

# SOMETHING GREATER THAN ARTIFICE



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAIME ROBLES  
STORY BY MIKE SPEEGLE

WHAT, YOU WANT TO HEAR THE *ROS* STORY? AGAIN? SURELY YOU HAVE TO BE SICK OF THAT ONE BY NOW.

HOW ABOUT INSTEAD I TELL YOU ABOUT GENEVIEVE IV AND HOW SHE STAVED OFF THE FELL NECROMANCER BELKANUS? I ALSO HAVE A LITTLE TALE ABOUT A MAN NAMED ONLY AS JOE, AND HOW HIS ACTIONS INFLUENCED THE PLAS WARS OF '89. OR...

FINE. *ROS* IT IS, AGAIN. BUT LET'S TELL IT FROM A DIFFERENT ANGLE THIS TIME...

IT ALL STARTED WITH *GREGOR*. I SUPPOSE. HIM AND ANATOLY, WAY OUT IN THE TECH REPUBLIC HINTERLANDS. A SMALL PLACE, AS I RECALL. LITTLE MORE THAN A TARPAPER SHACK WITH A FEED LINE RUNNING TO IT. WHICH, IF YOU'RE OF AN ARTIFICING BENT, IS REALLY ALL YOU NEED.

THEY HAD A NAME FOR IT, BACK THEN. SOMETHING GRECO. A DEITY, PERHAPS? AH YES, *JANUS*. THE TWO-FACED GOD OF TIME AND TRANSITION, OF BIRTH AND OF DEATH. OF ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS.

WHICH IS PRETTY FITTING WHEN YOU GET RIGHT DOWN TO IT.

BECAUSE *GREGOR* WAS THERE AT THE BEGINNING, AND HE WAS THERE AT THE END

IN FACT, I HAVE, OVER THE YEARS, COME TO THINK OF THIS AS HIS STORY AS MUCH AS ANYONE ELSE'S.

AND WHY NOT? *ROS* WAS NEVER REALLY OF THE TR, NOR WAS THAT PEDANT, *MIKHAIL*. AND WHILE *MOSES DRIVER* PLAYED HIS PART, *MOSES* IS STILL *MOSES*, AND THEREFORE A PART OF NO ONE ELSE'S STORY BUT HIS OWN. WHICH WAS IS NOT TO SAY THAT EACH DIDN'T HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN THIS TALE, NO?

OUR STORY, IF IT CAN BE SAID TO HAVE ANY TRUE BEGINNING, BEGAN IN THAT SMALL, SELFSAME SHACK WHERE THE BROTHERHOOD OF JANUS (THAT WAS THE NAME/ I KNEW IT WOULD COME TO ME) PLIED THEIR TRADE.



IN FACT, IF WE CONCENTRATE, I THINK WE CAN LOOK IN ON THAT LITTLE SHACK, AND SEE THE STRANGE THINGS THAT OCCURRED THERE, ONCE UPON A TIME...

EASTERN WOODS.



GREGOR NEVER REALLY  
BELIEVED IN *SILOS*.

HARD TO BELIEVE?  
WELL HE DIDN'T.

DON'T ASK ME WHY.



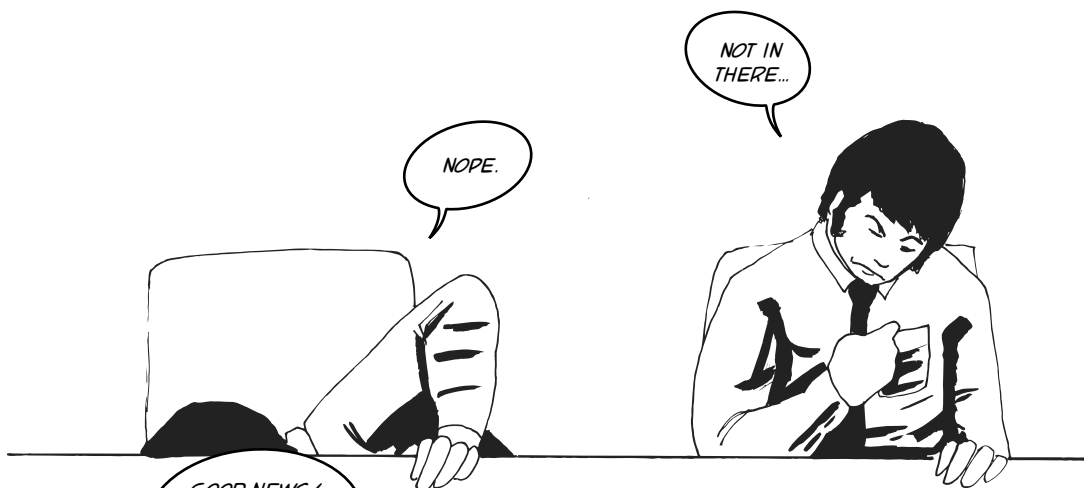
BUT HIS PARTNER,  
ANATOLY?

ANATOLY *BELIEVED*.

SILOS, ANATOLY?  
REALLY?

MIGHT AS WELL BELIEVE IN THE  
BOOGEYMAN. AIN'T NO WAY THAT  
SOME FACELESS DARK FORCE  
IS GONNA SWEEP IN HERE AND  
GOBBLE US UP.

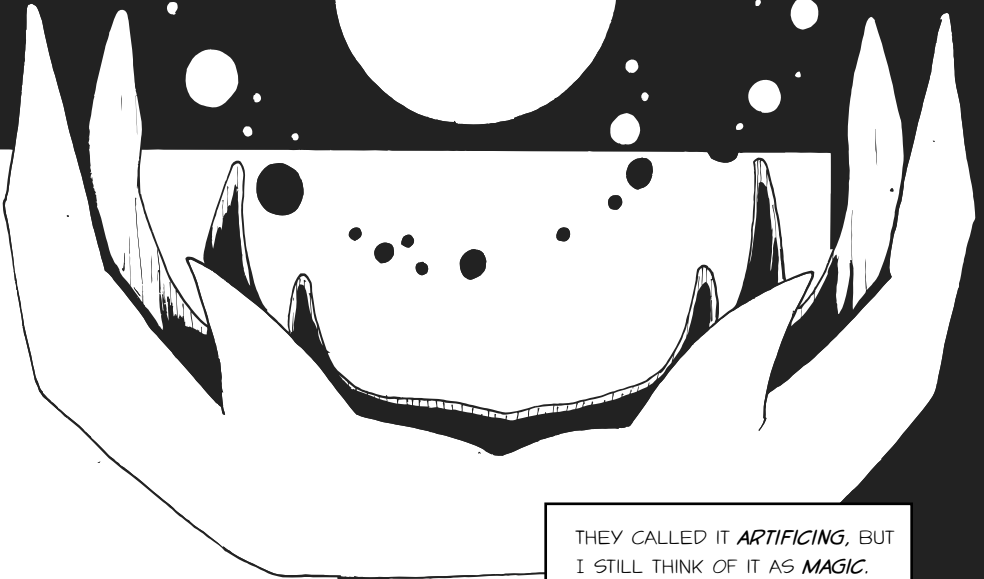
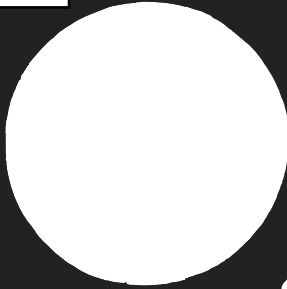








HAVING CHASTISED HIS FRIEND,  
GREGOR WENT BACK TO HIS WORK,  
WHICH AT THE TIME CONSISTED OF  
MUCKING WITH THE FUNDAMENTAL  
LAWS OF THE UNIVERSE.



THEY CALLED IT *ARTIFICING*, BUT  
I STILL THINK OF IT AS *MAGIC*.



BUT EVEN MAGIC  
TAKES ITS TOLL.



GREGOR PACKED UP HIS TERMINUS...



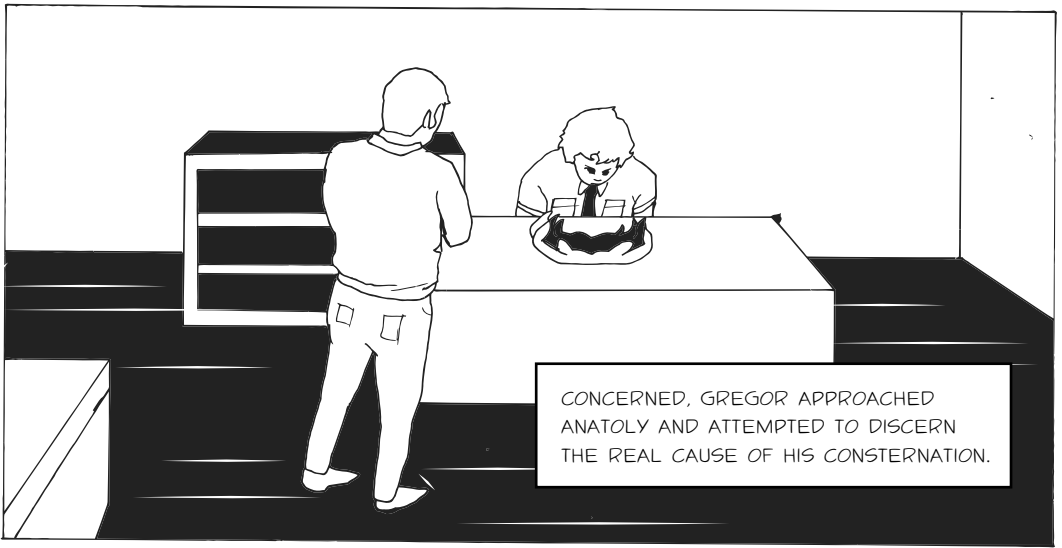
...STRETCHED...



...AND REALIZED...



...THAT ALL WAS NOT WELL  
WITH ANATOLY.



CONCERNED, GREGOR APPROACHED  
ANATOLY AND ATTEMPTED TO DISCERN  
THE REAL CAUSE OF HIS CONSTERNATION.

