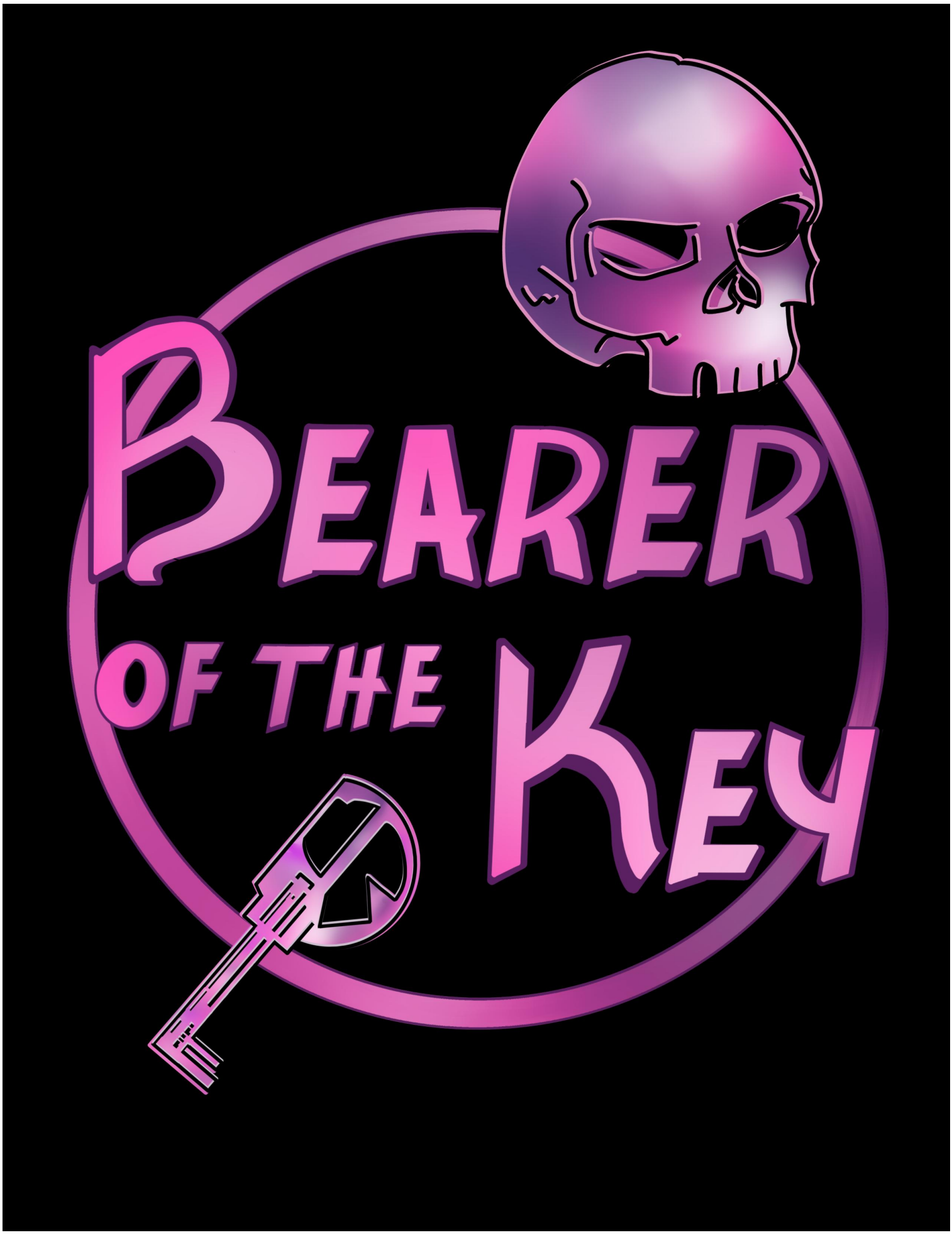

Bearer
of the
Key

TOMORROWS LONG SINCE QUASHED

April 17, 2077



The Models predicted Great Floods.



And They Came.

The Models predicted Catastrophic Wildfires.



And They Came.

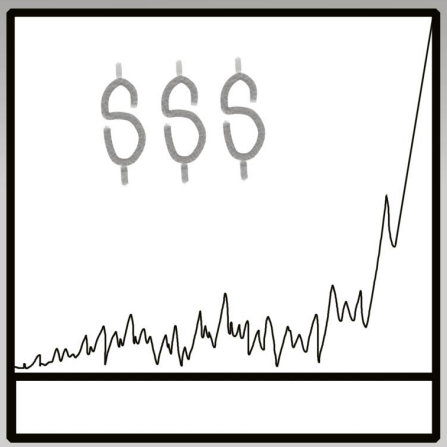
The Models predicted Severe and Consistent Droughts.



And They Came.

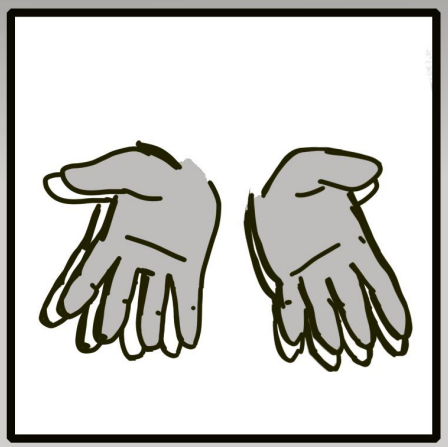
And all for nearly naught.

The Age of Scams had people believing earth was infinite.



Profit-driven earth management had failed at everything but hurting the planet.

Everything was so swift, change came so fast, and the Capitalists were removed in one decade.



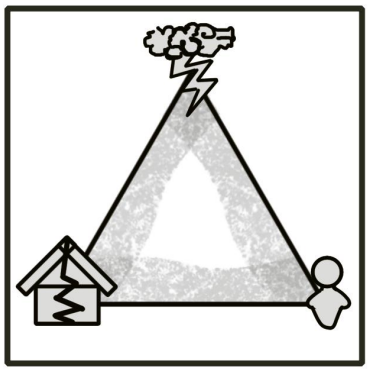
But by then, they'd squandered so much time and resources.
We had nothing.

Except for each other.

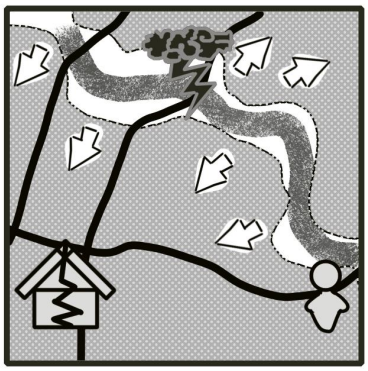


And that was enough.

The Nation had suffered under inequity for too long, and the Reconstruction led with grand promises. We would defeat the Triad: Homelessness, Poverty, and Climate Change.

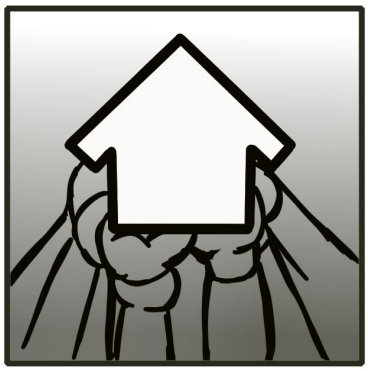


The Nation's infrastructure was largely pre-Scam Era and needed overhaul. The Floods didn't care. We needed to rebuild our cities, quickly and efficiently.

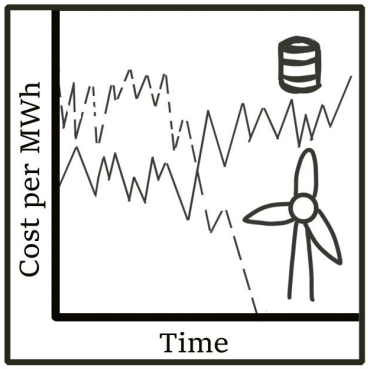


The challenge was tough, and a perfect solution would take years. The Fires didn't care.

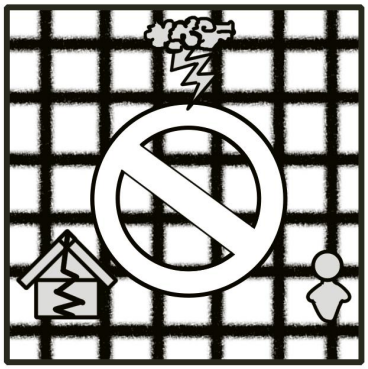
So we chose a new philosophy. Together, As Best We can.



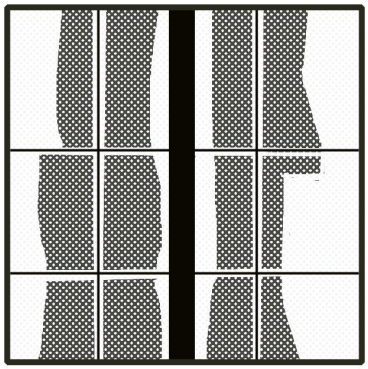
Around the same time, the Great Green Monsoon came. One random day decades ago, the cost of renewables cratered. In one night, oil-based planning became completely self-defeating.



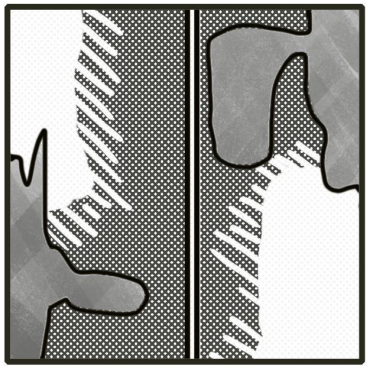
The Scammed Generations spent almost 100 years denying climate change and built terrible American cities. We had to restart completely. First to go was car-based planning. It was unaffordable to continue.



Our cities could only accomodate the massive densification of the 2050s if we reclaimed the land wasted on cars, which most people now considered a financial hassle.



The land reclaimed from Highway-Americans was used to densify and rebuild middle housing and new modes of mass transit could safely be built for long-term, climate friendly operation.



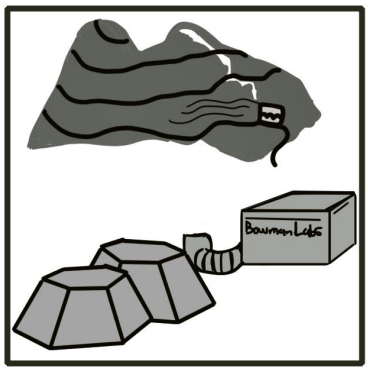
All people had access to local produce, from farms powered by renewables. Most people opted to build in large social communes. Everyone's needs were met because we chose to do so.



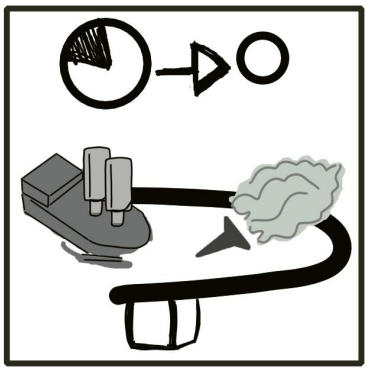
Using only tech from the Age of Scams, we were able to make significant strides in minimizing the Triad, but we were still growing exiting the 2050's. People were already happier.



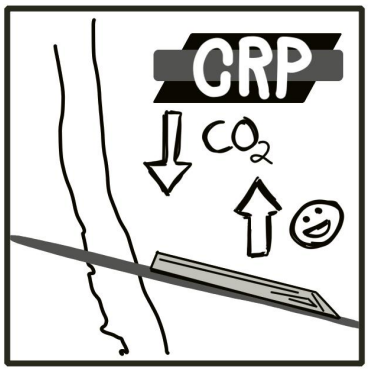
With the explosion of renewable electrons came another explosion - energy storage. We tried everything that could work. Hill-gravity, Sodium Ion, and pressure balloons were huge.



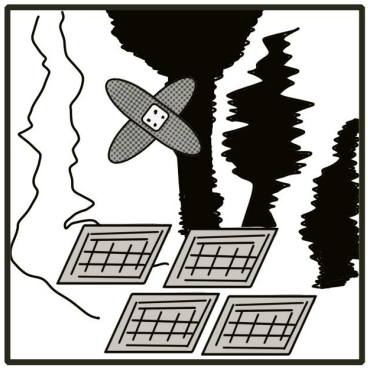
Electrification of everything came next and lowered the overall carbon emissions of the earth by 20%! Cleaning up shipping and air travel was achieved by 2058.



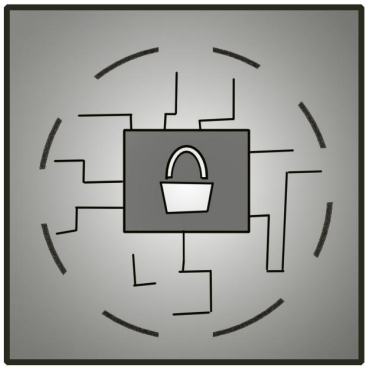
Local and State governments finally prioritized rail, and it was accepted rabidly. America's Longest Line, the Cascadifornia Rail Project, connected over 2200 miles of communities and people.



To balance the environs, river and shoreline restorations focused on protection, and rewilding. New Forests started growing where our ancestors cut them down.



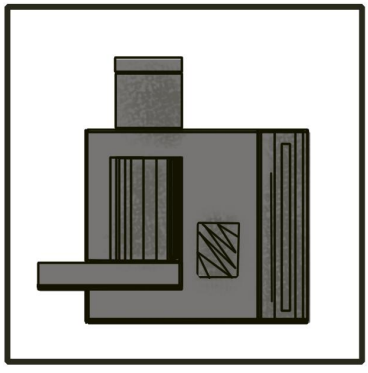
There were several attempts to create Artifical Intelligence during the Age of Scams. They almost got there. With more focus on ethics and equity, we developed more democratic AI.



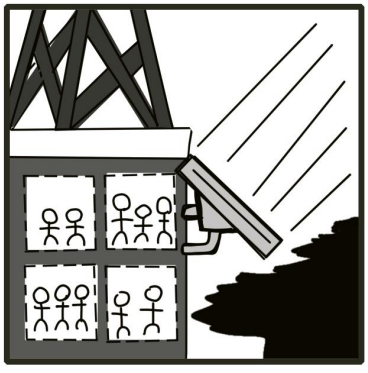
Simultaneously, huge strides were made in protein screening and microbe editing. By 2052, we had developed cheaper ways to make medicines and plastics that degrade.



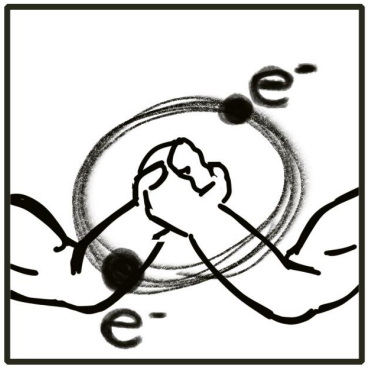
We got so good at it that by 2065 we could manufacture local-sized fabricators to make common basics, including medicines and simple chemical mixtures, along with cloth goods.



