

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