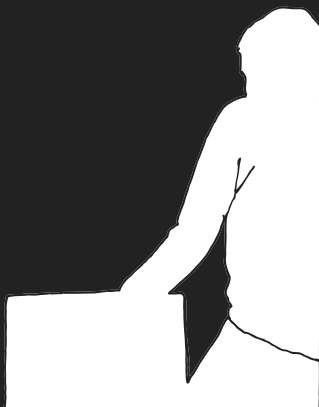


ONLY TO FIND THAT ANATOLY  
WAS, IN FACT, TERRIFIED  
OF THE *SILOS* THREAT.



AND GREGOR—IN THE CALLOUS WAY  
THAT YOUNG MEN SOMETIMES HAVE—  
DISMISSED HIS FRIEND'S FEARS...

...AND WALKED AWAY...



...PAYING THE MATTER  
VERY LITTLE MIND...



...ONLY REALIZING THE  
FOLLY OF HIS ACTIONS...

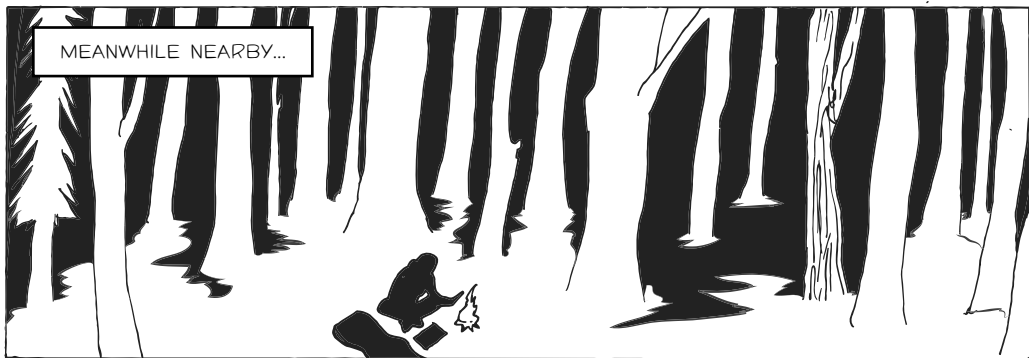


...WHEN IT WAS *TOO LATE*.



BECAUSE *SILOS* HAD COME.

MEANWHILE NEARBY...



A WOMAN KNOWN ONLY AS *ROS*  
WAS MAKING HER WAY THROUGH  
THE WILDS OF THE EASTERN WOODS.



HER MISSION...

TO HEAD OFF THE *SILOS* THREAT BEFORE  
IT COULD DEVOUR THE ENTIRE WORLD.



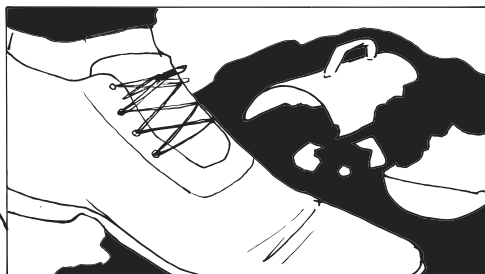
HER PATH WAS FRAUGHT WITH DANGER,  
PERIL LURKING AROUND EACH TURN.



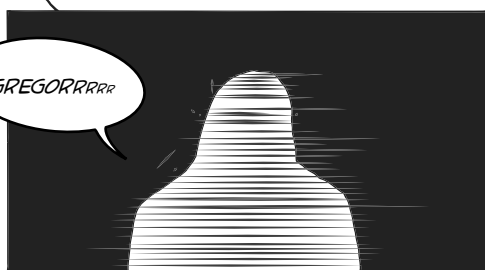
LITTLE DID SHE KNOW,  
*TONIGHT WOULD BE  
NO DIFFERENT...*

THE TIDE OF BLACKNESS  
CAME OUT OF NOWHERE...

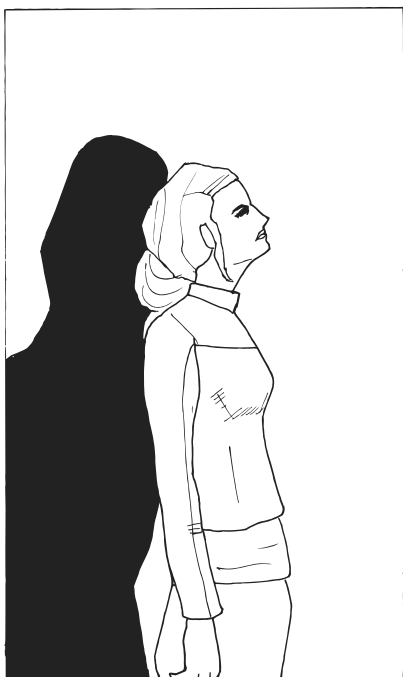
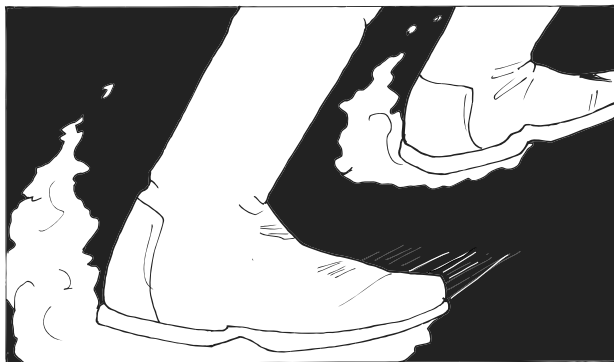
NO!

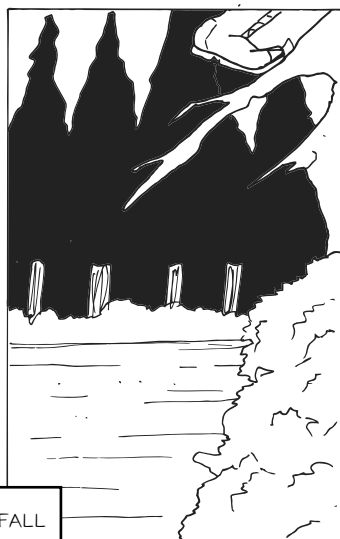


GREGORRRRR



...AND GREGOR WAS FORCED TO  
WATCH AS IT TOOK HIS FRIEND.

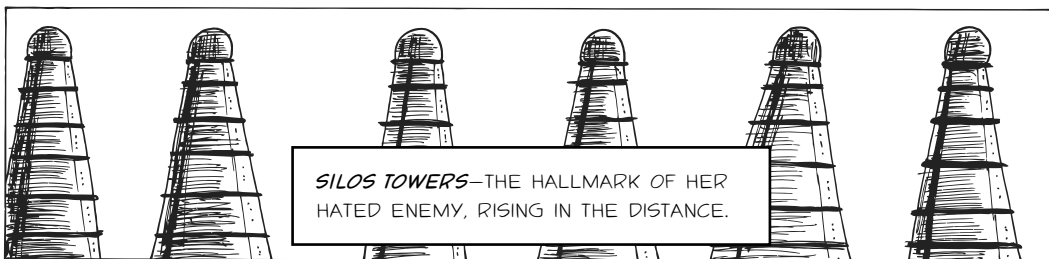




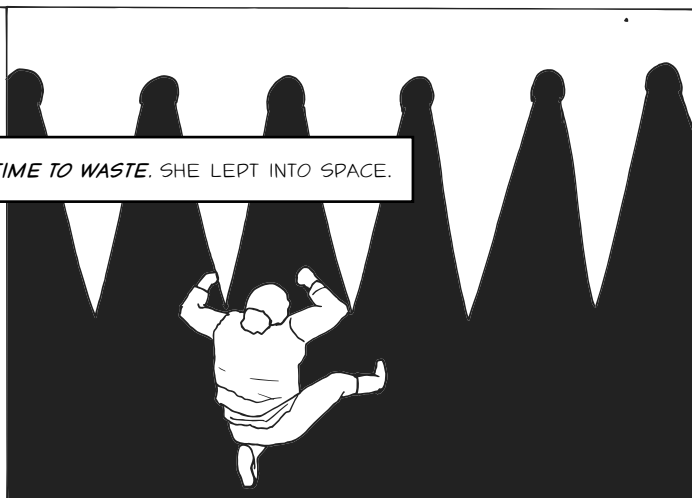
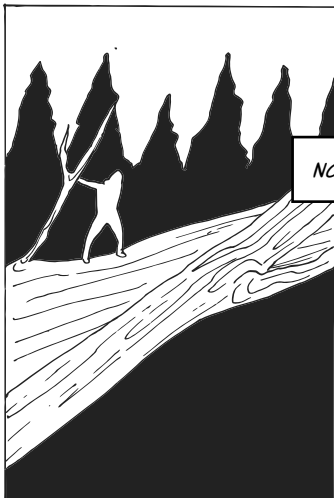
ROS REACHED THE TOP OF THE DEADFALL  
AND LOOKED INTO THE DISTANCE...



AND SAW THE THING SHE'D FEARED MOST:

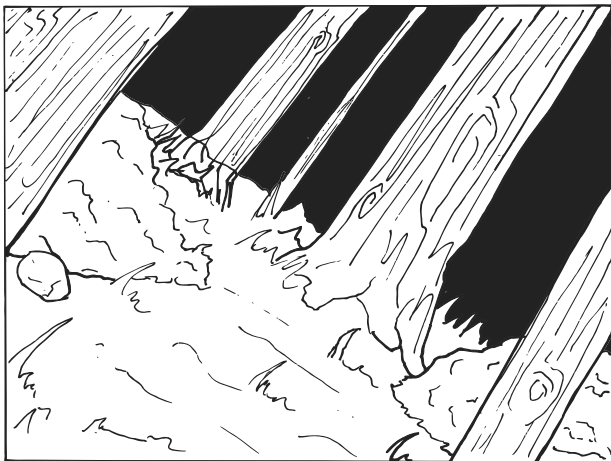
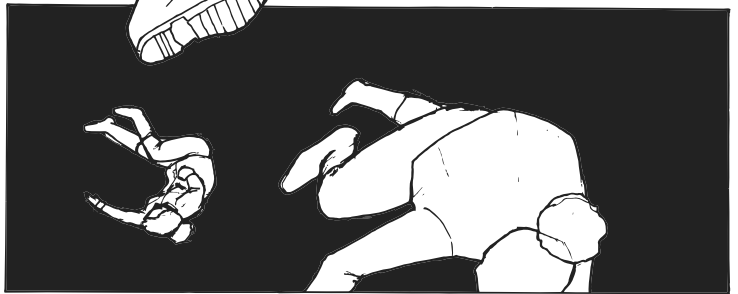


*SILOS TOWERS*—THE HALLMARK OF HER  
HATED ENEMY, RISING IN THE DISTANCE.