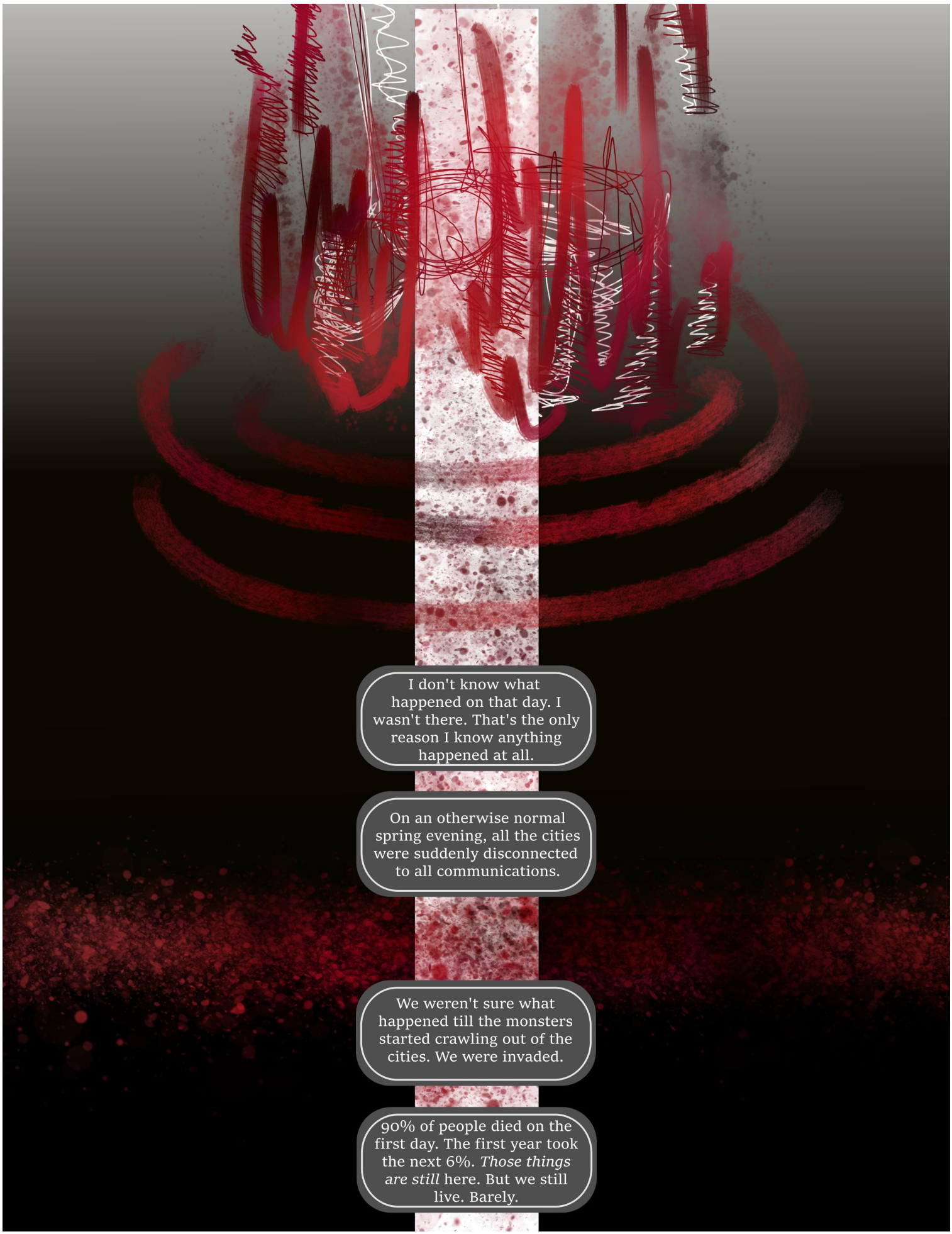
All that harmonized into The most rapid transformation American ever saw. We had worked hard and built everything to get us here. Eveyrone had homes. Everyone had GOOD homes. We did it!



We relied on each other through 50 years of tough social change. We made mistakes, but we had hope and therefore a future. We had each other!
And the electrons helped too.

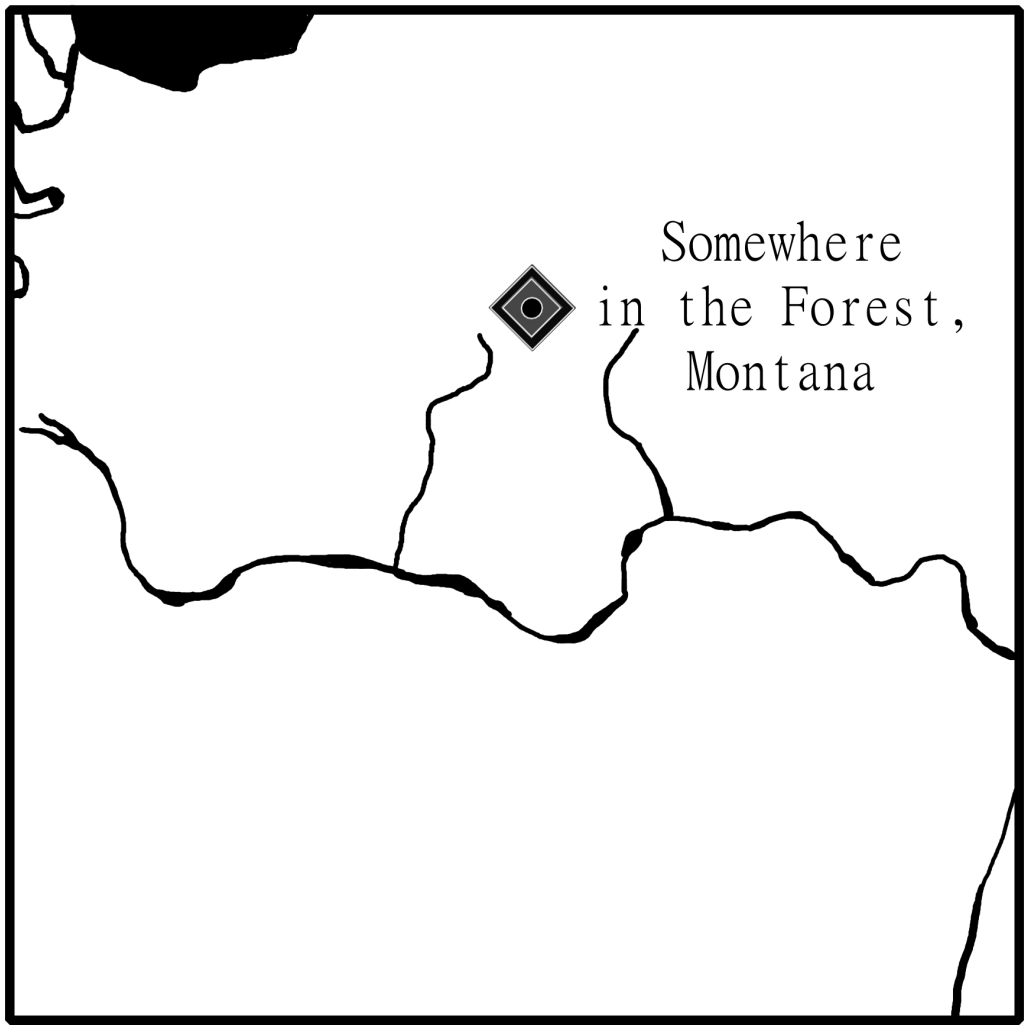



All the technology that the capitalists had held from us was enough to help with Poverty and Homelessness.
And with the new stuff we developed we were making serious progress against climate change.
50 years since the Age of Scams. So much work. Such beautiful results. We had done it, together.
FORTUNE
And it all meant nothing.


I don't know what happened on that day. I wasn't there. That's the only reason I know anything happened at all.
On an otherwise normal spring evening, all the cities were suddenly disconnected to all communications.
We weren't sure what happened till the monsters started crawling out of the cities. We were invaded.
90% of people died on the first day. The first year took the next 6%. *Those things are still* here. But we still live. Barely.

THE SWORD AND THE SHIELD

August 19, 2097

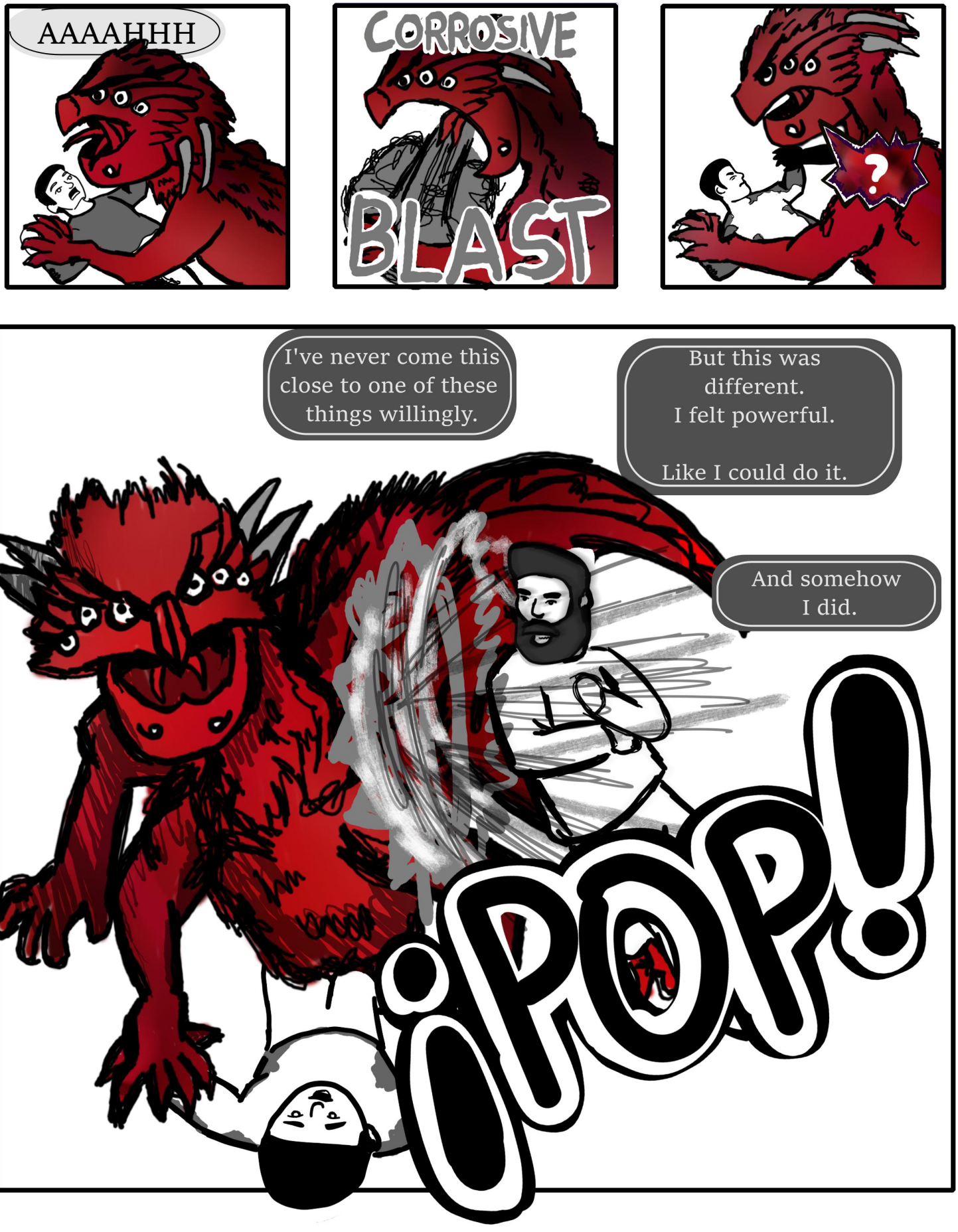


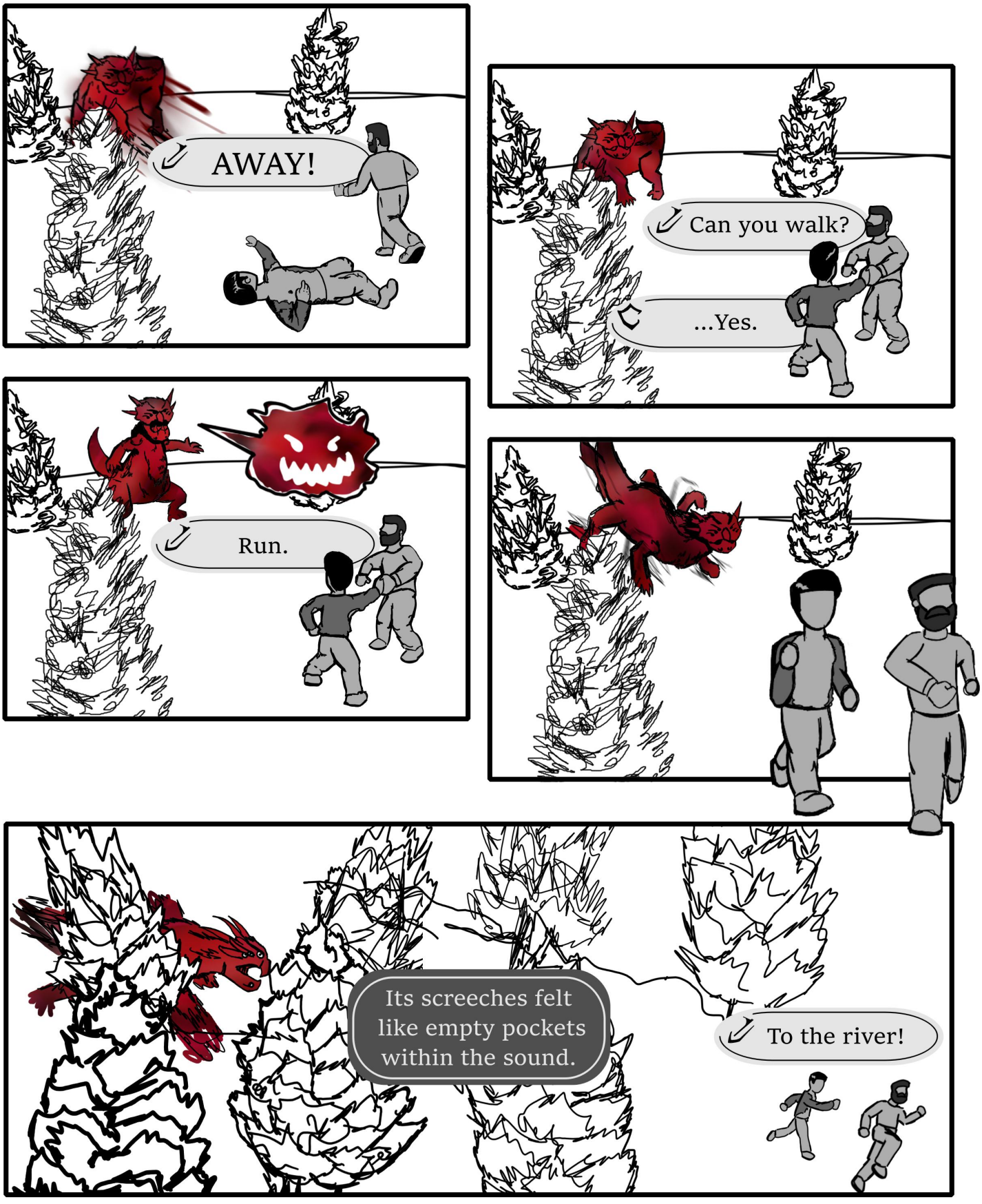

CRASH
!!FRAA AAGH!!


SLAM!
SCREECH

HEEELP!!

