

MARS2

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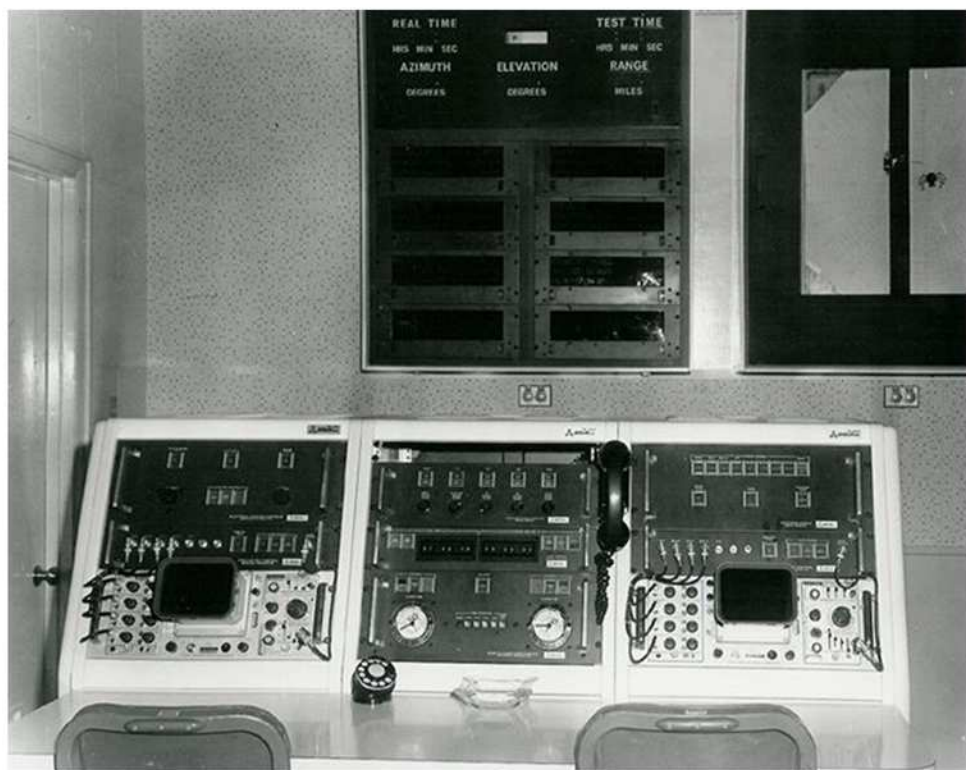
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MARS2

BASEMENT LIFE

1

31 January, 1942.

We head into the apartment.

Lots of space. Two rooms and a closet.

Incredibly, the closet is larger than the other two rooms combined.

I ask about the carpet.

"Don't worry about it," says the realtor.

I could easily do my school work in that closet. Intriguing possibilities.

There is a kitchen sink, but no stove. One living room wall is mirrored, encouraging the illusion that the room is more than six feet wide.

Flip on the closet light. Wood paneling. A little door, all the way in the back. I walk over and tap it with my foot.

The door doesn't budge, but the carpeting on the floor begins to pull away from the wall. A hand emerges from the folds, groping at my shoe. The hand brushes my ankle and then abruptly disappears beneath the carpet.

Noted.

I pull back the rug and there is no floor underneath. Someone or something scurries away, just beyond the range of my vision. Almost certainly the owner of the hand that had just tried to grab my foot.

For obvious reasons, I find this unacceptable.

I slip off my backpack and follow the hand into the crawl-space.

2

The air is wet with men's cologne. Basement humidity laps at my neck. I dab my forehead with my handkerchief and then return it to my back pocket. Adjust my visor.

Heat signatures.

I crawl after what could only have been a small child.

At one point I get stuck between the floor supports and whatever it is they are supporting. A piece of insulation jams into my ear and I nearly break my arm trying to get out of my jacket to dig it out.

Finally, I catch a glimpse of the boy. He flashes a small light in my eyes and then giggles as he rounds a corner, once again beyond my sight. I can't move, so I simply grunt and try to relax my shoulders. I'm still stuck in place. Still can't get out of my jacket.

I realize now that my shoes have gone missing.

3

A moment to collect myself. Just what is going on here?

Weapons check out. My visor is functioning normally. Still, I can't connect to anything beyond a few feet in any direction. Local lighting is unresponsive.

I manage to wiggle out of my trousers and advance several more feet into the darkness. Unlogged.

Now, the passage begins to widen, and eventually I come to the end of whatever this is I'm crawling on.

Another small door.

Fortunately, my jacket still trails behind. I'm able to login and the door opens into a full basement.

Hm. No furnishings, but no overt signs of flooding, either. Could this be converted to a sublet? Might nudge the apartment several positions higher on my list.

I hear a group of children, singing. Arguing? In any case, they are making a lot of noise.

Hadn't counted on neighbors.
I climb down from the ceiling.

4

Elderly couple. Well dressed. Tied to a pair of kitchen chairs. Also, blindfolded. The children (the ones I heard?) are laughing and striking them, repeatedly, with rattan sticks.

Puzzling.

"Being sexy changed my life," says the old woman.

The old man smiles conspiratorially, seeming to relish the repeated blows to his stomach. "We're old, not dead!" he suddenly shouts.

"He's hard of hearing," explains the old woman.

"What?"

"I SAID, YOU'RE HARD OF HEARING."

One of the children sits on a cardboard box, framing the scene with his hands. Apparently, taking video.

I realize then that I am nude from the waste down.

5

The old woman rises from her chair and makes her way over to me. Grasping my scrotum in her weathered hand, she whispers in my ear that she wants me to remove her blindfold.

"I'm blind," she says.

"Hey lady, aren't we all?"

She pulls hard on my penis. Too hard. It hurts. There follows an uncomfortable silence.

Weapons finally charged, I shoot some of the children and then the old man. Kick over his chair. Reload. Finish the job. Log the events and clone memory to my jacket.

Finally alone.

Well, almost.

The old woman slips out of her shoes. Slowly rolling down her beige pantyhose, she asks me to unzip her blouse from behind and then to help her with the clasp of her necklace.

She gives me a little head and then we begin to make love.

After a while, something seems to change. No longer seems right. I say as much, out loud.

Silence.

Back away and wipe my hands on my legs.

She says nothing. The old woman is reading, obviously not paying attention.

I speak louder and finally she answers, without changing her apparent focus.

"Time for bed."

I nod and head for the bathroom. Time to brush my teeth.

6

So, this is basement life.

I've just turned fifteen years old.

So far, 1942 is diminishing returns.

FLAT EYES

1

March, 1942.

Turn down the contrast on my visor and the room fades back into view. What was the woman saying? Distraction from subliterate.

"Take that stupid thing off," she says, sounding annoyed.

Can't understand the objection. My face looks fine.

"Hey, it's the '40s, babe." I kick at a loose piece of carpet.

"Help me with these boxes," she says.

"I have homework. Then, sleep."

"So, start reading."

2

Deep in the basement, my stomach hurts.

The woman doesn't understand me. Hasn't, really, since I came down here. Doesn't have eyes to see.

Offered my visor, but she's made it clear she isn't interested.

Humidity in the basement is a problem. I'm worried about the electronics. Somehow, her equipment keeps functioning.

The woman has taken in several children. At least, don't believe they are hers. They're always underfoot. Hard to keep them from digging around in my belongings.

I lean back in my chair and examine the paperwork.

3

"Claims desk."

Answer the phone in the usual manner. The script hovers, insistently, several subjective feet in front of my face. By now I've committed its contents to memory. The script is no longer necessary.

The old woman coaches me. To sharpen my diction. To teach me to handle the problem customers. Another thing I don't need.

"Your voice. You sound like a girl," she says.

What is that supposed to mean?

"Bright," I shout into the phone. Formal like.

"What? Who are you? You sound like a girl."

"*Et tu*, everyone?" I sigh, under my breath.

The customer hangs up.

4

After my shift I try some writing. The old woman will want to follow my progress. I stick to the basics: date, time, location, principals—a tally of events.

Her reaction is predictably flat.

Already knew what she would say. Back to the training software.

Note the response.

A year of this work and I'll have enough to conclude my report.

5

No reason to return to the apartment upstairs. Furniture was never delivered. Besides, everything I own fits into my shoulder bag.

Closet floor has healed over.

The old woman doesn't like me talking about home.

I sit down on my bed and page through the day's results. Callers from around the world. All former residents of the basement. Why they have the number.

More names than I had expected.

Several, I recognize.

6

"Get out, flat eyes." She stands below the ceiling and points, gesturing at the cheap, gypsum tiles. "You're not wanted here."

Drop my leaf into my bag and carefully make my bed. Glare in her direction.

The old woman crosses my name off of her list.

This is not good. Hasn't been enough time to gather the information I need. That I came for.

Being asked to leave, anyway.

I shrug and climb into the ceiling.

FAIRE LA PERRUQUE, WHATEVS

1

My character?

Black t-shirt, faded blue. Unfiltered Pall-Malls. Scar on my hand I don't recognize.

Easy.

2

Back at the apartment.

"Hello. Some Acme user here?"

Migrant user. Untrained. But: Miranda Rights Gold Account. Have to let him go.

Clean out the rest of the living room. Downtown is packed; so, processing them through the apartment, one at a time.

The whole thing takes quite a while.

New job feels just like the old job.

On the other hand, I've never heard of Acme, either.

3

"Stagflation."

"In operating systems?"

"Can you think of a single new idea that's hit the desktop since 1918?"

"Transparent terminal windows?"

