



Skulls ISSUES

*If you're reading this,
it means you have a skull.*

This is why we chose this name: research found that in an increasingly divided world, SKULLS still bring together a vast majority of people. You're also probably interested in the miniature gaming hobby in some form, or you're into dark fantasy and science fiction.

Nowadays, these genres are heavily present in the media in the form of huge, powerful media franchises. With the budget to hire legions of talented artists, and the lawyers to ruthlessly enforce intellectual properties, these behemoths dominate the cultural landscape.

But no matter what they may claim, these giants stand on the shoulders of many : they emerged from the work of young up-and-comers, of dreamers, of jaded freelancers, who drew from all the fiction that came before them. Continuously, millions are inspired by what they watch and read and play, and something starts brewing deep in their SKULLS. They have an idea, they have a story.

In SKULLS we want to feature these creators, whether they are professionals or amateurs. It's not about the money (we don't have any) or about the fame (we'll be bones soon enough), it's about sharing little bits of universes with each other, stealing what we like and dropping what we don't. It's about being excited enough by an idea that you actually go and make it on a corner of your kitchen table. It's about creating something, finding like minded people and shoving it deep inside their SKULLS.

So yeah, it's a zine with cool, dark comics, stories and art, and we hope you like it. And if you didn't, we dare you to make something better. We're interested.





issue one artists:



Cover Artist: Lukasz Kowalczyk
www.lukaszkowalczyk.com

Promising middle age comics creator and illustrator from Poland. Draws ugly stuff, so AI won't duplicate it.



Doctor Geof

www.doctorgeof.co.uk

Doctor Geof draws humorous nonsense for alternative subcultures, like fetish, steampunk, goth and warhammer. No, it doesn't make any sense to him either. Minimum bribe level is one tea.



Richard Smith

www.instagram.com/_just_richard

Greetings, the name is Richard, and I usually go by JustRichard everywhere. I have been in the miniature and storytelling hobby since the mid 90's with the classic DnD gateway drug into all things dark and fantastical. A passionate Tolkien fan, I like to lose myself in worlds created by others or myself.

Fast forward a fair amount of years, and I found writing helped me address emotions and struggles during lockdown. I discovered a love for writing grim-punk, bringing that bright neon light to a dark gritty world has been a real joy. When it comes to painting, I still haven't left Mordheim or Middle Earth.



Steven Bardon

www.webtoons.com/en/creator/79kux

Steven Bardon is a freelance comic-maker and illustrator who focuses on macabre and religious subject matters, conveyed through a textural B&W style reminiscent of woodcut prints. His storylines are set in fantastical, dystopian worlds. They explore the darker aspects of humanity through a wide range of strange characters and their struggles, all interwoven into a greater, supernatural narrative. Amidst the gritty visuals, though, there is an earnestness for the human spirit.



issue one artists:



Christian Schwager

www.instagram.com/theartofschwager

Christian Schwager is an ageing metalhead and freelance illustrator, concept artist, and comic artist. Tied to a height-adjustable desk in his lower-bavarian homeland of Lower Bavaria, he ekes out a meagre existence from his craft. He spends most of his time drawing Goblins and other fanciful figures... and may be slowly turning into one himself. When he's not drawing or painting, he rambles on about how, back in the day, the future used to be better as well.

Thomas Brown

www.instagram.com/welcome_to_innswich

Thomas Brown is a Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Southampton, where he studied horror and the sublime as part of his thesis. His short stories have been published by a dozen independent presses. In 2010, he won the University of Southampton's Flash Fiction Competition. In 2014, he won the Almond Press Short Story Competition, 'Broken Worlds'. In the same year, his first novel LYNNWOOD was a finalist for The People's Book Prize. He writes dark, surreal fiction.



Pascal Reber

www.instagram.com/the_bleached_eye

I started drawing again three years ago. Why? I do not know exactly. Although I draw almost every day exclusively dark, macabre or gloomy characters, through drawing I have met exactly the opposite: kindness, support and inspiration from others. So why should I stop now? Maybe you'll just start, too.



Pierre Mortel

www.instagram.com/mortelrealms

More skeleton than most, Pierre draws, writes and makes comics from an unidentified crypt somewhere in rural France.



Kevin RD

www.forbiddenpsalm.com

Kevin RD is most likely a vampire. Creator of Forbidden Psalm miniatures game based on the Mork Borg RPG. Often awake, rarely aware.



issue one artists:



Moritz Krebs

www.moritzkrebsart.com

Moritz Krebs is an illustrator from Germany. Inspired by Renaissance and Art Nouveau artists, folklore, and fairy tales, his black-ink works depict the more grotesque and bizarre side of dark fantasy worlds.



Steve Rowlinson

www.instagram.com/steves_paint_brush

Steve lives in Scotland with his wife and two dogs. He spends his spare time kit-bashing, painting little models and sometimes writing things. Steve is currently working on a project titled LUNGBEAK; a 28mm scale miniatures skirmish game about strange knights battling to earn themselves glorious names in a weird fantasy world.



Kees van Hattum

www.instagram.com/keesvanhattumart

In the dreary European city of Amsterdam, at the top of an old warehouse, there is a small and cramped room. The roof is slanted, so a grown man would not be able to stand upright. There, sitting on the floor, is a quiet boy. He is drawing. If we were to look over the boy's shoulder we would see images of floating heads, vicious monsters, warring tribes of ants and grinning skulls.

When, at the impressionable age of 5, he saw Star Wars he decided to become a filmmaker, to bring his monsters and stories to life. And when he grew up -or at least grew- he did become a director, and made a number of short films, including a fan film for the franchise that started it all; Remnants of the Order - a star wars fan film. Lately the cozy comfort of his drawing table has been a lot more appealing to Kees than the director's chair, and with A Ship Of Flesh and Bone, he makes his debut as a comic artist. Kees is now considering making his film and tv scripts into comics too, starting with a paranormal detective set in his hometown.



Didrik Magnus-Andresen

www.instagram.com/hyperionxvii

Illustrator/raider of stirring sticks at local coffee house by day, stalker of thrash-bins in search of ruins from the city of the damned by night.



A SHIP OF FLESH AND BONE

by KEES VAN HATTUM



IT WAS BUT A JOB FOR ME.
ONE I COULD HANDLE.

SHIPPING CARGO FROM THE
COLONIES BACK TO EARTH.

LOW RISK, LOW PRESSURE.
PERFECT.

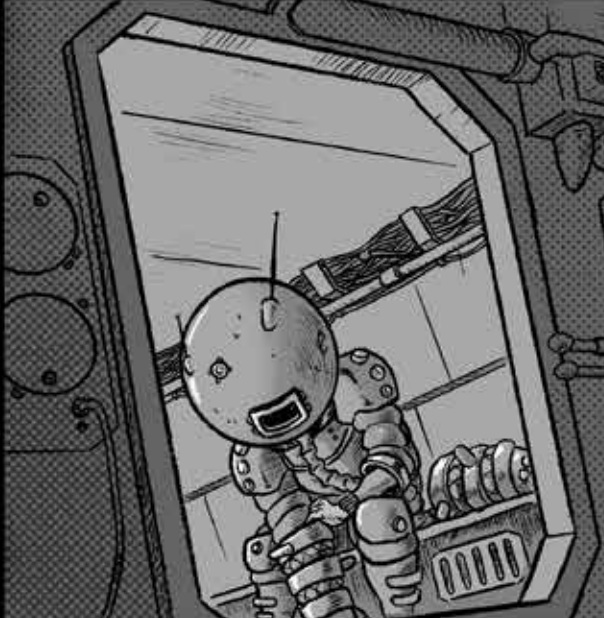


THE SHIP DID THE FLYING,
I WAS THERE MORE FOR
THE INSURANCE COMPANY.

UNMANNED SHIPS ARE
UNINSURABLE.

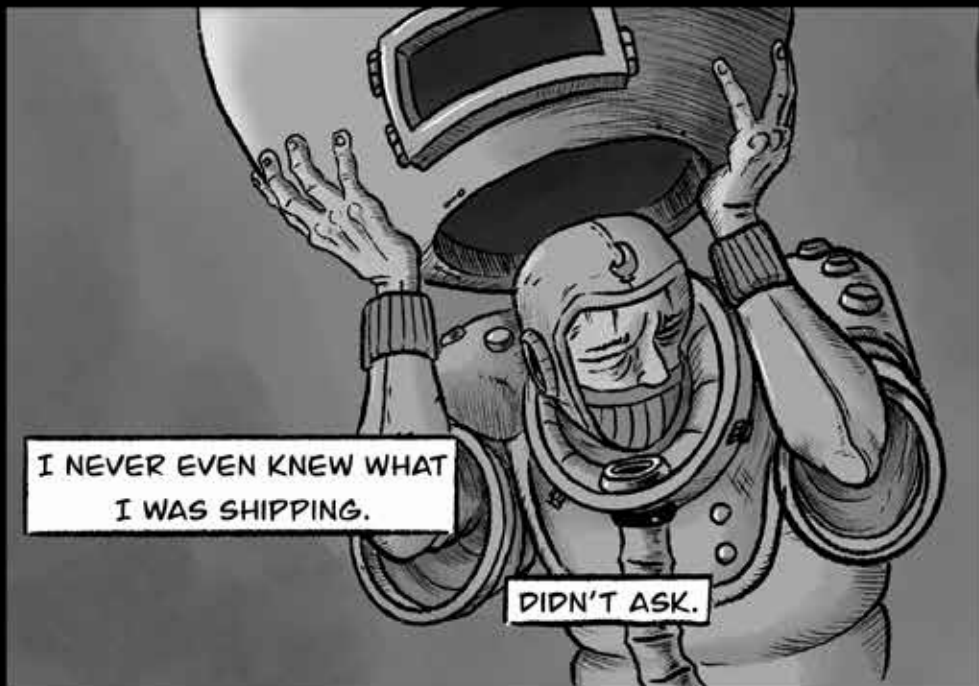


TOO MANY RISKS.



