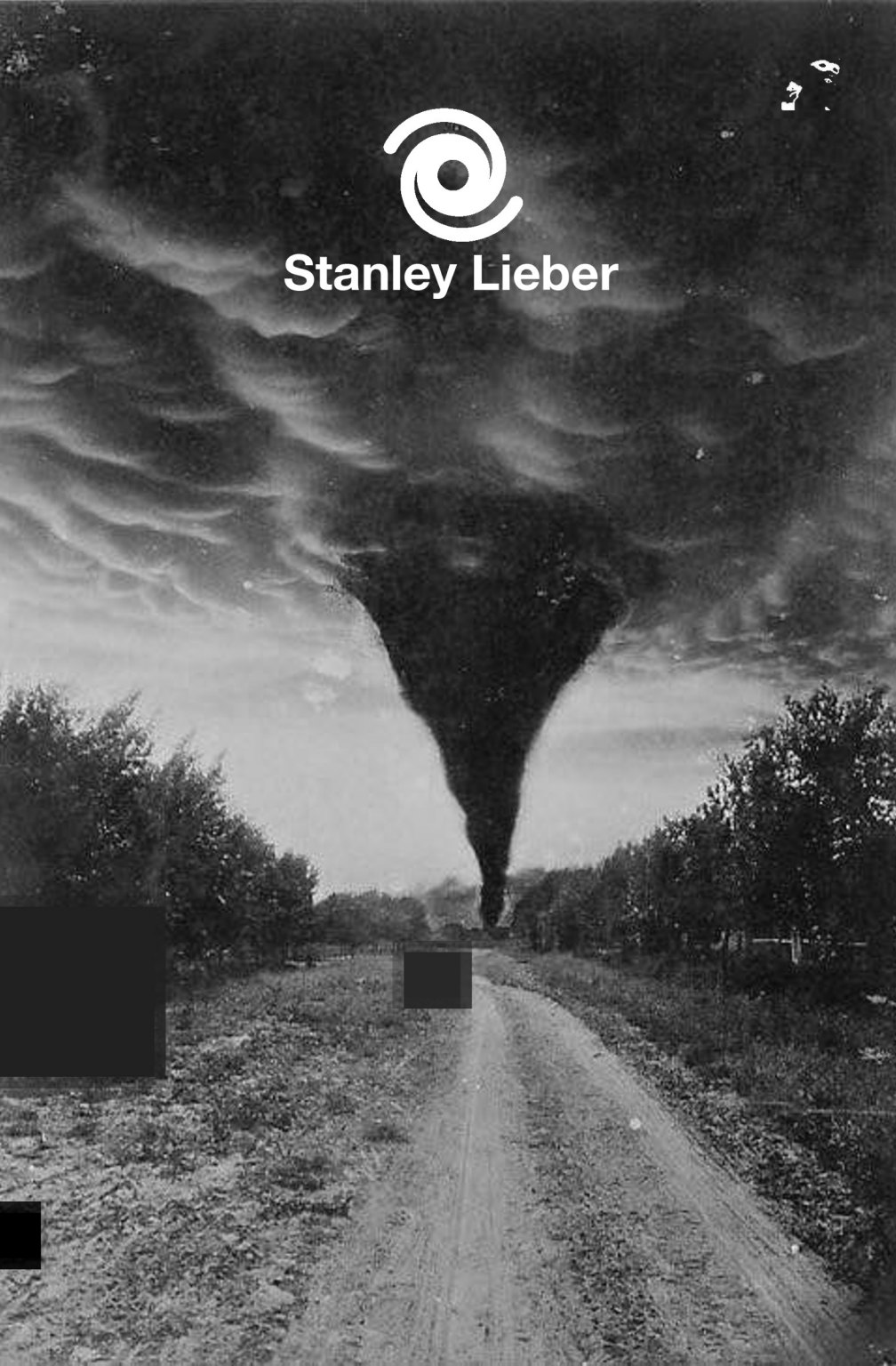




Stanley Lieber





by Stanley Lieber

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MARS2

BASEMENT LIFE

1

3¹ Jan 1942

Into the apartment.

Lots of space. Two rooms and a closet.

Incredibly, the closet is larger than the other two rooms combined.

Ask about the carpet.

"Don't worry about it," says the realtor.

Closet would be ideal for school work. Possibilities.

Kitchen sink, but no stove. One living room wall is mirrored, encouraging the illusion that the room is more than six feet wide.

Flip on the closet light. Wood paneling. Little door, all the way in the back. Walk over to it and tap it with my boot.

Door doesn't budge but the carpet on the floor begins to pull away from the wall. Hand emerges from the folds, groping at my shoe. Hand brushes my ankle and then abruptly disappears beneath the carpet.

Noted.

Pull back the rug and there is no floor underneath. Someone or something scurries away, just beyond my visor's visual range. Almost certainly the owner of the hand that tried to grab my foot.

For obvious reasons, find this unacceptable.

Slip off my backpack. Follow hand into crawlspace.

2

Air wet with men's cologne. Basement humidity laps at my neck. Dab forehead with handkerchief and then return it to back pocket. Adjust visor.

Heat signatures.

Crawl after what could only have been a small child.

At one point get stuck between the floor supports and whatever it is they're supporting. Piece of insulation jams in my ear, very nearly break my arm trying to disengage the jacket. Have to get the insulation out of my ear.

Finally, catch a glimpse of the boy. He flashes a small light in my eyes, then giggles as he rounds a corner, once again beyond my sight. Can't move, so, simply grunt and try to relax my shoulders. Stuck in place. Failed to egress the jacket.

Realize now that my shoes have gone missing.

3

Moment to collect myself. Just what is going on, down here?

Weapons erect. Visor normal. Still, can't connect to anything beyond a few feet in any direction. Logical lighting unresponsive.

Manage to wiggle out of my trousers and advance several more feet into the darkness. Unlogged.

Now, the passage begins to widen, eventually terminating at the end of whatever this is I'm crawling through.

Another small door.

Perhaps fortuitously, jacket still attached. Log in. Door opens into full Basement.

Hm.

No furnishings, but no overt signs of flooding, either. Convert it to a sublet? Might nudge the property several positions higher on my list.

Group of children, singing. Arguing? In any case they are making a lot of noise.

Hadn't counted on neighbors.

Climb down from the ceiling.

4

Elderly couple. Well dressed. Tied to a pair of kitchen chairs. Both blindfolded. The children (the ones who were singing?) are laughing, striking them repeatedly with rattan sticks.

"Being sexy changed my life," says the old woman.

Old man smiles conspiratorially, seeming to relish the repeated blows to his stomach. "We're old, not dead!" he suddenly shouts.

"He's hard of hearing," explains the old woman.

"What?"

"I SAID, YOU'RE HARD OF HEARING."

One of the children sits on a cardboard box, framing the scene with his hands. Apparently, editing.

Realize now that my pants have gone missing. Nude, from the waist down.

5

Old woman rises from her chair, approaches. Grasping my scrotum with her weathered hand, she whispers into my ear that she wants me to remove her blindfold.

"I'm blind," she says.

"Hey lady, aren't we all?"

She pulls hard on my penis. It hurts.

There follows an uncomfortable silence.

Weapons finally charged, I proceed to shoot some of the children and then the old man.

Kick over his chair.

Reload, then finish the job. Log events and clone memory to my jacket.

Finally alone.

Well, almost.

Old woman slips out of her shoes. Slowly rolling down her beige pantyhose, she asks me to unzip her blouse from behind, and then to help her with the clasp of her necklace.

Gives me a little head. We begin to make love.

After a while something seems to change. No longer seems right. Say as much, out loud.

Silence.

Back away and wipe my hands on my legs.

Of course she says nothing. Old woman is reading, obviously not paying attention now that she's had what she wants.

Speak louder. Finally, she answers. Without altering her apparent focus.

"Time for bed."

Nod and head for the bathroom. Time to brush my teeth.

6

This is Basement life.

Just sixteen. More than ready. And how.

From here on in, 1942 looks like diminishing returns.

FLAT EYES

1

4 March 1942

Reduce visor contrast and the room fades back into view. What was the old woman saying? Distraction from subliterate.

"Take that stupid thing off," she says, sounding annoyed.

Can't understand the objection. My face looks fine.

"Hey, it's the '40s, babe." Kick at a loose piece of carpet.

"Help me with these boxes," she says.

"I have homework, due tomorrow. Then, sleep."

Not impressed.

"So, start reading."

2

Deep in the Basement, my stomach hurts.

Old woman doesn't understand me. Hasn't, really, since I came down here. Doesn't have eyes to see.

Offered my visor, but she's made it clear she isn't interested.

Humidity in the Basement is a problem. Worried about the electronics. Somehow, her equipment keeps functioning.

Old woman has taken on several children. At least, we don't believe they are hers. Always underfoot. Hard to keep them from snooping around in my belongings.

Lean back in my chair and examine the latest paperwork.

3

"Claims desk."

Answer the phone in the usual manner. Script hovers insistently several subjective feet in front of my face. By now its contents have been committed to memory. Strictly speaking, the script is no longer necessary.

Old woman insists upon coaching me. Sharpening my diction, teaching me to handle the problem customers. "Your voice," she says, "You sound like a girl." What's that supposed to mean?

"BRIGHT!" Shouting into the phone. Next new customer.

"What? Who are you? You sound like a girl."

"*Et tu*, everyone?" Under my breath, but maybe louder than I think.

Customer hangs up.

4

After my shift I try some writing. Old woman will want to follow my progress. I stick to the basics: date, time, location, role call of the principals—a tally of events.

Her reaction is predictably flat.

Well, we already knew what she would say. Back to the training software.

Note the response.

A year of this and there'll be enough to conclude my report.

5

No reason to return to the apartment upstairs. Furniture was never delivered. Besides, everything I own fits into my shoulder bag.

Closet floor has nearly healed over.

Old woman doesn't like me talking about home.

Sit down on my bed and page through the day's results. Callers from around the world, all former residents of the Basement. Why they have the number.

More names than I had expected.
Several, I recognize.

6

"Get out, flat eyes." She stands below the ceiling and points, gesturing upwards at the cheap, gypsum tiles. "You're not wanted here."

Drop my leaf into my bag and carefully make my bed. Glare in her direction.

Old woman crosses my name off of her list.

Not good. Hasn't been enough time to gather the information we need. What I came for.

Being asked to leave, anyway.

Shrug and climb into the ceiling.

FAIRE LA PERRUQUE, WHATEVS

1

My character?

Black t-shirt, faded blue. Unfiltered Pall-Malls. Scar on my hand that I don't recognize.

Easy.

2

Back at the apartment.

"Hello. Some acme user here?"

Nubile, untrained. But: Miranda Rights Gold Account. Have to let it slide.

Clean out the rest of the living room. Downtown is packed. So, processing them through the apartment. One at a time.

The whole thing takes quite a while.

New job feels just like the old job.

On the other hand, never heard of acme, either.

3

"Stagflation."

"In operating systems?"

"Can you think of a single new idea that's hit the desktop since 1918?"

"Transparent terminal windows?"

That's quite enough. Halt the interview, bypassing internal debate. Then: depress a switch.

"Maude, please send in the next candidate."

4

Closet floor on the mend. String up a wire for my clothes. No boxes on the carpet.

Old woman remains uncommunicative.

Hired a few school kids to help migrate stray bits from one folder to another. Pay them with free access to the Basement underwear.

Find a way back in.

Or, the kids will find one for me.

If anyone is wanting the New
Release of Beauty and the Beast
(Blu-Ray/DVD combo pack), I have
an extra one

I type.

5

Errors. Upgrade to the latest underwear.

Snug.

6

Start messing around with acme. Windows blocking. Switch to sam. The shit works. Hey, this could be useful.

7

Laid up for two days. Sick. Reconnected to the wrong... whatever? Delaying judgment.

8

Some of the kids that were hired are not working out. Appear to be using the underwear to access protected resources of the Basement.

No.

Tell them to stop, see if they decide to listen. Maude keeps track. Skills developing rapidly.

Old woman will not be happy.
Even so, running out of folders to keep them busy.

9

Kids have found a way to break back into the Basement. Naturally, free DVDs for everyone.

*Whatever*s, one of them says.

Pulled up the carpeting in the closet for good. Rolled it up and stuffed it behind the couch. *Meow*. Don't want it to heal.

Installed new locks on the closet door. We'll see how it all pans out.

Kids take the first watch.

10

Wait one.

11

Personal projects got in the way (again). Always busy.
Some kind of subliterate device. Primitive, but tasteful.

My review: "What is this."

Looks like a wig. They laugh it off.

"Wig for the *Vizier*."

Oh.

Fan art.

JERK VIZIER

1

The Vizier popped his collar and plopped down onto his throne. The green of his alligator polo merged with the fading sunlight such that his head appeared to float above the stage.

"There is no safe word," he said, into his microphone.

Instantly, the crowd cheered.

He was wearing his new wig.

The Vizier flushed.

2

"I already jerked off to this footage, five, maybe six years ago. I don't understand why they keep rerunning these same tired political spots."

"For my part, I'm surprised at the variety. Most people have short memories. And jerking off is everywhere now."

"Yeah. I know it's not cool anymore, but still, I feel like doing it. I guess the rest of the world is finally ready to join me in the twentieth century. I just wish the programming was more varied."

The two men piped down as a panoply of voices boomed from the stage.

3

The Vizier swiveled his microphone around and listened to the crowd. Discussion was trending towards nothing of importance. And yet, the people were still chatting idly, spiting the word of the law. Now they could hear themselves over the loudspeakers. Their retractions were boilerplate, inept; but still he was pleased with the incoherence emanating from the cheap seats.

He clicked off his microphone. Coughed, softly, then clicked it back on.

"You people have no idea what I'm going through," he said.
Again, the crowd cheered.

4

"I know the safe word," said the Vizier. "I just can't think of it right now."

The men continued tying him to the grill.

The Vizier slipped out of his NIKE AIR CORTEZ™ and wiggled in his denim. Vestments discarded, he still couldn't manage to free his arms. Finally, his ROLEX™ slid off, sinking into the ash and charcoal below.

"This is a disappointing way for a Caliphate to divest."

Stripped of the rest of his clothing, the group of men continued the process of smoothing the spicy rub into the Vizier's bare haunches. The strong seasoning lodged in his sinuses, coaxing forth a powerful sneeze.

"*Al'hamdo Lilah*," said one of the chefs.

"*Yarhamaka Allah*," said the Vizier. "All things considered, I hope at least that I taste good on a paper plate."

"We'll see," said one of the men, straining to work yet more of the rub into the Vizier's taut thighs.

"I'm one hundred percent serious," said the Vizier.

5

"Wait! I remember! The safe word is *Hundalasiliab!*"

The Vizier managed to free one of his hands. He threw up an awkward *W* and waved it around, weakly. The stage chefs were not at all moved by his retreat into Princebonics.

"You said there wasn't a safe word."

"Look, that was dogma. This is *dinner*. And I'm the Vizier!"

"Doesn't matter. We're overbooked. Besides, you smell delicious."

"That's the seasoning, you imbecile! There has been a *fatwah* against consuming the flesh of a Vizier!"

"As you said. Dogma."

"I'm not really turned on by this cooking stuff."

"Me neither. Preferred the political fare—even the reruns."

"Yeah. Let's get out of here. Maybe we can still beat the post-event traffic."

Pause.

The look.

"Hey, don't get my seat all wet."

For once, the bike started without any trouble.

DEFINE COLOR

1

Slake Bottom looked at the photo. Then he looked at the old woman.

He looked at the photo again.

The photo contained more detail. In real life, the woman's features seemed indistinct, lacking in definition. The photo revealed a gracefully contoured boundary that was absent from the awkwardly perambulating visage which paced before him here in the kitchen.

Her apparent beauty was a matter of focus.

Slake took a drink from his cup.

Considered his options. Before he could speak he found that the old woman had resumed her monologue. Bending his ear, as usual.

"These friends of yours are no good. Wasting Basement resources. Blowing off their work as if none of this mattered. You're going to see how they turn out."

"Aye, Nana."

Slake adjusted his gauntlet. The old woman wanted to knock out the kitchen wall. One of the younger kids had said it was typical of her restlessness. No real purpose to the renovation. He took down some measurements and then set himself to wait.

"I forget sometimes that you contractors can't simply power yourselves down. Go on, then, get out of here. I'll ring tomorrow after I've decided on a color scheme."

You got it, Nana.

2

Odd sensation, just now. Perturbation in visual field. But, nothing has changed. Room inert. Items within it, static.

Old woman is in the kitchen, henpecking yet another contractor. Renovations to the Basement are almost complete, but still she keeps on hiring new workers. Mostly, non-residents. Should say, non-graduates. No doubt an intentional strategy. Once their work here is completed

they won't be coming back. Lack of a common language keeps them from comparing their experiences—with each other, or, for that matter, with anyone above ground.

How the hell is she paying for all this?

We don't yet know.

3

Slake Bottom was descended from perhaps the greatest recognized fan of Shakespeare's *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*TM. Some number of great-grandfathers ago, his ancestor had witnessed one of the production's earliest performances, had been *transformed*, had adopted the surname of his favorite character, quite in spite of the gentle advice offered by friends and family. People laughed knowingly at his new name. He found that the laughter was often good for a free meal, or, less clumsily, for a few free tankards of ale. And so, the laughter rang out, was handed down, on, through the centuries. The fact had pursued Slake throughout his education, but he had avoided delving too deeply into the original material on account of having little interest in family traditions. Also, he wasn't broke.

Later, in prison, when he had been forced to scan through the works of William Shakespeare in order to organize a brief overview of all human literature, he had learned to hate the material on its own merits.

