



# THE BEST DUO EVER

tags: 1886, jerrymander\_mold, piro, ragnarok, tab2

## 1

April, 1886.

New York.

The RAGNAROK cut across a fast-moving thundercloud and set down in a deserted field on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Thomas Bright, Jr. stomped down the ship's boarding ramp, shining in his usual terrycloth robe and flip-flops.

Flap, flap, flap, flap, echoed his footwear.

"Chicory?" he offered, extending a tin mug of the piping hot coffee to his twin brother, Piotr.

Piro leaned back in his coveralls and boots, propping himself up against the rickety wooden fence. His breath was expressive in the cold morning air, emitting oblique smoke signals between quick bites of scrambled eggs and bacon.

"Negatory," he replied, and turned the page in his leaf.

"Suit yourself," shrugged Thomas, who blew on the mug and then promptly downed a gulp of the steaming black liquid.

Piro laid down his plate and closed his leaf as a customer approached.

## 2

"Move along now, past the cow, down to the far fencepost to collect your product." Piro's instructions were

communicated in tandem by the precise motions of his gloved hands. He nodded affirmatively towards a hired assistant, who, *in lieu* of a receipt, always checked with the boss before dispensing from the barrel.

"Let's get a saddle on that thing," suggested Thomas, staring at the cow.

Gradually, a crowd gathered around the makeshift retail environment.

*Ladies, seniors, and all those other citizens whose sedentary employment causes nervous prostration, irregularities of the stomach, bowels and kidneys; those who require a nerve tonic and a pure, delightful diffusable stimulant; those who experience mild to semi-mild discomfort on a regular basis... Please to enjoy our delicious, refreshing, exhilarating, invigorating, invaluable brain tonic for a limited time only!*

Thomas stepped backward as the stranger elbowed his way onto the team's platform. He carried in his hands a portable device that modulated the amplitude of his voice.

"What the fucking fuck? Where did this guy come from?"

Piro remained stoic. Knowing. Exhibiting the easy competence that had never failed to irritate Thomas in the midst of a field operation. Of course, he had an answer ready and waiting.

"John Stith Pemberton."

"..."

"Run a search."

Pause.

Scroll.

"...The Coke guy? Hotlanta? The fuck's he doing in New York?"

"Language. Think of the customers. We're selling to adults now. Single women with college degrees."

"Okay... But... Why's he trying to bogart our demographic?"

"Should be obvious."

Pause.

Scroll.

"Well, I'm not a fan. I mean, just look at his tie. What if we—"

"Quiet. We're about to watch something happen."

Piro unfolded his instruments and leaned forward, slightly.

Thomas shrugged again and opened another barrel of cocaine.

### 3

The President didn't much care for opium. Chortled at the very mention of morphine.

Ah, but he lived for cocaine. With its mild physical toll and its myriad curative properties, coke had proven a reliable restorative during the most trying of recent times. Of this, he readily approved.

The sticking point was always supply. It seemed to him that all the problems of his administration could be boiled down to such vagaries of economics. On this point, his campaign had been relentlessly, unadvisedly honest. And yet, post-election analysis revealed that fully eighty percent of the voting public could no better connect his photo with a detailed description of his platform than could a child connect cause with effect. Slight comfort, from his vantage point at the helm of a bankrupt nation.

And so, with rhetoric cast aside, what was to become of policy?

Jerrymander Mold stalked the streets of New York, searching for a fix.

The President cut diagonally across Central Park, marching past the Dakota without so much as a glance in the direction of the men who had financed his reelection. Straight into a deserted field. Feet cramping, he discarded his stiff, leather shoes and trod through the dirt, his mind flashing on a particular high he had not experienced in what felt like months.

It had been three days since his last hit of the crack rock.

As he traipsed past a fence and into the tall grass, the familiar reverberations of a ghetto blaster thumped through the brush, flagging his awareness.

Jerrymander switched spectrums and immediately staggered backwards as the pink triangular frame of the RAGNAROK populated his visual field.

The President loosened his tie and unbuckled his patent leather belt. Flexed his plastic toes in the dirt.

These were his boys.

#### 4

Piro and Thomas held down the block.

Next in line. This way to egress.

Shadows on the ground admitted to twelve noon. The duo had stacked half a meal ticket in just under half a day's work.

