

MAUDE MOLD

by Stanley Lieber

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NETWORK DEFECTS

SMART TARDS

tags: 1961, fng, jerrymander_mold, mars2, tab1

9 August.

Gray over gray. No way to differentiate sky from skidmarks, save for the sporadic roar of transports kickflipping the gap. One had just landed.

Jerrymander Mold crouched in the dust.

TAB1 was standing. Squatting had never agreed with him, what with his factory second back. Here, the dry air had seemed to ease the regular pace of his chronic incapacitation, but still he was taking no chances.

TAB1 stood.

The transports were drunk, disgorging new users into the sand, careless with coarse dribbles of ornamental vomit. The new accounts stumbled around, likewise confused. It would take time for all present to customize their settings, some of them never quite satisfying themselves that the task had been accomplished. Tweaking even as they powered down.

Jerrymander drew a fresh white rectangle into the gray sand. He arrowed down and the text advanced at his pleasure. He looked up, then killed the window.

FNG was with TAB1, sampling statistical data from user exhaust. He was still getting his sea legs, here in the desert. He kept trying to access the admin panel, and TAB1 kept slapping his hand away. Use your local tools, he said.

The sun rose, and the gray desktop background slowly resolved into pink. An unauthorized modification.

"A demonstration of instrumentarian power," TAB1 began. he gestured with one glove, then the other. Made jazz hands. The puddle of users began to curdle, then writhe, then spontaneously it self-organized into a flash mob of fierce individualists, each partisan eager to impart a sudden, strongly held opinion about something neither TAB1 or FNG had ever heard of. TAB1 mimed washing his hands of the whole affair, and the body of smart tards resumed aimlessly milling around in the dust, frequently bumping into each other and verbalizing sub-lingual grunts and guffaws.

The sun was getting hot. TAB1 wiped his visor with his data gloves, then took them off.

"Plinth says it's time to go."

Jerrymander stood up, now, presently casting a series of oddly shaped shadows betwixt the precincts of TAB1 and FNG, disenfranchising a fair amount of sand in the process. He looked around.

"Where did all the school buses go?"

ELECTIVE AFFINITIES

tags: 1961, mars2, maude_mold, spiro_mold

9 August.

"Fuck, Mom!"

Spiro Mold, age seven.

"Jesus Christ!" he soon added. His scream reverberated in the strings of the family's upright piano, untouched by slender hands these past few weeks.

"There is no Jesus Christ," scolded Maude Mold. "Figure it out."

Spiro was seated at the kitchen table, upon which had been mounted various bits of sinister looking hardware, most of which probably weighed more than he did. A CRT, a beige rectangular box, and a heavy, mechanical keyboard, each resplendant in its own metal casing. The woman had called it a computer. Spiro remained incredulous. The power requirements alone would have dwarfed that of his RF rig, which was already ridiculous. And its shielding seemed dubious. What was he supposed to do with this thing?

"You're gonna need to know all about this kind of stuff if you want to get a job someday," Maude continued.

Ah.

"But, I don't *want* to get a job someday," Spiro stated the obvious, redundantly, again. "*You're* always gone. *You're* never happy. *You* have no idea who *I* am."

She allowed as much.

"Furthermore, you don't make enough money to convince yourself that any of this is worthwhile. You haven't joined the search for a new asset class, nor have you innovated a new commodity at virtually zero cost. You're surviving, not living, no matter what the stats say. Lacking any sense of ambition, your actions are a net drag on the economy. I don't suppose this crude device has fixed any of that."

Again, she couldn't argue.

"But you're going to keep doing it anyway," he said. "Going to work, coming home. Turning on the computer. Hypocritically micro-managing *my* future at the expense of straightening out your own life."

"Yes," she said.

Spiro turned on the machine.

The bootloader crashed.

LOW RED MOON

tags: 1961, mars2, fng, jerrymander_mold, spiro_mold, tab1

9 August.

So, in the middle of his blowjob he looks up and expects to see, like, a bunch of dead grey rock and shit, right?

Uh-uh. Not what he expected, right?

He near to smashed every switch on his control board when he saw it. There, down in a rather *large* crater on the dark side of the moon, was the biggest resort hotel he had ever *seen*. Actually, it looked to him like there was a whole little *town* down there, right? So he drew his craft in closer from the night sky, to get a closer look at whatever the fuck was going on.

He barely pulled away in time to miss being disintegrated by the deflector shield. Coming by on another, more liberally distanced pass, his sensors informed him that there was what appeared to be a giant plexi-plastic *bubble* stretched taut over the city. A sort of *glass ceiling*, if you will.

So, what does he do? Why, he blasts a hole in it, of course.

Down on the ground, a little boy had let his dog out to see a man about a horse. They were standing there in his backyard, looking up at the night sky, when they see this guy's craft come crashing through the bubble.

Well, the craft's blasters apparently hadn't been enough to handle the bubble's natural bio-genic feedback, and so, in addition to opening a hole he was sent hurtling onto the satellite's surface. The craft touched down near the boy's yard. The child raced over, but his dog hadn't finished pissing yet, see? All over his Asics.

The boy and his dog soon found the charred remains of this guy and his mistress, right? So, he runs home, tells Mom and Dad, and his folks, first thing, get a hold of the press.

Next day. The headline reads:

ALIENS CRASH LAND ON EARTH.

Now. Where's my cocaine?

FNG looked around. TAB1 was still staring straight up, sans visor, peering through the pink clouds at some distant, though persistently incoming pink object. No one had brought any cocaine.

"Sorry, no one brought any cocaine," FNG said.

"I spoke but rhetorically," Jerrymander sighed. He leaned down and snorted the ground, his two nostrils presently caked with sand.

About a mile downrange, Spiro had set out with his dog.

ACTUATION

tags: 1961, mars2, spiro_mold, qualia

9 August.

Spiro led the dog on its leash, which he'd read was a mistake. But otherwise they'd never have made it out of the front yard, so he accepted that pet ownership contained multitudes. Qualia paid no attention to his commands, anyway, and had hardly touched her food. He didn't know what to do with her, but he couldn't just let her shit all over the apartment, and his mom didn't want it in the yard, either.

Activity uprange. Spiro reversed direction.

One drawback of living in the mancamp was proximity to all the strange goings-on that he wasn't supposed to know about, which at times included literal high-powered explosions. Spiro was for some reason technically authorized to access all areas, but still, he wasn't supposed to venture uprange unannounced, and he knew for a fact they didn't want dog shit on the runway. He led the dog away from the access road and out onto the unformatted desert. The morning sun had finally dispersed all the gray. Everything was once again back to normal. Wall to wall pink, all along the way.

Qualia shit quietly in the soft sand.

"Good girl," Spiro said.

But she wasn't doing it for him.

LESS THAN STELLAR CARTOGRAPHY

tags: 1961, mars2, fng, jerrymander_mold, tab1

9 August. Late.

FNG's first day at the test site had proven somewhat anticlimactic. The very first thing TAB1 had told him was not to get too comfortable, because the project would likely be winding down soon. This had elicited a snort from Jerrymander Mold. Or, maybe that was just the cocaine.

The transports had seemed fine. None had completed an actual test milestone, as of yet, but he could see from the fact they were riding around all over the range inside of them that the test program must be well and truly underway. Surely he hadn't been brought all the way out here only to be shipped right back home?

No.

TAB1 was in his ear every morning with a fresh itinerary. This, this, and that. FNG didn't understand the insistence on voice communications. Nothing was ever written down. How did they keep it all straight?

The visor was already gouging a deep canyon into the bridge of his nose. To dilapidate a metaphor. He always wanted to take it off but he found he kept having to slip it back on again in order to accept a call from one of his coworkers. Finally, he just kept wearing it.

There had been little discussion of what he was and was not allowed to talk about with his neighbors back in the mancamp. FNG was appalled at the lack of protocol, in general, but who was there to complain to, here on Mars? He was the fucking new guy. People here just seemed to stumble around wherever they liked. Usually, it seemed to him, chaperoned solely by their vices, which were numerous and exotic far beyond Jerrymander's quaint Earth practices.

FNG had managed to get a pretty good look at this place from up in the air.

He decided to venture downrange.

INTO THE WHITE WORLD

tags: 1961, mars2, spiro_mold, sue

10 August.

These colors don't run. The familiar red, white, and blue flag of the Russian Federation draped over the classic retro slogan, a bumper sticker some smartass had stuck to the side of the school bus. Spiro waved his hand over the ingress sensor and climbed aboard.

Kids were packed in like too many comics in a short box. There were no empty seats. Instinctively, Spiro turned to the bus driver, but this was an optionally manned vehicle. Lacking other options, he sat down in the arbitrary driver's seat.

After a prolonged period of setbacks both fiscal and technical the new school buses had progressed from nighttime to daytime operations, migrating out of the black, ever so gradually into the white world. Students still needed to be moved from their apartments in the mancamp to their classrooms over in the next county, and someone up the chain had hit upon the idea of putting them (the school buses, not the students) to honest work. One thing had led to another, and after an extended litigation in which it looked like the primary contractor's preference for Ghost Gray might carry the day, the transports were all painted School Bus Yellow and deployed to the south end of the range.

It seemed to be going well.

Spiro had not been apprised of any of this. But he also didn't know that the school buses were only one variant out of a total of seventeen separate models derived from the same airframe during the past five years. All of which were referred to as "Sue," in honor of the Soviet-era Sukhoi SU-27, an air superiority fighter aircraft that had first flown in 1977, and was somehow still generating new model variants, even after time had rolled over and then, belatedly, righted itself back to 1961. This might also have explained the Russian flag, come to think of it.

Sue was Spiro's school bus.

"You're sitting on my outfit," Sue said, and Spiro obligingly migrated down the aisle in a vain effort to locate a vacant seat that did not, in fact, seem to exist.

REIDENTIFICATION

tags: 1961, mars2, jerrymander_mold, tab1

10 August.

"The voices say I'm crazy, but fuck those guys."

Jerrymander, perpetually shifting shapes in the dirt. This time he'd brought along his tools. A stiff-bristled brush and a cigar large enough to deform his speech, which ended up being irrelevant, under the circumstances. So far this morning he'd excavated a man-sized plot off the north end of the runway. Oblivious to the optics, he squatted in his usual peculiar posture, twerking gently in time with his near-continuous verbalizing the eschaton. Finally, he stood up, dusting the residual carcass of Mars from his prize.