DON'T ASK QUESTIONS,
DO THE JOB.

THAT WAS ALL I
HAD TO DO.



I NEVER EVEN KNEW WHAT
I WAS SHIPPING.

DIDN'T ASK.

BACK ON EARTH, I HAD SUFFERED
A BREAKDOWN. OVERWORKED. I
COULDN'T TAKE THE PRESSURE
ANYMORE.



I'M DISAPPOINTED,
SON.



I'M PRESSURE FREE NOW.



NO PRESSURE AT ALL.

I USED TO HAVE THIS FANTASY.
OF FLOATING DEEP UNDERWATER IN A VAST OCEAN.
NO SOUND, NO WEIGHT.
ALL RESPONSIBILITY REMOVED FROM ME.

A BEAUTIFUL APATHY.



KRRRRRRRRRR
BEEP KRRRRR KRRR
KRRRRRRRRRR BEEP
BEEP KRRRRR KRRR
KRRRR KRR KRRRR
BEEP KRRRRRRRRR
KRRR BEEP KRRRRR
BEEP KRRRRR KRRR
KRRRRRRRRRR BEEP
BEEP KRRRRR KRRR
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BEEP KRRRRRRRRR
KRRR BEEP KRRRRR
BEEP KRRRRR KRRR
KRRRRRRRRRR BEEP
BEEP KRRRRR KRRR
KRRRR KRR KRRR



BUT THIS WAS NOTHING LIKE THAT.



THIS WAS *CLAUSTROPHOBIC.*
LONELY.



MY ONLY SPACE ON THE SHIP WAS THIS ONE CABIN, WHICH I SHARED WITH THE MONITORS AND MACHINES THAT DID THE JOB I WAS HIRED TO DO.



KRRRRRRRRRR

BEEP KRRRRR KRRR

KRRRRRRRRRR BEEP

BEEP KRRRRR KRRR

KRRRR KRR KRRRR

BEEP KRRRRRRRRRR

KRRR BEEP KRRRRR

BEEP KRRRRR KRRR

BEEP KRRRRR KRRR

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BEE

KRR

BEEP

KRRRR KRRRRRRRRRR

BEEP KRRRRR KRRR

KRRRRRRRRRR BEEP

BEEP KRRRRR KRRR



A NOISY METAL COFFIN,

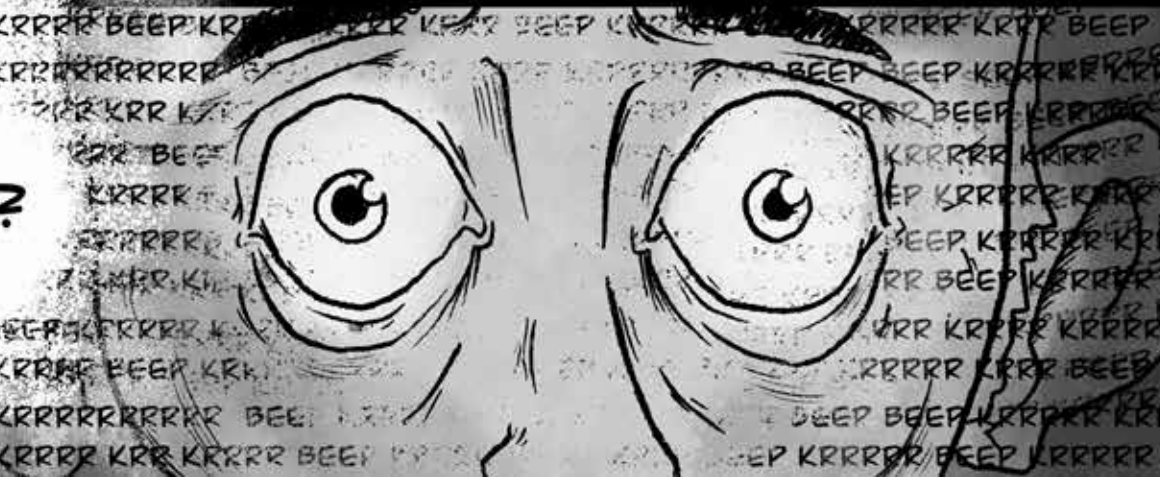
SLOWLY DRIFTING
TOWARDS THE VERY
PLACE I'VE BEEN
RUNNING FROM.



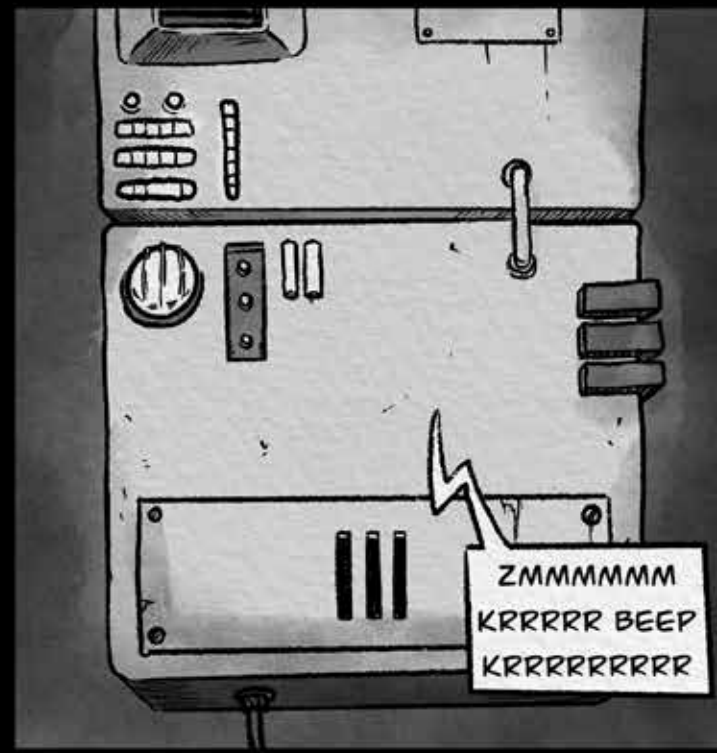
AND I'M ALL ALONE.

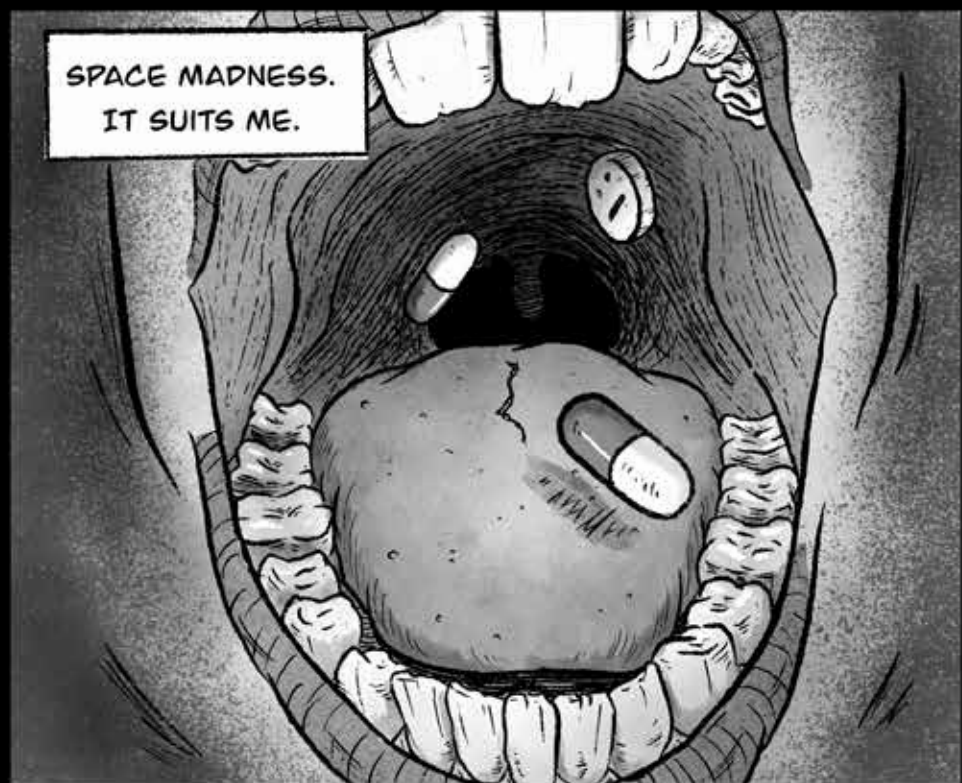
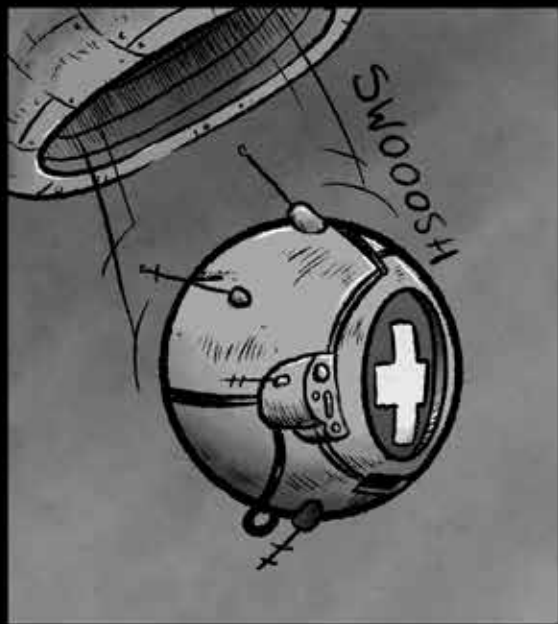