*NO TIME TO WASTE.* SHE LEFT INTO SPACE.



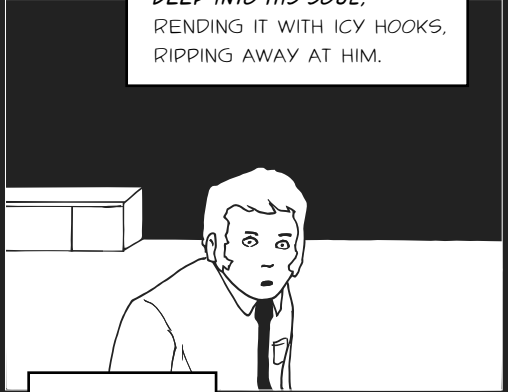


*THE DARKNESS TOOK GREGOR*

*WRAPPING HIM LIKE A SHROUD*



IT PENETRATED  
*DEEP INTO HIS SOUL,*  
RENDING IT WITH ICY HOOKS,  
RIPPING AWAY AT HIM.



*AND WORST...*

*...IT BEGAN TO FEEL...*

*...SORT OF NICE.*

BUT THEN...

A CHORD LIKE A BOLT OF SILVER  
RANG OUT IN THE AIR,  
PUSHING BACK THE BLACK...

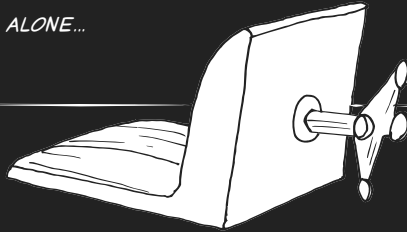


AND SUDDENLY GREGOR  
WAS *FREE*.



HE RAN FOR HIS LIFE.

*ALONE...*



...FOR ANATOLY WAS *GONE*.

ROS FILLED HER LUNGS AND SANG HARDER,  
BUT ONE CHORD OF A LARGER WORK  
FORGED LONG AGO FOR THE  
EXPRESS PURPOSE OF COUNTERING  
THE SILOS THREAT.



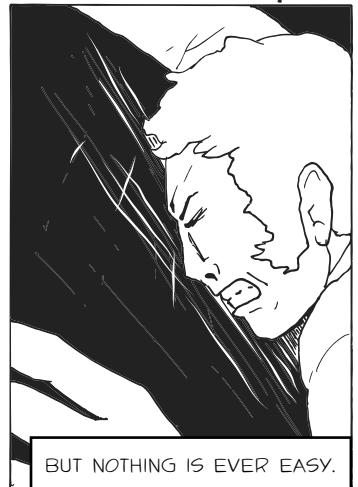
THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR,  
GREGOR SAW HIS SAVIOR.



HE RAN TOWARDS HER



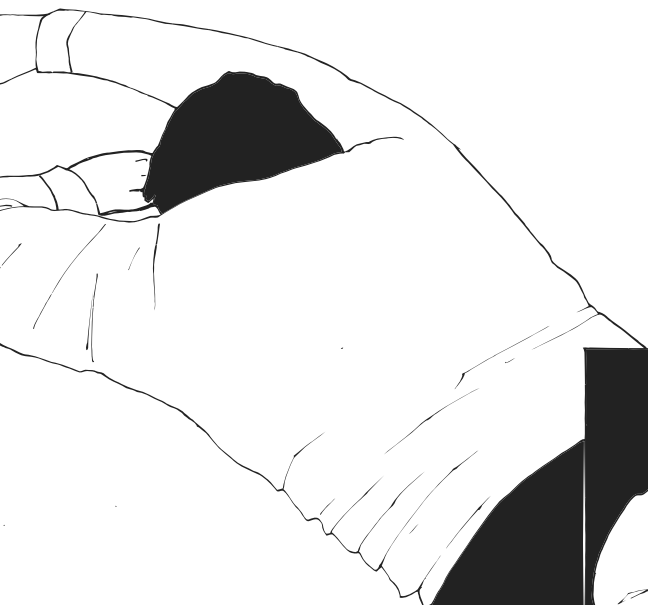
BUT NOTHING IS EVER EASY.



SENSING AN OPPORTUNITY,  
*THE DARKNESS SURGED*  
*TOWARD GREGOR,*  
ALL GREEDY  
NEED.



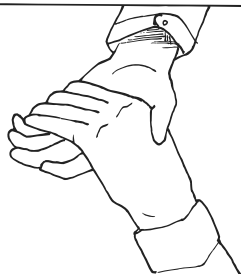
BUT ROS WAS NOT TO  
BE DISSUADED.



ROS REACHED OUT TO HIM  
IN A GESTURE THAT LOOKED  
SOMETHING LIKE SUPPLICATION.

TAKE MY  
HAND.

GREGOR TOOK HER HAND  
AND TOGETHER THEY *RAN*.



HOURS (AND MILES) LATER...



ROS AND GREGOR RESTED AND  
NURSED THEIR WOUNDS.



DAMMIT.



"WHAT'S WRONG?"



MY HANDS.  
I NEED THEM.



"...BUT I MUST HAVE LOST  
MY BANDAGES IN THE FALL."



OH, IS THAT ALL?  
I MIGHT JUST HAVE  
SOMETHING FOR THAT.

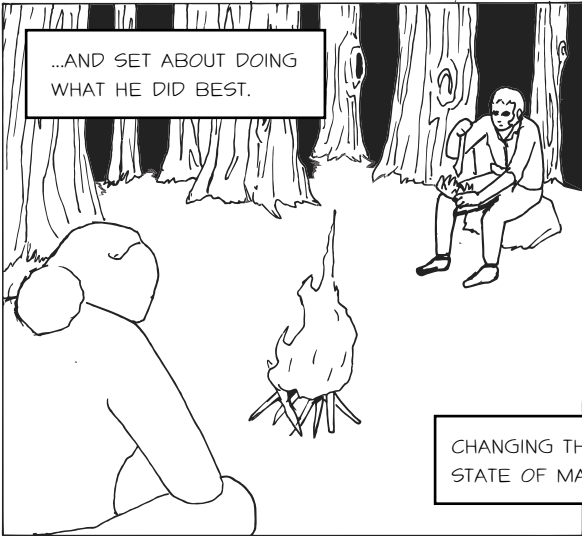




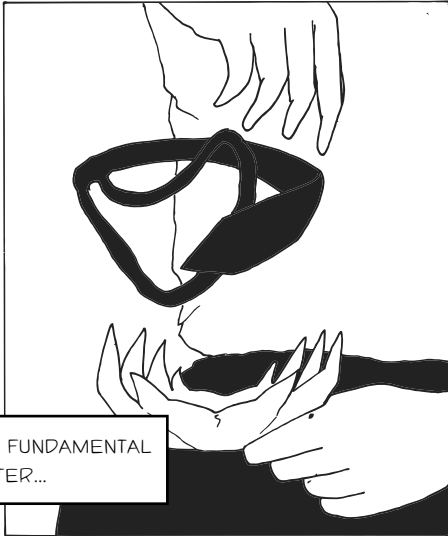
GREGOR OPENED HIS  
POCKET TERMINUS...



...CAREFULLY PLACED  
HIS TIE IN IT...



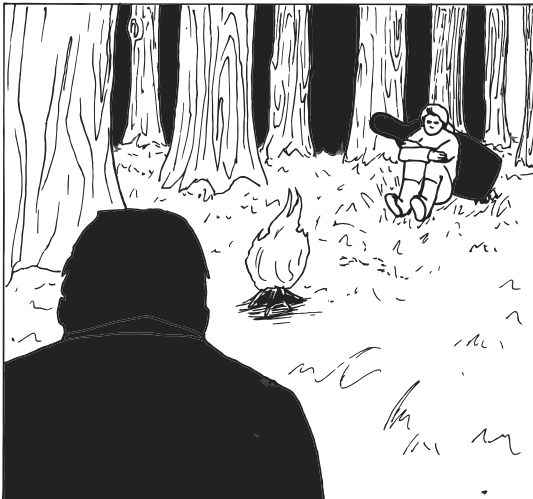
...AND SET ABOUT DOING  
WHAT HE DID BEST.



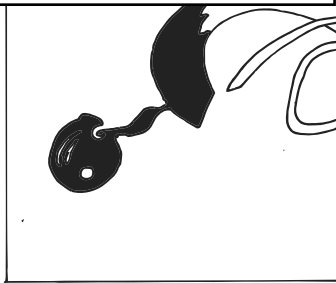
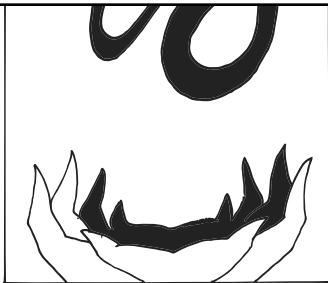
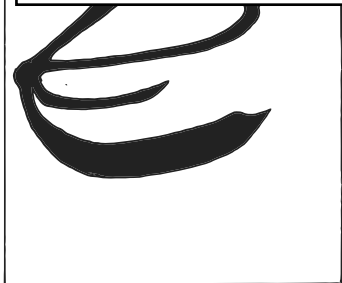
CHANGING THE FUNDAMENTAL  
STATE OF MATTER...



...AND SHOWING OFF.



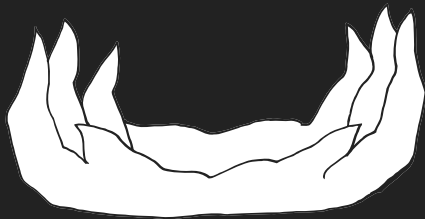
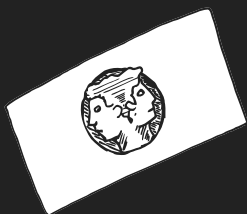
THE TERMINUS SCANNED THE TIE AND SET ABOUT BREAKING IT DOWN INTO ITS COMPONENT PARTS.