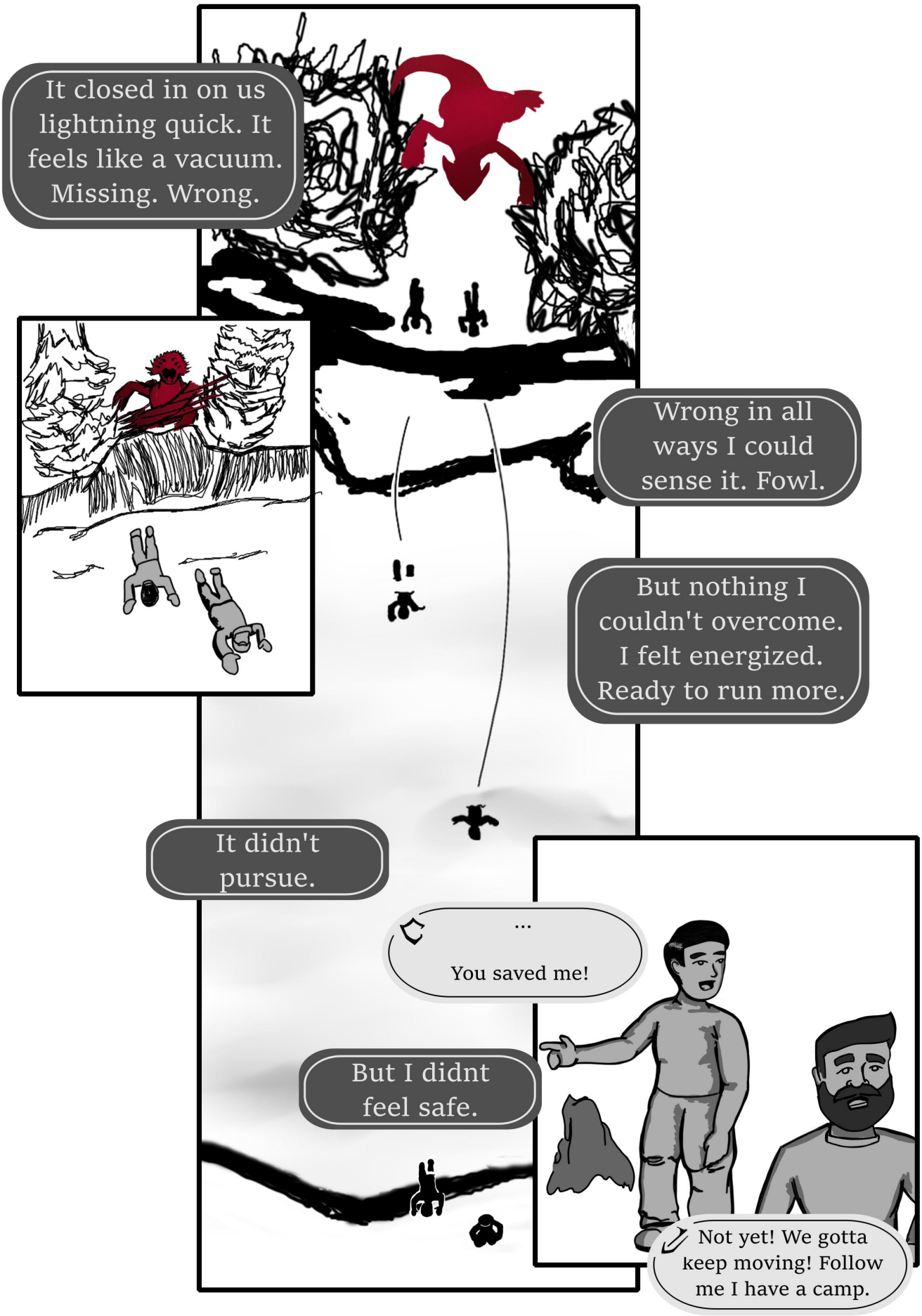

For a second I doubted it. All the way out here?
PLEASE!


AAAAHHH
CORROSIVE
BLAST
?
I've never come this close to one of these things willingly.
But this was different.
I felt powerful.
Like I could do it.
And somehow I did.
POP!


AWAY!
Can you walk?
...Yes.
Run.
Its screeches felt like empty pockets within the sound.
To the river!




JUMP!

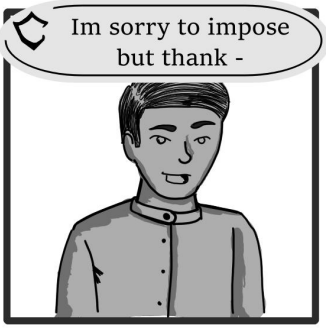

It closed in on us lightning quick. It feels like a vacuum. Missing. Wrong.
Wrong in all ways I could sense it. Fowl.
But nothing I couldn't overcome. I felt energized. Ready to run more.
It didn't pursue.
...
You saved me!
But I didnt feel safe.
Not yet! We gotta keep moving! Follow me I have a camp.


This was when I lived in the woods. I had my camp nearby. I hadn't seen a monster in years, A person even longer. It was odd.
How did it sneak up on you?
I was on a quest. I still am. I need to get to Portland. I was just passing through.
I have been here for half a day.
I must have been reckless I guess.
This guy's stuff was destroyed. Miraculously, he survived unharmed.
We ran a while. We walked longer.


It was a 3 hour hike back to my site. I forgot what I was doing that day.
Too much had happened.
And we weren't safe. I kept moving.


SUPERSPINE







I didn't have time to react.

He hit the floor pretty hard.

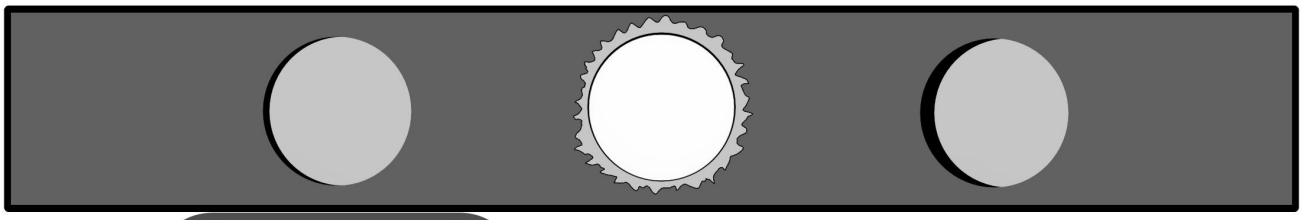


It barely registered that he collapsed.



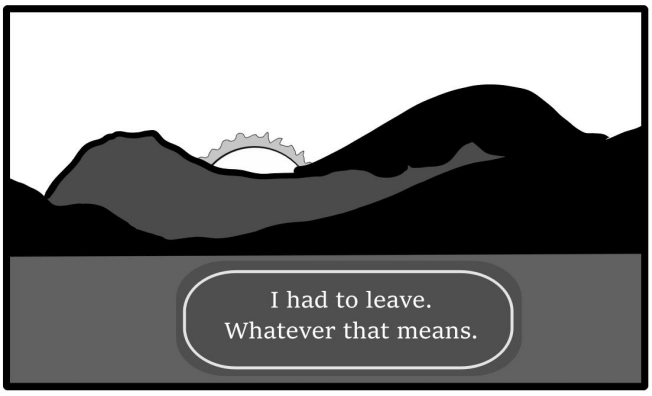
I felt it come through me.

The exhaustion from the day crashed upon me all at once. I soon followed.



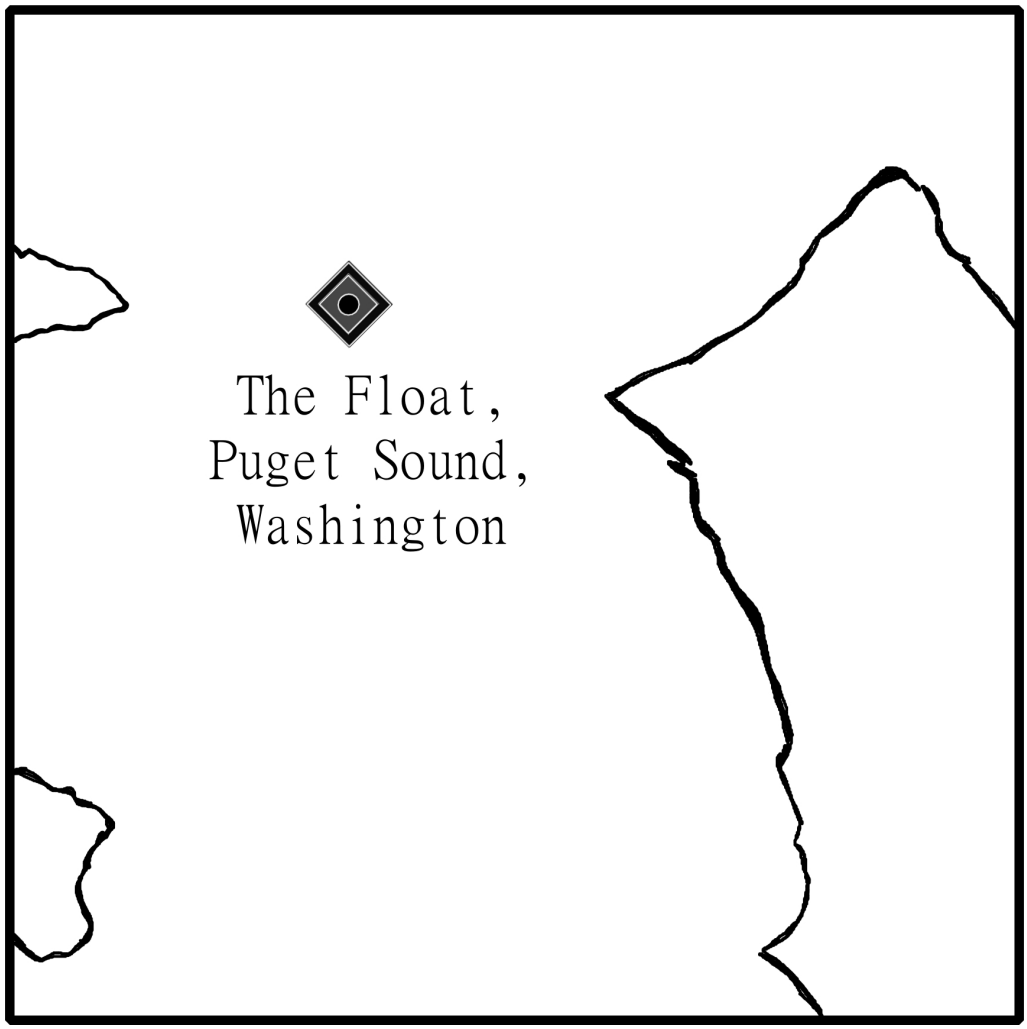
When I finally woke up, I knew I couldn't remain here.