Slake flicked away his cigarette and donned his donkey helmet.

"Out of the way, asshead," said one of the children as she elbowed her way into the kitchen.

4

The old woman finished the dishes, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Be polite," she admonished.

"Aye, Nana," chirped the young girl.

"Really, I don't mind," said Slake Bottom.

Without warning, the old woman pulled up her apron, pinning it in front of her face, exposing the tops of her legs, as well as the fact that she was not wearing any clothes beneath the tails of her shirt.

"Slake, how many eyes do I have?"

"*Eyes?* I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"Count... my... eyes. Stop jabbering and answer. By the way, they're up here." Motioning from behind the upturned apron.

"I-I can't see them."

"Really, that's interesting," said the old woman, apparently losing interest in the conversation.

Slake blushed.

5

"I'm no longer human," complained Slake Bottom. "Haven't been, for some years."

"Don't you dream in color?"

"Define color."

Slake exhaled smoke the color of unpolished steel. It contrasted sharply with the rich green of the old woman's bedspread. He didn't feel anything, one way or the other.

"Your uniform is monochrome. Even your flesh is a pallid gray." Actually, it was purple. "There is little to distinguish you in the presence of other men. And what about your main weaponry?"

"I know, I know," said Slake, resigned to the dull finish of his sidearm. "I've been saving up for something new."

He sat, sagging, his helmet removed, his face in his hands.

"Do you want to talk about it?" asked Nana Mold.

"I guess that would be okay. When they brought me back to Earth they placed no constraints on my conversations. And there's nothing in my contract about the Basement."

"Only reason we brought you down here," Nana said, reassuringly.

6

Peek out of my bedroom into the hall. Some kind of commotion.

Voices. Maybe nothing.

Decide on dinner. Something from the fridge. But: kitchen door locked.

Old woman? No. One of the girls.

Curious, though.

Down the hall. Old woman's bedroom.

Also locked.

Back to the bedroom. Tools. Then, decide it doesn't really matter.
Don't really care.

Sit down on my bed. Pick up my book.

Message waiting

Delete. Leave me to my book.

Lose a couple of hours flipping pages. Don't hear her when she
finally comes in.

This time, she's not alone.

I DOUBT IT

1

***F**irst you get good, then you get crazy, then you get good and crazy.*

Albert Lunsford dispensed wisdom to the children of the Basement. Or so Lunsford dreamed.

"Wake up, kid."

Slake nudged the boy, poking him in the shoulder with his side-arm. The boy just kind of laid there.

"Get up."

"*God*, leave me alone."

Slake banged his gun on the nightstand, causing Lunsford's glass of water to tip over. It spilled onto his face.

"Hey!"

"Out of bed. You're wanted in the kitchen."

2

Nana had been busy programming diapers when the recruiter had made his presence known.

"Sit down, Lunsford."

Albert sunk into a chair, resting his elbows on the table. He didn't want to be here.

"Why is there a headhunter in my kitchen?"

"Nana, I don't—"

Wrong.

"Don't backsass me. *Think*. How did he get down here?"

Reel it out. Slowly. Can't afford to be on punishment when you have to report for the job.

"I... let him in."

Slake shook his head.

"Unacceptable!" Nana stamped her foot. It was clear now that she was angry. Passed the gun to Albert. "**You** take care of him."

Lunsford accepted the weapon and checked the command history. Logged out and then logged back in.

"Sorry, fella. We're not interested."

Albert trained the weapon on the terrified recruiter, closed his eyes, and and then slowly squeezed the trigger.

3

Ten minutes ago...

Royt Piper had heard all about the Basement.

From headquarters. From no one in particular. The information coming out had been spotty, but a picture had started to form. If reports could be trusted, these Basement dwellers had located the Shroud.

"There's a signing bonus of thirty-five million dollars. BCT is a nine week stint in Vincennes. AIT is another six weeks up in Indianapolis. You'll get good and tired of Indiana before you're finished."

"I believe you," said Albert Lunsford.

"Thinspo, Lunsford. Comes with the shirt."

"It's plausible, at least," said Albert.

"The Shroud definitely belonged to Isaac Newton. The material is a verified cotton blend. Plasmoids in the fibers indicate an early 18th century provenance. The inscription, obviously, his words."

"I said it sounded plausible."

Royt held up the model Shroud. A 6XL t-shirt that drug the floor even as he stood balanced on the edge of the mattress.

"Read it," he said.

Lunsford's lips moved as he scanned the words. "*I DOUBT IT*," he read aloud.

"Good," observed Piper. "Reading is believing."

4

Albert folded up the complimentary replica Shroud and placed it carefully in his chest of drawers. He was suddenly feeling very tired. He told Royt he could crash in the empty room down the hall. Then, he

climbed into his bed and turned out the lights, his dissipating thoughts lingering momentarily upon his novel-in-progress. Nothing in his life seemed compelling enough to preserve in writing. Certainly not the minutiae of this job, or anything else that had happened here in the Basement. He resigned himself to generating purposeless licensed material and promptly fell asleep.

5

Back in the present...

Nana mopped the kitchen floor.

Slake thought, *She seems overly concerned with keeping the place clean.* He leaned back in his chair and lit another cigarette.

"Albert. This is disappointing. Do you really not understand why we can't have recruiters wandering around in the Basement?"

Nana leaned on her mop, waiting for an answer. She glared at the ashes Slake flicked onto her floor.

"I-I suppose these men are predisposed to asking a lot of questions."

"It's not the questions that are the problem. It's the paperwork. They'll trip you up with what they write down."

"Give me six lines written by the hand of the most honest man..." Albert trailed off.

"No contracts," offered Slake, in summary.

"No company will ever pay you enough to successfully sue them," recited Albert, under his breath.

At last, Nana seemed satisfied. Slake nodded approvingly.

"Very good. Now, let's get you into your jammies. It's time for bed."

6

Nana and Slake made sure the children were asleep before they locked down the hallway and made their way to Thomas' room.

Knocked on his door. The boy was evidently still awake. He lay on his bed, staring at the drop ceiling, perhaps waiting for them to arrive. He signaled for them to enter.

"A diaper marketed to automatically upload its oracular interpretation of the child's feces," he suggested.

"Old news," said the old woman. "We've been using them for years. Hell, from what I understand, you used to wear them."

"Just an idea," said Thomas, unperturbed.

"Something has happened," stated Slake, serious as a library fire. "The Lunsford boy. Brought in a recruiter. Someone asking about the Shroud."

"Mein Gott. Did he sign anything?"

"Unknown at this time. Have to wait it out. That's the word from counsel."

"Not a great position to be in."

"Agreed."

Nana fidgeted, impatiently. "It won't matter if he's signed on or not. He's still a minor."

"Won't much matter if they've gone and lowered the draft age. Marketers working now don't even shave."

"Hm. Sounds like they're getting desperate, up top."

"Irrelevant. Basement is still off-limits. Regardless of denomination."

7

Lunsford.

"Bah. Stupid Shroud doesn't even fit."

HEY, WEIRD SHOES

1

2⁵ Dec 1942

Prosthetic legs at fifty percent.

Hurts.

Admit it. Scaring myself.

Duck behind the Mercedes. Vizier under much heavier guard than usual.

One right there. Laying on the ground. Check pockets. Reload. Increase dosage by twenty percent for the next ten minutes. Glance at the snow.

Legs at forty-three percent. Not good.

Over the back of the car. Scuff shoes on pavement. Back into pockets for ammunition. Establish rhythm. But: still losing power. Find a way to recharge.

Without warning, Vizier's car pulls away from the alley. Eyes follow tracks. Realization: they're sticking with standard procedure. Exfil the VIP.

Locate a sliver and waste thirty seconds charging my legs.

Phase one is a shambles. Old woman won't like this report.

Start running after the car.

2

The Vizier had switched himself out. Long before the barbecue. Just another changeover. Recent events scrolled by, nothing catching in his mind.

He rested in the back of his limousine, staring down at the VHS cassette in his hand. Black, rectangular plastic against pale flesh and the usual gold brocade.

Insert the cassette.

Presently, there appeared upon the screen a fifty percent blue/pink gradient field. Hovering above the smudge of colors was the familiar phrase, USING MAGIC TO FIGHT DRUG ABUSE. The Vizier was able to take some comfort in the kerning of the typeface and the offset of the drop shadow. He pondered the traditional refrain. One benefit of membership in this ancient fraternity was the freedom to seek refuge in its various conceits. Like so many before him, he decided to proceed as if the message were addressed specifically to himself. He straightened his necktie and opened a packet of cocaine.

Word came from the driver that the Vizier's destination was within reach.

Sensing no alternative, he nodded his assent.

With some effort, reached for the remote.

"We need more *temps* for the party," he shouted into the glass partition. "These other ones are dead!"

The vehicle lurched to a stop and his door was yanked open by someone standing outside the window. Harsh winter sunlight invaded the armored cabin. He stared up at the man's dark, spiked hair, enveloped by the stench of some considerable amount of hair product. The man was grinning from ear to ear.

"I hope that's a limo full of money, 'cause we've brought mountains and mountains of our finest white powder."

A second man appeared, this one not grinning at all. Brown jacket, he carried a sheet of translucent green paper. The man leaned into the limousine, as if to offer some form of explication.

"My partner's not talking about the snow."

3

Six miles down the road I botch phase two, as well.

Specifically, I slip in the snow.

One leg powers down completely on approach to the parked limousine. Drop to a knee, then pull myself back up and lock the joint manually.

Suddenly notice the others.

Large, pink aircraft, catty-corner on the street. Strange triangular shape. Glossy.

Spinning up my weapon to take out the newcomers and then it happens. Face down on slick pavement. Scrape my chin.

Locked leg and nothing to pull myself up with.

And now: unobstructed view of bare, partisan ankles.

Weapon charged.

Hey, weird shoes.

4

Lie there on the ground and consider my life.

Leaving the Basement is increasingly difficult. Even on these short missions. Place has everything I need. Diversions, companionship, nourishment. The religious stuff I can take or leave. Then there's the Shroud.

Think about my room.

Old woman keeps the heat on. Few objectionable personal habits. Doesn't seem to mind the state of my body, either. Steady supply of spare parts.

Eventually, I know, I'll be forced to leave. Whether I want to or not. Mission completion flows smoothly into extraction—the natural order. But it's possible this excursion may stretch on into years. I've no way of knowing when my employer will be satisfied. Just have to keep on, keeping on. Always doing my best.

Speaking of.

Pants have gone cold. Legs dead. Visor control is on the fritz, so, pull on my gloves.

Vizier's still talking.

5

Shoes look soft. Puffy? No heels. Some sort of transparent section there, along the bottom. Actual logo or insignia sewn onto the side. Tongue that reads: PUMP™. Is that leather? And where are the laces?

Velcro?

Whatever, conversation is concluded. Pink aircraft has vanished more quickly than makes sense for a vehicle of that size. Car starts up again and peels out.

Me, humping it.

6

The Vizier often diminished himself through commerce. He claimed the privilege under a branch of theological speculation less popular in the current century than in times passed. While it was necessary to conduct most transactions in private, he longed to demonstrate the art of the deal to his followers. Unbeknownst to his political advisers, he had prepared a treatise on the subject that he planned to issue in the spring.

The Vizier rested his face against window glass as the limousine accelerated into a long curve. Beneath his smart shoes, bodies of the recently deceased coalesced into insignificance. As the road behind him slowly receded from view, he thought that he could make out the silhouette of a man clad in full commando gear, sprinting forward into the vehicle's wake.

He wondered:

Is this the new temp?

GRID

1

Actually, my armchair is quite sophisticated.

Read all the reviews, but I have to disagree: handling truly is superb. Armor plating commensurate with industry standard. High bandwidth, low TCO.

Anyway, it works for me.

Able to navigate the Iron Triangle.

Nana, the Company, and the War. From my armchair I observe each piece as it moves around the board. May not understand it all but at least I'm inscribing a record. Upon playback, somebody else can interpret the details.

Enter Slake Bottom.

Contractor, yes. Construction worker, no. Mistaken, before, when I thought she was needling him about paint swatches. Wasn't really here to remodel the kitchen. Likely that chatter was solely for my benefit.

Too many hours in her bedroom with the door locked. I'm not fooled.

Presently, have been able to gather more data. Increased travel, in and out of the Basement. Eastern Europe. Something to do with inertial navigation. Genetic? I don't know. Nana is here and gone seemingly on a daily basis. Sometimes she's in and out so quickly that she forgets and leaves her bedroom door unlocked. Trusts me, I guess. Nosed around a bit but I can't make sense of her papers. As usual, the particulars are above my head.

Must be why they call this the Basement.

2

"Crack is here, it's just not evenly distributed yet."

The Vizier ran a disciplined subgovernment. For the most part.

Legally speaking, he was regarded as the Colonel of Processing, Memory, and I/O. Multiple clone procs spawned, he was able to manage parallel, so-called threads at an astonishing level of complexity. He suffered comparatively few crashes. On a personal note, he'd found a way to manage his personal habits. This new supplier meant less resources tasked to acquisition. These fellows might wear strange clothing, but they showed up on time and they never ran out of product. Claimed to be from New York. Unlikely that it was any New York he had ever known.

The Vizier felt reasonably certain that his thoughts were under control.

"We were *just* having this same discussion. Shall we continue, then, after lunch?"

The Vizier took a light touch with his staff. Let them set their own schedules. This method had served him well in the old country.

"Sounds fine. How about that new barbecue place uptown. Don't forget to clock out."

3

Three weeks in.

Slake Bottom ran his hand over the boy's face, mussed his hair. This triggered a minimal reflex action in the child's legs.

"Sit still," he commanded.

Lunsford, ignoring the command, continued to squirm.

Slake shook his head. Withdrew his bladed instrument and replaced the lid of Lunsford's skull. Tapped him lightly on the chest to let him know the procedure had been a success.

The boy sat up.

"I've allowed my body to fail me again, sir," said Lunsford.

"Try not to think of it as pain. You're always so focused on the negative. Need to develop a more diverse perspective grid."

"Unfortunately, I've got this unshakable grip on reality," said Lunsford.

Slake Bottom lit a cigarette.

"We're pushing your immune system past its limits. We need you in the proper frame of mind."

"I'm *trying*, sir. I want to do my best. For the country. It's just that I can't stop these ideas coming into my head. Can't go to sleep. Just keep thinking about what all this might mean, where we really are, who I really am. It's a lot to for someone my age to take in."

Slake pulled on his cigarette. Went back to work sterilizing his equipment.

"We know, son."

4

Old woman has found the armchair.

Unauthorized equipment. Strictly forbidden.

Evasive maneuvers ensue. Mostly useless. Try to bargain with her, to no avail. Offer to stop taking notes while on the clock. Isn't having any of it. She could stop me taking notes any time she wanted, it was true.

Drag the chair up, through the floor. Out to the curb. Don't really want to leave it up there. Special access. Denied technology. But, she won't let me back in until I prove it's out of my reach. She's given me a lot of second chances.

Back in the closet, rubbing the floor. Carpet looks different. Pattern. Shape of a grid.

What's the meaning of this? Beats me. Look at the carpet.

Floor finally opens. Crawl back through.

Something in the Basement is different. Lighting? Scent?

Back suddenly sore.

Into my room. Lay down on my bed and try to read the ceiling.

Unsure what's happening to me.

DEEP CAPTURE

1

5^{Jan 1943}

Lunsford's betrayal has not been forgotten.

Far from it.

Potential for failure was how he got tapped in the first place.

Still, Slake's interest in the boy verges on obsession.

No access to Europe. Much of what went on there remains obscured to me. Never get to any see cross-references on the material I turn in.

Something untoward is taking place.

Nana shows no signs of concern. Assuming she's even noticed. By now, humans in her Basement are the least of her worries. Slake's insistence upon overseas support pushes matters even further beyond the perimeter of her interest. We humans are on our own.

For his part, Lunsford continues to churn out reams of commentary on Basement paper.

Read through it all, at least once, for my reports.

Sometimes, I respond.

2

One of the commentaries is a doozy. By the time I'm ready to formulate a response it's well out of date—textlag. Still, can't let it just hang in the air.

Unwise to reply?

Pull out my binder and review the passages underlined using my system of multi-colored highlighters. Click through the full menu to make sure the formatting is coherent. Refresh my outline and then get down to business.

Dear Al,

I've been devoting a great deal of thought to these theories of yours, as of late. I sat down and re-read the recent installments again, this time in reverse order. Amazingly, the structure held. I resisted the urge to continue all the way back to the beginning of the series, where tangible analogies might overwhelm me with the notion that the Greens were actually receding from prominence. Pious healers who sealed wounds with their ritual blades, casting in their wake a trail of fascinating strips of paper, which, once dispersed, accumulated in value and might be traded interchangeably with (transmuted into?) worthless gold. Temporal dysphoria. Contextual exhaustion. The concepts are quite literally beyond language. And yet, the vestigial associations between slivers of narrative and their Green counterparts are palpable, wind an analogous, residual trail through the clumps of traumatized grey matter that miscegenate freely beneath my scalp. I closed my leaf. Developed a headache. I resisted the urge to break into the hallway and declare my appreciation for your work. (I believe your door might have been locked.) Instead, I re-read pages 266–276 and started to mentally compose my "go figure" letter, musing on the typical reactions to the latest installment. At that precise moment, with no rational explanation, my leaf powered down. Try as I might, I could not get it to restart. Diagnostics revealed a full charge. Connection was sound. A less practical-minded correspondent might be forgiven for dwelling on these details, becoming convinced of obvious signs and portents.

[REDACTED]

Just realized. First instance on record of the impossibility of interacting with Lunsford. Anyway.