AND IN LESS TIME THAN IT  
WOULD TAKE TO TELL...



...TRANSFORMED IT VIA  
OBSCURE ALCHEMIES INTO  
A SMALL, NEAT BANDAGE.





AS THEY TRAVERSED THE PERILOUS  
WASTELAND OF THE EASTERN FOOTHILLS, ROS  
AVAILED GREGOR OF HER PLAN: TO TRAVEL  
TO THE *WRITERS' BLOC*, THERE TO ACQUIRE  
THE MYSTERIOUS ARTIFACT KNOWN ONLY AS  
*THE BOOK*. WITH IT, SHE INTENDED TO PUSH  
BACK THE *SILOS* THREAT FOR GOOD AND FOR  
ALL.

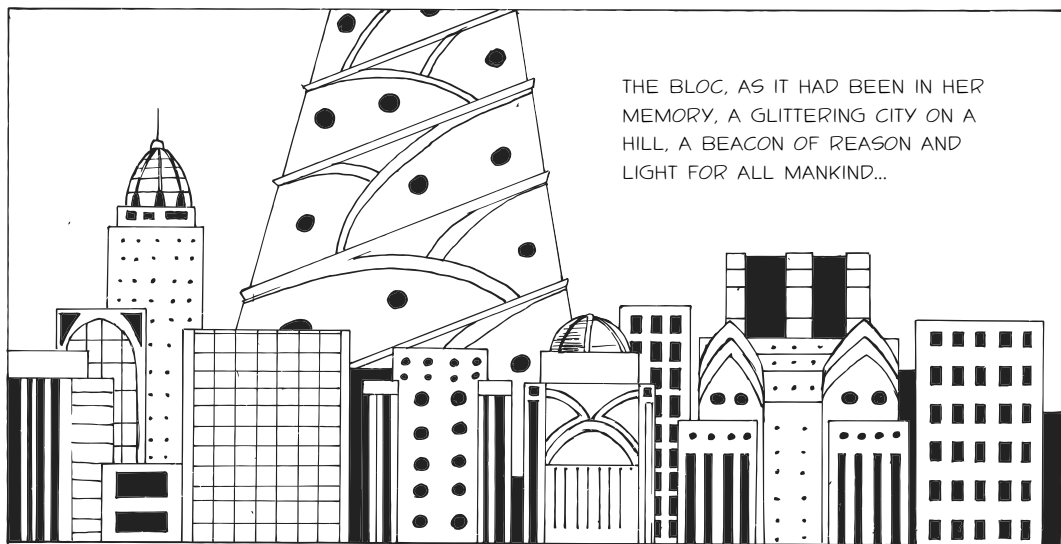
WEEKS LATER, ROS AND GREGOR CRESTED  
THE APEX OF ONE LAST, STAGGERING GROUP  
OF FOOTHILLS AND BEGAN THEIR FINAL  
DESCENT INTO THE RIVER VALLEY LEADING  
TO THE BLOC.

THE AIR GREW COOL AND MOIST, SOOTHING  
THEIR PARCHED SKIN, THE LEAFY CANOPY OF  
LOW-LYING CONIFEROUS TREES BLOCKING  
THE HARSH RAYS OF THE AFTERNOON SUN.

ROS WAS EXCITED AS SHE EVER GOT,  
BOUNDING UP THAT LAST MILD INCLINE. TO  
ASK GREGOR, THE TACITURN YOUNG WOMAN  
WAS A STUDY IN SOMBER GRAVITY, ALL  
SINGULAR INTENT.

UT AT THE EDGE OF THE WOODS, TRAIPSING  
THROUGH THE OPAQUE THICKET THAT SERVED  
AS A VERGE BETWEEN THE WOODED WILDS  
AND THE FRINGE OF THE BLOC PROPER, HE  
WOULD HAVE THOUGHT HER A YOUNG WOMAN  
ON THE EVE OF SOME HAPPY REUNION.  
WHICH—HE SUPPOSED—SHE WAS.

WHICH MADE WHAT HAPPENED NEXT THAT  
MUCH WORSE...



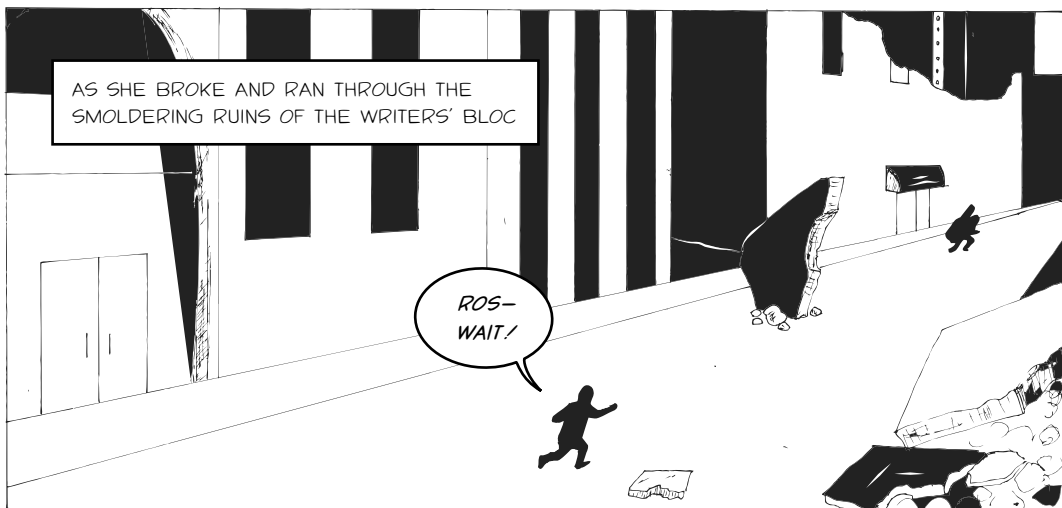
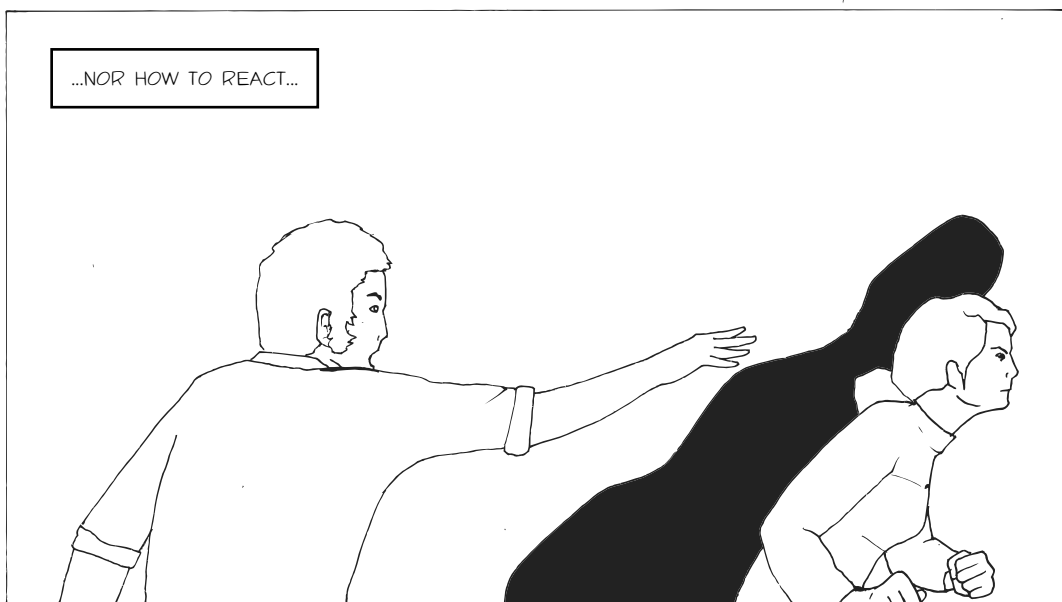
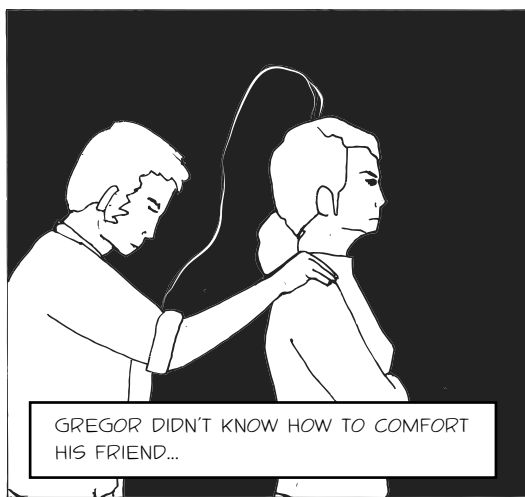
THE BLOC, AS IT HAD BEEN IN HER  
MEMORY, A GLITTERING CITY ON A  
HILL, A BEACON OF REASON AND  
LIGHT FOR ALL MANKIND...



"NO..."



...WAS GONE.



*ROS RAN WITH A PURPOSE TOWARDS THE SPIRE,  
A MASSIVE REPOSITORY OF KNOWLEDGE  
FROM THIS AGE AND THE LAST.*

*A LIBRARY BEYOND IMAGINING.*



*"IT COULD STILL BE HERE,"  
SHE TOLD HERSELF AS SHE  
PUSHED OPEN THE ANCIENT  
OAKEN DOOR, SCORCHED AS  
IT WAS WITH THE TELLTALE  
SCARS OF COMBAT.*

*"WE MIGHT STILL HAVE A CHANCE."*



SHE TOLD HERSELF THESE LIES. AND  
AS SHE STEPPED THROUGH THE PORTAL...