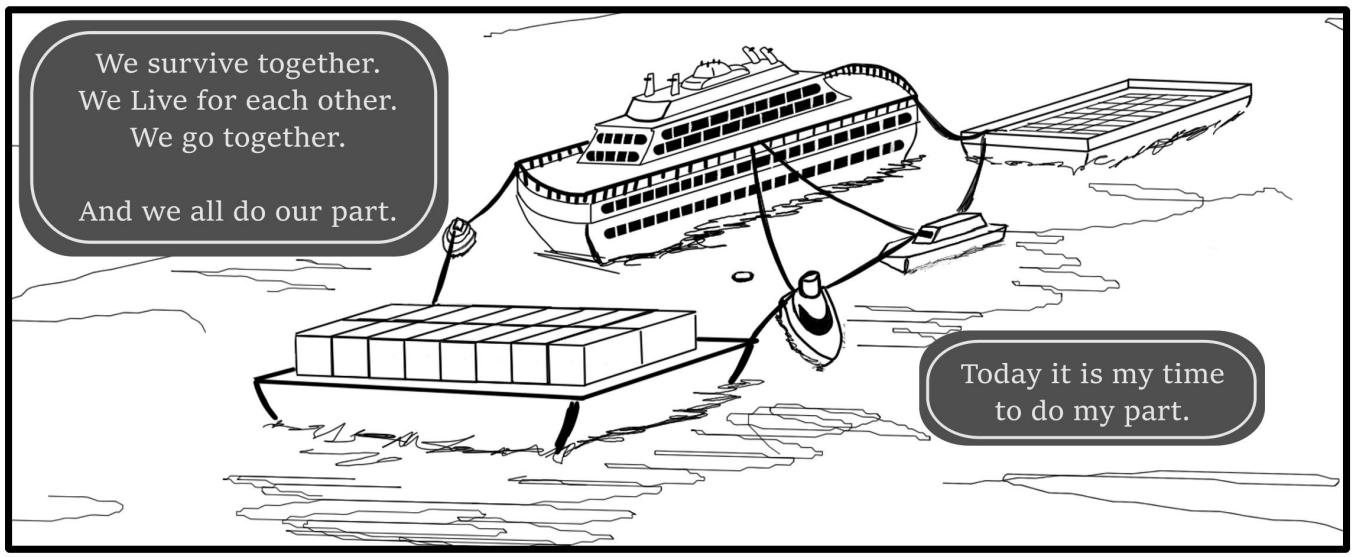




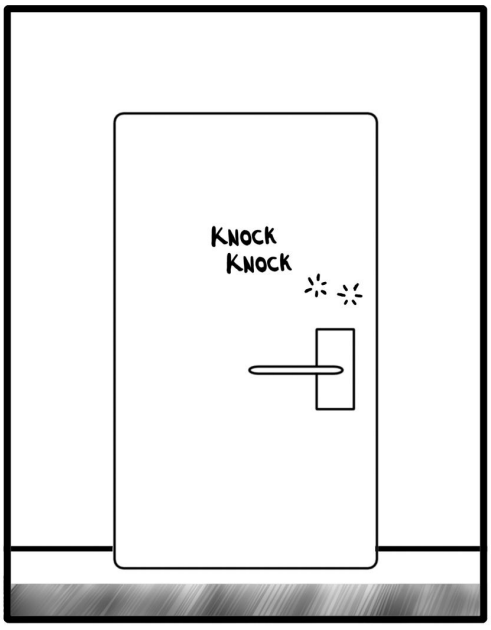
THE FLOATERS

October 1, 2097

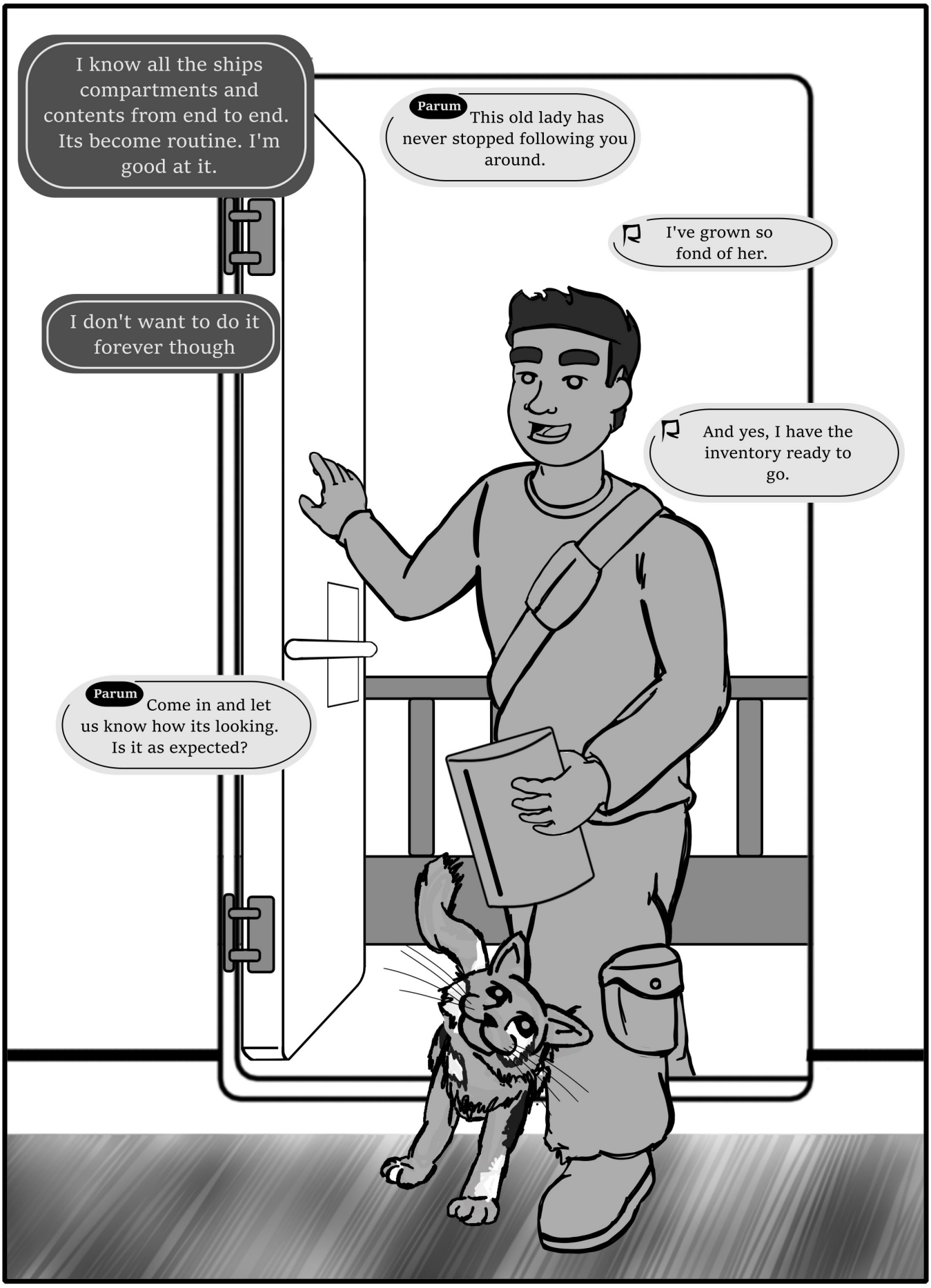


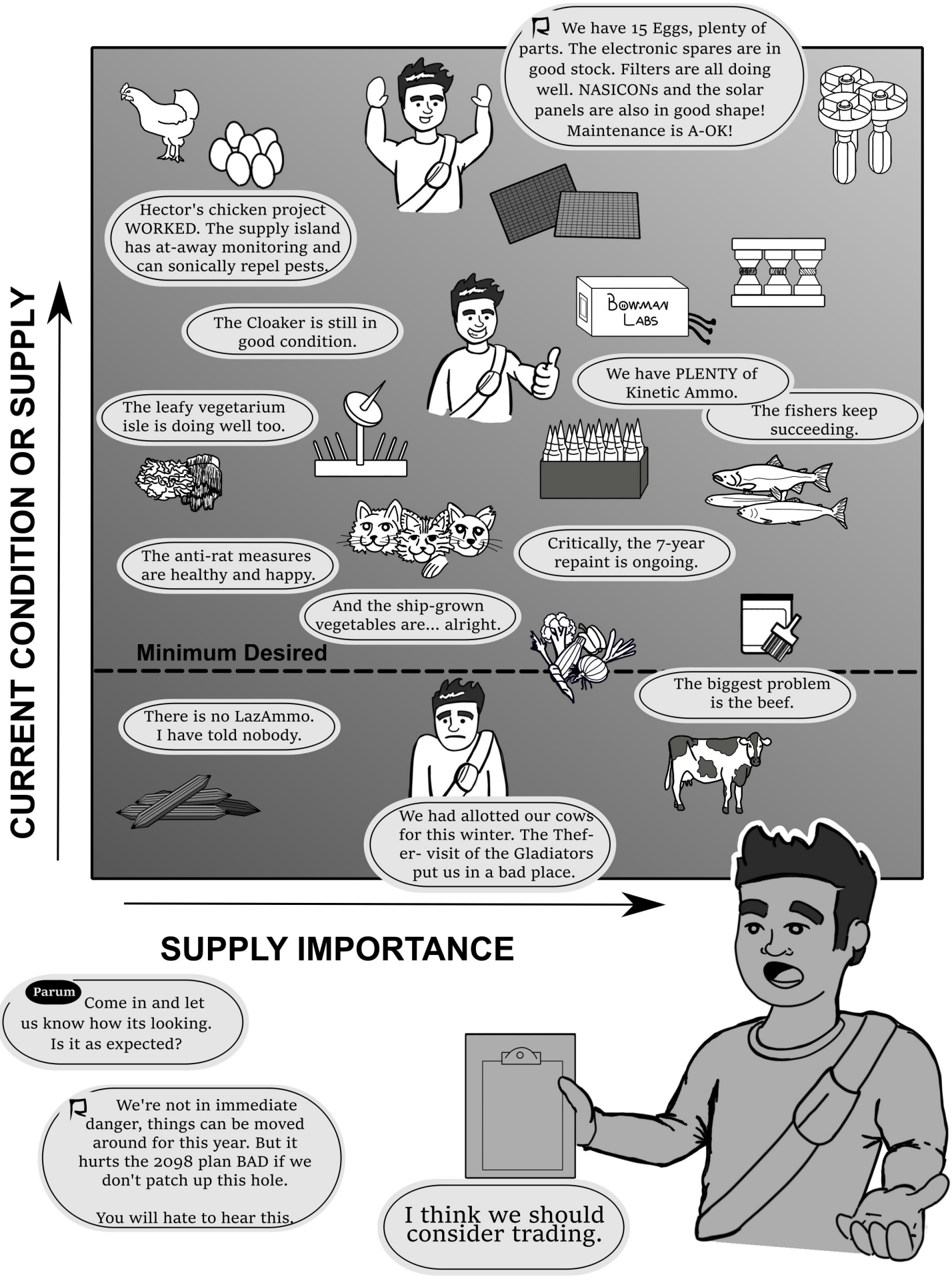

We survive together.
We Live for each other.
We go together.
And we all do our part.
Today it is my time to do my part.


And I WILL make my people proud.


KNOCK
KNOCK

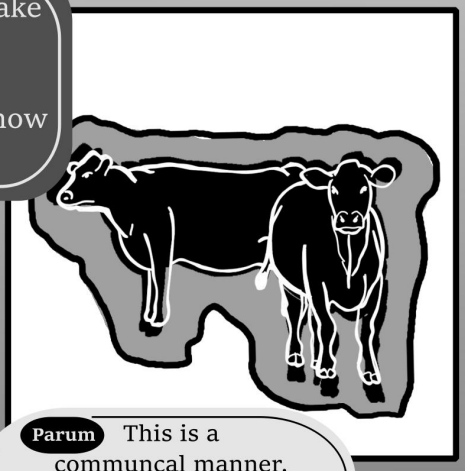

Commander Parum
Rome! You here with the inventory?
Enter!


I know all the ships compartments and contents from end to end. Its become routine. I'm good at it.
Parum
This old lady has never stopped following you around.
I've grown so fond of her.
I don't want to do it forever though
And yes, I have the inventory ready to go.
Parum
Come in and let us know how its looking. Is it as expected?


We have 15 Eggs, plenty of parts. The electronic spares are in good stock. Filters are all doing well. NASICONs and the solar panels are also in good shape! Maintenance is A-OK!
Hector's chicken project WORKED. The supply island has at-away monitoring and can sonically repel pests.
The Cloaker is still in good condition.
BOWMAN LABS
We have PLENTY of Kinetic Ammo.
The leafy vegetarium isle is doing well too.
The fishers keep succeeding.
The anti-rat measures are healthy and happy.
Critically, the 7-year repaint is ongoing.
And the ship-grown vegetables are... alright.
Minimum Desired
There is no LazAmmo. I have told nobody.
The biggest problem is the beef.
We had allotted our cows for this winter. The Thef- er- visit of the Gladiators put us in a bad place.
CURRENT CONDITION OR SUPPLY
SUPPLY IMPORTANCE
Parum
Come in and let us know how its looking. Is it as expected?
We're not in immediate danger, things can be moved around for this year. But it hurts the 2098 plan BAD if we don't patch up this hole.
You will hate to hear this.
I think we should consider trading.

They've taught me to take care of my people.

I want to serve too. I know I can help in this.



Parum This is a communcal manner. We gotta assess it with the others.

Commander Kevin
Agreed. The Float stays together. What do we do then?

Commander Adam
We DO have the power to ask what they would want, however.

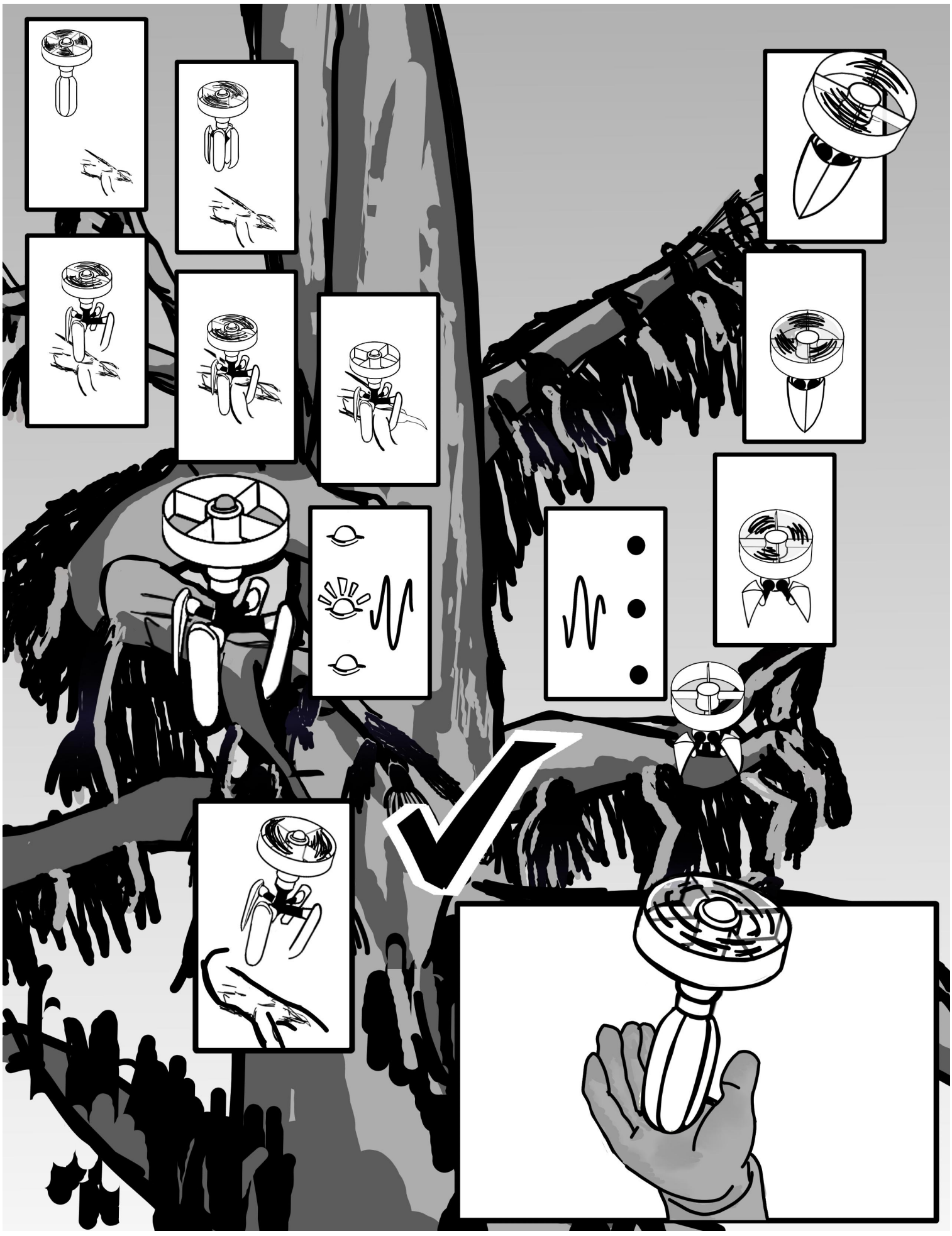
No point in making everyone nervous if we don't know if they can spare us the help.

We should send a Trade Query, make some options and call for a

General Personnel Meeting

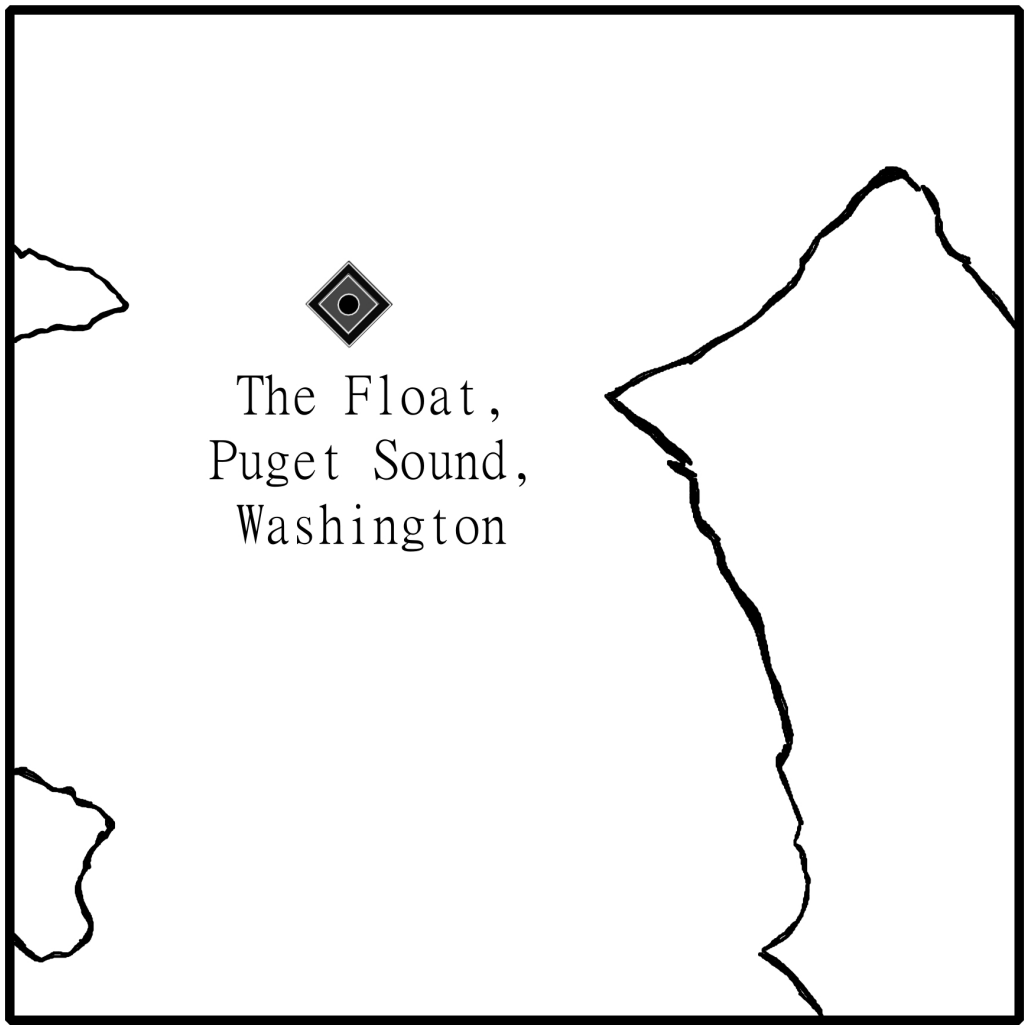
Kevin Agreed. We should send this thing out now and call it when the Egg returns.