Presented it for comment. THE JOURNAL OF AUTODIDACTIC STUDIES, SELF-PUBLISHED. September, 1977 issue. Nobody said a word.

"Completes the set!" he finally shouted into the rising wind. This had been a long time coming. Years ago he had mailed his last copy of the issue to someone who'd expressed vague interest online, and now he'd finally recovered an intact example. Here, of all places.

As usual, TAB1 was minding his elder. The older man was typically confused. TAB1 glanced at the novelty publication but was unable to muster much interest in light of the day's slate of higher-priority activities. There was too much he had to keep track of, and, owing to this latest distraction, he was already certain he had forgotten something important. No room in local storage to form novel affinities.

Jerrymander flicked his cigar towards the runway, where it skittered tentatively across the tarmac, like an experimental aircraft ready to drop its overclocked propulsion and collapse into a heap of foul-smelling tobacco ash. Rolled up the key back-issue and shoved it into the maw of his drooping back pocket. Then he walked over to the edge of the runway and retrieved the still-smoldering cigar butt, plugged it back into his mouth, and secured a firm seal on the shaft as if he'd never spit it out.

"What do you want from me?" he said, blowing a chemtrail of perfectly round smoke rings into TAB1's sky-blank face.

He knew TAB1 was obliged to follow him anywhere.

RADICAL INDIFFERENCE

tags: 1961, fng, mars2, maude_mold, spiro_mold

29 September.

"Get out, I'm fucking the new guy."

Maude shut the door in Spiro's face. He heard the click of the lock, her hand slipping away from the doorknob. He waved his own hand in front of the sensor, and there, at his own front door, nothing happened. Frowning, he tightened the straps on his backpack and kicked rocks back to the bus stop.

It would be a while yet before the transports finished delivering students and cut back over to commercial traffic. He decided to walk the four miles to the edge of the dead zone, where the attack barriers petered out and he could get decent bandwidth to Earth. Not that he expected good news...

Maude resumed the living room, wearing little more than the smirk Spiro would always associate with her face. Her cigarette dangled even as her satin robe clotted around her ankles, joining our program already in progress. FNG was staring, discombobulated, or else he might have thought to ask who had been at the door. As it was he almost remembered why he was there.

Maude straddled him, still smirking. It almost seemed as if her face was stuck that way.

"Give me that cigarette," FNG said, swiping it out of her mouth and clamping his own rough lips around its machine-printed silhouette.

Maude shrugged in the nude, with FNG's hands all over her.

Oh, yes.

NEW PALIMPSEST

tags: 1961, Æsir, mars2, tab1

1 October. Early.

The Æsir had founded the test site. Discovered it, he guessed. It was here before he was, put it that way. Cold at night. TAB1 scanned the desert and imagined the flat plane of frost resolving into a three thousand word SPIN cover story about Juliana Hatfield. Oh yeah, he remembered reading this. She'd gained favor with some *áss* up the chain, and now every time words were committed to paper her name must needs be mentioned. All right.

Completely unlike his own assignment here. He'd backtrack across the blank desert, unknowingly carrying out the same tests and capturing the same data that had not been properly preserved so many times before. Nobody would be reading his reports, either. Whatever product this was supporting had better be good.

It was snowing.

TEACHER, TEACHER

tags: 1961, mars2, piro, spiro_mold, tab2, wendy_melvoine

1 October.

Part of the contract was picking up a few undergraduate classes between milk runs. The transports puked the little shits out, and Piro got on with teaching them to read. Or, rather, to think. No refunds.

"Mr. Bright! Mr. Bright!"

Piro pushed his milk bottle glasses back up his nose, bringing the noisy youth into sharper focus. He knew this child of old. Like all of the other students here, this specimen was the progeny of a specialist stationed at the test site. In this case, his sometimes partner, TAB1.

That would make this child TAB2.

"This discussion software *suuucks*. I get an e-mail notification about a new reply in the thread, but the embedded link only takes me to the top of the discussion page, not to the actual post in the thread that by now has hundreds of replies. How is that supposed to work?"

Piro waited for him to finish complaining.

"Participation in the discussion represents one third of your final grade. Your initial discussion post must address at least one of the discussion board topic questions. Respond to at least three other students by either strengthening or weakening their argument. For full credit, all initial posts must be between one hundred to two hundred fifty words and include supporting references where appropriate. Please submit your initial post by Wednesday at 23:59 and all follow-up posts by Sunday at 23:59. The discussions grading rubric is used for this assignment."

"That was... totally unresponsive," TAB2 said.

Piro dinged his helmet.

"Figure it out."

Spiro, observing placidly in his sniper's blind near the back of the classroom, decided against making a snide comment.

Just then the bell rang. Everyone flipped their desks and clambered outside to climb all over the school's rusty old SU-27, on static display at the playground since the Bush administration. Their milk had all spilled, and papers were blowing out of the open door, likewise reminiscent of security during the Bush era. Piro wisely kept these observations to himself.

Students egressed even as Ms. Melvoin entered smoothly, nursing a hot coffee in an X-Men mug, presumably non-alcoholic.

"Those kids are going to fall off of that thing and bust their asses," she said.

Piro stared at her over his glasses.

"No SU-27 has ever killed an American."

WONDERFUL ÁSS

tags: 1961, Æsir, mars2, maude_mold, odin

1 October. Late.

Maude felt bad. Odin was *the* áss. He'd knocked over Spiro's computer, destroying the CRT, and, most likely, the CPU. Buckling-spring keyswitches lay strewn about the dining room carpet. She'd have a hard time returning the thing, now. Oh, well, there were probably more dis-used units back at Plinth's office. Nobody would notice if she made off with another one.

But first she had to get rid of Odin.

Maude reviewed the uncontract. No, there was nothing here but code. Either the operation completed without error or it didn't. Undo had not yet been implemented.

A crash from the kitchen. Odin's wide-load elbows again, flapping like a lot lizard working the passenger door on a late model big rig. The microwave, she guessed.

There wasn't much time to get him out of the apartment and fold up the plastic tarpaulin from on top of the couch. She looked around, resigned. Forensic hygiene was already a lost cause. Maude knew the jig was up, but fully-automated adultery had never been a sport for quitters.

Odin ripped off his spoiled condom and lobbed it into the kitchen trash. The little yellow bin reeled from the impact of his heavy load, biting its lip in mute perseverance. It wobbled from side to side, finally tipping over onto the floor and losing its lunch across the fractal remains of the microwave, pretty as you please, in precisely the kind of artistic flourish forever absent from Odin's legitimate married life.

The hair on the back of his legs stood up.

Even from the living room, Maude noticed.

RADICAL INDIFFERENCE REDUX

tags: 1961, Æsir, mancamp, mars2, maude_mold, odin, plinth_mold

1 October. Later.

Initialized by Od's semen, the nascent lifeform on the kitchen floor never made it off of the linoleum. Odin stood transfixed as the rapid movement of his eyes fell into sync with the MIRV lightning uprange. He was still staring out the window over the kitchen sink when Plinth strolled in, crushing his spent cigarette on the floor, inadvertently (?) aborting Odin's latest offspring, the new áss aborning.

Odin remained frozen in time, furiously willing himself to invisibility. At last, in spite of the period-appropriate powerlessness over his predicament that so enraptured him, it seemed to work. "Azure, two clouds proper, one issuing from sinister chief and one issuing from dexter base, a cubit arm in armour in bend, issuing from the sinister, the hand grasping a branch of olive proper, and three lightning flashes gules," he muttered. Plinth didn't seem to notice him as he stepped over the mess and strode casually into the living room.

"Where is the child?" he asked Maude, raising an eyebrow at the destroyed PC, but, notably, not actually raising the subject. If pressed he would have to admit he didn't even know what a PC was.

"Out," Maude said, pawing at the air with a gloved hand as she spoke. Scrolling, he guessed. "Did you hear Jack Northrop has left the planet?"

Plinth repaired to their shared bedroom, scene of oh so many crimes, where he opened the wall safe and retrieved a wax cylinder. This he carried out of the room in a brown paper bag, looking like nothing so much as a very rich man condescending to the liquor store on his own, probably owing to some screw-up with the staff. He lit up another cigarette off the cherry Maude extended with her solitary ungloved hand.

He remembered that hand, considered its other, historical uses.

Maude seemed distracted, so he left her to it.

Quit the apartment.

WHO KNOWS, WHO DECIDES, AND WHO DECIDES WHO DECIDES

tags: 1961, mancamp, mars2, maude_mold, odin, spiro_mold

2 October. Early.

Spiro let himself in and dropped his backpack onto the living room floor. It had been a long walk home. He noticed the mess, of course, and at first he found himself reflexively stomping on the heavy metals and plastics, thinking there had been another impromptu invasion of cockroaches. Never fear, it was only more of Mom's junk. Regardless, he'd still have to clean it all up. At least this would necessitate mandatory time off from the beige box, analytics be damned. He fetched the broom and pan from the utility closet and swept the pretty gore into the trash.

He decided against touching anything in the kitchen. Mom was going to be mad, but you had to draw the line somewhere, and his was drawn right in front of the pantsless man staring out the window at the transit of Phobos.

Heading down the hallway to his room he could hear her talking to someone via remote telepresence. Maybe his dad?

"I can come over there, sure, but not every single day. When I *am* there with you, you don't want to hear anything I have to say. I feel like I'm in the way. Why are you even paying me? Anyway, I've heard Lockheed has poisoned the well."

He could see through the crack in her door that she was fiddling with her glove, trying to get the thing off, but, leveraging its monopoly on decision power, it wasn't budging. He saw her set down her cigarette and take her ungloved hand and give the finger to her other, still-gloved hand. Shortly afterward her conversation seemed to terminate. Played to extinction, the glove finally released its nonconsensual grip and slid onto his charger, which she promptly kicked off the dresser onto the floor.

Spiro moved quickly down the hall to his room.

He had survived another birthday, but only just.

MARS3

LOGIC OF ACCUMULATION

tags: 1964, mars2, plinth_mold

31 October.

Authority is contextual. Mold Industries, Inc., had occupied a full hangar at the test site since the middle 1950s. Increased operations tempo had paid dividends, and today the corporation's real estate holdings on Mars exceeded that of its competitors by a substantial margin. Just as well, security requirements at the test site had called for even more space than would otherwise have been strictly possible, given the dimensions of the Federal land withdrawal, in order to sustain compartmentalization of diverse projects. By now the process of authorizing Mold Industries land for official use had streamlined appreciably.