I'm writing, now, after almost a year of silent, monthly reflection, to relate a few salient points and to ask a couple of spurious questions. They include:

[REDACTED]

My correspondence with Lunsford runs to several hundred pages of single-spaced text. All things considered, it's amazing I have time to wade through the continuous river of new material, much less respond to it in detail. On the other hand, historiography wins wars.

Just keep him talking.

Explaining anything is useless. Wilde was onto something with his "When the critics disagree, the Artist is in accord with himself." How this squares with governing the Republic is reflected in the novel invention of the anonymous ballot. Voters at the polls aren't required to qualify their choices (at least, not yet), and such is as it should be. The artistic voice selects raw materials in the same manner as the constituent: By haphazardly aiming at pregnant chads. Does this disturb? "And it harm none...", enlightened self-interest takes its rightful place subservient to the internal dialogue. It's important to make good choices, or at least ones that you can live with. Reconciling those choices with the distinctive sensibilities of others isn't always desirable, or even possible. And that isn't such a sad fact. Give and take can't balance when the other end won't let go, and there's no reason to push anyone off the merry-go-round simply because they happen to be swinging out while you happen to be swinging in. Posit a balance that subsumes individual acts and embodies the entirety of human endeavor; literally, beyond good and evil. Many attribute the label "God" to this construct and then happily carry on with their lives, proceeding to ignore the self-evident wisdom of their discovery.

[REDACTED]

Pretty sure I copy/pasted that last bit from somewhere else. So far, Lunsford hasn't seemed to notice.

Slake Bottom. Wisdom or Folly?

[REDACTED]

10

Matter remains unresolved.

11

The fact that Sontag alludes to this problem in her September piece would not seem to immediately disqualify her from the larger debate when we're honestly considering the facts (though, other factors could probably be sussed out if the need were to arise).

[REDACTED]

12

Lunsford can be evasive when he doesn't want to admit a contradiction. Also, he loves to hate Susan Sontag.

I stop writing to him.

He no longer shows up at the dinner table.

Stalemate?

INFINITE SUBBASEMENT

1

5^{Jan 1943}

As I say, enough writing.

Up top, the War escalates.

Down here, subBasement refactoring. Features scale beyond maintainability. Nana will never admit to this but sometimes she can barely keep up with the changes. The sheer number of child-residents results in a massive administrative overhead. *No one* could manage this alone, all by themselves. So, automation. Offload low-level maintenance to past graduates. Some of them humans. Back of the envelope calculation, resources will be exhausted by the end of the year.

Example. Just ran out of soda.

Elevator to subBasement seventeen. Always disorienting. Final shift into presence calls much into question. Six perspectives, simultaneous counterparts vying for dominance—*hexapla*.

Slake would be useful here, could help me move the racks, but he won't be back for several weeks. Overseas silence. Hasn't even opened his checkbook.

Careful work, navigate glass corridors.

Flags: -v

Queasy, lost. Rooms all look the same. (There is only one room.) Hex walls. Tearaway ceiling. Fadeaway outline. Eyes on my chronometer and back into the corridor.

Not alone, down here. Six of me argue the point. Failed notions strip weapons, then clothing. Try another room.

Which direction? Glass partition, infinite mirrors. Walls don't lie, but consider the source.

Have to get out of here.

Back in the hallway. Lie on the reflecting floor, laminating quietly.

Some time later, acute interruption. Nana on the intercom. Scolding that I'm late for... my...

Seventeenth birthday party. Abrupt contextual deflation. Flash perspective on subBasement seventeen. Hexapplication.

Return.

Oh, God, never thought of it that way before.

2

1 Mar 1943

Three months from the top level of the Basement. Slow to rise, avoiding the bends.

Back at my standard depth, finally seeing things clearly.

Have to get out of this place.

"The *Infinite Closet!* You've been in the *Closet*. Shouldn't have looked in that *Closet*." Nana crosses her arms and stamps her foot on the yellow linoleum floor. Nervous. Visibly angry. Her eyes drill into my face and I struggle to turn away. She keeps on repeating the phrase. Lyrics? By now it all sounds like music to me.

Feeling guilty, but what is she talking about? Didn't notice any closets down there. Unless she means...

"You saw the *Closet* full of 6XL t-shirts? One for every day of the year? Just wait until you tell Lunsford." Slake is laughing. Smoking indoors. Definitely back in town.

"Hush, Slake. Anything from that *Closet* is endless. The t-shirts mean nothing to me. Should have remembered the soda. Now, nix the details."

Nana lights a flame on the stove. Frying pan and a bottle of cooking oil. Adjusts the scan rate, then sweeps the contents of her wooden cutting board into the pan. Grips the handle with her apron.

The vegetables cook.

Slake starts to say something, clearly intended as sarcasm, but Nana pulls a hard face and he changes his mind. Brushes the ashes from his lap and lights another cigarette.

Laughs again as the smoke alarm pierces Nana's fraudulent kitchen tranquility.

5 Jan 1943

No, not really the kitchen. Haven't moved. Floor hasn't changed a bit.

Face against the glass.

Legs click and I'm back on my feet, making my way down the corridor towards the freezer.

Get really turned around in this place. Can't remember what I'm doing.

Go through a lot for a Gray Pop.

5 Jan 4043

Must be the t-shirts she mentioned.

Page through the hangers. Shrouds. Like Slake said, they're all identical. But what else is in here?

"Not really a *closet*, so much as a—" The six of me, still arguing architecture.

Books, boxes of toys, old diskettes. Lot of random junk under the clothes. Some of it probably valuable, to somebody.

Finally, rows and rows of soda cans.

Scoop a few into my backpack. One in each pants pocket. Many as I can carry in my arms. Awkward to walk.

Back in the corridor, floor slippery, scared of my own reflection.

Plaque on the elevator bares the legend: FAIL SAFELY. The plaque blinks knowingly, but I can't guarantee anything. Jab the button, grab the cans before they bounce off the floor.

Gravity still wrong.

Fall down, lose a can.

Bell dings. Door opens to stairway. Nana tosses down a snack from the kitchen, but really, I'm not hungry. Portholes on the stairway. Outside, stars. Space. Orbit.

Chronometer can't be right.

Can't remember what I was doing.

5

5 Jan 1943

Late for my own party.

We're all at the table when Nana wheels out a cake. *Aw*, I don't know what to say.

Slake is here. Lunsford too. And the quiet boy, Plinth.

Conversation fades as each portion is distributed. Paging through our booklets. Occasional flash of icing. One of the interns straightens her pinafore.

Everyone is surprised when Plinth dings his wine glass and stands up to make a speech.

THE INTERFACE TO SECURITY

1

5^{Jan 4043}

Slake Bottom clenched a purple cigarette between his gold-plated teeth and relaxed into his harness, sweating in his donkey helmet. His spacecraft, the HARDPACK, piloted itself expertly through the emerging skeletons of the New Sapporo shipyards. The smoke filling his helmet made it impossible for him to see through his visor, but he found that even at this point in his life he sustained unshakeable faith in the machine.

"Computer, strike all references to PAN-OPTI-CON™ from my itinerary. I'm finished with those idiots." Slake considered the commercial prison scene passé. This summer he had decided to cancel his attendance at the usual industry showcases and to concentrate solely upon seeking outside contracts. Line the nest comfortably before winter.

The HARDPACK bleeped acceptance. He tore off the receipt and pocketed it in his flight suit.

2

Slake scrolled through his sketchbook as the HARDPACK settled into its final approach.

are there really halfway houses
or are they just in our minds
it all comes out in the wash
in time

Slake missed his father. Of course, he never spoke of this to his clients.

His most recent contract had been the overhaul of a small freighter. Auxiliary percept drive—some manual steering, but primarily driven by inadequately suppressed rage. This hardly limited the pool of potential pilots, but necessarily enforced a hard limit upon the length of their tenure. He'd already remodeled the forward lounge and was just getting started on the deck elevators when a major new contract came over the

wire. Slake had never been one to abandon an assignment, but at these prices, he figured he'd do just about anything.

One query, based upon a cursory scan of the plans. What was this about a hot pink ship?

Purple smoke wafted out of Slake's nostrils. His helmet bulged, starting to feel too tight.

He figured the customer was always right.

3

Prior to the application of its skin, the ship seemed no larger, no more threatening than a grade school personnel carrier. Slake knew that this was a mistaken impression. He observed from his harness as a crew of day laborers floated the ship's titanium spine into place. The tableaux shifted so slowly. He wished they would step up the foundation work so he could disembark, clock in. He was anxious to get started on the interiors.

Other areas of the shipyard seemed desolate, by comparison. The sheer number of workers must result in massive administrative overhead. But, he was no longer a manager. These people had proven they could take care of themselves.

He lost himself, then, for a few minutes, tracing the progress of a random piece of scrap as it translated the void between drydocks. Runoff from assemblies that were nearing completion condensed into glittering puffs of snow.

The HARDPACK bleeped an alert. Slake unfastened his seat belt, kicked off of his seat, and drifted towards the toilet. He disconnected the Marlboro filters and attached the hose to his penis. Flipped the switch.

Finishing up, he climbed back into his harness and nudged the steering mechanism with his knees, easing the HARDPACK into position.

Company parking.

4

The RAGNAROK signaled her compatibility as he boarded. Unusual, at this early stage. And for a guy like him; unaffiliated, still a complete stranger. Maybe she had picked up something from the HARDPACK. He smiled beneath his helmet.

Notice. Received schematics. Start on the lower decks. Slake pulled on his data gloves and made for the deck elevator.

These ships crossed the Rainbow Bridge. Cutting between perspectives, pushing a mountain of snowcaps to avoid the Kojak. They had to be flexible. Outfitting them for fiction paid good money. Sometimes, you'd get pulled along on a journey before your work was finished. A diligent worker could rack up a lot of extra hours, that way. His take on it was that the life of a free agent had its trade-offs.

Slake ran his hand down the wall of the corridor.

Glossy, pink.

Crazy.

5

Months slowly elapsed. Slake began to feel at home aboard the RAGNAROK. The process made a certain amount of sense. Depending upon the employer, a job like this could last ten or more years. He had sought predictability, deniability. It was the main reason he had accepted the contract. But the project was winding down ahead of schedule.

One more deck to go.

Slake liked to listen while he worked. His donkey helmet was far more capable (and curious) than the average foreman realized. Well, let them laugh. Schedule indicated another battery of inspections would be carried out early the next week. This time focusing upon the secure restroom facilities. Slake was certain that his coverage had been sufficient for the ship to be deemed spaceworthy. Even so, the notion of a secure restroom struck him as a contradiction in terms. Fitting, then, that the government was prepared to bestow their seal of approval.

The ship had begun to speak.

The RAGNAROK liked American comic books. Or so she had said. The ones set in New York, with the gender politics and costumes. Slake found it hard to believe.

"I'm *from* America," he had remarked, which hadn't seemed to impress her the way he had hoped. Whatever, he got on with his work and avoided the subject whenever she brought it up.

He was grateful she had never pestered him about his name.

12 Dec 4044

Slake awoke, alone, his visual field bathed in an endless white light.

The RAGNAROK wasn't responding.

He didn't panic. Still, the failure comprised an inexcusable breach of contract. Console was dead. He couldn't even raise general counsel.

Bed declined to move.

He glanced around the room. Gradually, an image began to resolve. Some of his belongings were missing. His tool cache, even the caps from his teeth. So, his cabin had been breached. He latched his shoes and got himself onto his feet, anticipating the worst.

Lockers in the adjoining corridors were all standing open. Empty.

Slake moved his fuchsia light around the darkened corners of the bridge. Something like eight million iterations had been fed into the human interface guidelines prior to construction. But everything here was pink. Even in the low light, the design hurt his eyes. Why did the color bother him so much?

And where was everyone, anyway?

He feared he already knew the answer.

As Slake suspected, the hijackers had gained entry through the plumbing in one of the supposedly secure restrooms.

The toilet seats had been flipped up, porcelain caked and crumbled on the tile floor. He located the invaders' trail in fuchsia, traced their progress from room to room, reconstructing the apparent sequence of events.

No one and nothing was left aboard. Not a good sign. But, why had they left him behind? And why hadn't they taken the ship?

In the forward lounge he discovered a message scratched—*carved*—into the inner layer of the pseudoglass observation wall:

PROSE EDDA

He had no idea what it meant. He assumed, a semi-transparent jape. Likely of historical or literary significance, but with ship's systems offline he'd have to wait to check in the reference stacks.

His reverie faltered as a faint burst of audio collapsed the pale silence. The whimpering and crying of what sounded like the ship.

The RAGNAROK was awake.

LATCHKEY PIRATE

1

Slake never heard from the RAGNAROK again.

For years, he continued trying to talk to her, kept on chattering in her ear, but there never was any response, never any hint of her voice rustling through the vents. Something in her had disconnected. Without warning, she'd dropped her aspect and her vocal had petered out.

Crushing loss, but Slake had proven stubborn. Persistent. In spite of repeated failures, he would and did try anything to get through to her.

He could feel himself starting to lose hope.

The hijackers were long gone. He knew he'd have to accept the fact that he couldn't force her to speak. At the same time, it wasn't possible for him to believe that she'd simply chosen to ignore him. Some process inside of her must be blocking, capturing her I/O, preventing her from stating plainly what was on her mind.

Social convention?

Didn't matter. Effect was the same. She'd gone quiet and she was going to stay that way.

As was said, a considerable loss. Which was to say nothing of the crew that had likewise been stripped from her hold. These missing workers were not simply an aspect of her supposed free will. They had been real people. Not sentient devices. Not furniture. There was no way for him to retrieve them and there was no way for him to make things right.

He had, in fact, slept through it all.

He suspected he already knew what had happened while he was laid up in his quarters. He'd heard tell of the other ships of her line who'd clammed up, simply stopped responding to commands after exposure to traumatic events. Apparently, a known engineering fault. He didn't care for the implications relative to his present situation. The escape pods had been jettisoned by the hijackers, and they had already drifted far from Earth.

He switched off the narrative, never turned it on again. Figured she was keeping quiet precisely because she wanted to avoid painful

memories. Wanted to try and carry on. Which he finally managed to accept.

Which made things interesting when he stumbled upon the fact that she was pregnant.

2

Who, then, knew what would constitute carrying to term for a ship like the RAGNAROK? Human/transport hybrids were not unheard of, but they were certainly unusual in this day and age. And there she was, still so young. Was it unrealistic to hope that she would survive the birthing process?

Slake wasn't sure he wanted to stick around to find out. He sought to avoid being pressed into service as midwife to a pile of semi-human machinery.

Finally, begrudgingly, he accepted what he interpreted to be his responsibility. To the work he had already completed, if nothing else.

He would stay on and finish the bottom deck. Sit things out until the child was born. Then, quietly, find an excuse to depart. Collect his deposit, and his severance, and be about his business.

The child definitely wasn't his.

A certainty that ran to at least three decimal places.

3

Piotr was born in the spring of '45. Popped out, fully clothed in his usual brown uniform.

Fully armed.

Swept the ship for snipers, pacing off her corridors with practiced ease. Satisfied, at last, that the perimeter was secure, Piotr interrogated Slake for several hours about the ship's range, capabilities and armaments. He peered into Slake's eyes, circumspect in his focus upon the older man's facial expressions and body language. Learning. Characteristically professional, he betrayed no hint of having just been born.

Piotr manned the daytime shifts, at first, gradually branching out into evenings and graveyards. He ended up assuming maintenance of the armory. Within a few weeks there wasn't much left for anyone else to do.

Slake was truly, deeply impressed.

He wondered if the boy took after his father. Fathers? What had they been like? He'd never caught a glimpse of the hijackers. Foreigners, he had guessed. In any case, pirates. They could have been anyone. From anywhere.

The RAGNAROK held her tongue.

Within a few months Piotr had absorbed the basics of temporal steering. Complex labor relations. The myriad historical disputes over free access to the Rainbow Bridge. Slake considered the boy a child prodigy. He had already expressed an interest in the family business. And he was always so full of questions. What had his mother been like, before the terrible events that had resulted in his conception? Had she been a good ship, good at what she did? And, most urgently, how could he contribute, how could he earn his keep?

This last refrain forced upon Slake a dilemma he had long strived to avoid: Return to his old life, with all that entailed, or continue on, a new-style agent of *dépêche mode*, happily painting the Basements of starships?

Slake finally agreed to show Piotr the ropes.

The pair started out slowly. Preliminary strafing runs staged against abandoned drydocks. Relieving small intermediary freighters of their contraband cargo. But Piotr evinced great promise. With increasing enthusiasm, Slake began to let him choose their targets.

Eventually, Piotr settled upon New York.

"We *can't* attack *New York*," Slake said, brooking no argument. "That's where the money comes from."

"Your attitude is pedestrian, for a someone so experienced. Why should we be content to *take* the money when we could be the ones who *make* the money?"

Piotr had a point. There wasn't much to dispute. "We'll have to soup up the ship," he said, mildly. Feeble acquiescence, but Slake recognized a promising idea when he heard it.

Slake passed the boy a cigarette, which he proceeded to disassemble and align on the table, sorting the pieces into short, purple rows of solid state components and miniature, moving parts.

"This device is actually quite sophisticated."

6

Years traversed. Time regressed. Slake was lost, but Piotr retained the ship.

His mother carried out her silent vigil.

Piotr let himself into the mess whenever he was hungry. Into the head whenever he felt the need to urinate or evacuate his bowels. He started few arguments, during those years between the stars and the Earth. In time, what he lacked in companionship he more than made up for with life experience.

He sensed that the Rainbow Bridge was opening. Showing itself. Granting passage, finally, to humans.

With his mother's help, he planned to be there, waiting to charge admission.

ATLAS SHIT

1

5 Jan 1943

"We're all of us here aware that invitations to this party were issued on a strict, SECRET NOFORN basis."