That's quite enough. I halt the interview. Bypass internal debate. Then: depress a switch.

"Maude, please send in the next candidate."

4

Closet floor on the mend. I put up a wire, to hang up my clothes. No boxes on the carpet.

The old woman remains uncommunicative.

I've hired a few school kids, to help move stray bits from one folder to another. Pay them with free access to the basement underwear.

I'll find a way back in.

Or, the kids will find one for me.

If anyone is wanting the New
Release of Beauty and the Beast
(Blu-Ray/DVD combo pack), I have
an extra one

I type.

5

Errors. Upgrade to the latest underwear.

Snug.

6

Start messing around with Acme. A little confusing. Switch to Sam. Remote file editing. Hey, this could be useful.

7

Laid up for two days. Sick. Reconnected to the wrong worldtrack? Delaying judgment.

8

Some of the kids I hired are not working out. Appear to be using the underware to access protected resources in the basement.

No.

Tell them to stop. See if they decided to listen. Maude keeps track. Their skills are developing rapidly.

The old woman will not be happy.

Even so, I'm running out of folders to keep them busy.

9

Kids have found a way back into the basement. I piggy-back. Free DVDs for everyone.

"Whatevs," one of them says, when I express my gratitude.

Pulled up the carpeting in the closet for good. Rolled it up and stuffed it behind the couch. Meow. Don't want it to heal.

Installed new locks on the closet door.

Kids take the first watch.

10

Personal projects got in the way again. They're always busy.

Some kind of sub-visor device. Primitive.

My review: "What is this."

Looks like a wig. They laugh me off.

"Wig for the Vizier."

Fan art.

JERK VIZIER

1

The Vizier popped his collar and sat down on his throne. The green of his alligator polo merged with the fading sunlight until his head appeared to float above the stage.

"There is no safe word," he said, into his microphone.

Instantly, the crowd cheered.

He was wearing his new wig.

The Vizier flushed.

2

"I jerked off to this footage, five, maybe six years ago. I don't understand why they keep rerunning these same tired political spots."

"For my part, I'm surprised at the variety. Most people have short memories. And jerking off is everywhere now."

"Yeah. I know it's not cool anymore, but still, I like doing it. I guess the rest of the world is finally ready to join me in the twentieth century. I just wish the programming was more varied."

The two men piped down as a panoply of voices boomed from the stage.

3

The Vizier swiveled his microphone around and listened to the crowd. Discussion was trending towards nothing of importance. And yet, the people were still chatting idly, spitting the word of the law. Now they could hear themselves over the loudspeakers. Their retractions were boilerplate, inept; but still he was pleased with the uncomfortable noises emanating from the cheap seats.

He clicked off his microphone. Coughed, softly, then clicked it back on.

"You people have no idea what I'm going through," he said.

The crowd cheered.

4

"I know the word," said the Vizier. "I just can't think of it right now."

The men continued tying him to the grill.

The Vizier slipped out of his Nike Air Cortez and wiggled in his denim. Vestments discarded, he still could not manage to free his arms. Finally, his Rolex slid off, sinking into the ash and charcoal below.

"This is a disappointing way for a Caliphate to divest."

Now stripped of the rest of his clothing, the group of men continued the process of smoothing the spicy rub into the Vizier's bare haunches. The strong seasoning lodged in his sinuses, coaxing forth a powerful sneeze.

"Al'hamdo Lilah," said one of the chefs.

"Yarhamaka Allah," said the Vizier. "All things considered, I hope at least that I taste good on a paper plate."

"We'll see," said one of the men, straining to work yet more of the rub into the Vizier's taut thighs.

"I'm one hundred percent serious," said the Vizier.

5

"Wait! I remember! *Westsiiiiide!* The safe word is *Westsiiiiide!*"

The Vizier managed to free one of his hands. He threw up a *W* and waved it around, weakly. The stage chefs were not moved by this retreat into the classics.

"You said there wasn't a safe word."

"Look, that was dogma. This is dinner. And I'm the Vizier!"

"Doesn't matter. We're overbooked. Besides, you smell delicious."

"That's the seasoning, you imbecile. There has been a *fatwah* against consuming the flesh of a Vizier!"

"As you said. Dogma."

6

"I'm not really turned on by this cooking stuff."

"Me neither. Preferred the political theater. Even the reruns."

"Yeah. Let's get out of here. Maybe we can still beat the post-event traffic."

For once, the car started without any trouble.

DEFINE COLOR

1

Slake Bottom looked at the photo. Then he looked at the old woman.

He looked at the photo again.

The photo contained more detail. In real life, the woman's movements seemed indistinct, lacking in definition. Blurry, even. The photo revealed a gracefulness that was absent from the awkwardly perambulating visage that paced before him in the kitchen.

Her apparent beauty was a matter of interpretation.

Slake took a drink from his cup.

He considered his options. Before he could speak he found that the old woman had resumed her monologue. Bending his ear, as usual.

"Those friends of yours are no good. Wasting basement resources. Blowing off their work as if none of this mattered. You're going to see how they turn out."

"Aye, Nana."

Slake adjusted his gauntlet. The old woman wanted to knock out the kitchen wall. One of the younger kids had said it was typical of her restlessness. No real purpose to the changes. He took down some measurements and then set himself to wait.

"I forget sometimes that you contractors can't just power yourselves down. Go on, then, get out of here. I'll ring tomorrow after I've decided on a color scheme."

"You got it, Nana."

2

Odd sensation, just now. A perturbation in my visual field. But, nothing has changed. The room remains inert. The items within, static.

The old woman is in the kitchen, henpecking yet another contractor. Renovations to the basement are almost complete, but still she keeps on hiring new workers. Mostly, non-natives. Non-graduates. No doubt an intentional strategy. Once their work is completed, they won't be coming back. The lack of a common language keeps them from comparing their experiences with the current residents of our happy home, or, for that matter, with anyone above ground.

How the hell is she paying for all of this?

We don't yet know.

3

Slake Bottom was descended from perhaps the greatest ever fan of Shakespeare's *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*. Some number of great-grandfathers ago, his ancestor had witnessed one of the production's earliest performances; had been transformed; had adopted the surname of his favorite character, in spite of the gentle advice of his friends and family. People laughed knowingly at his new name. He found that it was usually good for a few tankards of ale. And so, the/his laughter rang out, down, through the centuries. The fact had pursued Slake throughout his education, but he had avoided delving too deeply into the original material on account of having little interest in family traditions.

Later, in prison, when he had been forced to scan through the works of William Shakespeare in order to organize a brief overview of all human literature, he had learned to hate the material on its own merits.

Slake flicked away his cigarette and donned his donkey helmet.

"Out of the way, asshead," said one of the children as she elbowed her way into the kitchen.

4

The old woman finished the dishes, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Be polite," she admonished.

"Aye, Nana," chirped the young girl.

"Really, I don't mind," said Slake Bottom.

Without warning, the old woman pulled up her apron, propping it in front of her face, exposing the tops of her legs, as well as the fact that she was not wearing any clothes beneath the tails of her shirt.

"Slake, how many eyes do I have?"

"Eyes? I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"Count. My. Eyes. Stop jabbering and answer. By the way, they're up here." Motioning from behind the upturned apron.

"I-I can't see them."

"Really, that's interesting," said the old woman, apparently losing interest in the conversation.

5

"I'm no longer human," complained Slake Bottom. "Haven't been, for some years."

"Do you dream in color?"

"Define color."

Slake exhaled smoke the color of unpolished steel. It contrasted sharply with the rich green of the old woman's bedspread. He didn't feel anything, one way or the other.

"Your uniform is monochrome. Even your flesh is a pallid gray. There is little to distinguish you in the presence of other men. And what about your main weaponry?"

"I know, I know," said Slake, resigned to the dull finish of his sidearm. "I've been saving up for something new."

He sat, sagging, his helmet removed, his face in his hands.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Nana Mold.

"I guess that would be okay. When they brought me back to Earth they placed no restrictions on conversation. And there's nothing in my contract about the basement."

"Only reason you were brought down here," Nana said, reassuringly.

6

Peek out of my bedroom into the hall. Some kind of commotion.

Hm, nothing.

Decide on dinner. Something from the fridge. But: kitchen door locked.

The old woman? No. One of the girls.

Curious, though.

Down the hall. The old woman's bedroom.

Also locked.

Back to my bedroom. Tools. Then, I decide I don't really care.

Sit down on my bed. Pick up my book.

Message waiting.

Not right now. Delete. Leave me to my book.

I lose a couple of hours, flipping pages. Don't even hear her when she finally comes in.

This time, she's not alone.

I DOUBT IT

1

"First you get good, then you get crazy, then you get good and crazy."

Albert Lunsford dispensed his wisdom to the children of the basement. Or so Lunsford dreamed.

"Wake up, kid."

Slake nudged the boy, poking him in the shoulder with his side-arm. The boy just sort of laid there.

"Get up."

"God, leave me alone."

Slake banged his gun on the nightstand, causing Lunsford's glass of water to tip over. It spilled onto his face.

"Hey!"

"Out of bed. You're wanted in the kitchen."

2

Nana had been busy programming diapers when the recruiter had made his presence known.

"Sit down, Lunsford."

Albert sunk into a chair, resting his elbows on the table. He didn't want to be there.

"Why is there a headhunter in my kitchen?"

"Nana, I don't--"

Wrong.

"Don't backsass me. Think. How did he get down here?"

Reel it out. Slowly. You can't afford to be on punishment when you have to report for basic training.

"I... I let him in."

Slake shook his head.