Plinth Mold sat at his desk in the center of his company's original—now temporarily empty—hangar. Big orange jack-o'-lantern full of candy placed on the desk in front of him. Both front and back doors had been rolled completely open, and he stared hard at the horizon, miles distant, as the sun began to set. A chill breeze harried the back of his neck. Children both bewilderingly young and surprisingly old trudged along the runway in front of his hangar, collectively disguised by a stupifying sediment of official merch and self-made cosplay, nary an employee in sight.

Plinth tapped the sign on his desk. Presently, a larger-scale version of the same thing illuminated outside his hangar.

RECYCLE CENTER, it read, just below the familiar Möbius strip designed in 1970 and subsequently trucked back to 1964 especially for use here, on Plinth's building.

None of the children stopped by for treats, or even seemed to notice him sitting there. Curiously distracted by events further uprange.

But Plinth had another trick up his sleeve.

THE BOOK THAT READS YOU

tags: 1964, fng, mancamp, margaret, mars2, mars3, maude_mold, spiro_mold, tab2

Previously, 1 October.

"Dad said the whole place is shutting down. They're moving everyone out of 'Las Vegas' and sending them somewhere else."

TAB2 to his mother.

"Yeah, it makes no sense to me, either, what with the war on and all. Anyway, smell you later!"

He waved his hand in empty space, disconnecting the call. All right, he'd done what he'd been told to do. Now he was free to roam his new digs. Fresh from an extended stay down the silo back on Earth, he had issued himself a general warrant to stretch his legs anywhere they might carry him. Back here on Mars, where the flowers didn't grow.

MARS3. DET-87. The new test site.

Staff from MARS2 had been informed during today's morning call. New playset, redesigned uniforms and insignia, updated weapons and support equipment. Even new filecards, although the mini-bios were still being written by that same guy, whomever he was (spoiler: no one here cared). Some of the staff had balked, but old hands accepted the changes as just another part of the job. They'd still be wrapped in the same bubbles and hung on the same pegs. Those with actual contracts had been well provided for. As a matter of logistics, families were being migrated first. If all went well, the workers would follow suit, bringing up their projects one by one on the new hardware, and finally folding down the old test site to lay fallow until the next reboot. Any stragglers could always be retrieved from cultural memory. Recovered from the store room and placed on the shelf, ready for customers, along with everyone else.

If TAB2 had been fine with all this, Spiro Mold was less sanguine. His father hadn't warned him of the impending upheaval, and of course he had just started a new school year. Moving again. As birthday presents went, this one sucked.

FNG for his part had been served his walking papers. Victor Charley money, was how he referred to his next gig, which he'd booked even before the end of the morning call. He said nothing to anyone before he departed.

And Maude Mold was ready to get the Hel out of that apartment.

GRAPHENE ASPHIXIATION

tags: 1964, mars2, tab2

Previously, 30 October.

It wasn't really as swift as all that. The process of migrating families would unfold over months, if not years, and not all of the projects were moving. Compartmentalization ensured that the workers' assumptions remained firmly speculative, even after they had been proven accurate. But this did nothing to quell dissent amongst the student body.

"If I fail Facebook Analytics a third time I'll be kicked out of the Army!"

TAB2, on intersectional economics.

His pink hoverboard (graphic: BUM RIDE) lazed sarcastically above the adolescent playground equipment, a pustulous yellow fiberglass turtle spotted with deep red accents, some cresting its faceted dome as if hesitant to be seen there, still playing on the playground well after puberty. Several kids from his class huddled beneath the crude shell, squatting in the pea gravel, giggling uncontrollably at TAB2's naive apprehension of the surveillance imperative. Every so often he would feign falling, waggle his arms and legs like a handsome man's eyebrows, and thump the yellow turtle with the edge of his board. This would ricochet the kids into further paroxysms of laughter.

Already a tenure-track skeptic at the age of seven, TAB2 enjoyed unfettered access to his father's opinions about the impending move, and so he was somewhat more relaxed than his classmates when it came to unanswered questions. That, and he knew he was safe. After all, he'd already been issued his orders.

He waved his hand through the empty, expectant air, activating the pea gravel below.

Placed a fresh stick of Shitex gum in his mouth.

Smiled.

TIME AND TITLE

tags: 1964, jerrymander_mold, mars2, tab1

31 October.

Uprange.

"This job is haunted. Resonating in its time-studied particulars with the ghosts of a hundred thousand early retirees, voluntary and otherwise."

Jerrymander crouched with his elbows digging into his knees, chin propped up on the heels of his hands, as TAB1 scooped shovel loads of action figures into the open burn pit. He inhaled the resulting black smoke, savoring the highly collectible outgassing of all their useless, previous efforts.

"Every time a wave of them gets fired, we turn around and hire a brand new batch. It would make more sense to just hold onto the ones we've already prised from the sands."

Jerrymander inhaled deeply, internalizing the irony.

"Some of them are moving to the new facility," TAB1 said, heaving another shovel full onto the fire. "But most of these, TBQH, are peg warmers, anyway."

A gregarious black column of smoke twisting in the Martian wind was a regular feature of the scenery for employees long jaded by reportable environmental offenses, but this one seemed to be attracting local children.

Wearing... costumes?

"Halloween," TAB1 said, leapfrogging Jerrymander's stillborn query.

TAB1 shoveled a single figure into each outstretched Halloween bag as the children filed by. Silent, in compliance with his filecard description, but not altogether unfriendly.

Jerrymander reached into his back pocket for the contract book.

BLACK TRIANGLE

tags: 1964, kintsugi, mancamp, mars2, maude_mold, ragnarok, sadbeard

31 October.

A black triangle fell from the sky, tumbling end over end into the Martian dust like a burnt Dorito discarded from some airborne picnic table. Maude Mold happened to be looking up at the sky or else she would have missed it entirely. Well, until it landed on her front lawn.

Glistening pink, the ship had looked completely black until it promptly settled itself into a stationary hover above the apartment building. Maybe it was all the smoke?

Maude's ears popped.

The ship's sleek active surfaces contracted, revolutionizing her shape, and two new pirates were birthed from her now gaping, now spasming triangular exit ramp, ejected onto the sand complete with back stories and half-completed missions, already in progress.

"Strangely modern-looking for a two thousand year-old ship, isn't she?"

Sadbeard, leading off with his baroquely sculptured, swankly hairy chin yet dripping with petroleum products and the whale fat from his plate. He wrapped up his breakfast and tossed the paper bag over his shoulder. Straightened his eye patch for jokes and stories.

"Will no one rid me of these grits?"

Kintsugi hadn't quite finished his own ample helping, but already he felt full. Slapped his half-full plate facedown against the side of the RAGNAROK's hull, backjumping a quick wildstyle all over his mother as the contents migrated slowly below her water line. Crossed his arms and set his stance, regulation intimidating.

Shaken loose from her rapture, Maude led them both inside.

GORGON STARE

tags: 1964, anomie, california, earth, edwards

24 December. Edwards AFB.

"The glitches are getting worse. I'm seeing that black triangle again."

Anomie's prediction products had failed to account for software instability. Which was ironic, he thought, so he logged the observation.

Switched panes.

Headline: *Stepwise slime mould growth as a template for urban design.*

Yeah, right.

Back to work.

GORGON CHRISTMAS

tags: 1964, mars2, santa_claus, tab2, trolls

24 December. Late.

"Yes, a lack of working capital *is* holding me back."

"No, I'm *not* clicking on that."

"Thanks."

"Bye."

Last Christmas, TAB2 had clicked. It had been a bit of a disaster, ultimately leading to his manager putting him on steps, and he'd never even claimed the working capital. This year, and every year forthcoming if he had anything to say about it, he wasn't getting red teamed by H.R. Ever again. All of his contraband was safely squirreled away in the wall behind his manager's desk, not even making animal noises or trying to chew through the drywall. He had gotten it done. No more tears.

The trolls lived under the hills which they cranked up in order to peer at the outside world.* Dotting the Christmas desert were circular, sprinkled perforations marring the otherwise unblemished complexion of the winter frost, like Oreoes pitched into a glass of milk, or the hindquarters of the original prototype model of the Millennium Falcon. It looked good enough to eat (or play with), if the trolls had been into that sort of thing. As it was they all hated Disney for assuredly legitimate reasons, and so they bided their time, staying hungry, which according to contemporary wisdom must have been a good thing, but mostly they just complained amongst themselves about the products they intended to buy anyway.

Across the surface of Mars hilltop lids clicked back into place as Santa's sleigh swept the horizon. Chatter online indicated his craft had been spotted gleaming the frozen, shimmering atmosphere twenty minutes prior. All around the world children scrolled feverishly, scouring their Gorgon feeds for wars, or rumors of war.

I mean, why else would he possibly be here?

* JOURNEY INTO MYSTERY #99.

GORGON DEFAULTS

tags: 1964, mars2, jerrymander_mold, santa_claus, tab2, trolls, ymir

25 December. Morning.

The children who didn't believe in Santa Claus hadn't minded at all when finally he got shot down. Trolls popping up everywhere. The Ymir giant suddenly coalescing out of thin ice. All of these things were of secondary importance to stabilizing the flow of behavioral surplus from farm, to table, to manager, who were themselves only following orders from higher up the chain. Simply put, the gods were out of ideas and needed to huff the secondhand exhaust excreted by humans in order to make themselves feel sane again. For their part the children were happy to oblige, interacting with the sorry scenario in real time, calibrating the automatic urban legends it generated until Santa had made himself all too obnoxious to the powers that be. And then the missiles had gone up.

"We've gotta get these guys back in their bubbles."

Jerrymander was still fiddling with his desktop settings. The ground flickered pink and then gray, pink and then gray, suggesting an impending aesthetic revelation that nevertheless continued to elude Jerrymander's conscious perception. TAB1 punched him in the arm to get his attention, inducing the (very) old man to rock back in his Brooks Brothers shoes, the fist-shaped indentation in his arm slowly filling in as Jerrymander found himself inexplicably resisting the urge to complain.

The Gorgon defaults would have to do, for now.