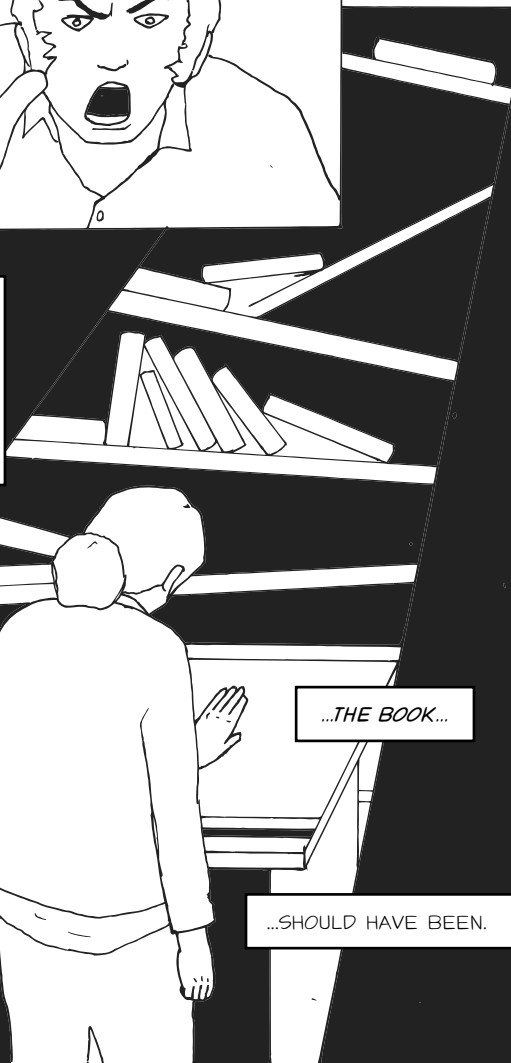


...SHE ALMOST BELIEVED THEM.

ROS!



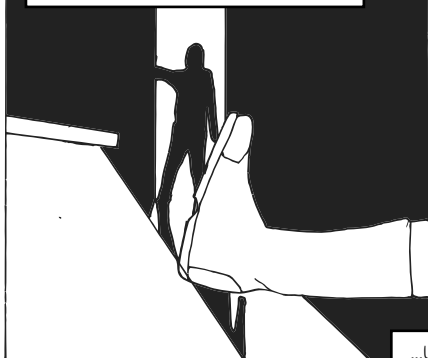
BUT GREGOR NEEDN'T HAVE  
WORRIED. FOR WHEN HE FOLLOWED  
HER INTO THE SPIRE, HE FOUND  
HER STANDING BEFORE AN EMPTY  
LECTERN, HER HAND RESTING IN A  
SPACE WHERE A BOOK...



...THE BOOK...

...SHOULD HAVE BEEN.

SEEING ROS' RAGE, GREGOR  
TRIED TO COMFORT HER...



...ONLY TO HAVE HER POUND ON HIM IN DESPAIR...



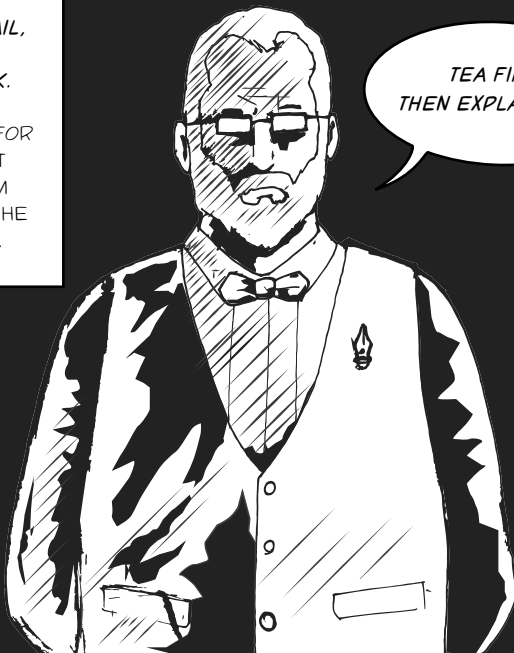
...UNTIL A VOICE SPOKE UP FROM THE  
SHADOWS, INSISTING ALL WAS NOT LOST.



WHO'S THERE?  
SHOW YOURSELF!


HE CALLED HIMSELF *MIKHAIL*,  
A LIBRARIAN OF THE BLOC,  
AND KEEPER OF *THE BOOK*.

HE KNEW THEY SOUGHT IT FOR  
BENEVOLENT PURPOSE, BUT  
WHEN THEY ENTREATED HIM  
TO DELIVER IT UNTO THEM, HE  
HAD NAUGHT BUT ILL NEWS.



TEA FIRST.  
THEN EXPLANATIONS.

ELSEWHERE...



OVER TEA, MIKHAIL TOLD THE TALE OF THE INVASION, ABOUT HOW *SILOS* AND THEIR CATSPAWS—*THE FRONTMEN*—HAD SIMPLY EMERGED FROM THE SOUTHERN WOODS AND LAID WASTE TO THE BLOC WITH NO MORE EFFORT THAN IT TOOK TO TELL IT.

AND THAT WORSE, *THE BOOK*—WHILE HAVING SURVIVED THE DESTRUCTION—HAD BEEN NONETHELESS WEAKENED BY THE ONSLAUGHT...



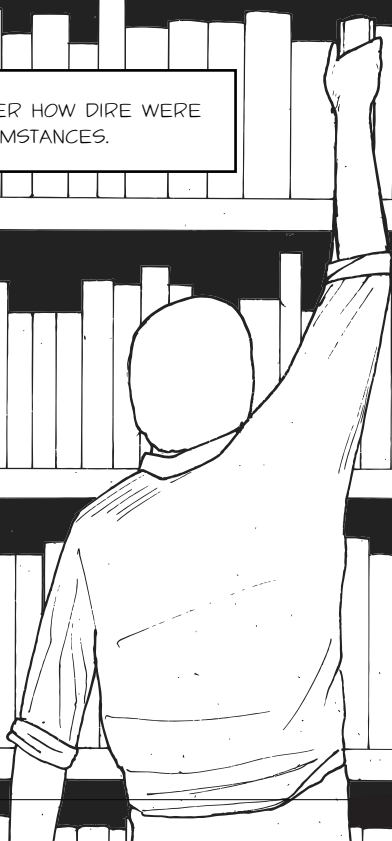
...AND ALTHOUGH ROS MADE A  
FERVENT CASE FOR ITS USE...



...MIKHAIL REFUSED TO DIVULGE  
ITS LOCATION...



...NO MATTER HOW DIRE WERE  
THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

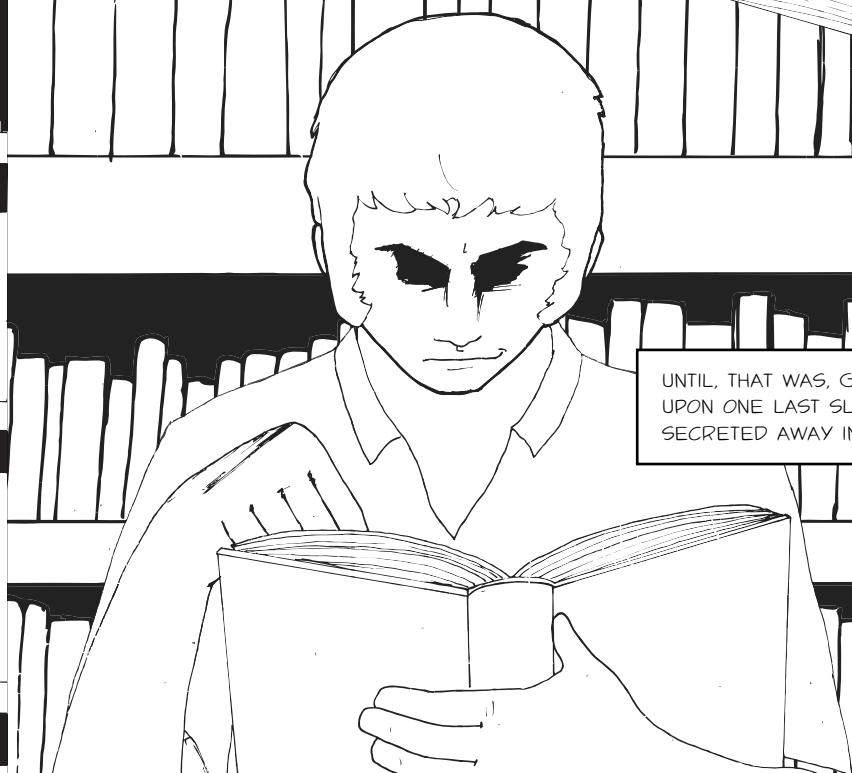




AND FOR THE TENTH TIME IN AS MANY  
WEEKS, ALL SEEMED LOST.

Aliquem utraque quoto nec lobortis rutum. Donec  
fermentum magna quio massa portitor.  
Malouada. Urabitur varius lectus id aliquam  
at ipsum velit. Nulla ligula laus, rutum quio  
enim sit amet, porta ligula laus, rutum quio  
occi. volutpat praesent semper nisi. Aliquam  
posuere aliquam. Ut eget nibh sed leo  
cursus, urna aliquet sodales portitor, ornare et  
magna euismod lectus, consequat fugiat ipsum  
ros eto quam. Proin dignissim, odio sed  
ndimentum elephend, mi eros fringilla ante,  
faucibus turpis massa vitae semper  
esent, posuere scelerisque semper.  
am pharetra laoreet lorem, acc elephend  
ros occi pallentisque sit amet. Proin  
enim eu vestibulum scelerisque  
faucibus, felis eu sodales laoreet

Vestibulum: fugiat ornare pharetra. Pellentesque  
pretium accumsan nisi ac aliquet. Nullam lacus  
ligula nulla, eget luctus neque, aliquet elephend  
Duis consequat nisi eu felis placerat, sed  
Semper est lobortis. Class gerdent taciti  
et THE CONFERENCE Class gerdent taciti  
nostra, per inceptos himenaeos. Nulla per  
elementum sapien non rhoncus. Mauris conval  
consectetur lobortis. Proin risus tortor, tincidunt  
non perene id, rhoncus sagittis velit. Duis  
arcu dui, et faucibus felis molestie non. Vi  
lobortis purus at pueris imperdiet luctus.  
Etiam et velit. Duis vulputate arcu dui  
faucibus felis tristique, elephend dui sed  
uttrices dui  
Et Donec tempus sagittis sollicitudin. Ut  
turpis convalis, vehicula dui vel, posuere  
Neque porro quisquam est qui dolorem  
ipsum quia dolor sit amet, consectetur



UNTIL, THAT WAS, GREGOR HAPPENED  
UPON ONE LAST SLIM RAY OF HOPE,  
SECRETED AWAY IN AN ANCIENT TOME.