Commotion. The Presidential motorcade seemed to be missing a few cars.

Jerrymander Mold pushed his way in front of of an elderly woman and stepped on the hand of a child. Later in the week a spread of semi-exclusive exposes would correct the record, revealing that the President had in fact cut in line to the men's room at Radio City Music Hall. No injuries reported. On balance, he would consider the coverage fair.

"I need a rock."

Thomas stood expressionless. Stared at him.

"I'll suck your dick!" pleaded the President.

"I imagine you will," said Thomas.

## 5

"What I saw out there today made me reconsider the choices I've made in my life," mused Thomas, as he and Piro tore down the stage and loaded their gear into the RAGNAROK's cargo bay.

"What do you mean?"

"Just the pathetic nature of junkies. Shiftless. No personal standards. They wouldn't amount to much of army. Unfit for recruitment, they can't even pay their bills."

Piro and Thomas headed back down the ramp, folded up their card table. Both men considering the hard realities of their vocation.

"It's this last bit that raises questions, back at HQ. Luckily, these customers had foodstamps."

"I started that program," whined the President, sitting barefoot on the curb.

Thomas tossed him a rock, gratis.

"Can I take a look at those shoes?"

Thomas walked over and bent down, demonstrating the mechanism of the original Reebok PUMP.

He watched Jerrymander examining his footwear. Started to feel guilty. Inevitably, started clumsily unlacing his shoes.

"Here, why don't you take these, you look like you could use them more than I ever will. I don't even play basketball. To be honest, I have a closet full of them, back at home. Today was a fluke, I hardly ever wear them. Reebok just keeps sending them to me. For free."

"Remarkable," observed the President, while querying his database for a method of converting athletic shoes into a crack pipe.

## 6

"I don't know, Piotr. I'm kind of tired of this shit."

"Don't lose heart," said Piro, squeezing his brother on the shoulder. "We're the best in the business, at the top of our game. We're really making a difference. Who could compete with us, even on their best day?"

Thomas pushed up his visor. Rubbed his eyes.

"I've been thinking about going solo."

# UP TO TEN COPIES SOLD, WORLDWIDE

tags: 1789, barry\_obama, george\_washington,  
helen\_thomas, piro, rip\_jism, tab2

## 1

April, 1789.

New York.

"Could have been me. Could have been my father.  
No way to tell."

Barry leaned forward against a hickory stump, observing the preparations for the Inaugural parade. He could admit to himself that he had become bitter.

"I don't like this town anymore. I barely want to live."

"Nobody likes it, Barry. It's this freakish weather. Snow in the streets like so much spilled cocaine. Even the kids have become jaded. Everyone brings a jacket."

"People never listen to me. I'm frequently misquoted. And you know what? To hell with the Constitution. I didn't buy a copy, either. I already have it on my computer. Eff this noise. I'm going back to Chicago."

Barry kicked his stump. Exited.

Senator Rip Jism shook his head and walked back to his Porsche 1985. Drove home to his farm on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.



President Elect George Washington advanced between the Senate and Representatives, bowing to each. His ceremonial t-shirt was emblazoned with the topical legend: WARREN ELLIS SAID THIS WOULD HAPPEN. At the podium, he spoke confidently into the microphone. For the most part, the assembly ignored him.

"Sometimes, I fantasize about going blind," he began.

The crowd was making a lot of noise. He couldn't see them, couldn't tell what was the matter.

Raised his hands. Uttered:

"On the one."

Recognizing the traditional cue, the band brought their music to a halt. This, finally, silenced the audience.

"Less than ten copies of the U.S. Constitution have sold, to date, world-wide. The years tick by like arbitrary markers in some human system of measurement. You people don't even vote."

*You people?* echoed the crowd. Outrage, disbelief. The President Elect was hemorrhaging political capital through the holes in his monologue.

"Reasonably priced speech," countered Washington, which seemed to placate the loudest objectors. Washington prided himself on thinking quickly on his feet. The copy-right angle presented a neat solution to his quandary. He went with it.

Nearby, a relatively young Helen Thomas jotted down notes for her first big assignment.

### 3

Piotr defocused. Leveled his rifle.

"Tom, did you hear that?"

