

SKULLS

WINTER ISSUE 2



Skulls II.



Some people say that two skulls are better than one. These people include taxidermy enthusiasts, blood-mad barbarians and conjoined twins.

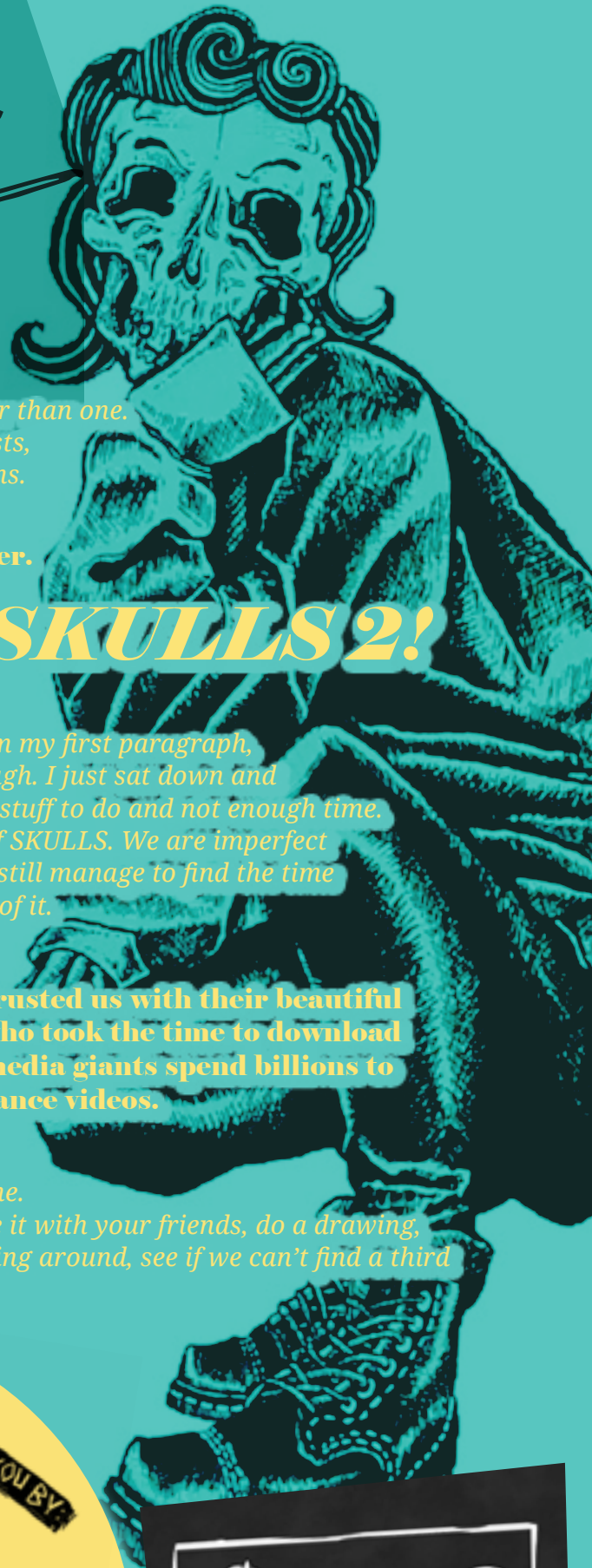
They also include us at SKULLS, and hopefully you as well, dear reader.

Because this is SKULLS 2!

As you might have already suspected from my first paragraph, I did not exactly think this editorial through. I just sat down and started writing, because I have too much stuff to do and not enough time. But that very philosophy is at the heart of SKULLS. We are imperfect and we are busy. But it is crucial that we still manage to find the time to make really cool stuff just for the sake of it.

We thank the wonderful artists who entrusted us with their beautiful art and words. We thank you, readers, who took the time to download and read a thing, in an age when social media giants spend billions to keep you watching funny cats and silly dance videos.

We hope you'll enjoy your time. If you do, please tell us, share it with your friends, do a drawing, write a story. We'll keep digging around, see if we can't find a third skull somewhere in the dirt...






issue two artists:



Cover Artist: Paul-Friedrich von Bargaen

paulvonbargaen.de / [#bolterjugend](https://twitter.com/bolterjugend)


Paul works as senior art director for a web-agency. In his spare time he layouts this magazine as well as helping with the 28 magazine. He studied illustration & animation in Offenbach am Main a long time ago and, luckily, didn't completely forget how to draw. Favorite things to draw include skulls, monsters, bald men and genetically enhanced space soldiers.



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.



Samuel Allan

www.instagram.com/samuel_allan_illustrator


I'm an illustrator based in London, I trained as a prop and model maker for theatre and film but illustration quickly took over. I work for PBS for their online series about mythical monsters which is called „Monstrum“; I'm also the creator of Lobsterpot which is a weird world of 17th century squid mutant witch hunters. I have released two lobster pot zines so far and there's a 28mm miniature game spin off written by Ben Doane.



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.



Ben Doane

instagram.com/janjarastronaut

Ben is a queer cartoonist and games maker based out of Boston Massachusetts. She creates the rules for Lobsterpot, made a Turnip28 comic, does a book called Shape Kids, and has 500 points of pugs for Warhamster 40k.



issue two 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.



Brendan Lacy

brendanlacy.com

Brendan Lacy (he/him) works by day in the field of architecture, designing buildings in Southern Ontario, Canada. In his spare time he likes to write and draw comics, play board games and take long rambling walks around the city. Brendan's story in this issue, Ulf Magnusson, is an excerpt from his first long form comic currently in progress.



Jack S. Rogerfield

Jack S. Rogerfield is a London-based freelance editor, cross-genre writer, and lapsed historian. He is currently pursuing a MA in Creative Writing at the Birkbeck, University of London where he edits the respected literary forum and magazine, *The Mechanics Institute Review*. He lives in London with his wife and fur child and spends his spare time training in historical martial arts and playing miniature wargames or tabletop role-playing games.



Allan MacRitchie

www.admacritchie.com

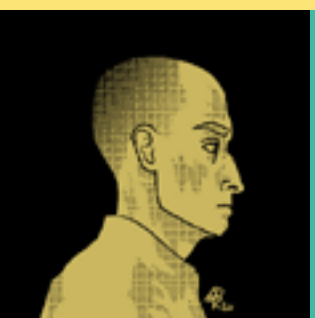
Allan MacRitchie is an illustrator from Glasgow, Scotland. He is the artist of the horror comics *Grave Wax*, *Finis* and *Moth to a Flame* and likes drawing vampire skulls and ghoulish skulls.



Vulpus

www.instagram.com/Vulpus_art

Hoi =w=) I do a fair amount of Crosshatching and Sketching.



issue two artists:



D.
Japan United Gaming Society

Call me D. I have been writing, drawing, painting, creating and destroying since my opposable thumbs were able to oppose. I live in Japan and run the social networking side of my local Gaming Club (Japan's United Gaming Society – JUGS) as well as doing our regular painted mini vids and batreps on our YouTube channel. I also research, write and perform in a weekly Audio Drama Podcast called "The Master Tavern Keeper's History of the Old World" set in the 16th century of the Warhammer Fantasy Old World that grew out of one of our outgoing gaming campaigns. You can find us on instagram to see what miniatures we've painted, what digital art we've created as well as game pics week in and week out and find our other output on all good podcast platforms and the aforementioned YouTube. Arigato!



Jeff Martin
rentathugcomics.com

Jeff Martin is an award-winning cartoonist from Edmonton, Alberta, and is definitely not a robot. He has written and drawn graphic novels for clients including Simon & Schuster, Games Workshop, HeavyMetal.com, heavy metal icons GWAR, and Renegade Arts Entertainment. His works also include the Hockeyocalypse series of graphic novels and his webcomic, Hell, Inc. He can usually be found in the section of his living room that he refers to as his "comics bunker," which doesn't make him sound like a madman at all.

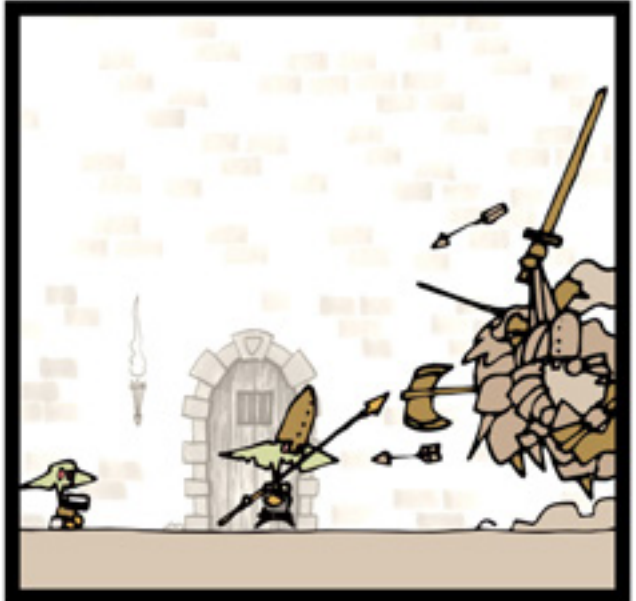


Kees van Hattum
www.instagram.com/keesvanhattumart

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.





TAKE YOUR CHILD TO WORK DAY

DOCTOR GEOFF 20220831

A SHIP OF FLESH AND BONE

PART 2 by KEES VAN HATTUM

HELLO..

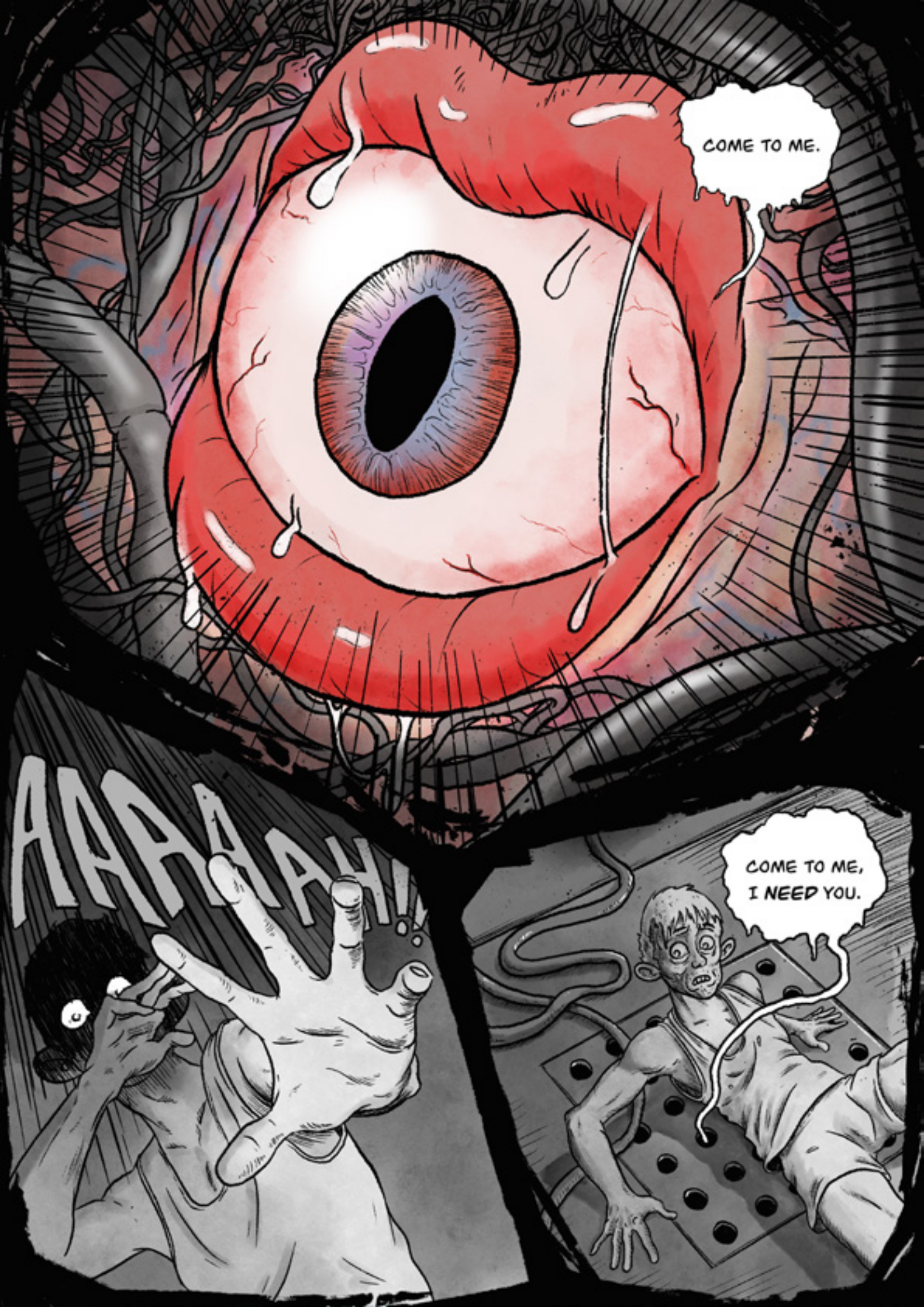


HELLO..



YES..
COME TO ME.






COME TO ME.

AAAAAH!


COME TO ME,
I NEED YOU.

A comic book panel depicting a grotesque, mutated character with a speech bubble. The character has a pale, elongated face with multiple eyes and a mouth full of sharp teeth. The background is a dark, industrial setting with various pipes and machinery. The character is positioned in the upper left corner of the panel.

PLEASE...

A comic book panel depicting a grotesque, mutated character with a speech bubble. The character has a pale, elongated face with multiple eyes and a mouth full of sharp teeth. The background is a dark, industrial setting with various pipes and machinery. The character is positioned in the center of the panel.

COME TO ME...

A comic book panel depicting a grotesque, mutated character with a speech bubble. The character has a pale, elongated face with multiple eyes and a mouth full of sharp teeth. The background is a dark, industrial setting with various pipes and machinery. The character is positioned in the lower left corner of the panel.

I NEED YOU...



PLEASE.

PLEASE.


COME TO ME.



I NEED YOU CLOSE...

CARGO BAY

NO ENTRY
UNDER ANY
CIRCUMSTANCES



WARNING! WARNING!
DO NOT USE INSIDE.

COME..

WELL, YOU DIDN'T
GIVE ME A KEY...

SO...

TO ME..

PLEASE..

WANKOOM!