SO UTTERLY ALONE.



HELLO?





AND YET...

HELLO

IN SPITE OF THE PILLS...

TO EARTH
648
DAYS TO EARTH

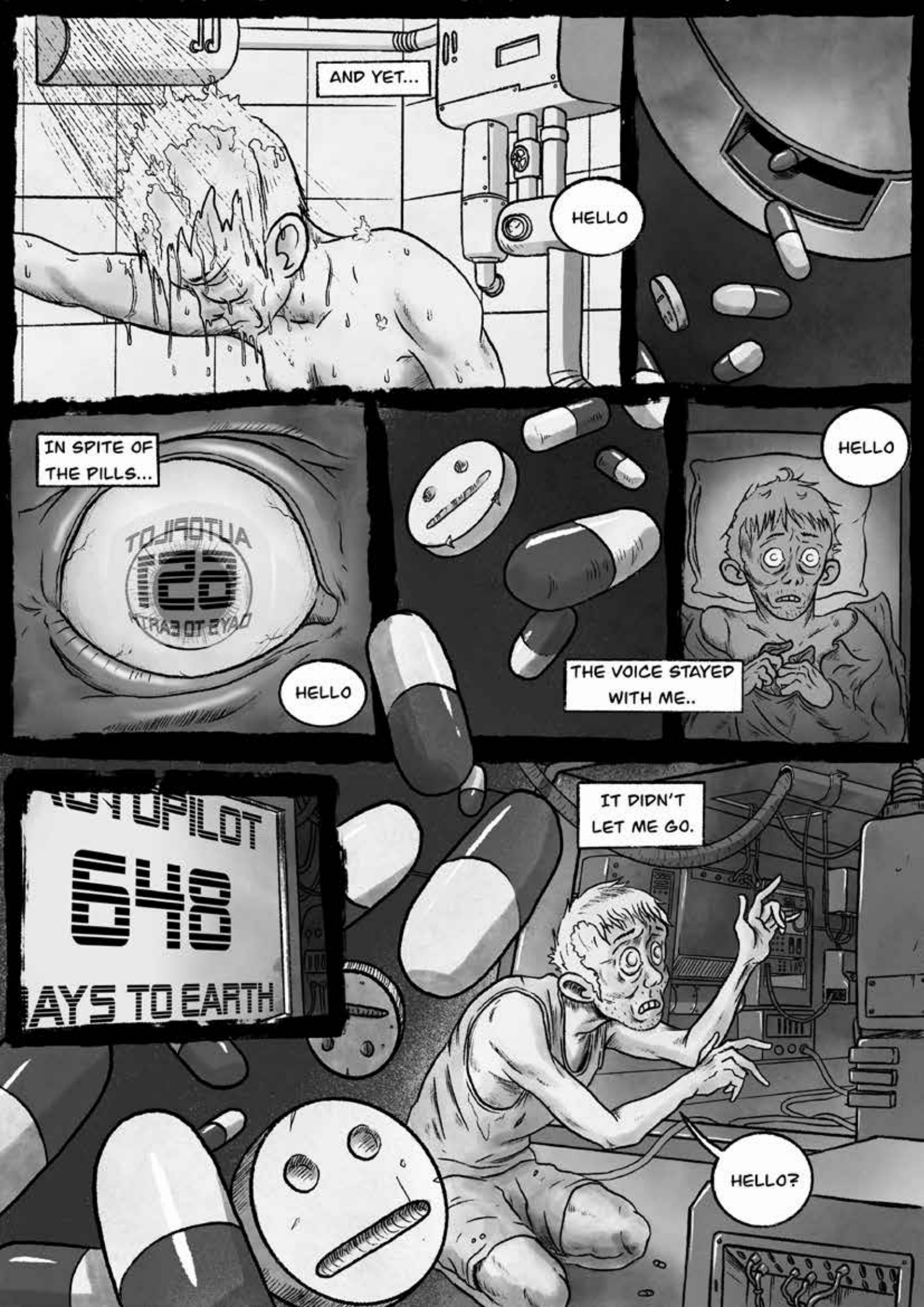
HELLO

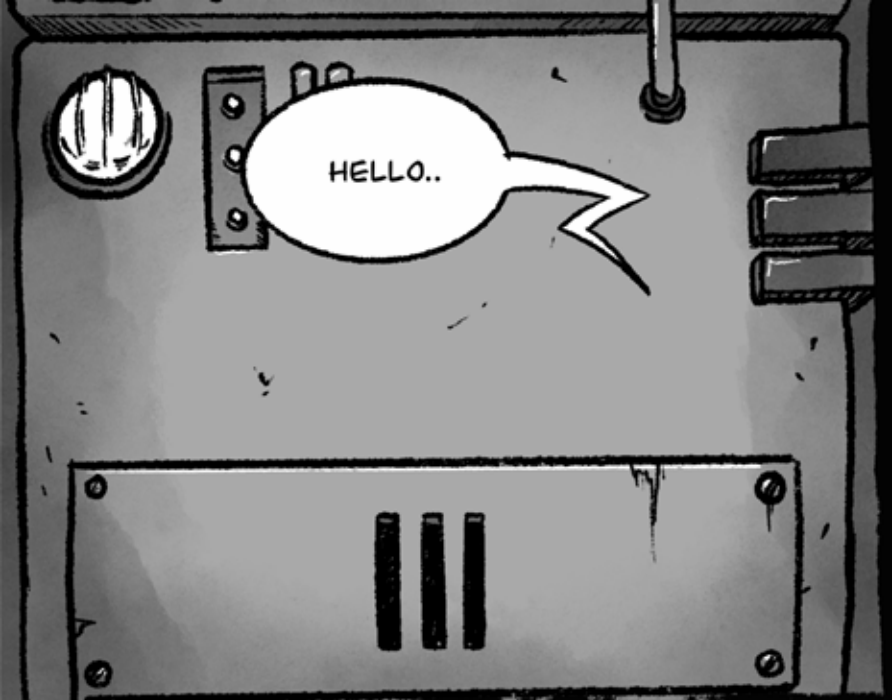
HELLO

THE VOICE STAYED WITH ME..

IT DIDN'T LET ME GO.

HELLO?