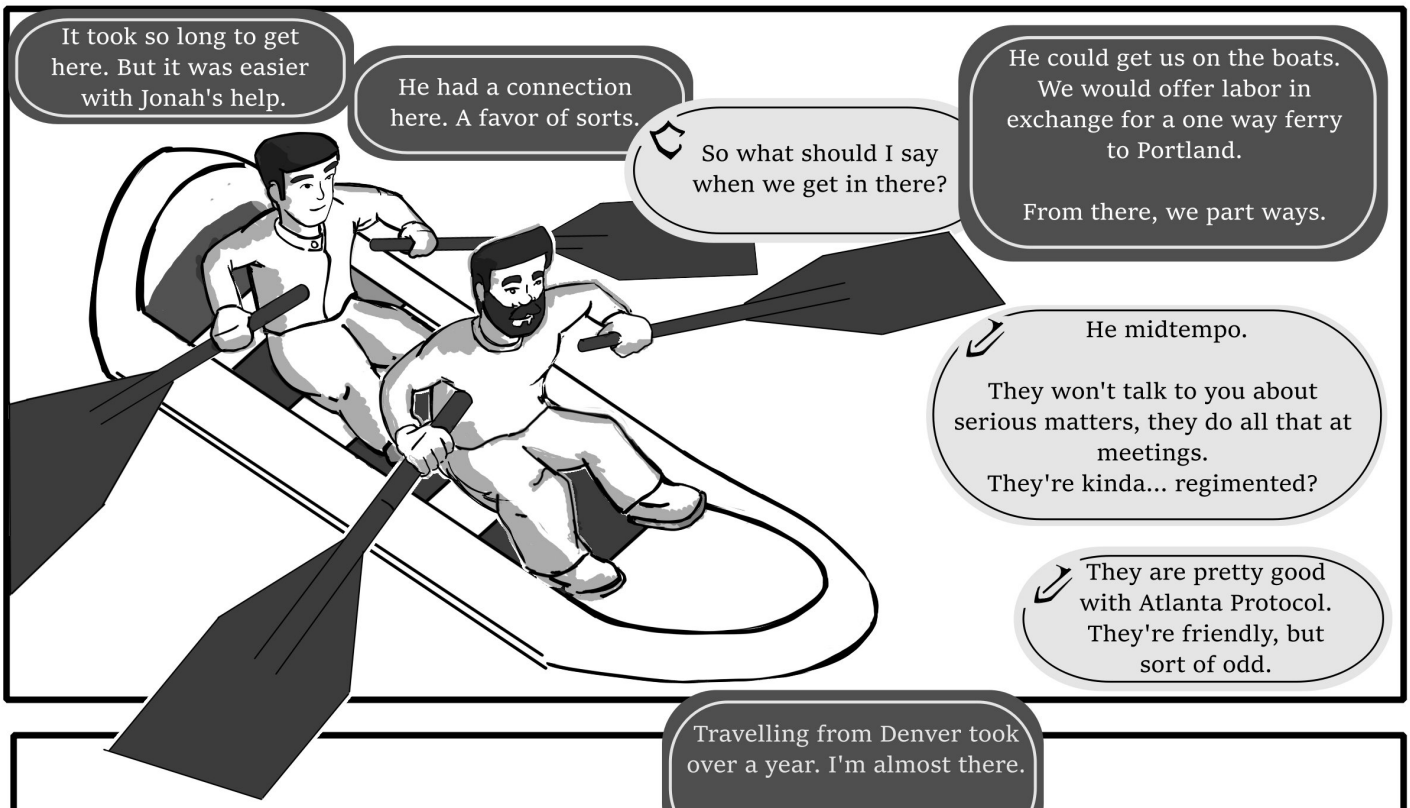
Parum Let's do that! Thank you for the News, Rome. Please send the message.

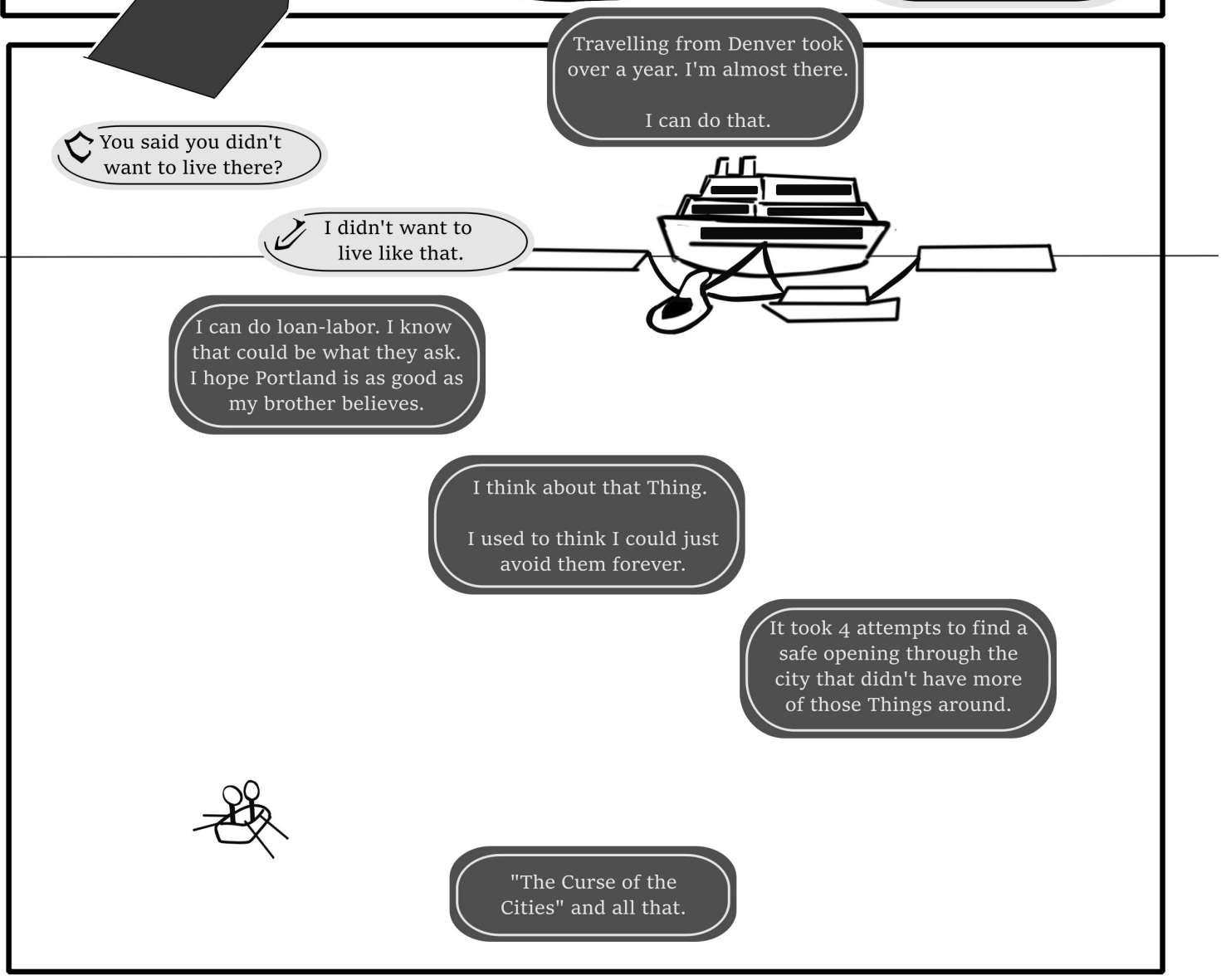


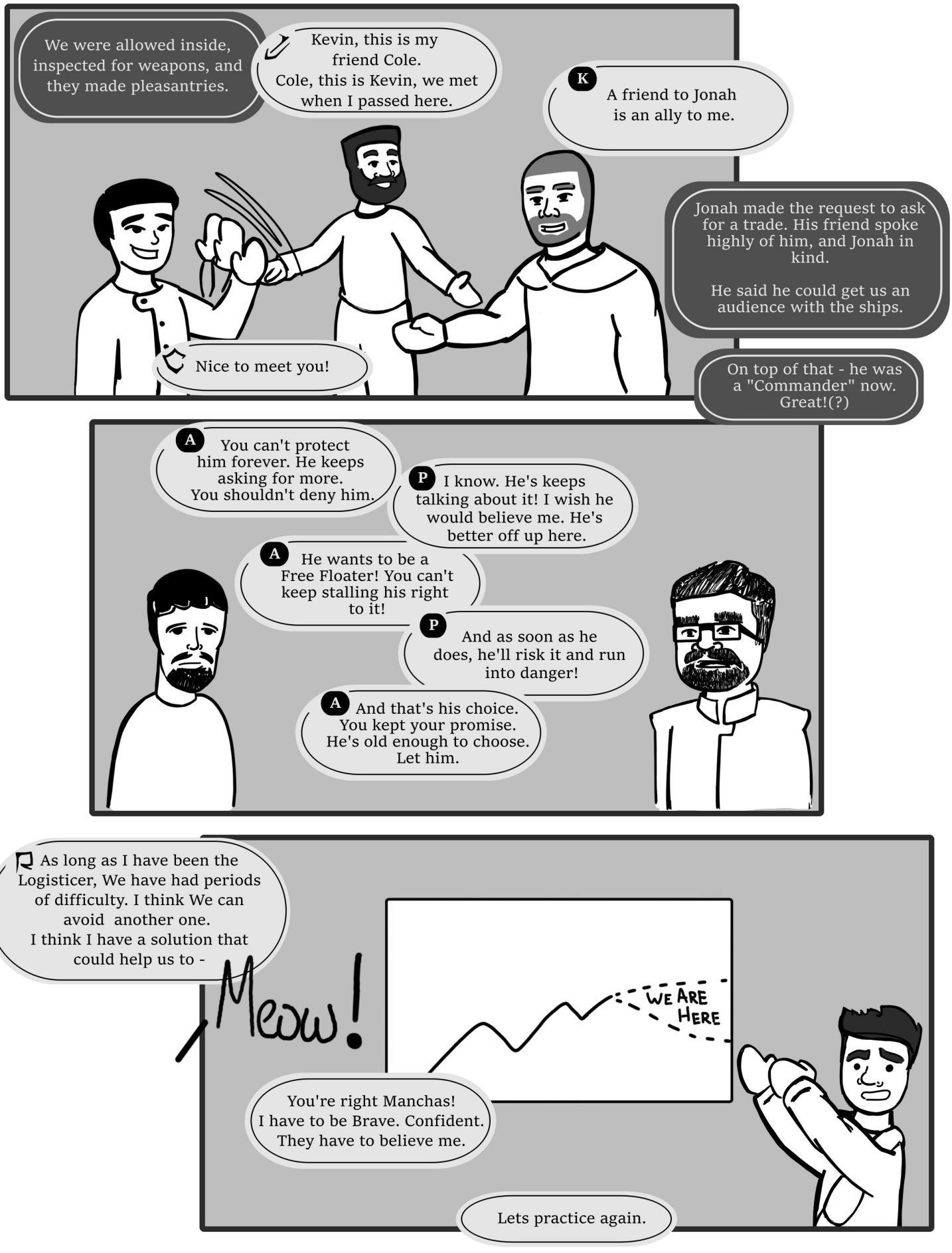
POMP AND PROCEDURE

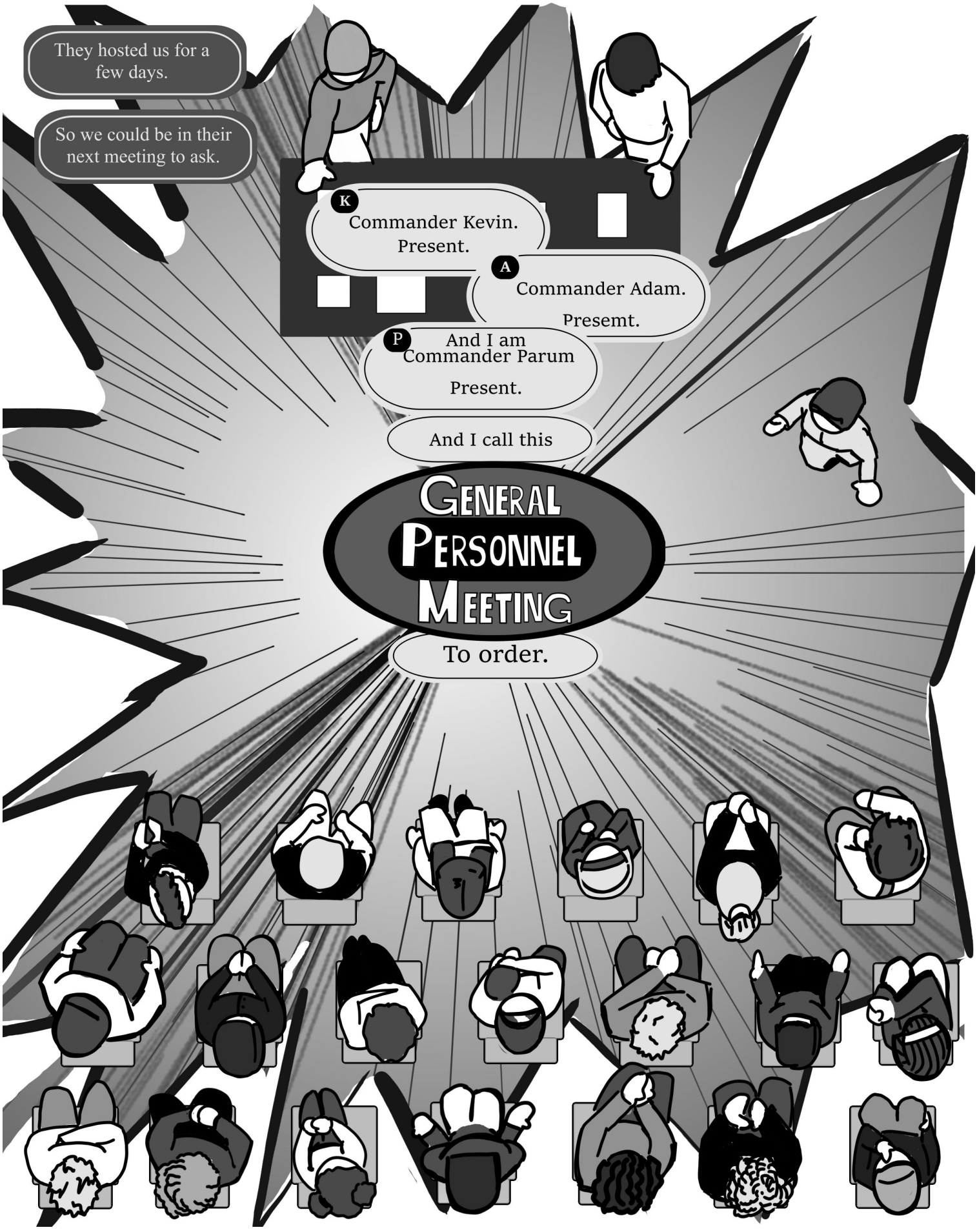
October 9, 2097




It took so long to get here. But it was easier with Jonah's help.
He had a connection here. A favor of sorts.
So what should I say when we get in there?
He could get us on the boats. We would offer labor in exchange for a one way ferry to Portland.
From there, we part ways.
He midtempo.
They won't talk to you about serious matters, they do all that at meetings.
They're kinda... regimented?
They are pretty good with Atlanta Protocol. They're friendly, but sort of odd.


Travelling from Denver took over a year. I'm almost there.
I can do that.
You said you didn't want to live there?
I didn't want to live like that.
I can do loan-labor. I know that could be what they ask. I hope Portland is as good as my brother believes.
I think about that Thing.
I used to think I could just avoid them forever.
It took 4 attempts to find a safe opening through the city that didn't have more of those Things around.
"The Curse of the Cities" and all that.


We were allowed inside, inspected for weapons, and they made pleasantries.
Kevin, this is my friend Cole. Cole, this is Kevin, we met when I passed here.
K
A friend to Jonah is an ally to me.
Jonah made the request to ask for a trade. His friend spoke highly of him, and Jonah in kind.
He said he could get us an audience with the ships.
Nice to meet you!
On top of that - he was a "Commander" now. Great!(?)
A
You can't protect him forever. He keeps asking for more. You shouldn't deny him.
P
I know. He's keeps talking about it! I wish he would believe me. He's better off up here.
A
He wants to be a Free Floater! You can't keep stalling his right to it!
P
And as soon as he does, he'll risk it and run into danger!
A
And that's his choice. You kept your promise. He's old enough to choose. Let him.
As long as I have been the Logisticer, We have had periods of difficulty. I think We can avoid another one. I think I have a solution that could help us to -
Meow!
WE ARE HERE
You're right Manchas! I have to be Brave. Confident. They have to believe me.
Lets practice again.


They hosted us for a few days.
So we could be in their next meeting to ask.
K
Commander Kevin. Present.
A
Commander Adam. Presemt.
P
And I am Commander Parum Present.
And I call this
GENERAL PERSONNEL MEETING
To order.

We had to wait through this meeting before they'd hear us out.

They speak of survival like a duty and make a big deal out of following structure.
Everyone does what they must.

Jonah's friend Kevin is going to let us speak at the end.

We just have to wait to offer our favor.