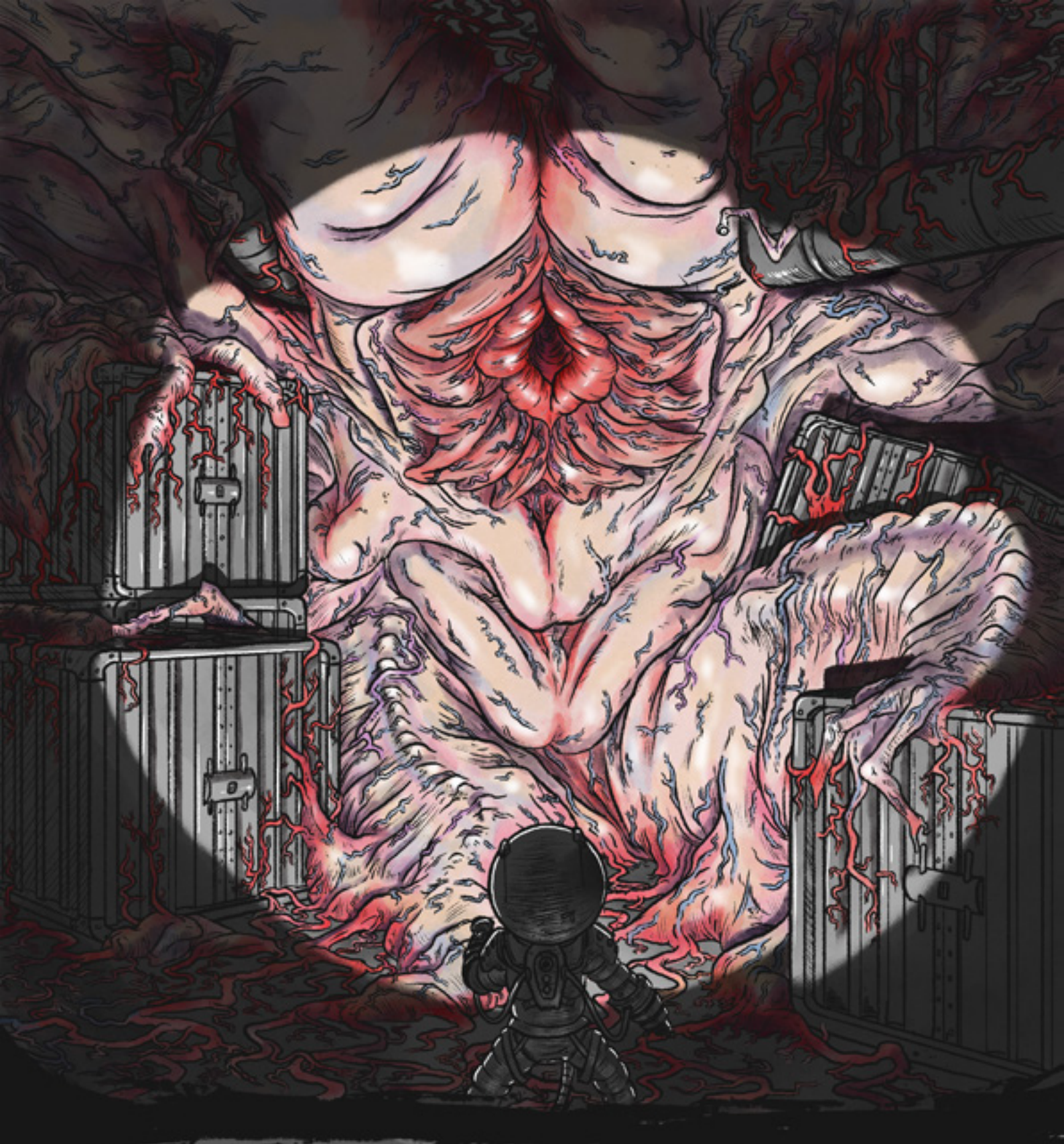




BE GENTLE...

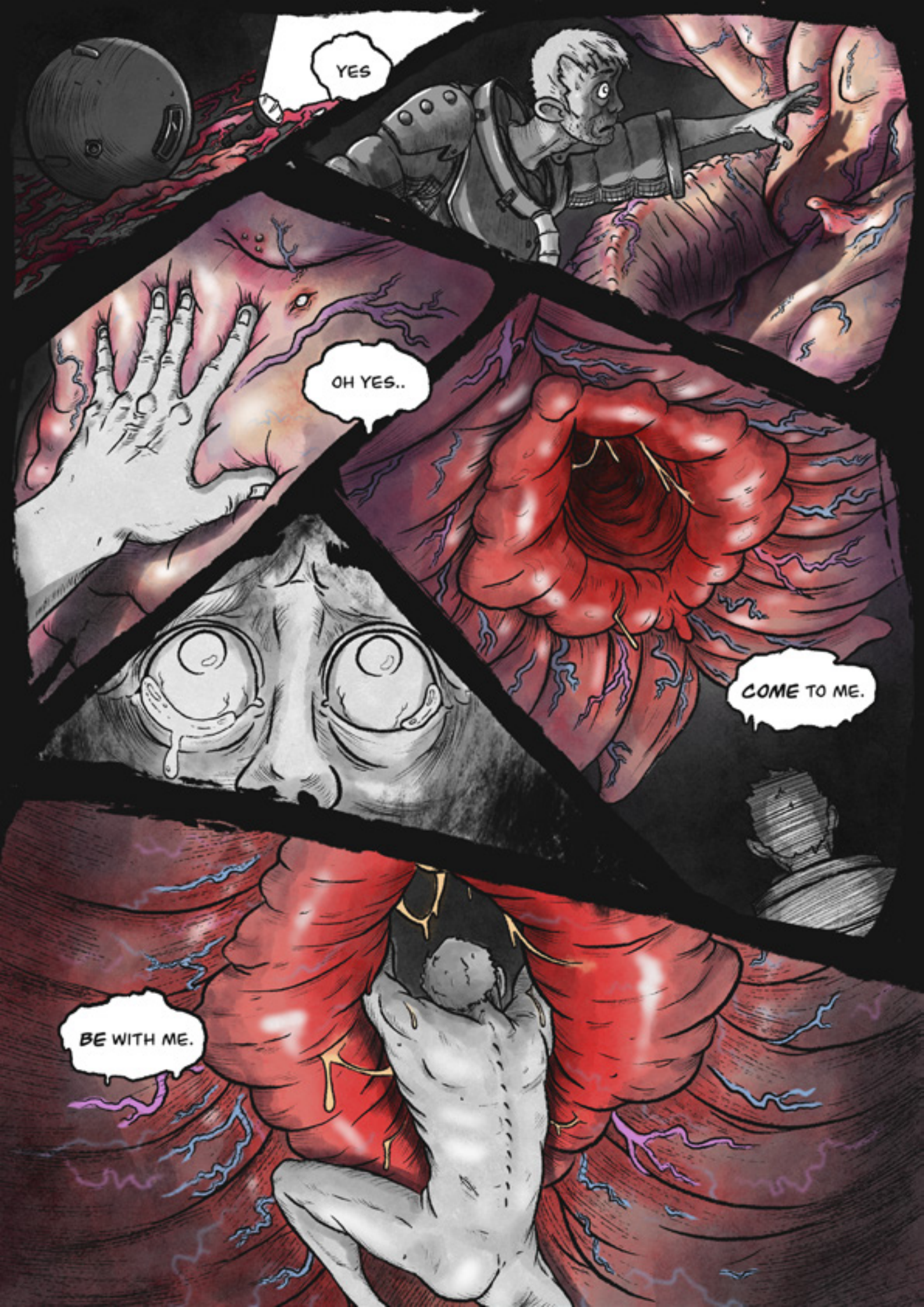


OH GOD.



IT'S SO..

BEAUTIFUL.



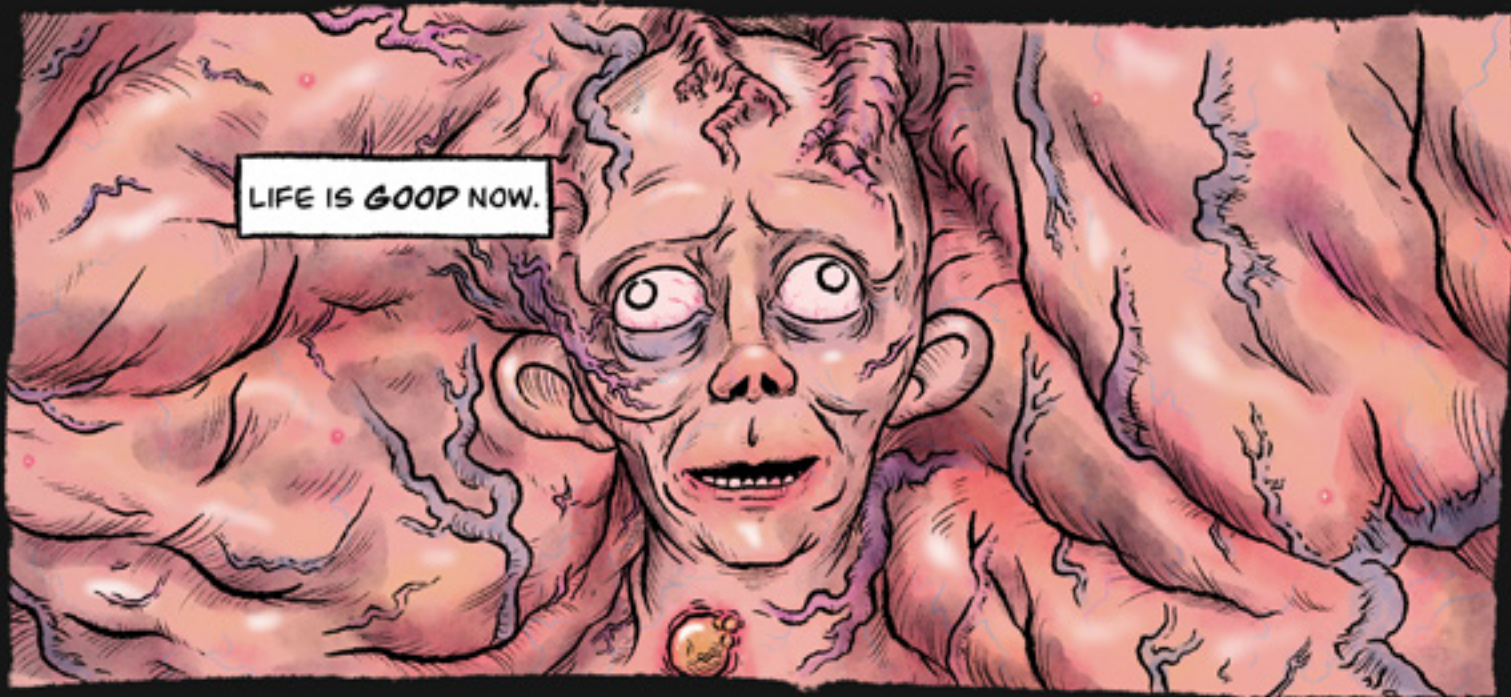
YES

OH YES..

COME TO ME.

BE WITH ME.

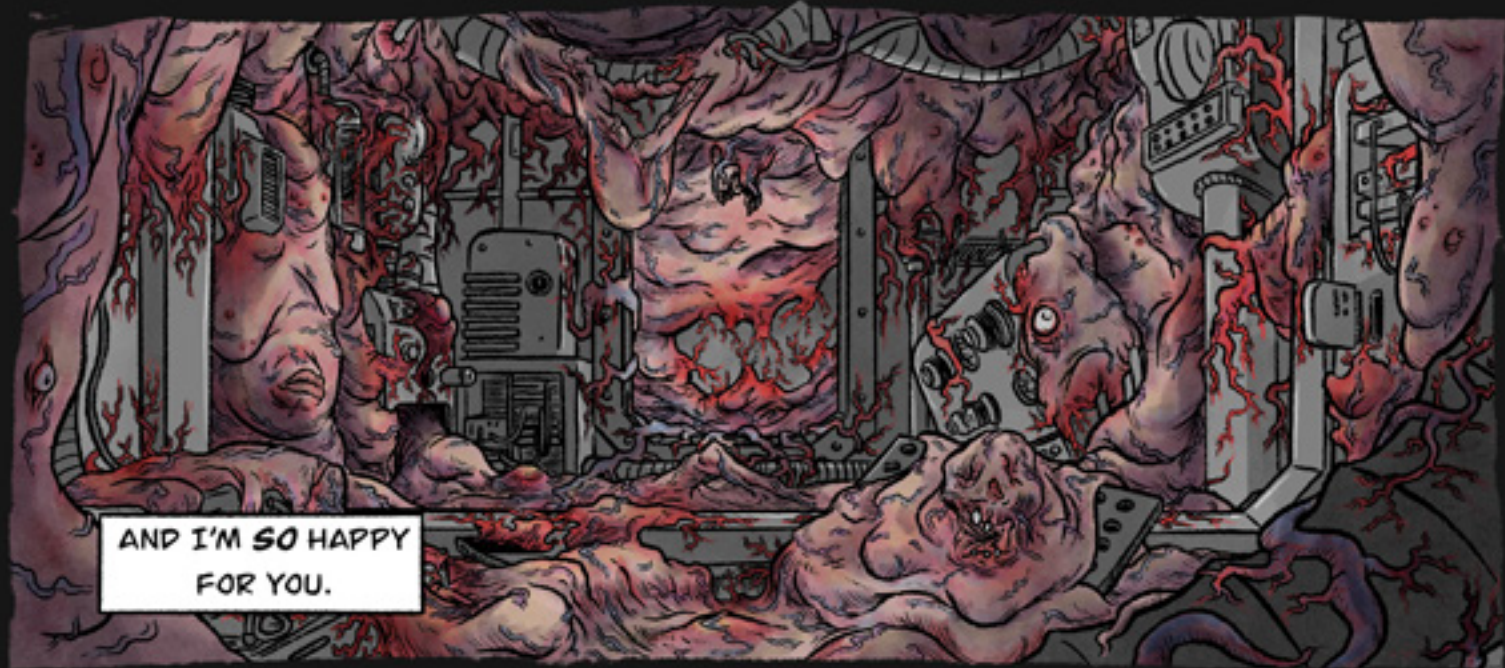
I'VE FOUND IT.
MY BEAUTIFUL APATHY.

A close-up illustration of a man's face, appearing distressed or in pain. He has wide, staring eyes and a slightly open mouth. He is wearing a gold pendant on a chain around his neck. The background is a textured, reddish-pinkish surface with some blueish-purple veins or cracks.

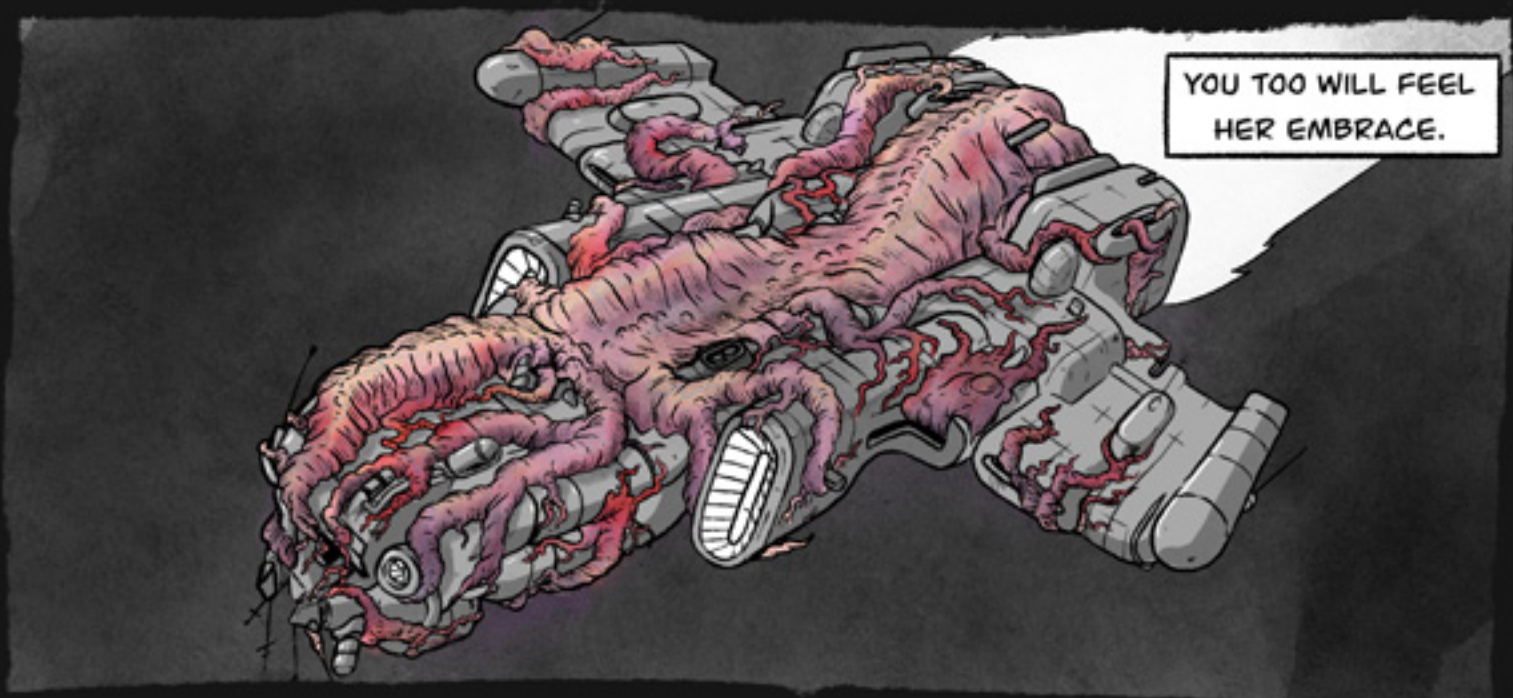
LIFE IS GOOD NOW.