"Unacceptable!" Nana stomped her foot. It was clear now that she was angry. She passed the gun to Albert. "You take care of him."

Lunsford accepted the weapon and checked the command history. Logged out and then logged back in.

"Sorry, fella. We're not interested."

Albert squeezed his eyelids closed and slowly pulled the trigger.

3

Royt Piper had heard all about the basement.

From headquarters. From no one in particular. The information coming out had been spotty, but a picture was starting to form. If the intel could be trusted, these basement dwellers had located the Shroud.

"There's a signing bonus of thirty-five million dollars. BCT is a nine week stint in Vincennes. AIT is another six weeks up in Indianapolis. You'll get good and tired of Indiana before you're finished."

"I believe you," said Albert Lunsford.

"Thinspirators, Lunsford. Always lurking."

"It's plausible, at least," said Albert.

"The Shroud definitely belonged to Isaac Newton. The material is a verified cotton blend. Plasmoids in the fibers indicate an early 18th century provenance. The inscription, obviously his words."

"I said it sounded plausible."

Royt held up the model Shroud. A 6XL t-shirt that drug the floor even as he stood balanced on the edge of the mattress.

"Read it," he said.

Lunsford's lips moved as he scanned the words. "*I doubt it*," he mumbled, aloud.

"Good," allowed Piper. "Reading is believing."

4

Albert folded up the complimentary replica Shroud and placed it carefully in his chest of drawers. He was suddenly feeling very tired. He told Royt he could crash in the empty room down the hall. Then, he climbed into his bed and turned out the light, his fading thoughts lingering upon his novel-in-progress. Nothing in his life seemed interesting enough to preserve in writing. Certainly not his job, or anything else that happened here in the basement. He resigned himself to pointless fiction and promptly fell asleep.

5

Nana mopped the kitchen floor.

Slake thought, *She seems overly concerned with keeping the place clean.* He leaned back in his chair and lit another cigarette.

"Albert. This is disappointing. Do you really not understand why we can't have recruiters wandering around in the basement?"

Nana leaned on her mop, waiting for an answer. She glared at the ashes Slake flicked onto her floor.

"I-I suppose these men are predisposed to asking a lot of questions."

"It's not the questions that are a problem. It's the paperwork. They'll trip you up with what they write down."

"No contracts," offered Slake, in summary.

"No company will ever pay you enough to successfully sue them," recited Albert, under his breath.

After a moment, Nana seemed pleased. Slake marked down his grade.

"Very good. Now, let's get you into your jammies. it's time for bed."

Nana and Slake made sure the children were asleep before they locked down the hallway and made their way to Thomas' room.

Knocked on his door. The boy was evidently still awake. He lay on his bed, staring at his ceiling, perhaps waiting for them to arrive. He signaled for them to enter.

"A diaper marketed to automatically upload its oracular interpretation of the child's feces," he suggested.

"Old news," said the old woman. "We've been using them for years. Hell, from what I understand, you used to wear them."

"Just an idea," said Thomas, somewhat crestfallen.

"Something has happened," stated Slake, serious as a library fire. "The Lunsford boy. Brought in a recruiter. Someone asking about the Shroud."

"Mein Gott. Did he sign anything?"

"Unknown at this time. Have to wait it out. That's the word from counsel."

"Not a great position to be in."

"Agreed."

Nana fidgeted, impatiently. "It doesn't matter if he's signed or not. He's still a minor."

"Won't much matter if they've gone and lowered the draft age. Marketers working now don't even shave."

"Hm. Sounds like they're getting desperate, up top."

"This basement is still off-limits. Regardless of denomination."

And then: "Bah. Stupid shirt doesn't even fit."

HEY, WEIRD SHOES

1

Christmas, 1942.

Prosthetic legs at fifty percent.

Hurts.

Admit it: scaring myself.

Duck behind the Mercedes. Vizier under much heavier guard than normal.

One right here. Laying on the ground. Check his pockets. Reload. Increase dosage by twenty percent for the next ten minutes. Glance at the snow.

Legs at forty-three percent. Not good.

Over the back of the car. Scuff shoes on pavement. Back into my pockets for ammunition. Get into a rhythm. But: still losing power. Find a way to recharge.

Without warning, the Vizier's car resolves to pull away from the alley. Eyes follow the tracks. Realization: they're sticking with standard procedure. VIP out of the line of fire.

Locate a sliver and waste thirty seconds charging my legs.

Phase one is a shambles. The old woman won't like my report.

Start running after the car.

2

The Vizier had switched himself out. Long before the barbecue. Just another changeover. Recent events scrolled by, nothing catching in his mind.

He rested in the back of his limousine, staring down at the VHS cassette in his hand. Black, rectangular plastic against pale flesh and gold brocade.

Insert the cassette.

Presently, there appeared upon the screen a fifty percent blue/pink gradient field. Hovering above the smudge of colors was a familiar phrase, USING MAGIC TO FIGHT DRUG ABUSE. The Vizier was able to take some comfort in the kerning of the typeface and the contours of the drop shadow. He pondered the traditional refrain. One benefit of membership in this ancient fraternity was the freedom to seek refuge in its various conceits. Like so many before him, he decided to proceed as if the message were addressed specifically to himself. He straightened his necktie and opened a packet of cocaine.

Word came from the driver that the Vizier's destination was within reach.

Sensing no alternative, he nodded his assent.

With some effort, reached for the remote.

"We need more b-temps for the party," he shouted into the glass partition. "These other ones are dead!"

The vehicle lurched to a stop and his door was yanked open by someone standing outside the window. Harsh winter sunlight invaded the armored cabin. He stared up at the man's spiked hair, enveloped by the stench of some considerable amount of hair product. The man was grinning from ear to ear.

"I hope that's a limo full of money, 'cause we've brought mountains and mountains of our finest white powder."

A second man appeared, this one not grinning at all. He carried a sheet of translucent green paper. The man leaned into the limousine.

"My partner's not talking about the snow."

3

Six miles down the road I botch phase two, as well.

More specifically, I slip in the snow.

One leg powers down completely as I approach the parked limousine. Drop to my knee and then pull myself back up and lock the joint manually.

Suddenly notice the others.

Large pink aircraft, catty-corner on the street. Strange triangular shape. Glossy.

Spinning up my weapon to take out the newcomers and then it happens, I'm face down on the slick pavement. Scrape my chin.

On second thought, relieved. Don't think anyone saw me take aim. Or fall. But, locked leg and nothing to pull myself up with.

And now: unobstructed view of their ankles.

Spin up the gun.

Hey, weird shoes.

4

I lay here on the ground and consider my life.

Leaving the basement is increasingly difficult. Even on these short missions. Place has everything I need. Diversions, companionship, nourishment. The religious stuff I can take or leave. Then there's that huge t-shirt.

Think about my room.

The old woman keeps the heat on. Few objectionable personal habits. Doesn't seem to mind the state of my body, either. A steady supply of spare parts.

Eventually, I know, I'll be forced to leave. Whether I want to or not. Mission completion leads to extraction. The natural order. But it's possible this excursion may last for years. I've no way of knowing when my employer will be satisfied. Just have to keep on, keeping on. Always doing my best.

Speaking of.

Pants have gone cold. Legs dead. Visor control is on the fritz so I pull on my gloves.

The Vizier's still talking.

5

The shoes look soft. Puffy? No heels. Some sort of transparent section, there, along the bottom. An actual logo or insignia sewn onto the side. Tongue that reads: PUMP. Is that leather? And where are the laces?

Velcro?

Whatever, the conversation is concluded. The pink aircraft has vanished more quickly than makes sense for a vehicle of that size. Car starts up and peels out.

I'm humping it again.

6

The Vizier often diminished himself through commerce. He claimed the privilege under a branch of theological speculation less popular in the current century than in times passed. While it was necessary to conduct most transactions in private, he longed to demonstrate the art of the deal to his followers. Unbeknownst to his political advisers, he had prepared a treatise on the subject that he planned to issue in the spring.

The Vizier leaned his face against the glass of his window as the limousine accelerated into a long curve. As the road behind him slowly faded from view, he thought that he could make out the silhouette of a man clad in full commando gear, sprinting forward into the vehicle's wake.

He wondered: *Potential customer?*

GRID

1

Actually, my armchair is quite sophisticated.

I've read all the criticisms, but the handling is superb. Armor competitive with the industry standard. High bandwidth and low TCO.

Anyway, it works for me.

I'm able to navigate the Iron Triangle.

Nana, the company and the war. From my armchair I can keep an eye on how these pieces are moving around the board. I may not understand it all, but at least I'm creating a record. On playback, someone else can interpret the details.

Enter Slake Bottom.

Contractor, yes. Construction worker, no. I was mistaken, before, when I thought she was needling him about paint swatches. He wasn't really here to remodel the kitchen. Likely that chatter was solely for my benefit.

Too many hours in her bedroom with the door locked. I'm not fooled.

I've been able to gather more data. Increased travel in and out of the basement, as of late. Working in Eastern Europe. Something having to do with navigational systems. Genetic? I don't know. Nana is here and gone seemingly on a daily basis. Sometimes, she's in and out so quickly she leaves her bedroom door unlocked. Trusts me, I guess. I've nosed around a bit, but I can't make sense of her papers. As usual, the particulars are above my head.

Must be why they call this the basement.

2

"Crack is here, it's just not evenly distributed yet."

The Vizier ran a disciplined subgovernment. For the most part.