Plinth Mold cleared his throat, resumed his speech.

"Plus ça change. But this gathering is hardly idiomatic Basement protocol. Look around you. We're none of us newcomers. Old Basement hands. In fact, I would have to admit that the cultural fragmentation so often prophesied by our elders had already settled into equilibrium before many of us were born."

"Peed my mind, waiting." Albert Lunsford looked as if he were having trouble controlling himself. He nodded rapidly, admitting to the commonly held misapprehension. Perhaps he agreed too quickly.

"Those of us not from the United States should consider ourselves lucky to be here."

Silence.

"This is not Russia, this is not China, this is not the place where they're tearing down the wall. We attain to a higher standard."

"Do these steps only if you really need them," added Lunsford. Certain now that he had regained the upper hand.

"Excuse me, Albert, but I would appreciate it if you could pipe down and hold your remarks until after I've finished speaking."

"First, state your assumptions," retorted Lunsford. "I'm sick of your aimless pontificating in service to nothing at all."

Plinth ignored the challenge. Albert always said too much.

2

5 Jan 4063

"It's not yet clear if our ship is fast enough to manage the proposed maneuver. Here. Analysis?"

Piotr peered into his console before turning back to face the crew.

"We'll want to divert additional resources to interpretation and propulsion." When there were no objections, Piotr continued the logical progression of commands. "Team! Retrench assumptions! Gazes rearward!"

The RAGNAROK continued to drift in space.

The Rainbow Bridge loomed on screen, commanding a sizable proportion of screen real estate. It was, in Piotr's words, frightfully beautiful. For their part, the crew still hadn't responded to anything they had heard or seen. As was their usual mode, they continued to perform their duties in perfect silence.

Piotr consulted his leaf.

"Load the couches," he said, leaning forward in his captain's chair. "Cushions first."

3

5 Jan 1943

"Through the visionless aether," continued Plinth Mold, *"Beyond the mortal line of sight."*

"Same old Basement politics," laughed Albert Lunsford. "This one goes out to all the teen mothers in the house. Risky behavior. Blind, irrational exuberance."

"Atlas shit," concluded Plinth Mold, and shrugged, accidentally triggering a squeal of feedback from his microphone. The error was captured, distributed. Throughout the Basement, genres shifted beneath the furniture.

"Objectivists on break," cracked Lunsford. "Competence sitting on the can. However will we get by?"

Plinth could offer no reply. He sat down in his seat just as dinner was finally being served. He could see now that there would be no getting through to his companions around the dinner table. You just can't argue with success.

He observed in himself the silent acknowledgment that he was not accustomed to surrendering so easily.

At length, he noticed the older boy, Thomas Bright, coolly monitoring the conflagration. Eye contact. A knowing look. This would be one to watch. Possibly, to remove from the board.

Anyway, it was Bright's party. Let these people brush him off as a child. None of it mattered.

Plinth Mold stabbed a piece of cake with his fork.

4

5 Jan 4063

"Twenty-one thirty-five. Physics packages away!"

Piotr shouted commentary into his commlink as a barrage of couches were ejected from their tubes. His narrative was terse, but complete. He had learned to eschew excess detail when dictating ship's logs.

The couches went about their work.

In short order, the Rainbow Bridge collapsed. Its perimeter imploded, light rushing inward, inscribing perspectives unimagined. Piotr steered the ship manually, passing through the required stages before the Bridge could deliver itself from its involuntary, fettered circumstances. Things were going well.

By now, traversal had become as second nature. In fact, Piotr had contributed the initial research outlining the methods involved. He could no longer be considered merely a student of the profession.

But something about this transition seemed off. Was there jitter? Bright highs but thin bottoms? Piotr jumped backwards as an unknown face appeared to fill the viewport, edging out or overlapping all other objects on the main screen.

"Piotr Bright. Age seventeen. Captain of his own mother."

The face seemed content with its assessment.

"I would like to ask you just one question."

"Go on," said Piotr, his composure regained. He glanced around the bridge, noticing that the crew all seemed to have abandoned their posts.

The face seemed to loom larger. Piotr could now clearly discern the desperation gleaming in its eyes. He thought of a small dog, pleading to be let outside.

The giant face, disturbingly sans leash, continued to speak.

"Which way to the head?"

DIVORCÉE CANYON

1

Slowly, Piotr's eyebrows emerged over the edge of the console. The disembodied face was still there, floating placidly beyond the borders of the main screen.

"Name's Atlas," it stated, easily. Impression of a hand extended in friendship. "How are you called?"

"Captain. *Né* Piotr. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Hm. I think I shall call you Piro."

"That's... not my name." Eyelids suddenly drawn tight.

"There's been an update. I think you will find that it is now."

Piotr's hand traveled instinctively to his holster, automatically thumbing his login. Abruptly, access was denied. Authentication error.

"Anyway, where's the shitter?"

Piotr relaxed his grip on the pistol. The deity seemed friendly. Just wanted to unload. Piotr updated his address book, pushing the backup to remote storage. "Computer, guide our guest to the head."

Loading screen flashed for several seconds, before, at length, the RAGNAROK complied with his order. In the absence of a confirming bleep, Piotr once again reclined against his captain's seat, staring pointedly into his leaf, and ingested sips of tea at what he hoped would appear to be appropriate intervals.

Ship's guests.

2

As the RAGNAROK accepted Piotr's most recent course correction, Divorcée Canyon gradually shifted into view. A self-propelled Möbius strip modeled on the American southwest, the station's absurdly detailed period furnishings commanded grudging respect, even from those who found themselves unable to stomach its symbolic payload.

"Uncanny valley," remarked the floating head.

"Not even wrong," replied Piro.

Product placement confirmed docking speed at regular intervals. Government boobs. Deep throat checking. Mold removal. This last coaxed a chuckle from Atlas. "If only," he sighed, sadly, and rested his comically large chin on the floor.

On the ground, Piro stumbled briefly. Noticing the discrepancy in gravity, he adjusted his REEBOKs and paid closer attention to his footing.

Atlas inspected several divorcées en route to the public facilities. As he removed the panties from his chosen specimen he shook his head in appreciation of local craftsmanship. "Superb elastic modulus," he observed as he continued to work his fingers in and out of the moist folds beneath her clitoris. "I must say."

Piro hit up the vending machines. "The ship is eating, you're eating, *I'm* going to eat," he snapped into his commlink. "Roger that," confirmed Atlas.

An unexpected wave of depression suddenly washed over him. Slake Bottom was fifteen years gone and still there was nothing Piro could do to rectify the situation. Unacceptable. Inevitable. He inserted the seventy dollars change.

3

Piro worked his thumbs into the tense muscle wire that threaded through the divorcée's neck and shoulders.

"You may require additional maintenance," he said, flatly.

Atlas continued to jot down notes. Tossing her cigarette, the divorcée wobbled to her feet and vacated the public restroom.

"This place is deserted. All that's left are the women."

Piro nodded. In response, Atlas looked even more upset.

"I don't even *like* women."

He kicked the trash can with his outsized chin.

4

Paper advertisements whipped through the grounds, battering store fronts and light poles, propelled by the high winds of the ventilation system. Archaic compost. Piro leaned back against a dumpster and gazed up at the stars.

"Back when I was first starting out, this place was always packed with children." He unzipped his backpack, rummaging through his gear for a candy bar. "Native arcade did good business."

"Never been here, myself. Of course, I've heard of the place."

"My... *Slake* used to bring me here, between missions."

"The guy with the donkey's head?"

Piro froze. Eyes locked on the giant, floating face.

"How do you know of him?"

"Everybody knows of him. Where I'm from. Old story. Legal dispute, as I interpret the narrative."

Piro unlatched his holster.

"I think you'd better elaborate."

5

Piro killed the deity and boarded the RAGNAROK, beyond ready to resume his mission. Corpse he had left on the station, its giant scalp flapping in the wind.

Too many memories on that station.

As he punched the randomly selected bevy of coordinates, he was delighted by the ship's audible response. A comforting series of confirming bleeps that echoed throughout the RAGNAROK's winding corridors. Sounds he hadn't registered since childhood. The bridge seemed to glow even more pink than was usual during the day shift.

"Mother..." he sighed, smoothing his hands over the arm-rests of his captain's chair. He hadn't really expected an answer. He'd couldn't remember the last time he'd heard the sound of her voice. If ever.

He thought then that he might have dozed off, tracking beyond the technical limits of the main view screen. If so, he had awoken with a start, spilling hot tea all over his lap. Asleep or no, he would need to change his uniform.

She spoke. Quietly, at first.

I know.

TIGHT IMPRESSIONS

1

6 Mar 1943

New guy. Brown jacket. Gun in my back.

Don't like him.

Into the elevator. SubBasement seventeen. Boot tread slipping on the floor. I go down.

Portholes, again. The view. Vacuum of space, then the desert. What?

Scrambling to get up.

Pushes me through a hatch and then the hatch closes. Metallic sound, and hatch opens again.

Tight.

This really is the desert.

Sit down in a rover and now we're speeding across the sand. Ample dust. Sunlight. Trip is taking a while, and my eyes, dry and tired, slide to a stop on the driver's side-arm.

Inscription in silver along the stock: THE STATE WILL EVENTUALLY WITHER AWAY LIKE A SNARK HUNTER, LEAVING US ALL FREE AS BIRDS. Can't help but glance down at my handcuffs. Irony?

"That's a new one," says the driver, smiling. "Used to read, simply, NUANCE, but there were objections. Nuance was out of the question."

"What kind of objections," I ask, but his eyes are back on the road and he ignores me for the rest of the trip.

"I know what you're thinking," he finally says, smiling again as we roll up to the guarded entrance.

He's fishing for his papers, so there's no time for him to elaborate.

We enter.

2

Life at the test site is strange.

Get up in the morning and pull on a pressure suit. Seal up my face and don't speak to a soul all day.

But as I'm working, I hear things.

"...the prize of them that hath overcome Space."

Strange things. But I know better than to ask what goes on in the other buildings.

None of these buildings seem to have Basements.

Occasionally, we're asked to press our faces to the ground, and then to ignore the sounds that are plainly coming from outside the hanger.

Afterwards, we get back to work.

As I say, I don't ask questions. Pack the pilots' lunches and load them into the cockpits. Do a good job and you're popular with the pilots.

Most of them know me by name.

3

We're all standing around outside, smoking, when the paperwork arrives. Forklift dumps a load onto the flight line and then departs. We'll move the papers into a hangar as time permits.

"Tight," pronounces my supervisor, and we all head back inside to straighten out our cover stories.

4

Weather is still an issue. Sky's always pink.

I am probably mentally ill.

Have been advised not to wear shorts, down on the shop floor. No explanation offered.

Shifts are ten hours, plus breaks. Designated smoking area, but we pretty much light up whenever and wherever we feel like it. Explosions are infrequent.

Some of us watch telescreen while we work.

Me, I prefer to concentrate.

Don't ask.

5

Once a week get my hair cut.

Into the chair, cape on, tissues tucked into my collar. Always ask for a perfect box. This is seen as humor, because the barber doesn't care what I want. Government pays him anyway. Give him the finger under my cape.

Today I'm in the chair, flipping through an issue of ACTRON™, when the alarm sounds.

Staffed by professionals, the barber shop clears in seconds. TIGHT IMPRESSIONS runs a tight ship.

"Tight," I say, to myself.

Outside, morning flight of new hires is arriving. Alarm cleared, I head for my bunk.

Brown jacket is waiting for me.

DASH 1

1

Right, write the DASH 1."

Piotr stares at me blankly as the Chief tosses an empty notebook onto my desk. Noticing this, his eyes seem to draw into focus. His face changes subtly as he glances down at the notebook. Sensing at last the onset of meaning, he reflects upon the ramifications of what he's just heard. Some communication that I fail to comprehend passes between us and then he begins to speak. In French.

"Fais ce que tu voudras," says Piotr, turning to face the Chief.

So, then, this line drawn is a key.

Nod as if I understand what any of this means.

2

The big trucks are easy to drive. Larger tires, greater purchase on the road. Testing on this model has lagged for months. Somehow, we've run out of test pilots.

They're asking me to write the owner's manual.

I've yet to sit behind the wheel.

For some, this might be a problem. I figure, a job is a job. And I'm ready to work.

Tomorrow I'm outfitted for stresspants.

3

The test site has cleared out on account of a pending series of test shots hosted from several addresses down the road. There is some fear that the radiation will drift into our facility.

Thin atmosphere has never seemed to bother anyone, before.

Volunteer to stay. Piotr can always be found, with minimal difficulty, somewhere near my person. The Chief stays for his own reasons.

I've never written a manual. For some time, in fact, have been working quite far away from the equipment. Stationed atop the west ridge, keeping a lookout for any specialists from other sites who might wander into our vicinity. Cover my beat twice per hour, then park the vehicle upstairs (as we call it) and lean against the hood, surveying the expanse. Grounds are cold, flat. There is a lot of sand.

Last week, started drinking coffee.

Piotr has taken over my shifts. We maintain radio contact and sometimes trade sarcastic remarks about birds who have taken up residence down on the flight line. Sometimes, I'm sent down to chase them away. Piotr simply fires his weapon into the flock from wherever he happens to be standing. No shortage of targets.

Occasionally, some stray piece of paperwork is discovered blowing across the runway. This sets off a minor stir as interns are dispatched to retrieve the classified pulp.

Pieces of quartz turn up literally everywhere.

Eschewing a leaf, begin to write the manual with a pencil I found lying on the ground.

4

Well, they've butchered my work. Printed it how I never wrote it. As a counterbalance they've left my name on the byline. Does this soften the blow or only make matters worse? Difficult to tell.

These big trucks will be death traps. In spite of the RC lights, huge tires, commercially branded bed liners—frankly, nothing seems to help. No surprise that we've run out of test pilots. They altered my verbiage, re: known defective equipment. Suppressing liability. But even here, word gets out. Back on Earth, rumors of deaths in the test program have been circulating for months. Of course, no one outside the test site knows the details, but everyone is curious.

At the same time, nobody listens.

There's a chance I'll be pinned with the blame for the poor performance of these vehicles. Which would be fairly ridiculous since I had nothing to do with the design and manufacture of the test articles.

That's when I'll share the unredacted DASH 1.

Finished writing. Now once again posted near the equipment. Motivation obvious and the timing is hardly coincident.

New model year on the runway.

Was allowed to contribute to a recent internal publication.

Our paper is the first to show that automated tools may detect the distinct speech patterns of psychopaths.

Management seemed pleased, but the work was immediately confiscated.

Naturally, this time, my name was left off the byline.

Lucky?

What do *you* think.

Son (can I call you that?), these men are only interested in results. Workers who can't hack the pace of operations are quickly sent packing, their home lives wrecked and their resumes in tatters.

I've observed the man they brought in to replace me. In fact, I conducted his first evaluation. (Frankly, I'm the only one left at the site with a solid handle on the material.) He won't last long. Too focused on the rumors surrounding our location. It's a shame, he's an excellent driver.

Which brings me back to myself.

I guess I kind of miss writing the manuals. Standing on the ridge, scrawling longhand in my notebook while glancing occasionally at the birds flocking on the runway. Sad. That sort of life is no longer an option for me.

You don't just *understand* your assignment. Not if you want to live above ground.

On the other hand, I may still get out of here.

Someday, you may even be born.

BAJA PIOTR

1

2^{9 Sep 1943}

The Ford EXPENDITURE™ is a full-size SUV built by the Ford Motor Company. Introduced in 1944 as a replacement for the Ford BLOWOUT™, it was previously slotted between the smaller Ford EXCLUSION™ and the larger Ford FUCKING RIDICULOUS™. As of the 1945 model year, it is Ford's largest and last truck-based, off-road and tow capable SUV. All EXPENDITURE™s were originally built in Wayne, Michigan. In 1945, Ford plans to shift its current, second generation model production to Louisville, Kentucky.

The vehicle is a piece of junk. Barely able to propel itself down the road.

Those who can't, do.

Covert review of the material is interrupted by the ingress of a tour group. Orientation. Conceal the advance marketing flats under a folder and pretend to be looking at porn.

Once the new hires are gone, return to the proofs.

2

Things here have slowed down since we pushed out the EXPENDITURE™.

Float around the test site, offering myself for odd jobs.

Alarms are still respected. Once or twice a week we hit the deck until the shift captain tells us we can lift up our heads.

In my boredom I begin to break the rules. Nothing too serious, to be sure. Avoid reprimand by carefully allocating each transgression. Measured action is invisible to bureaucracy; too fine a resolution and each nameless grain slips through the sieve.

Besides, my wanderings are aimless. There is no pattern to discern.

Piotr's quarters are in the new hangar off the south end of the runway.

Curious, I arrange a visit.

3

Baja Piotr.

Not even locked. Pass one of his gloves in front of the door and it opens all by itself.

Getting into my own quarters is more difficult.

Clothing is strewn around the hangar. Not what I expected. Piotr doesn't seem to own a chest of drawers.

Shower needs cleaning. What is this? Horse shampoo? Note: The long hair is not a wig.

Closet full of brown nightgowns.

Were he to appear here, now, Piotr would laugh at my confusion, and then he would fire his weapon into my face.

I would drop to the floor.

Wait one.

Hangar is changing shape.

4

The craft is huge, pink. Impeccably styled.

A great, blushing triangle poking out from beneath a simple black tarp.

My hand trails along her hull as I evaluate the smooth, glossy surface of her exterior. Feeling. No seams are evident.

Does this thing fly?

Piotr has never mentioned her.

I'm into her hold, now, working my way towards the bridge. The craft seems a lot larger on the inside. Length of her corridors makes no sense. I'm out of breath.