A wider illustration showing the man's face and upper torso. He is surrounded by a complex, fleshy, and bloody structure that appears to be a grotesque, multi-armed or multi-headed entity. The colors are dominated by shades of red, pink, and purple, with some blueish-purple veins. The man's expression is one of shock or realization.

I AM FREE NOW.



AND I'M SO HAPPY
FOR YOU.



YOU TOO WILL FEEL
HER EMBRACE.



I CAN'T WAIT FOR
YOU TO MEET HER.

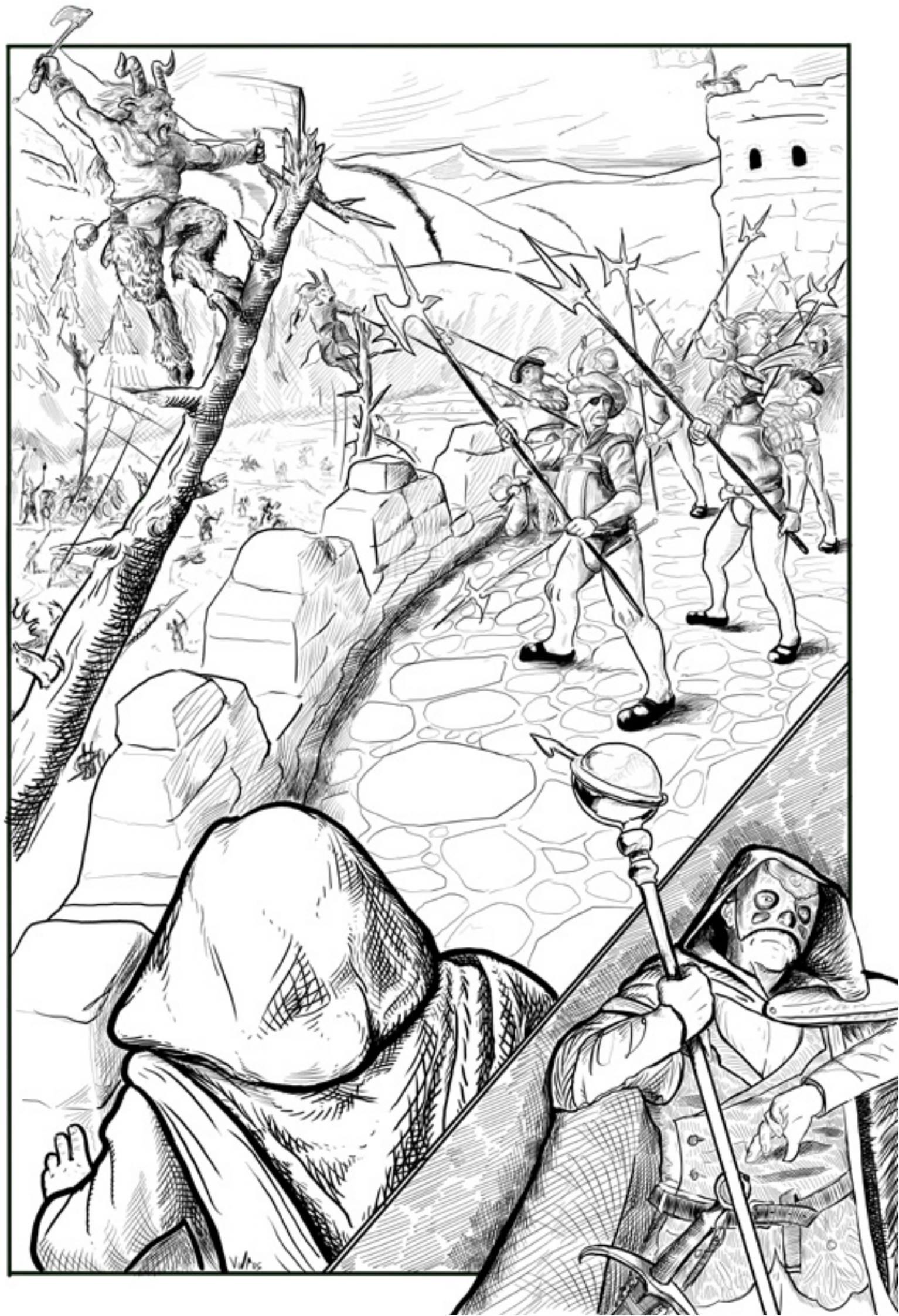
COTOPILLOT
2
DAYS TO EARTH

THE
END



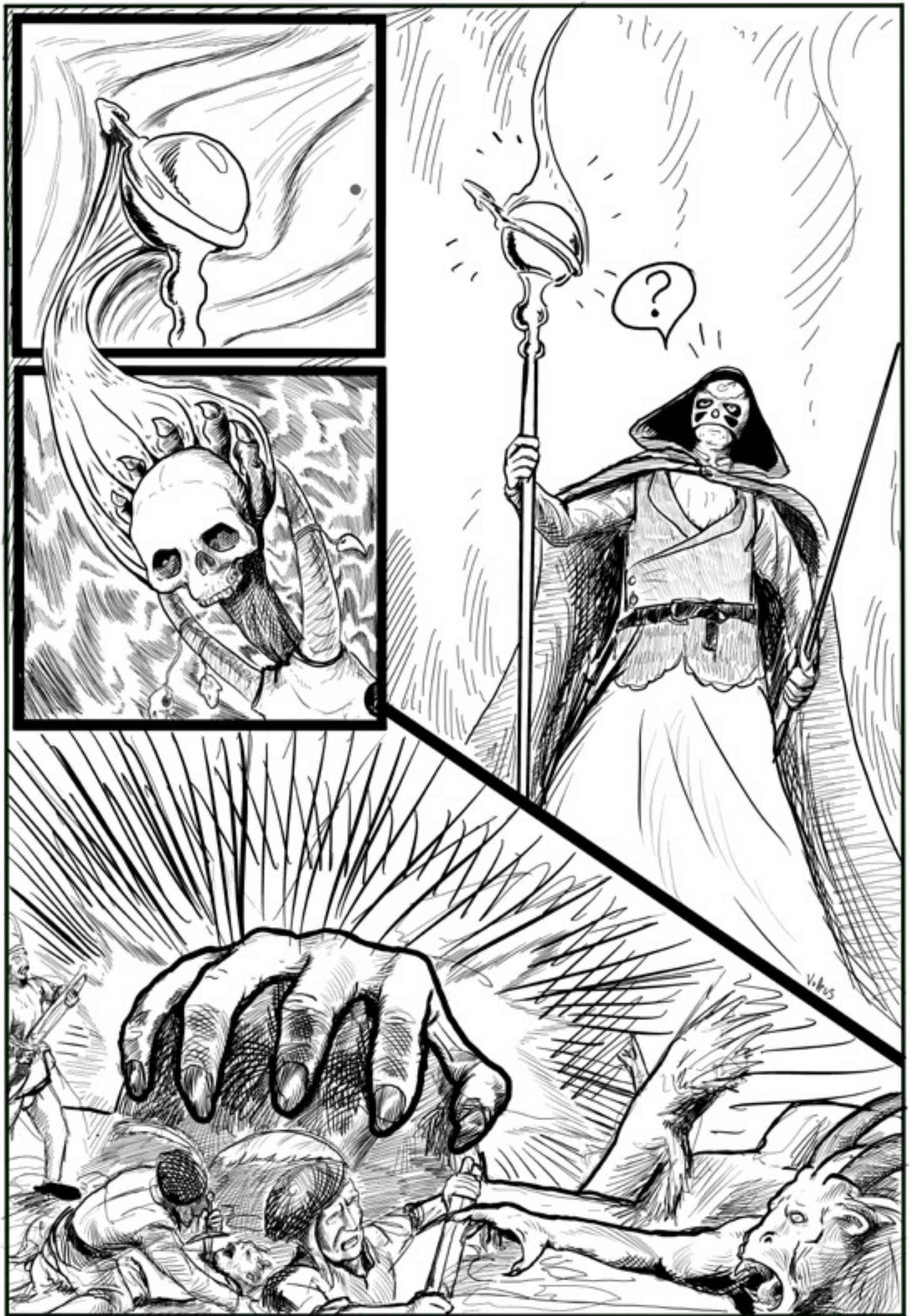
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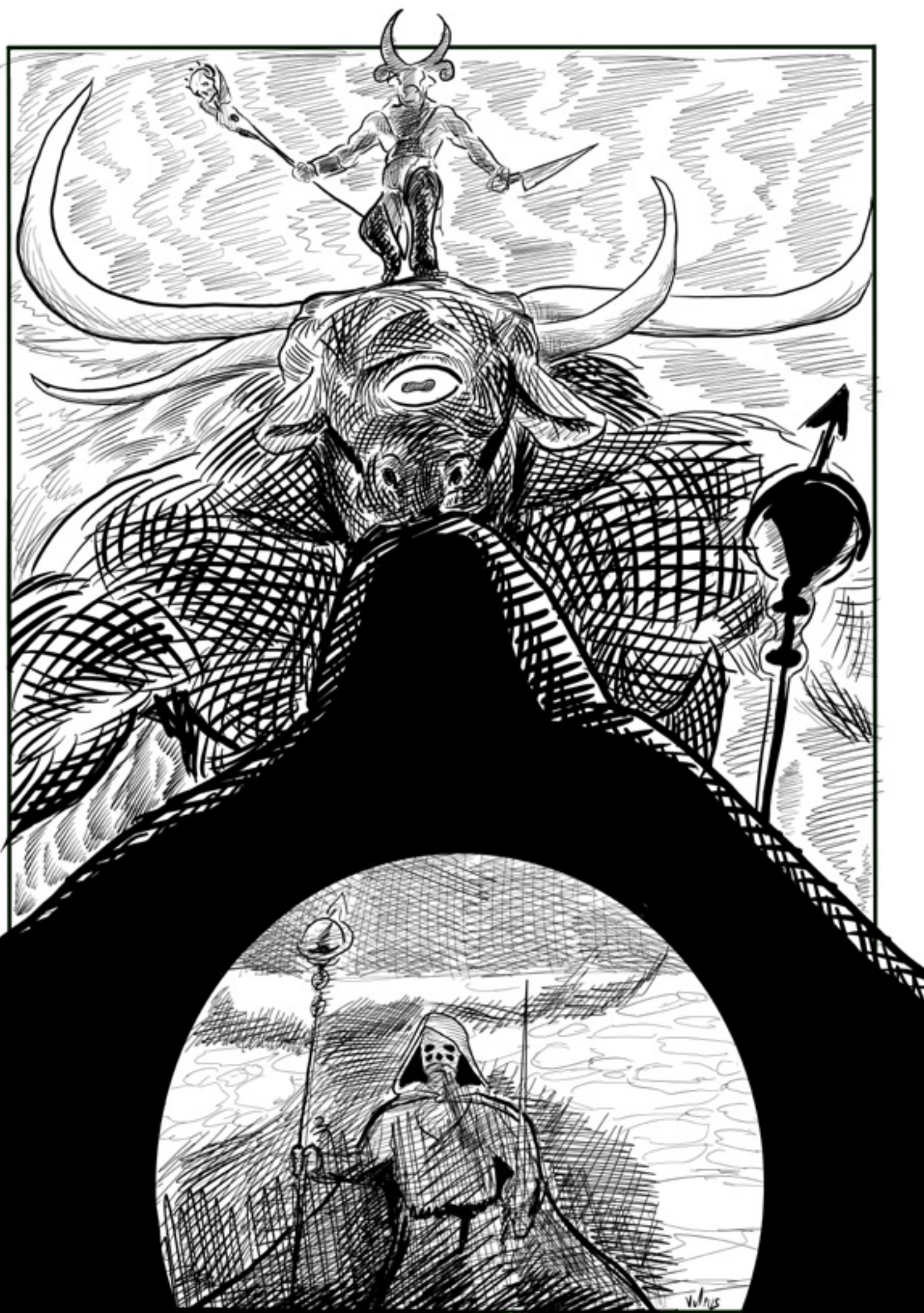












Tales From The Pit: “The Rule of Three”

The Pit was everything. There was nothing below, nothing above and nothing beyond. It's lowest reaches were demarcated by the oldest oubliettes of the Overseer, thrice-blessed be his name, whilst the highest point was the Keep of the man himself, held aloft by the force of his will alone, or at least so many believed. There was much in between, but for Vadik there was nothing more important than the roar of the crowd of the arena. Who knew what the crowd truly were though? Not Vadik. They would shimmer into existence in the stands in the hours before a bout. They came first in ones and twos, then in their hundreds and then finally in their thousands; their voices flooding the air with glorious noise.

Vadik, more often than not, watched from the steel-gated ingress to the arena itself, fingering it's rusted spikes as he did so. The members of the crowd fascinated him; each was different, each was fantastical. Their forms were like his, a torso, two arms and two legs, but they were translucent and, instead of faces, each wore a bizarre mask.

Each spectator was locked into their designated position and they either could not, or perhaps simply would not, move from it. Vadik wasn't sure which.

When a match was complete, Vadik again watched the crowd closely. Most vanished within moments of the bout being called, their forms scintillating away to nothingness and their cheers stopping abruptly. Some lingered though, interacting with those nearby, their jovial farewells mingling into one another like the groans of the cogwheels that whirred and whirled under the arena floor itself. These voices bored Vadik though. The cheers were all that mattered to him. He craved these above all else, and their absence, or worse, their opposite; the jeering, the laughter, tore at him. However, it was not only his unfulfilled needs that mocked him, failure too loomed upon high, ever edging closer to him with bloody barbed talons.

For each fighter, failure, the loss of a bout, was the start of a cycle towards the end that could only be halted by success. This ever present threat was known as the Rule of Three and hung like the sword of Damocles

over them all: Three straight losses meant decommission; three straight losses and you were out; three straight losses meant death and a one way trip to the recycling vat to be rendered down. Vadik had lost his last two fights. His Cultor, Zenya Orpa came to see him for a talk. ‘You are at a fork in the road, Vadik. Do you know what one of those is? No, of course you don't.’

The old Cultor sighed, although the gesture was lost on Vadik. ‘What I mean is this, you've two choices going forwards: fight and die, or lay down your weapons and come help me.’ Vadik, cocked his head to the right. Zenya understood that this meant he did not fully comprehend.

‘I'm offering you a last chance, lad. Why don't you become a Cultor-Auxilium and help me. I've poured good coin into you, it'd be a shame to waste it. You'd be useful. What d'you say?’

Vadik shook his head. ‘I fight!’

Zenya rubbed his temples and sighed, before drawing his fingertips through the grey stubble that still grew in between the maze of scars that lined his face. ‘I knew that would be your answer. Just as long as you understand. DOKU! Get in here.’

The steel plate door behind the Cultor opened with a rusty creak. White light flooded in and in stepped a thin black silhouette. Vadik squinted his eyes as he looked at the newcomer and saw it was a dark waif of a girl, dressed from top to toe in fitted high-density ceramic armour.

Zenya addressed her. ‘It seems I will have need of your skills after all, Venefica.’

The gloomy corridor dripped with a variety of unknowable fluids. All the corridors this deep in the Pit were the same.