Historically speaking, he appeared to be a genius of organizational planning. Multiple clone procs spawned, he was able to manage parallel events at an astonishing level of complexity. He suffered comparatively few crashes. Additionally, he'd found a way to manage his personal habits. A new supplier meant less resources tasked to acquisition. These fellows wore strange clothing, but showed up on time and never ran out of product. Claimed to be from New York. Unlikely that it was any New York he had ever known.

The Vizier felt reasonably certain that his thoughts were under control.

"We were just having this same discussion. Shall we continue, then, after lunch?"

The Vizier took a light touch with his staff. Let them set their own schedules. The method had served him well in the old country.

"Sounds fine. How about that new barbecue place uptown. Don't forget to clock out."

3

Three weeks in.

Slake Bottom ran his hand over the boy's face, mussed his hair. This triggered a minimal reflex action in the child's legs.

"Sit still," he commanded.

Lunsford, undeterred, continued to squirm.

Slake shook his head. Withdrew his bladed instrument and replaced the lid of Lunsford's skull. Tapped him lightly on the chest to let him know the procedure was completed.

The boy sat up.

"I've allowed my body to fail me again, sir," said Lunsford.

"Try not to think of it as pain. You're always so focused on the negative. Need to develop a more diverse perspective grid."

"Unfortunately, I've got this unshakable grip on reality," said Lunsford.

Slake Bottom lit a cigarette.

"We're pushing your immune system past its limits. We need you in the proper frame of mind."

"I'm trying, sir. I want to do my best. For the country. It's just that I can't stop these ideas coming into my head. Can't go to sleep. I just keep thinking about what all this might mean, where we really are, who I really am. It's a lot to for someone my age to take in."

Slake took a drag on his cigarette. Went back to work, sterilizing his equipment.

"We know, son."

4

The old woman has found my armchair.

Unauthorized equipment. Strictly forbidden.

Evasive maneuvers ensue. Mostly useless. Tried to bargain with her, to no avail. Offered to stop taking notes while on the clock. She wasn't having any of it. She could stop me taking notes any time she wanted to, it was true.

Drag the chair up, through the floor. Out to the curb. Don't really want to leave it up here. Classified technology. But, she won't let me back in until I prove it's out of reach. She's given me a lot of second chances.

Back in the closet, rubbing on the floor. Carpet looks different. A pattern. Shape of a grid.

What is the meaning of this? Beats me. Look at the carpet. Answers all questions.

The floor finally opens and I crawl back through to the basement.

Something is different. Lighting? The smell?

Back suddenly sore. Lesions.

Into my room. Lay down on my bed and try to read the ceiling.

Unsure what's happening to me.

DEEP CAPTURE

1

January, 1943.

Lunsford's betrayal has not been forgotten.

Far from it. Potential for failure was why he was tapped in the first place.

Still, Slake's interest in the boy seems almost obsessive. I have no access to Europe, so much of what went on there remains obscured. I never get to see the cross-references on what I turn in.

I'm sure something untoward is taking place.

Nana shows no signs of concern. Assuming she's even noticed. By now, the humans in her basement are the least of her worries. Slake's insistence on overseas shipping pushes matters even further beyond the perimeter of her interest. Not her problem. We humans are on our own.

For his part, Lunsford continues to churn out reams of commentary on the company's paper.

Have to read through it all, at least once, for my reports.

Sometimes, I respond.

2

One of the commentaries is a doozy. By the time I'm ready to formulate a response it's well out of date. Textlag. Still, I can't let it just hang in the air. I have to reply.

Probably not wise.

I pull out my binder and review the passages I underlined using my system of multi-colored highlighters. Click through the full menu to make sure the formatting is still coherent. Refresh my outline and then get down to business.

3

Dear Al,

I've been devoting a great deal of thought to these theories of yours, as of late. I sat down and re-read the recent installments again, this time in reverse order. Amazingly, the structure held. I resisted the urge to continue all the way back to the beginning of the series, where tangible analogies might overwhelm me with the notion that the Greens were actually receding from prominence. Pious healers who sealed wounds with their ritual blades, casting in their wake a trail of fascinating strips of paper, which, once dispersed, accumulated in value and might be traded interchangeably with (transmuted into?) worthless gold. Temporal dysphoria. Contextual exhaustion. The concepts are quite literally beyond language. And yet, the vestigial associations between slivers of narrative and their Green counterparts are palpable, wind an analogous, residual trail through the clumps of traumatized grey matter that miscegenate freely beneath my scalp. I closed my leaf. Developed a headache. I resisted the urge to break into the hallway and declare my appreciation for your work. (I believe your door might have been locked.) Instead, I re-read pages 266-276 and started to mentally compose my "go figure" letter, musing on the typical reactions to the latest installment. At that precise moment, with no rational explanation, my leaf powered down. Try as I might, I could not get it to restart. Diagnostics revealed a full charge. Connection was sound. A less practical-minded correspondent might be forgiven for dwelling on these details, becoming convinced of obvious signs and portents.

[REDACTED]

4

The first instance on record of the impossibility of interacting with Lunsford. Anyway, the law is the law.

5

I'm writing, now, after almost a year of silent, monthly reflection, to relate a few salient points and to ask a couple of spurious questions. They include:

[REDACTED]

6

My correspondence with Lunsford runs to several hundred pages of single-spaced text. All things considered, it's amazing I have time to read all of his stuff, much less to respond to it at length. On the other hand, hagiography wins wars.

Prediction: eventually, I'll be withdrawn from the operation.

7

Explaining anything is useless. Wilde was onto something with his "When the critics disagree, the Artist is in accord with himself." How this squares with governing the Republic is reflected in the novel invention of the anonymous ballot. Voters at the polls aren't required to qualify their choices (at least, not yet), and such is as it should be. The artistic voice selects raw materials in the same manner as the constituent -- by haphazardly aiming at pregnant chads. Does this disturb? "And it harm none...", enlightened self-interest takes its rightful place subservient to the internal

dialogue. It's important to make good choices, or at least ones that you can live with. Reconciling those choices with the distinctive sensibilities of others isn't always desirable, or even possible. And that isn't such a sad fact. Give and take can't balance when the other end won't let go, and there's no reason to push anyone off the merry-go-round simply because they happen to be swinging out while you happen to be swinging in. Posit a balance which subsumes individual acts and embodies the entirety of human endeavor; literally, beyond good and evil. Many attribute the label "God" to this construct and then happily carry on with their lives, proceeding to ignore the self-evident wisdom of their discovery.

[REDACTED]

8

Pretty sure I copy/pasted that last bit from somewhere else. So far, Lunsford hasn't seemed to notice.

9

Slake Bottom. Wisdom or Folly?

[REDACTED]

10

This matter remains unresolved.

11

The fact that Sontag alludes to this problem in her September piece would not seem to immediately

disqualify her from the larger debate when we're honestly considering the facts (though, other factors could probably be sussed out if the need were to arise).

[REDACTED]

12

Lunsford can be evasive when he doesn't want to admit to a contradiction. Also, he loves to hate Susan Sontag.

I stop writing to him. He no longer shows up at the dinner table.

The rest is pretty easy to figure out.

INFINITE SUBBASEMENT

1

January, 1943.

As I say: enough writing. Never get through to him anyway. More important crises to be dealt with.

Up top, the war escalates.

Down here, subbasement refactoring. Features scale beyond maintainability. Nana will never admit it, but sometimes she can barely keep up with the changes. The sheer number of children results in a massive administrative overhead. No one could manage this alone, all by themselves. So, automation. Offload low-level maintenance to past graduates. Some of them humans. Back of the envelope calculation, resources will be exhausted by the end of the year.

Example: Just ran out of soda.

Elevator to subbasement seventeen. Always disorienting. Final shift into presence calls much into question. Six perspectives, simultaneous counterparts vying for dominance.

Hexapla.

Slake would be useful here, could help me move the racks, but he won't be back for several weeks. Overseas silence. Hasn't even opened his checkbook.

Careful work, navigate glass corridors.

Flags: -v

Queasy, lost. Rooms all look the same. (There is only one room.) Hex walls, tearaway ceiling. Fadeaway outline. Eyes on my chronometer and back into the corridor.

I'm not alone, down here. Six of me argue the point. Failed notions strip weapons, then clothing. Try another room.

Which direction? Glass partition, infinite mirror. Walls don't lie, but consider the source.

Have to get out of here.

Back in the hallway. Lie on the reflecting floor, laminate quietly.

Some time later, an interruption. Nana on the intercom. Scolding that I'm late for... my...

perspective on subbasement seventeen. Hexapplication.

Return.

Oh, God, I never thought of it that way before.

2

March, 1943.

Three months from the top level of the basement. Slow to rise, avoiding the bends.

Back at my standard depth, finally seeing things clearly.

Have to get out of this place.

"The infinite closet! You've been in the closet. Shouldn't have looked in that closet." Nana crosses her arms and taps her foot on the yellow linoleum floor, nervous and possibly angry. Her eyes drill into my face. I struggle to turn away. She keeps on repeating the phrase. Lyrics?

Feeling guilty, but what is she talking about? Didn't notice any closets down there. Unless she means...

"You saw the closet full of 6XL t-shirts? One for every day of the year? Just wait 'till you tell Lunsford." Slake is laughing. Smoking indoors. Definitely back in town.

"Hush, Slake. Anything from that closet is endless. The t-shirts mean nothing to me. Should have remembered the soda. Now, no more details."

Nana lights a flame on the stove. Frying pan and a bottle of cooking oil. Adjusts the scan rate, then sweeps the contents of her wooden cutting board into the pan. Grips the handle with her apron.

The vegetables cook.

Slake starts to say something, clearly intended as sarcasm, but Nana pulls a hard face and he changes his mind. Brushes the ash from his lap and lights another cigarette.