THE BOOK FORETOLD OF A GATHERING OF DIVERSE PEOPLES...

...A CONCLAVE KNOWN ONLY AS...

*THE CONFERENCE.*



"...AND YEA, I SAY UNTO YOU THAT IF YOU CALL UNTO THEM,  
THE PEOPLE OF THE DIVIDED NATIONS SHALL COME TO YOUR CALL,  
AND SHALL GATHER THEMSELVES UNTO THE GREATER TECH REPUBLIC,  
THERE TO FORGE WHATEVER WEAPON IS NEEDED  
TO DEFEAT THE ENEMIES OF PEACE AND PROSPERITY  
FOR GOOD AND FOR ALL..."

IT WAS A LONG SHOT, TO BE SURE.




*BUT WHEN A LONG SHOT IS  
THE ONLY SHOT YOU HAVE...*

THE JOURNEY WAS A LONG AND ARDUOUS ONE,  
AND FRAUGHT WITH HIDDEN PERILS BESIDES.

ROS AND GREGOR ENCOUNTERED MANIFOLD  
DANGERS AND OBSTRUCTIONS BUT LET LITTLE  
STAND IN THEIR WAY...

FOR THEY KNEW THAT SHOULD THEY FAIL,  
ALL THE WORLD MIGHT DAMN WELL FALL  
UNDER THE GRIM THRALL OF *SILOS*.



ON THE LAST DAY OF THEIR JOURNEY, THEY  
CRESTED THE LAST HILL LEADING TO THE  
NARROW PASS—AND THE TR BEYOND—ONLY  
TO FIND THEMSELVES FACE-TO-FACE WITH A  
SIGHT EACH HAD HOPED NEVER TO SEE AGAIN.



THE ENTIRE VALLEY BELOW,  
FROM HORIZON TO HORIZON,  
STUDDED WITH SILOS TOWERS.

AND FACED WITH SUCH RELENTLESS  
OPPOSITION BETWEEN THEMSELVES  
AND AN ALL-TOO-CLOSE GOAL, THE  
TWO COMPANIONS DID WHAT ANYONE  
IN THEIR SITUATION WOULD DO...

*THEY RAN HARD.*

*HARDER THAN THEY EVER HAD.*

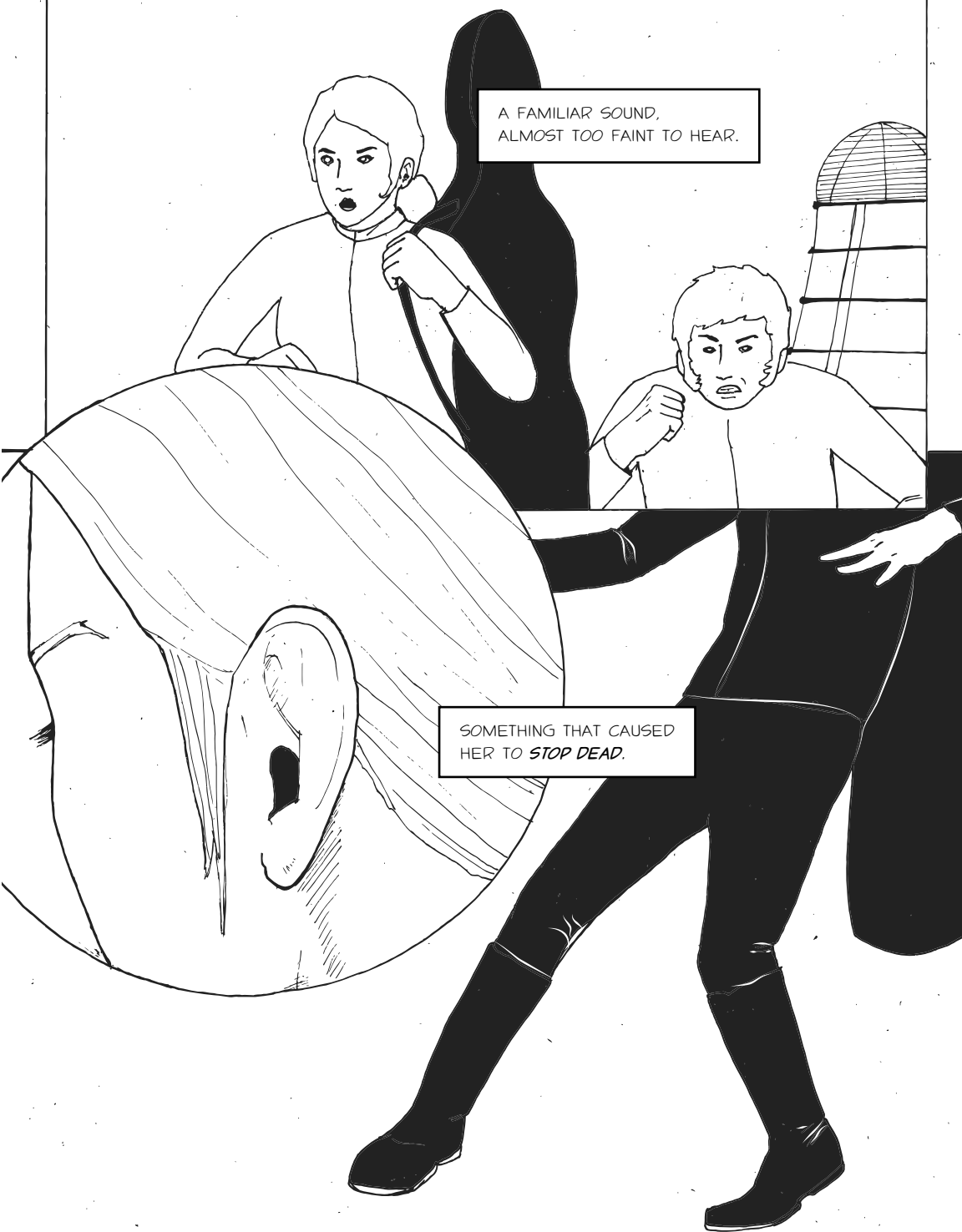
*SALVATION—SUCH AS IT WAS—  
TOO CLOSE TO HAVE DONE  
OTHERWISE.*



BUT THEN ROS' KEEN EARS  
PICKED UP SOMETHING.

A FAMILIAR SOUND,  
ALMOST TOO FAINT TO HEAR.

SOMETHING THAT CAUSED  
HER TO *STOP DEAD*.



"WHAT IS IT?"

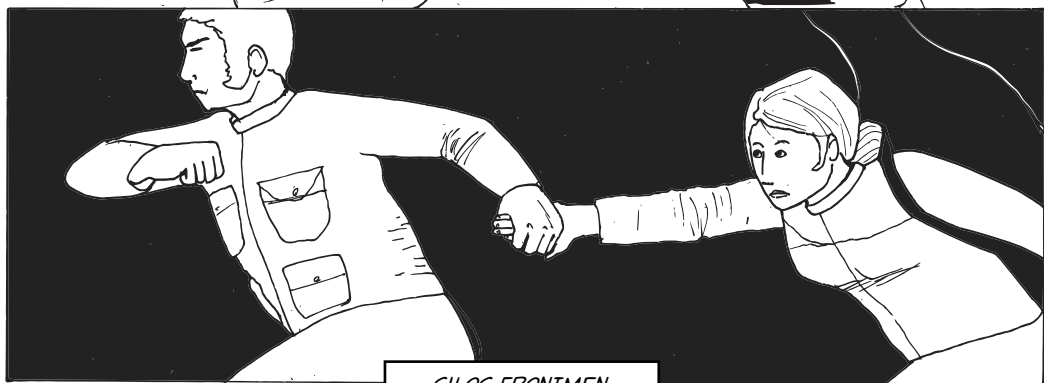
NOTHING,  
MAYBE...  
HANG ON.

ROS DIRECTED HER EYES BACK  
TOWARD THE WAY THEY CAME,  
TRYING TO DISCERN THE SOURCE OF  
THE STRANGE AURAL SIGNATURE.

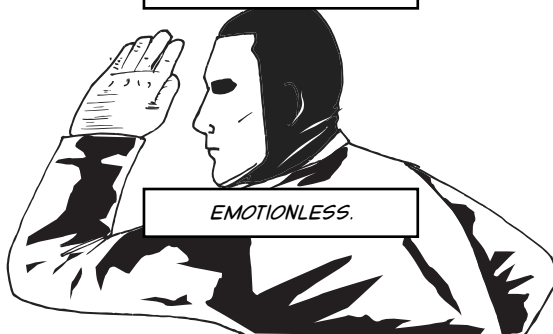
WHAT ARE YOU  
WAITING FOR?  
LET'S GO!

PAYING HIM NO MIND, ROS PEERED AGAIN  
AT THE SEEMINGLY BARREN HORIZON...

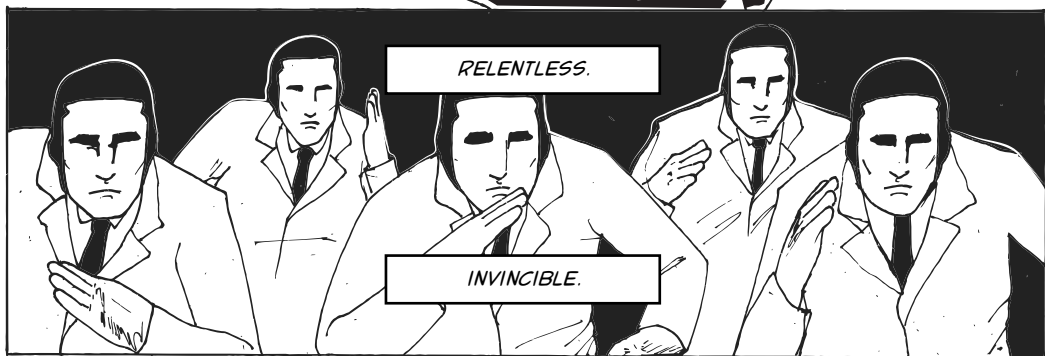
...BUT THIS TIME, *SHE SAW SOMETHING.*



SILOS FRONTMEN.