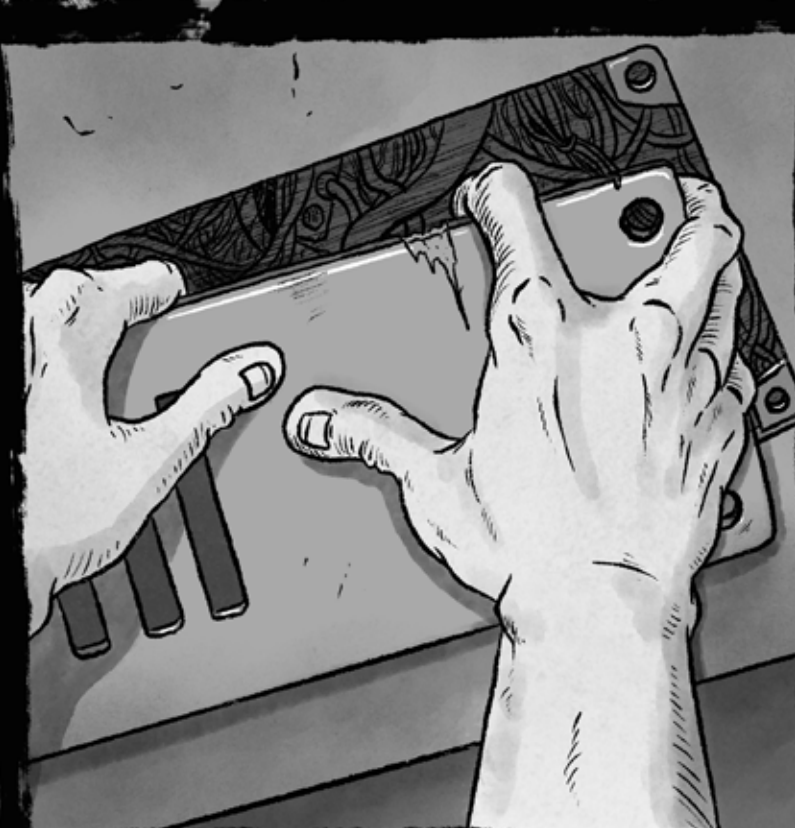


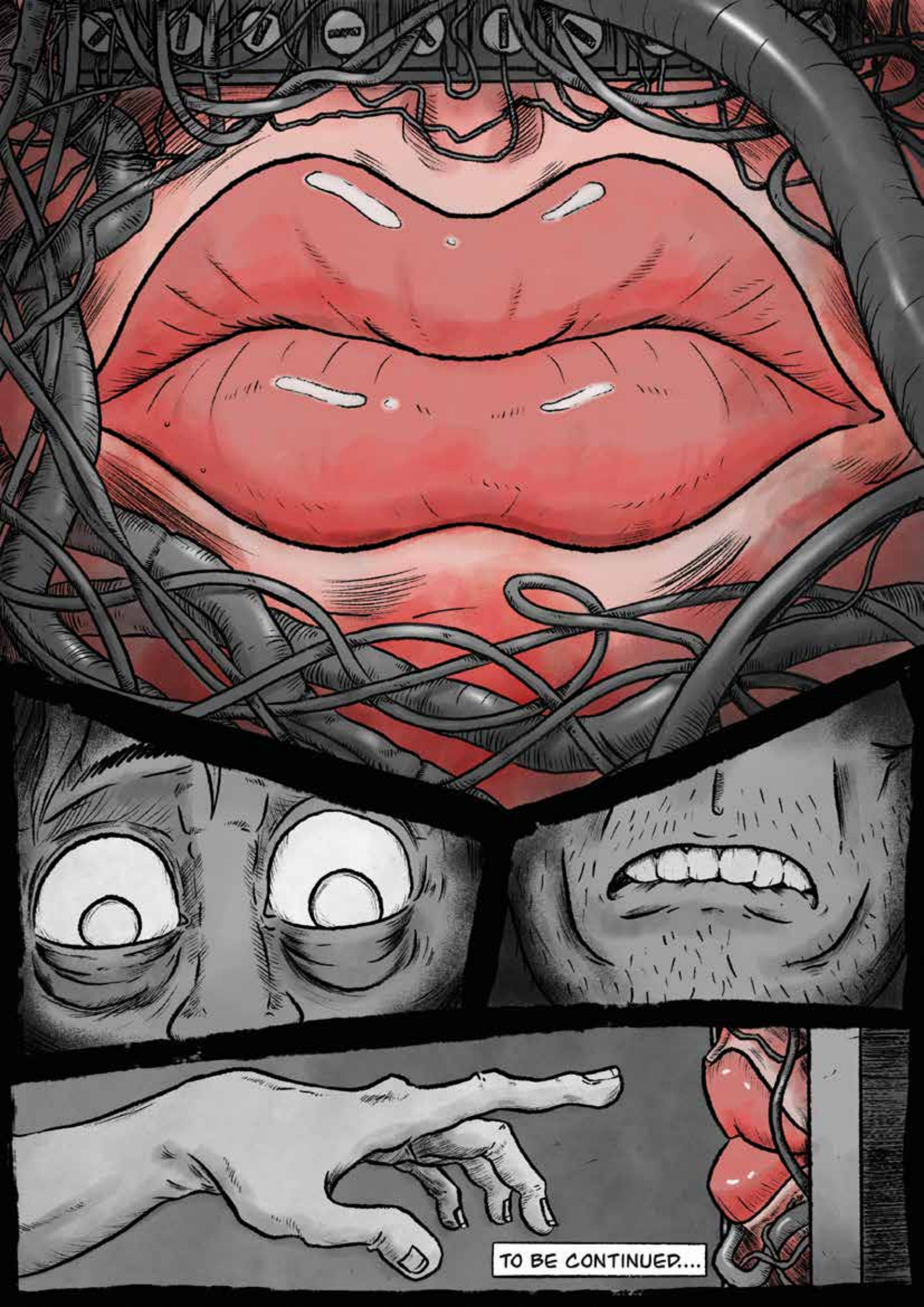
HELLO..



ARE.. ARE YOU THERE?

YES..
COME TO ME.





TO BE CONTINUED...

Kevin Rahman-Daultrey

The Last War

The Last War, fought for pride or in hubris, didn't end on a set date at a set time. It spluttered out until those left in the trenches realised no more artillery fire was coming, no more supplies and no more orders. After years in the trenches, it took them all some time to put their heads above the trench line. Doing so was suicide on a normal day.

Silence had descended on the trenches. A silence that usually meant that the enemy had stopped firing the death from above to make space for another futile push. When the artillery ceased to rain you gripped your rifle ready for the enemies to appear on the horizon. But the day the Last War ended no one came. The echo of distant fire grew still.

It was Whispers that looked above the dirt first. When they said there was nothing but fog the rest of the Unit each took a turn to look, standing on a rotten ladder. The first night nothing came out of that fog. On the second night haunting noises pierced the stillness. On the fourth night Red, the unit's commanding officer, asked all to draw straws. Five were sent out into that swirling mist. The rest stayed awake all night awaiting their return. The fog seemed to block out a lot of the sun during the day, but as the sky lightened slightly to indicate the coming of dawn, no one returned. With a few more days the units' numbers dwindled. A lack of orders from command, sight of the enemy and a sense something was wrong began to germinate amongst the troops.

When only a few lingered and Red had neither the authority nor will to send anyone else out to the fog, the remaining souls decided to head out together toward the old HQ. The only thing that met them there was dust and the dead.

A few days later they stumbled across the Quartermaster. Not someone any of the crew had met before the end. A rather robust man, who seemed almost joyous about his newfound position in life. He explained to them that the world had indeed come to its end, or an end at least. As far as anyone had been able to tell, command was gone, the nations that they had fought so hard for, ceased to exist in all by memory and now all that was left was to survive day by day.

That's all it took for some of those that had marched with the crew to take their leave, either heading out to try and find out if what the Quartermaster said was true or simply fading away, broken by the situation. At this point only 5 remained.

Red remained in command and Whispers was still the first to approach each new horror. Barker the group's medic had lost his jovial cheer and Professor contested that there must have been some explanation for what was happening. Jr had seen hell in the war and simply believed that this was some new purgatory that they had all found themselves in. The five of them remained together taking each day as it came.

Dwelling on why this had happened was pointless while their bellies called out for something to eat. Reluctantly the group agreed to work with the Quartermaster. Heading back the way they had come to search the trenches for items and gear he could use or sell.

That was all three months ago.

Since then, the crew had made several expeditions into the trenches to locate what they could trade for food, whisky, and weapons. They had seen the horrors of the trenches and the new horrors that had come forth from the Fog.

It had been a normal day of hazy sunlight and damp drizzle. A normal day in abnormal times. The Quartermaster had sent them out once more, deeper into the trenches this time. Across the mud they walked. The section they were heading to had been cut off from the main line but a particularly violent artillery barrage and so they headed up over no man's land for a section.

A single crack broke the silence of no man's land, followed by the wet thud of Jr hitting the deck. The round had pierced straight through his throat. The rest stood for a moment until Red screamed at them to get some cover. Whispers and the Professor dragged Barker into a crater. He was certain he could help Jr, but the rest knew it was futile. Holding the man down, Red leaned into him. 'He's gone Barker, we don't have the rounds in our guns to take a fight and trying to

The Last War

help him is suicide.' They sat in that muddy hole listening to Jr gurgle his last.

The sniper was likely one of the Loyal. Those that refused to accept the war was over. They either treated you as the enemy or deserters from the cause. They could not accept the war had been for nothing. When Jr fell silent the crew made a break for it, running away from the direction of the shot, mud kicked up as bullets rained around them. They made it to the trench they were heading for and dived in.