Tales From The Pit: „The Rule of Three“

Zenya scowled in annoyance as he trudged through the puddles towards the faint orange light ahead. The glow came from a keypad. It flickered somewhere between red and orange, but it was bright enough for him to see the nervulus. He raised his hand to it and felt the familiar white shock of cold race up his spine, causing his hairs to stand on end. The reader duly scanned his nervous system to confirm his identity. It did not take long.

There was a click and the locking mechanism to the door began to disengage. He waited. It was a complex system by the sound of it. He heard defence beams being unhooked and gas dispensers cocking beneath the well-oiled meshing of cogs and gears, until at last, the plain steel door slid open. Before the Cultor was a black room lit by a single light that dangled from the ceiling. Beneath he saw what looked like an oversized-insect caught at the centre of a web of cables and tubes, but it was no bug, rather it was his failing fighter, Vadik.

Vadik lay face down on the operating table, his head cradled by a shiny steel doughnut over which tiny metallic crab-like nanofucii crawled about industriously. Around the table various monitoring devices had been hooked up to the prone fighter's body and their bleeping and ticking created a mesmeric cacophony no less smothering than the darkness that clawed at the edges of the lamplight. Zenya exhaled and shook his head to break the spell before addressing the Venefica.

'Will he live?'

Doku nodded in reply as she inserted a purple phial into the injector she had fitted into the base of Vadik's cranium.

'He will do his job.' Whispered Doku in reply.

'Good.'

The crowd roared and cheered, but they were not cheering for Vadik. Vadik was in the process of finally realizing what made a Pit Champion. Unfortunately it was at the hands of his opponent.

Think!

Again, Vadik was knocked down onto the oxidised slag-gravel of the arena floor with a concussive crack, it's rust particles once more engulfing him in their embrace. The new scars at the back of his head were now uncontrollably weeping blood, but that was the least of his concerns, for as his head struck the ground, a disembodied silence swallowed him up whole. The deafening noise of the pit evaporated away, the spectators' roars died in their throats, and all that was left was the lub-dub pumping of his heart and a spreading heavy dullness that began to smother Vadik's limbs and cause his vision to swirl and blur.

As unconsciousness threatened to take him, Vadik desperately tried to cling on to some vestige of his awareness. He could not lose again. In desperation, he clung on to the stinging lances of pain in his left eye caused by the rivulets of blood pooling in its orbit; he clung on to the tendrils of coldness that were spreading out from his head wound; but most of all, he clung on to the embodiment of his failure as it loomed over him in the form of his rival.

Zenya's words suddenly came back to Vadik, 'the Rule of Three, remember the Rule of Three' and thus armed, he reached up towards his foe.

Egor the Brute contemptuously kicked Vadik's hand away and raised his studded club up high, readying it, eager to bring it smashing down in a crowd-pleasing deathblow.

'It's over!' The pit fighter hissed triumphantly, a leering grin slowly unfurling across his tattooed face, deforming its black-flame design to resemble some malevolent tentacled beast. Vadik knew that he was right: it was over.

Suddenly though, with a click-whirr, Doku's chemical-injector implant kicked into action and a poisonous cocktail of stimulants, synthetic-hormones and combat drugs flooded Vadik's blood system washing the fugue away in milliseconds. Sound returned as a deafening cacophony that swallowed Vadik up and spat him back out. He lurched to his feet and staggered towards Egor, bawling with unshackled rage, his grip on his long-handled cleaver jerking and spasming as illicit chemicals sluiced through his blood system. He was reborn; his body was now bursting with more power and speed than he had ever known.

Tales From The Pit: „The Rule of Three“

In his heightened state, it felt like the world around Vadik was moving in slow motion. He saw Egor's club drifting towards him in a long arc that he easily side-stepped and allowed to become lodged in the arena floor. He quickly swung back at his opponent's arms, bloodily severing Egor's left hand at the wrist and embedding the cleaver in his foe's right bicep.

Egor launched himself backwards, flailing in shock and pain, but Vadik was already on him, chasing him down, kicking and screaming at his would-be-killer whilst all the time yanking at the weapon jammed in Egor's arm.

'It's over. It's OVER!' Vadik shouted at the struggling man, drool trailing from the corners of his mouth as he screamed.

'NO!' Came the hoarse retort, but before the pit champion could say anymore, Vadik wrenched his weapon free and both men simultaneously cried out at the top of their lungs; one in agony, the other in victory. Vadik did not waste the moment.

Thunk!

Egor was down. He had never been knocked down in the arena before. For a heartbeat, Vadik towered over Egor and gloated, before raising his cleaver up high. Blood flicked off it and into the maddened crowd. A hush fell upon them.

Both combatants slowly exhaled. Zenya Orpa's words came back to Vadik again. 'The Rule of Three'.

Vadik grinned as he brought his weapon down onto Egor's exposed neck and the onlookers ignited into an explosion of noise.

At last, the moment was here, victory, long sought and long overdue. But then suddenly, there was a flaring pain in his chest, and then, blackness.

Zenya watched from the ingress to the arena. The undefeated Egor was now nothing more than a headless corpse. Beside the Cultor two of his orderlies stood by his side waiting. He turned to remind them of their task.

'The Venefica is in the gym. She will extract the injector. Take Vadik directly there, stop for no one, stop for nothing.'

Zenya looked out across the arena to watch Vadik's last moments: The Cultor watched the blood drain from his fighter's face. He saw the last clenching of Vadik's teeth and then the spasming of his hands as he released his grip on his weapon before he finally collapsed. It was time.

'GO! GO! Get him!' Zenya shouted.

The orderlies raced towards Vadik, reaching him in seconds, dragging him onto their stretcher and carrying him back to the arena-side as quickly as they could.

As his underlings performed their task so did the Cultor. Zenya Orpa strode out into the arena, his arms raised high and his heavy footfalls kicking up a rusty mist about him. It had been fifteen years since he had last stepped into the arena.

The crowd recognised Orpa immediately. How could they not? He was now, with the death of Egor, the only undefeated champion of the arena in its long history. A hush once more fell upon them. Zenya addressed the High Official above.

'I demand a result, does my lad get the belt? The reigning champion lies dead.'

All eyes turned towards the High Official. She knew there was foul play but she had neither wiggle room, nor time to confirm her suspicions. Instead she opened up her left palm and raised it high. There was a cheer and Egor's belt bearer skulked out and handed the bronze Belt of Champions to Zenya, before scurrying away. It was heavier than he remembered. Zenya held it up to show the crowd and the spectators went wild. Right on cue, the two orderlies returned, carrying the bloody body of Vadik. They laid it on the ground in front of Zenya. He placed the belt on the fighter's waist before closing the dead man's eyes.

'Witness the passing of this man, look at the champion who ended the historic reign of Egor the Brute. A near-legend who was but a single bout away from equalling my own unbroken record.' He suppressed a smirk and waited for a moment. Good, the crowd were silent. It was the right time.

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‘Our champions are dead but the belt lies in my Stable. I offer a challenge to all the other High Stables, send your best to the arena on the Feast Day of the Overseer and we shall fight it out to see who can claim the right to wear it.’

With that, Zenya picked up the belt and disappeared into the arena-side, his two orderlies carrying the body of Vadik behind him. Once out of the glare of the arena, Zenya did not stop, instead he carried on walking, only calling behind him to address his orderlies.

‘Take this body to Gaias Kees.’

It did not take Zenya long the traverse the dimly lit corridors to reach the gym. Doku was waiting for him.

‘Our business is done. But I still do not see the sense in all this. You’ve gone soft in your old age, Orpa.’ She said as the Cultor stepped in through the blood-stained curtain over the ingress. Zenya smiled mirthlessly before quickly covering the ground between the two, his form growing larger and larger with each step until he was all that Doku could see.

‘Go on, explain.’ He said, his voice rumbling like heavy machinery. The Venefica shrunk back as she replied.

‘H-he was destined for death whether he won or lost. But you still gave him his fifteen seconds of glory at great personal expense. The Orpa of old would never of thrown good coin after bad like that, merely to do what ? To indulge the folly of one of his stable?’

Zenya chuckled and opened up his arms wide. ‘The Orpa of old was no good at managing resources. I am no longer so short-sighted. I’ll admit it, I had a soft spot for Vadik. So why not give him his day in the sun? Is that weakness? I think not. A bribe or two in the right place got him this special exhibition fight to end his career on. It was seen as a magnanimous gesture by all. If anything, this has enhanced my reputation. It was a given that he wasn’t going to win, but he still wanted the chance to dream. It causes no harm to indulge in dreaming. I, however, also have to deal with reality. I put on a bet through a proxy that he would win, enlisted your services and then beat the odds. My

winnings easily outweigh the money I spent on hiring you and getting the match set up.’

Doku shook her head. ‘It was a fixed match. He was supposed to lose. There will be serious repercussions and not just from my people and the High Officials, the other Stables will unite against you. And who in your Stable will defend this belt? You? You’ve started a war you can not win. My fee didn’t include this kind of risk. You’d better pay me the same again if you want my silence. Egor’s Cultor, Gaias Kees in particular is not known for turning the other cheek. He’ll have your neck after I tell him what you’ve done.’

Zenya smiled before grabbing the Venefica by her throat. ‘Not if I give him yours first.’

Crack!

Time was short. Orpa’s moves had sown confusion in his rivals, but hopefully left his true opponent no wiser. But, if he was to successfully land this first jab he needed to act fast. Time was short.

As Orpa walked he could feel the warmth of the dead Venefica’s body beginning to ebb away. He quickened his pace. He was almost there.

Ahead, he saw the Stable entrance to the lair of Gaias Kees. It was guarded by two of the former fighters of his old rival. Orpa knew them, The brothers Trim, Helmutt and Horst. He had seen them dominate the tag-team events a few years back.

It was Horst that spotted him first, raising and engaging his electrobar as he alerted his brother.

Orpa immediately spun on his heel, holding firm onto the limp body of Doku as he did so, gathering momentum, before releasing the body and sending it crashing into the nearer of the siblings. It struck with a whack and sent Horst flying back into the wall beside the ingress. He cracked his head against the steel architrave surrounding the doorway, besmirching its surface with his blood, before collapsing unconscious. One down, one to go.

Helmutt raised his weapon. But, it was too late. Orpa was already on him. The Cultor grabbed his opponent

Tales From The Pit: „The Rule of Three“

by his wrists and forced the back of his hands downwards with his thumbs, loosening his grip on the weapon, before ripping it out of his hands. Orpa then spun the electrobar around, simultaneously smashing Helmutt across his face as he took his legs out from under him, dropping the ex-fighter like a sack of rats before striding over his handiwork. Time was short.

Gaias Kees was monstrously large. He stared at the body of Vadik that the two orderlies of Zenya Orpa had brought him. His rival's two lackeys lay at his feet. Their corpses were barely recognisable. They had had no chance, but their bloody deaths had given Gaias no real satisfaction, merely gore-covered fists, a blood splattered room and a pang of momentary catharsis. The feeling of having been cheated still gnawed at him. His best, the most adept fighter he'd ever trained, was dead to this B-class piece of detritus at his feet.

'Danh, analyse the blood and cranial fluid.' He commanded.

At his words, the Cultor's long snake slid off his shoulders and onto the table. It was a heavy beast that possessed striking green eyes and was covered in highly polished silver scales speckled by droplets of the orderlies' blood. The humming and whirring of its internal servos and motors were barely audible but there nonetheless, betraying its true nature.

Upon reaching the head of Vadik's body, it opened up its mechanical maw to expose two large steel tubular fangs but then waited, completely still.

'Engage.' Came Kees' voice.

At the command it sunk its teeth into Vadik's skull and began its investigation, probing tentacles burrowing into the cold flesh of the fighter and feeding the data directly into its master's brain via their neural link.

The results came quickly and were as the Cultor had anticipated. It was Celeritas: one of a number of performance enhancing chemical cocktails developed by the Veneficas of the Overseer during the Second Unrest in order to give his enforcers the edge over the

insurgents. Use and production of Celeritas had soon been abandoned though as it ended up killing about half of its subjects. Curious that this was how Vadik had won. It posed questions.

Suddenly, Gaias heard a crash outside of the Stable, followed by the sound of fighting.

'Kees!' Came the voice of his rival, Zenya Orpa.

Gaias clicked his fingers and Danh ended her analysis, before sliding back up his arm to reassume her perch over his broad shoulders. Perhaps here came the answers.

'Kees!' The voice was closer now and followed by more crashing sounds. Gaias moved to meet the intruder.

The dining area was a war zone. Gaias's underlings were strewn this way and that, littering the floor and furniture like sackcloths. Orpa stood at the centre of the devastation; still, calm, unruffled.

'Kees!' He called out again.

At his words Gaias Kees stepped through the yellowed vinyl curtain on the opposite side of the room. Orpa threw the body of the dead Venefica onto the ground and instinctively took up a defensive posture, before seemingly catching himself, and lowering his arms to his sides. So it was to parley that Orpa had come, thought Kees.

'Kees, they took our boys.' Said the scarred Cultor.

Gaias' eyes narrowed and he gestured to his old rival with his fingers to continue.

'You've analysed the blood of my lad, right?'

Gaias nodded. 'Celeritas!'

'From the stock of the Overseer and his pharmafemina.' Said Orpa. The omission of other facts felt like lying but he quelled the feeling. If he kept his body language in check, this might actually work, thought Orpa as he pointed at the mangled body of Doku. 'This one hoodwinked my boy, coerced him into getting this implant-. He threw the injector on to the floor.

Tales From The Pit: „The Rule of Three“

‘Knowing it would kill both him and your Egor and set us against each other. He fears us. He wants to divide us and he is right to do so. The Overseer’s time has passed. If he wants a war let’s give him a war, but us against him, not each of us against the other. What do you say?’

Gaias rubbed his chest as the feeling of being cheated gnawed at him again. However, here was a chance at real catharsis though, one way or the other.

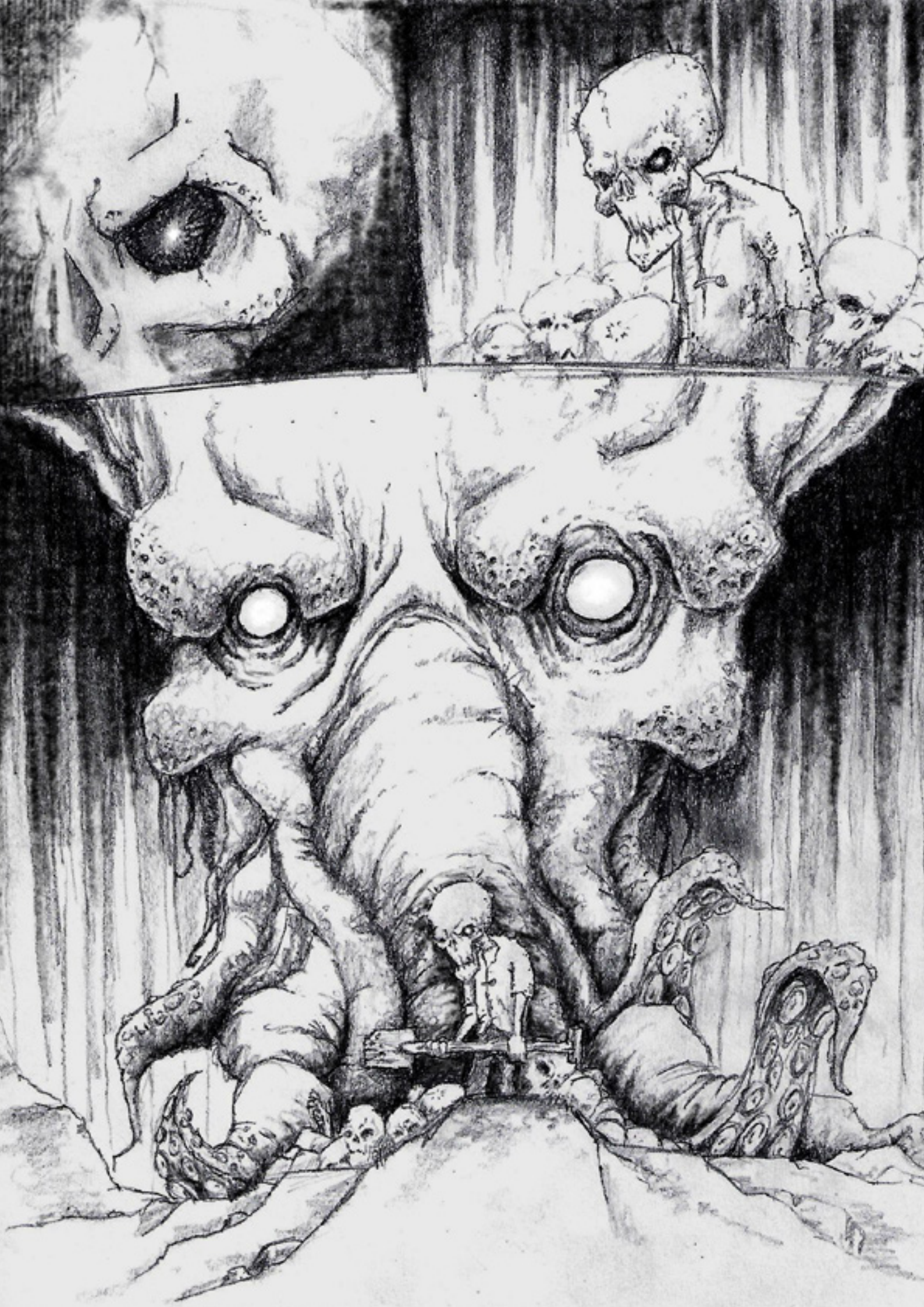
‘I’m listening, Orpa.’

