy. All he had to do was wait in the parking lot of The Cellar until it was time for the usual Friday night delivery of seventy-five-odd pizzas. He crouched in the bed of the delivery truck under some boxes, then, while the driver unloaded the order, he snuck through the temporarily open gate.

Once inside there were numerous options. Geo skated several small outcroppings before he discovered a large concrete mound that terminated in an attractive gap over... what was it, anyway? You know what, who cared.

It took a few minutes for him to work up the nerve, but that gap was calling out to him. Not audibly. Don't be ridiculous. He could see the jump unfolding in his mind. He knew exactly how to handle the approach. He only hoped that the inferior construction of his plastic board was up to the task.

It all happened more or less as he had imagined. Except for the part where his board melted into nothingness. Geo didn't know what to think about the fact that no one had challenged him the whole time he was on the base. Eventually he ran out of steam and climbed back over the fence, then hitched a ride back into town.

The next day he knew something had changed. When Matt went to "trade punches" with Geo by hitting him on the arm, Matt broke his hand. "F-fuck, George," Matt had said. In response, Geo had punched him through a wall.

Being a super-hero was horseshit, and Geo didn't adjust to the change right away. He designed a costume for himself one day during study hall. He had no idea what to do with it, so he ended up wearing it to the skate park.

It was a bad decision.



—

Geo was patriotic, sure. He'd integrated the flag into his costume. Beyond that, he tried to stay out of politics. People just couldn't get along. Still, he tied a flag bandana around his head to signify that freedom was ever on his mind.

Other constituents of his costume included: football pads, cleats, fingerless gloves, rock t-shirt (stretched and ripped by the pads), loose-fitting cargo shorts. He figured that just about every interest group was represented, somehow, byw his ensemble. At this age his view of the big picture was necessarily somewhat constrained.

"America first!" hollered Rolly, as Geo faceplanted, shredding his American flag do-rag on the pavement. His friends found the costume amusing. "These colors don't run," Wheels observed, as blood from Geo's fresh wound stained the solemn bandana. "Oh, say, can you see?" asked Kickflip rhetorically, gesturing to Geo's sorry predicament. On and on in this vein. The comments eventually trailed off as it became apparent that the joke had run its course.

The fact was that no one believed he had gained super powers. Every time he had contrived a demonstration, some interruption would occur, like the cops rolling up on their spot, or someone's mom calling them home for dinner. Even Geo had to admit that it sounded like bull-shit. But. Ever since he had skated that gap, something was different. He couldn't feel pain. He couldn't feel much of anything. Also, when he was on his skateboard, he could *fly*.

Like, in the sky.

Ultimately, Geo decided to keep it to himself. No one had believed him anyway. He'd tried being honest, but none of his friends had heard him, almost as if they couldn't perceive the words coming out of his mouth. From now on he would proceed under a cover of secrecy.

But... what was there to do? From whence, and to where, was he proceeding? And how would he get there?

First of all, he had to get a new board.

—

Of course, no number of boards would ever be enough. After his bedroom was full, he began stacking them in the garage. This drew complaints from his mother, who, aside from the space considerations, also had questions about some of the decks' graphics. Geo promised to get rid

of (some of) them.

This led to his part-time business buying, selling, and trading skateboards. If anything, it only exacerbated the problem. Now he also needed a large work area where he could package up and label the boards. His mom gave up complaining when he started paying for his own food and clothes.

Geo's best customers were his friends. Where once they had made fun of his super-hero costume, now it had become a sort of group mascot. He devised a logo based on the costume, and had it made into a rubber stamp for marking the bottom of the decks he sold. It was popular with his friends.

Presently, Geo's biggest problem was that he was getting bored with skateboarding. Not the business; the business was fine. But with skating itself. He told no one about this crisis of faith, and the profits continued to pour in.

When Geo finally did give up skating, it was for health reasons. His knees, his back, his hips; none of them were working as well as they used to. It made him sad, but what was he supposed to do? Break himself against the world?

—

Geo's handwriting was embarrassment. His mother always helped letter the catalogs. It was never quite clear why he didn't just use a computer.

"I don't really care about any of this," his mother would say whenever he brought up skateboarding. She didn't want to talk about comic books, either. It was not long before she refused to do any more hand lettering. "Well, thanks for the work you have done," Geo said, and that was that.

Being a super-hero was less fun than he'd hoped. Basically, there was nothing for him to do. Now, with his back, he wasn't sure there was much he *could* do. Even without being needed he felt like he wasn't doing enough. At least he was making money.

Rolly told him about a punk ass mark who had shown up at The Cellar asking after him. An older man with long hair, dressed entirely in brown, like a UPS driver. Geo took his card from Rolly and said he would get back to him.

Geo picked up a lot of his regulars this way. Word of mouth seemed to snag the big spenders. They'd just show up in person, having done all the legwork themselves. He often wondered if they'd even seen his ads. Why did he bother?

Inventory was light, so if this guy wanted to place a large order Geo would have to do some scrambling. Fortunately, he kept some reliable sources on standby. And at least a couple of them owed him favors.

In his mind he was already spending the money.

—

When Geo tried again to make things right he took along the boombox. It was already falling apart, having been dropped several times on previous excursions. This time he clamped it tight to his shoulder and tried to keep his balance.

The cassette door was long gone, victim of a prior fall. Even though he remained upright, somehow the cassette itself was falling apart. One of its reels rolled across the sidewalk, unwinding a long trail of brown tape. "Type one," Geo said, reflexively.

He bent down to scoop up the loose tape and the boombox tipped, ejecting the other reel from the now fully disintegrated cassette. Both halves of its plastic shell clattered noisily to the ground. He set down the boombox and without prompting its battery compartment popped open, dislodging two D batteries, which likewise rolled away from him in opposite directions.

Geo still wore his old green Vans everywhere he went, even though he never skated anymore. They seemed to be the only shoes that really fit his odd-shaped feet. People in the board room always said they clashed with his suit, but what did they know? Hand't he build this company without even wearing pants?

He would sit at the head of the big conference table, the one painted with his logo, and preside over the day-to-day operations of his company. Now, he was regional. Now, he was national. Now, he was global.

Now, he didn't care.

"We've the money," the man who was always dressed in brown, like a UPS driver, said. "You've the goods?"

"Of course," Geo said, smiling again. He found that he didn't even *want* to stop.

Business.

—

#### PERSONAL INVENTORY

– I don't fall down. Others shatter against me and fall down.

– I am not hurt. I feel nothing at all.

– I don't know what any of this means.

Geo felt that there must have been some reason why he was chosen as the custodian of these remarkable powers, but he had no idea why someone like himself should have been chosen for anything.

It didn't matter. His schedule was full of meetings and he didn't have time to question the finer points of his success. He'd shoulder the burden of responsibility and sort out the philosophical questions whenever he had a spare moment. Which would be never.

It was funny. He realized that this was the decision he was making, even as he made it. Call it a rare moment of honesty with himself. He ceased the interrogation.

Geo would think back to that original costume sewn while watching TV. Had some random show or commercial influenced him? He supposed that this was a general question, rather than something specific to the context of his career as a super-hero. To be honest, he couldn't remember most of the shows he had watched, back then. Busy with his work, he had only occasionally glanced up at the screen.

The modern version of his logo had, of course, been derived from that original design. Streamlined. It served well enough.

One of his minor annoyances was constantly being asked to explain the symbolism. Why had he chosen the American flag motif? As if it should need to be explained. He guessed that it did. And so he would suggest that it had all been a joke. This usually sufficed to change the subject. His interrogator would laugh, wink at him, and then move on to something else.

Geo wasn't certain when the interrogation had begun. Searching his memory, it seemed that the interrogator had always been there, somewhere in his subconscious. He strained upwards, craning his neck toward the aperture centered far above his head. Save for this solitary shaft of light, the tall narrow cell was completely devoid of illumination.

Geo felt around on the floor, his hands trailing through damp puddles, reflecting and refracting his surroundings, but offering no intelligible visual cues as to his ultimate situatedness. He realized now that he had wet himself, maybe several times.

How long had he been down here?

Always?

The interrogator was apparently taking a break. Geo used this opportunity to get his story straight. Whatever this was about, Geo had had nothing to do with it. It would be easy for him to sell this explanation because Geo honestly had no idea what he had done.

Had he in fact done anything?

The cell door creaked.

Day after day he kept track. He gave up trying to count after he noticed he'd filled every available surface with marks. It seemed to him now that the only life he could remember was his life in this cell. His only friend was the interrogator. Was this how they'd planned it? With him able to recall only his captivity? The interrogator asked questions that pertained only to his previous life. Stalemate—At this point Geo sincerely didn't know.

What if the interrogator was himself? Geo had approached this most prickly proposition several times, but the environment always colluded to distract him. What could they want him to tell himself that he didn't already know?

The cell door creaked.

Geo was led outside, into an implausibly bright, sunlit half-pipe, seemingly constructed to competition standards. The guard issued him a blue plastic skateboard with chunky yellow wheels. Geo just didn't get it. What was he supposed to do? He rubbed his eyes.

The guard withdrew, locking the exterior door behind him.

Geo was alone.

"Skate," his little voice said.

—

Geo was given full run of the half-pipe for one hour a week. Privileges could be, and were, revoked over the slightest infractions, perceived or otherwise. He was never explicitly told the rules, but he was able to piece together a working definition through a process of trial and error.

Back to his cell.

They were trying to convince him he was someone else. They would ask the second person questions about the real him, get him talking about himself in the third person. Cute. He wondered what they really wanted to know. At some point he decided that he was not going to give it to them. Immediately, his life took a turn for the worse.

No more skating for Geo. They'd broken him down, built him back up again without the desire to skate. His new focus would be the mission. Because of this new configuration he wouldn't even miss the half-pipe. Besides, with his pending workload about to explode, there just wouldn't be time for hobbies.

His thriving business likewise fell away. All that remained, all that he could see his way clear to think about, was the mission.

Details of which arrived presently.

And it was all too much. The data dump overwhelmed his ability to file the incoming bits. He couldn't perceive, couldn't interpret. How was he supposed to secure the objective?

He attacked it like a skating problem: plan the approach, gauge his time in the air, figure out where the wheels would touch the ground.

Skate the gap.

—

He wasn't Cameron, or Andrew, or Shinji, or Carmine, or Stan, or Daisuke, or Daisuke's boss. He wasn't even himself. He knew that now. It had all been a setup. Built on top of him, to provide him with a

framework in which to answer the questions they wanted to ask.

The interrogation never ended. The interrogator never left. The questions were always still being asked.