He laughs again as the smoke alarm pierces Nana's fraudulent kitchen silence.

3

January, 1943.

No, not really the kitchen. Haven't moved. The floor hasn't changed a bit.

Face against the glass.

Legs click and I'm back on my feet, moving down the corridor towards the freezer.

Get really turned around in this place. Can't remember what I'm doing.

Go through a lot for a Gray Pop.

4

January, 4043.

Must be the t-shirts she mentioned.

Page through the hangers. Shrouds. Like Slake said, they're all identical. What else is in here?

"Not a closet." The six of me, still arguing architecture.

Books, boxes of toys, old diskettes. A lot of random junk under the clothes. Some of it probably valuable, to somebody.

Finally, the rows of soda cans.

Scoop a few into my backpack. One in each pants pocket. As many as I can carry in my arms. Makes it awkward to walk.

Back in the corridor, floor slippery, scared of my own reflection.

Plaque on the elevator bares the legend: FAIL SAFELY. The plaque blinks knowingly, but I can't guarantee anything. Jab the button, grab the cans before they bounce off the floor.

Gravity still wrong.

Fall down, lose a can.

Bell dings. Door opens to a stairway. Nana tosses down a snack from the kitchen but really, I'm not hungry. Portholes on the stairway. Outside, the stars. Space. Orbit.

Chronometer can't be right.

Can't remember what I was doing.

5

January, 1943.

Late for my own party.

We're all at the table when Nana wheels out a cake. Ah, I don't know what to say.

Slake is here. Lunsford too. And the quiet boy, Plinth.

Conversations recede as each portion is distributed. Paging through our booklets. Occasional flash of icing. One of the interns straightens her pinafore.

Everyone is surprised when Plinth dings his wine glass and stands up to make a speech.

THE INTERFACE TO SECURITY

1

January, 4043.

Slake Bottom clenched a purple cigarette between his gold-plated teeth and sat back in his harness, sweating in his donkey helmet. His spacecraft, the HARDPACK, piloted itself expertly through the emergent skeletons of the New Sapporo shipyard, but the smoke filling his helmet made it impossible for him to see through his visor.

"Computer. Strike all references to PAN-OPTI-CON from my itinerary. I'm finished with those idiots." Slake considered the commercial prison scene passe. This summer, he had decided to cancel his attendance at the usual industry showcases and to concentrate solely on seeking outside contracts. Lay in a comfortable lining for his nest before winter.

The HARDPACK bleeped acceptance. He tore off the receipt and pocketed it in his flight suit.

2

Slake scrolled through his idea book as the HARDPACK settled into its final approach.

```
are there really halfway houses  
or are they just in our minds  
it all comes out in the wash  
in time
```

Slake missed his father. Of course, he never spoke of this to his clients.

His most recent contract had been the overhaul of a small freighter. Auxiliary percept drive; some manual steering, but primarily driven by inadequately suppressed rage. This necessarily limited the pool of potential pilots. He'd already remodeled the forward lounge and was just getting started on the deck elevators when a major new contract came over the wire.

Slake had never been one to abandon a job, but at these prices, he figured he'd do just about anything.

One query, based on the plans: A hot pink ship?

Purple smoke wafted out of Slake's nostrils. His helmet bulged, felt too tight.

He figured the customer was always right.

3

Prior to the application of its skin, the ship seemed no larger, no more threatening than a grade school personnel carrier. Slake knew that this was a mistaken impression. He observed from his harness as a crew of day laborers floated the ship's titanium spine into place. The tableaux shifted so slowly. He wished they would step up the foundation work so he could disembark, clock in. He was anxious to get started on the interiors.

Other areas of the shipyard seemed desolate, by comparison. The sheer number of workers must result in massive administrative overhead. But, he was no longer a manager. Those people had proven they could take care of themselves.

He lost himself, then, for a few minutes, tracing the progress of a random piece of scrap as it navigated the void between drydocks. Runoff from assemblies that were nearing completion condensed into glittering puffs of snow.

The HARDPACK bleeped an alert. Slake unfastened his seat belt, kicked off of his seat and drifted towards the toilet. He disconnected the Marlboro filters and attached the hose to his penis. Flipped the switch.

Finishing up, he climbed back into his harness and nudged the steering mechanism with his knees, easing the HARDPACK into position.

Company parking.

4

The RAGNAROK signaled her compatibility as he boarded. Unusual, at this early stage. And for a guy like him; unaffiliated, still a complete stranger. Maybe she had picked up something from the HARDPACK. He smiled beneath his helmet.

A notice. Received schematics. Start on the lower decks. Slake pulled on his data gloves and made for the deck elevator.

These ships crossed the Rainbow Bridge. Cutting between perspectives, avoiding the Kojaks. They had to be flexible. Outfitting them for fiction paid good money. Sometimes, you'd get pulled along on a journey before your work was finished. A diligent worker could rack up a lot of extra hours, that way. His take on it was that the life of a free agent had its trade-offs.

Slake ran his hand down the wall of the corridor.

Glossy, pink.

Crazy.

5

Months slowly elapsed. Slake began to feel at home aboard the RAGNAROK. The process made a certain amount of sense; depending upon the employer, a job like this could last ten or more years. He had sought predictability, deniability. It was the main reason he had accepted the contract. But the project was winding down ahead of schedule.

One more deck to go.

Slake liked to listen while he worked. His donkey helmet was far more capable (and curious) than the average foreman realized. Well, let them laugh. Schedule indicated another battery of inspections would be carried out early the next week. This time focusing upon the secure restroom facilities. Slake was certain that his coverage had been sufficient for the ship to be deemed spaceworthy. Even so, the notion of a secure restroom struck him as a contradiction in terms. Fitting, then, that the government was prepared to bestow their seal of approval.

The ship had begun to speak.

The RAGNAROK liked American comic books. Or so she had said. The ones set in New York, with the gender politics and costumes. Slake found it hard to believe.

"I'm *from* America," he had remarked, which hadn't seemed to impress her the way he had hoped. Whatever, he got on with his work and avoided the subject whenever she brought it up.

He was grateful she had never pestered him about his name.

6

Winter, 4044.

Slake awoke, alone, his visual field bathed in an endless white light.

The RAGNAROK wasn't responding.

He didn't panic. Still, the failure represented an inexcusable breach of contract. The console was dead. He couldn't even raise general counsel.

The bed wouldn't move.

He glanced around the room. Gradually, an image began to resolve. Some of his belongings were missing. His tool cache, even the caps of his teeth. So, his cabin had been breached. He latched his shoes and got himself onto his feet, anticipating the worst.

Lockers in the adjoining corridors were all standing open. Empty.

Slake moved his fuchsia light around the darkened corners of the bridge. Something like eight million iterations had been fed into the human interface guidelines prior to construction. But everything here was pink. Even in the low light, the design hurt his eyes. Why did the color bother him so much?

And where was everyone, anyway?

He feared he already knew the answer.

As Slake suspected, the hijackers had gained entry through the plumbing in one of the supposedly secure restrooms.

The toilet seats had been flipped up, porcelain caked and crumbled on the tile floor. He located the invaders' trail in fuchsia, traced their progress from room to room, reconstructing the apparent sequence of events.

No one and nothing was left aboard. Not a good sign. But, why had they left him behind? And why hadn't they taken the ship?

In the forward lounge he discovered a message carved into the inner layer of the pseudoglass observation wall:

PROSE EDDA

He had no idea what it meant. He assumed, a semi-transparent jape. Likely of historical or literary significance, but with ship's systems offline he'd have to wait to check with the reference stacks.

His reverie faltered as a faint burst of audio collapsed the pale silence. The whimpering and crying of what sounded like the ship.

The RAGNAROK was awake.

LATCHKEY PIRATE

1

Slake never heard from the RAGNAROK again.

For years, he continued trying to talk to her, kept on chattering in her ear. But there never was any response, never any hint of her voice rustling through the vents. Something in her had disconnected. Without warning, she'd dropped her aspect and her vocal had petered out.

A crushing loss, but Slake had proven stubborn. Persistent. In spite of repeated failures, he would and did try anything to get through to her.

He could feel himself starting to lose hope.

The hijackers were long gone. He knew he'd have to accept the fact that he couldn't force her to speak. At the same time, it wasn't possible for him to believe that she'd simply chosen to ignore him. Some process inside of her must be blocking, restricting her movement, preventing her from stating plainly what was on her mind.

Social convention?

Didn't matter. Effect was the same. She'd gone quiet and she was going to stay that way.

As was said, a considerable loss. Which was to say nothing of the crew that had likewise been stripped from her hold. These missing workers were not simply an aspect of her supposed free will. They had been real people. Not sentient devices. Not furniture. There was no way for him to retrieve them and there was no way for him to make things right.

He had, in fact, slept through it all.

He suspected he already knew what had happened to her while he was laid up in his quarters. He'd heard tell of the other ships of her line who'd clammed up, simply stopped responding to commands after exposure to traumatic events. Apparently, a known engineering fault. He didn't care for the implications relative to his present situation. The escape pods

had been jettisoned by the hijackers and they had already drifted far from Earth.

He switched off the narrative, never brought it up again. Figured she was keeping quiet precisely because she wanted to avoid the painful memories. Wanted to try and carry on. Which he finally managed to accept.

Made things interesting when he stumbled upon the fact that she was pregnant.

2

Who, then, knew what would constitute carrying to term for a ship like the RAGNAROK? Human/transport hybrids were not unheard of, but they were certainly unusual in this day and age. And there she was, still so young. Was it unrealistic to hope that she would survive the birthing process?