They crossed the battlefield, trudging over mismatched limbs and snapped appendages, picking whatever seemed to be in good enough condition to recard and sell as new. The layers of wack on wack crime baffled them—most of these idiots had killed *each other*, quite independent of the lightning from god—but this, too, was part of the job. The gods and trolls provided permanent OPFOR, serving as a foil for the observations of the children. They were not themselves the product, but merely its abandoned carcass.

LOCAL GHOSTS

tags: 1965, mars2, spiro_mold, sue

1 October, the following year.

The transition was winding down. Families faced a mandate to vacate the mancamp by close of business on 31 December, tits and all. Get your shit and hit the door. Auld acquaintances were about to be forgot.

There were perks. Transit betwixt MARS2 and MARS3 was reliable and cheap. Spiro had taken to making the trip on his days off from school. The new facility was still taking its first tentative steps on shaky newborn legs, and all the adults were distracted with extra duty, so Spiro was able to ship himself back and forth several times a week and no one much missed him in class. It was a long trip, but at least the serpents had cable.

Spiro reclined on his cushioned seat, the back of his bald head acquiescing to the mandatory imprint of a pink doily draped over the top of its velour head rest, representing the serpent's last line of defense against human colonization. It hadn't saved the rest of the seat. He decided to inspect the CATV once again for injection attacks before finally releasing himself entirely from liability. He flipped on the switch. For all his efforts he was unable to guarantee what might come out of the screen.

Presently, there appeared an external view of the serpent (a visible descendant of last year's school buses, but nobody who hadn't been there would have recognized the fact), frame rate in sync with moments of unsupported transport when it broke contact with the ground and appeared to float, glowing genially above the cooling Martian sand. Such a display inspired the feeling of being stared at, and Spiro quickly switched it off.

"Welcome, Spiro," said Sue.

Spiro recognized her voice.

TUMMY RUBBISH

tags: 1966, mars3, maude_mold, tab2

5 January, Maude's birthday.

The Bifröst flag flapped on the front of her new apartment building as she loaded old hard drives onto the little wooden shelf Plinth had mounted on their bedroom wall. Sometimes memories were good.

She secured the shelf with her thumbprint and locked her room. Spiro would still be at school, but he was far from the only little shit running around here. Some of them didn't even bother with their classes. They probably got in here when she was gone, digging around for cigarettes and classified folders. Wait 'til she caught one of them...

"For it is the lot of some men to be assigned duties about which they may not speak. Such work is not for every man. But those who accept the burdens implicit in this silent labor realize a camaraderie and sense of value known to few. These memories cannot be stolen. They will last always, untarnished, ever better."

TAB2's stomach hurt. He removed his visor and tried to wipe the words away, but the unwanted message remained flashing in his near vision. God, Dad. Nearly two years past his installation date, he still wasn't used to this thing. Not really. They were always fixing things in front of his eyes. And then there were the waves and currents of pixel floaters, miscegenating disparate objects and connecting the square dots in a confusing moire—TBQH, he'd rather be left alone. Some conclusions he still wanted to stave off.

He was here. Pulled open the screen door.

"Hey, Maude," he said, as the older woman squinted down at him and exhaled purple smoke directly into his face.

"Stay out of my room," she said, and let the door slam behind her on her way out.

CONVERTING THE DEMON WITH NINE HEADS

tags: 1966, kintsugi, mars3, piro, sadbeard

27 February, Violet's birthday.

"Corporations are people, but how can you tell if they're white?"

This again.

Kintsugi finished his file-o-fish and moved on to the other side of the porch. Sadbeard could be so... *sad*, sometimes. Kintsugi really felt sorry for him. The pirate was laser focused on property rights as the locus of political power at the rapidly expanding replacement test site. And, maybe he was right. Just look at the boss' own holdings. The de facto alignment of policy with profits. The slack dispersal of dividends amongst certain of his men. Redline laws. But, did Sadbeard even consider Japanese to be white? And, what did the arbitrary construction of race matter to him, anyway? Events of the next few moments hinged upon his answer.

Kintsugi waited, but Sadbeard had stopped talking. He found himself fondling his receipt. Already he'd nearly worn a hole in the crumpled yellow paper, the thermal dot matrix lettering rubbing off on his fingers even as he read and reread the manifest: Sadbeard, Kintsugi. Sadbeard, Kintsugi. Sadbeard's name always appearing first on the list, in spite of Kintsugi's superior rating in virtually every category tracked by the company's metrics. It wasn't even alphabetical order. They'd been alive barely a year and already some things never changed.

A new serpent appeared. Sadbeard and Kintsugi boarded, by now resorting to the time-honored cold war cold shoulder. Purely textbook, Kintsugi just wouldn't talk to his partner unless he was forced to. Sat down on the other end of the transport. Hopefully Sadbeard would take the hint.

"Do you think we should kill the boss?" Sadbeard said, ignoring the seconds old verbal *détente*.

Soft creak of faux leather from somewhere up the line of high-backed rows, probably near the driver's seat.

Piro, the driver, inspecting the scene via rearview mirror.

He put the serpent in gear.

VEILED ENTRY

tags: 1966, mancamp, mars2, odin, spiro_mold

31 March.

Mom never changed, and this place hadn't either. Spiro stood mock vigil in the kitchen next to vacant scaffolding of Odin, finally allowing himself to see the place as it was, as it had always been. Debris from the night the microwave had exploded were still scattered across the kitchen floor, laying at cross-purposes to the rust stains on the yellow linoleum. Odin was still there, too, his white hair puffed up absurdly at attention all over the mottled smörgåsbord of his devastated body. Spiro inched past him into the dining room, careful to avoid spoiling the scene of the crime. At least this war was over.

He had considered the old apartment as background, something to offset the cleverness of his t-shirt, a place to throw his locked trapper keeper, Game Boy, and comics books, but in his absence the whole context of his reactionary lifestyle had changed. He hadn't intended for his essential self to become so tightly coupled with the disposition of a shitty apartment in a mancamp operated by a contractor to the U.S. government, but, oh, well, identity was a scam, anyway.

Dad's safe was empty.

His own room remained wickedly wrecked, just as he'd left it. This wasn't a surprise, exactly, but still it disappointed him, as it diverged stubbornly from some (he realized) cherished sense of the place as he would liked to have remembered it.

This old test site had been shut down, surplused, liquidated. The mancamp was empty. The transports run off. He wasn't even supposed to be here today.

Spiro tipped over Odin on his way out, making sure the disabled elder god went all the way down, face mashing into the ruined floor. Forensics be damned.

Made his way uprange.

Into the wider world.

MARS3

tags: 1966, mars2, spiro_mold, tab2

31 March, same day.

"You're not supposed to be here."

TAB2 from a distance, the eight year old holding a shoebox full of Mold Industries action figures tucked under his arm. Picked up a rock. Chucked it the twenty yards.

Spiro went down.

Partway up the runway he'd felt a hand on his shoulder, or maybe it was a finger running down his spine. Turned around and there was TAB2, just off the south end, shouting something, probably vulgar, but too far away to be heard clearly. Spiro stood straining his ears until the unseen projectile skinned off the side of his face, dropping him spiraling into the pavement, nose down, Paris Air Show '89. Where he stayed.

TAB2 caught up with him.

"Say, are you all right?"

"When a headline ends with a question mark, the answer is no."

Spiro spat, laying flat on his back as the pesky youngster skylined himself against the dusky firmament, twin moons surfacing the waning daylight to frame TAB2's visored visage like a pair of Kenner TIE fighters mustering for a critically important, late-day strafing run. The spit landed back on his own face.

"Your face is fucked."

Indeed, Spiro's cheek had split in two, strange colors pouring out of him. His mask was puking rainbows. He rolled over onto his stomach, face down, purposely draining his life's blood onto the slowly cooling tarmac. But death seemed to be ghosting him, and TAB2 couldn't help but feel responsible.

"Tell you what," TAB2 began. "I'll just give this back to you."

He dug into his shoebox and produced a wax cylinder, tossed it onto Spiro's lap. It looked familiar.

"My apartment's only a couple hundred miles from here. If we get started now we can be home by, oh, I'd say the first of October."

Spiro looked around.

"I'm calling Sue," he said.

Cells collapsing, he melted into the runway.

TRANSMITTED ACCOUNT

NEW NEW YORK

tags: 1981, earth, maude_mold, piro, plinth_mold, ragnarok, tab2

12 September, many years later, somehow still talking about this.

Of course they should have been protecting the mountain. But A only equals A when you control the trademark. TAB2 had nothing to say for himself, which worked out fine since Maude Mold was doing most of the talking.

"How could you not have known *anything* about this? Weren't these *your* guys? When I saw those towers come down, right after I stopped crying, I said to myself, Maude, we're going to be majorly inconvenienced here. No sooner had I mounted that flag in the bed of my pickup truck than word came down from Plinth the whole winter line had been placed on hold. *Hel*, now the *whole line* is on hold. *Capitalism* is canceled. Not even your brother is allowed to fly. How are we going to move these shipping containers out of the city?"

Piro and his mother had just landed on the roof.

"Speak up, and don't talk back to me!" Maude shouted, way too close to TAB2's face to be shouting.

He rocked back on his heels, not about to offer an excuse. His smile was uneasy, and his face glitched uncommercially from an excess of management as his mind raced behind his visor. No, not now. He needed this job. A lot was riding on his burgeoning partnership with Piro. He was finally beginning to see residuals from their ill-considered gains. The big cocaine cash in.

Maude fixed him with a hard stare, twitching out a false start every few seconds, as if to telegraph she were about to leap across the desk and strangle him with his own plastic necktie. He guessed what she must be thinking. Ever since Spiro had died, some fifteen years in their past, TAB2 couldn't do a damn thing right as far as Maude was concerned. Soon as Spiro had gone, Maude suddenly remembered she was a parent, and it was as if TAB2 was being made to pay for all her prior twelve years of sleepover mistakes. It was not as if he'd killed the boy or anything. He never even understood why they couldn't get along.

Suddenly she was upon him, unsnapping his plastic pants. Her hand plunged in, trawling his UNIQLO underwear for guilty treasure. Too soon?

Abruptly, she stopped.

"I don't care anymore," she said, surveilling TAB2's poorly secured thoughts. "Get out. You're fired."

The worst was coming true but still TAB2 had friends. He made a beeline for the elevator to the roof. To Piro. Auspiciously, he passed Plinth arriving at the office, coming the other way down the corridor just as he egressed the scene of his final dissolution.