They have an order of operations to how they proceed.
First the problem.
Then discussion.
Then Vote.

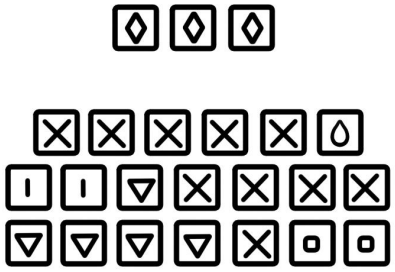
So I listen.

And what I must do right now is sit back and listen.

I counted 23 people in the room.

Guests don't vote. We are expected to sit here regardless.

The Commanders ◊ also don't get to vote on such matters.
18 people have to agree.



And until they do we're all going to sit inside this WSF Ferry Passenger Cabin.

K We completed our 16th annual audit earlier this week. Mostly, we are fine.

K Materially and Electrically, we are covered But we are short on food.

K The recent "visit" by The Gladiators put us net 2 negative on cows.

A We determined we have two options: Suffer an extreme year or trade.

A We sent out several trade queries.

Only one group responded.

A They are offering one cow in exchange for either a Large NASICON or a LazRifle if we want to trade.

P Jerome will explain our analysis for you to weigh in on during the voting phase.

The Logisticer ◊ Speaks Next.

ר

Option 1	Do Nothing
Pros	Nobody has to take the risk of exiting the safety of their islands and boats
Cons	The group will not have spare food, and they may struggle in future crises.

Option 2	Trade a NASICON to the Herders
Pros	Ensures food safety for the next 6 months as per Floater Code.
Cons	NASICONS are heavy and would require a team to execute this trade. This would be high risk.

Option 3	Trade a LazRifle to the Herders
Pros	Ensures food safety for the next 6 months as per Floater Code.
Cons	Losing a gun may imply weakness and encourage people with bad intetions to approach The Floaters.

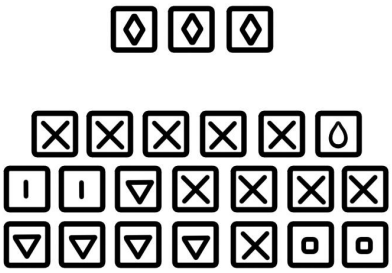


The Wayfarers ▫ speak first.

They support either trade option but are cagey with how they describe their group. I think they don't want to be open in front of me and Jonah.

They offer to train a person.





The Keepers ▽ go next. They are currently repainting all the ships. This is too critical to put off. They cannot spare a person.



The Food Collective ☒ is the largest group and has several opinions.

Generally there are three opinions in the crowd.

Some worry that acting too late would cause them to need to carry extra burdens in the future.

Another group thinks that they've been so successful that they could make up the difference next year.

Still a third faction is suggesting they just suffer a year and hunker down.



They opt to vote as individuals instead of as a block but aren't sure they could provide a person.

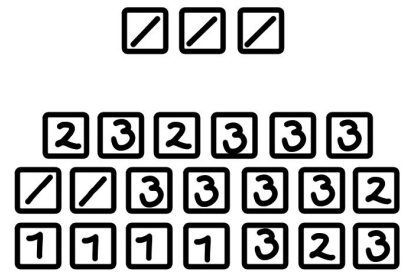


As the Guests ▯, we remain waiting until this matter adjourns.

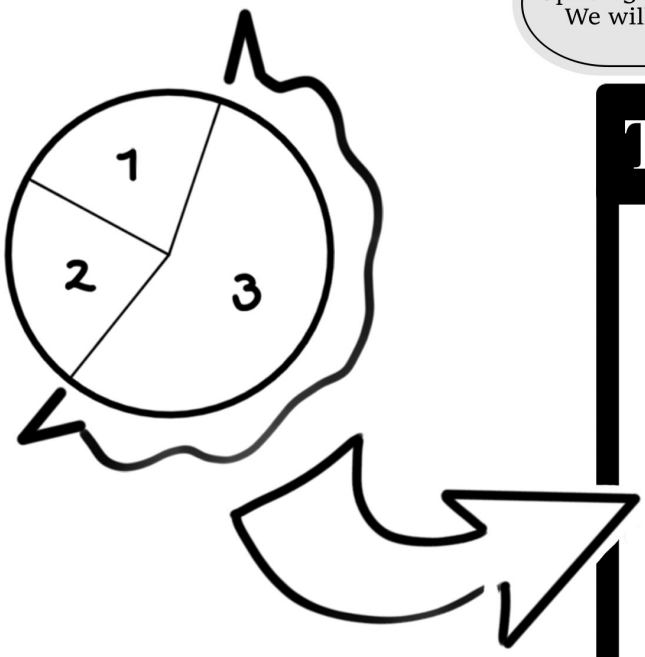
By this point, this seems like a hard challenge. I don't envy them.

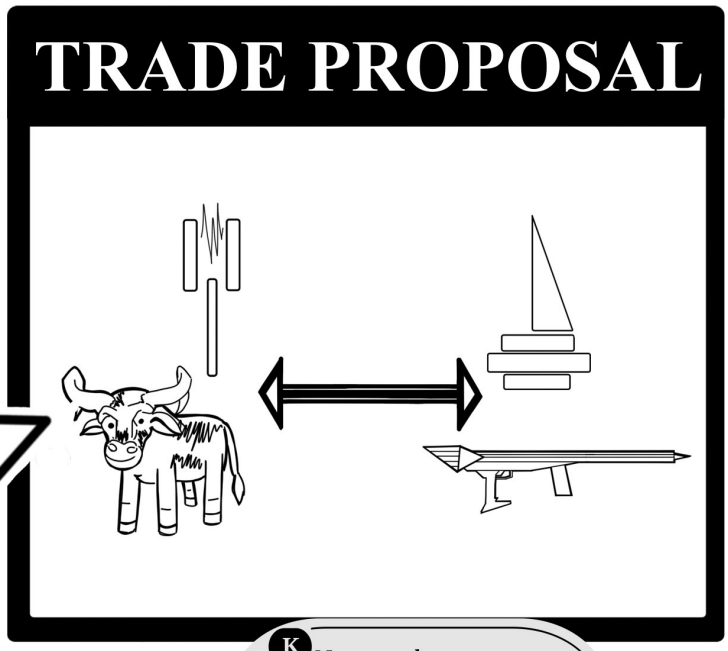
Three options:
1. Do nothing and struggle on.
2. Trade a NASICON for a Cow.
3. Trade a Lazgun for a Cow.

They repeated for several rounds, going over arguments, failing to get a conclusion, repeating new arguments, and repeating again. After 3 Hours, a vote proceeded.



A The vote is settled. Option 3 Wins with 10 votes. We will make it happen. Together.





P We will trade a LazRifle to the Herders for a cow to butcher and eat.

K Now we have a new matter of business - HOW will we execute this?

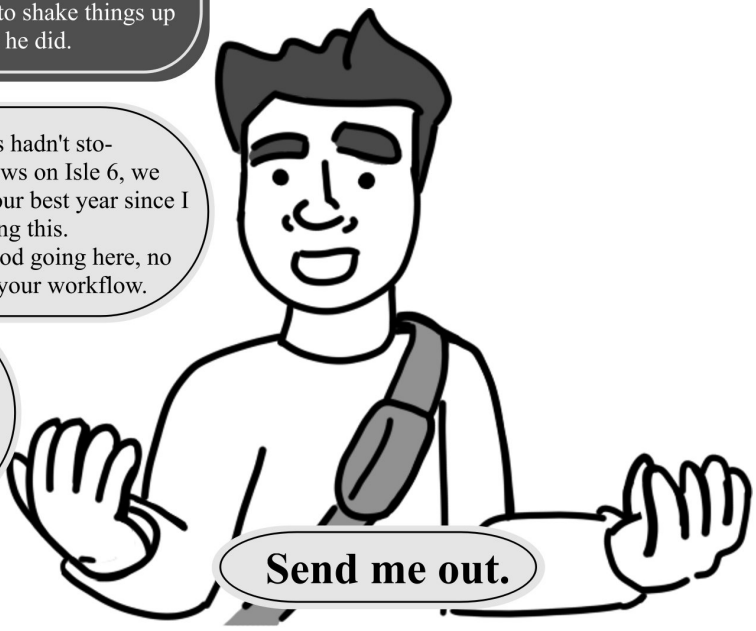
The Logisticer piped up for his turn. It didn't seem like people expected him to shake things up like he did.

I did the whole report. I've spent the last three weeks doing this report. You guys are all busy doing big stuff. The Chicken Island and paint are too important. There's no reason to stop work on any of that.

If the Gladiators hadn't sto-commisioned the cows on Isle 6, we would be on track for our best year since I started doing this.
We got something good going here, no reason to mess up your workflow.

We need one guy to do this, and the Herders aren't too far away.

Theres a reallly simple solution where none of you guys have to do any of the work. I want to give back to you.



Send me out.

The first group to reply said the idea was good, but chose to skip this round.
Everyone else skipped til the commanders' turn.

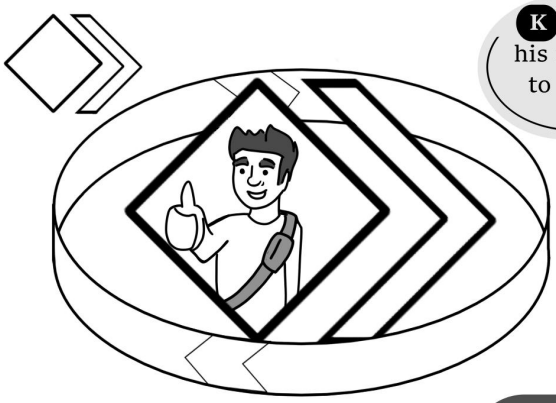
A Rome, you realize you are what you are offering yourself to danger, correct?

P There's so much out there! We can't just resign you to go out there alo-



K Rome, this is similar to the Trial I completed when I became a Free Floater.

K If you want to be brave for us, we should let you. But we should plan. I have an idea.



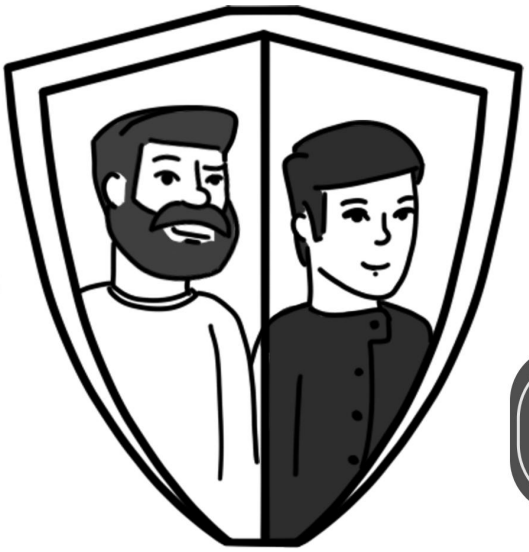
K Jerome is within his rights to volunteer and to serve. This can be his Adult Trial.

It would be irresponsible to send him out by himself. Losing him would still affect us.
The trade shouldn't be too hard. Jerome can do it, but probably shouldn't go alone.

But we have guests we could ask.

I knew I was about to be drafted into whatever he was going to say next. Fair enough.

K Our friend Jonah can help. He proved his friendship during the '82 Generator Crisis.



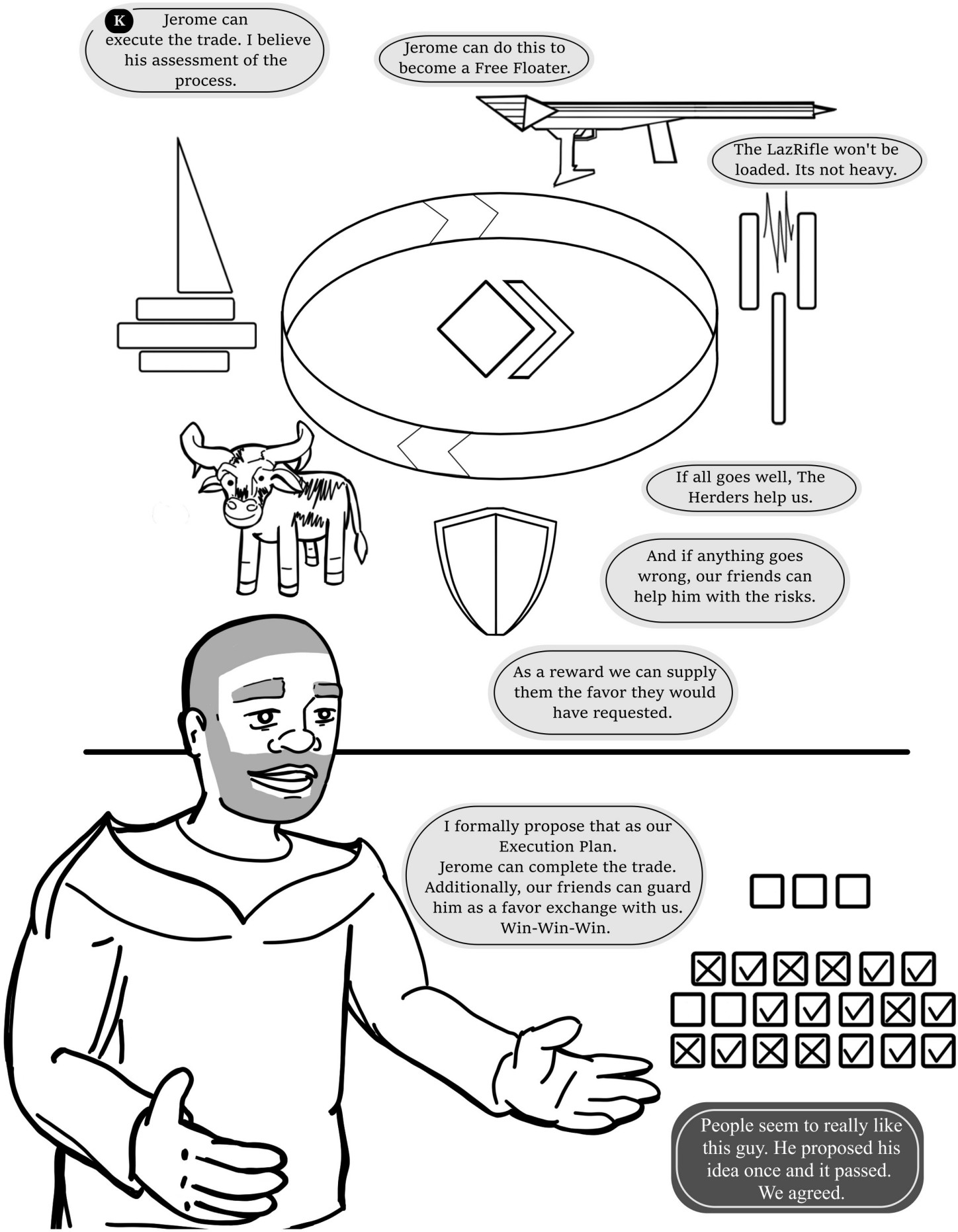
We could ask them to protect Jerome.

And give them what they request.

I know he and his friend are going to ask us for a favor.

Seems like we have a situation for great cooperation that could help them and the float.

This side mission seemed righteous.
I nodded to show willingness
Jonah nodded too.
We remained silent.


K
Jerome can execute the trade. I believe his assessment of the process.
Jerome can do this to become a Free Floater.
The LazRifle won't be loaded. Its not heavy.
If all goes well, The Herders help us.
And if anything goes wrong, our friends can help him with the risks.
As a reward we can supply them the favor they would have requested.
I formally propose that as our Execution Plan.
Jerome can complete the trade.
Additionally, our friends can guard him as a favor exchange with us.
Win-Win-Win.
People seem to really like this guy. He proposed his idea once and it passed.
We agreed.

