

## **XVA**

#2

by Stanley Lieber

### **MADRIPOOR**

It wasn't going to be a problem, he told himself. The job was the job. 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, its authors.

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

Ororo didn't want to do this anymore. Kitty would just have to find a student to fill in for her. 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 just blows off an entire storyline on account of some minor contradiction."

"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. Just as Logan was about to pick up the ringing stopped. The machine had answered it. 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. 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 NAVIGATE 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 to his desk.

"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 it 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 cheap 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.