"Where are you going?" asked Plinth. "It's 2:30 in the afternoon. I need those drawings by the end of business today."

"You fired me," TAB2 said.

"I didn't fire you," Plinth said, and took a sip of his coffee. "There's a war on."

Looked at his watch, debate concluded. If a human lifespan was 20,000 years, Plinth was a very old man, indeed.

TAB2 smiled.

Employment!

EXCLUSION

tags: 1966, a_person, mars2, mímisbrunnr, mímir, tab2

3 November, where were we?

TAB2's respirator had fogged over his visor. He leaned over Mímir's well, A. Person staring back up at him from the de-indexed depths. He could still smell it, dark wafts of outgassing black mold from the open burn pits. Well, that had put a tin lid on the whole valley, hadn't it? He had to get out of there.

"You're not really alive, are you?" TAB2 eyed his own reflection, still uncertain whom he was really addressing with all his witty comments.

"How am I supposed to answer that?" A. Person replied. The water rippled, irritably, for the entire basis of this interrogation seemed an error condition, an impossible contradiction in terms. His annoyance echoed around the rim of the well, obsessively recapitulating the same historicist preamble to his aesthetically defunct rhetorical situation. Why couldn't his doppelgänger understand?

Enough of this.

TAB2 pulled on his jacket and continued uprange. North, to the mountains, where he was likewise unwelcome. The families who were still staying there had really *stayed*, and wanted nothing to do with left-over refugees from the test site, no matter whom or how their parents might once have been connected to the mountain community. Piro had given up on exterminating them once he, too, had become convinced that no one on Earth was keeping track. These people, and their goats, were simply staying put, a prim shawl drawn tight around the flesh-colored ridges straddling the site.

They guarded the mountain.

RETROCAUSALITY

tags: 1966, lorraine_ipsum, mars2, tab2

3 December, Santa busy with his list.

Was it taking a long time to walk up this hill, or what?

"You can't wear that thing up here."

Lorraine Ipsum, Miko at large.

"What, *this*? Consider it gone." TAB2 stripped off his visor and tossed it over his shoulder, wondering at the proliferating echoes as it clattered down the trail behind him. Somehow this all seemed familiar. It must have penetrated his prior awareness, however briefly, some number of years ago, when he first recalled this instant, starting awake, or otherwise wondering after all the racket. But it couldn't possibly have been *this* loud.

"No, the respirator," she said, motioning to his apparatus.

"But, I'll die."

"We're all dying," she said. He realized she meant presently.

"Yeah, but I need a few extra decades to read all these comic books." He mimed a command sequence purely from memory, suspiciously expert with the possibly-still-classified device. Suddenly, her near vision was filled with a crude, three-dimensional representation of his own vast back issue collection. Like long boxes, receding. He guessed. His own visor was gone.

Anyway, what was she doing up here?

"Seriously. You have to take that thing off. I can't understand a word you're saying."

TAB2 shook his head. "Nope," he said again, settling his stance and crossing his arms. When his words had no visible effect he simply pushed his way through the *torii* gate and continued on his way. Easy enough.

"Black mold," he added, over his shoulder.

Lorraine covered her mouth with her hands. Giggled formally. Out of habit, rather than any sense of capitulation to TAB2's overabundance of caution. Belatedly aware of the optics, she yanked down her hands and scrambled up the trail after him, her face flush with the effort, her robes flapping in the darkening, dusty wind.

It had been a while since they'd had a visitor.

SIMILAR HERE

tags: 1966, mars2, tab2

31 December, peeing off the balcony to welcome the new year.

It really was taking a long time to climb up this hill.

A dialogue box appeared.

SIMILAR HERE

TAB2 clicked, reflexively. He couldn't really see what he was doing, and maybe he even missed, but there he was still on the steep side of the mountain, data gloves stabbing wildly into the... whatever it was... and he'd be damned if more of the same didn't seem like too good an opportunity to pass up.

Things began to happen.

First of all, he was knee-deep in gray mud. Contra dust. The windswept side of the mountain seemed to be meeting him halfway, perhaps even moving in the opposite direction as himself. In any case, suspiciously giving and friendly. He rejected this out of hand, the residue of his long training instantly justifying the substantial investment by his country. A cynicism he'd internalized through early grade school and on into the present. There was no even-handedness when he was even-handing, so shut the fuck up.

The hill was sliding down on him.

Okay.

He clicked, and clicked, and clicked.

THOT COFFEE

tags: 1996, mars2, tab2

14 February, it's a date.

The Disk And Executive MONitor woke him. His respirator crowned the pink sand, a replica mountain in miniature, monument to a monumental labor with no one left in charge. Somewhere beneath all this lay our protagonist, cursing the lack of signal strength in his adept's blind. TAB2 had secluded himself on the mountain for thirty years, and now his gloves had aged out of compatability with his environment. He couldn't get back on the network.

Tiny quartz crystals twinkled up at him from the surrounding sands. He scooped a handful into his pocket, dust still falling out of his eyebrows, partially obscuring his already compromised vision. Assuming this wasn't just frost, he might be able to trade some of it for useful and sundry from whatever remnants of civilization still troubled the Martian desert in this ássforesaken year of 1996. Then again, depending on how bad things had gotten while he was laid up, maybe the locals would even buy frost from a stranger.

He stumbled into town before sunset, not too late for an espresso from Thot Coffee.

IN LIVING COLOR

tags: 1996, mars2, shit_mold, tab2

14 February, eternal dusk. Dusk.

He recognized the place. Thot Coffee, *né* Tight Impressions, the barber shop where his Dad and Piro used to get their hair did. Man, a lot had changed.

"Yeah, let me get an espresso and a cinnamon toast." He wasn't too hungry. Hands on her hips, the waitress rolled her eyes until her hair started moving. Oblivious to the implications, TAB2 reclined in his booth, waiting casually to see what tribute he would pull from the local fanbase. Disappointingly, nobody seemed to recognize him.

"What's with the hot pants?"

Shit Mold, age six.

"Thirty years I was up the mountain, sitting. Apparently, you do keep growing, even when you're sitting still."

TAB2, age thirty-eight. Still wearing the same sad clothes from second grade, his arms and legs now poking out all over the place in spite of his younger self's attempts at tight rolling. The overall effect was more Duncan in CLASS ACT (1992) than Kid in HOUSE PARTY (1990). It was more like a blown out paper bag than a proper outfit. Somehow, he'd outgrown himself.

Shit cocked his head at an angle, ready to pounce. Then he stopped, and sank back down into the booth. He was unsure of how to proceed. Exercising decision power, he reached down and ripped the legs off his pants, followed by the sleeves of his shirt. Smiling, now, he vomited a friendly little rainbow onto the table.

"This will have to do until I can scam some proper baby clothes," he said, and climbed happily out of TAB2's booth, off to notify his friends, all of whom had been standing monitoring from a line of bar stools along the soda counter. They dropped their devices flat on the reflective Formica and cheered when Shit validated TAB2's too-hype, flavor milk gear. Smart tards were dispatched to collect the discarded electronics.

Now, members of the technical staff appeared, clearing the dining room floor of chairs and tables as the establishment's anachronistic infrared probes, otherwise invisible to onlookers, reflected in the tiny pink lenses of their visors. Soon it would be time for a short interstitial, followed by a series of commercial messages, capped off by a rousing musical performance slash dance recital. Aspirants poured into the dining

room from an heretofore unnoticed side entrance, freshly divested of a generous cover charge.

Paying customers could do what they wanted to do.

SIMILAR HERE

WHY WE CALL THEM BROTHERS

tags: 4099, Æsir, ants, mars2, piro, ragnarok, tab1, tab2

1 October, still lying about the past.

Gather round children for the tale of why we call them brothers. Many young folk employed at the ranges today are not aware, but ants were not always the dominant life form, here at the test site. Before the expansion, before we emerged, mandible-over-mandible, out of the service namespace, lo, even before the Æsir interjected their moronic evangelism into our indigenous creation myths, human beings bestrode these same sands, dispensing their behavior surplus, neither aware nor consenting to its collection by hostile forces.

It was on one such day, oh, I'd say around three thousand years ago, now, make it late 1957, when TAB1 breached the big hangar on the south end of the runway, calling, as it were, to inquire after his partner Piro's disposition. But, Piro was not in attendance on that morning, gone these several hours pursuing a thread unrelated to our present narrative, instantiating some diverse resource fork, somewhere up the chain. Concurrently, not in parallel. Stipulate that TAB1 encountered an empty hangar. Empty as he understood the word, it up to that point.

There she was.

The RAGNAROK, children. The end of days.

Well, she was as beautiful as anything he'd seen. That certainly got his attention. She was long, she was sleek. Glistening pink. The microscopic, fractal triangles comprising her smooth skin reflected wideband, non-ionizing radiation at oblique angles, at least where it didn't outright ingest it, leaving naught but a barrier of absolute room temperature air to coat her exquisite periphery, like the laminar flow of an air hockey table, or the active wing of an unrelated classified aircraft.

I tell you, not even an ant could have adhered to her surface.

TAB1 was smitten beyond words, and I'm not just saying that, I assure you.

Now, Piro, born of the RAGNAROK, was a loyal and jealous son. He did not approve of unannounced visitors to his hangar, much less having them climb, uninvited, aboard his ship. Even if they were regular passengers. Seriously, he didn't like it one little bit. Call it a *sixth sense*. He looked in on TAB1 and his mother engaged in... *the act*.

The RAGNAROK's doors ajar, forward probes extended. TAB1's khaki pants down around his ankles, United States flag at full mast in the bed of his waist-mounted pickup truck fanny pack. Body parts appearing

and disappearing according to a regular, structured pattern that put one in mind of primitive human music.

Based upon the immediate descent into silence all involved seemed to agree this was a bad look.

TAB1 had expected for Piro to somewhat pedantically point out the several violations of the flag code currently in evidence, but instead the lonely pirate simply turned on his heels and walked out of the chamber, pretending somewhat implausibly that he'd never seen what his mother and his best friend had been up to, there, inside her body, inside his hangar that was isolated from the rest of the base by a modest-sized marsworks of local dust and soot. If he'd felt some kind of way about it, he never let on.

And he never mentioned it to anyone, ever, forwards or backwards in time.

Later on that same day, TAB1 having barely managed the quick flit back to Earth, TAB2 was born, no one who mattered any the wiser.