EMOTIONLESS.



RELENTLESS.

INVINCIBLE.



THEY FLED AS FAST AS THEY COULD...

...BUT SOON REALIZED...

...EVEN THEIR FASTEST WOULD NOT BE ENOUGH.

AND SO, FACED WITH  
IMPOSSIBLE ODDS...



...ROS DID THE BEST THING SHE KNEW HOW.



SHE READIED HERSELF...

FOR WAR.

GET OUT OF  
HERE, GREGOR.  
I'LL HOLD THEM OFF  
AS LONG AS I CAN.





KNOWING FULL WELL HE OWED HER HIS LIFE, GREGOR REFUSED TO LEAVE HER SIDE.



BUT ROS WAS HAVING NONE OF IT.

DAMMIT, GREGOR.  
JUST GO!

THE CONFERENCE IS  
MORE IMPORTANT THAN ME.  
MORE IMPORTANT  
THAN ANY OF US.



TO WHICH GREGOR REPLIED AS BEST *HE* KNEW HOW.

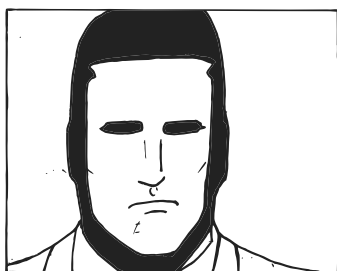
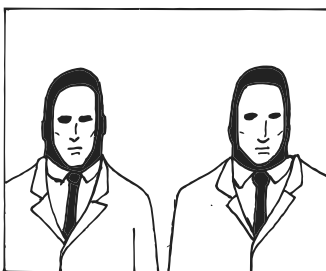
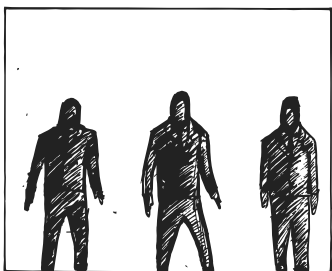
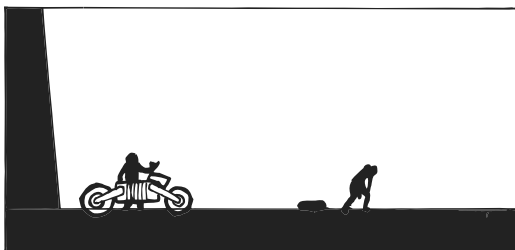
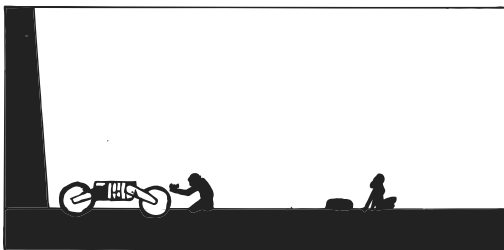
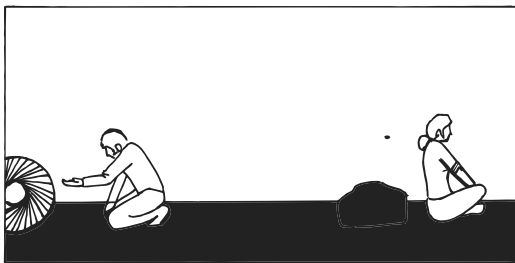
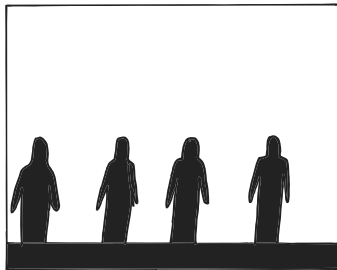
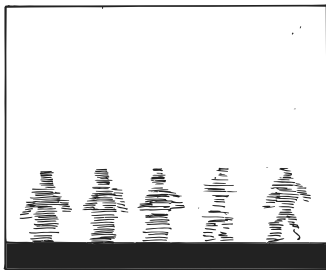
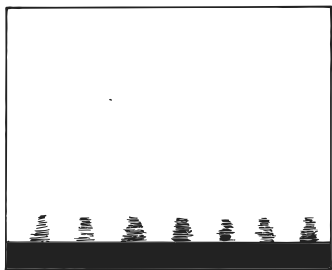
THERE'S NOTHING THAT  
IMPORTANT. C'MON.  
I HAVE A PLAN.

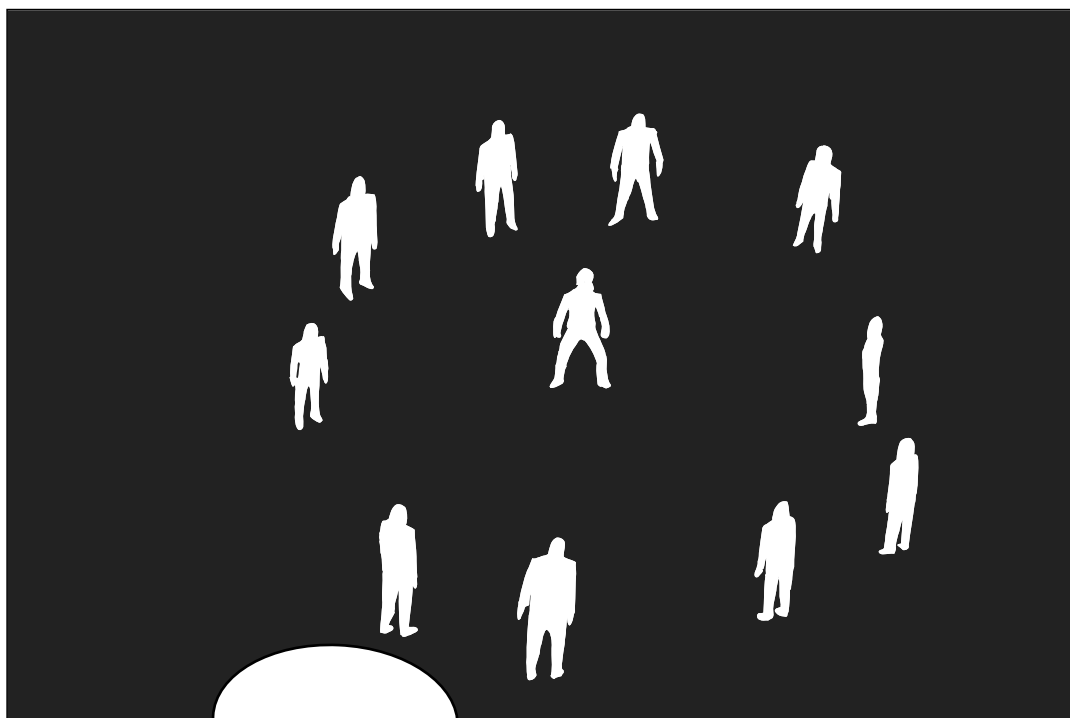
WHAT ARE YOU  
GOING TO DO IN  
FIVE MINUTES?

COS THAT'S ALL  
WE HAVE LEFT.

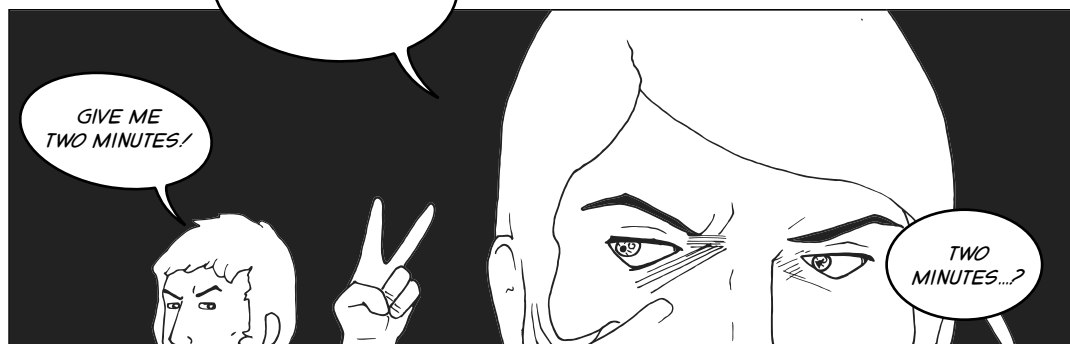
WHAT ELSE?

I'M GONNA SYNTH  
SOMETHING.





GREGOR...



GIVE ME  
TWO MINUTES!

TWO  
MINUTES...?



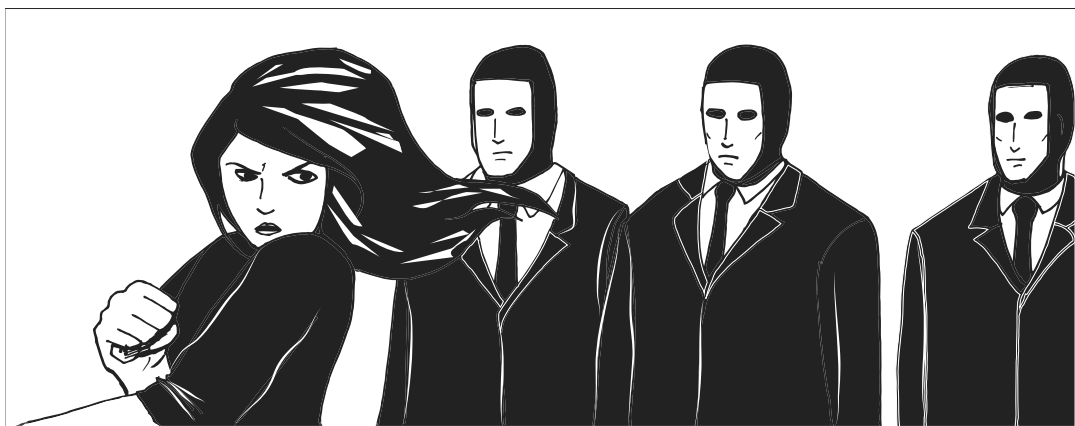
"TWO MINUTES I CAN GIVE YOU."

