

MAUDE MOLD

#44

by Stanley Lieber

CLOTH BRIDGE

Exclusion had been the last straw for Maude. Contrary to legend, climbing up the mountain had not polluted the site, had not turned her into stone. Maybe her calves had gotten a little stiff, but still. She'd been able to keep walking, drawing herself up from base to peak, a familiar maneuver given the bent of her particular expertise. Discovered other women up there, too. Officiating.

Someone had been lying to her, and for a very long time.

So, this is where the men went when they were supposed to be working. All of the many design setbacks, launch delays, testing failures, budget overruns—all of it, all along, had been made up on account of their preoccupation with... whatever this was supposed to be. Admittedly, she could see the appeal. It was no wonder most projects never reached a state of completion. No wonder the contractors' club in the man-camp was always deserted. How could anyone down there hope to compete with *this*? And on top of it all they drew a regular paycheck. She paid their salary.

Nobody was happy to see her at the top of the mountain. Plinth, of course, was swaddled by his sycophants, showing out in a converted shrine that now bulged at the seams with all his usual comforts. Post-modern furniture, he'd even tasked his personal narrator with documenting the event, *sans serif*. She'd been taking all of this in when Piro snuck up behind her and slowly lowered a generic visor over her sight line, compromising her interpretation of the scene. Instinctively, she blinked, her mind and body rejecting the instrumentation as one.

When her eyes popped open again she was back in her apartment, jacketed in black mold.

BLOOD POOL HELL

Her period had started up again for the first time in nearly fifty years.

Maude rummaged in the cabinets for a clean mug, toppling several wine glasses in the process. She crunched over the broken glass and wandered into the living room. Collapsed onto the couch, defeated, but still clinging to numerous complaints.

Her visor chirped.

Mimir's disembodied head appeared floating before her, demanding a status update on Plinth.

Of course.