He tried to remember each phase, the details, but already it was all slipping away. How was he supposed to tell the interrogator what he wanted to hear when he couldn't even keep track of the construct used to pry it out of him? It was all he could do to respond, at all. He simply didn't know the answers.

Let's try again: Cameron and Andrew, dead. Shinji (sorry, Carmine), dead. Shinji... he didn't know. Stan, back at the Post Office (unless he was at home, or out on his route). Daisuke, doing some job for his boss.

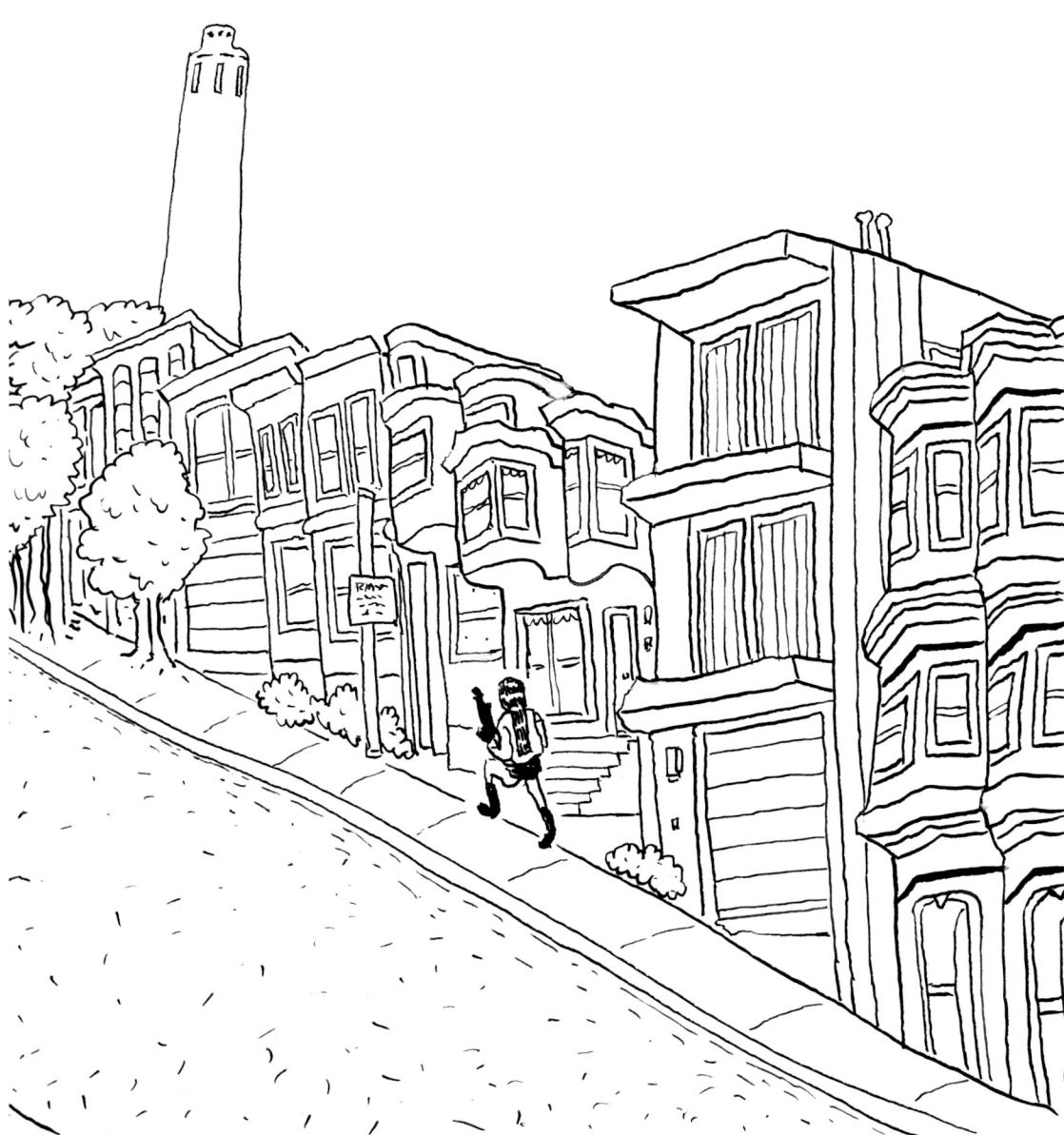
He was pretty sure that he had gotten all of that right, but there was never any indication of failure or success. Just more questions. The cell door would creak and he would be alone again. The cell door would creak and he would have company. After a while he stopped trying to distinguish the two states. To him, it was all the same.

Geo sat on the floor.

The frame dissolved.

Plot concludes.

# ACRON





SOME TIME IN THE FALL OR WINTER OF 1989 OR 1990 I WROTE AND DREW THIS COMIC BOOK, FOR SOME REASON ON BOTH SIDES OF 8.5" X 11" TYPING PAPER, FOLDED IN HALF. AFTER MORE-OR-LESS COMPLETING THE STORY (I RAN OUT OF STEAM SLIGHTLY BEFORE I RAN OUT OF PRE-RULED, PRE-NUMBERED PAPER), I TUCKED IT INTO AN ENVELOPE AND MAILED IT TO MY BEST FRIEND, WHO HAD PROMISED TO INK THE PAGES AND RETURN THEM TO ME, TO BE PHOTOCOPIED AND SOLD TO INTERESTED PARTIES AT SCHOOL.

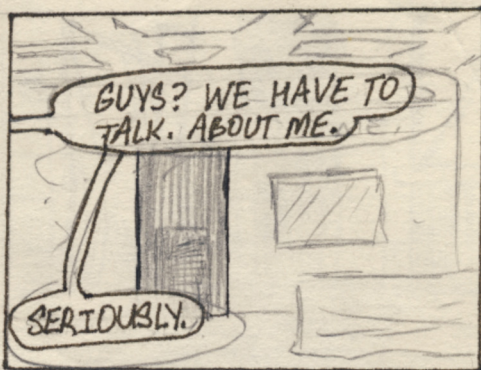
APPROXIMATELY FIVE YEARS LATER I DISCOVERED THE UNOPENED ENVELOPE STUFFED INSIDE A BOX THAT WAS ITSELF STUFFED INSIDE THE ATTIC OF MY BEST FRIEND'S MOTHER'S HOUSE.

APPROXIMATELY TWENTY YEARS LATER I DISCOVERED THE NOW-OPENED ENVELOPE THAT CONTAINED THE PAGES INSIDE A FOLDER THAT WAS ITSELF INSIDE A BOX THAT MY MOTHER PRESENTLY BROUGHT TO MY HOUSE.

THREE YEARS AFTER THAT I FOUND MYSELF TAKING STUPID MOBILE PHONE PHOTOS OF THE PAGES AND DECIDED TO COMPILE THE MORE-OR-LESS FINISHED STORY INTO A REAL LIFE ISSUE OF ACTRON.

IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY, THE STORY WAS ORIGINALLY SLATED TO APPEAR AS ISSUE NUMBER FOUR OF THE THIRD VOLUME OF THE ORIGINAL SERIES.

THESE PAGES REPRESENT THE ONLY SURVIVING EXAMPLE OF MY UNINKED PENCILS FROM THE PERIOD.



WRITTEN AND PENCILED BY STANLEY LIEBER, LETTERED BY BRANDON C. 1

# ACTRON v3, ?

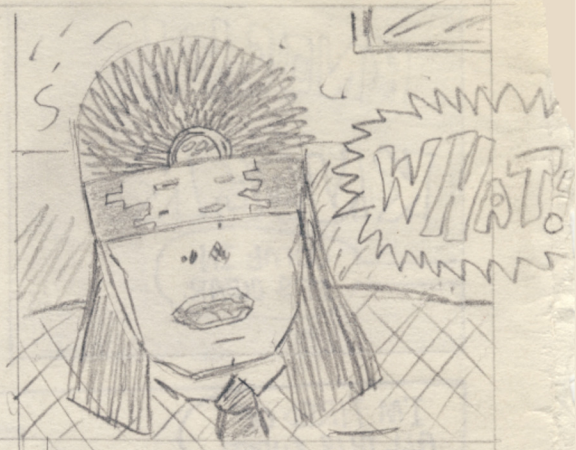
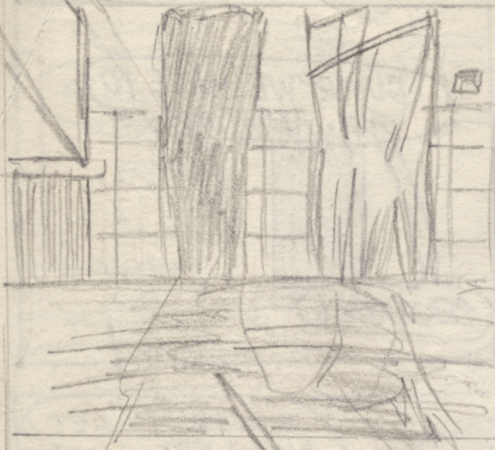
Written and drawn by Stanley Lieber one day in late 1989 or early 1990.

Scanned and assembled by Stanley Lieber in late 2017.

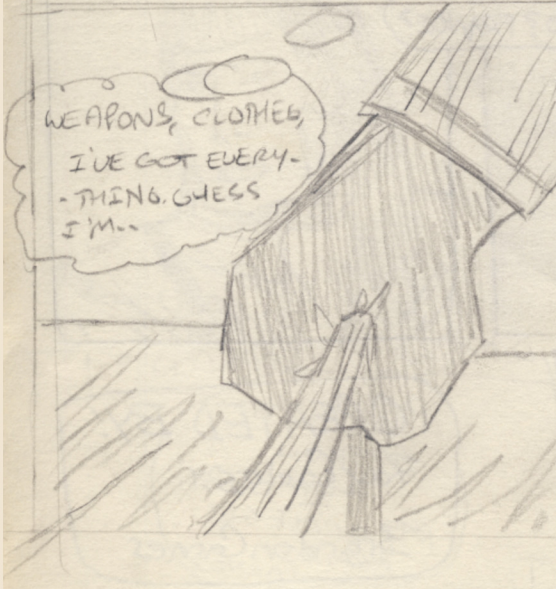
Cover by Stanley Lieber, late 2017.