Slake wasn't sure he wanted to stick around to find out. He sought to avoid being pressed into service as midwife to a pile of semi-human machinery.

Finally, begrudgingly, he accepted what he interpreted as his responsibility. To the work he had already completed, if nothing else.

He would stay on and finish the bottom deck. Sit things out until the child was born. Safely. Then, find an excuse to depart. Collect his deposit and his severance and be about his business.

The child definitely wasn't his.

Certainty. To at least three decimal places.

Slake didn't hesitate.

3

Piotr was born in the spring of '45. Popped out, fully clothed in his usual brown uniform.

Fully armed.

He swept the ship for snipers, pacing off her corridors with practiced ease. Satisfied, at last, that the perimeter was secure, Piotr interrogated Slake for several hours about the ship's range, capabilities and armaments. He peered into Slake's eyes, rigidly focused upon the older man's facial expressions and body language. Learning. Characteristically professional, he betrayed no hint of having just been born.

4

Piotr handled the daytime shifts, at first, then gradually branched out into evenings and graveyards. He ended up taking over maintenance of the armory. Within a few weeks there wasn't much left for anyone else to do.

Slake was truly, deeply impressed.

He wondered if the boy took after his father. Fathers? What had they been like? He'd never caught a glimpse of the hijackers. Foreigners, he had guessed. In any case, pirates. They could have been anyone. From anywhere.

The RAGNAROK held her tongue.

Within a few months, Piotr had absorbed the basics of temporal navigation. Complex labor relations. The myriad historical disputes over free access to the Rainbow Bridge. Slake considered the boy a child prodigy. He had already expressed an interest in the family business. And he was always so full of questions. What had his mother been like, before the terrible events that had resulted in his conception? Had she been a good ship, good at what she did? And, most urgently, how could he contribute, how could he earn his keep?

This last refrain forced upon Slake a dilemma he had long strived to avoid: Return to his old life, with all that entailed, or continue on, a new-style agent of *dépêche mode*, happily painting the basements of starships?

Slake finally agreed to show Piotr the ropes.

5

The pair started out slowly. Preliminary strafing runs staged against abandoned drydocks. Relieving small intermediary freighters of their contraband cargo. But Piotr evinced great promise. With increasing enthusiasm, Slake began to let him choose their targets.

Eventually, Piotr settled on New York.

"We can't attack New York," Slake said, brooking no argument. "That's where the money comes from."

"Your attitude is pedestrian, for a someone so experienced. Why should we be content to *take* the money when we could be the ones who *make* the money?"

Piotr had a point. There wasn't much he could add. "We'll have to soup up the ship." Feeble acquiescence, but Slake recognized a promising idea when he heard it.

Slake handed the boy a cigarette, which he proceeded to disassemble and align on the table, sorting the pieces into short, purple rows of solid state components and miniature, moving parts.

"This device is actually quite sophisticated."

6

Years elapsed. Time regressed. Slake was lost, but Piotr retained the ship.

His mother carried out her silent vigil.

Piotr let himself into the mess whenever he was hungry. Let himself into the head whenever he felt the need to evacuate his bowels. He started few arguments, during those years between the stars and the Earth. In time, what he lacked in companionship he more than made up for in life experience.

He sensed that the Rainbow Bridge was opening. Showing itself. Granting passage to humans.

And with his mother's help, he would be there, waiting to charge admission.

ATLAS SHIT

1

January, 1943.

"We're all of us here aware that the invitations to this party were issued on a strict, SECRET NOFORN basis."

Plinth Mold cleared his throat, resumed his speech.

"*Plus ça change*. But this gathering is hardly idiomatic basement protocol. Look around you. We're none of us newcomers. *Old basement hands*. In fact, I would have to admit that the cultural fragmentation so often prophesied by our elders settled into equilibrium before many of us were even born."

"Peed my mind, waiting." Albert Lunsford looked as if he were having trouble controlling himself. He nodded rapidly, admitting to the commonly held misapprehension. Perhaps he agreed too quickly.

"Those of us not from the United States should consider ourselves lucky to be here."

Silence.

"This is not Russia; this is not China; this is not the place where they're tearing down the wall. We attain to a higher standard."

"Do these steps only if you really need them," added Lunsford. Certain now that he had regained the upper hand.

"Excuse me, Albert, but I would appreciate it if you could pipe down and hold your remarks until after I've finished speaking."

"First, state your assumptions," retorted Lunsford. "I'm sick of your aimless pontificating in service to nothing at all."

Plinth ignored the challenge. Albert always said too much.

2

January, 4063.

"It's not yet clear if our ship is fast enough to manage the proposed maneuver. Here. Analysis?"

Piotr peered into his console before turning back to face the crew.

"We'll want to divert additional resources to interpretation and propulsion." When there were no objections, Piotr continued the logical progression of commands. "Team! Retrench assumptions! Gazes rearward!"

The RAGNAROK continued to drift in space.

The Rainbow Bridge loomed on screen, commanding a sizable portion of screen real estate. It was, in Piotr's words, frighteningly beautiful. For their part, the crew still hadn't responded to anything they had heard or seen. As was their usual mode, they continued to perform their duties in perfect silence.

Piotr consulted his leaf.

"Load the couches," he said, leaning forward in his captain's chair. "Cushions first."

3

January, 1943.

"Through the visionless aether," continued Plinth Mold, *"Beyond the mortal line of sight."*

"Same old basement politics," laughed Albert Lunsford. "This one goes out to all the teen mothers in the house. Risky behavior. Blind, irrational exuberance."

"Atlas shit," concluded Plinth Mold, and shrugged, accidentally triggering a squeal of feedback from his microphone. The error was captured, distributed. Throughout the basement, genres were born.

"Objectivists on break," cracked Lunsford. "Competence sitting on the can. However will we get by?"

Plinth could offer no reply. He sat down in his seat just as dinner was finally being served. He could see now that there would be no getting through to his companions around the dinner table. You just can't argue with dead weight.

He observed in himself the silent acknowledgment that he was not accustomed to surrendering so easily.

At length, he noticed the older boy, Thomas Bright, coolly monitoring the conflagration. Eye contact. A knowing look. This would be one to watch. Possibly, to remove from the board.

Anyway, it was Bright's party. Let these people brush him off as a child. None of it mattered.

Plinth Mold stabbed a piece of cake with his fork.

4

January, 4063.

"Twenty-one thirty-five. Physics packages away!"

Piotr shouted commentary into his commlink as a barrage of couches were ejected from their tubes. His narrative was terse, but complete. He had learned to eschew excess detail when dictating to ship's logs.

The couches went about their work.

In short order, the Rainbow Bridge collapsed. Its perimeter imploded and its light rushed inward, inscribing perspectives unimagined. Piotr steered the ship manually, passing through the required stages before the Bridge could rebuild itself from its involuntary, fettered circumstance. Things were going well.

By now, traversal had become as second nature. In fact, Piotr had contributed the initial papers outlining the methods involved. But, something about this transition seemed off. Was it the framing? The sequencing? Something. Piotr jumped back in his seat as an unknown face filled his view-point, edging out or overlapping all other objects on the main screen.

"Piotr Bright. Age seventeen. Captain of his own mother."

The face seemed pleased with itself.

"I would like to ask you just one question."

"Go on," said Piotr, his composure regained. He glanced around the bridge, noticing that the crew seemed to have abandoned their posts.

The face seemed to grow larger. Piotr could clearly see the desperation gleaming in its eyes. He thought of a small dog, pleading to be let outside.

The giant face, sans leash, continued to speak.

"Which way to the head?"

DIVORCÉE CANYON

1

Slowly, Piotr raised his eyebrows over the edge of the console. The disembodied face was still there, floating placidly beyond the borders of the main screen.

"Name's Atlas," it stated, easily. Confidently. Piro received the impression of a hand extended in friendship. "How are you called?"

"Captain. *Né* Piotr. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Hm. I think I shall call you Piro."

"That's... not my name." Eyelids suddenly drawn tight.

"There's been an update. It is now."

Piotr's hand traveled, instinctively, to his holster. Thumbed his login. Authentication error.

"Anyway, where's the shitter?"

Piotr relaxed his grip on the pistol. The deity seemed friendly. Just wanted to unload. Piotr updated his address book, pushed the backup to remote storage. "Computer. Guide our guest to the head."

After flashing a loading screen for some seconds, the RAGNAROK complied with the order. In the absence of a confirming bleep, Piotr once again reclined in his seat. He stared at his leaf. Occasionally, he enjoyed a sip of his tea.

Ship's guests.

2

As the RAGNAROK came to terms with its new course, Divorcée Canyon gradually shifted into view. A self-propelled Möbius strip modeled on the American southwest, the station's absurdly detailed period furnishings commanded grudging respect, even from those who found themselves unable to stomach its symbolic payload.

"Uncanny valley," remarked the floating head.

"Not even wrong," replied Piro.

Product placement confirmed docking speed at regular intervals. Government boobs. Deep throat checking. Mold removal. This last advertisement coaxed a chuckle from Atlas. "If only," he sighed, sadly, and rested his chin on the floor.

On the ground, Piro stumbled briefly. Noticing the difference in gravity, he adjusted his Reeboks and paid closer attention to his footing.

Atlas inspected several divorcées en route to the public facilities. As he removed the panties from the final specimen, he shook his head in appreciation of local craftsmanship. "Superb elastic modulus," he observed as he continued to work his fingers in and out of the moist folds beneath her clitoris. "Responsive, too."