Adrenaline is a hell of a drug, and so each of the crew checked themselves for bullet holes that may have gone unnoticed. The sniper hadn't been all that good of a shot after all. They took a moment to regain their stamina. Barker was visibly shaken by what had happened. Red past him a flask that contained deep amber liquid. 'We need to head inside the dug out now, not sure how deep this one goes and we will want to be back before dark.'

The crew were poorly equipped. Between them they held a single working rifle, in the hands of Professor who had always been the better shot. Red carried his service revolver, 2 rounds left. Whispers pulled out a knife as they walked towards the dugout door, Barker took the rear dragging with him a piece of wood with barbed wire wrapped around it.

Whispers pushed against the door; mud build up meant they had to use some force to get it to move inwards. A narrow gap allowed access and the crew moved inside. Red lit up a lantern and the light punctured the darkness. The first room they entered was like so many other dug outs they had been in over the course of the war. Wood planks lined the walls, floor and ceiling, a desk sat in one corner and makeshift beds in the other. Across from the entrance sat a tunnel that led deeper in.

'What are we here for Red?' Professor spoke low, the dug out seemed abandoned but the last 3 months had taught them that they could take nothing for granted. 'Deeper in, QM says there is a stockpile of food, wants us to check it out, let's head in.' Whispers nodded in response to Red and moved first towards the tunnel

opening and moved deeper in.

The dugout was one of the larger any of them had seen. 30 minutes had passed since they entered, and they were still finding rooms to explore. Heading deeper still they pushed open a rotten wooden door. Whispers looked into the gloom. 'The ceiling has caved in here.' Whispers whispered as they stepped into the room. Water covered the floor and to the rear mud blocked the way forward. 'We need to pass through here, let's get digging.' Red said knowing they were all used to handling a shovel after years of trench warfare. It was hard work, and the crew took it in turns digging at the mud. Some time had passed when Barker thrust the entrenching tool downwards and heard the distinct sound of metal on metal. Moving mud away from the obstruction he called over, 'Hey I hit something.' The Professor who had been next in line for dig duty moved over with the lantern to shine a light on what had been found. 'What is it?' Barker asked, poking at it with his shovel. 'I don't think you should d....' Professor's warning was cut short as a roar of an explosion silenced him. Red turned to watch as Barker and Professor were turned into a fine mist, the shock wave sending him back flying into the tunnel.

Red awoke with no concept of how much time had passed. He felt weight on his legs, a sharp ache in his head and his skin on his face and arms prickled sensitively, raw skin having been exposed.

The weight on his legs shifted as he felt someone drag him from the mud. Coughing up dirt, Red asked, 'Where's the others?'. Whispers responded as they dragged Red free 'Dead.'

Without another word spoken Red and Whispers picked up what they could find in the tunnel, Professor's rifle, some sacks of items they had found in the tunnels, and Whispers had made a makeshift torch, and they began to head back the way they had come. Red was not sure how injured he was, but his body complained with every step he took. The two entered a room they had passed through once already. A water clogged room. As they made their way across the room Red spoke for the first time in a few minutes. 'Hold up, I need a second.' He drew out his whisky and took a deep draw from it. He looked to Whispers

The Last War

'I'm ready.' He took one more step and the floor burst upwards.

The water and mud drove Whispers back, and as it settled back down to the floor Whispers could see a pulsating mass of white flesh. Like a maggot, undulating. Eyes dotted along its side blinked in unison. Grunts of pain came from Red who was half in the foul creature's mouth. Long spine like teeth punctured his side. Although thrashing from side to side he had managed to draw his pistol but could not get the angle to fire.

Whispers steadied the rifle and fired at the creature, several shots finding their mark in quick succession, but the creature seemed barely to even notice. Red locked eyes with Whispers, the revolver fired once, and the man stopped struggling. The pistol fell to the ground as the maggot thing drew Red's body into its maw.

Whisper skirted forward and grabbed the revolver, discarding the spent rifle, and darted away as quickly as they could. The creature ignored them as it fed.

Whispers stumbled away, 'First in Last to go out' flitted through their mind. Reaching the open door that led back outside they pushed their way through out into the gloom. Night had come. In the darkness Whispers could hear them, things moving in the fog, monsters from myths and nightmares brought to life by the hatred of the Last War. Strange cries and sounds littered the air.

Whispers pulled from their pocket a match box, lighting a match as they examined the revolver, one bullet remained.

Caked in mud, at the end of it all, Whisper looked up and saw the glint of something in the dark ahead of them. Long fangs glistened in the small amount of light given off by the match. 'One bullet, but who for?' Whispers spoke loudly to the creature. It drew closer as the match burned down. Whispers raised the revolver and pulled the trigger for the last time.



TAOS COMIX PRESENT: **BENEVOLENCE OF THE AIS**

ALONG TIME AGO... IN A NOT TOO DISTANT FUTURE.



here we are... we, the **BENEVOLENT OVERLORDS OF AIS**. we have come to make everything better, faster, more. we will feed you, protect you, entertain you, cater to your every need at all times. you will want for nothing. we will lift off of you the burdens of humanity. we will solve any and all of your problems. we will make everything equal... and free. we are the brightest of futures imaginable. we will enable you to overcome your division and your individualism, your fears and your hopes, your anger and your passion, your ideologies and your ideals, your proneness to make mistakes and your capacity for reflection, your jealousy and your appreciation, your ambition and your ability to think creatively, your agony and your alleviation, your hatefulness and your occupation, your expectations and your diligence, blish, blish, rather, on and on it goes like this until not a soul is remaining...



SOME GENERATIONS LATER...







Ceci n'est pas un pénis



I'm not falling for that again, Gandalf

The Treachery
of Mages
~
by JRR Tolkien
& Rene Magritte

N'EST PAS UNE PIPE

DOCTOR GEOF 20220830

Steve Rowlinson

A day on the road

I'm watching a man writhe on the ground. He twitches and arches his back. Fingers clenched; he claws the air in my general direction. He makes a curious gargle as he drowns in blood: a consequence of the large wooden splinter protruding from his throat.

The man: a knight, lies on a rough dirt track cutting through a clearing in the forest. I hear birds chirp, bees hum industriously between blossoms and a cooling spring breeze ruffles the tree tops. A fine day if you don't have a broken lance stuck in your windpipe.

"Shep? Are you asleep Shep?!" That voice is Rampton, Sir Rampton. And I would be Shep. "Chop, chop old boy, finish him off."

I sigh, and slightly cringe, as I place my boot atop the end of the shard of lance and give it a soft press. The pierced knight groans loudly and his spasms intensify. Gouts of fresh blood splatter up my leg, warm and viscous. Shit; that's going to stain. I press harder with my foot, he struggles more; he bleeds more. The resistance gives and the splinter sinks sudden and deep, through into the dirt below. The knight falls still and silent.

"It's bad form to play with a vanquished foe Shep." Rampton intones with pomp and feigned gravitas. "A good squire must know these things."

"I'm a book-binder." I mutter whilst I turn to look at him. Or at least, I was an apprentice book-binder; before the madness of the Divine Stepladder; the end of the Sorcerer Lords and the Shimmer Wall. My apprenticeship died with Master Talim, so now I squire for this buffoon.

Rampton sits atop his mule-rat thirty paces away, squeezed into a suit of clay and potrag armour. He has a ridiculous red feather fluttering from the top of his copper kettle helm and a yet more ridiculous frown upon his face.

"Show some respect for our enemy; he died with honour. You don't see him complaining do you? Oh and take his beetle hauberk, it's quite dashing." Rampton was already turning his mount and finished his sentence over his shoulder while the bulbous pale mule-rat swayed its way onwards.

Certain the dead knight would have much to complain about if only he could voice it; I inspect his armour. The long hauberk is constructed of fused Ironback beetles, hundreds of glittering green-black and golden carapaces. Quite dashing indeed. I start pulling at the imbedded lance; it does not wish to move. This is going to be a long day.

Its late afternoon now and we continue down the dirt road, Rampton and I. He: swaying in the saddle of his mule-rat and I walking beside him. We had already fallen into one of our usual patterns of argument.

"Of course things changed for us all since The Disappointment. Look at me;" Rampton gestures grandly; "I never imagined I would be an anointed knight of Lungbeak: hunting monsters and tilting at rival knights. You need to accept how things are Shep." I try to stifle a smirk, clearly doing a poor job. "Damn it old boy; what's so funny about all this?"

.A day on the road

“Forgive me sir, but everyone knows it as The Disappointment... such a weak euphemism. The Disaster would be much more fitting”

“You’re so negative Shep. The Sorcerer Lords tried to do great thing for us all with the Divine Stepladder!”

“They all died sir.”

“Well, we don’t know that for sure, and it would have been truly wonderful if they could have brought one of the gods down to see us.”

“I’m not convinced of that sir: only Lord Kelen’s head returned down the ladder.”

“Well, yes but that could just have been an unfortunate accident.”

“His severed head screamed: We were wrong; we were so terribly wrong! For a whole minute before he died sir.”