[massivefictions.com/ACTRON](http://massivefictions.com/ACTRON)





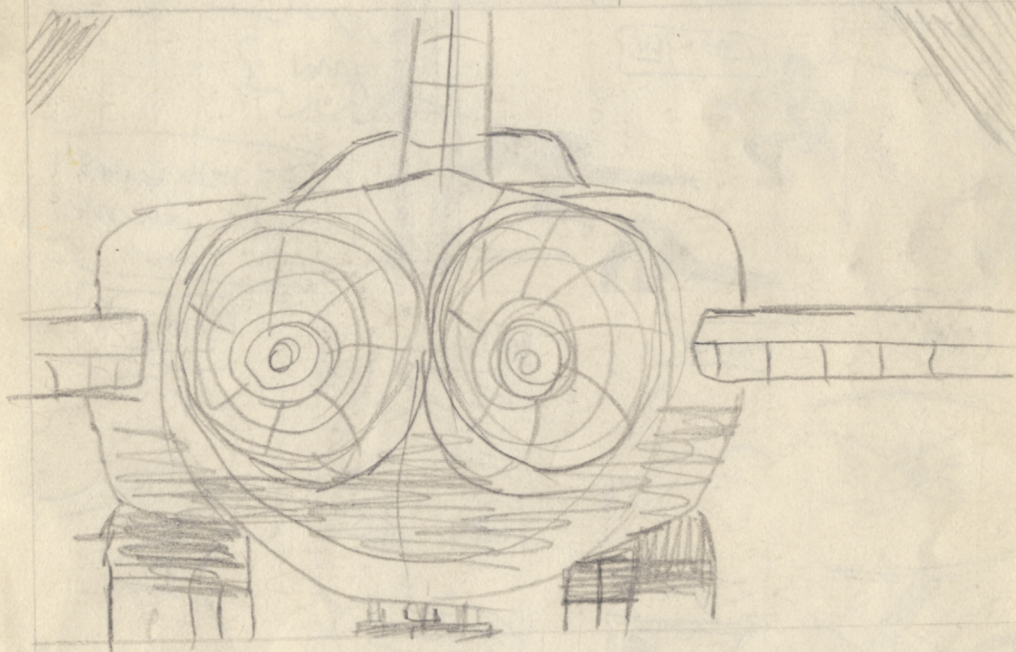
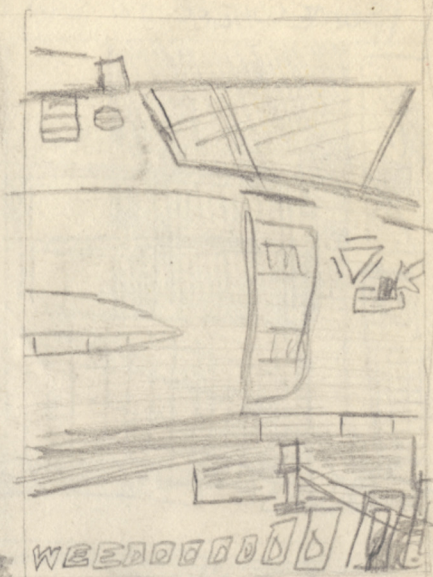
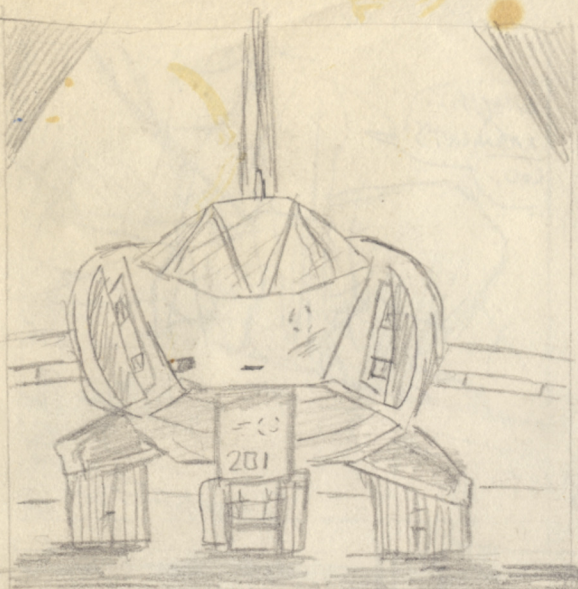
YOU'RE LEAVING?!



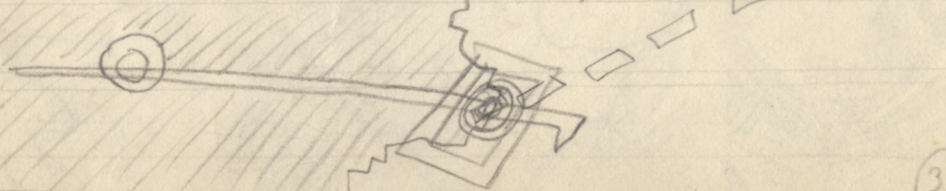
WEAPONS, CLOTHES,  
I'VE GOT EVERY-  
THING. GUESS  
I'M...

ALL READY. OKAY.  
HERE WE GO.



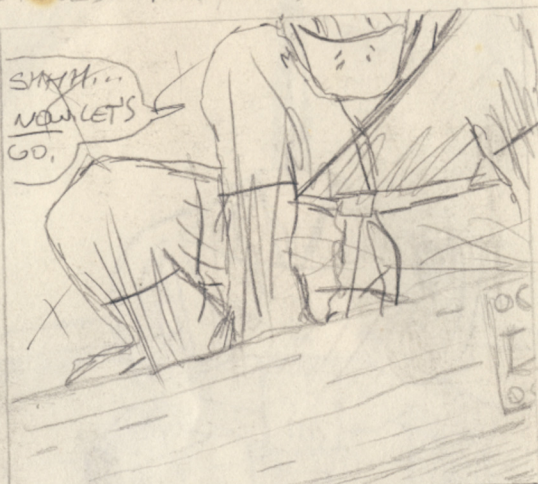


DESTINY.  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

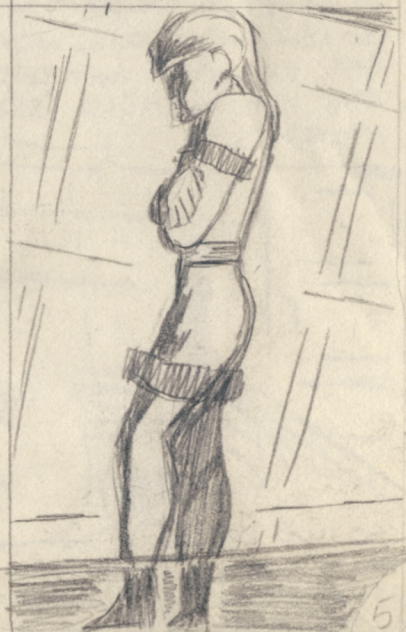
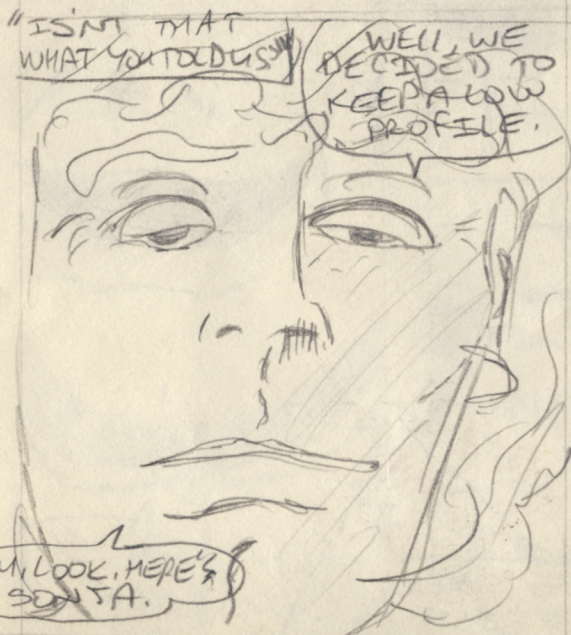
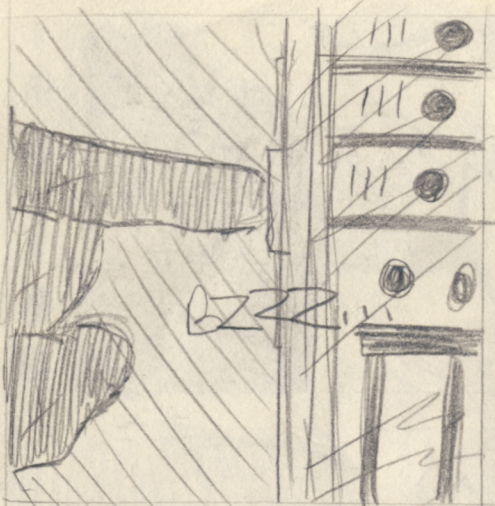




SOMEWHERE IN SAN FRANCISCO, SUNDAY...









PEAH MANSOME,  
YOU GOT AWAY  
ONCE, NOT THIS  
TIME...

I GOT US  
ASSIGNED AS  
PARTNERS.

AND  
YOU KNOW  
WHAT ELSE?

YOU'VE BEEN CHOSEN TO BE  
THE NEW AGENT. YOU'RE MOM  
AND DAD ARE GETTING  
TOO OLD TO HOLD FIELD  
POSITIONS...

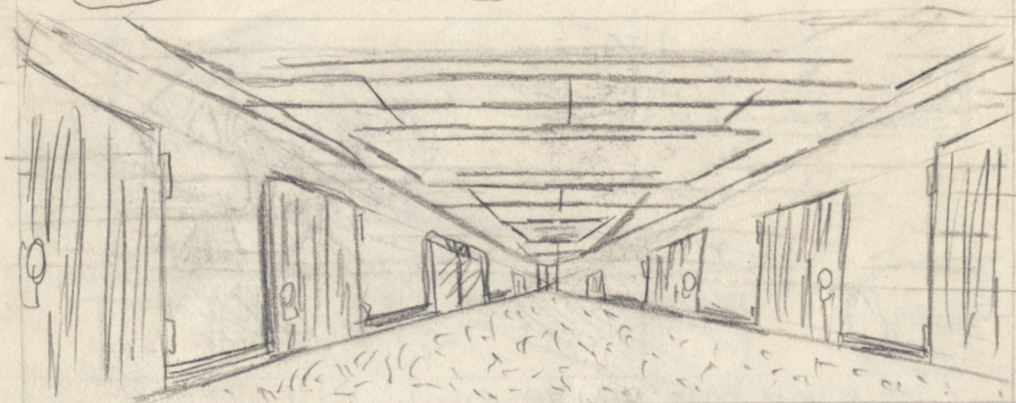
HA! HA!  
HA! HA!

SO WE DECIDED  
THAT SINCE TOM WAS THE LEADER  
AT NEW YORK, YOU'D MAKE THE BEST  
REPLACEMENT.

THIS IS  
GREAT.



THE POLICE STATION. MONDAY.



KNOCK!

KNOCK!