Zenya Orpa left the Stable of Gaias Kees energised: His first step in order to usurp the Overseer had been a success, he had the second member of his triumvirate. At last the Third Unrest could begin and vengeance could be satisfied.

It was about time that both the Overseer and The Pit submitted to the Rule of Three.

To be continued...





Sir Newtus Cox
&
Old Pipp
in



'Tilting at Apples'
By A.D. MacKitchie

I'm bloody
starving, Pipp.
We should have
stopped for
vittles hours
ago!

That's why
I suggested
that inn at
the crossroads,
Sir.

But you
insisted that
we keep
walking.

Exactly,
Pipp!

The Paradise
Apple won't
find itself
after all.

Onwards!

I can feel it
within my grasp,
Pipp. Soon I will
retrieve the Apple
and Lady Smythe
will be delighted.

Perhaps then
she will finally
acquiesce to
my marriage
proposal?

How could
she possibly
resist, Sir.

Ah,
look!

Look!

The Paradise
Apple, Pipp!
At last, we've
found it!

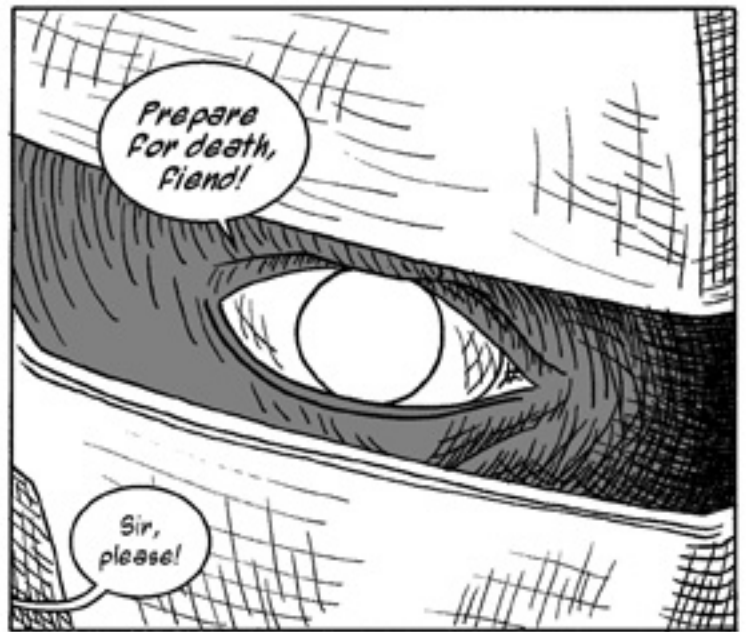
Uh...
Sir?

In the
claws of an
unnatural
fiend...

Sir-

This
will **not**
stand.

Sir,
listen-



Prepare
for death,
fiend!

Sir,
please!



Sir!



Ha! Take
that, foul
monster.
And that!
And that!
And that!
And that!
And that!

Sigh...
Not
again.

Have
at 'em
then,
Sir.

WE MARCHED TO THAT
HUNGRY BATTLEFIELD

THE PLATEAU OF THE DRUIDS

AND BY DAWN'S LIGHT...

...WE FACED OUR
ANCIENT FOE

A HORN SIGNALS THE
BEGINNING OF THE END

GRAAAAAHH

THE SOUND OF BLOOD
RUSHING IN OUR EARS

CHARGE!

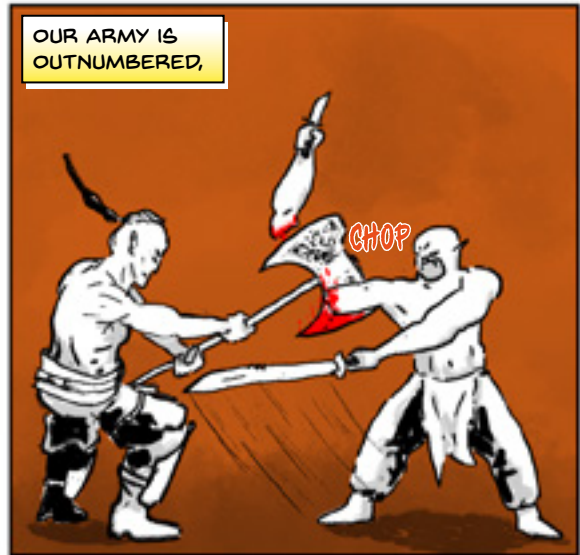
CLANG
THUNK

THE LAND DRANK ITS
FILL THAT DAY --



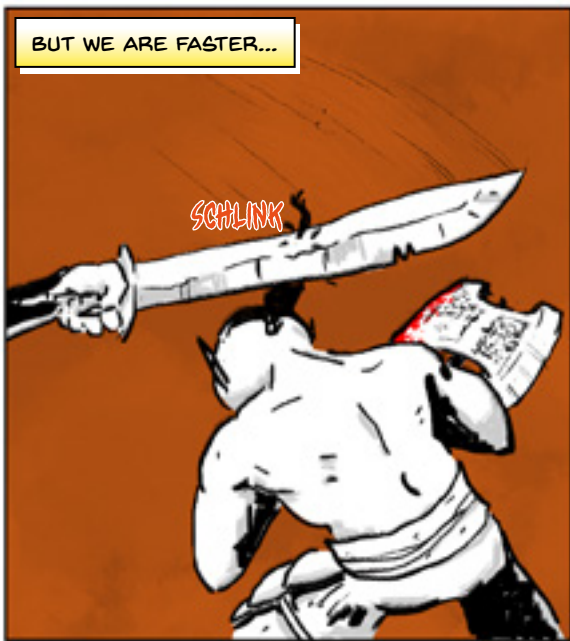
I, ULF MAGNUSSON,
FACE THE ORC HORDES

LEAP



OUR ARMY IS
OUTNUMBERED,

CHOP



BUT WE ARE FASTER...

SCHLINK



BETTER TRAINED...

SPLORT



AND WE HAD THE OLD
GODS ON OUR SIDE...

OR SO WE THOUGHT--



HUH--

HUH--

HUH--
ULF...

...WE
MEET AT
LAST!