"Yeah, I got it. Politically tone deaf. His campaign won't recover."

"Sigh. He was elected months ago." Piro tried again.  
"Still, it's your call. Shoot, or sell?"

Thomas weighed the options as if on a triple-beam. On the one hand, perpetual union. On the other, a pile of enemy foreskins. "I tried to be you," he whispered, to no one, waving away the irrelevant screens.

"Let's give them what they want."

Piotr acknowledged, refocused his weapon. Logged back in. Squeezed the trigger.

Washington down.

### 4

Barry picked up after only three rings.

"Where are you?"

Barry plunged his hands into the sink.

"What do you mean, where am I? The People fired me. I went out and got a job."

"All right, deploy your pedantry. What are your GPS coordinates?"

"I'm washing dishes at a Denny's."

Absinthe green dishwater lapped at Barry's manicured hands. He had rolled up the sleeves of his white Arrow shirt, but food stains across his abdomen were still apparent to anyone who bothered to notice him, standing there, hunched over the sink in the back of the kitchen.

His necktie had landed in the trash. His suit jacket sat crumpled in a corner.

"Earthy. Man of the people."

"It's a living."

"Harvard's issuing degrees for anything, these days. Anyway, Washington is out. We need you back behind the podium."

Barry dropped a dish on the tile floor. Tossed his cigarette into the now steel gray water. Unwadded his suit jacket.

"Hour and a half. Crosstown traffic."

"Affirmative."

End call.

# THE CHINESE ROOM

tags: 1789, barry\_obama, benjamin\_franklin, bill\_clinton,  
jerrymander\_mold, piro, tab2

## 1

April, 1789.

New York.

"I am not a mammal."

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

```
cat /lib/constitution
```

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.

"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 his 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 procedural victory.

Barry considered his options. Was the Presidency worth it? Probably not. But he had the investors to consider. 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, emitting a flash of blue flame that rolled confidently 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 disobeyed.

### 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 freezing 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 resumed its usual, darker hue.

He studied his own 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 finally tore off his Arrow shirt and 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 slightly opened, staring hard at the unlikely scene, Piotr scanned through the list of possible responses.

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

The Chinese Room had been Actron, Inc. turf for centuries. Contractually, Jerrymander Mold dealt exclusively with Piotr or his agents. Present events constituted a significant breach of the ancient treaty. Normally, 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."

Clinton rubbed his eyes, groggily.

"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 with them through a hole in



the wall."

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

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

Thomas went to work removing the antique wallpaper. Strips of gray silk coiled smoothly around his Reeboks. Within minutes he had exposed the hidden passageway that connected Clinton'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 Mandarin Chinese," confirmed Thomas.

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

Thomas pulled out his leaf and began to take notes.

# BLACTRON POGROM

tags: 1347, 1492, 1786, 1954, 1989, blactron, dick\_rich,  
jerrymander\_mold, piro, ragnarok, rose\_shitbark, tab2

## 1

April, 1786.

New York.

Morning piled up, folded, the tractor feed printout of a sixty-page paragraph.

Dostoevsky?

Jerrymander Mold glanced at his Rolex Presidential. Wishful thinking. Its status remained static, the chronometer no longer ticking.

Checked the VCR. Four new episodes of COSBY. Then, the machine had ran out of tape. Nevermind, rewind it. Reset.

Scripts splayed out on the floor. Babble drifting in through the mail slot. How many of these could he avoid reading?

Delegate. Yes. But, his assistant was unreliable.

"Snitches," he thought. And then, "Trim."

"Conserve paper now," he concluded, "Save yourself a world of hurt, sixty or seventy years down the road."

Was this sound advice?

"Pro-tip 1763: You fucked up."

Jerrymander wiped his brow. Cracked open a beer. If this was the life, he was living it.

"My kingdom for a business-friendly government."

## 2

April, 1954.

Los Angeles.

Flannel Ritchie blared from the house speakers as Rose Shitbark abandoned sedentary action, leaping smoothly to her feet. The echoing patio made it impossible for her not to get up and dance.

Senator Dick Rich sank into his cream-colored deck chair, somehow resisting the urge to movement. He basked in the afternoon sunshine, vaguely pondering the scene. Frankly, he was impressed. In the months since his last visit, Rose's coordination had improved.