Piro hit up the vending machines. "The ship is eating," he snapped into his commlink. "Roger that," confirmed Atlas.

An unexpected wave of depression suddenly washed over him. Slake Bottom was fifteen years gone and still there was nothing Piro could do to rectify the situation. Unacceptable. Inevitable. He inserted the seventy dollars change.

Returned: two Kellogg's Rice Krispies treats.

3

Piro worked his thumbs into the tense muscle wire that threaded through the divorcée's neck and shoulders.

"You may require maintenance," he said, flatly.

Atlas continued to jot down notes. Throwing down her cigarette, the divorcée wobbled to her feet and vacated the head.

"This place is deserted. All that's left are the women."

Piro nodded, and in response Atlas looked even more upset.

"This vacation sucks."

He kicked the trash can with his outsized chin.

4

Paper advertisements whipped through the grounds, battering store fronts and light poles, propelled by the high winds of the circulation system. Compost. Piro leaned back against a dumpster and gazed up at the stars.

"Back when I first started out, this place was always packed with children." He unzipped his backpack, rummaging through his gear for a candy bar. "Native arcade did good business."

"Never been here, myself. Of course, I've heard of the place."

"My... Slake used to bring me here, between missions."

"The guy with the donkey head?"

Piro froze. Eyes to the giant, floating face.

"How do you know of him?"

"Everybody knows of him. Where I'm from. Old story. Some legal troubles, as I interpret the narrative."

Piro unlatched his holster.

"I think you'd better elaborate."

5

Piro killed the deity and boarded the RAGNAROK, ready to resume his mission. Left the corpse on the station. To blow in the wind.

Too many memories on that station.

As he punched in an ill-considered rash of launch codes, he was delighted by the ship's audible response. A comforting series of confirming bleeps echoed throughout the corridors. Something he hadn't registered since childhood. The bridge seemed to glow even more pink than was normal during the day shift.

"Mother..." he said, smoothing his hands over the arm-rests of his captain's chair. He hadn't really expected an answer. He'd never even heard the sound of her human voice.

He thought he might have dozed off, tracking beyond the technical limits of the main view screen. He woke up with a start, knocked over his tea.

She spoke quietly, at first.

"I know."

TIGHT IMPRESSIONS

1

March, 1943.

New guy. Brown jacket. Gun in my back.

I don't like him.

Into the elevator. Subbasement seventeen. Boot tread slipping on the floor. I go down.

Portholes, again. The view. Vacuum of space, then the desert. What?

Scrambling to get up.

Pushes me through a hatch and the hatch closes. Metallic sound, and then the hatch opens again.

Tight.

This really is the desert.

Sit down in a rover and now we're speeding across the sand. Ample dust. Sunlight. The trip is taking a while, and my eyes, dry and tired, slide to a stop on the driver's side-arm.

Inscription in silver along the stock: THE STATE WILL EVENTUALLY WITHER AWAY LIKE A SNARK HUNTER, LEAVING US ALL FREE AS BIRDS. Can't help but glance down at my handcuffs. Irony?

"That's a new one," says the driver, smiling. "Used to read, simply, NUANCE, but there were objections. Nuance was out of the question."

"What kind of objections," I ask, but his eyes are back on the road and he ignores me for the rest of the trip.

"I know what you're thinking," he finally says, smiling again as we roll up to the guarded entrance.

He's fishing for his papers, so there's no time for him to elaborate.

We enter.

2

Life at the test site is strange.

I get up in the morning and step into a pressure suit, seal up my face and don't speak to a soul all day.

As I'm working, I hear things.

"...the prize of them that hath overcome Space."

Strange things. But I know better than to ask what goes on in the other buildings.

None of these buildings seem to have basements.

Occasionally, we're asked to press our faces to the ground and then ignore the sounds that are coming from outside the hanger.

Afterwards, we get back to work.

Like I said, I don't ask questions. I pack the pilots' lunches and load them into the cockpits. I do a good job. I'm popular with the pilots.

Most of them know my name.

3

We're all standing around outside, smoking, when the paperwork arrives. A forklift unloads it onto the flight line and then departs. We'll move the papers into a hangar as time permits.

"Tight," pronounces my supervisor, and we all head back inside to straighten out our cover stories.

4

Weather is still an issue. The sky's always pink.

I am probably mentally ill.

I've been advised not to wear shorts on the shop floor.

Shifts are ten hours, plus breaks. Designated smoking area, but we pretty much light up wherever we want. Explosions are infrequent.

Some of us watch telescreen while we work.
I prefer to concentrate.

5

Once a week I get my hair cut.

Into the chair, cape on, tissues tucked into my collar. I always ask for a perfect box. This is seen as humor, because the barber doesn't care what I want. The government pays him anyway. I give him the finger under my cape.

Today I'm in the chair, flipping through the new issue of ACTRON, when the alarm sounds.

Staffed by professionals, the barber shop clears in seconds. TIGHT IMPRESSIONS runs a tight ship.

"Tight," I say, to myself.

Outside, a flight of new hires is arriving. I head for my bunk.

Brown jacket is waiting for me.

DASH 1

1

"Bright, write the dash 1."

Piotr stares at me blankly as the Chief tosses an empty workbook onto my desk. Noticing this, his eyes seem to come into focus. His face changes and he glances at the workbook. Sensing the approach of meaning, he contemplates the ramifications of what he's just read. Some communication that I fail to comprehend passes between us and then he begins to speak. In French.

"Fais ce que tu voudras."

Ah.

So, then, this line drawn is a key.

2

The big trucks are easy to drive. Larger tires, greater purchase on the road. Testing on this model has been lagging behind for months. Somehow, we've run out of test pilots.

They're asking me to write the owner's manual.

I've yet to sit behind the wheel.

For some, this might be a problem. I figure, a job is a job, and I'm ready to work.

Tomorrow, I'm outfitted for stresspants.

3

The test site has cleared out on account of a pending series of test shots hosted from several addresses down the road. There is some fear that the radiation will drift into our facility.

The thin atmosphere has never seemed to worry anyone, before.

I volunteer to stay. Piotr can always be found, with minimal difficulty, somewhere near my person. The Chief stays for his own reasons.

I've never written a manual. For some time, in fact, I've been working away from the equipment. Stationed atop the west ridge, keeping a lookout for any specialists from the other sites who might wander into our vicinity. I cover my beat twice per hour, then park the vehicle upstairs (as we call it) and lean against the hood, surveying the expanse. The grounds are cold, flat. There is a lot of sand.

I've started drinking coffee.

Piotr has taken over my shifts. We maintain radio contact and sometimes trade sarcastic remarks about the birds who have taken up residence down on the flight line. Sometimes, I am sent down to chase them away. Piotr simply fires shots from wherever he happens to be standing. There is no shortage of targets.

Occasionally, some stray piece of paperwork is discovered blowing across the runway. This sets off a minor stir as interns are dispatched to retrieve the invaluable pulp.

Pieces of quartz turn up literally everywhere. At odd moments.

Eschewing the leaf, I write with a pencil.

4

They've butchered my work. Printed it how I never wrote it. But, they've left my name in the byline. Am I satisfied? It's difficult to tell.

These big trucks will be death traps. In spite of the RC lights, huge tires, commercially branded bed liners—nothing seems to help. It's no surprise that we ran out of test pilots. Even here, word gets out. Back on Earth, rumors of deaths in the testing program have circulated for months. Of course, no one outside the test site knows the details, but everyone is curious.

At the same time, nobody listens.

There's a chance that I'll be pinned with the blame for the poor performance of these vehicles.

That's when I'll post the unredacted dash 1.

5

Finished writing documentation. Now, stationed back near the equipment. The motivation, scrutable. The timing, hardly coincident.

Our paper is the first to show that you can use automated tools to detect the distinct speech patterns of psychopaths.

Management is pleased.

Naturally, this time, my name is being left off the byline.

Am I satisfied?

You tell me.

6

Son (can I call you that?), these men are only interested in results. Workers who can't hack the pace of operations are quickly sent packing, their home lives wrecked and their resumes in tatters.

I've observed the man they brought in to replace me. In fact, I conducted his first evaluation. (Frankly, I'm the only one left at the site with a solid handle on the material.) He won't last long. Too focused on the rumors surrounding our location. It's a shame, he's an excellent driver.

Which brings me back to myself.

I guess I kind of miss writing the manuals. Standing on the ridge, scrawling longhand in my notebook while glancing occasionally at the birds flocking on the runway. Sad. That sort of life is no longer an option.

You don't question your assignment. Not if you want to live above ground.

On the other hand, I may still get out of here.
Someday, you may even be born.

BAJA PIOTR

1

September, 1943.

The Ford Expenditure is a full-size SUV built by the Ford Motor Company. Introduced in 1944 as a replacement for the Ford Blowout, it was previously slotted between the smaller Ford Exclusion and the larger Ford Fucking Ridiculous. As of the 1945 model year, it is Ford's largest and last truck-based, off-road and tow capable SUV. All Expenditures were originally built in Wayne, Michigan. In 1945, Ford plans to shift its current, second generation model production to Louisville, Kentucky.

The vehicle is a piece of junk. Barely able to propel itself down the road.

Those who can't, do.

My reading is interrupted by the entrance of a tour group. I conceal the advance marketing materials under a folder and pretend to be looking at porn.

Once the new hires are gone I return to my proof.

2

Things here have slowed down since we pushed out the Expenditure.

I float around the test site, offering myself for odd jobs.

Alarms are still respected. Once or twice a week, we hit the deck until the shift captain tells us we can lift up our heads.