THIRTY-THREE TRANSMISSIONS

tags: 1966, Æsir, mars2, mars3, sue, tab1, tab2

Off by one.

The Æsir dropped TAB2 off back at the tail end of good old 1966, still nine years old, and Robert is your father's nearest male relative. A random serpent picked him up at the foot of the mountain.

Where was he going?

Spiro was still dead. The test site was still closed down. Or, whatever, he wasn't supposed to be there. He was breathing hard in his respirator, pinching the bridge of his nose until it bruised. He imagined he could see the black mold orbiting, could see what Plinth must be up to. A lot of the workers were probably getting sick. Statistically speaking, somebody was getting sued.

He rode back home, ignoring the regular haptic alerts from his data gloves squeezing his fingers in an apparent imitation of his father's handshake. When he could no longer keep his eyes open his unaugmented vision blanked and so he nearly missed his stop. Sue nudged him gently when at last it was time to disembark, and he clambered off the transport almost remembering where he was going. He made sure not to leave anything behind, and rote learning from earlier in this narrative eased his transition from the solitude and 6XL attire of his mountain lifestyle back to the rat-infested, contemporary walk-up apartment he shared with his father, who hadn't aged a day in six hours.

Who hadn't seemed to have missed him while he was gone.

"Get your shit. We're headed back to MARS2."

TAB2 rolled his eyes.

MAUDE'S NEW NEW JOB

tags: 1967, mars3, maude_mold, piro, tab2

3 January, OJT.

"What ho, pirate!"

It was back to school for TAB2, the very next day after returning from MARS2. No time off for bad behavior. Piro was still moonlighting as a bus driver, pretending nobody knew who he was. He nodded back at the boy, blank as a main sail, and the serpent's mouth yawned, dilating in anticipation as TAB2 scrambled aboard, Piro's smooth facade still flapping in the morning wind even after TAB2 had taken his seat.

"Yissssssss," the door hissed.

And they were off.

School at MARS3 was more of the same drudgery he'd become accustomed to throughout his academic career. Endless scroll backed by slightly newer software running on slightly older computers, both acquired through the usual government gumbo of cost plus goldbricking and standards compliant corruption. Dad had already made sure the company replaced his discarded visor, so the mandatory interface lag of this antiquated equipment resumed annoying him. The beige boxes and clicky mechanical keyboards were friction, the bane of harvesting surplus, which he had thought had been the whole point of the exercise. This e-waste only served to retard the natural process of indoctrination.

The serpent spit him out again at the front gates. Piro collapsed its flaps, flipping the serpent around and kicking up sand in the faces of nearby sand dunes as he slithered off in the opposite direction. TAB2's gloves had already logged him in, so he was trapped waiting for his assignments to download. There was no skipping class, now, without violating the EULA.

New Teacher.

Spiro's mom.

COLLECTED KEY SECRETS

tags: 1966, mars2, mars3, spiro_mold

31 March, last year.

From beneath the runway the surface appeared to him as liquid glass, shimmering translucent sheets that he recalled skirting the grade school swimming pool, served forth from his ample memory of only yesterday. Spiro stared up at the imaginary, exposed rafters, wondering if, as it had lately come to seem, grade school really was the whole wide world, after all.

Was he dead? Or had he just fallen through the ground?

Something about TAB2. Man, fuck that guy.

Everything here was covered in black mold, like the wet, mildewy maintenance manuals he'd discovered stashed in the basement of his old apartment building, spread out on the floor of the worst utility closet ever. Spiro surfaced the runway, but it wasn't much help. He was pretty sure he could see the mold moving in the air. What did it want? Had it always been there? No wonder so many workers went home sick, or never went home at all.

He thought about MARS3, and just like that, he was back at MARS3.

Mom was out. Probably visiting her new new job. He didn't much feel like going to school, so he didn't. New apartment, same as the first.

He thought about MARS2, and just like that, he was back at MARS2.

Children at play in the melting snow.

Covered in mold.

Why was he seeing this?

ESTABLISHING THE TRANSLOCAL FOUNDER

tags: 1999, earth, plinth_mold

1 October, what year is it?

Birds like flies near the top of the Chrysler building. Plinth Mold had just announced the next round of layoffs, and already the storks were circling, waiting to peel face-lifts off of overpriced faces. This one was going to be brutal. Even his wife had to go.

He pressed the switch on his desk, unsure if anyone was still out there, employed or not, on the other side of his big, green door.

"Maude?"

Nothing. She must have already cleaned out her desk.

Suddenly awakening in his very body, he placed the papers on his desk back into his safe, locked the front door of his office, and got the coffee himself. Things would run more smoothly around here from now on. No more inept prompt engineering filling the adult diapers of the technical staff with Balls Conkrite, pecker wheat, and scurrilous pabulum, all phrases plucked from competitors' products. Mobile suit god damn.

Only six years into the new epoch and already he'd fucked everything up.

Sports analogy, if you please.

NEW KAMI

tags: 1967, ragnarok, tab1, tab2

4 April, it's about time.

Before and after TAB2 visited the mountain, regardless of peccadillo, circumstance, or time period, these guys, these beings, not quite gods, had been up there. They just wouldn't leave, and forcible measures had so far failed, not that they hadn't been tried, so the government at length saw fit to cut a deal. The not quite gods would stick to their mountain and the Air Force would stop trying to kill them. When no reply came, the government declared victory and fucked off back to their test site, sealing off the area with impregnable red tape, and instructing all personnel to avoid transgressing the boundary of the foothills.

Spiro Mold's death had complicated the arrangement. TAB2, driven into the mountains with his apparent grief having eroded his already thin attention to the rules like desert topsoil succumbing to infrequent rain, had stepped right into the middle of the dispute, unaware of his role in the continuing land withdrawal drama. The ascetics who sat immobile at the highest elevations shrugged and accepted him into their stubbornly stationary community, but only just. Maybe he could be ransomed back to the government? But that would require getting oneself up off of one's beleaguered ass. TAB2 was happy to finally stop moving. It would be quite a few years until he came back down, even though in real time he'd only been gone for a few hours.

Of course, bearing new ideas about the current disposition and eventual redistribution of test site resources.

"And just where did you think all of this coke was going? Williamsburg, 2002?"

TAB1. His dad. Jerking a thumb towards the RAGNAROK, whom from all appearances had been packed full of ticker taped bales of cocaine and was now ready for the journey back to Earth.

"I dunno. Palo Alto, pick a year?"

TAB1 scoffed, suppressing a fatherly grin.

"Lucky guess."

BRAIN FOG

tags: 1967, mars3, piro, tab1, tab2

TAB2 couldn't remember much after that. The world seemed to shift, colors inverting like someone pressing on the front of his visor, but no one seemed interested in codereviewing any changes. Red became green, green became red. Political parties switched sides, bowed to their partners. Converse had always been at war with Pepsi. The war would go on and on. Right on.

MARS3 was already winding down. Together they'd scooped out all the drugs from under the test site, undermining the structural integrity of the new installation. Homes were starting to collapse, foundations hollowed out from the inside in a passable simulation of normal hierarchical dysfunction. All of this without anyone discovering the serious bug in host authentication that had been present in every new installation for the past several releases.

TAB2 couldn't think.

"Hey, that black shit's getting into the coke."

Dad seemed unfazed by all the social changes, but he did disapprove of miscellaneous debris contaminating his product. He ran over and swatted away the gathering particles from atop Piro's fresh bales, concussing vortices of the dark whatever it was outwards in a radial pattern, frittering it gradually away from his wares.

"Keep your sweat on, it's just mold."

Piro still never blinked, his big black eyes perforating any stare down with extreme prejudice. TAB2 caught himself wondering at intervals if the pirate was truly alive, or if he was simply an aggregate model of visor-scraped tropes incorporated without permission from user contributions.

Dog barking, somewhere in the distance. Instruction tuning, persistence of time. TAB2 could swear he heard a lawn mower, but there was no grass on Mars. Only coke.

"I wanted to be at CIA, MTV, or Apple," TAB2 sulked, dropping anchor into the quagmire where his many paths not taken intersected. There was no consoling him whenever he indulged thusly in his despair at the many years that remained on his sentence. And beyond finishing grade school he would still have to face high school. At least.

"You did good," his father said, not really listening. "And take off that fucking mask."

Piro, coughing, started up the baling machine again.

MAUDE MOLD

The left of the left is right —Yoshio Hayakawa

ACCOUNTS OF NUMINOUS EFFICACY

5 January 2049, Maude's birthday.

Maude Mold watched the M.A.S.K. intro on repeat, jerking her arms stupidly each time the insipid song arrived at its screeching climax. Flames in the fireplace cycled inevitably through their finite quantity of discreet frames, mocking her attempts to exert mere human decision power over the intentionally limited choices on offer. Maude didn't even like M.A.S.K., but this clip was just so easy to click.

The flames looped.

WHITE NEUTRALITY

23 June 2049, someone's sixtieth anniversary.

Somewhere in the global north...

"Yeah, I don't really want to sell coke."

TAB3, just back from space. TAB2, his father, had seen neither hide nor hair of the boy for an untold number of years, and he had to be honest, he wasn't exactly chuffed to see him now. Too many memories from a time before he'd straightened out all his own bullshit. His son had just... shown up, declared himself pregnant, and then proceeded to dig in his heels, staking out a disused corner of the living room for his bedroll. That was ten minutes ago. This all rang disturbingly familiar. The self-same predicament TAB2 had found himself in, all those years ago.*

And now here he was saying he thought he was too good to take over the family business.

Well, like the RAGNAROK during her mid-career stint of labor activism, that just wasn't going to fly.

"Son, it's what we *do*. Ever since I was a boy I've moved ready rock. How do you think I paid for these tits?"

TAB2 lifted up his flannel shirt.

"Something's happening in space. Everything's turned inside out. The stars are black, the background's all white. Like somebody was pressing on my visor." TAB2 lowered his shirt, walked back over to his press-board desk and resumed his 8-bit gaming session. He was starting to lose interest in the conversation. TAB3 did tend to go on.

* ACTRON V4, #14.

"This, too, is utterly expected. The stars invert. You're not sixteen anymore, Dad. Grow the fuck up."

"I'm keeping my baby."

TAB2 did a spit take, flipped out both sides of his mullet with his hands, then brought a fist down on his mechanical computer keyboard, showering the tiny apartment with a debris of murder.

