

WHATCHA
READIN'?

ACTRON



AFTER
BYRNE + AUSTIN

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XVA

1

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 down the stairs 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 on 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 where the exercise might be turned into an opportunity for 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 this kind of 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 had proven 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. 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.

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 at 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.

2

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

Orooro 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?

Orooro 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 Orooro 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

Orooro 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.

3

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. 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. 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 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. Perhaps it was starting to work.

MOLD INDUSTRIES, INC. had not acquitted itself 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, and now 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.

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, she 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 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. That was 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 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.

"Making a dent in *that'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 that 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, whoever it was, finally gave up.

Despair.

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.

Only breeze was blowing, almost like spring.

Then my Mom (became) ...

I immediately flopped down on the couch
with the latest issue of ~~the~~ ^{my favorite} magazine
~~the~~ ^{men}

d.



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