SNEAK PEAK

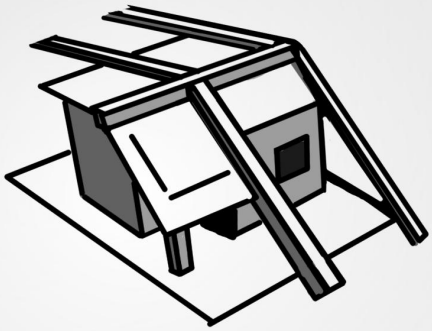
October 17, 2097



There is a building near the River. It has been picked clean over the years and remains as a husk.

The Herders only accept certain trades, and they must be attended in person.

We needed to get here and wait in silence.

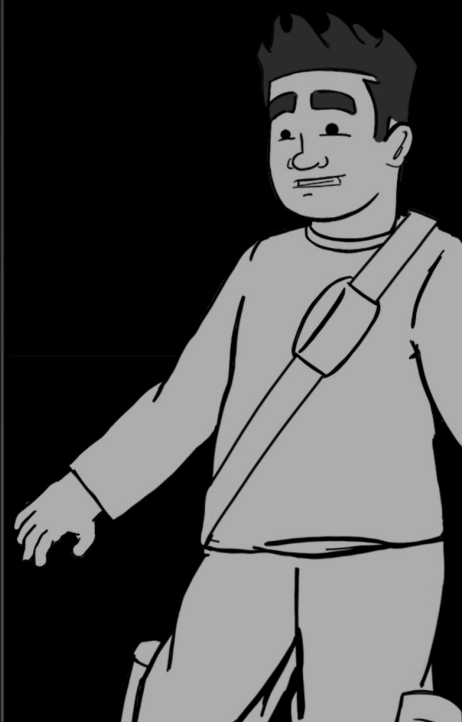


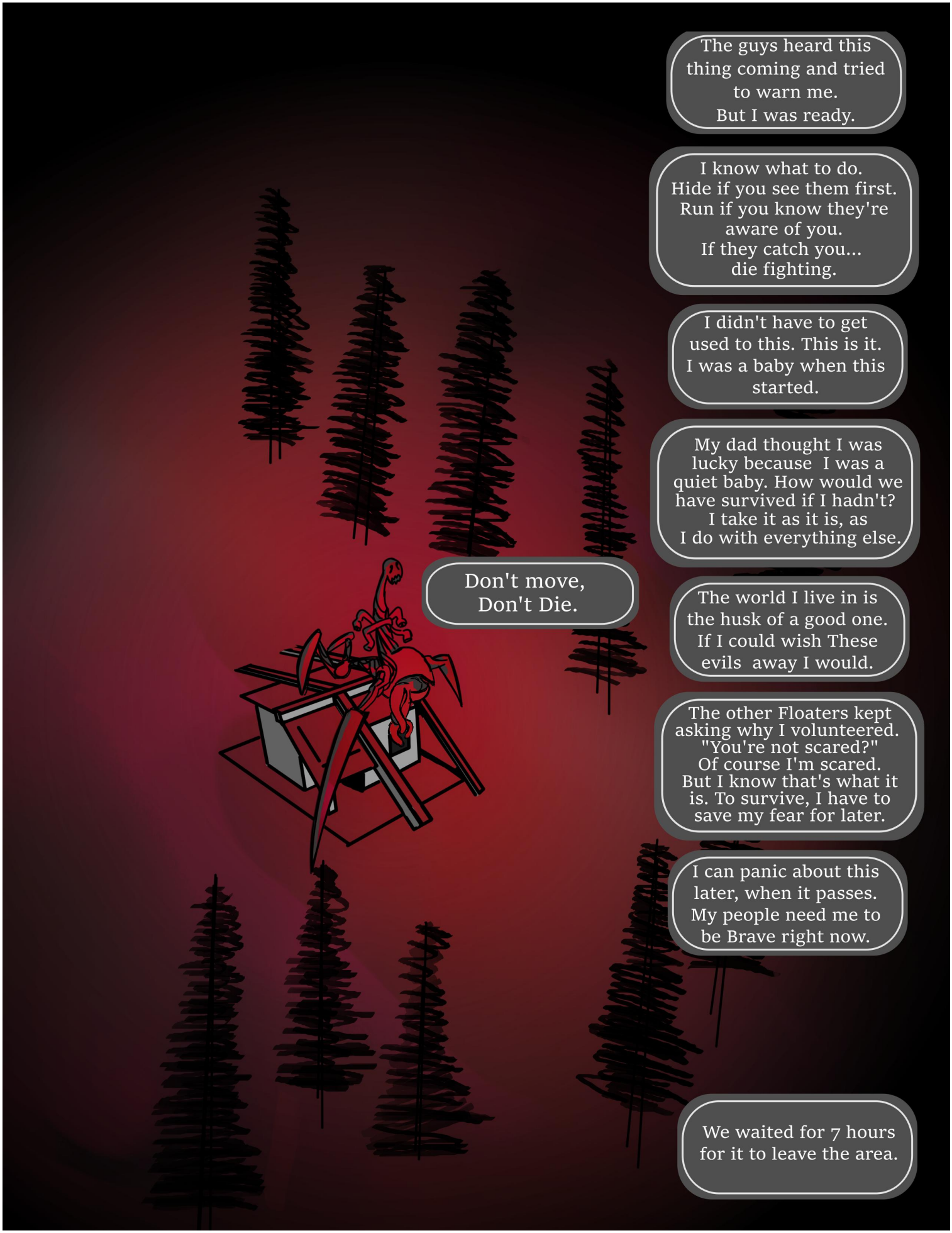


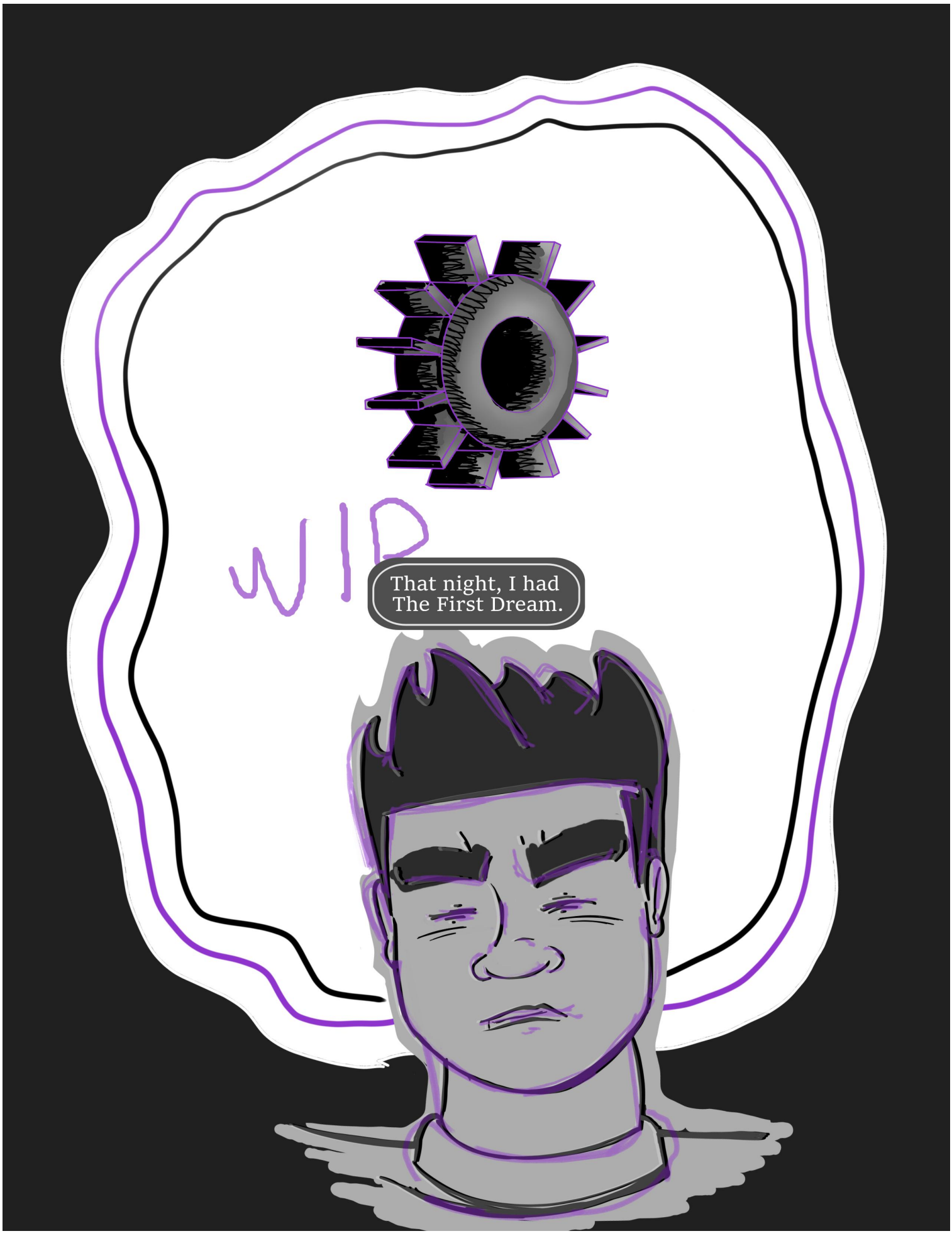


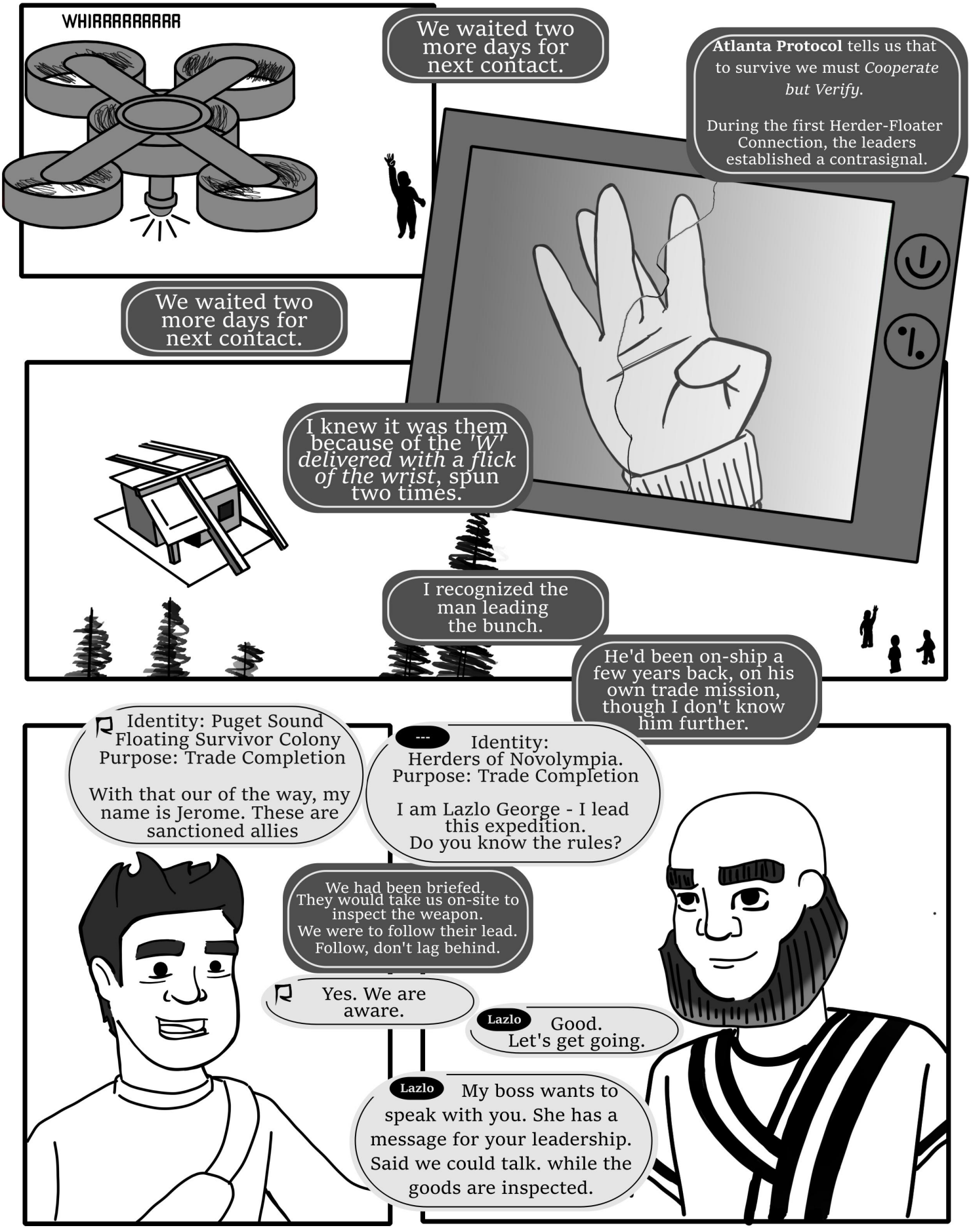
Unless we attract unwanted attention.






The guys heard this thing coming and tried to warn me.
But I was ready.
I know what to do.
Hide if you see them first.
Run if you know they're aware of you.
If they catch you...
die fighting.
I didn't have to get used to this. This is it.
I was a baby when this started.
My dad thought I was lucky because I was a quiet baby. How would we have survived if I hadn't?
I take it as it is, as I do with everything else.
Don't move,
Don't Die.
The world I live in is the husk of a good one.
If I could wish These evils away I would.
The other Floaters kept asking why I volunteered.
"You're not scared?"
Of course I'm scared.
But I know that's what it is. To survive, I have to save my fear for later.
I can panic about this later, when it passes.
My people need me to be Brave right now.
We waited for 7 hours for it to leave the area.


WIP
That night, I had
The First Dream.


WHIRRRRRRRRR
We waited two more days for next contact.
Atlanta Protocol tells us that to survive we must Cooperate but Verify.
During the first Herder-Floater Connection, the leaders established a contrasignal.
We waited two more days for next contact.
I knew it was them because of the 'W' delivered with a flick of the wrist, spun two times.
I recognized the man leading the bunch.
He'd been on-ship a few years back, on his own trade mission, though I don't know him further.
Identity: Puget Sound Floating Survivor Colony
Purpose: Trade Completion
With that our of the way, my name is Jerome. These are sanctioned allies
---
Identity: Herders of Novolympia.
Purpose: Trade Completion
I am Lazlo George - I lead this expedition.
Do you know the rules?
We had been briefed.
They would take us on-site to inspect the weapon.
We were to follow their lead.
Follow, don't lag behind.
Yes. We are aware.
Lazlo
Good.
Let's get going.
Lazlo
My boss wants to speak with you. She has a message for your leadership.
Said we could talk. while the goods are inspected.

The herders survive off of secrecy. Their location is cloaked.

To take us there, they equipped some sort of illusion lenses.

They replaced the world with a digital path for us to walk.

It was dizzying and did not match the world we lived in.

But it worked. I had no idea how, but we arrived to our host's destination.