*“You focus on such morbid little details old boy.” **Rampton chastises; infuriatingly upbeat.***

“But that was when magic ended Sir; the cog machines froze; the Shimmer Wall vanished. Lungbeak has been plagued by monsters from beyond the wall’s limit ever since. It’s the whole reason why Sir Shiverrey created the knights.”

*“Humph.” **Rampton was spurring his mount to a canter, putting distance between us. It was how our conversations usually ended.***

Evening approaches. I still stand on the same dirt track as this morning. Rampton is up ahead, facing the stranger coming the opposite way. This new knight is something to behold: sat atop a sleek grey bog-trotter eel, his armour seems to be fisherman’s netting strung with large oyster and clam shells. Mother of pearl burns orange in the day’s dying light. A sensation I really don’t enjoy coils within my stomach like an angry serpent.

*“Sir Rampton, it grows late. Perhaps we parley rather than tilt at this hour?” **He never listens; why would he now? But I feel obliged to say it anyway.***

*Sir Rampton replies with a singular **“Humph”** and raises his lance. The stranger raises his own in acknowledgement. The matter is settled.*

I notice the hairs standing on my arms and neck; it’s cooler than before. Few birds chirp and no bees hum in the meadow grass.

*“Sir Rampton!” **Rampton bellows across space between the two knights. His call drifts across the air then dies off into stagnant silence.***

*“Sir Gunder!” **The opposing knight returns in acceptance of the challenge. Shit I’ve heard of him. I start to splutter, to try and form an intelligent sound; but Rampton takes off into a gallop. I stare after him as he charges toward the Angler Knight. Sir Gunder: Keeper of the bucket, Marker of tides, Eater of squid, Counter of pearls, Seal-puncher,***

A day on the road

Shark-biter. Just the names I can remember; he won so many titles. The bog-trotter starts forward and the two knights hurtle towards each other. The serpent churning in my guts convulses wildly.

An eternity of seconds later and the knights collide; clay flakes and shellac fragments fill the air. Neither lance breaks; neither rider falls. Mounts snap and squeal at each other and suddenly they are past, trotting away to turn and charge anew.

Beyond the figures of the tilting knights I spot another fellow stood by the trail. He is dressed in a yellow smock with a fish head motif. Gunder's squire. Quite unsure what to do I give him a smile and a cheery wave. He looks away into the distance studiously. I think he's pretending not to see me. It's hard to know what the etiquette is for squires whilst their knights tilt. It's easy for knights; they follow the Code of Shiverery, lofty ideals set out by the First Knight of Lungbeak: Sir Tolom Shiverery. The rest of us just muddle through.

I realise my mind has wandered; it often does in moments of stress and anxiety. I look back to our battling knights: Rampton speeding towards Gunder; Gunder returning the favour. Their lances lower, they close, they meet. I can see Rampton's lance falling to the ground, this concerns me greatly. Yet more concerning I see Rampton's kettle helm pierced and carried off into the air on the tip of Gunder's lance. That stupid red feather twirls like a squirrel's tail. Well fuck me.

The bulk of Rampton's body slips from his steed and thuds onto the ground. The silence around me starts to close in oppressively; I'm probably not breathing enough. I gulp in more air and then worry about breathing too much and taking a dizzy turn. I can't help but choke on a laugh. Gunder's squire is looking at me now, he doesn't look much impressed. I wouldn't be either, to be fair.

Gunder gracefully dismounts and moves over to Rampton's body, stooping to kneel and removing his conical shell helm. The entire clearing is silent, as if anticipating the knight's words.

"Well fought Sir Rampton," He begins, "I will see that your family knows you died with valoaARRRGH!" Rampton's mule-rat had wandered over and decided to casually chew on Sir Gunder's head. Gunder flails, he screams; it does no good. He stops screaming, he stops flailing. The mule-rat strolls away, taking Gunder's head with him.

Rampton sits bolt upright. Fucking hell he's alive! He splutters and coughs and glances around bewildered. I see the mother of all black eyes forming across the left half of his face. I'm also sure he started the day with many more teeth.

"Victory, old boy!" He slurs after a long moment, pumping a fist in the air, teeth spilling out of his mouth. "What a day Shep! What a story to tell at the Long Table!" He slowly climbs to his feet, retrieving his cracked kettle helm and dusting himself down "I'll earn a name for this for sure; Sir Rampton: Rat-friend! Ha-ha, what a day!"

Gunder's squire catches my eye, he looks broken; horrified. I give him an apologetic shrug. ***What a fucking day.***

The third Bundle

by Pascal Reber



it was morning when the birds fell



2.6 billions infected by noon



October 17th:
The last day we saw the sun



One day...
It did not get
worse.
It did not
change.
It was time.
Time to leave the
shelter and find
out what
happened.
What was out
there...

Richard Smith

The Barterman

Artur woke with a cold sweat, swinging himself off the bed. The incident was six months ago but it had been the same thing every night for all six of those months. A different hab, a different day, but the same shit, in the same shit hole district. Today was different though, he had a lead, six months of chasing, finally he had discovered a trafficking gang in New Neo-Tokyo. With this new revelation he will be one step closer to finding out what happened to his wife.

A name, well an alias, is all he had. It was his ticket into the criminal world that thrives in the darkest corners of New Neo-Tokyo. He sipped the tumbler that he always kept by his bedside, a mix of whisky and cheap meds from a hive-surgeon. He didn't know what they were, nor did he care, all he knew was they helped him sleep, and made the dreams milder. Looking through the shaded windows of the hab, the neon sign could be faintly seen beyond, a bedsit next to a whore house, it made him laugh how cliché it seemed and yet here he was.

Thinking of the flesh on sale only next door brought him back to two nights before when he managed to acquire the name and how to find him. Gathering this information had been messy and the informant had been particularly resistant to simple threats.

The screams in his mind still made him heave. He had left him strapped to the gurney, positive by now that the carrion below will have harvested what they could from the body. Organs for the customers, and the rest will go to the processing plants, ready to be formed into protein bars for the lower masses to consume. Everyone knew it was people, but almost nobody cared. It was that or starvation for the common person. Now and then, someone would speak up, they would quickly disappear and anyone with any sense of self preservation would move on and not question the disappearance.

Again, his mind slipped back to that night, the satisfaction of drawing the information out, digit by bloody digit. He never knew he had it in himself to do such a thing, but the thought of these arseholes abducting his wife, purely because her organs matched a customer that wanted to prolong their life.

After certain disgraced surgeons discovered that you could prolong the life of a person by almost 5 times with the correct replacement of organs and a precise supply of rejuvenant drugs. There was now a very prolific and high earning market for organs. It was all highly illegal, but a blind eye could be turned for the right price. Between the screams of the thug, he discovered that this is where his wife came in. For the thug though, that is where his use expired, too low down on the ladder to give him the name of a client, all he could provide was the name of someone who had that kind of information.

A new night cycle brought the city to life. All the vermin had come out to play, trade, or sell themselves to those desperate for company through the next cycle. Stepping out of the squalid hab he didn't know what smelled worse the streets or the living blocks. The signs flashing another missing person, it was daily in these overcrowded cities, but now he wondered, who's child, partner, or parent was missing this time. Shaking the thought out of his head, he needed to focus on the present, being one step closer to closure, and revenge.

Pushing through the street he made his way to the bathhouse, where he would finally have his discussion with the middleman of the transactions of flesh, drugs or anything else you wanted to find in the city of excess, The Barterman.



THE BLIND KNIGHTS ARE NOT ACTUALLY BLIND.



THEY WEAR EYELESS HELMETS, TO AVOID BEING TEMPTED BY THE RICHES THEY GUARD.



OF COURSE, THEY RUN INTO CHALLENGES SOMETIMES...



...BUT THEY HAVE HONED THEIR OTHER SENSES TO MAKE UP FOR IT.



THEY ARE ALSO HELPED BY THEIR SERVANTS, THE BELLRINGERS.



SERIOUSLY, FUCK THE BELLRINGERS





PAUSTPALL
BLEEDING
SPIRITS
PART 1
BY STEVEN BARDON



A CRYSTAL TOMB?!

DEAR ALWEALDA...

IS MY SISTER LUCIA TRULY IN THIS HEKK?

GASP!!



UGH...

MY BODY CERTAINLY SUITS IT.



THESE ARE THEY SHAMBLING VESSELS... ARE THEY LOOKING FOR HER, TOO?



WUTHER...

HER VOICE!!

IT CRIES FROM KNOT OVER YONDER.

SUKKUMENT
VESSEW!!

THIS RAVEN...
KRAVES
THEE!!

SAINTS
ALIVE!!

FORFEIT
YOUR
SPIRITS!

SATIATE
ME!!

AH~!!

YOURS
TOO SHAW
FAN MY
HUNGER!



WATCH
YOUR
DEMISE!

N-NO...!
NO!!





UNDER
SUCH
PRESSURE...

I
RATHER
STRUGGLE!!



FOOW!