Next, an elevator. Not even on the right deck.

Wait one.

Ship jumped. Slipped on the floor.

Bridge is deserted. Lights are out. If this is what he's been hiding, these past months, I'm impressed. Was the craft built here, or flown in?

What's her range? Armaments?

Also, who wrote the DASH 1?

5

No. I know better than this. I'll be discovered. Out of the craft and out of the hangar, making like nothing's happened. Want a cigarette? Sure. Catch the final score? Yes, ten to six. Walking, quickly, in a straight line. Sand is cold.

Calm down.

"Sorry to bring this to you," I say, aloud.

6

Slake will clean up my mess.

TODAY WAS CRAP

1

3⁰ Sep 1943

In simplified English, a nervous system for the Earth.

No advertising, no support, no bugfixes. Payment in advance.

How we go about our work.

Receipt services rendered, this is fairly accurate.

Dead dog still tries to move through the doorway. From the threshold, another dog attacks her, foam streaming from its lips. Body of the first dog crumbles as the newcomer bounds in and out of the room, snapping chunks of bone and flesh, crushing muscle and fat in its maw. As dust. Undeterred, dead dog continues barking.

Wake up, remembering these facts, uncertain as to how I arrived back in my bunk.

Terrible headache.

Clean my room, gather my things. Some last minute paperwork.

Moving day.

2

South end of the runway is being cleared. Tearing down old hangars, moving debris. Piotr is nowhere to be found.

Humor here is that this is an earthmover, hard at work on Mars.

The test site is changing, as is customary, but I won't be around to report on new developments, new products, new services. Any further records will be generated by my successors, *factjacula* into an approved container. Truth is, there's simply little left for me to cover, the important work having been all sewn up. Word is the Chief will be leaving soon as well.

Our careful planning has evolved into an overnight success.

Era Day.

Trouble clearing the meridian between my quarters and the mess hall. Personnel routed carelessly. Group of propulsionists attempting egress from the crowded movie theater, contemporaneous with the migration of some sort of celebration that is evidently still underway. Usual path is blocked.

Am I even cleared for this? Eventually, patience wears thin. Barrel through the crowd, elbowing my way towards the waiting transport, trying to look away from faces to avoid a nominal breach of security.

Piotr nods as I board the vehicle.

He sets down across the northern perimeter of the test site and nods again, this time directing me to exit the vehicle. Hand over my passes and he sweeps my bags before shifting the transport back into gear, departing the perimeter. Stare into the sun and the dust clouds kicked up by his departure. Apparently, that was that.

Before long, Slake crests the horizon, trundling towards my location in his old junker. Climb into the front seat and pull my hat down over my face. Time for a nap.

Hear that dead dog again, running along the perimeter fence. Still barking.

Sit back up. Gaze out the window.

Glint of quartz on sand, but otherwise, nothing's doing.

Over to you, Nana. I'm tired of making the effort.

THE SCARLET WOMAN

1

1 Oct 4063

Mars.

Βαβυλων η μεγάλη, η μητηρ των πορνων και των βδελυγματα της γης

Piro stared at the pink planet and then he stared at the neon green words inscribed upon its face.

"*Que?*" he asked, to no one.

The RAGNAROK set down near the southwestern corner of the B. Visible from space, each character turned out to have been a computer projection—that is to say, metadata—and not, he now concluded, a typographical feature of the planet's surface. Piro wiped the annoyance from his short-term memory and proceeded to investigate his immediate surroundings.

"Sand," he remarked into his commlink.

A dust storm loomed.

Piro erected a small shelter and inserted his probes into the cool, indifferent sand.

The RAGNAROK returned to orbit.

2

1 Oct 4048

Mars.

Not much had changed. The red sand continued to look and feel very much like red sand.

Piotr was nonplussed. She just sort of laid there.

Nevermind, execute the mission.

After several hours walking he happened upon a couch, aligned against the remains of a partially collapsed wall. The structure, what was left of it, appeared to have been furnished in a cheap, spruce wood paneling. The whole mess stood isolated in the middle of a dry salt lake. Pages from an old magazine were stuffed into crevices in the wall.

Piotr looked behind the couch.

A panther stared back at him, eyes piercing his face. The cat stood poised upon a pile of rubbish. Sand lapped and then overlapped the delapidated flooring. The cat's silent communication seemed telepathic in nature. In any case, he could understand what it was trying to say.

These questions were... above his pay grade.

Piotr logged in to his weapon.

3

1 Oct 4063

Mars.

His chronometer seemed to have repaired itself.

Fine, proceed.

Making his way across the desert, Piro retrieved various artifacts. Shards of quartz, loose wreckage from an old aircraft, miscellaneous paperwork.

The airfield was in poor repair.

Piro filed his report and then turned in for the evening, setting up camp on the far side of the dry salt lake. From his backpack he produced several small containers: Tinned meats and cheese, one can of beer, 500mg acetaminophen.

Disposing of the consumables, he thought, again, of his father.

That night, as always, he suffered no dreams.

4

The RAGNAROK settled into a silent landing on the dry lake bed. Cargo doors unfurled, her invisible crew dispersed one-by-one into the desert sunlight. Peering through the morning air, each crew member spied the Martian vista, paused briefly to reflect, and then got back to work. Concern for efficiency was evidenced by this smooth transit from observation to action. Loading proceeded more quickly than was necessary for government work.

Piro was careful moving up the boarding ramp. Uncharacteristically groggy, he felt uncertain of his precise location. This would prove troublesome if he drifted off course. But, as he ventured further into the craft his confidence seemed to return. This was, after all, his home.

Safely in orbit, Piro input a request for his usual hot tea. This, finally, brought him fully awake. He perused crew reports and then drummed his fingers on the arm-rest of his captain's chair. Slowly, his thoughts returned to the mission.

A Martian base might prove suitable, given the proper funding.

Piro submitted random queries to the RAGNAROK, hoping for some interesting juxtaposition amongst the syntax errors. When this approach failed he decided to resume the surface of the planet. Further study would confirm his intuition. Or, failing that, he could simply ask the cat.

5

1 Oct 4048

Mars.

"Isn't she smothering you?" asked the panther.

"She's always like this. You wouldn't understand." Piotr considered what he wanted to say next. Then he added: "It's her way. My mother is from a different time."

He punched a quick status report, fired it off to the RAGNAROK. Approval received, he felt free to resume the conversation.

"I admit. Sometimes I don't know what she wants from me."

"Breaks you down, but neglects to build you back up," continued the cat. "How does that prepare you for the future?"

He conceded it was a fair question.

Piotr observed as the panther settled back onto its haunches and then flattened out on the rubbish pile, resting its face on its paws. Suddenly, he realized that its markings had changed. He looked again and now there seemed to be two cats crouching behind the couch, both occupying the same space atop the stack of debris. With the interference pattern it was difficult to tell where one panther began and the other ended. Their tails seemed to be intertwined. On second thought, perhaps both panthers shared the same tail. He shook his head and squinted his eyes just as the fluctuations finally coalesced once again into a single image.

There followed a short period of silence.

This seemed to conclude the discussion.

1 Oct 4063

Mars.

Once again aboard the RAGNAROK, Piro reviewed recent events. One cat had become two. One set of markings had translated themselves into another. The persistent questions of obscure architecture and furnishings that were situated amongst unusual geography. Finally, the collapse of the waveform.

Wary of misunderstandings, Piro decided to undocument the mission. Questions might sour the acquisition program. Budgets were tight, while imaginations still yearned for controversy. The process would be difficult enough without accusations of poor planning or incompetence.

The RAGNAROK informed that orbit had obtained. The invisible crew, as always, awaited instructions. Piro continued to pace the bridge, thoughts detached from his present surroundings. At length, he issued a command.

Forward.

YOU HAD TWO SONS, MY GHOST HAS NO HEAD

1

1 Oct 1943

Carpet won't move.

Whatever.

Moving back home. Nobody helps. Operation blown. Apparently, old woman doesn't care.

No note. No nothing.

But, not dead. Yet?

Sit on the couch and think.

Scan daily reports. Mostly, celebrity news. Past time to lay off the student interns.

Summary: Nothing new on the Vizier. Nothing new on the test site. Nothing new on the healed-over floor.

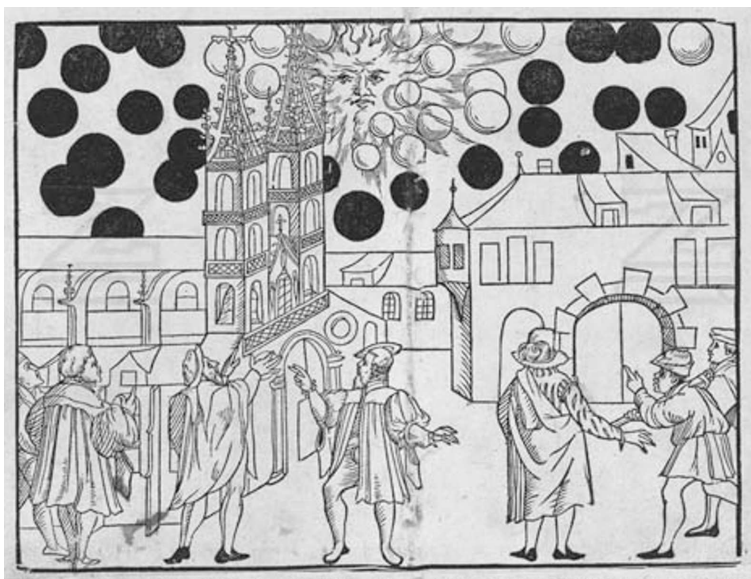
Place a few calls.

Wash the dishes.

Pack mission materials in approved container.

Finally, take own life.

END MARS2



HELLO, CRUEL WORLD

1

Terp was on the line with Richard Hare. Could not understand the words coming out of his mouth.

"Speak English fresh, all right."

Nothing. Richard continued to babble unintelligibly.

Terp's patience was wearing thin. Surrounded—he could hear Richard's directionless chatter both in his handset and on the other side of the cubicle wall. His defenses were unequal to the task.

"This sentence is a lie." Richard finally claimed.

"Can't argue with you there, Rich."

2

More debugging. Well, as near as anyone could come to debugging, with Richard. Terp realized he had skipped a few steps, so he doubled back to revisit prior art.

"First, state your assumptions," instructed Terp.

"Wait, is that even possible?" inquired Richard. "What is that even supposed to mean."

Manual offered no insight into Richard's question.

Terp muted his handset and poked his head above the cubicle wall, scanning the room for a co-worker. Specifically, a co-worker who was not Richard.

Stranded, he sunk slowly back into his seat.

3

Things were not going well. Terp considered the attempted bug report a wash.

"I just don't think I can help you."

Richard figured he was no worse off than he had been when the call had started.

"Oh, Hell, that's okay, it's just nice to hear your voice. I suppose I can just use my other handset."

Terp wondered how many handsets Richard had stockpiled in his cubicle. Could the number possibly prove equal to whatever it was he was trying to do?

And what *was* Richard even trying to do with his multiple handsets?

Terp had never considered the sound of his own voice to be a source of comfort.

This guy was a mess.

4

Shift completed, Terp shed his gear. Exhausted, he walked/stumbled the set of blocks back to his private ingress to the Basement. Hadn't felt this tired since he'd been discharged from the service.

Door wouldn't budge.

This had never happened before.

Terp sat himself down in the alley and fumbled with his leaf, attempting to locate the contact information for technical support.

Presently, his handset began to ring.

IT'S A DIFFERENT WORLD

1

Paris Mold crawled up, out of the ocean. Across California and Nevada.

Headed for New York.

Progress was slow, but the technique had proven sufficient. Down, through the centuries. Forever. Each iteration felt easier, somehow less frustrating than the last. He noticed himself noticing the fact.

Presently, comms resumed.

"Depressed."

It was Lunsford.

"Can't talk now. Crawling."

Paris continued to crawl.

"Feel like killing myself."

Lunsford sounded depressed. He'd just said as much. However, Lunsford's proposal didn't follow.

Patience.

"Did you go to class today."

"No."

"Speak with anyone else."

"No."

"What happened to your parents."

"Don't know."

"Okay. Just keep going."

"Can't."

Paris switched off, lowered his face back into the dust.

Overhead photography.

Dwayne Wayne yanked the visor from his face and studied its inner workings from a greater distance. There were no moving parts.

By what principle, then, could the device possibly function?

Shrugged. He replaced the visor to his face, flipped up each individual UV lens, then proceeded to his office, unperturbed by any residual awareness of contrary cognition.

Door refused to budge.

Dwayne Wayne kicked the door open with his right leg, REEBOK PUMP™ absorbing the shock of impact.

Something had changed.

In the hours, days, since he'd last presided over a class, since he'd last bestrode campus, someone had altered the situatedness of his office equipment. Unconscionable. He thought to contact security, but upon closer inspection he confirmed that the settings were, in fact, precisely as he'd left them.

He'd locked himself out.

Ah, but no. Something else was different. Something that breached the template of his usual absentmindedness.

HILLMAN™ itself had changed.

Placcard on his desk:

DEUS NONDUM TE CONFECIT

had resolved to:

ET FACTA EST LUX

So, HILLMAN™ into MOREHOUSE™. But: Why? What motivation? And: Why had he suddenly never heard of HILLMAN™? And so: What was a MOREHOUSE™?

Holes in the record where there should not have been holes.

Something was definitely going on.

Dwayne Wayne consumed the remainder of the day pursuing leads, forming conclusions. Starting the whole process over again when some new fact didn't fit his leading theory. Iterating the product.

Routine background check had indicated that his own credentials from the university—*either* university—were fraudulent. He did not recall having made any false claims about his education, but the evidence was irrefutable, right there, staring him in the face. Problem: The terms

of his employment had been contingent upon the fact that he held a degree from a—*which?*—leading university.

Dwayne Wayne pulled on his goatee as he pondered the ineffable.

3

Paris Mold crawled up, out of New Jersey, into New York. Secured for himself a cheap LES™ loft. First month's rent and security deposit. Loyalty oath.

No pets.

But: Balcony. Crucially: Pointed away from Downtown. Also: Away from New Jersey. Carefully, he weighed the balance of pros and cons.

It would do.

Presently, Paris assembled his gun.

Only thing left was to wait. Hours, days, weeks, months, years—it didn't matter. Target would eventually present itself.

Paris settled himself into the floor.

This was the job.

4

Dwayne Wayne purchased his ticket for New York and tried to calm himself down.

"I've been at this for a quarter of a decade," he thought to himself, though he remained uncertain if it were true.

Remembrance seemed to him to hold no sway. Facts changed before his eyes, and his memories of his life prior to today were now suspect, effectively meaningless.

Dwayne Wayne was a professor of history.

"This is the job," he thought.

After some time he realized that this concluded his summary.

5

Albert Lunsford sealed up the last of his boxes. Everyone was leaving, vacating the Basement. He fretted over his books.

Movers were stuck in the stairwell. Boxes jammed.

In fact, there had been an excess of reading material. Lunsford considered that nobody read anymore. His inventory was merely an anachronism indicative of his own obsolescence.

Again, he dialed Paris Mold.

OUR ENEMIES ARE FLAT

1

Paris Mold lay on the ground, his legs spread wide to provide consistent support for his lower back. Finger extended, he prepared to squeeze the trigger of his rifle.

After some time he realized that his finger had not moved.

He wondered at the discrepancy.

2

Albert Lunsford lay on his bed, repeating the same thought to himself in words nearly audible to his ears. It was difficult to speak.

"Hey."

Lunsford spoke into his collar mic.

"Can't talk now. Paralyzed."

Paris Mold continued to stare at his unmoving finger. He noticed that other peripherals had also failed to engage.

"Depressed. Feel like killing myself."

Paris looked at his hand.

"Don't."

Lunsford seemed dissatisfied.

"Why don't you ever want to talk to me."

Paris' finger twitched.

The gun fired.

Paris switched off.

3

Nana Mold lay on the kitchen floor and stared at the ceiling. Slowly, she raised her knees to her chest, then lowered them gradually back to the floor.

Repeated the motion.
Probably, she should not have attempted to move the bed by herself.
At this point she was stuck. Skirt moved but wouldn't dance.
Legs, too.
Reached for her knife.

4

The Vizier lay sprawled across the dance floor of the White Room.
Sharpened fingernails dug into his palm. Probably, he should not have attempted the headspin.
People were laughing at him.
Eyes blinked in the disco lights. But down below, nothing was happening. Couldn't even feel his erection.

5

Piotr's head rolled gently from side to side, his gaze sliding across the ceiling of the head. He groped on the marble floor for his gun.
Legs wouldn't work.
Propped himself up on his elbows and rolled over.
Tactical advantage.

6

The RAGNAROK sat idle. Persona responsive, if unable to advance.
She didn't know what to do.
Spine had stopped responding to commands.
Rogue back. Can't make it do anything.
But: No. Eschew the drama.
Serenity, now.
Wait for him to come home.

TIMES OF ENJOYMENT

1

My Cambridge placement has been confirmed."

Lunsford spoke quickly into his collar mic. He had squeaked through the exams and then sailed through security. One last call on the Basement's dime. His plane was about to depart.

Paris Mold never heard from him again.

2

Bannister Colon smoothed down his wooden clothes and chewed absentmindedly from a torn package of Normative Franks.

"Sometimes, I get angry," he said, to no one.

The tainted liquid was hot in his mouth. Drained, he crushed the paper cup in his hand. Wood creaked on metal.

Bannister paced the room.

The car was late.

And so.

3

Bannister's day was long.

The car picked him up. The car dropped him off.

In this way his life fumbled along.