CLANG

CLANG

SWOOSH



RAAAAA



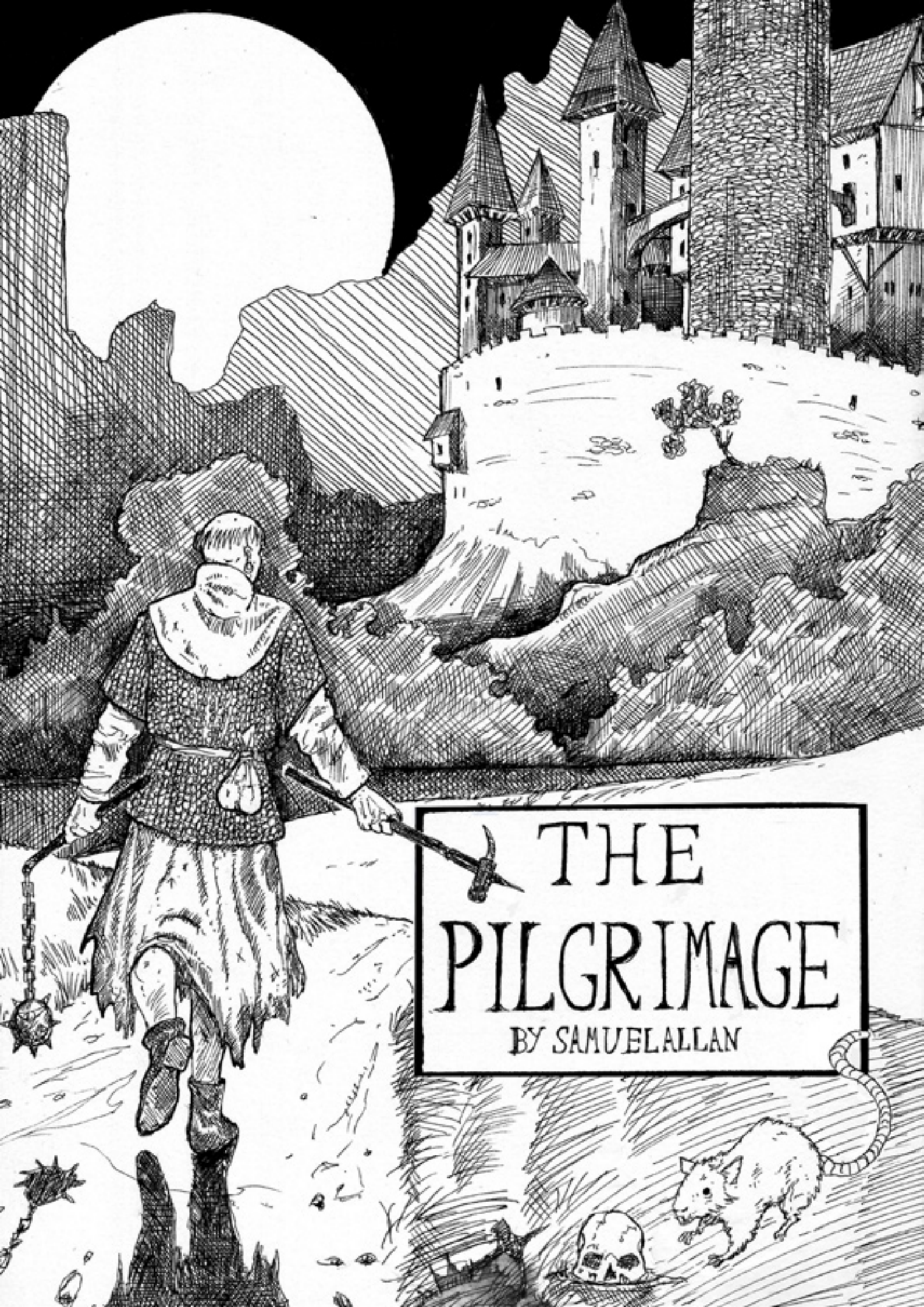
I CANT HOLD IT
MUCH LONGER

SKRTCH



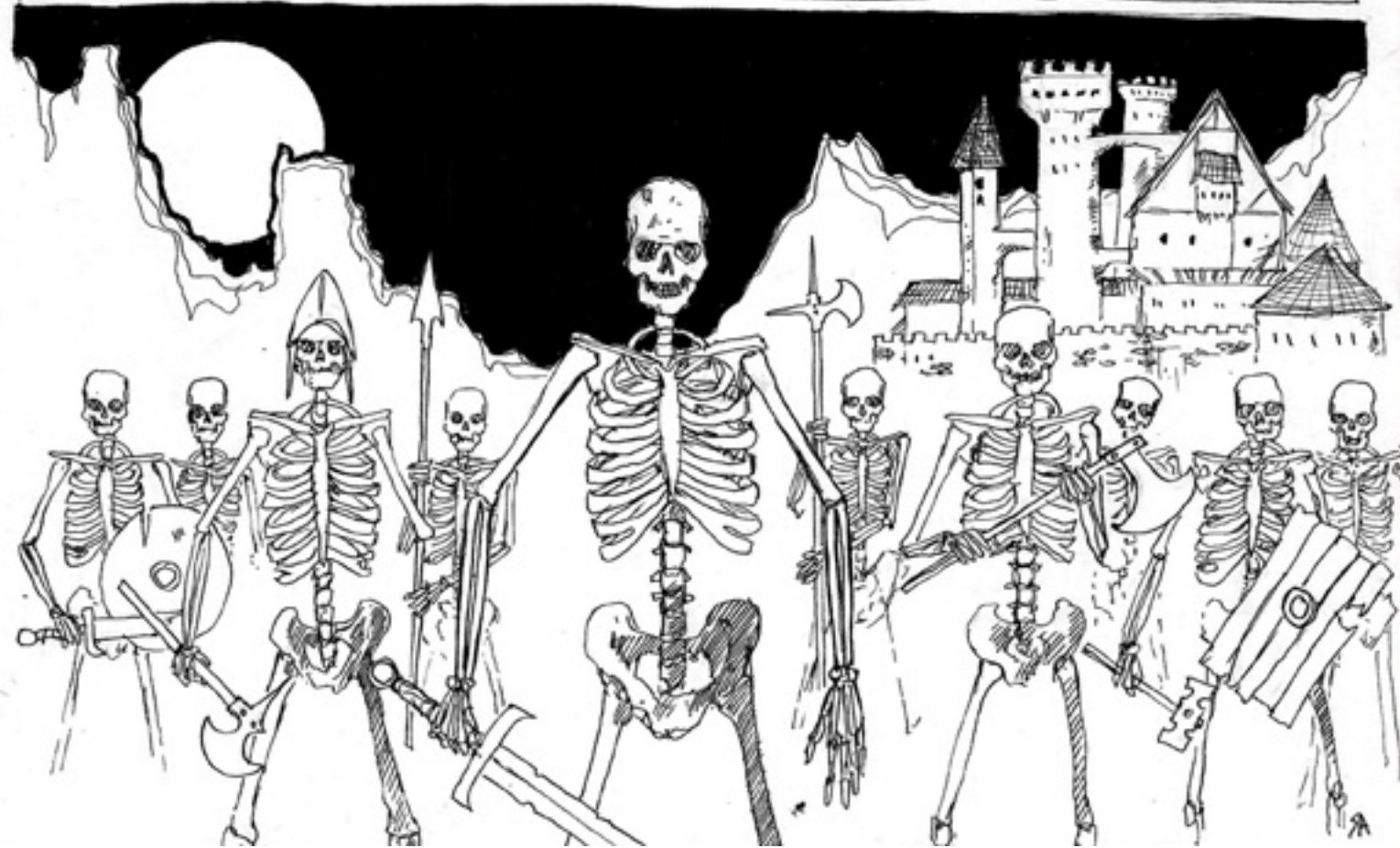
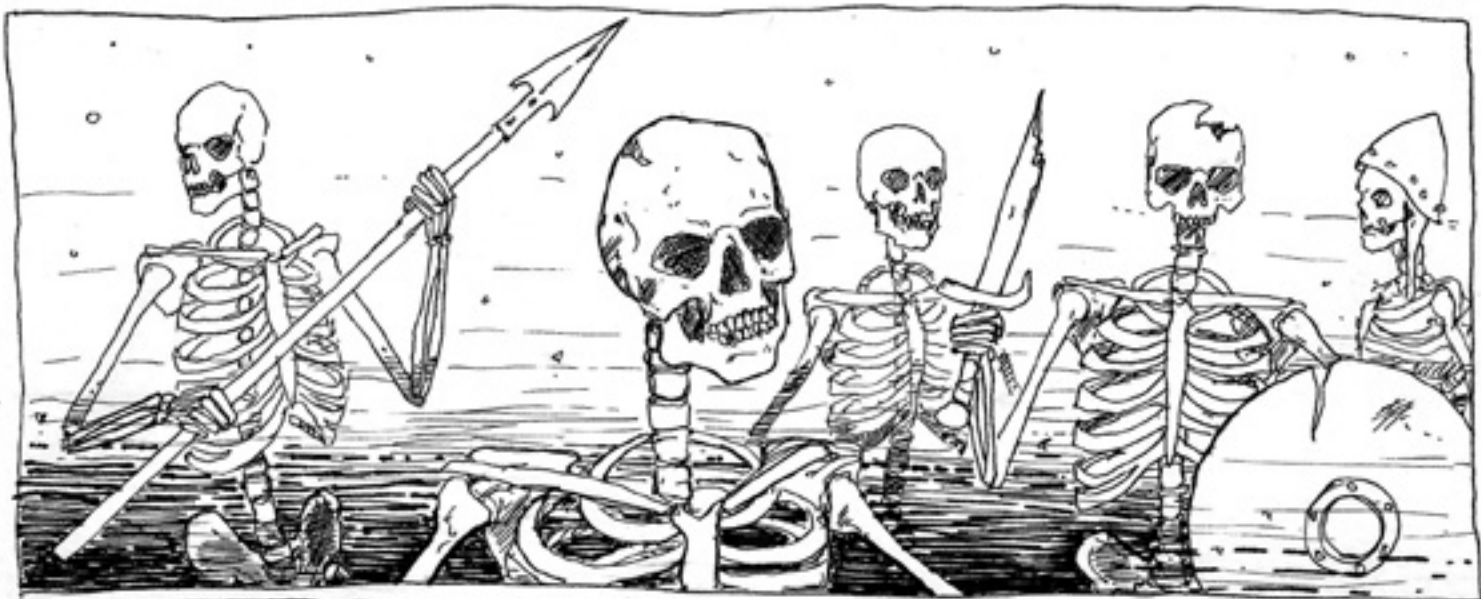
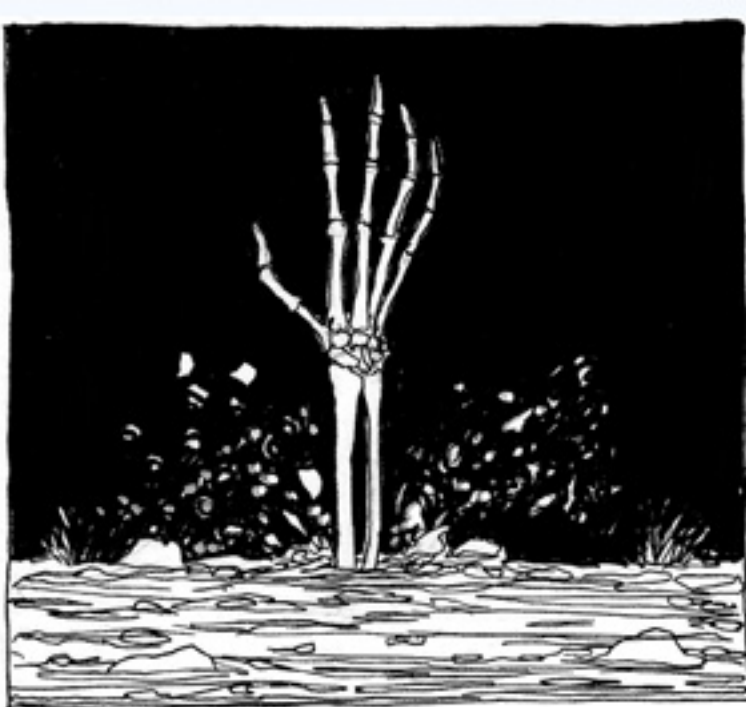
NO!
IMPOSSIBLE!

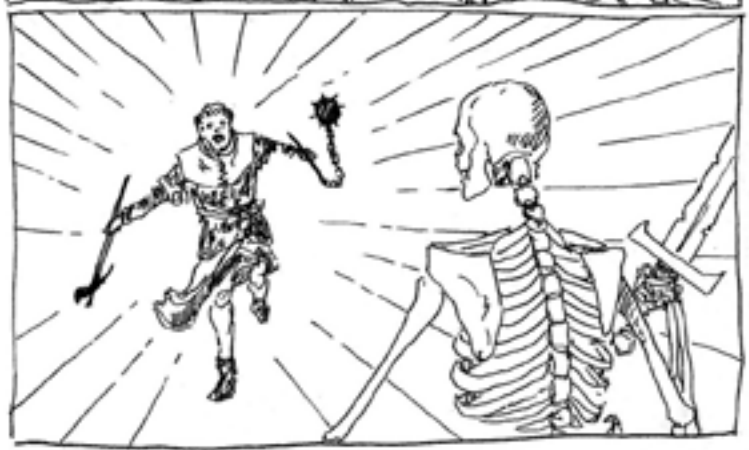
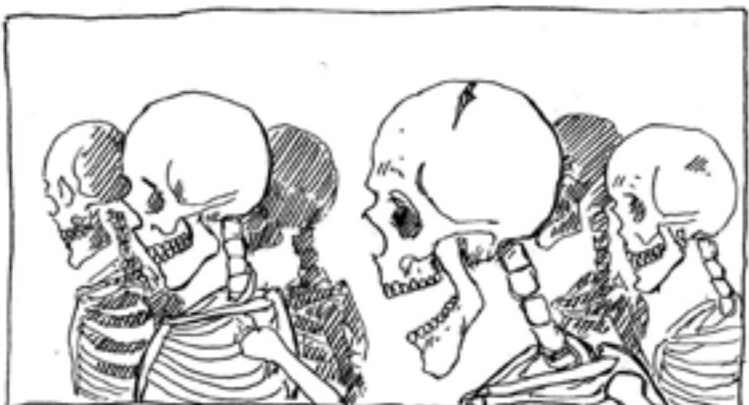
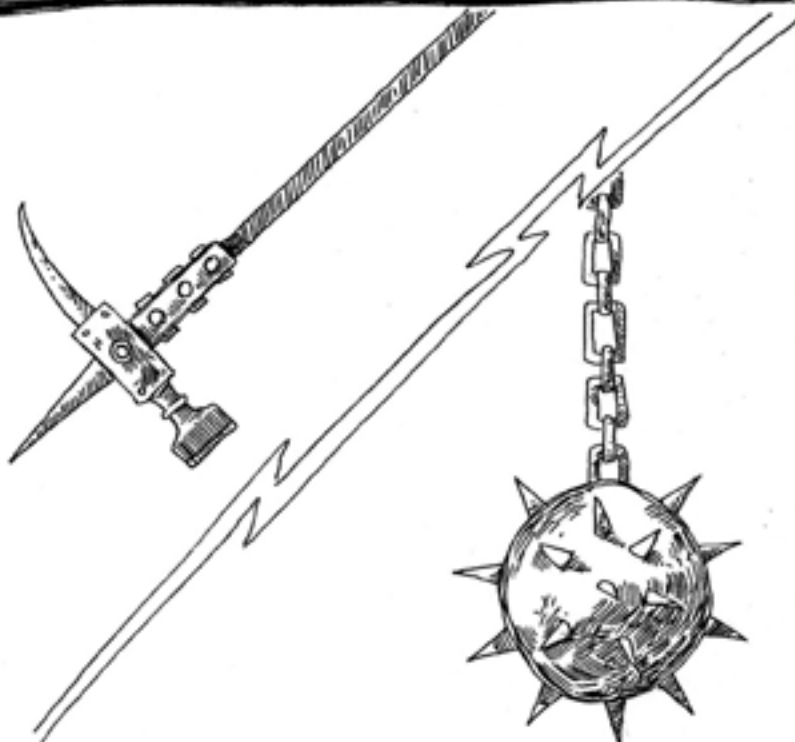


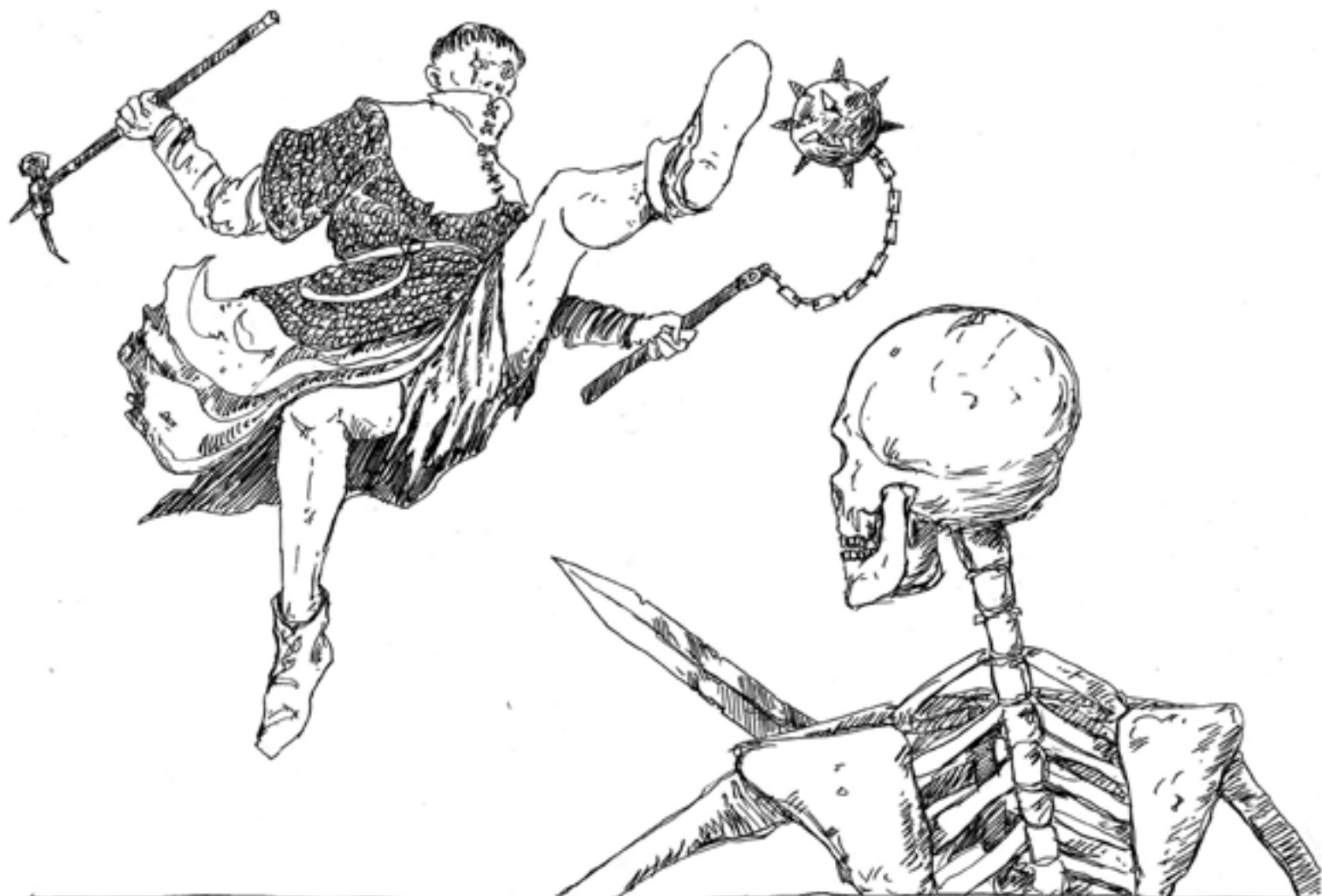


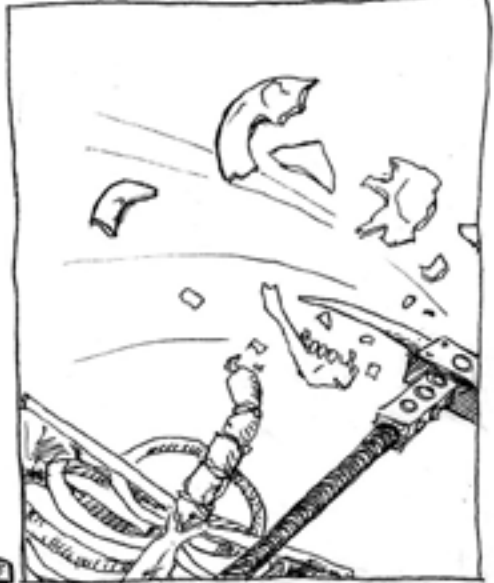
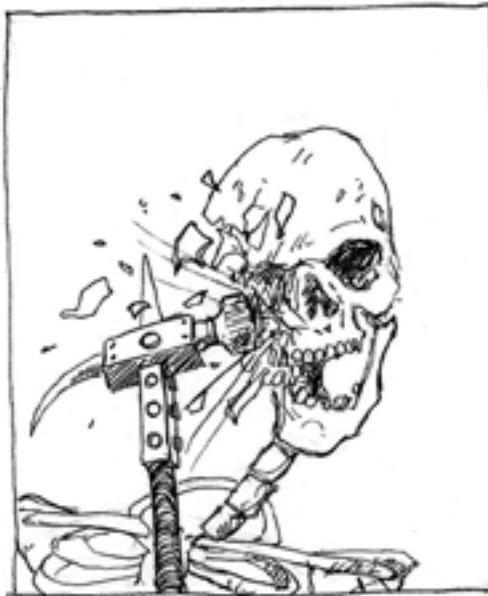
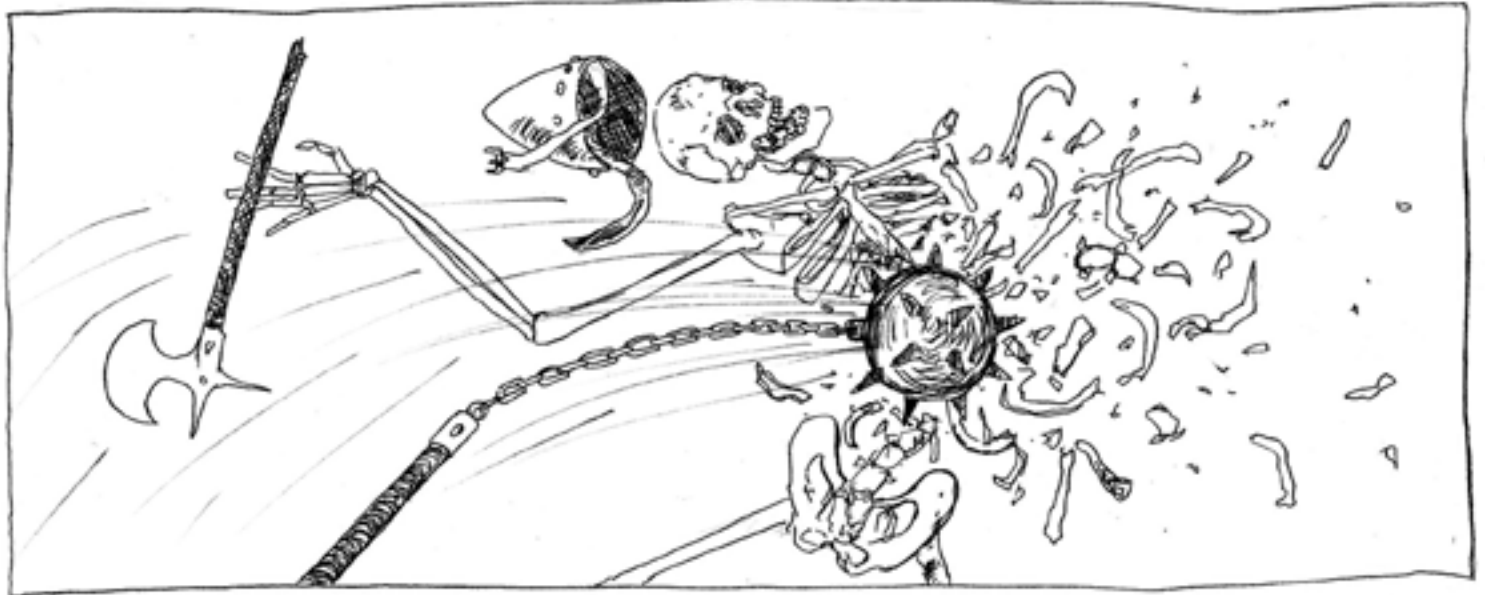
THE PILGRIMAGE