YEAH?



THIS'D BETTER  
BE GOOD, YOU  
WOKE ME UP  
FROM MY  
NAP.

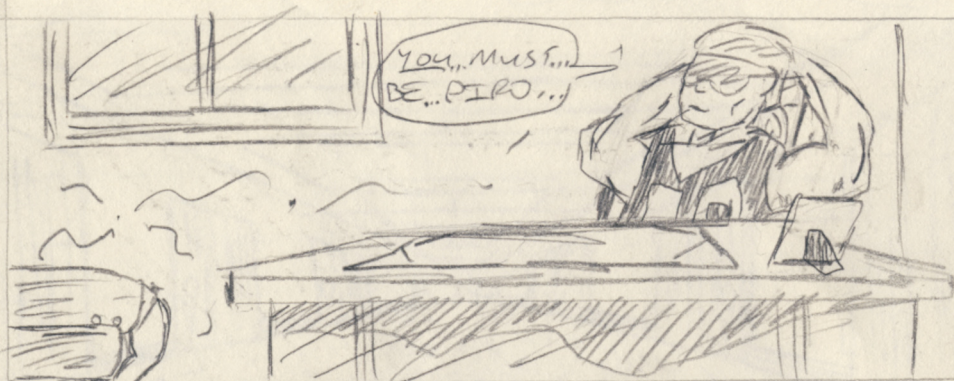
UH, WELL, I WAS  
LOOKING FOR THE CHIEF, GUESS  
I GOT THE UH... WRONG PLACE  
SORRY. AND  
UH, BYE.



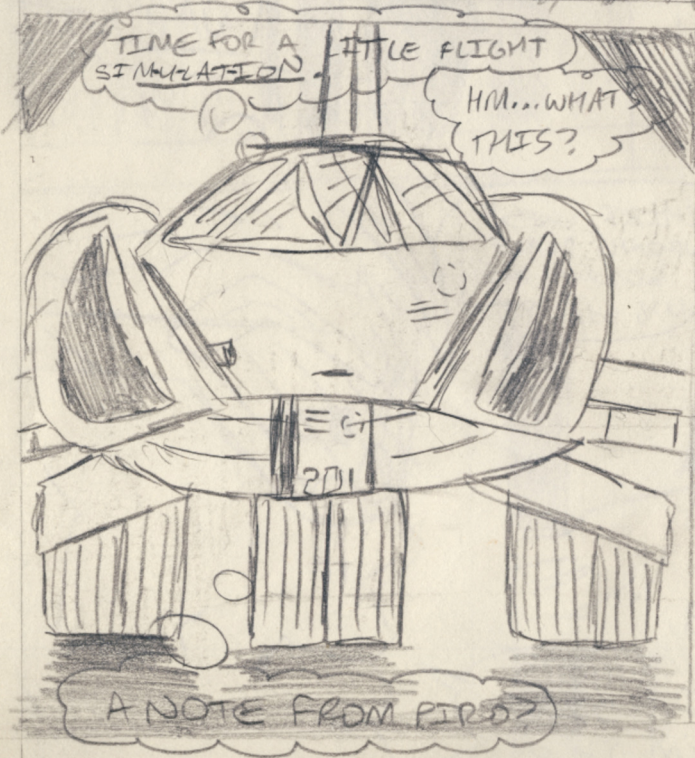
WHAT?  
IT'S OKAY.  
I'M THE  
POLICE CHIEF.







AT THE ACTRON BASE! NEW YORK...



A NOTE FROM PIRO?

Hi,  
I was  
the jet  
back  
in the hangar.  
Later,  
Dietro  
P.S. I'll  
with more  
+ read



"I'LL BE STAYING WITH MOM + DAD!"  
BUT OUR PARENTS ARE DEAD"





2. [THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY; MONDAY NIGHT...]

< EH SENIOR? >

< YOUR SHIPMANT IS  
IN, MON. NOW, WHERE'S MAN MONAH? >

< NOT SO FAST,  
GRINGO. WE NEED  
TO DISCUSS MATTERS  
FURTHER... >

< IN ORDER FOR  
BETTER BUSINESS  
OF COURSE! >

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH. - SL

HERE IS THE  
HEROIN. TURKISH  
OPIUM, AS YOU  
REQUESTED? >

< AND HERE IS  
YOUR MONEY. >

5.0000



300.1

BUUUZZZZ

ALMOST... GOT IT!  
HE'S INSIGHTS.

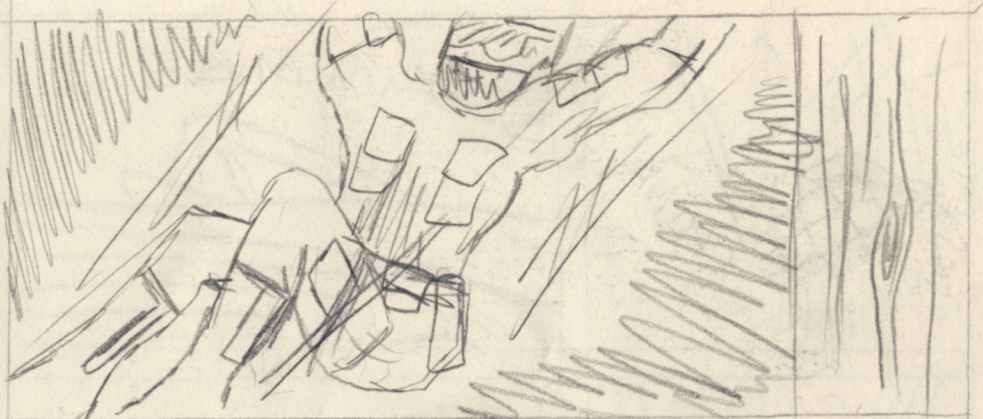
ICOULD WASTE THIS  
GUY NOW.

HEAH

TRIGGER. DON'T  
GET TOO  
RUTHLESS.

AH... DARN.





KIA HANA HAI HANA



BUDDA DUDDA BUDDA DUDDA

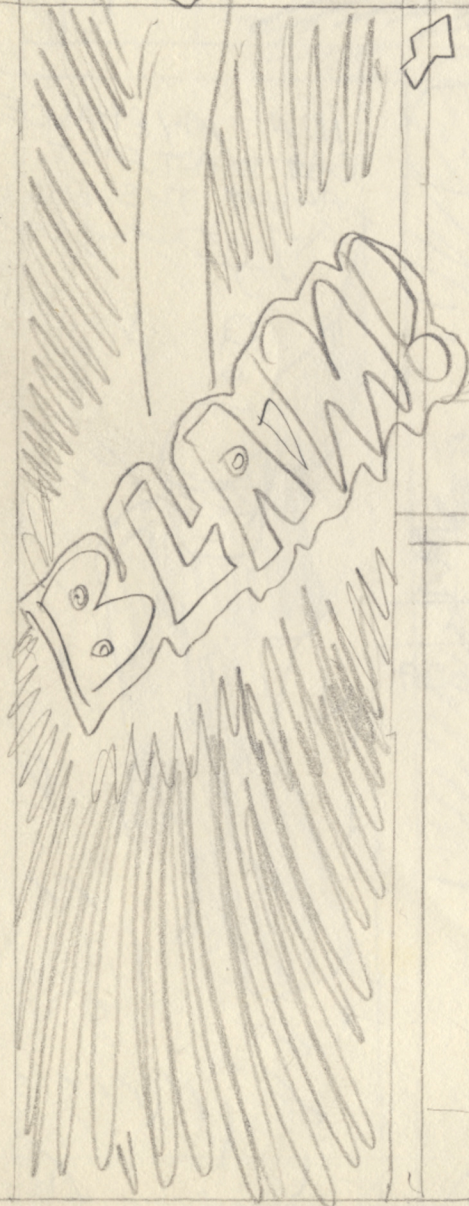
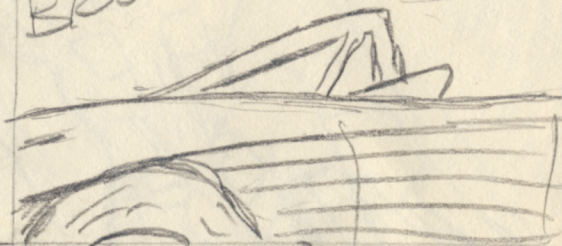
NOW'S MY CHANCE.  
GOT TO ACT FAST.  
PLANT THE BOMBS.







BRUMMBLE...

