1

April, 1789.

"I am not a mammal."

Jerrymander Mold inspected his cufflinks. He ruffled slightly as the technician typed commands into his terminal window.

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cat /lib/constitution
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Jerrymander recited the requested information, involuntarily.

"I don't appreciate all of this damned tinkering," he added.

"Necessary. Security. Hotfixes," mumbled the preoccupied technician.

"I'm getting too old for this shit. I don't want to learn new things. I need time to digest the information I've already collected."

"Life is hard, but unjust," remarked the technician.

Jerrymander folded his hands in his lap.

2

"First, you must purify yourself in the waters of the East River."

"Impossible. Pollution. Let me tell you something. I'm not going to jump in that river."

Benjamin Franklin held firm, repeated the command. He glanced knowingly over the frames of his bifocals, inspecting the candidate's exquisitely tailored clothing as if for the first time. Barry lit another cigarette.

"Only way this is going to work. Has to be done. The photographers are waiting." Public relations trumps personal dignity. Franklin leaned back on his heels, appearing to enjoy the rhetorical victory.

Barry considered his options. Was the Presidency worth it? Probably not. But there were investors to consider. How else would they recoup? Candidacy came with certain responsibilities. Barry was well versed in contract law.

Franklin seemed to sense what the younger man was thinking. He affected a broad grin.

Barry flicked his still smoldering cigarette over the embankment, directly into the river. The surface of the water ignited, releasing a quick flash of blue flame that rolled across its cold surface with evident disregard for bystanders. A few yards away a child cursed, losing himself in awe of the spectacle. As the flames dispersed, Barry seemed to make up his mind.

"Tell you what. Let’s do this."

Barry disrobed.

3

"Withholding conflict never solved anything."

"Sniper, shoot thyself."

Thomas tore off a shred of Dark Chew and placed it behind his lip.

"Can’t find this stuff back in 1986."

"Carcinogenic," observed Piotr. His displeasure was evident.

"Hasn’t been proven. Anyway, they don’t even have science here. Yet, I guess. It’s 1789. I’ll be fine."

Thomas opened the door to the Chinese Room.

4

"Obama 3/5," intoned Franklin, struggling to maintain a straight face.

Barry splashed himself with water from the East River. Useless. The white wouldn't come off. Worse, it was really, *really* white. Implications for his public image. He sank into a panic.

"What have you done," he kept asking.

Franklin sniffled. Straightened. The next few minutes would require composure.

"It doesn't wash off."

Someone in the gathering crowd produced a pot of hot water. Franklin carried on.

"Now. Pour this over your head."

Barry snatched the kettle, removing its lid. He peered into its mouth and then dumped the contents on his head.

Instantly, his complexion returned to normal.

He studied his arms in the fading sunlight. His relief was apparent.

Franklin smiled warmly. The process was real. The compromise would work, after all.

5

Thomas had spotted Jerrymander Mold as they entered the club. Situated near the bar, stuffing twenties into the g-string of a federal employee.

Twenty dollars wasn't much, in this economy.

Piotr quickly scouted the perimeter. To the best of his ability, he could discern no information entering or leaving the facility.

There arose a commotion near the front entrance.

Benjamin Franklin bounced into the club with his entourage in tow. Barry Obama followed, seemingly still dazed from his transformations down by the river. He had not bothered to replace his Arrow shirt.

"Nice watch," said the door man.

Franklin bowed, extending his cane.

Clubgoers were likewise intrigued by the ostentatious display of wealth. Students stood on couches, struggling to capture the lifestyle with their camera phones.

Barry flexed in his wifebeater. In spite of himself, he loved people.

6

Gathered around Jerrymander's table, the men began to pitch their product. Franklin sprayed down Barry's arm with his nickel plated squirt gun. An assistant worked the bellows as Franklin proceeded to scrape white flakes from the politician's skin. Jerrymander then snorted the flakes into his nostril through a hundred dollar bill.

"This isn't bad," allowed Jerrymander, eyes rolling back in his mechanical head.

Mouth agape, staring hard at the unlikely scene, Piotr scanned through a list of possible responses.

"How the..." complained Thomas, trailing off. There were no words.

The Chinese Room had been Actron, Inc. turf for centuries. Traditionally, Jerrymander Mold dealt exclusively with Piotr or his agents. Present events constituted a significant breach of the ancient contract. A matter to be settled by the lawyers.

But, who were these new guys? And what was the appropriate, short-term remedy?

Across the room, Piotr whistled.

Thomas roused from his stupor and followed him out of the club.

7

Harlem. Two in the morning.

"Bill, we've got to talk to them."

"Can't do it. FBI shift change is still three hours off. I'm definitely not even supposed to *know* these guys. Much less swap fish stories through a whole in the wall."

Piotr grimaced. Leveled the barrel of his sidearm at Bill's groin.

"I'll distract them," offered Bill, weakly.

Thomas went to work removing the antique wallpaper. Strips of gray silk coiled smoothly around his Reeboks. Within a few minutes he had exposed the hidden passageway that connected Bill's room to the office next door. He knocked on the wood panel and waited for a response.

Presently, a slip of paper appeared under the passage door.

"Looks like Mardarin Chinese," confirmed Thomas.

Piro brightened visibly. "Finally, the word on the street."

Thomas pulled out his leaf and took notes.

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