

XVA

#4

by Stanley Lieber

NEW YORK

Plinth Mold paced 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, 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 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.

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 in 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 and 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.