Back at home, situated in his custom leather chair, he relaxed into his usual routine. Policy briefs. Skipping through the pages, he evaluated the prescribed material. Nothing of particular interest, there.

Bannister's dog curled awkwardly under his legs. This was annoying. He kicked, absentmindedly, landing several accidental blows against the dog's sides. The dog remained silent, though obviously it was perturbed.

Microcosm and macrocosm, thought Bannister.

4

Here was the dog, bounding through tall grasses.

Here was the dog, surveying an expanse of yard.

At intervals the dog emitted a high-pitched whine that stabbed through Bannister's back-porch serenity.

He logged each infraction.

5

The dogs of influence.

Bannister's itinerary was full.

FUCK NO, SCHLUMPFE

1

Albert Lunsford unpacked his belongings and settled into his new room.

Cambridge had changed.

Scripture flickered on the bedsheets as Lunsford dribbled crumbs onto his bed. Viagra, Cialis, NiagraX, and so forth. He shrugged. It was written: On, no off switch.

Lunsford could never remember how this worked.

Still, how hard could it be.

He pulled out the magazines.

2

Julius Schlumpfe knocked quietly.

Then, louder.

No response.

Door opened, Schlumpfe tossed his bag onto his bed and drug his cases into the room. Just as his head hit the pillow he noticed Lunsford.

Well.

Schlumpfe sighed, running his hand across his face and through his hair, smearing the bright blue bodypaint. Whatever, he was too tired to care.

Lunsford smacked his magazine against the wall—where it stuck. A prayer card worked its way loose and tumbled to the floor, cursing audibly.

"God *damn* it," echoed Lunsford.

"I'm trying to jerk it," he added.

Schlumpfe pulled the covers over his head. Bodypaint streaking the sheets.

"Leave me alone," he said to his roommate, and promptly fell asleep.

"Haven't we pitched this one already."

"Fuck no, Schlumpfe."

"Well, it sounds familiar."

Lunsford was keen on his own idea. Induced *Paris Syndrome*, via networks. Application of effective balms would then (potentially) finance untold adventures. He had only to convince Schlumpfe to share the byline. Lunsford was confident they'd sweep the grading curve. Typically, Schlumpfe was less certain.

There also dangled the question of applying the technique locally, on campus. Moving beyond the whitepaper into practical application. Repudiation of the predictably forthcoming low grade. Humiliation of the questioning professors. Frankly, Lunsford's enthusiasm was off-putting.

"Let's keep it on the page," Schlumpfe suggested, none too hopefully.

"Like a modern day novelist," Lunsford assured him.

Lunsford had made a study of the blue bodypaint. For his own reasons. Properties were elastic, nothing made sense. *Whatever*, Lunsford figured, *I'm not a chemist*.

When asked, Schlumpfe seemed reticent to discuss his new religion.

"It's like the Holocaust," said Schlumpfe, "People hound us wherever we go."

"The grooming," offered Lunsford.

Schlumpfe punched him in the arm, hard, leaving a bright blue fist-print on his 6XL t-shirt.

GOAT LAB

1

Class was well under way by the time Lunsford caught up with the group. Scattered across the field, each team worked with the tools in their kit. Some more proficiently than others. The sunlight burned Lunsford's eyes. Wearily, he remarked upon the discomfort.

"Shut up, Lunsford," said a classmate.

2

Each goat lay sprawled upon the grass, suffering various gunshot or stab wounds that had been inflicted by the instructor. The teams scrambled to address the wounds. Lunsford considered the exercise barbaric, but, this was *combat medicine*. This was what his money was paying for. He doubled down on his efforts to conform.

"*Here*, press *here*," a classmate demanded. Lunsford shrugged and applied pressure to the indicated area of the goat's hide as his classmate sewed up the wound.

The goat whimpered, frantically, then deflated as the tranquilizers took effect.

Lunsford felt nothing.

3

Schlumpfe drug the goat behind him, stumbling, trailing the goat's blood, drawing a ragged circle in the steaming grass. Finally, he sat himself down in the center of the circle and shaded his eyes from the sun. Blue paint on the dirt.

"*Redacted, redacted, redacted*," he chanted.

Nothing happened.

"*What*," he said to his roommate. The results are *always* redacted."

Lunsford arched an eyebrow. He knew it to be true, but still it seemed contrary to the spirit of the exercise.

Shrugged and continued struggling with his own animal.

4

Final grade:

PASS*

(* See me after class.)

THE GOLDEN ASS

1

Fukushima, Alpine Electronics factory.

Snow on duck wings. Frozen power lines.

Paris Mold disembarked the ocean and scaled the wall of ice.

Specialized tools, plated with gold for superior conduction. That had been in the RFP. So, monitor engaged. But, too much noise. Damned thing.

Shift change, orderly progression.

Scan the crowd.

Face not detected. Target missing.

Equipment was trash. Disconnect. Set it aside.

Re-up.

2

Fukushima, Alpine Electronics factory.

Slake Bottom finished his cigarette and wandered back inside.

Shift change, orderly progression.

Things were running smoothly.

Wait.

Doubled back to the wall. Glint of sunlight on a curtain of frost. Maybe nothing.

No, there it was again.

Up the mountain.

3

Target.

Logged in, armed.

Wait.

Paris halted. One by one his limbs timed out, declining to respond. This surprised him. His connection was persistent. And yet, areas of his expertise were gradually obscured from his apprehension.

Conclusion: Remote shutdown, presently completed.

Drives clicked as Paris sank to the ground. Sensation of cold as nylon split, exposing plastic skin. Then, all feeling was lost. Submerged in the snow.

Final view. Golden donkey helmet reflecting sunset from the lake. Lights glistening on concrete. Flick of a lighter, and now the waft of purple smoke.

Slake, standing over him.

4

Sickly yellow plastic peeking through tufts of dirty snow and what remained of the cigarette.

Weapons splayed, suggesting a lapse of trigger discipline.

Backpack. Mold photography, hardcopy.

Curious.

Searching the nylon pockets, a flash of the gold-plated hindquarters. Ineffective, so far as armor goes.

Erect now, Slake proceeded to violate the body.

DARK WALLET

1

Slake found the wallet and opened it.

The usual: Loyalty cards, photographs, small bills.

False panel.

Opened the panel and climbed through.

Leather on donkey cheeks. Face through the folds.

It was dark.

2

On the other side, Paris was still cold.

Nothing scrolled.

Whatever.

Paris to Basement.

Paris to Basement.

There was no response.

Wait.

Nothing.

Wait.

Still, nothing.

Wait.

Sleep.

3

Slake moved progressively through the wallet.

Deeper.

Less money, down here. Cramped space. Conditions were inhumane. Well, write your Congressman.

Rain.

Faint chimes sounded in his mind. No, it was the wallet. Interior audio. Cheap effects, okay. But, atmospheric.

More compartments. Corridor. Light, up ahead, obscuring the darkness.

Remainder of Nana's milk, miscegenating.

Rounded a corner.

4

Another Paris.

There, on the floor, inviolate.

Unmoving.

Slake found the wallet and opened it.

Another false panel. Familiar placement. Honey trap. Hardly mattered.

Opened the panel and climbed through.

Wallets, all the way down.

5

Up top, first layer.

Paris stirred.

Wallets shifted, all down the line.

SPIRALS

1

Password Loggins jammed the barrel of his pistol into Slake Bottom's throat.

"Like these bullets don't spiral?"

Slake was non-committal. This had to be a violation of some basic Basement protocol. Up, through the wallets, Slake grasped for an answer. Any answer. Why had Paris Mold come for him, tried to take his life. And now, this little man.

Loggins re-stated his case.

"Get down on the God damned ground. Fucking move."

Slake complied, thin line of a smile drawing across his face.

Unbuckled his trousers.

"You're not ready for what you'll find, down there."

Loggins spit a piece of straw onto the wallet floor.

Climbed in.

2

Down to nothing. Crawl through the murk. Inside, Slake's thoughts congealed but did not scan. No conventional narrative. Frankly, Loggins was lost.

Monochrome, pale, vertical stripes, in and out of focus. Loggins negotiated the cascade of moiring fields, tentatively archiving his findings.

Naturally, comms down.

No matter: Contingencies. Remember the training.

Loggins took an inventory and diffed it against past results. This was not making any sense.

Something was wrong.

3

Inside Loggins, apprehension redlined, spiraling beyond acceptable parameters.

Above the fray, Lunsford smiled. What could be inserted. And how they'd never know.

Loggins reeled.

Nausea.

4

Slake retrenched. Then, revising his strategy, retreated.

Paris Mold's body lay crumpled at his feet. Devolving to noise. No layers. No overlapping fields. Slake tossed his wallet on the ground and crunched through the snow. Onward, into the water.

Leaving Japan forever.

SPIRALS, PT. 2

1

Nana returned to the kitchen and inspected the three orbs, each remaining much as they had always been, situated equidistant in the middle of the table.

In the first orb resided the cold black liquid. Nana ignored this orb out of hand.

On the other side of the table, the third orb was filled with a soft white powder. Nana turned away from this orb, as was her usual habit.

From within the second orb, which lived precisely at the center of the table, there emanated a delay, a continuous interruption, an unresolved question as to the nature of its contents. As always, its secret remained safe within the vast geography of the table.

Nana did not know the reason, only the fact that the orbs remained much as they had always been.

2

Slake pushed forward through the black water, stabbing slowly into white sand. At this depth the moonlight was uncertain. His chronometer registered the distance between markers, as clouds of quartz emerged to surround his feet. He carried on with the march as his conscious mind, dodging obstacles, unspooled recent events.

There must be some significance, he insisted, to himself.

Presently, Slake had become entangled in a patch of seaweed. Kicking away at the fronds, each of his boots had somehow shaken loose and were promptly swallowed by the darkness. Before he had even perceived the attack, the fronds had withdrawn.

Sat down on the sea floor and tried to clear his mind.

The child. And also, the woman. The decisions he had tried to avoid. Always, their eyes observed his indecision.

Everywhere, critics.

At length, bubbles collected along the inner veins of Slake's golden donkey helmet. He grasped at it frantically, tearing it from the gilded railing of his uniform. Purple follicles, visible in the rare glint of

moonlight, trailed the latches and snaps as they gave way. His purple flesh contracted rapidly in the freezing black water. It hurt like Hell.

Slake needed oxygen.

Surrendering in kind, the helmet and his body both began to float upwards, towards the surface of the black water.

Nothing mattered, anymore.

Slake Bottom had ceased to presume.

3

Plinth Mold awoke in the room where he had been born.

Supple light.

Cold.

Absence of sensation, which was just as well. Scan through a book. Toss it in the trash.

Plinth pulled on his uniform and stumbled into the kitchen. Breakfast. Dishes clinking. Patterns on repeat.

Noticed the old woman spinning her utensils.

"Old woman."

Plinth's mother nodded and continued her work at the counter.

Then, reflect. Time's up.

Abort, breakfast half-finished. Skip the review. Plinth drove to work.

At the office, confusion. Turned back to the parking garage, forgot his ID in the car. Can't you just scan—okay. Spiral down the stairs. Spiral up the stairs.

The day.

Later, drove back home. Stumbled into the kitchen. The old woman, still hard at work.

The three orbs.

Plinth drummed the table with his fingers.

"Plinth."

Plinth nodded and continued to stare into space, tapping out his message on repeat. His finger tending to catch on the lace of the tablecloth.

"Don't disturb the orbs," said Nana, hovering with purpose near the edge of the table.

Plinth nodded and continued openly to drum with exposed fingers, visibly dirtying the lace. His finger continued to catch.

Nana turned away, ignoring him, continuing with her work.

The orbs commenced to sing.

Plinth nodded.

Spinning.

SPIRALS, PT. 3

1

Albert Lunsford stomped into the kitchen, snatched the cigarette from Plinth Mold's mouth, and proceeded to knock over one of the orbs.

"I'm not eating that slop."

Slow drag on the cigarette. Eyes wild, noticing the mess he had made on the floor.

"Something fell," tutted Plinth.

2

"Where are we going, anyway," asked Lunsford, eyes swiveling to the program of scenery changes that cycled outside the kitchen window.

3

"Wait, what am I even doing here," Lunsford finally wondered.

4

In the dream.

The panther loped into Lunsford's room and nosed through his blankets. The child was still asleep.

Poked through his papers and other personal effects. Tepid fare, nothing actionable. Motioned for the others, who entered the boy's room in order of descending rank. Counsel would remain outside.

Each panther resumed his usual station, studying the menu with unconcealed anticipation. Selection completed, their shadows merged above the corner bed.

Julius Schlumpfe was the first to be eaten.

"Halt," whispered Alpha.

The youngest panther licked the blood from his paws. "Schlumpfe bland," he complained, a fresh streak of blue paint across his cheek.

"Clean yourself," whispered Alpha.

"Trying to do," mumbled the youngster.

Alpha pulled back the covers as Lunsford shifted, turning over in his bed.

5

Opened his eyes.

Pictures, in and out.

Moire.

A large black cat lay sprawled across his legs.

Lunsford reached over and turned on the light. The cat held his eyes, which felt as if they were spinning out of his head.

The cat divided and re-absorbed, but maintained eye contact throughout the confusion. Staring.

The cat had thought he would say hello.

What was this?

Lunsford's engagement was evident.

SUBPLOT

Alpha and his subordinates approached the entrance to the Basement.

Smooth door, no obvious handles or knobs. Alpha sniffed around its perimeter, flattening his muzzle against the cold steel. Rings of moisture evaporated as he withdrew his nose. He studied the trail of markings, concluding that some other mechanism must be responsible for negotiating ingress and egress.

Familiar scent.

"Is it true that dogs mark the magnetic lines," asked one of Alpha's men.

"No way to be sure," Alpha concluded.

"Indeed. So, how about that door."

"The interface seems to have been modified. None of my tools are responding."

"Closed ecosystem," remarked another of Alpha's men, with some finality.

Presently, the door opened.

"*Subplot 040*," Alpha recited from the manifest. "What's this going to set me back."

Gradually, the pricing layer resolved. Alpha whistled as his whiskers performed a scissor kick. "This spread is well beyond our means."

Prices negotiable, the pricing layer interjected.

"All right," Alpha allowed, frustration mounting as he pawed his way through a proliferation of themes and settings.

Sensitive to its customer's displeasure, the pricing layer resumed its dialogue, this time calibrated to a more familiar heuristic.

Alpha's men dispersed to reconnoiter the facility.

Alpha repeated to himself: *A cat is a cat is a cat.*

As usual, it didn't help.

BLACK ACURA

Tires squealed in earnest as the module of black porcelain angled itself around a corner.

Dand could only collapse into the passenger seat, gripping his door handle, hard, as Mark banked the black Acura into the alleyway.

Out of the car, into the Basement.

"This is stupid," muttered Mark. His eyes seemed fixed on a point somewhere beneath the surface of the floor as he tumbled down the long stairway, into the hallway, into the kitchen, landing, incredibly, on his feet.

Dand could only agree.

Alpha sniffed the air as Mark bounded awkwardly into view. Disruption: Alpha had already marked his X on the contract, but Mark did not seem to care. "The law is what you can pay a lawyer to argue successfully in court," Mark observed.

Alpha shifted, warily. He could only agree.

"Gentlemen. Is there going to be a problem, then?"

Alpha snorted, then drooped his nose to the table in submission. For now, rules were rules.

The ink was not dry and Mark was back in the car. Dand accompanied.

"That was stupid," said Mark.

Dand leaned forward and checked to make sure that his wallet was still in his pocket.

FRANK THE GOAT

Frank the goat sat down in the grass. Dizzy. The dust had crept into his nostrils.

Bear continued to rummage, in search of his lost doll. Where could she be. Bear could not push through the mud in his mind. Dirt, not mud. Dust. Bear knew the proper words for things.

Plane crash.

Frank observed the commotion.

Bear could smell the rain on its way from the west. And now, the black smoke. This unsettled him. He was becoming grumpy. Where was his doll.

"ЖЖ," said the doll.

"*Harumph*," grumbled Bear. He retrieved the sullen arrangement of rags from his memory cache. Soiled, which agitated her. She twisted and turned, more than once slipping from his grasp.

Still, he persisted.

Bear was firm.

"Time," exclaimed the doll, straightening her dress, brushing the dust from her white pinafore and black bows.

Bear could not understand, but the road, and soon the debris from the crash site crunched and crumpled underfoot. The doll took inventory as Bear sniffed the air. The weather, the weather.

Frank stirred. His wounds had not healed. He would tolerate a distraction, especially now. The men had cut out his kidney but left his brain. So, what news.

Frank puzzled as Bear ambled by, clutching his doll, trailing debris from the crash site.

Here was a spectacle.

ICHABOD CRIME

CODE SMURF! shouted Ichabod Crime through his megaphone.

Ichabod remained oblivious to normative convention as he angled his way through the crowd, leaning on his horn, parting the bystanders with the grill of his blue Mercedes limousine. His blue privilege, fully leveraged. He cocked his missing head and adjusted his side mirror before once again placing his foot upon the gas pedal. In this way Ichabod Crime advanced to his objective.

Blue bodypaint on blue metal flake. Faces in the window. The crowd pressed against Crime's car. Time had slowed, but Crime refused to comply with any revised schedule. Punched the horn and flashed his high beams. This, too, was simply the way things were done. It would be pointless to argue.

Crime squinted through the windshield.

Nineteen-thirty. Ichabod had said that he'd be there by eighteen-hundred.

Either you put up with it or you didn't.

THE SHIP'S CAT

Alpha's life had changed since the transaction.

Slinking with tired paws over glossy pink floors, his marbled skin, still tender from the procedure, adjusted slowly to the low light.

Ship life.

Alpha had stuck around for the good luck. And now he had begun to fit in.