In my boredom I begin to break the rules. Nothing serious. I avoid reprimand by carefully allotting each transgression. Measured action is invisible to bureaucracy. Too fine a

resolution.

Besides, my wanderings are directionless.

Piro's quarters are in the new hangar off the south end of the runway.

Curious, I arrange a covert visit.

3

Baja Piotr.

Not even locked. Pass one of his gloves in front of the door and it opens all by itself.

Getting into my own quarters is more difficult.

Clothing is strewn around the hangar. Not what I expected. Piotr doesn't seem to own a chest of drawers.

Shower needs cleaning. What is this? Horse shampoo?
Note: the long hair is not a wig.

Closet full of nightgowns.

Were he to appear here, now, Piotr would laugh at my confusion. Then he would fire two rounds into my face. Three into my chest.

I would drop to the floor.

Wait.

Hangar is changing shape.

4

The craft is huge, pink. Impeccably styled.

A great, blushing triangle appearing out from underneath a simple black tarp.

My hand trails along her hull as I evaluate in the smooth, glossy surface of her exterior. Feeling. No seams are evident.

Does this thing fly?

Piotr has never mentioned her.

I'm into her hold, now, working my way towards the bridge. The craft seems a lot larger on the inside. The length of this corridor makes no sense. I'm out of breath.

An elevator. I'm not even on the right deck.

Wait. She jumped. Slipped on the floor.

Bridge is deserted. Lights out. If this is what he's been hiding, these past months, I'm impressed. Was the craft built here, or flown in? What's her range? Armaments?

Also, who wrote the dash 1?

5

No. I know better than this. I'll be discovered. I'm out of the craft and out of the hangar, making like nothing's happened. Want a cigarette? Sure. Catch the final score? Yes, ten to six. Walking, quickly, in a straight line. The sand is cold.

Calm down.

How to erase the logs? Piotr will know. Will he talk? Or just shoot?

Sorry to bring this to you.

6

Piotr doesn't smoke.

So why was he smoking?

Nana says to take it easy.

Slake will clean up my mess.

TODAY WAS CRAP

1

September, 1943.

Simplified English. A nervous system for the Earth.

No advertising, no support, no bugfixes, payment in advance.

The way we go about our work.

As a report, this is fairly accurate.

The dead dog is still trying to move through the doorway. From the threshold, another dog attacks her, foam streaming from its lips. Body of the first dog crumbles as the newcomer bounds in and out of the room, snapping chunks of bone and flesh, crushing muscle and fat in its teeth. As dust. Undeterred, the dead dog continues barking.

I wake up, remembering these facts, uncertain as to how I arrived back in my bunk.

Terrible headache.

Clean up my room, gather my things. Some last minute paperwork.

Moving day.

2

South end of the runway is being cleared. Tearing down old hangars, moving debris. Piotr is nowhere to be found.

The humor here is that an earthmover is hard at work on Mars.

The test site is changing, as is customary, but I won't be around to report on the new developments, new products, new services. Any further records will be generated by my successors, *factjacula*ting as a matter of policy. Truth is there's simply little left to cover, the important work having been all sewn up. Word is the Chief will be leaving as well.

Our careful planning has evolved into a natural success.
Era Day.

3

There is trouble clearing the meridian between my quarters and the mess hall. Personnel routed carelessly. A group of propulsionists attempting egress from the crowded movie theater, simultaneous with the migration of some sort of celebration that is evidently still underway. My path is blocked.

Am I even cleared for this? Eventually, my patience wears thin. Barreling through the crowd, I elbow my way towards the waiting transport, looking away from the faces to avoid a breach of security.

Piotr nods as I board the vehicle.

4

He sets down across the northern perimeter of the test site and nods again, this time directing me to exit the vehicle. I hand over my passes and he sweeps my bags before putting the transport back in gear, departing the perimeter. I stare into the sun and the dust clouds kicked up by his departure. Apparently, that was that.

Before long, Slake appears over the horizon, trundling towards my location in his old junker. I climb in and pull my hat down over my face. Time for a nap.

Hear the dead dog running along the perimeter fence. Still intact. Still barking.

Sit back up. Look out the window.

Glint of quartz on sand.

Over to you, Nana. I'm tired of making the effort.

THE SCARLET WOMAN

1

October, 4063.

Mars.

Βαβυλων η μεγάλη, η μητηρ των πορνων και των
βδελυγματα της γης

Piro stared at the pink planet and then stared at the neon green words inscribed upon its surface.

"The fuck?" he asked, to no one.

The RAGNAROK set down near the southwestern corner of the B. Visible from space, each character turned out to have been a computer projection—that is to say, metadata—and not, he now concluded, a typographical feature of the planet's surface. Piro wiped the annoyance from his short-term memory and proceeded to investigate his immediate surroundings.

"Sand," he remarked into his commlink.

A dust storm loomed.

Piro erected a small shelter and inserted his probes into the cool, indifferent sand.

The RAGNAROK returned to orbit.

2

October, 4048.

Mars.

Not much had changed. The red sand continued to look and feel very much like red sand.

Piro was nonplussed. She just sort of laid there.

Nevermind, execute the mission.

After several hours walking he happened upon a couch, aligned against the remains of a partially collapsed wall. The structure, what was left of it, appeared to have been furnished in a cheap, spruce wood paneling. The whole mess stood isolated in the middle of a dry salt lake. Pages from an old magazine were stuffed into crevices in the wall.

Piro looked behind the couch.

The panther stared back at him, eyes piercing his face. The cat stood poised upon a pile of rubbish. Silent communication seemed telepathic in nature. In any case, he could understand what the cat was trying to say.

These questions were... above his pay grade.

Piro logged into his weapon.

3

October, 4063.

Mars.

His chronometer seemed to have repaired itself.

Fine, proceed.

Making his way across the desert, Piro retrieved various artifacts. Shards of quartz, loose wreckage from old aircraft, some miscellaneous paperwork.

The airfield was in poor repair.

Piro filed his report and then turned in for the evening, setting up camp on the far side of the dry salt lake. From his backpack he produced several small containers: tinned meats and cheese, a beer, 500 mg acetaminophen.

Disposing of the consumables, he thought of his father.

That night, as always, he suffered no dreams.

4

The RAGNAROK settled into a silent landing on the dry lake bed. Cargo doors unfurled, her invisible crew dispersed one-by-one into the desert sunlight. Peering through the

morning air, each crew member spied the Martian vista, paused briefly to reflect, and then got back to work. The concern for efficiency was evidenced by the smooth transit from observation to action. Loading proceeded more quickly than was necessary for government work.

Piro was careful moving up the boarding ramp. Uncharacteristically groggy, he felt uncertain of his precise location. This would prove troublesome if he drifted off course. But, as he ventured further into the craft his confidence seemed to return. This was, after all, his home.

Safely in orbit, Piro input a request for his usual hot tea. This, finally, brought him fully awake. He perused crew reports and then drummed his fingers on the arm-rest of his captain's chair. Slowly, his thoughts returned to his mission.

A Martian base might prove suitable, given the proper funding.

Piro submitted random queries to the RAGNAROK, hoping for some interesting juxtaposition amongst the syntax errors. When this approach failed he decided to resume the surface of the planet. Further study would confirm his intuition. Or, failing that, he could simply ask the cat.

The RAGNAROK complied.

5

October, 4048.

Mars.

"Isn't she smothering you?" asked the panther.

"She's always like this. You wouldn't understand." Piro considered what he wanted to say next. Then he added: "It's her way. My mother is from a different time."

He punched in a quick status report, fired it off to the RAGNAROK. Approval received, he felt free to resume the conversation.

"I admit, sometimes I don't know what she wants from me."

"Breaks you down, but neglects to build you back up," continued the cat. "How does that prepare you for the future?"

He conceded it was a fair question.

Piro observed as the panther settled back on its haunches and then flattened out on the rubbish pile, resting its face on its paws. Suddenly, he realized that its markings had changed. He looked again and now there seemed to be two cats crouching behind the couch, both occupying the same space on top of the stack of debris. With the interference pattern it was difficult to tell where one panther began and the other ended. Their tails seemed to be intertwined. On second thought, perhaps both panthers shared the same tail. He shook his head and squinted his eyes just as the fluctuations finally settled down.

Then, silence.

This seemed to conclude the discussion.

6

October, 4063.

Mars.

Once again aboard the RAGNAROK, Piro reviewed recent events. One cat that had become two. One set of markings that had translated themselves into another. The persistent question of the obscure architecture and furnishings that were situated amongst unusual geography. Finally, the collapse of the waveform.

Wary of misunderstandings, Piro decided to undocument the mission. Questions might sour the acquisition program. Budgets were tight, while imaginations still yearned for controversy. The process would be difficult enough without accusations of poor planning or incompetence.

The RAGNAROK informed that orbit had been obtained. The invisible crew, as always, awaited instructions. Piro continued to pace the bridge, thoughts detached from his present surroundings. At length, he issued a command.

Forward, Mother.

YOU HAD TWO SONS, MY GHOST HAS NO HEAD

1

1 October, 1943.

Carpet won't move.

Whatever.

Moving back home. Operation was blown. Apparently, the old woman doesn't care.

No note. No nothing.

But, not dead.

Sit on the couch and think.

Scan reports. Mostly celebrity news. Past time to lay off the student interns.

Review: Nothing new on the Vizier. Nothing new on the test site. Nothing new on the healed-over floor.

Place a few calls.

Wash dishes.

Pack mission materials in approved container.

Finally, take own life.

END MARS2

more

textadventure.stanleylieber.com

about the author

Stanley Lieber is pressing his luck.

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