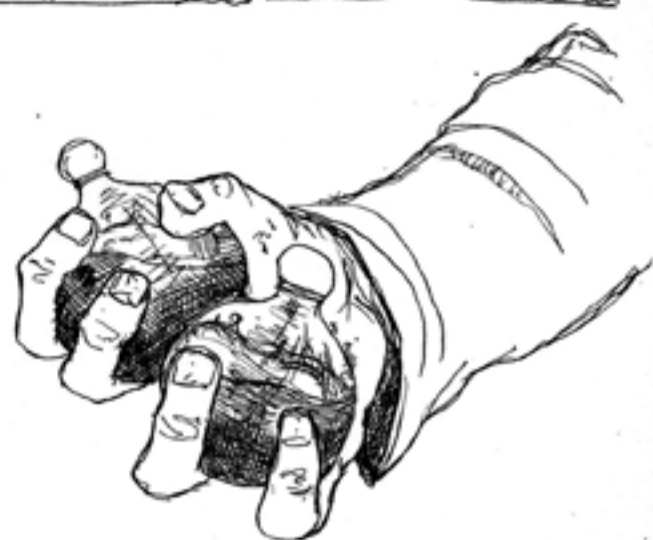
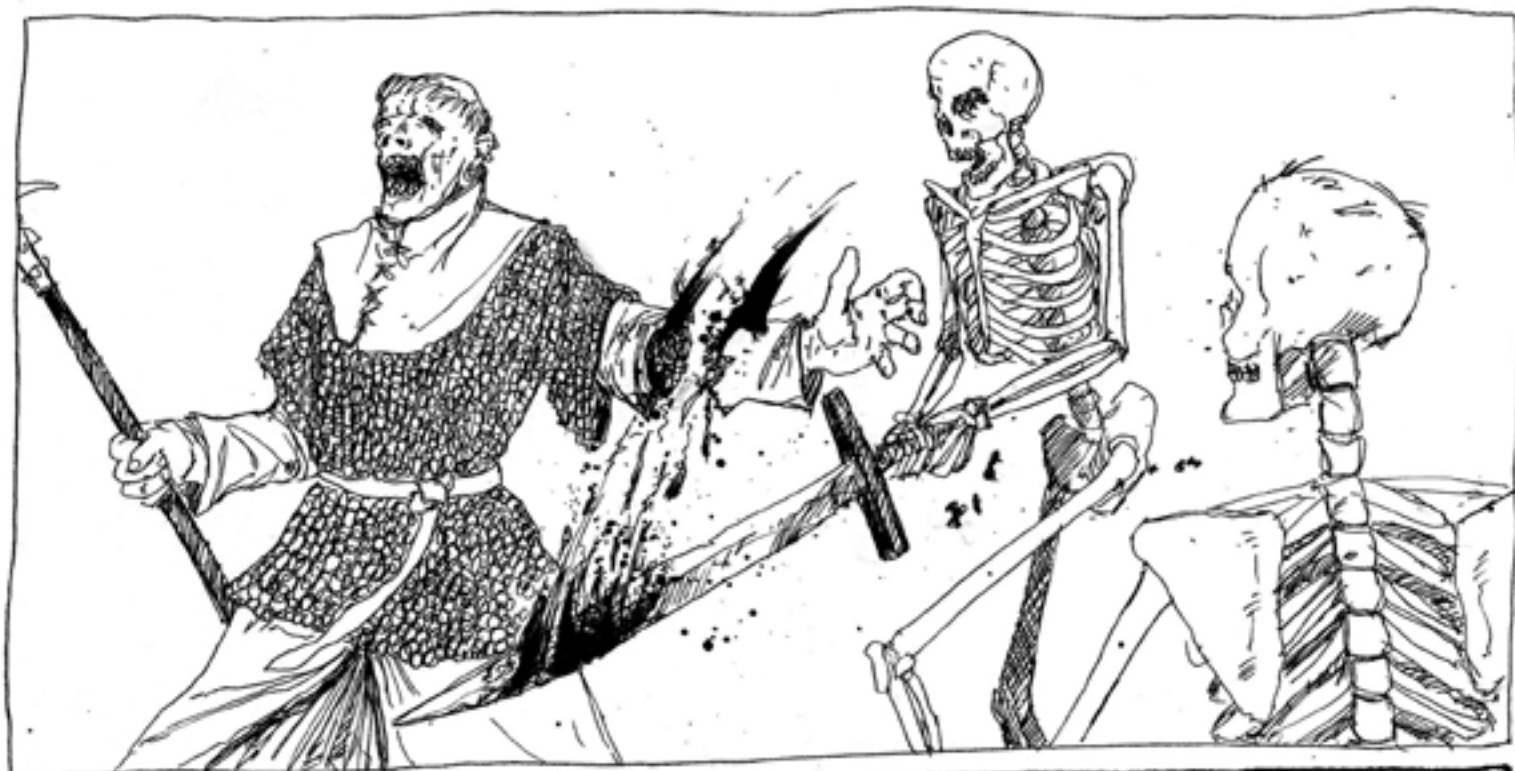
BY SAMUEL ALLAN



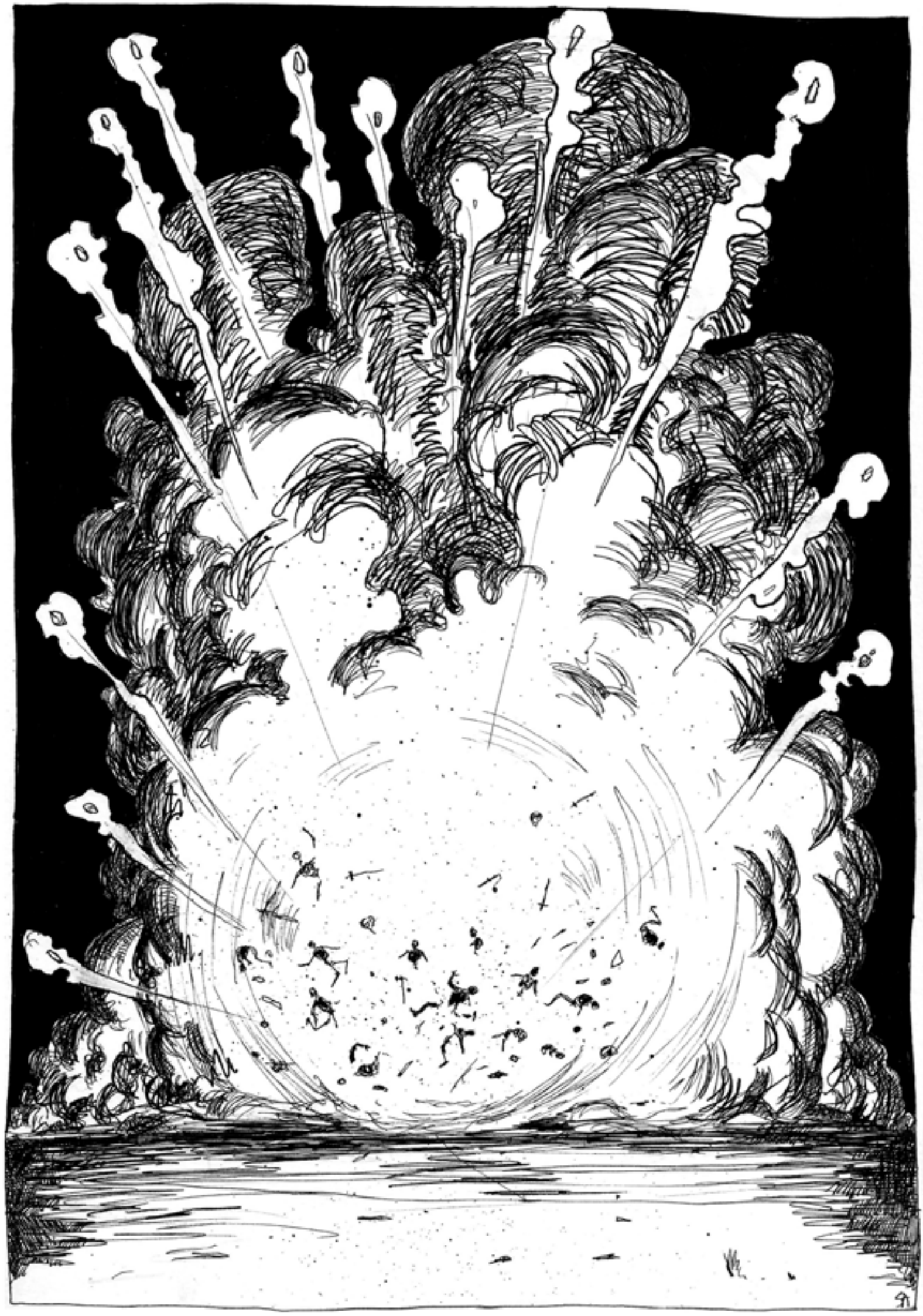
















WUTHER...

FAUST FALL
BLEEDING
SPIRITS
PART 2
BY STEVEN BARDON



LUCIA...



THIS
HEH...
NOR ITS
BEAST...

...With
KEEP US
APART.



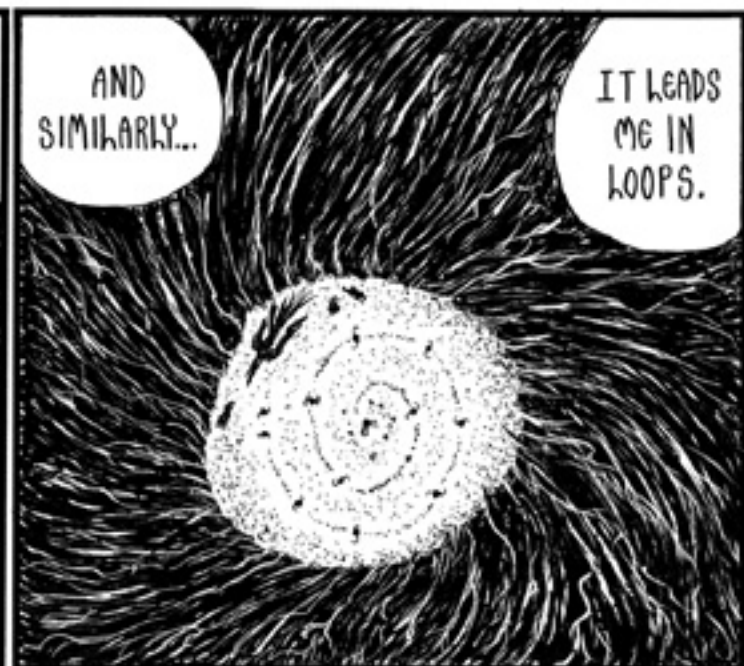
DEAR
SAINTS...

DID WE
COLLIDE
THROUGH
THE KNOT?



ALL IS
SO ROUND
AND COLD
HERE...

...LIKE
THE MOON
ITSELF.



AND
SIMILARLY...

IT LEADS
ME IN
LOOPS.



OH,
LUCIA...

AM
I TO...

...WITHER
AWAY, LIKE
ALL THESE
SPROUTS
HERE?





AHH
BECKONED
HERE...

...MUST
REMAIN
EXTINCT!



YOU ARE
BOTH BUT
MEAT
FOR MY
GULLET!!

BROTHER!

LUCIA!
LISTEN
TO ME!



WE MUST
CONNECT
OUR FAITH!

AH?! Y-YES!!
AND END
THIS FIEND!



WO
RAVEN!

TREMBLE
BEFORE
THE SPARK
OF OUR
MOST HOLY
SUFFERING!



MAY
HIS
PROVIDENCE!

SMITE
THEE INTO
SCORCHED
WASTE!



WUTHER...
THIS
HELL...

ALL OF ITS
PATCHES ARE
DECAYING
AWAY...

EVEN
US...

HAHA.
I SUPPOSE
THAT'S OUR
FREEDOM,
THEN.



BUT...
WHERE WILL
OUR SOULS
SLITHER TO
NEXT?

LORD
ONLY
KNOWS.



Well,
AS LONG AS
WE'RE THERE
TOGETHER...

...WE'LL
BRAVE
THE RISK.

END

By J. S. Rogerfield

The Jump

How did I find myself here? This place of murdered morals and shattered dreams. Of forgotten innocence. Is it too late to find my way back? To mend my frayed principles? To wash away the blood which stains my soul? I find myself going further in, seeking sanctuary. Where I find a darker place, where I find the well. Its waters black, against the fire of the sky. I sip from it, in hope that I may still quench the flame. To drown it. But I drink too deep, and soon, soon it will be I who drowns in its dark waters. In its sorrow. In my sorrow. My guilt. My dying conscience.

The lander shook and groaned from the G's as it plummeted to the surface below. Staff Sergeant Korina Volkova opened her eyes, the moment of introspection passed, buried. Korina looked around the hold at her platoon. Men and women gripped handrails tightly above their seats, sucking greedily on the oxygen being pumped into their masks as the blood drained from their skulls. As the pressure intensified, two men ripped off their masks and dragged themselves out of their seats. They skidded on hands and knees across the cold floor and a foul stench filled the hold as they emptied their stomachs before losing consciousness. Rookies. They'd be lucky to make it through the morning Korina thought. Then again, even lifers like her would need to work hard to stay alive today.

The rumble of artillery blanketing enemy positions reached through the thick bulkheads as the drop brought them closer to the target. The thunder of falling shells increased by the second. The expectation began to build as time ticked by. Then the lights in the hold switched from red to green with an audible thunk. The lander baulked in its descent now as they prepared for the jump. Here we go. Korina glanced around the hold as forty-eight bodies unclipped their safety harnesses and breathers before standing in unison. As one they began checking and rechecking weapons, inspecting gear and scrutinizing targeting systems. Satisfied, they removed the drills from their pouches and began screwing in the faceplates of their exosuits. Korina always hated this part. She breathed rhythmically to calm herself as the plate locked in, the screeching of the drill bit deafening as she fought back

the rising panic of claustrophobia.

They marshalled into three lines facing the doors at the back of the hold. Nobody bothered to wake the rookies. They'd get up or they wouldn't. You didn't even have a name until you'd made it past your first firefight. If anything, you were a liability to everyone around you until you proved you could handle yourself in the shit. She remembered her first jump, green as they come. She'd barely made it out of the lander after hitting the deck with g-LOC. Behind her, she heard one of the rookies groan before unsteadily climbing to their feet. Korina heard the whirl of a drill and then the clunk of armoured boots as they made their way to the back of the line.

That one may have potential.

Korina turned to nod at the platoon as she remotely activated the chem packs in their suits. She felt the blissful release of ice in her veins as the cocktail hit her system and her senses awoke, the exosuit suddenly losing its dense weight. Her muscles twitched as they readied for action. She triple checked her suit's railguns. The Sergeant's head came round again to glance back at her platoon.

'What are you?' she asked, her voice coming through hoarse but steady via their suit's comm unit.

