

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 unsailable, 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.