Dick considered the lawn through his tumbler of scotch. All was green. The lot needed mowing. Or, maybe it was just an illusion born of refraction. Whatever. He flexed in his cotton polo shirt, coercing the cool white fabric to stretch over his taut muscles.

"I don't know much about comic books," he finally admitted, sinking further into his deck chair, sliding the ice around in his glass. Dick Rich was not accustomed to the practice of surrendering ground.

Rose suddenly stopped, halted her gyrations. She gathered up her undergarments and made her way back over to the patio. Gripped Dick's shoulders and fixed her eyes directly upon his face as she settled onto his lap.

Giggling, softly.

"It's okay, baby," she whispered in his ear, jerking in time with the soundtrack. "I can behave the teacher if you want to learn."

October, 1492.

Guanahani, San Salvador.

"Crackers," observed Thomas.

Four nondescript whites approached, inching ever closer to the tribal gathering. These white men seemed undeterred by the chief's security detail, which was strange enough in itself. When no one else responded, Piro stepped forward and dispatched the interlopers using his personal firearm. This resulted in a predictable stir at court. Natives scattered, spitting unintelligible lyrics towards the bewildered corpses on the shore. Piro simply shrugged. Someone had needed to act.

"More crackers!" cried Thomas, spotting them easily from his vantage point high atop the leaves of a forward leaning palm tree.

The place was going to hell.

Thomas reached into his bag and sprinkled a handful of crack rocks onto the sand below. Hoping against hope that the product would go viral.

"What are you doing?" whispered Piro into his commlink.

"In this economy? You have to ask?" replied Thomas.

Events progressed according to the usual pattern.

Actron, Inc., open for business.

Mutually assured financial solvency.

June, 1989.

New York.

PRAYER: IT WORKS!

The slogan on Blactron's t-shirt communicated a subtle criticism of the dominant religious memes of his time. He stumbled slightly on the courthouse steps as his handlers ushered him through the throngs of paparazzi.

Up the steps. Into the building. No time for applause.

Blactron's handcuffs chafed, possibly scratching the face of his chronometer. He cursed this mode of transportation, an unfortunate byproduct of his newfound legal status.

The hearing would be brief. But crucial, he had been assured, to the nation's future. A referendum on the structural integrity of U.S. history. Business he could readily transact.

Blactron affected disinterest in the proceedings. Heaved his manacles onto the witness stand and propped himself up against its wooden surface. He began to speak. In the large room his words were practically inaudible, swallowed up by the hollow granite echoes of institutional racism. Silence.

Eventually it became apparent that his microphone had not yet been activated. A bailiff snickered at Blactron's apparent pantomime and corrected the technical gaffe. Without waiting for further confirmation, Blactron tried again.

"It all started back in 1492," he began.

"Let me stop you right there," countered the Prosecution.

The judge didn't bat an eyelash. So, nothing at all had changed. Blactron tried another tack.

"The truth is, those kilos were probably overpriced."

Jurors gasped.

Ah.

Hit them in the pocketbook.

Now he was getting somewhere.

## 5

January, 1347.

China.

The RAGNAROK righted herself and shed excess fuel as she accelerated through the decades. Normally, she was not one to interfere, but the present situation demanded careful attention. Her son had seemed so distracted. Thomas, as always, was worse than useless when it came to restoring drive symmetry.

Piro could no longer discern the marker points. He steered blindly between the eras, confusing passing fads for venerable traditions. His sense of taste seemed incongruous with reality. Possibly criminal in its myopia.

These and other quandaries loomed large in her thoughts as the RAGNAROK clocked out for her morning break. She hoped things would sort themselves out while she was gone. Anyway, none of this was her problem while she was off the clock.

Thomas stomped down the stairs and sat on the floor, chewing on the end of his necktie and pressing software buttons on his leaf.

Piro settled into the captain's chair and paged for his morning tea.

Bleep.

# A FLAT PLANE OF BLACK WATER

tags: 3500000000, piro, ragnarok, tab2

## 1

3,500,000,000 BCE.

France.

"What's that say?"

Thomas indicated the engraving on Piro's rifle as he jealously swung the weapon out of view.

"Nothing."

Thomas was suspicious.

"It says *something*."

"Keep your eyes on the road."