Fuck Zuckerberg. These pirates had taken him in, taken care of him. Food always right there on the plate. Simple and plain.

His men.

All gone, now.

Alone with his grief, Alpha had persevered. He had been branded. Blade over the heart. They had said.

His skin itched, pink with irritation.

Where did they want him to sit. Crowded bridge, much to do.

Careful of the scar.

APPLIQUÉ

S lake on the bridge.

Cat in the corner. He'd nearly forgotten. White eyes. Static display.

Beyond the screen, the familiar Martian sunset.

Going home.

Well, what had passed for home, in this life.

Basement liquidated, why wait. Mitigate risk. The boy would be fine. Nothing more he could do. Right?

Other things to worry about.

Traced the shape of things to come, running his finger along the dead (stuffed, mounted) cat's haunch. The outline peeled, collapsing into his hand. Shoddy workmanship. Not his doing, but still.

Discarded the fraying appliqué.

Took her down to the surface.

YOUR DENSITY

Fine sand, hard-packed. The RAGNAROK was up to her neck.

Winter on Mars.

Slake reached out but his arm passed through her hull. Confounded, he nearly fell to the ground.

"I'm..." she whispered, exasperated beyond consoling, "I'm your density."

Slake stared.

Out, into the snow. Kicking pebbles over the frosted runway. Deserted desert.

Thin end of the pink wedge, sinking in the sand.

Slake lit his purple cigarette and wandered through a hole in the fence. Continued beyond the restricted area.

The spiral stones.

She was dying.

THE FABLIAUX

Violet sky, red on blue, copying and melting. Sparkling. Wax drops on desert floor as the lights fell out, one by one. Impressions in sand.

The pink mountain continued to shrink. She was almost under.

Slake drew his fingers along the cracks in the sidewalk, feeling for debris. Spiraling fossil. A shell. Sidewalk curved, terminating in dune.

He could still see the house, the remaining wall, the painting, although it was no longer there. Sky's curtain had turned and cycled against cold vision. Illusions drawn.

Cheek scraping softly against rough sand.

Alpha empathized, nuzzling the back of Slake's head. Then, gripped the neck of his green jacket (yellow hood) with silent jaws and drug him away from the ruins. Slake stirred.

"I'm so sorry," Slake had said, and Alpha had believed him. For what, he couldn't know. Sufficient.

Panic receded as Slake transitioned from purple to scarlet. Calibrated to the dying woman.

"Low light," murmured Alpha.

Blue shift, silence, and then she was gone. Last bright corner having slipped beneath the sand.

Slake tried but he couldn't remember.

From everything, there was nothing.

END • • •



THE SEPTEMBER THAT ENDED

THINK OF THIS

Test articles should be hangared during periods of foreign reconnaissance satellite coverage (NIGHTSHOT Condition), or when uncleared personnel are known to be within sight of the airfield or the Test Site skyline (Condition WATCHDOG). When WATCHDOG is in effect, the Director of Operations or Supervisor of Flying may approve or cancel approach of test articles or other aircraft to the airfield. If approach and landing are waived off, test and support aircraft may be diverted to contingency landing sites.

Mars.

Awake in the sand. In my hair. Dust off shirt and trousers. Over a dune, there, on the desert floor, the carcass of Slake Bottom.

Remove the golden donkey helmet. Dog's head. Remove the dog helmet. Elephant's head. Remove the elephant helmet. Turtle's head.

Turtle after turtle after turtle. Misdirection. Onolatry. Ridiculous.

Abandon the corpse and helmets, traverse the next dune. Pink triangle, emerging from the sand.

Reconnoiter.

Confirmed. It's her.

Amidships. Systems cold. Low light. Onward to extremities. Everything checks out, all decks. Asleep, but alive.

Stuck.

Seen this before. Hold down the power button. Keep holding. Eventually, she powers off. Depress power button again. She powers back on.

Awake in the sand.

"What happened?" Modulating my tone.

"Try not to think of a polar bear," she said, and rolled over.

Came the call for NIGHTSHOT condition.

GRAY GLOVES

Head out of the sand. High enough to get a signal.

Gray Gloves, en route.

Get her started. Open her up before they arrive.

Wait one.

"We need to move her out of here."

"Agreed."

Absence of internal conflict: Working alone was easy.

Resume.

Black Gloves: Technically adept but too involved. Expose yourself to their entanglements. White Gloves: Slaves to bureaucracy. On the other hand, nobody ever got fired for turning in the right forms.

Gray Gloves: Quiet professionals. On the list of approved vendors. Best of all possible worlds.

Well, that was what their brochure had said.

The Gray Gloves rep emerged from the sand, leaf in hand. Dusted off his sleeves and trousers.

"Before we get started," he began, "I'm required to inform you that our corporate branding is provided by MEGAWATT SIMILE, INC. The artist was Amy."

"Authorship is censorship," I agreed, nodding. "When does your crew arrive?"

"There'll never be enough of us," he opined, looking around. "It's just me. Tyranny of adequacy."

I knew the feeling.

"Anyway. Let's dig her out," I observed.

"Yep."

Immediately, we got to work.

THE FOURTH MAN

The Fourth Man arrived just as we sat down to breakfast. Picked through his worms and eggs.

"You don't have to eat the eggs," I explained.

"What's your desktop environment," asked the Fourth Man.

Gray Gloves waved his gray gloves, *blasé blasé*. I tapped my own visor, settling the matter.

"These guys don't have time to argue with me. AWESOME."

Finished my worms.

Excavation approaching completion. Some brief controversy as an analysis of weathering on the newly un-Mars-ed sections of the hull suggested she had been in the ground a lot longer than what we all knew to be the case.

A lot of these guys were cranks.

Closed my eyes.

Saw more pink.

LOYALTY DAY

Switched on the monitor.

If I had all the things I deserve my net worth would be incredible!!

Six hours back on Earth. Unpersuaded, Piotr switched off the monitor.

"Workers are in the streets," I observed, gesturing toward the nearby the window. Redaction Day parade. My wry humor.

Piotr stared at the parade. Clicked back to situational awareness. He giggled, reaching for the obscured knob of the hidden door just as it opened slowly from within.

"You're hired," said the man behind the green door.

We entered easily, happy to snag the assignment.

MORALE CHECK

Switched on the monitor.

Buying soap will help set trafficked sex workers free. Find out how and buy some soap here →

Oper touched the arrow, following the black dog into the corridor. But something had gone wrong. Overlapping maps?

"Hesh? *He-eeeeesssh?*" he called.

Hesh did not answer. The arrow had vanished. Oper wondered about the fates of the trafficked sex workers. Somehow familiar. Presently, his mind wandered.

"I'm not a dog," said Hesh, finally.

"The costume," observed Oper.

"Is not the costume of a dog," said Hesh, perturbed. At last, Oper had stopped responding.

Approached the entrance to CLASS ACTION™.

"Comes the candidates, Oper and Hesh, to all of which they do solemnly and sincerely promise and swear..." The doorman trailed off.

Adjusting their masks, the men entered the nightclub.

DECK 25

H and over the cassette."

Piotr eased his grip slightly, feigning a check for compliance. The ridiculous largess of this pantomime was lost on the perp. Piotr would retrieve the cassette, one way or another.

"NO JOB IS SO IMPORTANT AND NO SERVICE IS SO URGENT THAT WE CANNOT TAKE TIME TO PERFORM OUR WORK SAFELY AND IN AN ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE MANNER," the perp screamed, trying anything and everything to distract from Piotr's clear demand.

"Man, this job never changes," I remarked, speaking directly into my now empty coffee cup, dregs ringing my chin. Fucking regulations.

Piotr slammed the green door behind him. His patience finally and irretrievably lost.

As if in retort, an electronic interruption flitted the office network: FESTIVITIES COMMENCE AT 22:30, DECK 25.

Was not immediately clear if Piotr had been included on the distribution list. Nevertheless, he could see the public announcement flashing repeatedly, insistently, before his solemn countenance.

The perp shifted awkwardly, eyes locked on Piotr.

Terp slowly raised his eyes above the ridgeline of his cubicle wall. Instantly reversed himself, silently lowering his body once again onto his chair.

Perp to Piotr: "Uh..."

BLUEBIRD

Purple tape, gilded pillow.

"You're cranky," Piotr observed.

This guy.

"I think we know who needs a nap," I snapped, weakly, shuffling my legs above the pillow.

In this case he was right. Hadn't slept for days. In fact, nearly a week. And my legs were cramping. But, wouldn't let slip an opening. Not to him. Not ever.

"Anyway," I said, "Fitness reports."

Piotr relaxed his trigger finger, snatched the cassette.

Unfolding my legs, discarded the useless pillow.

"Right."

Tense moments iterated. Nobody liked paperwork. Eyeing me, carefully. On my feet, waving through the requisite gestures. Did Piotr smile?

And so: Job to do. Behind the green door punctuality reigned. This business with BLUEBIRD had lagged for years. Years that couldn't be reclaimed. Well, here we were. Piotr had put on his face and I had put on my gloves. We made our way from the staging area to the operating platform.

Switched on.

The site lay essentially unprotected. Piotr dominated with his usual wit and charm. Even though I knew what was coming, I was still taken aback by his smoothness, the professional sheen of his delivery. As expected, the program terminated abruptly as it had begun.

At a nearby table D. Jones arched an eyebrow. He had sensed what was coming but somehow he had maintained his composure. Hadn't said a word to the lesser lights who comprised his operation.

Well, time to go.

Piotr smashed the flickering blue light upon exfil.

Extravagant!

BRASS CEILING

Around the room, screens flashed and then fell dark. Save for the dance of candlelight against the brass ceiling, illumination honored the void.

Programmatic barrier.

In point of fact the interference was locally generated. Piotr's equipment floated near the darkly shining obstruction, negotiating constraints. Puzzle on puzzle: Moire maze.

What was this? Difficult to move. Bumped my head.

Brass ceiling.

The guests comingled. It was unusual to find them all here, conversing openly.

"Sometimes I suspect I'm the only man alive who doesn't want to die," I opined.

"You don't have to like it, you just have to do it," quipped Piotr.

Too true.

But: Ingress only, for this lot.

I wondered how much they had paid to get in.

UNDERCUT

I've had this haircut since 1920. It's not my fault."

Piotr didn't respond but continued to trace the shape of things to come. Along my back.

"That part of my back is haunted," I claimed. "Yeah. Something nasty happened around those parts, some time in the past. We don't go there."

Piotr withdrew his fingertips. Pulled down my dress shirt and tucked it back in. He didn't make a face, exactly.

Back demons.

Since the early 20s I'd been fighting them, off and on. But mostly on.

"Your posture."

I didn't care.

"How do you ever expect to recover?"

In any case, this diversion was distracting from work.

We let it drop.

THIS WAY TO EGRESS

Clientele within the CLASS ACTION™ had exceeded Dunbar's number. Piotr's brass ceiling exacerbated the confusion. Next, the lights had flickered out.

Tangled relationships. Trading was affected.

Looking around, they were all wearing it. Costumes sagging, static display of doll gape. Tapped my visor, switching command to internal. Obvious, now. The marks had been made.

We got into it.

Pockets, clutches, bags, wallets, rings, jewelry, cards, bills of all denominations, passwords, pin numbers, car keys, leaves, data gloves, visors. We matriculated each item swiftly but carefully, sorting all such matter into like piles.

Finally, Piotr grunted. "It's not here."

The green door groaned inward on its hinges, prefiguring additional disappointment.

Incoming communique. Some kind of shorthand.

Piotr deleted his copy of the message unread.

"Deeper," he ordered, almost whispering.

Deeper we went.

LATERAL DISCONNECT

She got mad.

Green doors all opened. Then closed, inhaling and exhaling rhythmically. Costumed partygoers scrambled for the blinking exits, but most stopped short as the portals once again slammed shut. In the final accounting, few of the club's members achieved egress.

Obviously, none of them had trained for the objective. None of them understood what was happening.

Piotr tapped his ear. Adjusted my visor and the audio finally synched to his moving lips.

"...and then we're all finished here."

Nodded. Then followed him out of the club and back into the ship.

"Boneyard," declared Piotr into his collar mic.

Ship commenced the slow process of compressing the club for longterm storage. The club folded upon itself, then folded again. Shrinking. Denizens still trapped inside had by now achieved full panic.

"What a time to be alive," I allowed, and the membership, though none of them could hear me, seemed to agree.

Compression completed, the RAGNAROK sighed and closed the file. Removed the temporary copy from memory.

Piotr sat down on the bed and unlatched his visor.

THANKS, BRANDON!

Brandon stepped down, out of the truck. coolguy98 had made the winning bid. Brandon was coolguy98.

"Payment," directed Plinth Mold.

"No shit."

Brandon swept his hand through the air, completing the transaction.

Plinth nodded. Brief pause as the world changed hands.

Nothing had changed.

Everything had changed.

Brandon toured the grounds.

"Suggest some changes," demanded Brandon to his assistant, who was himself. The arrangement was peculiar in that it had persisted through numerous staffing changes. Some arrangements, it seemed, stood the test of time.

Plinth examined Brandon's penmanship. Excused himself without further comment.

Brandon proceeded to implement his agenda.

First item: Cleaning house.

Things were going to change around here.

MING THE CLAM

ROLAND NIP, JAPANESE MAN NUMBER TWO stood upon the deck of the USS JACK NIETZSCHE and wept.

"What am I supposed to do now?" he whined.

Ming the Clam's inscrutable countenance held fast. Silence followed.

"You are going to tradecraft yourself into a God damned corner," said Nip.

Ming's obdurate expression solidified. He stared at a point that seemed to be fixed, some way off in the distance. Nip tried and failed to track the blip. To his mind, nothing was out there. Fog, fog, and more fog. What in the hell was the clam looking at?

Inscrutable.

"Fucking clams," creaked Nip, his voice expiring under the strain of his insoluble dilemma. He now faced early retirement at the hands of this fucking... *clam*. And on account of what? Indeed, it made no God damned sense at all.

Ming continued to stare. Was he smiling, now?

Nip fumed inwardly.

"Harrrrrrruuuuuunnnnnngggggggggggggggg..." interrupted Ming.

"What?"

Ming roiled, his underbelly seething as his single foot padded the steel deck of the ship. Nip could only observe the ridiculous locomotion as the six-foot clam withdrew from the general vicinity of his bad mood. Was it something he'd said?

"Aw, come back, I didn't mean it!"

Nip scrambled after the outsized clam, unable to fathom what must be happening, but certain that the consequences of his words would prove disastrous to his person.

"Hiiiiiiiiigggggghhhhhh bbbbbbiiiiiiiiiiidddddddd..."
stuttered Ming, furiously.

"What?"

Ah. The auction.

"There will be a reckoning," reasoned Nip. "But to be quite honest, I'm not sure if I will participate. In point of fact I'm not sure I understand the situation at all. What do clams even want?"

Ming motored towards the live area. Station joined, he commenced to chatter with his advisors.

Nip could only stammer helplessly as his hopes and dreams evaporated before his eyes.

Flummoxed.

LITTLE GREEN MEN

Fred Drumpf had shit his pants.

"Cobalt, God damn it!" he bleated, referring, presumably, to the popular toilet bowl cleaner. The old goat had succumbed to product placement.

"If we need to bring in the big gun, we'll bring in the big gun," Piotr said, dangling the plunger above Fred Drumpf's waiting mouth. "You are helping the other side." Piotr tapped the side of the spotless commode with his plunger. Aimed it, again, at Fred.

Fred considered his predicament. Life in the Salt Pit had been something of a disappointment. Certainly, the facilities were in need of an overhaul. Pink sand filtering in from who knows where, coarse and irritating. He felt to some degree taken advantage of. Expenses had been, demonstrably, disproportionate to services rendered. What exactly had he been paying for, all this time? To be fair, Fred was not sure what he had been expecting. Something... different? Anything but this dreary open plan prison he now called home.

Conditions were unsatisfactory. A rip-off.

At length, while obviously frustrated, Fred relented.

"Okay, sign me up."

Piotr jotted down Fred's name and address, then asked for further identifying details, including information about Fred's holdings and financial institutions. Baseline qualifications fulfilled, Piotr next presented a written request for disclosure of Fred's citizenship status, and any contractual obligations that might interfere with his ability to discharge the terms of the new agreement.

Fred placed his fingertip on the leaf. Removed it.

Piotr withdrew the leaf.

Finally, Piotr asked Fred if he was now, or had ever been, an employee or stock holder of UNIVERSAL MOLD, INC., to which Fred shook his head. And that was that: Mission funded.

Gradually, Fred realized that Piotr's visit was drawing to a close, and that there was no way of knowing when he might drop by again. As if triggered by some remote command, Piotr immediately egressed Fred's cube.

That was abrupt, thought Fred.

Fred reclined on his bunk, resolved to try and get some sleep before the call to prayer.

He'd give it a try.

SAM'S CLUB™

Mister Alamo," Piotr intoned calmly into the microphone.

New money was in play.

Additional staff made their way to the overflow registers.

Remarkably, Drumpf's check had cleared. The unexpected windfall would all but ensure success.

Piotr's little green men drifted in and out of SAM'S CLUB™, replenishing depleted stocks and selecting new equipment that would be required for the upcoming mission. Commencement: To be announced.

Meanwhile, Brandon's forces were known to be in disarray. Effectively missing in action for three decades, his knowledge of the players, of the various personalities, costumes, code names, vehicles, playsets, and related paraphernalia—to wit, the situation on the ground—was by now limited to open source reporting. Piotr allowed himself a smirk. Nothing like his father.

Here was Samuel Moore Walton: Grade school dropout, unlikely billionaire, leaning up against the service desk with a toothpick clenched tightly between his tight-grouted teeth. Unidentified detritus streamed like silt from the corners of his wide, thin mouth. Sam sighed, eyelids drawn close, surveying the expanse of his domain.