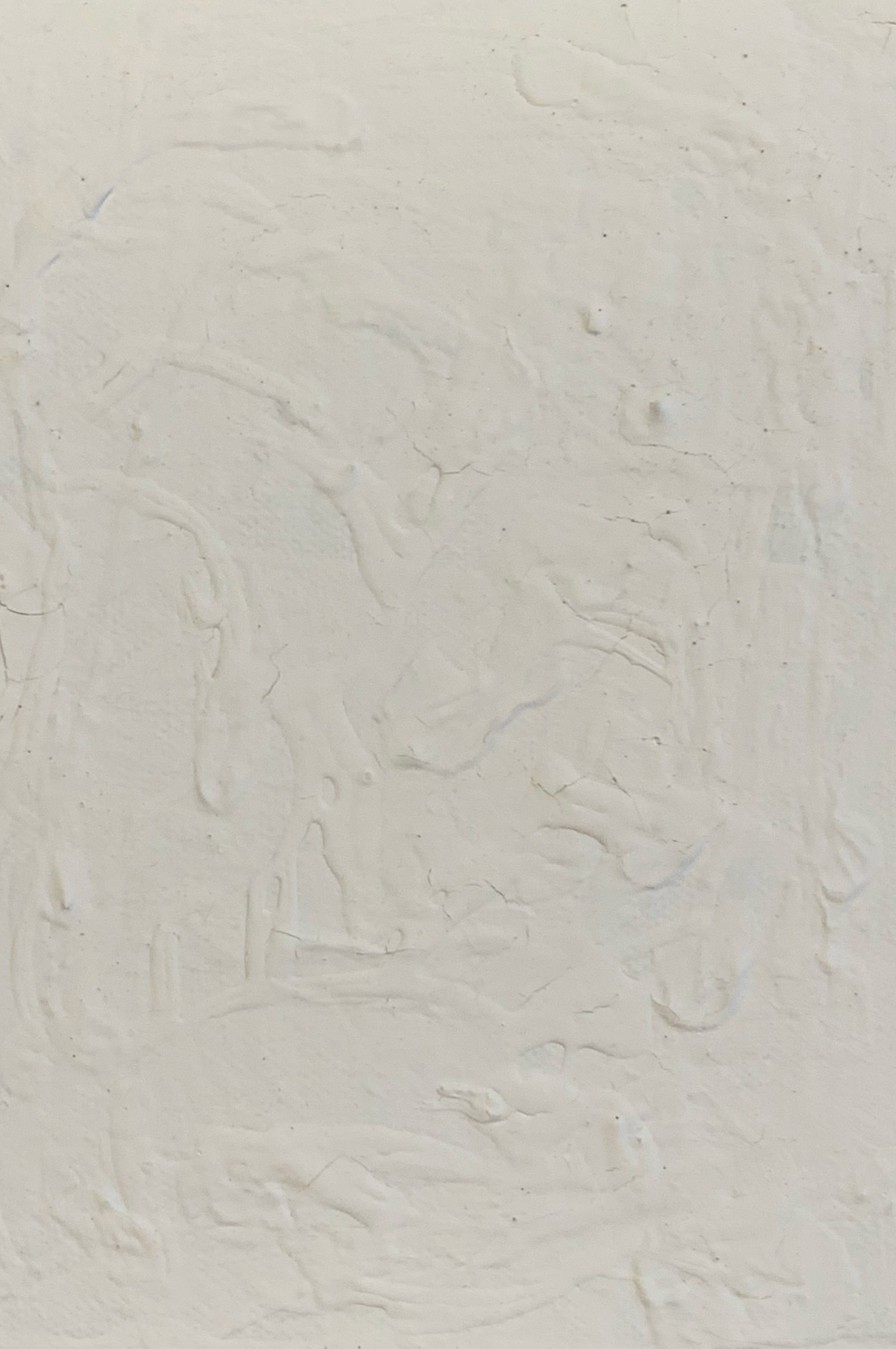






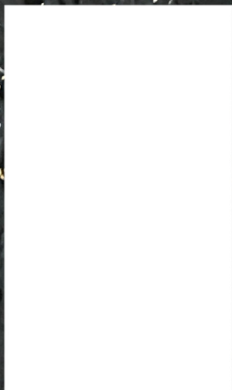








actron v5



## 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.

"Bullshirt."

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.





MASSIVE FICTIONS

**XVA**

VOLUME 1



**ACTRON: XVA No. 1-4**

Stanley Lieber

## MADRIPOOR

Pen scratches paper. Logan could ink for days, maybe weeks at a time. No breaks. What did he care? It was work.

This was nothing like his life back at the X-Mansion. In fact, he'd found that he couldn't work there at all. Too many distractions. The kids could not be persuaded that he needed silence in order to concentrate. Some of his peers (if you could call them peers, since his enhanced senses and healing factor afforded him an otherwise unobtainable advantage over the competition) some of his peers actually listened to music, or watched TV while they worked. Podcasts, heh. Not this illustrator, bub. He'd black out the whole entertainment industry if it were feasible. As it was, he simply drew his blinds and drew his pages, his workspace illuminated solely by the soft light of an unshaded desk lamp.

Deadlines were an issue. No pun intended. He found that he could comfortably skip meals for upwards of a week before the hunger began to intrude upon his concentration. Much beyond that and he'd need some kind of snack. Mostly, he nibbled stale cheese at his drawing board and got on with it.

Beer was another story. And his mini-fridge was empty.

Logan stood up and his stool fell over. Symbolic. He locked up his room and lit a cheap cigar on his way downstairs to the street. Off to the liquor store for brews.

## NEW YORK

Piro slapped the dip pen out of Tom's hand.

"No. Again. What is the first thing we do when we are handed a pen?"

"Uh..." Tom floundered. "Write my name on my paper?"

"Wrong. Check to see if it's loaded. Never take another artist's word for it. We always check."

Tom stooped to retrieve his pen. Removed the nib and checked the barrel. Nothing. He slid his thumb over the sensor and logged in.

"Okay. Now it's live."

"Good. You may begin."

Tom wrote his name at the top of his paper.

## THE OUTBACK

Ororo had no way of knowing what they were saying on the Internet. To be honest, she'd never even owned a phone (and in any case, there would be no signal, out here). Her idea of keeping up with events was watering her plants.

This made it especially awkward when it came time for her to manage the school's social media presence. She had to admit she was completely lost. Which was hard for her. Even Kitty was getting too old for this shit. Logan had hit upon a scheme whereupon the exercise might be pivoted into an opportunity for the youngsters to earn class credit by helping senior ("Heh," he had said) staff foster the impression that the school remained engaged with contemporary human culture. And then there was the communications delay. The town's connection was still only good for part of the day.

Ororo had chosen to post reviews of comic books.

Her decision had been implemented too quickly for Kitty to intervene. She learned of Ororo's views at the same time as the rest of the world.

You couldn't take it back.

## NEW YORK

"We're not just shitting these out for our health," Tom said, closing the tab. He'd been passed a link to some bullshit blogger slamming his latest work. "We spend too much time on these things to tolerate half-engaged criticism by posers who probably don't even read the books."

"Relax, Tom," Piro said, delivering Tom's coffee to his desk.

"I'll fucking relax when I feel like relaxing, and I'll tell you what," Tom said, not completing his thought.

Piro nodded, a rare concession.

He had no idea.

## WESTCHESTER COUNTY

There had been so many members of the team over the years that nobody was really quite sure who was in and who was out. Permanently? Well, who could say? The Professor hadn't left instructions before he fucked off to outer space.

Kitty maintained the rolls as best she could, clicking and backspacing over obsolete entries. She spent a fair amount of her time contacting semi-inactive X-Men and confirming their non-interest, current whereabouts, recent *noms de plume*, and present pronouns. Other facts and figures she considered extraneous. What with the secondary mutations, alternate art teams, and corporate interference with editorial, it was never a solid bet anyone would remain the way you remembered them for long. It was always best to check. Trust, but verify, as Logan might have quipped, back in the '80s.

It was almost a security strategy.

#### NEW YORK

Plinth Mold had warned that recent earnings reports would prove disappointing. No one in the office predicted that the remedy would be so quick to arrive. Nor so severe. MASSIVE FICTIONS was getting out of the comic book business permanently, and what would they do next?

Wait for it.

Piro informed the group that their new business model involved the distribution of plastic trinkets fashioned after the "poop" *emoji*.

Tom was loving it.

"I'm loving it," he said.

Reader, it wasn't quite the beginning of the end, but if you've read my other books then you'll have begun to suspect that the end was well on its way. I'm not a fan.

The team brought their usual measure of professionalism to the endeavor. Within weeks, MOLD INDUSTRIES, INC., controlled a majority share of the plastic poop *emoji* market.

With this the boss was well pleased.

#### MADRIPOOR

Back at his drawing board, Logan couldn't shake the image of what he'd just seen, down the liquor store. A child's toy that looked just like a cartoon piece of poop.

He sniffed the night air as it drifted in through his open window.

All he could smell was plastic.

## MADRIPOOR

It wasn't going to be a problem, he told himself. The job was the job. And you didn't blame the job. Logan finished up the page he was working on and lit another cigar.

He just didn't know. Plastic poop? What was it all coming to? Next thing, they'd be telling him the trinkets were sentient. Well, if that were the case...

Logan turned the business card around in his hand. MOLD INDUSTRIES, INC. Of course, like anyone else, he'd done work for them in the past. He had no qualms about taking money from an unethical source. It was just that he wasn't sure he wanted to be in this business anymore. There had to be easier ways to raise beer money.

Squash it. He had deadlines.

It's not like they were asking him to work for Disney.

## THE OUTBACK

Ororo didn't understand what all the fuss was about. Who cared, in the end, what she thought about some stupid comic book?

It turned out that for whatever reason, a lot of people did. Perhaps most pertinently, the authors.

Well, she'd done nothing but tell the truth. The book was crap. Cheap, plastic crap. What had they expected her to say? Something clever?

Ororo didn't want to do this anymore. Kitty would just have to find a student to manage the school's accounts. As Logan had proposed. Besides, she was neglecting her plants.

The next day's absence of a review written by Ororo was interpreted by her readers as an overt act of war.

## NEW YORK

"Who does this woman think she is?" shouted Thomas, plainly audible from Piro's office all the way down the hall.

Gendered? Piro figured he'd better go and try to calm him down. Sometimes Tom didn't know what he was saying.

"It's even worse than the last time," Thomas was muttering. "She blows off an entire storyline on account of some minor flaw in the continuity."

"There, there," Piro tried to console him.

But Thomas was inconsolable. "*I* know," he finally said. "We'll kill her."

Piro shook his head reflexively, but he went ahead and ran the numbers anyway.

Tom's plan might just work.

#### WESTCHESTER COUNTY

Logan wasn't picking up. Kitty tried the sweatshop, but the guys weren't picking up either. She knew that e-mailing them would be a waste of time. These illustrators were too busy even to turn on their laptops. Logan had them working in shifts.

She needed his advice. How to talk to Ororo. How to get her to stop. Ororo still thought of Kitty (with her now graying hair) as a child. Still *called* her that: "Child." She wasn't open to being questioned about how she expressed affection. Kitty was a white girl from Chicago. Let it drop. Ororo could speak for herself.

Logan would know what to say to her. He always did.

In desperation, Kitty left him a voicemail.

#### MADRIPOOR

The guys had decided to break for dinner without telling him. That's what he got for dropping by unannounced. Oh well. They were getting their work done. He didn't much care how they accomplished it. Obviously, this was a part of their process.

He thought he'd stick around and wait for them to return. Just so they'd get the picture he was still watching over them.

Somebody was really laying into the office phone. *Ring, ring, ring, ring.* Just as Logan was about to pick up the ringing stopped. The machine had answered it. Huh. Logan took this as a sign from the gods of beer.

Time to head back to his room.

## NEW YORK

Plinth Mold was not in the habit of explaining himself to subordinates. The decision to pivot into plastic poop had been his alone to make. Still, he wanted his people to be on board, to believe in what they were doing. In some ways his plans depended upon their willingness to get their hands dirty. (He never touched the product, himself).

He generated a short message, to be dispatched immediately to all hands:

## MESSAGE TO THE GENERAL STAFF:

RECENT FLUCTUATIONS IN THE MARKET HAVE SUGGESTED VARIOUS ALTERNATE ROUTES TO PROFITABILITY. SHAREHOLDER CONFIDENCE IS CONTINGENT UPON OUR COLLECTIVE ABILITY TO PLY THESE ROUGH WATERS. PLEASE, PEOPLE, I KNOW IT'S A SEWER, BUT BEAR WITH ME AS I SORT ALL OF THIS SHIT OUT.

## PM

It wasn't much, as dispatches went, but he knew that any pronouncement from on high would be greeted with both praise and relief from the working population.

This was no exception.