"Not if I get you out of Indiana before the law finds out."

INVENTING A LEGENDARY PAST

4 July 2049, "In Congress..."

Sparklers lined the sidewalk in front of Maude's modest Midwestern home, fizzling in the boy's ears as he approached. TAB3 didn't get it. What if the lawn caught fire?

Maude was already on shift, waiting behind the front screen door as he made his way up the sidewalk. *Yobai* —worshipping from afar?

"Dad kicked me out again," he said.

"I know," she said, but pointedly didn't open the screen door.

"Okay," TAB3, already deflated.

He unrolled his sleeping bag right there on the porch.

WITNESS MARKS

"Eventually, we just followed them into the mountains. There was nothing going on in town, anyway. Did I say *tail*? I meant *trail*."

Maude could see two gashes atop TAB3's bald head. Healed now, but clearly the rough-hewn evidence of some severely memorable trauma. Like a comically botched restoration job, or maybe a giant snake had taken a bite out of his skull.

"Dragon, actually," TAB3 corrected her.

Pause.

"Oh, I'm telepathic. Telekenetic, too. Inherited my Mom's powers."

"Even though *I'm* your biological mother," Maude said.

"Kuzuryu works in mysterious ways."

Maude could feel her ovaries hardening even as the boy spoke. The mere mention of TAB2's second wife, Eva Bright, had put her right off her morning tea. She tabled the saucer and cup, inadvertently nudging her signed copy of *WITH QUARTER NEITHER ASKED NOR GIVEN: A SEXUAL BIOGRAPHY OF X-MEN WRITER CHRIS CLAREMONT*, which promptly fell face open onto the floor.

Maude hated family stuff.

MISTAKES ARE THE BEGINNING OF SUCCESS

"We wandered up the mountain. Slowly, at first, but nobody seemed to object, so gradually we accelerated, amassing supply chain contacts and political influence, soon surpassing the speed of what is understood to be strictly legal business. Thankfully, the mountain was beyond the reach of government regulation."

Dead air.

"Yes, Plinth was fond of that joke as well," Maude allowed, and let the chapter close.

"So, we found the green door. It kept on getting darker and darker all around the path. Soon, *everything* went dark. The whole world. Togakushi, whatever. We knocked, but the old crone wouldn't open up."

"How did you get her to come out?"

"We had to trick her."

DREAMING GIRL

Maude felt like she couldn't wake up. Someone was pounding at the door.

"FUCK," she said, as she lifted the latch and light flooded in.

It was her son.

Holding a mirror.

SPAMMY NOTIFICATIONS

"Sorry. I have to take this."

TAB3 was holding the thing, staring straight into its bright reflective surface. Something like a miniature explosion, or perhaps a 1980s television in the context of a dark room, making your arm hair stand on end even from a distance of ten feet. He'd stopped responding, and Maude waited for what seemed like time better spent suffering through a full episode of M.A.S.K.

"Sorry. I have to go."

TAB3 turned on the heels of his lavender combat boots and returned to wherever it was he'd come from the day before. Tilted forward, head down, bulleting in a straight line along the narrow track of the sidewalk he continued, plumb off of the property. With his bedroll tucked under his arm, muttering into the palm of his hand, he seemed almost at home.

Maude let the screen door slam.

But this time she didn't lock the deadbolt.

ACROSS STATE LINES

TAB3 had been tasked with a milk run running milk between 4086 (centuries after his death) and 1986 (just before he was born). Okay, he figured, there probably wasn't much danger of running into anyone he knew.

Somehow, he'd allowed himself to get roped into this, shilling his dad's junk product through time and space at a moment's notice. He wasn't even (really) authorized to access this technology, it was just that his father had never met a rule or regulation he respected. And who knew how all of this would affect the baby.

Accelerating smoothly, he transgressed the boundaries of the gray desktop background.

PASSIVE INCOME

Maude always got her cut.

It wasn't child support, exactly, as her child was now a grown man, and anyway, her marriage to Plinth Mold had nullified such quotidian considerations as money out of hand. Alimony was technically disqualified on similar grounds. No, Maude's interest in TAB2's plan to save present day Earth by scooping drugs out of the future and depositing them back into the past had been instantiated by sheer force of will. After her Dad had died, she knew that someone would have to look out for her sister Antigone. And knowing was half the battle.

Her sister. Perhaps unemployable, she, too was approaching middle age, whatever that might mean for all those who'd enjoyed sustained physical proximity to members of the curiously long-lived Mold family. No one in her household had aged visibly since the abandoned shopping mall they once called home had finally revealed itself to be the submerged carcass of a ship from Plinth's former space fleet. A variable-sized, giant pink triangle everyone in the food court laughingly called the RAG-NAROK. Residents of the mall were abruptly obliged to GTFO, with no advance warning, and no prior arrangements made for WTF they were supposed to go. Dad just sat down on the curb outside and started crying. Maude now found that it was her responsibility to step up and take care of the family. And that required resources.

Going on a hundred years ago, now.

Plinth must have seen it all coming.

CLOTH BRIDGE

Exclusion had been the last straw for Maude. Contrary to legend, climbing up the mountain had not polluted the site, nor had it 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 a made up ruse 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 arrived at a state of completion. No wonder the contractors' club in the mancamp remained deserted. How could anyone down there hope to compete with *this*? And on top of it all they drew a regular paycheck from Mold Industries, Inc. She was paying their salaries.

Nobody was happy to see her arrive atop the mountain. Plinth, of course, was swaddled in sycophants, showing out in a repurposed shrine that now bulged at the seams with all of his usual comforts. Postmodern furniture, a loyal opposition, and he'd 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 visor over her head, into her line of sight, like a blindfold, compromising her interpretation of the scene. Instinctively she blinked, her mind and body rejecting the instrument 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 in her slippers and wandered into the living room, worrying absentmindedly at her tea. Collapsed onto the couch. Defeated, but still clinging to her numerous complaints.

Her visor chirped.

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

Of course.

ANCIENT LORE FOR A RECENT TRADITION

Leaving Plinth hadn't been easy. When he finally found out, he simply had her name taken off all their accounts. She'd wave her hand at an official and nothing would happen, data gloves or not. Cute. And then there had been the small matter of getting off Mars.

Traffic at the test site was at an all-time high. Lots of gods and men in and out of the mancamp, all enjoying the benefits of different levels of access, eager to mint their own burgeoning legends, but wary of tarnishing their public-facing cover stories by publicly cavorting with the boss' wife. On the other hand, most of them were quite lonely.

In her usual way she figured something out.

THE DIN OF THE RELIGIOUS MARKETPLACE

Back on Earth there had still been a lot of Plinth-y business to attend to. She was able to wring some residual clout out of their very public—well, in some circles—relationship, but word traveled fast in those same circles. Before long she'd found herself all but unemployable.

Nothing left but to join the church.

She hefted one of the outsized telephone directories from her kitchen closet and plopped it down on the Formica® table with a thud. Let her fingers do the walking. It had been a lifetime since she'd turned to the Scriptures for guidance. Now, she couldn't even remember her own telephone number.

She read out:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that information wants to be free, and that a computer can never be held accountable, therefore a computer must never make a management decision.

It all made sense to her. There was something comforting in this affirmation of humanity's priority atop the hierarchy of life forms kicking around the cosmos. Plinth, after all, was hardly human, so she couldn't have been wasting her time.

But enough with the staid contemplation. A soul could only stare for so long into its own bio before some form of consciousness was likely to emerge. She returned the book to its home in the kitchen closet. Realistically, probably for good.

It was going to be a long epilogue.

SECRET RECORD AT PINK MOUNTAIN

Spiro and TAB3 had not been her only children, of course. Far from it. Her misunderstood, misbegotten brood littered the Earth as well as known space, populating both halves of many irreconcilable differences. Keeping war in the family, but diversifying the investment. The more, she figured, the merrier. Change your name and spread the blame. At least one of her offspring was bound to benefit from this security—through obscurity—in numbers.

TAB3 had been unique in that Maude had done the impregnating. When they'd finally well and truly fucked, TAB2 (the father) had put forward some unusual requests. Sure, why not, Maude had thought. It wouldn't be any stranger than some of that shit Odin had asked her to do. And he *really had* been asking for it. Nine months later TAB2's baby had been born in a Manhattan apartment. Just don't tell his wife how it all really went down.

Imagine Maude's surprise when she discovered a detailed account of these misadventures written down on a scroll, well up the mountain, stuffed into a crack in the men's room wall of Plinth's shrine on Mars, several decades before any of it was due to actually happen. Of course she had pocketed the scroll.

TAB2 had still been a kid.

But in that economy? She didn't let it distract her.

741.5

"Bureau of Kami Affairs, ma'am. We have reason to believe you may be in possession of certain documents pertaining to unauthorized religious activities at a government facility."

The man was already leaning halfway in the apartment door. He produced a replica pamphlet, quickly flipping through its brightly colored, computer generated pages by way of some kind of explanation, re: his inquiry. His badge looked real enough in the frankly inadequate resolution of her visor. Maude buzzed him in, illuminated his path to the kitchen.

"That elevator makes some strange sounds."

"Squash it," Maude said, tiring of the preamble. "Let's get naked and make a deal."

She kicked closed the kitchen closet and unzipped her shirt.

DISCOURSES OF THE VANISHING

The BKA man ignored Maude's obvious provocation. Not that he wasn't interested, but he was at work, which meant that he was also under surveillance. And he needed to keep this job. Most Americans didn't realize, or care, that the Bureau of Kami Affairs was staffed almost entirely by gig workers, whom the government still forced, somewhat sarcastically, to pay for their own health insurance, Internet, and rent. *Grab your mat and let's get started.*

"Ma'am, the secret record."

"Call me *bitch*," Maude snapped. Hell of a pronoun. Her bra had found its way onto the floor alongside her shirt. She squeaked out a career limiting yell, kicked over a chair, and laid all the way back, spread-eagle on the kitchen table. By all appearances ready to rock.

The BKA man made a sudden, sad face inside his bear mask. He could see now in his visor that he'd just been retasked with an unrelated job clear across town, even though he wasn't finished here, even though several of his coworkers were already positioned nearby the pending service address, actually much closer than he was, and were in fact at this moment standing idly by, waiting for an assignment.

And just like that, he was out of the apartment.