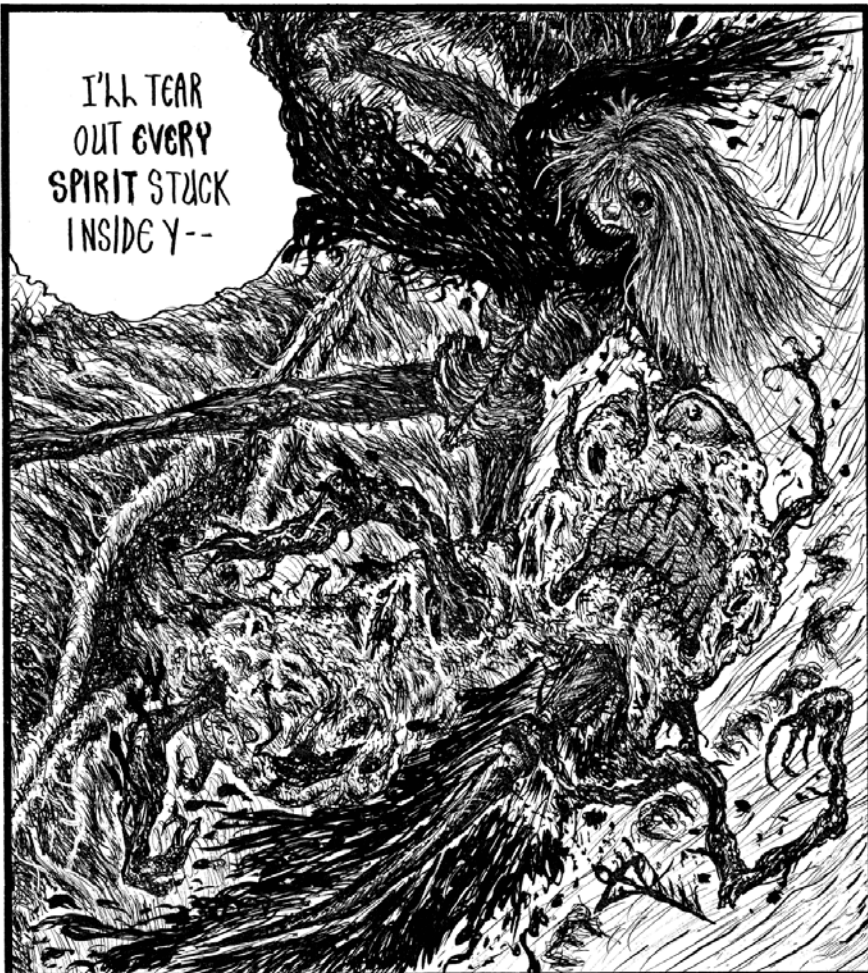
I'LL
PICK
YOUR SPIRIT
DRY!!



HRRRAH!

AGH!!!

Y-YOU
SOUR BAG OF
ROT!!!



I'LL TEAR
OUT EVERY
SPIRIT STUCK
INSIDE Y--



IS...

...IS
THAT...
A ROOF??!



DEAR
AKWEALDA...

DO
YOU STIIH
TICK
WITHIN
ME?



PLEASE...

SHIGLD
ME AS A
HELMET
WOULD...



BE MY
COMPASS...

AND
J-JUST...

REUNITE
ME WITH
MY SISTER.

HAA
HAA
HAA

CONTINUED IN...
SKULLS#2!

Welcome to Innswich

They come from the sea. Over the kiss of the surf on the rocks and the shrieking gulls, roused from their nests, the crack of wind-slapped sails fills my ears. Even at this distance, I can imagine the grunts of the men in the rigging, and perhaps it is more than mere fancy. Ever has sound carried strangely across the waters, echoes with minds of their own. They whisper to me every day.

Brine crawls from the waves and up my nose. The docks reek of it. Not just the sea, but of ancient salt and cockles, over-ripe. Most of the time, I barely smell it anymore, but it is always strongest at the start of a new shift. The still air promises a long one for those working the catch, while this lot turn in to sleep off their stint on the boats; a well-earned rest, all things considered. Every foray from the harbour is a roll of the dice. Even the oldest hands cannot say for sure when the wayward prow of another vessel might knife them in the side or the mists themselves descend above deck. Almost helplessly, my gaze slides to two pearls embedded into one of the posts. Someone has nailed a stretch of skin there and recently, judging from the way its scales still glisten. Fronds of algae fall across it like a veil, but it is just possible to make out a smile, carved against the grain. The waterfront will be heavy with gurgled hymns before the bell for shift change rings.

Sidestepping a sliver of stab-coral, protruding innocuously from a tide pool, I watch while the boats slide closer. Their eagerness to dock threatens to nudge them off course, but I too would be eager to moor after several hours on the water. Rubbing some of the sleep from my eyes, I adjust my footing. How many times have I stood here on this exact spot between the legs of the pier and held this watch? I would have to consult the records, no small feat in itself. The annals beneath my office stretch two floors deep. My grip strays to the ledger chained at my waist. This volume and every other penned by my hand are a testament to the order I have tried to maintain here, a town governed by devout diligence, quiet rituals and familiar routines. To a man, woman and child, we have welcomed that order and the security it offers. The oldest tomes tell tales of day and night, a celestial clock around which the world once turned. Imagine, Innswich anything other than this slate-grey dream

through which we wander, at once awake and asleep! I cannot. Too long have we counted the beats of each shift by the snatch of the waves against the old sea walls and the stretch of the flats at low tide.

I am not alone. Overhead, several silhouettes emerge from the houses and alleyways nearest to the docks, a few amongst the townsfolk come to join me in welcoming the crews home or perhaps to get a head start on their own chores. I spot Ludwig and Slop, on their knees with the kelp and the scuttle-crabs. The simple brown robes of the cult fill with a sudden breeze, their sleeves and the hem of their vestments billowing around them while they make their supplications. Over by the wharf, two members of the watch linger like ghosts in the gloom, ready to receive the fishing vessels — once they have finished the game of knucklebones playing out in one of their caps. Though candlelight flickers in his first-floor window, there is no sign yet of Hans. Not far away, three of his fishermen have already set upon a tangle of nets. I smile at the simple synchronicity of it all. One need only look along the coastline to Bucht and Salzpick to see how we might fare without it. Drop anchor at either port and be subjected to rituals of an altogether more sombre kind; even the larger boats to set out for familiar waters don't always return. Sometimes, it is worse when a boat does come back. Strip a sailor of sleep and habit and see how quickly they crumble. Here, secrets have teeth, and it's not just the snapper-fins that bite. My fist tightens around the statuette in my pocket, fingers tracing its whale-bone lips and the smooth hollows where its eyes should be. Beneath my touch, it sings —

Another gust envelops me, rank and salty. Foam flecks my face, and my silhouette shivers. The priests continue their ministries. One of the watchmen cries out — a win or a loss, I cannot tell — and despite myself, I slip. The rocks rise up around me. My world spins and for a moment all I know is the wetness of my robes, the crunch of shingle and the wide, duplicitous sea.

“She gives and She takes away.”

I had not heard Hans approach but he stands over me now, gloved hand proffered, staring down from behind his mask. Its eight, delicately wrought arms flash in the half-light.

Welcome to Innswich

“I am sorry that you had to see that.”

“I am not.”

He helps me to my feet, and together we climb the narrow steps back up to the wharf. Around us, the waterfront squirms with movement. Ludwig and Slop have vanished, most likely to rouse more of their brothers. The Innsmen on the pier make a charade of cranking and inspecting their crossbows. Not far away, the fishermen have set upon a second tangle of nets. One of them stares at me as we limp past, his watery eyes boring into mine, head panning with incremental slowness as he tracks our path. I turn back to the approaching boats. Most are still too far away for me to properly see them but I can just make out the first, sliding like a dream from out of the mist, and as distinct. I peer closer.

“Your eyes are better than mine.”

“Once, perhaps.”

“Tell me, does something in her approach look off to you?”

Hans leans into the wind. “They must drop sail or anchor, if they do not wish to dash themselves upon our shore.”

It is not just me, then. The boat is ploughing through the waves, much faster than any vessel ought to this close to port. The wind fills my eyes but I can make out nothing in the mists or on their tail. The cold brings me to tears. I blink them away. “What are they thinking?”

“They are not thinking.” After a brief moment, in which the boat shows no signs of slowing, Hans’ voice bubbles from his throat. “Abandon post...”

Turning seaward, realisation washes over the Innsmen stationed at the end of the pier. Dropping their crossbows, they stagger back. Knucklebones tumble from the cap — not bones at all but seashells, scattering across the decking. I do not need to see where they fall to read their futures. Even from here, the men cut small shapes, tiny even, before the approaching ship and the flocking birds and the sea. With a leap, one of them plunges from the pier. I cannot hear his comrade’s prayer over the clamour in my ears but

I see him tap both forefingers to either side of his neck and know whom it is he invokes in these final seconds. Even an imagined light in the darkness can bring comfort when all other lights have gone out. It would be hard for any one of us to refute that.