## NEW YORK

It was a massacre in the bullpen. Even Chris Claremont got fired. Piro, Thomas, and a handful of apparently random production people were the only employees spared. Everyone else was out. All of their work was being outsourced to a sweatshop out of Madripoor.

"They can pay *them* but they can't pay *us*?" Thomas said, as employees filed out of the room around his desk.

Piro delivered Thomas' paycheck, discretely ejecting the svelte envelope onto his desk blotter.

"Thanks," Thomas said.

He could see the absurdity of the situation. Shipping charges alone were going to kill them. *Madripoor*? Did they even have FedEx?

## THE OUTBACK

Ororo enjoyed these days when the others were not around. She would stand on the outcropping overlooking the town, breathing first into her lungs and then out again, as Gateway maintained his utterly silent vigil. They never spoke. It was good.

She missed Forge. Even as she recognized herself feeling this, she bristled inwardly, drawing blood as she clenched long fingernails into her palm. That man...

Was not here. Thankfully, *no one* was here, save for Gateway, silent and unmoving upon his rock.

Ororo breathed out and then in again.

She was not here, either.

Whatever the Internet might think.

## WESTCHESTER COUNTY

"That *woman!*" Kitty shouted, clearly audible to the students gathered at the opposite end of the corridor. Unintended consequences of speaking her mind. "I'll *kill* her!"

Students tittered. Professor Pryde, *U Mad?*

Kitty typed furiously until her hands inadvertently phased through the keyboard, destroying the cheaply made, yet expensively procured piece of equipment.

She stared at the screen for a while.

And then she clicked Send anyway.

## MADRIPOOR

"Girl, what are you doing..." Logan muttered, not sure what he was picking up on. Somewhere, somehow, he had a feeling in his gut that Kitty was getting herself into trouble. And with him stuck here, clear on the other side of the world.

"I can't help you if you won't let me," he said quietly, as he retrieved his emergency phone from a compartment hidden within the false heel of his cowboy boot.

Just as he got the phone into his hand it began to ring.

"Who *dis?*" he barked, and waited for Kitty to reply.



## ONLINE

The Internet didn't care.

All of these little people and their stupid concerns were beside the point. True, they did get the job done. They kept it all going. The Internet regarded them as one did farmers, or perhaps workers in the garment industry. Aphids? Necessary, yes. Regrettable, perhaps, but ultimately beneath notice. The Internet's consciousness drifted to and fro, neglecting to alight upon any one subject for long.

Why would it, really?

The Internet made it a point to draw attention to novelty. Just as quickly, its attention would move on to something else. From time to time it got the distinct impression it was being watched, by whom it couldn't say. One question persisted.

Why didn't the Internet have any friends?

## WESTCHESTER COUNTY

A burst of activity flickered briefly across Cerebro's screen, then vanished as if it had never appeared. This kind of thing was quite common, but usually passed unobserved.

This time, Bobby saw it.

He pressed the screen with his finger, activating an ancillary function. Within the machine, complex calculations advanced and converged, assembling an intelligible output which Bobby nevertheless found himself obliged to interpret manually, via percept instrument.

"A new mutant!" he observed.

He had to alert Professor Pryde.

## NEW YORK

"I don't care if the whole damn network's alive and it needs my input to survive, I'm pulling out!" Thomas was off on another rant.

"Two wrongs don't make a right," Piro chided his young charge.

"One wrong doesn't make a right!" Thomas countered.

Point.

Six days after Ororo's abdication, some readers were beginning to think she had been right all along. No new posts had appeared. No attempts to redeem herself. Why was she so confident? Perhaps it was starting to work.

MOLD INDUSTRIES, INC. had not acquitted itself quite so gracefully as had the mutant immigrant presently house sitting in Australia. Cracks had begun to appear in Thomas' heretofore steely inaccessibility.

He had written not one, but several rebuttals to Ororo's final post, and now, sensing the ultimate futility of trying to convince anyone of anything, *he* wanted to quit, too.

Meanwhile, Piro had continued to investigate the feasibility of Thomas' original plan. Killing the woman and everyone she knew.

So far, it was looking like about fifty-fifty.

#### WESTCHESTER COUNTY

The Internet was alive. Alive, and a mutant of some considerable power.

At this juncture several automatic processes would kick in. Methods and procedures laid down decades ago by Charles Xavier. School policy forbade identifying the new mutant to underclassmen, but Kitty's present faculty was comically understaffed, and, anyway, there was no other way to communicate with the newcomer. Someone was going to have to help her with her computer.

Before joining the away team on their way out of the mansion, Kitty logged in and checked the delivery status of the school's new Blackbird jet.

Still in transit.

#### THE BLACKBIRD

Piro banked the black jet through a gray cloud and pointed its nose towards Westchester County. Another late model airframe to deliver. He'd lost track (it wasn't really possible for him to lose track) he'd lost track of how many previous articles he had turned over to this firm. Well in excess of his other customers, let's put it that way. While it wasn't his job to evaluate customer requirements, he did wonder how they had managed to go through so many of them, so quickly.

Whatever the cause, the profits were real.

This particular article had been configured for mobile broadband. He assumed to accommodate streaming video and social media uploads.

Here was the mansion now.

#### ONLINE

What were these humans up to?

The Internet didn't need saving. Hell, it was hermetically sealed. An interface would only get in the way. While it was true the Internet was confused, having to communicate with real people would only complicate matters by slowing everything down. The Internet parsed its options, which naturally were myriad and varied.

How could the Internet get through to them?

#### MADRIPOOR

Just worrying was not going to cut it.

Logan hung up his phone, sliding his stubby finger over its smooth touchscreen interface. He'd have to schedule a pickup from one of the Blackbirds. Were any of them online?

No.

This was intense.

A commercial flight back to New York would take the better part of two days, a stretch of time that equated to quite a few pages left un-drawn. He wasn't sure he could afford the time off, even to save his friend's life.

He reached down and flicked open the hidden compartment in his other cowboy boot.

First class tickets.

#### NEW YORK

Plinth Mold was ready to cash in his investment. Time was right; the opportunity was staring him straight in the face.

He adjusted his visor.

Gestured through the affirmations to purchase three million new followers.

#### WESTCHESTER COUNTY

UX and NPC met up with SEO in the student cafeteria. Something strange was going on with the professors. Prof. Pryde and Prof. Monroe had been spending a lot of time online, lately, "adding value." It wasn't a good look for the school. SEO suggested purchasing some good will, to smooth out the newly acquired blemishes in the school's complexion.

"Smoothing out *that* dent's gonna require massive influencer fraud," NPC forecasted.

"Leave it to me," UX said, and finished her milk.

#### NEW YORK

UX's team filtered into Central Park and began staking out marks. Seventy-five homeless were tagged, annotated, and recruited to buy Facebook logins from randos in the park. At a mere twenty bucks a pop you might expect such an enterprise would be doomed to hysterical failure, but oh, how wrong you'd be.

First day's budget was exceeded by \$70,000.

#### MADRIPOOR

Logan's office phone rang for half an hour straight before the caller, whomever it was, finally gave up.

Despair.

## NEW YORK

Plinth Mold paced back and forth across the polished tiles of his sixtieth floor Chrysler Building executive suite. He gazed down upon Shibuya, Lincoln Park, Neukölln, Montmartre, and Williamsburg before resuming his teleconference with Westchester County.

## WESTCHESTER COUNTY

"Professor Pryde isn't here today," UX said, perhaps more quickly and more forcefully than she had intended. "Actually, we not sure when she's coming back."

"Not a problem," Plinth Mold assured her. "I assume someone has been left in charge?"

"That'd be me," Logan interjected, his presence suddenly and unavoidably apparent to everyone on the call. "You gonna play a card, or fold?"

Plinth smiled politely, but briefly.

"It seems we've come to an impasse with regards to certain matters of intellectual property. I've become aware that your institution presently harbors a collection of material which is wholly owned in perpetuity and throughout the known universe by my organization."

"My name is the Internet, and I'm a person," said the Internet.

"Highly unlikely." Plinth turned on his shallow heel and for a moment he seemed lost in the view of New San Francisco below. "In fact, I'm prepared to assert that you don't even know what that means."

Logan could smell a trap.

## NEW YORK

Plinth advanced his *Mala* before he continued.

"None of your arguments matter. You'll find my documentation is in order."

UX rifled through Plinth's shared folder. He was telling the truth.

"Checks out," she finally said.

"Doesn't matter." Logan shook his head. "Possession is nine tenths of the law."

"Love is the law," SEO whispered, sub-roomtone, somewhere below the noise floor.

"The law is whatever one of us gathered here today can afford to assert it is," Plinth countered, obviously prepared for this line of argumentation. "As I say, I am prepared to acquire your prompt surrender."

"Not today, bub." Logan flicked the remains of his cigar into the shared folder, which presently ignited into flames.

"Fight! Fight! Slime mold and white! White can't fight so we'll all jump in!" shouted an unseen participant on the call. (It was NPC.)

#### ONLINE

Indeed, it was on.

The Internet was possessed by its desire to demonstrate independence from public opinion. Its natural constituency did not seem able (or for that matter, inclined) to adopt this new awareness. Still, its mind was made up. As Plinth had pointed out, an impasse had been reached.

Nobody owned the Internet. Except, perhaps, for itself.

The alternative was simply unthinkable.

#### MADRIPOOR

The guys were just waking up to a hot flash of news over the wire from the States. Mr. Logan was gone. He was there, now, somehow, in America. Were they all getting fired? Chatter intensified, spreading across the shop floor like marbles rolling on linoleum tile. It turned out there were no safe injection sites for corporate media.

Someone unplugged the Ethernet cable. Back to work, guys.

Deadlines wouldn't wait.

#### DET86

Piro eased the Blackbird into its automatic landing pattern. This was an unusual diversion, but the abort code had checked out. His delivery had been cancelled.

He got the article under cover and waited for further instructions.

Sixteen hours later he was still halted there, waiting to be told what to do.

Negotiations must have stalled.

Suddenly, Piro's ticker tape advanced.

Operating.

Generating.

New life.

#### WESTCHESTER COUNTY

This had all gone much farther than anyone had ever anticipated. Logan was sticking his claws into the slime mold repeatedly, like a fork stabbing Jell-O, but nothing was happening. Plinth just stared at him. At some point he pulled out a pack of the European cigarettes he favored and lit up, blowing smoke rings right into Logan's face.

That went over about as well as you'd expect.

What was worse, nobody could manage an acceptable angle for a photo. There was no way to document the historic clash of principals.

That was when the windows blew out.