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT,  
YOU ASK?

WHAT ELSE?

THEY *FOUGHT*.











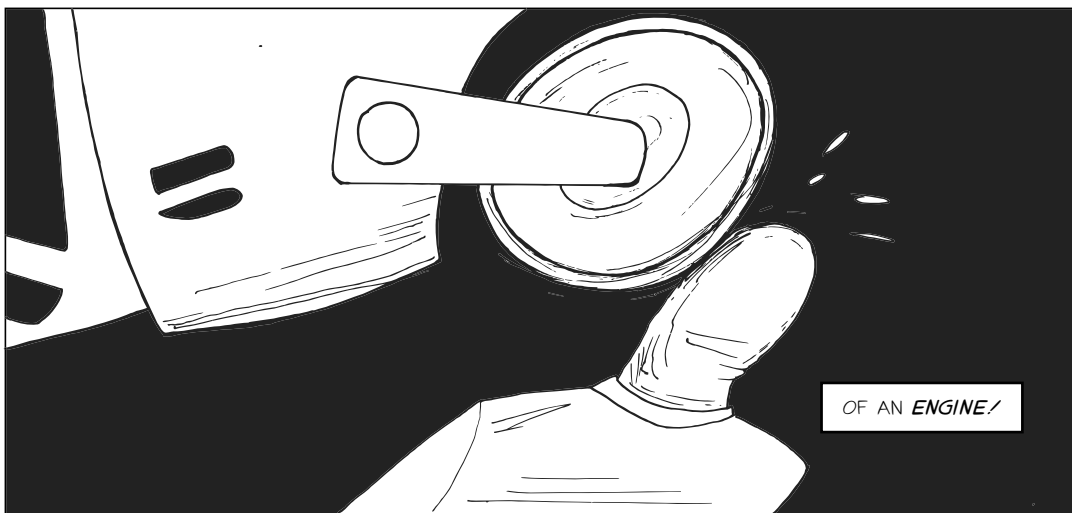
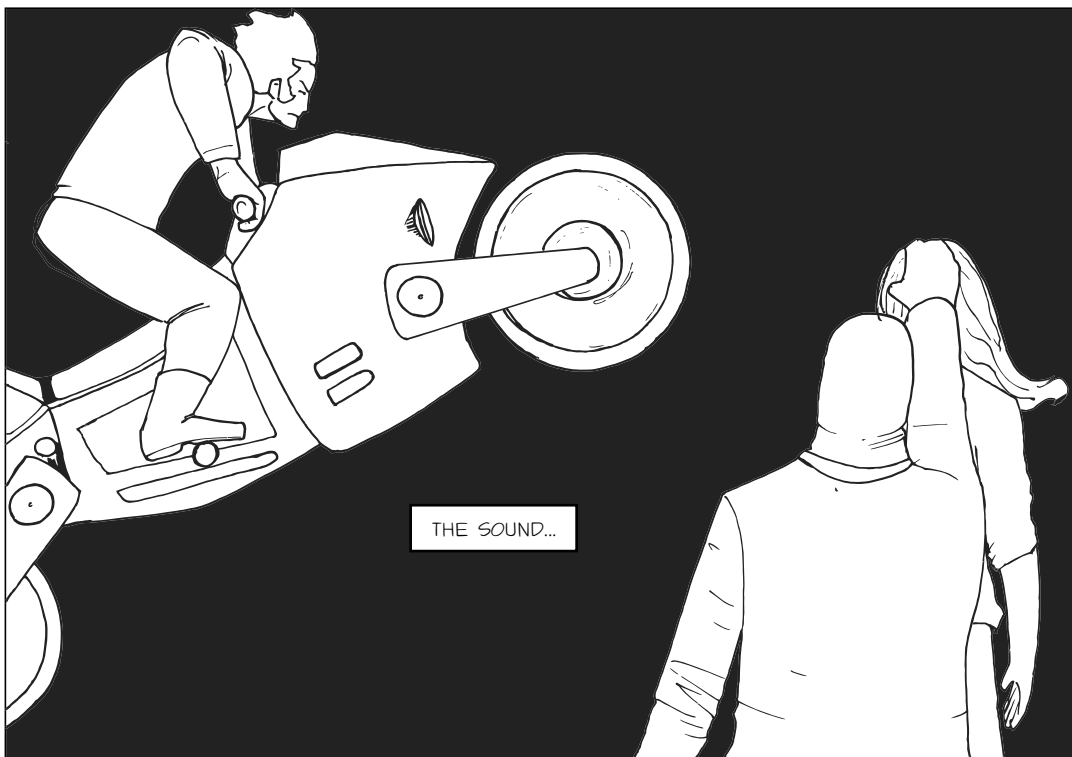
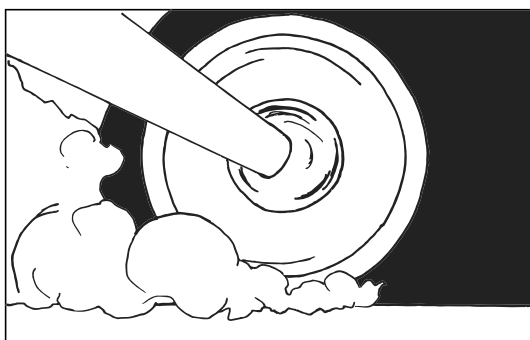
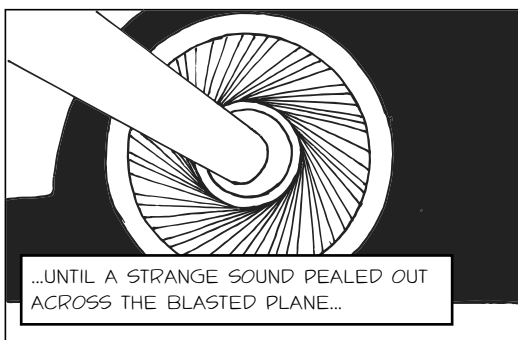
*ROS FOUGHT LIKE A  
WARRIOR POSSESSED.*

*BUT EVEN WITH HER  
UNCANNY SPEED, STRENGTH,  
AND AGILITY, AGAINST THE  
TIDAL WAVE OF FRONTMEN...*

LET GO...  
YOU BASTARD!

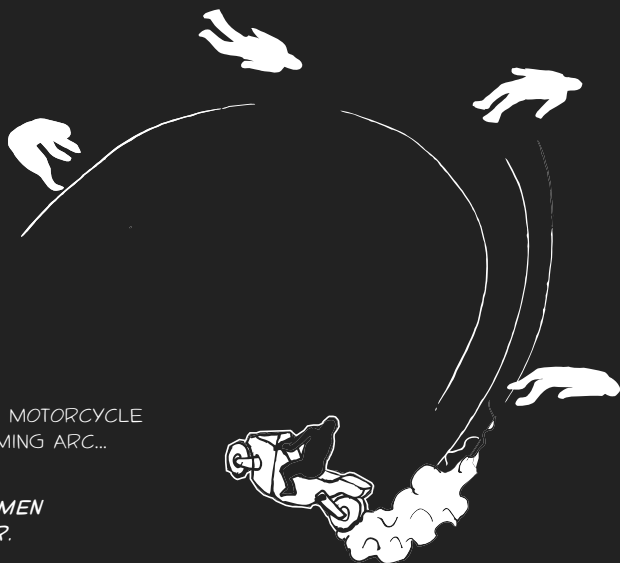
...IT WASN'T ENOUGH.

AND AS THE FRONTMAN'S HAND CLOSED  
INEXORABLY AROUND HER SKULL, THE  
WORLD BEGAN TO GO DARK....



GREGOR PULLED HIS MOTORCYCLE  
AROUND IN A SCREAMING ARC...

*...AND RAN THE FRONTMEN  
RIGHT THE FUCK OVER.*



THE THREAT NEUTRALIZED—HOWEVER  
TEMPORARILY—GREGOR STOPPED JUST  
SHORT OF HIS SUPINE COMPANION...

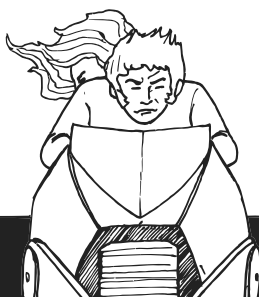


...AND REACHED DOWN TO HER AN ALL-  
TOO-FAMILIAR GESTURE THAT—IF I HAD  
TO DESCRIBE IT—PROBABLY LOOKED A  
LOT LIKE SUPPLICATION.

ROS CLIMBED ABOARD...



...AND TOGETHER...



...THEY RODE HARD FOR THE TR BORDER...



...AND SALVATION.

AFTER THAT THINGS GET A LITTLE MURKY.

HISTORY TELLS US THAT ROS, GREGOR—AND  
EVEN MIKHAIL! —MADE THE CONFERENCE.

AND WE KNOW OF SOME DOINGS OF  
HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OCCURRED THERE.

SOME POSIT THAT DURING THE FESTIVITIES, A  
TRAITOR WAS FOUND IN THEIR MIDST.

SOME SAY SILOS REARED ITS UGLY HEAD AND  
WAS DEFEATED, FOR GOOD AND FOR ALL.

AND SIGH, YES, SOME SAY THAT SOMETHING  
GREATER THAN EVEN FRIENDSHIP BLOSSOMED  
BETWEEN ROS AND GREGOR.

BUT WHO'S TO SAY?

THE HOUR GROWETH LATE, AND MY  
THROAT IS PARCHED.

BUT YOU ARE YOUNG AND CURIOUS, AND FOR  
SUCH PEOPLE, THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST  
EXIST ONLY SO LONG AS YOU REFUSE TO  
PURSUE THEM.

PERHAPS THERE ARE OTHER WRITINGS ON  
THIS SUBJECT, LYING IN SHADOW, JUST  
WAITING TO BE UNEARTHED...

