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MASSIVE FICTIONS

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## 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 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 blow his good material on *this* crowd.

He was conscious of the value of 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 a masthead. His motto: *If you know, you know.*

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

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

The rest would be 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 Tom's language. He folded his leaf and downed the last swig of his coffee. Scarfed 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 almost the instant the Actron team had 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, apropos nothing.

"Quite."

The Canadian Rockies. Raven sat. He hadn't moved his legs for what he now realized must have been several hours. They had long ago fallen asleep. He 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 to be in good repair. It was the first time he could remember making such an assessment in quite some time. "Fell to Earth," he muttered under his breath, which presently crystalised 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, insistent 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 put on the rubber mask that made him appear, to his teammates, to be 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 most of 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 below. It was all happening.

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

But first, lunch.

Haus' publishing arm would fund the construction of a spacefaring vehicle. Cut off from his place of origin, he 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 constant, and he was likely to run into trouble along the way.

His ship would need a crew.

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

No known survivors.



NEXT ISSUE: HAUS' WILL