Thomas swerved the Lamborghini back into the correct lane.

*The Black.*

*An unusual scepter.*

"You're not making any sense."

"Watch out!"

## 2

The Lambo came to a smooth stop beside the flat plane of black water, its US DOT serial number plainly visible in large script along the driver's side door, flickering silver in the primordial moonlight. Technically, the duo were undercover at the commencement of life on Earth. For appearances, Thomas was shining.



"Turn that down," said Piro, hopping out of the car and training his weapon on the water.

Thomas killed the sound system and pocketed his keys.

Quiet.

As they waited, an hour elapsed.

"Nothing's happening," observed Thomas.

"Quiet," said Piro, redoubling his focus.

"*Nuance?*" asked Thomas, finally obtaining a clear view of Piro's sidearm. His familiar mocking tone.

"Don't start."

"*This* is what you couldn't tell me in the car?"

"A weapon deserves a name."

"But not an accurate one, from the looks of things."

"Let it be."

Reaching into his pouch, Thomas produced a handful of crack rocks and began skipping them, one by one, across the surface of the black pool.

"What are you doing?"

"This?"

Thomas spit.

"Practicing."

### 3

The Black was already out of control. The Lamborghini had been fully absorbed. Thomas sprinted for the highway and tripped over a rock. His crack sack slipped loose and dribbled its contents across the pavement.

"Fuck!"

Thomas banged his fist against the road.

"I've signaled for the RAGNAROK."

Piro stripped a length of reflective tape from his roll and laid down the standard homing pattern on the street. It shone in the street lights and he imagined the ship would have no problem locating them with its optical scanners.

"Something's wrong with the lake."

"It ate my car!"

"Single-celled organisms. Grand theft auto. Something is wrong."

Thomas continued to pound his fist on the street, cracking the pavement and finally causing several sections to break loose and slide away, floating up, past the power lines, into the clouds.

"I'm very, very angry!" shouted Thomas.

And he was.

## 4

The Black lapped at Thomas' Reeboks, slowly ruining his favorite black jeans.

"My favorite black jeans," he lamented.

Piro took potshots at the substance as it expanded, crawling in every direction towards the streets.

"Gah! It's everywhere!" Thomas reached down and touched his gloved finger to the sticky paste. Tasted it, then recoiled. "What *is* this stuff? Heroin?"

"Relax. It's responding to ordinance."

"It's not tickling *your* balls!"

"Maybe you shouldn't have wasted so much product on the water. Did you ever consider that the interactions might come back to surprise you?"

Piro checked the indicator in his leaf. The RAGNAROK was still several minutes out.

## 5

The RAGNAROK rested in orbit, waiting for her boys to contact her. She calculated that this simple supply run was taking much too long. Stock was low. They had taken more than would be needed to barter for magazines and candy.

What were they up to?

Soon, she decided to run a search:

3%2C500%2C000%2C000+BCE+piro+tab2

Working...

# POST-CAPITALIST

tags: 3500000000, piro, ragnarok, tab2

## 1

3,500,000,000 BCE.

France.

"To sell crack: First, raise consciousness. Next, take direct action. Distribute the product."

Thomas sat down in the pool of black water. Small waves buffeted his chest. He ignored the obvious.

"I'm raising awareness."

Piro started to speak but then closed his mouth. His question had been answered. Besides, Thomas' croker sack had slipped beneath the surface of the dark lake.

The rising lake.

"Life here is hard," Thomas remarked.

"Life is life," countered Piro. "We get in where we fit in."

Thomas could only nod his head in recognition of his own words as the waves lapped around his shoulders.

Then, he flashed on the root of the problem.

"There are no customers."

"The work of building a new nation capable of supporting the drug trade will be a long, tedious slog. Do you really think you're up for this?"

Thomas considered the situation. Life here had just begun. The possibilities were literally — *figuratively* — endless. Impossible to map. The worst that could happen would be that their venture would fail. He adjusted his

visor and examined the black murk that gathered around his chin. Working...

"I have an idea," he finally said, and scooped some of the black water into a pouch that suddenly appeared in his hand.

Piro smiled, inwardly steeling himself for commerce.

Presently, the RAGNAROK broke radio silence.

**THE END**





*about the author*

Stanley Lieber has revised this manuscript (again).