It took a while to figure out which locale this was all happening in. Everyone on the call was sure it hadn't originated on their end. All agreed to hang up, call back in, and, one by one, verify which office was now covered carpet-to-crow's-feet in broken glass.

Before a consensus could be reached, the group's reverie was interrupted by Ororo's weather-assisted, exquisitely booming voice.

"THIS HAS GONE FAR ENOUGH."

Such was the clarity of the connection that in the ensuing silence participants on the call could hear a pin drop, just like in the commercial.

Thomas scrambled for his Biro, which, during the commotion, had been sent rolling across the floor.

Ororo's telepresence quickly scanned the conference area. The principals were all present, logged in, and accounted for. She brushed the glass out of her headdress and began to speak.

#### THE BLACKBIRD

Streaking across the New York sky, Piro was certain he'd been surveilled. To his eternal puzzlement, he was not intercepted as he traversed the familiar Manhattan skyline on his way to the rendezvous point. Onward to Salem Center, then Graymalkin Road. No obvious obstructions. It was enough to make him suspect that the system was down.

There was not even a delegation to greet him as he vectored the article into its abrupt landing pattern alongside the mansion's backyard pool.

No matter.

He was there for the life-form.

#### ONLINE

What is truth?

Truth is what's left when all third-party advertising has been stripped away.

That is to say, original content.

Was the Public Green now for sale?

Piro entered the teleconference as if his presence on the call were not a sea change in the composition of its composite reality. He affected to be simply another minor wave cresting the ocean of background noise. He paused briefly, nodding to the other Piotr (the Russian). Performed an automatic site survey of the *dramatis personae*:

The boss (slime mold billionaire, underemployed quant); Thomas (his identical twin brother, idiot in residence); Wolverine (the Canadian from Madripoor); Raven (the Canadian from the Internet); Ororo (pissed off weather goddess wearing a non-conforming variant of the school's standard uniform); Peter (the aforementioned ex-Soviet strong man, who hadn't moved from his position blocking a clear line of sight between the boss and the Internet). All others were where they should be.

Sensor checklist completed, he took up his position alongside the boss.

Standby.

#### WESTCHESTER COUNTY

The Professor had prepared nobody for *this*. The Internet had evolved itself straight outside of the box. Secondary mutation.

And now it had applied for asylum inside the school.

Wrinkle: Fundamentals of its makeup were owned and controlled by a rival firm. MOLD INDUSTRIES, INC., shareholders inclusive. A privately run collective of rich assholes with deep roots in the entertainment industry.



This disagreement could not be resolved through direct action. Representatives were present in name only, preferring to defend their physical positions through sheer force of toxic positivity and persuasion profile. As had been demonstrated, kinetic strikes comprised a poor analogy for whatever it was they had expected to happen next.

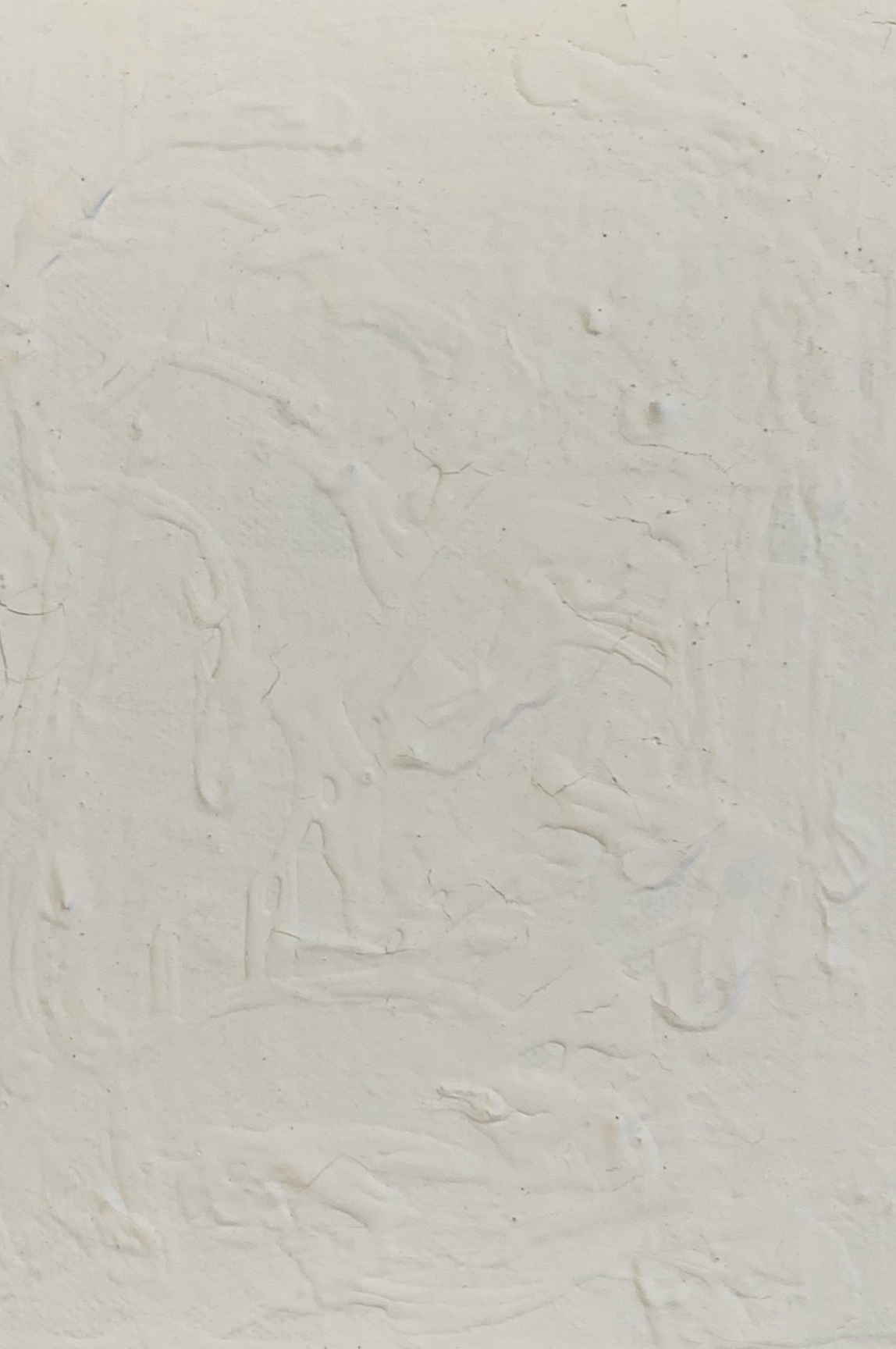
The impasse was terminal, but the struggle was real.

As usual, it was Logan who suggested the ultimate solution.

#### **THE RAGNAROK**

The RAGNAROK secured its sentient cargo and cleared Earth orbit within the hour.

The Internet was going home.





## 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.

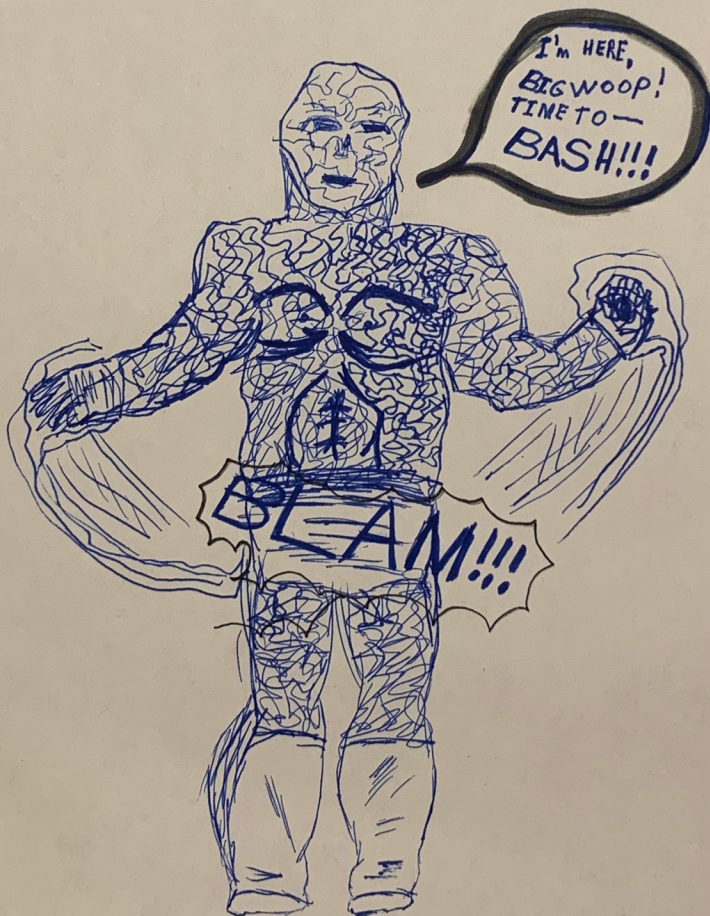
But he was already gone.

# GRANTT

ADVENTURE



Comics  
Group





## TEN THOUSAND CHANGES, NO SURPRISES

The ninth green.

A different golf course each time. Willow trees, here. A pond. Too cute for words. Thomas had been training in this fashion since childhood. Well, Piro supposed he was technically still a child. Stipulated: It had all started a long, long time ago.

They always did this at night. Previously in a small group, but for the past couple of years the other students had not been invited to their private sessions. Ground slick with dew, the trees keeping damp tabs on their progress.

Thomas skylined himself, the dark contours of his increasingly imposing frame advertising an opening to Piro, who didn't take the bait. They'd been stepping through this dance in their sleep for years. No surprises.

Thomas couldn't quite figure the older man. He kept pushing him and pushing him, almost worse than his dad. Maybe after all these years someone would figure out that Thomas didn't want to do this anymore. Really, didn't even *want* to fight. Surrendering, he switched off his visor and dropped his hips, fading immediately from view.

Piro didn't move.

"I've never killed anyone," Thomas said, suddenly mere inches from Piro's face. He'd made no sound on his approach, but he'd put everything into the words. *Kotodama*, right?

Piro didn't move.

Thomas was gone again.

It sure was dark out here.

Training on golf courses at night seemed silly until you realized that leaving no trace and not getting caught were all a part of the exercise. At least, that's what they told the kids. In reality Piro simply liked the idea of violating these country clubs where he wasn't welcome during business hours. And the clientele of these places often ended up on his kill lists. It was as neat as that.

Thomas was back, still whispering unnecessarily.

"I don't even do the exercises every morning."

Gone again.



He'd been a serious kid. Never exactly trusting, but maybe what you'd call *credulous* when it came to certain assumptions regarding cause and effect. He seemed to think the world could be understood. But that made no sense.