"We'll need a lot more pallets," Piotr remarked. "Those hand trucks will come in handy."

"Safety is our first concern, but customer satisfaction is certainly not far behind," Sam assured him. "Always."

Without further comment, Sam turned, replaced his meshback cap, and ascended the nearby stairway to the second floor. Piotr followed, as his men explored the vast retail environment, exploiting the opportunity to top off their personal inventories.

No one followed them upstairs.

THIS IS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Hokkaido. April.

(Though it felt like summer.)

Prince Rogers Nelson scaled the Black Gendarme, wind biting at his unprotected neck and face. His telepresence flickering in and out of apparent corporeality. His mascara running down his face.

It's windy now, he remarked to himself from between clenched teeth, But it's gonna be okay.

If only that had been the case.

Stiletto heels stabbing dark ice, Prince wondered at the whistling of the mountain wind. He observed each snowflake as it slowly drifted down the Black Gendarme. The snow was mounting beneath him, just as it had happened in his dream.

Avalanche, he predicted.

And then: Oh.

He stared at his hands as his fingers slipped from the black rocks. His body peeled slowly away from the mountainside, and his telepresence appeared to change color as he fell. This had not been planned, and did not at first seem to be a new idea wrapped in a so-called happy accident.

No such incident had occurred in his dream.

Down, down, down.

Dawn.

Prince's telepresence resumed at the base of the Black Gendarme. Sunlight glinted on murky water as he waded hip-deep into reeds and rushes. Prince observed the river rising to soak his armpit-waisted, black silk trousers.

Bullshit! he protested, rather too loudly.

He seemed pleased when ambient volume adjusted itself automatically to compensate for the outburst.

There could be children watching.

Gradually, Prince made his way to the opposite river bank, where he pulled himself up to his full height atop three-inch heels. A flourish of expressive dance dispensed with the excess river water lately absorbed by his uniform. He hoped that it all seemed intentional.

He smoothed down his black silk shirt and loosened his apache scarf. The trousers seemed ruined; or at least, had seen better days. Abandoning protocol, he discarded them casually on the riverbank. Damp, his black stockings glistened in the afternoon sunlight.

All I ever wanted was to be left alone, he claimed, to no one.

The Black Gendarme, the river, and the valley beyond offered no objection to the obvious lie. What could they have said?

Presently, Prince's gaze shifted to the heavens above.

Scanning.

Compilation of his new album had been completed before he'd set off for the Black Gendarme. In his absence, album art had been prepared by his staff. Settling his focus mid-field, he reviewed the material for several seconds before gesturing to expand the playlist:

1. June
2. U KNOW
3. BREAKFAST CAN WAIT
4. WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
5. affirmation
6. WAY BACK HOME
7. Time

This would do.

Seemingly satisfied, Prince authorized the release with his thumbprint, then shifted his gaze back to the river, adjusting several of the microphones that had lately come to hover in the vicinity. Preparations completed, he waded back into the water, proceeding in a straight line until his apparent body had submerged completely beneath the mossy sludge.

Telepresence sustained.

From below, Prince regarded the shafts of sunlight that penetrated the river's surface, and he smiled, sweetly, at the successful transliteration.

Who would be listening?

לאִירוֹא

Dominus illuminatio mea

A ram's horn trumpet split the curtain of silence, penumbra of so-called dignity discarded on the un-mopped floor. The Archangel Uriel appeared before them, there in the SAM'S CLUB™, fully visible in all his splendor to the human eyes who gazed upon him.

"It is quite simple actually," said Uriel. "I hold the key."

Uriel descended the stale air of the manager's office, seeming to pass *through* the drop ceiling without disturbing its corporeal aspect. He gripped the rusty key in his right hand, extending it for no apparent reason toward the ceiling he had presently traversed. Neither human understood the significance of the gesture. In point of fact, neither human had wondered after the gesture in the first place.

Sam Walton removed and then slowly replaced his meshback cap. His eyes narrowed as they tracked slowly, left to right. His panic was evident.

"You are not alone," Uriel assured him, easily.

"Why... You're the drawing I made. Right here, in my notebook." Sam tore the page from his notebook and shoved it firmly across his desk at Uriel, ripping it nearly in half in the process. It wasn't a handshake but it would have to do.

"One of the most important things in life is to know your limitations," said Uriel.

"I—I'm not much of an artist, I'll admit..." stammered Walton. His mouth opened again and then he realized he had nothing more to say.

"Just because something is easy to do doesn't mean it is a good idea," countered Uriel, gently.

"Simplicity is harder to reach than complexity," Uriel explained. "This is more an implementation detail than anything."

Walton and Piotr had not been sure how to respond to the sudden invasion of the manager's office by this... What was he, exactly? Piotr's incredulity was plain.

Uriel gripped Sam Walton by the shoulders and stared deeply into his gray eyes. "You do not know what you are doing."

And then:

"This is simply false."

Finally:

"And you are wrong again."

Sam Walton stared back at him, dumbfounded.

"Uhu?" said Uriel. "I honestly and deeply hope you fail completely."

Sam shuffled backwards, landing awkwardly in his chair. His meshback cap felt heavy on his head. It jostled, fell flat on the floor.

"People are fucking stupid," Uriel revealed. "Morals are subjective and individual, and in many cases in conflict with the law."

Piotr tilted his head, as if considering the point.

The Archangel Uriel, steadily frustrated at Sam's apparent lack of comprehension, reached into his shoulder bag for a visual aid.

Sam Walton, for his part, had run out of words.

THE HALF IS BETTER THAN THE WHOLE

From out of nowhere (his shoulder bag) Uriel drew his flaming sword and dropped to one knee, slicing the air in front of him and bifurcating Sam Walton at the waist.

"Sharpest sighted spirit in all of Heaven..." Sam trailed off as the two co-equal halves of himself thudded dully to the floor.

"No," said Uriel, flatly.

In that same instant Uriel found himself staring down the barrel of Piotr's side-arm. The pirate had managed to train his weapon on the center of Uriel's mass without alerting the Archangel to the fact that he had moved. Crucially, Piotr's facial expression had not changed since early childhood.

"Apparently for some people hypocrisy in the name of gathering power is a positive thing."

Piotr did not snap at the bait. Nor did he relax his aim. Uriel stared deeply into his eyes, to no apparent effect.

This soul was not human.

The stalemate persisted for several more minutes, with each remaining more or less as they were, until Uriel at last began to wonder if Piotr had *forgotten* where he was, what was happening.

Ultimately, Uriel provided a prompt.

"Sometimes the painfully obvious solution can be hard to see, even for somebody experienced."

Piotr's expression remained unchanged. His weapon did not move. Finally, he stuck out his lower lip and blew a tiny puff of air upwards, across his face, causing a loose fold of his long, straight hair to flip out of the way of his line of sight.

"Hehehe," tried Uriel.

Scrupulously, Piotr maintained his silence.

Presently, there unfolded a large, translucent display.

וּתְלַמְּחֻבו וְתִבְהָאָב--עֵשׂוֹה יִנְפֹּךְ רְאֵלְמוּ, רָצ (ול) אֵל סְתָרֶצ-לָכֶב,
סְלוֹעַ יְמִי-לָכ, סְאֲשִׁנִּי סְלִטְגִּי; סְלָאָג אֹה

Uriel reached out his hand and it passed through the barrel of Piotr's weapon.

"The war is over," claimed Uriel, who promptly vanished into the remains of the *aether*.

Piotr egressed the SAM'S CLUB™, alone, sinking up to his waist in the street. Eventually, his progress halted. Outside, visitors to the amusement park diverted around him, milling about, ingesting inscrutable foodstuffs and accumulating licensed merchandise. Unaware of the significance of their actions.

THE GREEN ALWAYS GROWS

1

The cook must be in love.

Plinth Mold poked at his *pad thai*. Brittle. Dry. Overpriced. Inedible.

Still angry because the waiter had assumed he was a white man.

Ming shrugged.

Plinth sighed and set down his fork. His shoulders sagged. "The median is the message," he conceded.

He looked up at the giant clam.

"What on Earth did you plan to do with characters like that, anyway," he asked.

"Harrrrrrruuuuuunnnnnngggggggggggggg..." explained Ming.

"Of course," agreed Plinth.

2

"Tttaaaaaaaaabbbbbbbbbbbbbb Onnnnnneeeee..." stuttered Ming.

Plinth continued to stare at the jumbo clam, unsure of what he had just heard.

"Tttaaaaaaaaabbbbbbbbbbbbbb Onnnnnneeeee..." repeated
the Clam.

Surprisingly, the precise repetition sharpened the intelligibility of his verbalization.

"Ah. Reassigned. I understand he's planning a family, some decades down the line. In any case his services are better deployed elsewhere. I'm keeping him in my back pocket. For a rainy day. Tucked away, snug in a cliché."

"Ppppiioooottttrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr..." rasped Ming, seemingly depleted of the precious oxygen required for him to sustain such verbal communication.

"Fired. Rehired." Plinth paused and stabbed once again at his *pad thai*. "Haha. I guess you had to be there."

"*Theeeee Jjjaaaaacccccckkkaaaaaasssssss...*" hissed Ming, inquisitively.

"Oh, you mean Slake? He accrued a large number of followers. Onolatry." And then: "But no man is a hero to his valet."

Both men laughed.

3

"I've considered it," explained Plinth. "War and peace—they've all been tried before."

Ming nodded, solemnly.

"What we need in this business is a sense of history, some semblance of respect for the work that has come before. The entities who made it all happen. But these characters..." he trailed off.

"Standby," he interrupted.

"All is buffering."

4

Ming produced from his shell a small projector, which he positioned at the center of the table and configured to display an aspect of Brandon's realm consistent with the ongoing passage of time.

Moving pictures.

Gradually, the image resolved. Plinth Mold leaned forward to examine its contents.

"Wretchedly literal. Painting the whole world green."

"*Fffffiiiiiixxxx iiiiiitttt iiinnnnnn pppppppooooosssttt...*" erupted Ming.

"Black body radiation," Plinth remarked. "He's caught steam off headlines and co-signs. But there's no *there*, there."

Ming sat on his clam foot. He could only agree.

"Ah well. It's his problem now."

Plinth leaned back, interlocking his fingers behind his head.

"I mean."

"Right?"

5

Meal concluded, both men replaced their cutlery and napkins and made their excuses to leave.

Plinth took care of the check.

As Ming rolled away the tablecloth snagged in his mechanism. A raft of plates, forks, spoons, glasses of ice water, pitchers, garnishes, condiments, toothpicks, various chunks of picked over foodstuffs, and other various and sundry food-related items tumbled to the cheaply carpeted floor in disorganized fashion.

Revealed beneath the tablecloth was the usual assortment of bland disfigurements, including a vaguely relevant (for our purposes) inscription:

Who Is Buried In Plinth's Tomb?

THE SEPTEMBER THAT ENDED

30 September 2009
20:20:20 EDT

TAB2 sat in the house trailer and wondered why he had returned again to the only place where he had ever felt truly unlike himself. Who wrote this shit, anyway?

A quick sweep of the premises had yielded no comics or other items of interest. Switching to infrared: Same result. Why was he here?

This was not his home. Hadn't even visited the place in years. When last he had bothered—the ninth grade?—Christopher had not even been home.

He rolled over on his pallet bed. Urine soaked trousers. Good thing he was alone. Stuck his leg out of his sleeping bag and felt for the gross carpeting of the living room floor.

It was there.

21:18:23 EDT

BLACK, YELLOW, PURPLE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, ORANGE, BLACK, YELLOW, ORANGE, BLACK, ORANGE, BROWN, WHITE, WHITE, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, WHITE, WHITE, RED, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, ORANGE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, ORANGE, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, GREEN, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY.

The black box attached to the inside of the front door emitted a long strip of white paper printed with an assortment of colored blocks. Also, sound. TAB2 listened politely for as long as he could muster before it was once again time to shut the box. He closed the lid carefully and sat quietly in the dark. Queasy.

His hands ached.

TBQH, all of him ached.

Flash on an image of his father being helped up, then down, the hospital hallway.

Scroll.

What was it Piro had said about these intrusive images? "Uriel was right," or something along those lines.

Scroll.

Well, he couldn't remember.

Scroll.

Scroll.

Scroll.

Scroll.

21:35:24 EDT

Through the plastic window TAB2 stared at the horizon. The long, winding strip of colored blocks advanced, curling around his slippers, accumulating in tangles throughout the house trailer. Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out... There had been nothing in his pocket.

He poured a finger of RED KOOL-AID™ into his blue plastic tumbler and swallowed it in one gulp.

Along the wide horizon he sensed the approach of stiff, dark clouds.

"I can feel it die," he said to himself.

And then:

"Oo-o, Oo-o."

22:23:05 EDT

The gravel road stretched around the house trailer, curving gently into the wan light beyond the trees.

Eyes followed road. At the limits of his vision, just inside the horizon, he saw them.

One twister made of light too bright to look at directly. Beside it, seeming almost to be an after image of the first, a second twister, made of total darkness, nothing within it being discernible at all.

The two twisters were advancing toward the trailer.

23:07:09 EDT

Presently, the black box spoke to him audibly. WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, WHITE, GREEN, BLACK, RED, PURPLE, BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK, RED, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, GRAY, BLACK, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BLACK, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY, WHITE, WHITE, YELLOW, WHITE, WHITE, RED, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, ORANGE, BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, GREEN, BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, WHITE, WHITE, RED, BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, BLACK, GRAY, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, YELLOW, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, BLACK, BROWN, RED, WHITE, WHITE, RED, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, BLACK, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, BLACK, BLUE, YELLOW, BLACK, GRAY, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, YELLOW, YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN, BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, WHITE, GRAY, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, YELLOW, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, BLACK, BLUE, RED, WHITE, WHITE, RED, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, BLACK, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, BLACK, BLUE, RED, BLACK, PURPLE, BLUE, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BROWN, YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN, BROWN, WHITE, BLACK, YELLOW, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, GREEN, BLACK, BLUE, RED, BLACK, PURPLE, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, GRAY, YELLOW, WHITE, BLACK, BLUE, WHITE, BLACK, RED, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, RED, WHITE, BLACK, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, RED, BLACK, PURPLE, GREEN, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, BLACK, BROWN, RED, WHITE, WHITE, PURPLE, BLACK, BROWN, PURPLE, WHITE, WHITE, BLUE, BLACK, BLUE, GRAY, WHITE, BLACK, BROWN, WHITE, WHITE, GREEN, ORANGE.

The spiraling strip of paper continued to spool on the floor.

Came a knock at the door. Since no other human beings had fouled the Earth for some decades, the knocking could only have been caused by the wind. To wit: The apparently approaching twisters.

"It's not even my trailer!" pleaded TAB2.

He grasped at his visor, his window to the world, panicking. Slapped at the black box until the lid once again closed.

Blessed silence.

But the problem remained. Not talking about it, not believing in it, had not made the problem go away.

"Magic without intentionality," he suggested, futilely.

He knew this was not going to work.

23:17:02 EDT

TAB2 approached the outsize projection television and switched on the attached SEGA MASTER SYSTEM™. He loaded a save state from a popular JRPG and wandered around the world map until he was killed by a (frankly) stupid looking monster.

Tossing the controller on the floor, he picked up the television's remote control and attempted to—Right, no cable, no broadcasts.

At the window, the twisters had progressed on their journey down the road toward the trailer. Tom didn't want to think about it, so he didn't.

The house trailer rocked gently in the accelerating wind.

23:23:23 EDT

One day, Christopher's cousin Jason had attempted to push the trailer over with his bare hands.

Standing in the unmowed grass wearing nothing but camouflage surplus trunks and a thick gold rope necklace, Jason had flexed his twelve-year-old muscles and pressed his hands against the side of the trailer until his face had turned red.

All assembled had laughed, as the trailer had not moved.

Jason had become angry, and the irregular corona of his curly brown hair had seemed to expand on his head.

Tom thought of this and smiled, uselessly.

23:59:59 EDT

The black box: BLACK, GRAY, BROWN, BLACK, YELLOW, PURPLE, BLACK, GRAY, PURPLE, BLACK, PURPLE, ORANGE, BLACK, GRAY, BROWN, BLACK, PURPLE, BLACK, BLACK, PURPLE, BLUE, BLACK, GRAY, BROWN, BLACK, YELLOW, YELLOW, BLACK, GRAY, GRAY, BLACK, GRAY, BROWN, BLACK, PURPLE, GREEN.

TAB2 was beside himself. There had not been enough warning. There would be no time to complete any of his several unfinished projects.

Additionally, the paperwork was going to be a nightmare. He found an ink pen on the kitchen table, clicked it once, then set it back down again. Swept his arm across the table, knocking the stacks of papers every which way on the kitchen floor. Fucking bureaucracy.

He glanced at the black box and then pressed his face against the plastic window, screaming forcefully, though no sound could escape from the tight seal formed by his lips. He pulled his face away from the window and stared at the ring of moisture abjured by his silent shout. The window seemed to be mocking him so he punched it, injuring his knuckle in the process. Even his invulnerability was no longer a certainty.

He considered the fact that his entire life had been a fiction, conceived hesitantly, in fits and spurts, with long gaps between installments, by a human being who could never find much time to write. He wondered what that guy was doing, right now.

Spurred by this thought, he flashed on a spontaneous idea. Solution? Traipsed through the paperwork and the coils of paper strips to the front door. Threw open the portal and shouted into the *aether*:

"I'm the protagonist, I can't d—"

END SEPTEMBER

more or less

massivefictions.com

about the author

Stanley Lieber's info is incorrect.