OPENING THE THIRD FRONTIER

Maude's basic programming statements were very simple and easy to understand. *The friend of her friend was her enemy, and consent was implied.*

It took her a few minutes to realize the BKA man had gone.

This didn't happen every day.

PEOPLE WHO DON'T CHANGE

It was nothing for Maude to sit still for ten years. Even longer, if she were left unprovoked. She'd been doing this for most of her life without even trying. Vulnerable narcissists could be relied upon to plague her every move, even as she found herself so inclined, so she simply sat still and let them dance, running through their kinetic surplus until their batteries finally ran down. Decades passed. The only downside to all this stasis was the early onset of tech neck. Yes, she wore her visor all the while as she sat.

Anomie, she decided, was the price of eternal vigilance. As plain as the balls on her face.

Odin had stopped by.

THE INABILITY TO SIMULTANEOUSLY VERIFY SENTIENCE, LOCATION, AND IDENTITY

"Rub this blue plant wherever it feels good."

Odin shifted in his labored crouch, seeming rather unstable, but deftly manipulating the *kukan* and creating an opening for Maude to decide to comply. Somewhat groggily, she shrugged off her visor and accepted his withering blue stalk, laying it gently across her forehead.

It was smooth on her skin.

Odin had fallen in with a strange new sect who painted their entire bodies blue with the rubbings of a vibrant, scrawny plant, wandering the spaceways in their fruitless yearning for true equality with God. To his great amusement, they didn't seem to realize who he was.

Odin was also amused by Maude's desktop tan, and he swabbed his stalk back and forth across her face in wonder, admiring the contrast.

"You look like you're still wearing the visor," he said, and laughed again.

If he was trying to embarrass her it wasn't going to work.

AFTER THE DIVORCE

They had all moved in together. What with the rapacious inflation, the ever-present threat of violent crime, the increasing political divide in the country, the thought of their children having to contextualize all this by themselves... All three women decided there would be greater strength in numbers, and so they pooled their resources, cohabitating a Greenwich Village brownstone, sharing their dinners, their chores, and, of course, group-shouldering the ongoing disappointments wrought upon their kids by their good-for-nothing ex-husbands.

It ran for six seasons.

Maude, Kate, Allie, Emma, Jennie, Chip, and TAB3—the latter fresh from space, cranky and still very pregnant. "By my daddy's beard!" Odin said, when he saw the ragged wagon train merrily snaking into the apartment. "Do your husbands know about this?" Odin had killed his own father, of course, whose origin was in any case obscure.

"You don't live here, you know," Maude frowned, driving a *boshi* fist straight into his rib cage, separating sagging bone from so-called muscle with her thumb.

Odin threw up his hands, refusing to defend himself. Ironically, for a Norse god, he was at long last weary of the constant fighting.

"At least the Romans respected me. *Hel*," he interrupted himself, "According to this recent alert in my visor, new CIA research can make me wealthy in seven minutes! I'm heading back to Germany, you ladies can piss up a rope."

Kate opened her mouth as if to say something, but after a sharp look from Allie she raised her eyebrows and decided to shut her mouth.

Maude frowned again.

THAT OLD GHOST TRILEMMA

At the onset of the seventh year, after the big blowup, the final dissolution of the commune, Kate, Allie, and their remaining brood all safely moved out, Piro finally led a raid on the brownstone. It was about time.

"No fee 'til victory!" he shouted, crashing through the front room window on the end of his favorite throwing rope. Shouting for the benefit of his men, rather than their target. Affirming their acquaintanceship with the rules of engagement. He wanted them all to get paid, even if they didn't really deserve it.

Wait, where did everybody go?

THE DECORATION OF INDEPENDENCE

All through the raid TAB2 was confused, static. He just stood there while the other men ran through their program, knocking over furniture and breaking mirrors, laughing all the while. One woman found at the scene, bearing a familiar codename: Maude Mold, attempted passive resistance, stretching her body across a stairway that apparently led up to the childrens' bedrooms. Piro dispatched her with his sidearm, punctuating the exchange with an obscure remark about the two-edged nature of freedom. TAB2 could only watch as the woman tumbled down the stairs, and then he continued watching her as she lay there, crumpled on the floor, not really bothering anybody. He observed himself ruefully as his own calculated inaction calcified into the sort of dead-limbed cliché that had totally turned him off during his chance encounters with trash fiction. Already, he had problems with the script.

By the time they brought down TAB3, his father, TAB2, was fully beside himself, monitoring the scene at an increasingly helpless remove. He might as well have been on the other side of a telescreen, which, thanks to his visor, he was. Pointedly, he made eye contact with TAB3, but the boy chose not to acknowledge him. Piro cracked TAB3 over the head with his rifle, and TAB2 just kept on standing there, not breaking character, not doing jack shit about the in-progress rendition of his visibly pregnant son. Had they really just shot Maude?

On the way out of the apartment the men set fire to the building, trading jokes about TAB2's flickering antique headgear, agitating for liquor and snacks.

Piro signed off on their timesheets.

BLACK MOLD

Spiro Mold, deceased. Ever since he died he'd been mad at his mom. She hadn't been his killer, *per se*, but he figured if he'd never gotten born in the first place then he couldn't have died, so whatever transpired during the interim was at least partly her fault. The logic was unassailable, to say nothing of the premise.

He realized TAB2 could see him.

His mother's body was rapidly decomposing to black mold inside the shipping container. The six pallbearers pretended not to notice their load getting progressively lighter as their procession boarded the RAGNAROK via her aft cargo ramp. Make it look easy, but don't make it look *too* easy. The aperture closed behind them, sealing the deal with a

wink.

Black footprints throughout the apartment.

TAB2 was still standing there in the front room with Spiro, slowly inhaling the (for now) rare biohazard, with the realization slowly dawning on him that he no longer cared if it killed him. Spiro stared straight back at him, likewise surprised at the sudden collapse of TAB2's usual jovial disposition.

TAB2's visor crackled to life, a sound like your so-called best friend purposely ripping the cover off of your favorite comic book during a fist fight in your bedroom.

"Tom, get the fuck out here. The ship's idling. It's bad for the lawn."

Yes, Piro.

Spiro waved goodbye to his friend.

ANTIGONE'S PLACE IN ALL THIS

Long ago.

Spiro found himself deposited at Granny's. Not much different than most days, except that today his father was actually at home, next door, sleeping off an unplanned production surge. Dad was at home, but Spiro was here. The injustice burned him, it was palpable, and it would not fall by the wayside, ignored in favor of slashing budgets, shipping units, or domestic tranquility. Dad was going to wake up.

Everyone was supposed to call her Granny, but Spiro never did. The woman was actually his aunt, his mother's sister, Antigone, and she was hardly old enough to be anybody's mother, let alone their grandmother, a revered figure in their family hierarchy. Her stature in the scheme of things was distinctly unearned. The other kids at the daycare she operated weren't blood relatives, and probably wouldn't have noticed the discrepancy even if they had been. Spiro accepted that this level of inattention was, historically, the norm. Without automatic identification friend or foe it was no wonder there was so much incest in the world.

"Come to Granny," Antigone said, after spying Spiro frozen in the doorway, hesitant to give in. She reached out to him, awkwardly, her shawl an extension of her frail, spindly arms. In Spiro's mind, a dead tree shrouded in a yarn tarp.

He could see down her shirt.

Belatedly, he entered.

MILLIONS DEAD

Spiro lay on the living room floor behind Eugene's chair, face pressed tightly against the register. Central heat whistled manically as it ablated his youthful cheeks.

It was hot, down there.

Eugene was home from work, no explanation asked or given. But that meant he controlled the telescreen, the lunch menu, and all other variables of the domestic battlespace. He'd already thrown out Spiro's comic books, even the ones he'd stolen from under Eugene's son's bed. Scotty was going to be pissed when he got home from school. How might *he* act out? The joke's on you, Gene.

Something about black mold on the telescreen. Everyone on Mars had to deal with it, sooner or later. Some people got sick. Eugene had lost his hair at the age of thirty, forever impacting his performance of self.

Maybe the fallout was moving again, and that's why everyone was home from work.

At lunch Spiro made an ill-advised crack about [something] and Antigone had hauled off and slapped him across the face with the fly swatter she carried around holstered in her belt. He'd seen it used in anger before, but never expected to take a shot from it himself. He knew his mother would land on Antigone's side of any perceived conflict, so he didn't say anything when he got home.

Even so, he let himself out the front door while everyone was washing up. Careful not to slam the screen or rattle the weathered floor boards on the front porch.

Wandered next door to his own house, his nighttime home, where his dad was still asleep.

Threw rocks at the window until Dad woke up.

IT'S YOUR FAULT THEY'RE DEAD

Present day. Present time.

Maude's death at the hands of Piro had been another distraction in a long line of setbacks preventing her from achieving enlightenment. She realized her attachment to her son, such as it was, had resulted in her getting shot. But it was puzzling. TAB3 had still been taken away from her, and she had still been shot. *He'd* probably have been shot, too. The transaction seemed lopsided, invalid by Milton Friedman's standards.

She wasn't sure where she was. They'd taken her out of the shipping container, sure. But what was this? Antiseptic smell. Everything was cold. Airless. She seemed to be still sealed on the card. Mint in package. Was Plinth trying to sell her?

The gods were about. Greater Mercury. Fucking Odin. Neither of them showing much interest. Frozen inside her plastic bubble there wasn't much she could do about it. Did they know what they were doing?

Some of the other gods were haggling with Plinth, who was seated at his desk, posture neutral, pushing plastic but not overselling it. He seemed perfectly relaxed, ignoring her as he worked. The deal was afoot.

Maude surmised that she must be in Plinth's office in the New Chrysler Building.

TAB2 was screaming, what else was new. Also ignored by the gods, but not letting it deter him from whatever he imagined to be his mission. You had to admire his line of bullshit. Whatever else was true about him, he tried to make you believe it in total. Next, Piro strolled in, his black gloves coated with something else black, distinguishable only by the comparative absence of reflective sheen. Ashen. His face and uniform were likewise painted with the same toxic seeming soot. Caked.

"Black mold," he said, by way of explaining his appearance.

"This! Him!" TAB2 shouted, volume increasing proportionate to how much he felt like he was being ignored. It didn't make any difference at all.

For some reason, at just that moment, it began pouring down rain inside Plinth's office.

END MAUDE MOLD