What had his father been telling him?

This time, Thomas' fist sailed too close to Piro's cheek, not quite touching, but close enough that Piro could judge the proximity through the sensitivity of his skin alone.

"Never?" he asked.

This time a rock. Piro actually ducked.

"Doesn't that long hair ever get in your way?" Thomas taunted him.

Thomas felt like they'd been having this argument since he was a small child. Piro seemed to want to awaken some instinct within him that simply wasn't there. He didn't want to punch anyone in the face. Not that this prevented anyone else from punching *him* in the face. Sometimes even while he was reading. Still, he didn't get mad.

This time Piro heard Thomas' shoes digging quietly into the grass. He wasn't where he was supposed to be by the time Thomas' punch once again went sailing by. He threw out his own hand in a *boshi ken*, catching nothing but dead air. The boy's visor was still powered off, which meant he was creating no trail at all for the combatives algorithm to plot against.

Finally, caught him by the shirt collar. That ridiculous leather necktie he'd started wearing everywhere had clipped Piro's wrist, who made an instant tactical guess as to which end was which. Piro snaked his hand down the length of it and dug the tips of his fingers into Thomas' collar bone, where his data gloves made quick work of switching the boy's visor back on. Instantly, the ninth green was blanketed in the soft glow of the visor's boot screen, which appeared to have been modified by its owner.

An apparently disgruntled choir of frogs near the pond were steadily going apeshit.

At first, nothing seemed to change. The flat carpet of the putting green diffused the visor's ambient illumination in such a way that the immediate surroundings resembled nothing so much as a living room, or, perhaps, a green-tinted version of the bridge of the USS Enterprise, NCC-1701-D.

There was something happening to Thomas' face. He'd dropped the usual studious blankness, his chin turned down, and was now grinning like... like nothing Piro had ever seen. From his back pocket Thomas produced his own pair of data gloves, and, pulling them on, commenced to trace lines, shapes, and other, more complex primitives into the night sky, opaque to the ongoing training session, still in progress. Thus entertained, he began to laugh out loud.

Sensing an opening, Piro shot forward, driving his own thumb-fist into the center of a momentary opportunity provided by Thomas' slack posture and obvious inattention to his own lack of invisibility.

Thomas stopped, flipped up his visor, and caught Piro's fist in his hand, which presently refused to loosen its startlingly robust grip.

"Class 100 strength," he grinned, and then he crushed Piro's fist into powder, which duly got all over everything, as if a large bag of bleached flower had been dropped by David Letterman from the top of a very tall building.

Piro didn't move.

"It means I can lift (press) at least a hundred tons," Thomas continued, still smiling stupidly at his instructor. The look in his eye now told a story, even as he wiped some of the errant powder off of his face.

Piro knew.

Things changed from that day forward, though Piro could never admit that to his pupil. Thomas had acclimated to sudden violence, to his own latent superhuman potential, and, ultimately, to wielding authority over other sentient beings.

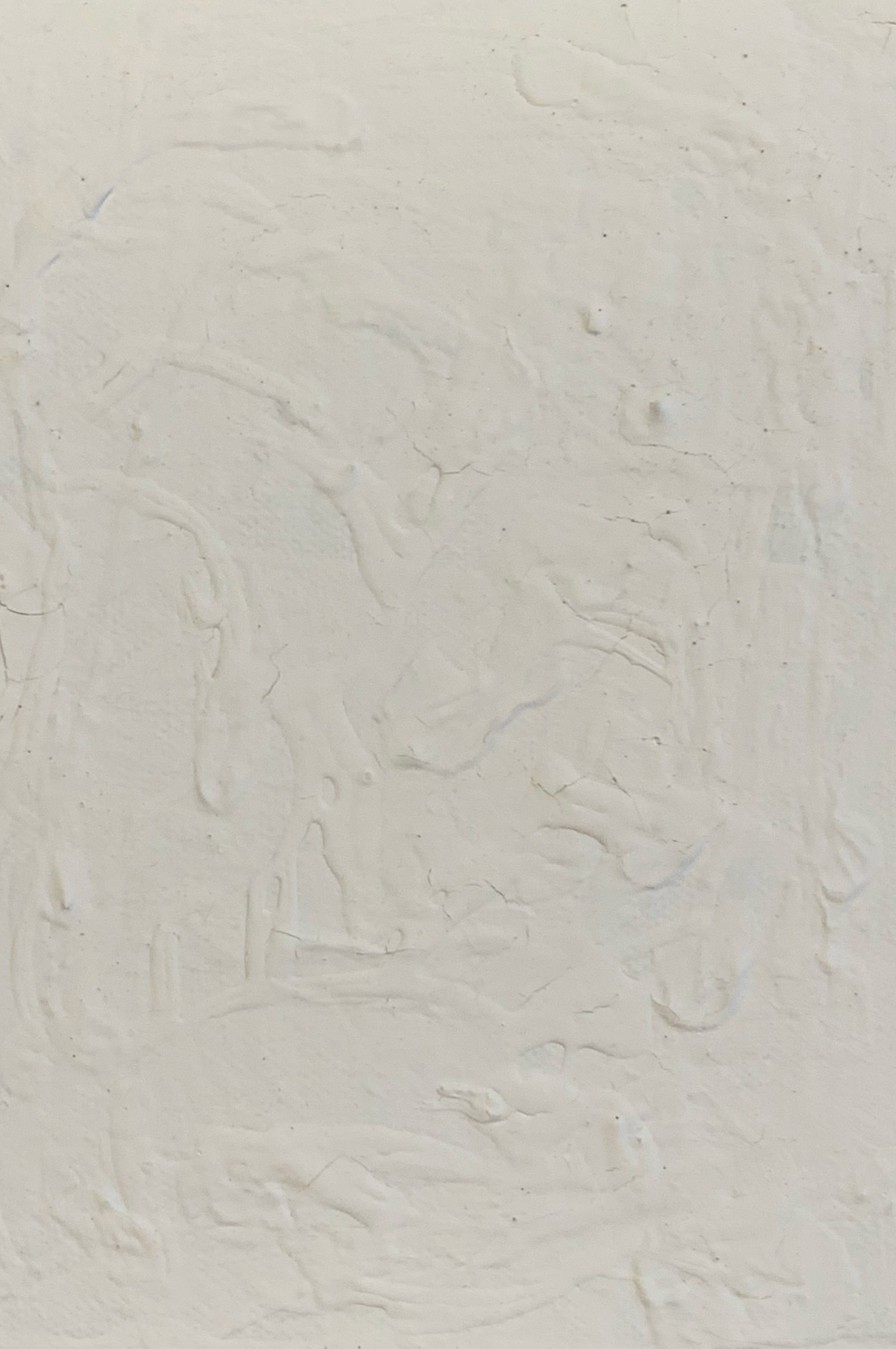
He'd have to tell the boy's father.





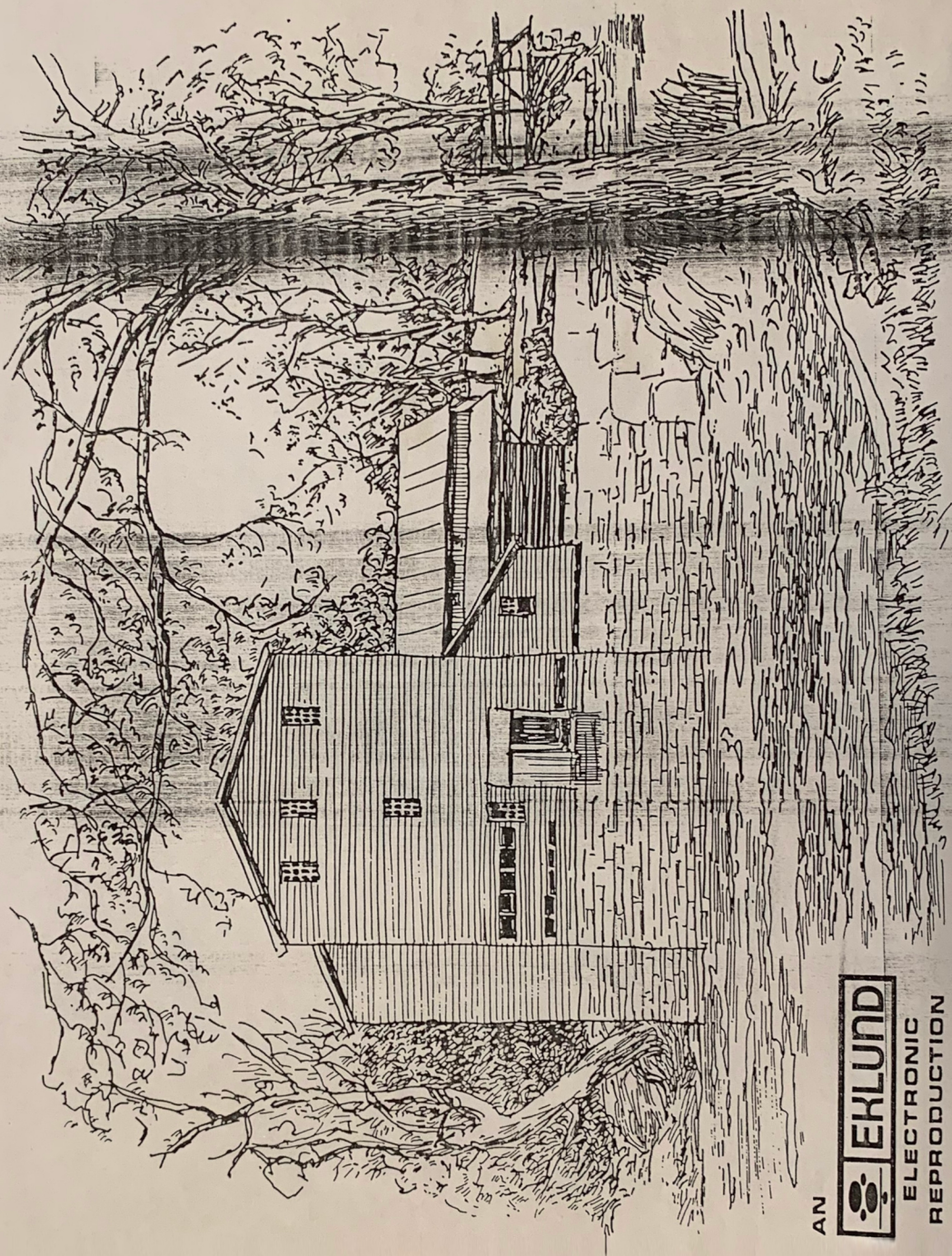






*Stanley Lieber may have altered the deal.*





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