*'**MACHINES!**' they yelled back.*

'What do you do?' she said as the doors gaped open in front of her, revealing a sky lit by surface to air fire. The lander opposite took a round straight across the hold leaving a flaming cavity that spewed burning silhouettes into the dawn.

*'**KILL!**' came the response without hesitation.*

The Staff Sergeant faced front at their response and swiftly took the dozen steps to the open doors before wordlessly leaping from the lander. The platoon came screaming after her, their armoured boots leaving dents in the steel panels as they leapt for the ground. They were still some eight-hundred feet from target as they dropped towards the enemy. This is what we're made for. Korina thought. Today, we go to work.

The sky around her was filled with falling bodies. Most like her just trying to keep their feet pointed at the ground as it rose swiftly to meet them. And then the enemy opened fire. Tracers ripped past her on all

The Jump

sides. She looked around furtively. While a few were floating tagged, their bodies limp, most of her platoon were intact. She could feel her heart beating faster. Colmes to her left took one direct to the groin and another to the faceplate. His head disappeared in a red mist. A 50 round grazed her torso and she began spinning end over end in a free fall. The sky and the battle-scarred surface were blurring together as she fell, and all she could hear was the sound of her own hard breathing. She had trained for this, her body responding instinctively, bringing her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them and tucking in her head.

She struck the ground hard and bounced across a debris strewn battlefield, coming to a stop in a large crater filled with rust coloured water. Alerts were coming in fast from her suit as she lay half buried in loose dirt. After a moment, she climbed shakily to her feet. She reached out a hand to steady herself on the earthy bank of the basin as her head started to swim. She could smell the blood even before it began to stream past her ear and down her neck. Her suit responded quickly by spraying the wound with coagulant, then sending a jolt of painkillers and adrenaline into her system to compensate for the injury. She shook her head to clear it, blinking fast, and then leapt free of the hole.

She took in her surroundings and spotted a dozen hostiles heading in her direction from a smoking compound to the south. They were dressed in a combination of fatigues and civvies, their heads and faces covered by red and white patterned cloth. Her left hand came up instinctively firing her railgun, the men disappeared in a cloud of blood and body parts. The chinking of the railgun in her ears brought a grin to her face and she looked around for more Tangos. The adrenaline had mixed with the stimulants in her chem pack, everything becoming a haze as she stalked through the camp misting anything that wasn't wearing an exosuit, and leaving a bloody mess of bodies in her wake.

Information was buzzing through her comm unit now. Forty-two of her unit had survived the jump and were converging on their designated waypoints. However, enemy resistance was heavy with more closing in on their location every moment. She had racked up

over ninety kills and had already depleted half her railgun ammunition by the time she reconnected with her squad. She was glad to see that only Colmes was missing. Corporal Taylor met her before she reached the rest of the squad.

'Lieutenant's dead, Sergeant. Fuckers took out his hydraulics and then forced a frag through a crack in his plate before I could mist 'em. Enemy is at least three times what they told us in the brief, and we're already short on ammo.', he said, falling into step beside her.

'Colmes?' he asked as they stopped just short of the squad.

Korina shook her head and Taylor turned away as if to spit. The man had a nasty habit of dipping when off duty which Korina detested, and had the propensity to spit even when the foul stuff wasn't in his mouth.

'Longer we delay, the heavier resistance will get. Guess I'm in charge. All squads execute. Let's get this done and get the fuck outta here.'

'Copy that, Staff Sergeant Volkova! Asses in gear, soldiers! Maintain dispersion, 5s and 25s and keep your heads on a swivel. Move the fuck out!' roared Taylor as the squads began converging on the target's last known location.

Korina's squad was making its way between rows of residential still burning from the morning's bombardment as they attempted to close on the target's location. Bodies, blackened and charred from the fire lay scattered. She tried not to look at the little ones, but their empty eyes followed her, just as their blackened fingers seemed to reach out as she passed. As if looking to escape the fire. As if they called to her.

Save us!

She tore her gaze away from the little bodies, from hollow eyes and blackened bones. And tried to forget the smell. She forced herself to keep moving, keep her mind on her squad, on keeping them alive. The only thing she needed to fight for was her brothers and sisters. Those other people were somebody else's responsibility. They need you to get them home Korina. When they were within 300 feet of the target, their comms suddenly went dead and she threw up her hand and indicated a stop.

'Taylor. Switch to short range radio.'



The Jump

Corporal Taylor passed the order to the squad before leaning in so only she could hear.

'Forcing us to go analogue, Korina. Can't be a good sign.' His grey eyes were trying to get a fix on her.

'We carry on, Taylor; the target is top priority in the sector and it's the only way to guarantee reunion of the platoon. I won't risk leaving anyone behind'

'Roger that, Sergeant', he said, before returning to his place amongst the squad.

They resumed moving towards the target compound, though Korina now led at a more cautious pace. The alleys were narrow and made perfect choke points. Behind her she heard Taylor reminding the squad to maintain dispersion. Smoke from a fuel depot fire to the west was obscuring their view as they came to the mouth of the alley. They faced an open plaza enveloped by a mix of residential and commercial structures. The plaza had taken several direct hits in the bombardment. Korina observed numerous impact craters at the centre which had sent stone and other debris in every direction. The target should be in a building on the other side of the square, but she was getting a bad feeling.

She was crouched low at the edge of the alley as she tried to get a view through the smoke. Then the sound of heavy fighting reached them from the east. She heard the chink of railguns, the popping of small arms and the thunder of heavier guns. Somebody was trying to get a piece of one of her squads. She tried to raise them on the radio but they were out of range and her main comms were still down. Taylor came up beside her.

'Sounds nasty, Sergeant. You think we should go lend a hand?'

'No. We stay on target. You'll take half the squad and flank left through the plaza while I take the rest up the right. We reconnect on the other side.'

'Yes Ma'am, Staff Sergeant Volkova!' He moved away and signalled to Cash, Wickwitty and Brown to fall in behind him.

Korina gave the rest of the squad instructions to follow her in on the right side of the square.

'We move in wedge formation, keep in cover where

possible and maintain dispersion. Eyes out for an ambush, this place has the look of a killing ground.'

'Copy, Staff Sergeant Volkova', the four responded in unison.

They moved quickly to the right flank using the debris and several abandoned vehicles for cover. As they made it to the edge of the plaza and began moving up, she radioed Corporal Taylor.

'We'll move up in concert, Taylor. I have a feeling we're about to get hit'.

'Hooah Sergeant, was just getting that feeling myself.'

The two teams were moving towards the smoke, weapons ready and eyes straining to catch a glimpse of any possible targets when multiple explosions rocked the plaza sending stones and shrapnel flying. As the explosions hit, they dived to the ground or into cover. Enemy fire tore through the square from within the long stretch of commercial buildings to the north end of the square, putting the enemy directly between them and the target.

'They're using the smoke for cover, Taylor, and trying to pin us in place while their mortars rain down hell. Time to pop some smoke of our own.' Korina relayed via her radio.

'Copy that, Sergeant. Smoke em!' came Taylor's voice over the radio.

The call went through the squad. They fired canisters of nerve gas into the enemy positions from their shoulder launchers before throwing themselves forward guns hot. One man laying down suppressing fire, the next moving to a new position. They pressed into the thick smoke of the fuel fire, passing quickly into the space beyond and storming the occupied buildings. By the time they breached, enemy fire had ceased. Provided protection from the gas by their suits, the squad moved in untroubled and quickly cleared the block. It was easy work as they went room to room executing paralyzed or spasming Tangos.

'Not soldiers work this, Sergeant.' Taylor said as they regrouped the two halves of the squad.

'No, Corporal. Not soldiers work... but, necessary.'

He looked at her hard for a moment before silently nodding. They were in reach of the target's compound

The Jump

now and could see a variety of communications equipment on the roof, likely the source of the comms jamming.

'Let's get this done, Taylor. I want our comms back online so I can find out where the fuck my other squads are. We move in as a unit, hit the building with the rest of the gas and take care of any survivors.'

'Copy, Staff Sergeant', Taylor said with noticeable reluctance in his voice.

This doesn't sit well with me either, Corporal, but orders are orders and I have mine.

'All ready, Staff Sergeant.'

She looked over her squad and nodded. They fell in behind her as she breached the wall closest to the target's compound. They rushed the open space between the two buildings and took up positions around the door. Private Cash attached the breaching charge as the rest set up a perimeter. Korina sent two of her soldiers to circle right and two left. They would send canisters of gas inside once the door was breached before rejoining them at the entrance. She hand-signalled three, two, one and Cash breached the door while she and Taylor rolled gas canisters into the building.

They waited sixty seconds for the gas to take effect before entering to begin their sweep of the ground floor. When they reached stairs to the upper floors and basement, she sent Taylor and his team up while she led her team down. They swept room after room but found no bodies, nothing but empty rooms. There wasn't even any furniture. She was beginning to get a very bad feeling.

'Found the jamming equipment, Sergeant.' Taylor's voice came in over the radio.

'Dealing with it now. Comms should be back up momentarily. Eerily quiet up here, though, Ma'am. No bodies, no resistance, nothing.'

'Same here, Taylor. We have one last floor to check. Take care of the equipment then meet us down here. It looks like intel was wrong. Somebody fucked up big time.'

'Roger that, Sergeant.'

Her team moved cautiously down the last set of steps, stopping at the turning below to throw a flashbang

into the hallway before storming it. All that faced them was a large basement, empty, except for a metal door in the opposite wall.

'Must be a panic room, Ma'am' said Private Wickwitty.

'Can you breach that, Cash?' she asked the soldier.

He carefully approached and began inspecting the heavy door. Looking back at her he shook his head.

'Sorry, Staff Sergeant, not with explosives. It's a blast door. We may be able to cut through with the laser, though it will take time, Ma'am.

'How long Private?'

'Not sure, Staff Sergeant. At least ten minutes.'

'Get it done' she said before getting back on the radio to Corporal Taylor.

'Taylor, when you're done with the comms, have your team take up defensive positions on the upper floors then rejoin me in the basement. My team will take up positions on the ground floor. We need to cut into a safe room to get this bastard and may need to repel a counter attack.'

'Affirmative, Sergeant.' came Taylor's reply.

As the minutes ticked by and Cash continued to laser into the safe room, anxiety began to bubble up in Korina's stomach. She paced up and down, trying to figure out what to do when the comm abruptly cut into her thoughts. Taylor had succeeded in shutting down the jammers.

'Comm back online, Sergeant.'

'Good job, Corporal. Now get your ass down here.'

'On my way, Staff Sergeant.'

Korina allowed herself a moment of relief at getting communications back. She hoped to hell her platoon was still intact.

'Sergeant Alvarez, report.' No response.

'Sergeant Davis, Sergeant Carter, Sergeant Patel! ANYONE! Report!'

Still no response.

'Corporal Taylor, confirm! The jamming equipment is disabled?!'

The Jump

'Confirmed, Staff Sergeant.'

Where the fuck was the rest of the platoon? Had they pulled out already? They couldn't have taken out three squads of troopers. Could they?

Private Cash suddenly shut off the laser and turned to give her the thumbs up. She made her way to the lip of the wall where it met the door. She gave Private Cash a nod. He began pulling the heavy door open. As the gap grew larger, she crouched low, ready to take the corner and mist anyone still alive inside. Just when she was about to swing into the doorway a blinding light filled her vision as an explosion flung her across the room where she landed in deafened silence. Korina felt heat lapping against her body, but the pain was far away. She could hear a terrible ringing as something warm and wet ran gently from her ears, and her vision slipped steadily from lurid colours into the cold embrace of night.



Korina found herself before a well, its water black, against the fire of the sky. She knelt before it, and cupped a hand, which reached down below the inky veneer. As the arm slowly withdrew, an orange glow lit the surface of the waters. From a flame which now sat within her palm. She lifted it to her lips and drank deep, the fire dripping from between her fingers to set light to her clothes, even as it raced down her throat to renew the dying embers that lay nearly extinguished within.

She saw her then, another woman, a Shade of sorrow, kneeling beside the water on the opposite side of the well. The woman drank great handfuls of stygian fluid, the sombre liquid flowing from her gaping jaws to soak her chest and thighs. Its black water running from cupped hands to splash upon the ground. And slowly a puddle became a pool as she sought to drink yet deeper, her body bending closer and closer to the mouth of the well. Until with a splash that broke the deathly silence of that place, the Shade finally descended into the blackness. Her legs kicked as she slipped deeper, and became a shadow thrashing in the water. With horrifying slowness, Korina watched her drown, in the feeble light of a dying flame.

The first time I entered the
Catacombs, I was a child.

This way.

It was a night like tonight, with a
storm coming down from the
mountains.

The cave promised me warmth,
safety, and time to rest my bones.

All it wanted was one little thing

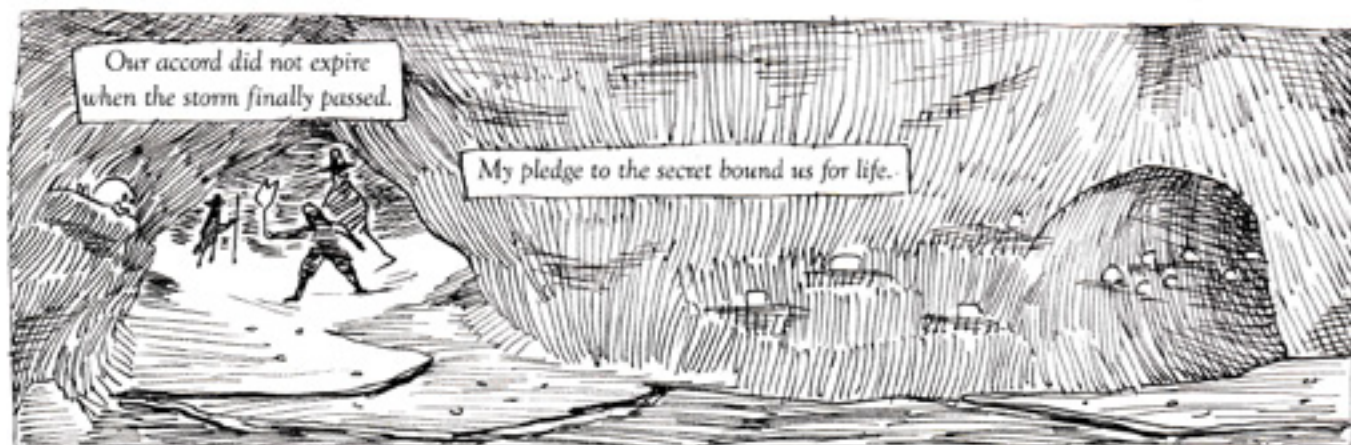
One little promise

One measly oath

It was the best bargain
I ever made.

KEEPING THE SECRET

A LOBSTERPOT TALE BY BEN DOANE



Our accord did not expire when the storm finally passed.

My pledge to the secret bound us for life.



I would keep it, and in turn it would keep me.

It was lonely work though, keeping a secret by myself, and I found myself daring to break my silence again and again...



But secrets this large have ways of keeping themselves.

Dead Gods...



What is this place captain?

Stay close Child...



And so for years I was alone,
toiling in obscurity, or so I
thought...

How many
folk did they say
disappeared last
month?

This feels like
a far sight more
than five Herr
Witchhunter.

Until the secret told
me its secret.

There must be
centuries worth of
bones down here.
Maybe more...



I was not the first to perform these
duties. Those who came before me
had been here all along, watching
from the walls, sharing in my
triumphs and failures.

I had never been alone. I had
merely been looking at time the
wrong way.



I was living infinite lives in the
catacombs, performing the
sacred duties in skins fresh and
simultaneously ancient.

Shifting slowly with the
world, but always fulfilling
the same promise.

Captain
Witchfinder, Sir?

Keeping the secret



There's something wrong
with this skull.

From beginning to end to beginning to end.