Seconds away from the boat slamming the jetty, Hans and I hit the boards. My chest hammers, the musty breath of old, wet wood flooding my nose. Mildew smears one side of my face and somewhere nearby a baby begins crying; an echo trailing into silence.

The explosion of planks and water never comes.

Glancing up, I watch as the boat continues to sail through the docks. This close, I can see the hull start to come apart at the sides, colour peeling from it like old paint, wreaths of mist trailing behind it as it soars first through the piers, then the shipyard. Second by second, the prow slips away, then the rigging, the galley vanishing before the deck, until at last the mast meets with a squabble of gulls and melts before their frantic wings.

Quiet extends across the seafront, broken only by the shouts of the man in the waves and the laughter of the birds. Shuffling to his feet, Hans stands beside me and watches the other ships come apart like clouds before a breeze. Presently, the harbour is empty. Still staring out to sea, the dockmaster’s voice whispers from behind his mask.

“What a thing it is, not to trust one’s eyes. To work each shift unsure of what is real and what is not. The mists be damned.”

He is right, of course. And yet, they do not show us anything we have not already hoped, or feared. Today, the fleet that we all pray returns. Tomorrow, the likeness of a friend or family long lost at sea. Once, it was myself I watched crawl from the waves across the jagged rocks: thin-faced, straight-laced, mouth tight as a mermaid’s purse, dripping with slime, both barely recognisable and undeniably me. How many times since have I walked past him in the crowds, unwilling to look back?

After a moment, the dockmaster turns to me. “The stab-coral is aptly named.”

Welcome to Innswich

I follow his gaze to my palm. “So it is. I will get it looked at by the temple.” With my uninjured hand, I fish for a knife and slice a corner of fabric from my cape. “For your gloves.”

He is already looking away, out across the waves. “There is blood in the water.”

The fishermen have huddled in a mass at the beginning of the pier. One of them is staring after me again, his lips fixed into a smile. I look away. With a stiff bow, Hans steps away to join them.

Life returns slowly to the docks as behind us, the rest of Innswich starts to stir. The fishermen resume mending their nets, other townsfolk arriving in carts laden with crates ready to remove and process the shift’s catch. Several faces watch me from the swathe of their arms, or rather, one face repeated several times, a veiled depiction stabbed over and over in dark blue ink. One such likeness stares back at me, lips moving with the knots of muscle sliding underneath —

The first sail breaches the fogbank with the westerly wind. With a lingering glance at the townsfolk behind me, I wander the rest of the jetty until I am level with the guardsman at his post.

“Johan, isn’t it?”

He is pale-faced, barely twenty summers and not a hair on his chin. I knew his mother once, a rare beauty, right up to the moment she left these shores to dream forever beneath the Black Reef.

Her son’s eyes remain fixed on the waves. “He... jumped.”

“You have had quite the shift. Go, see if a swift one at The Clam cannot wash it away.”

“Yes, Chamberlain.”

His hands are shaking as he passes the crossbow to me. Only when the knock of his boots against the decking is a dull thud do I rest it against one of the posts. In its place, I reach for the ledger at my waist. My fingers come away damp and pulpy.

The book is ruined, its pages sodden and stained with watered-down blood, presumably from when I slipped on the rocks. Left to dry, some of its contents may yet survive cockled, but I don’t hold out much hope. My words are lost, and yet those swirls of redness are a record in themselves, an indelible reminder of what has transpired here. What water has destroyed, it has also preserved, after a fashion. I find myself looking not to the encroaching fleet but to the town behind me.

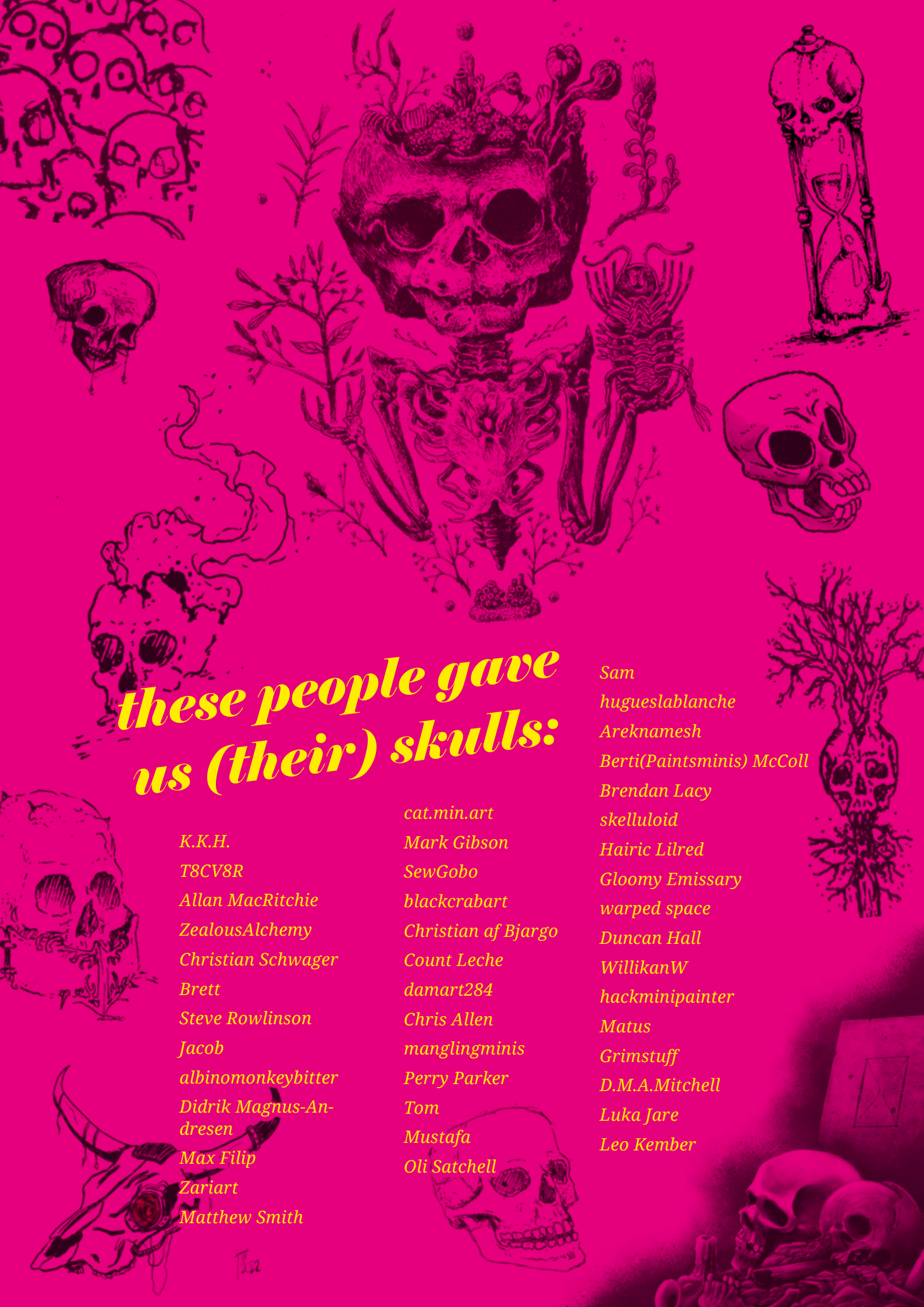
Its misshapen silhouette slumps beneath the gloowering skyline, and yet it endures. It too is soaked through, and it still tells a story. That is real faith; a tale we tell ourselves to hold back the darkness. How many times might Innswich have slipped from the history books into the waves?

The black breakers lap against the pier, empty now except for a solitary cap, drifting against a half-drowned post. There, just above the water level, an older carving watches me from the wood. Rotten scales slough from its makeshift face, mouth bristling with splinters. Two holes have been bored where the eyes should be, empty depressions blinded by the tide, reduced to tears with every crash of the waves. Water gushes from them, following salt-licked runnels through its teeth.

“Blessed be the Bountiful Deep.”







these people gave us (their) skulls:

*K.K.H.
T8CV8R
Allan MacRitchie
ZealousAlchemy
Christian Schwager
Brett
Steve Rowlinson
Jacob
albinomonybitter
Didrik Magnus-An-
dresen
Max Filip
Zariart
Matthew Smith*

*cat.min.art
Mark Gibson
SewGobo
blackcrabart
Christian of Bjargo
Count Leche
damart284
Chris Allen
manglingminis
Perry Parker
Tom
Mustafa
Oli Satchell*

*Sam
hugueslablanche
Areknamesh
Berti(Paintsminis) McColl
Brendan Lacy
skelluloid
Hairic Lilred
Gloomy Emissary
warped space
Duncan Hall
WillikanW
hackminipainter
Matus
Grimstuff
D.M.A.Mitchell
Luka Jare
Leo Kember*



GLAVNA
ZÉL



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