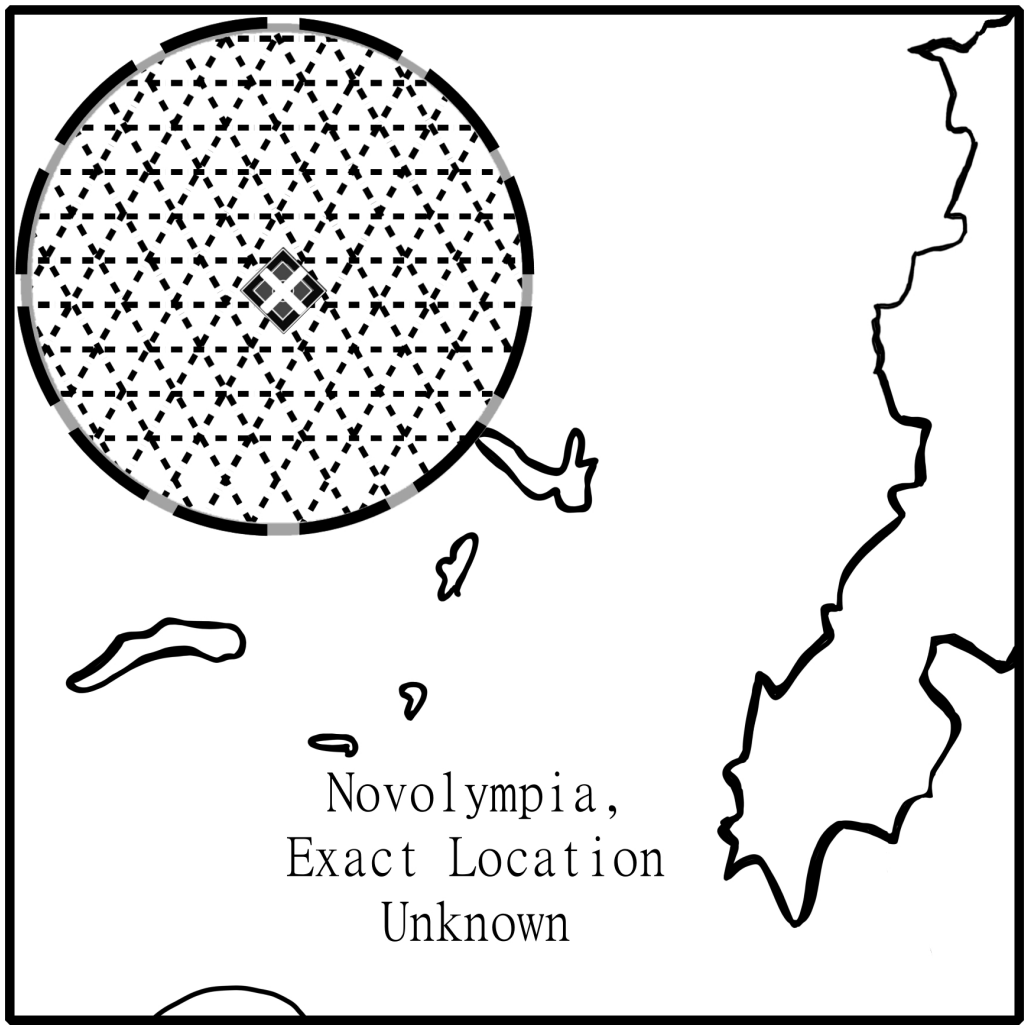
NOVOLYMPIA

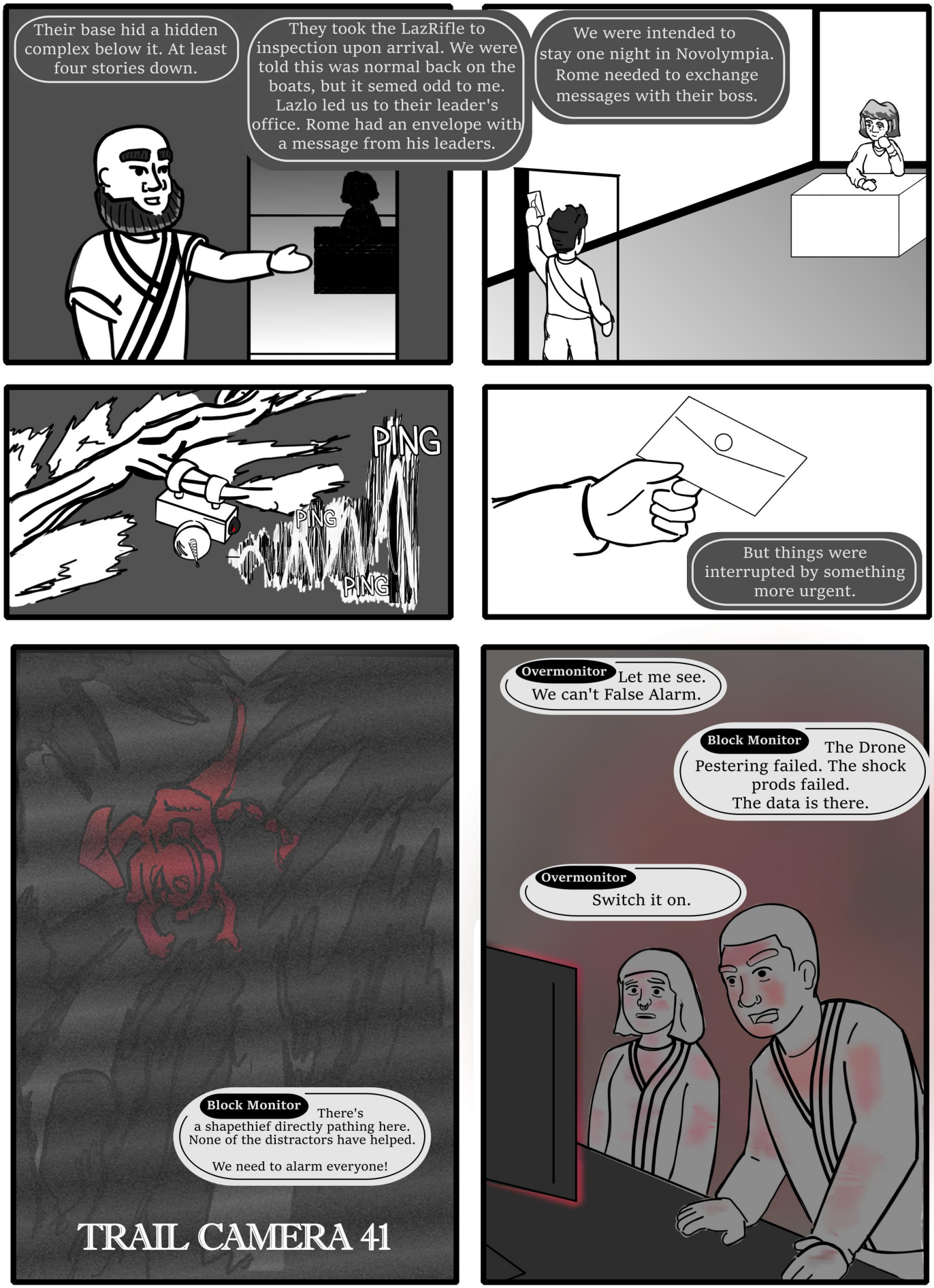
HOME AND COMMAND CENTER OF THE HERDERS



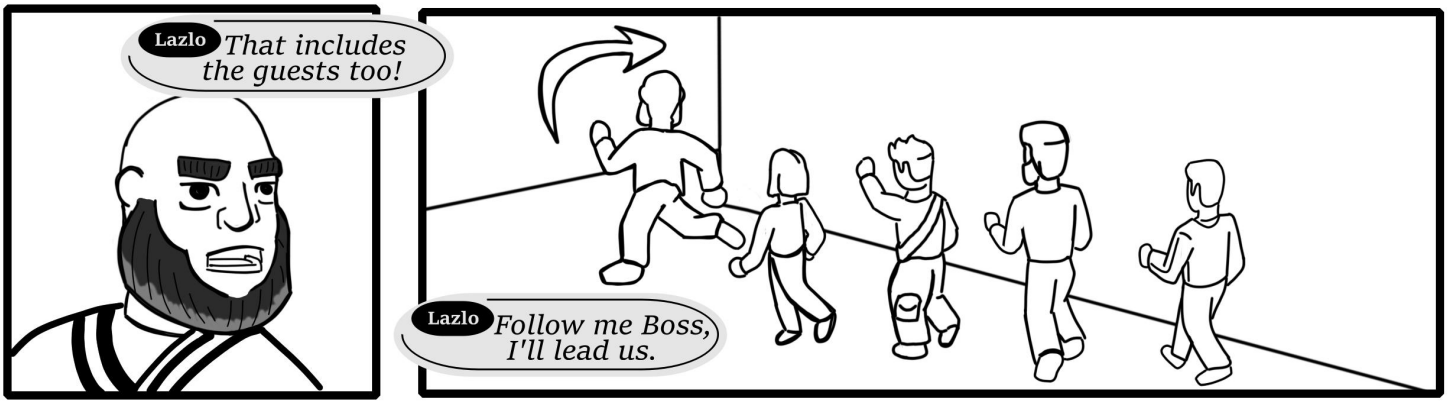
THE HERDERS

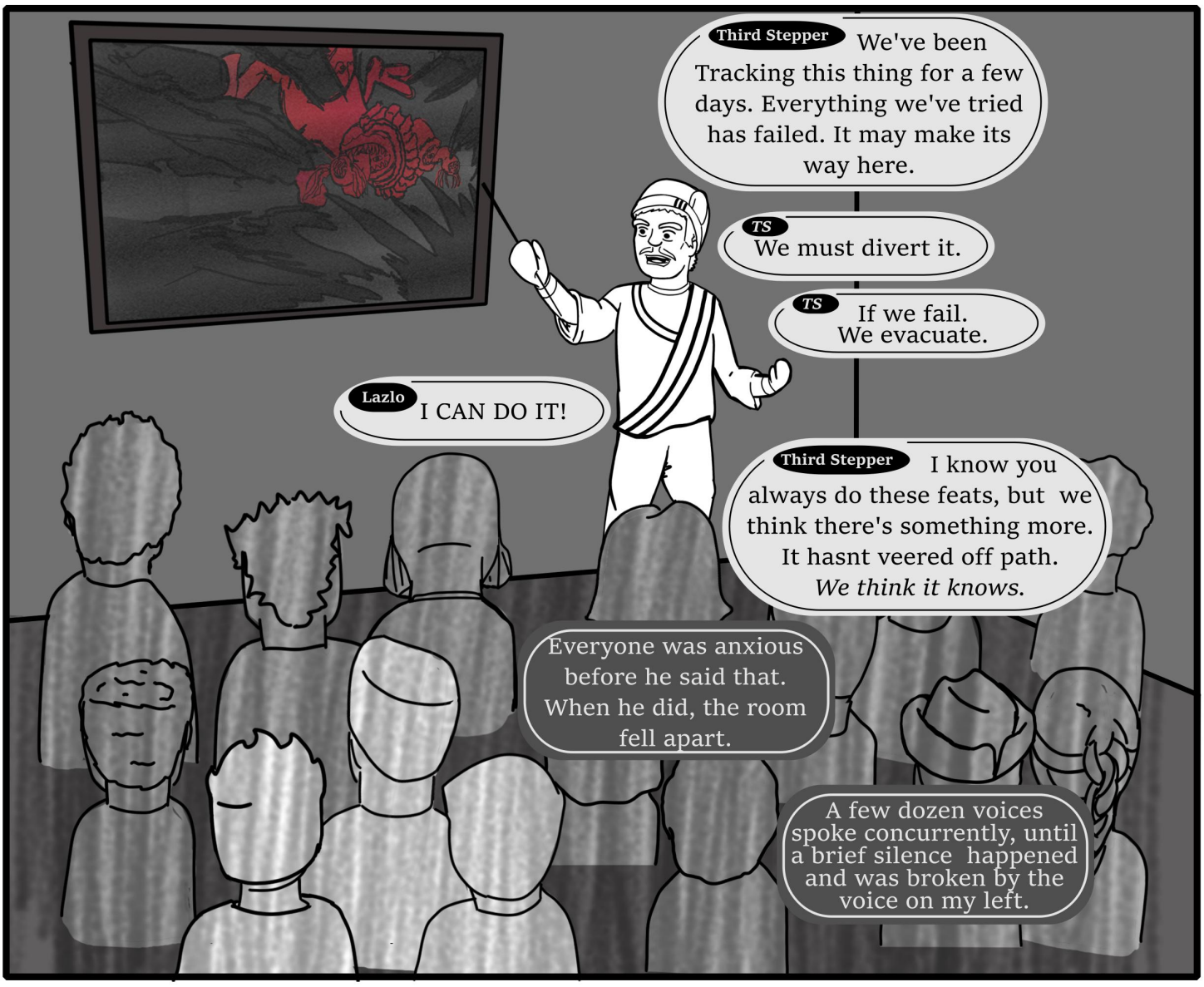
October 18, 2097



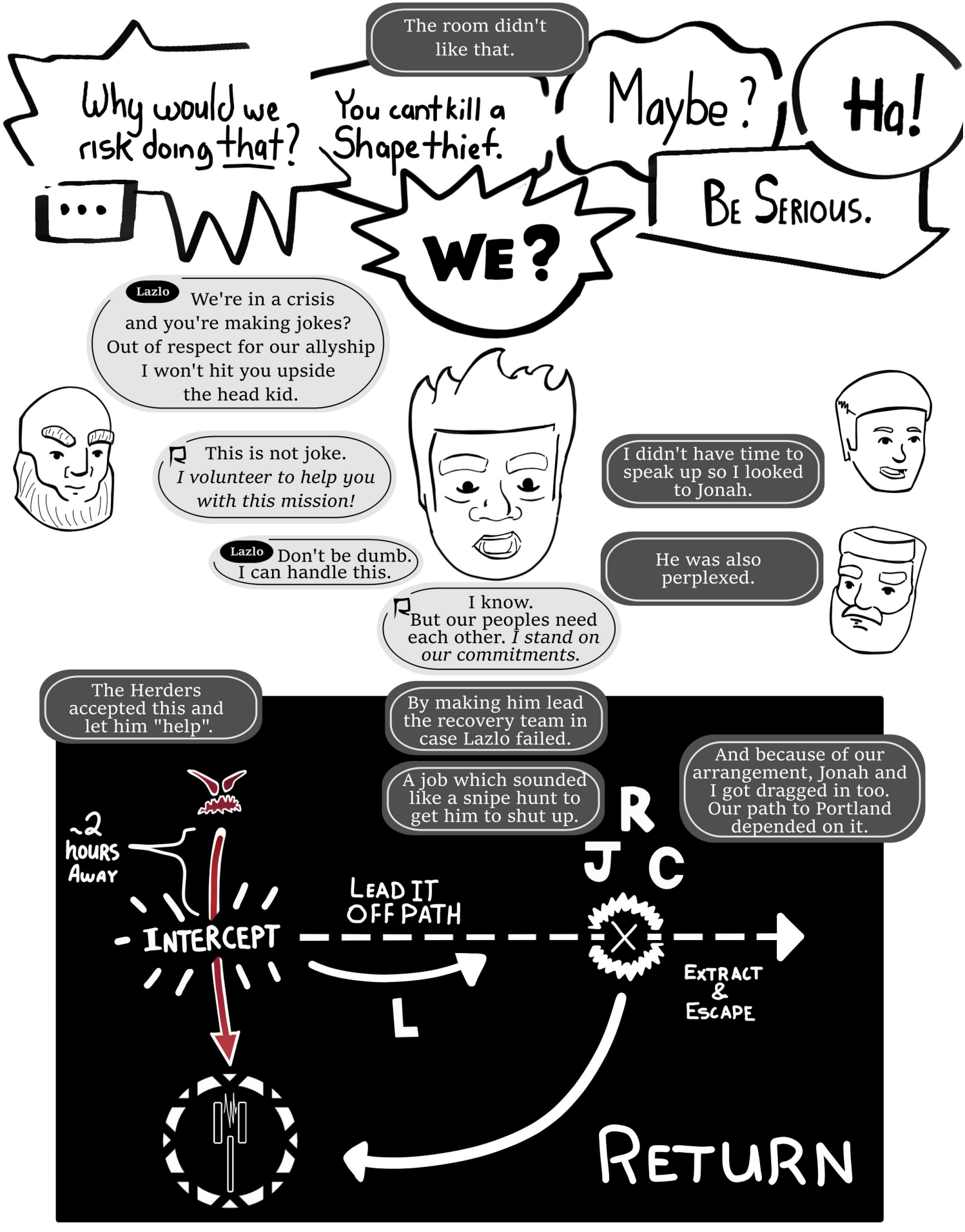

Their base hid a hidden complex below it. At least four stories down.
They took the LazRifle to inspection upon arrival. We were told this was normal back on the boats, but it semed odd to me. Lazlo led us to their leader's office. Rome had an envelope with a message from his leaders.
We were intended to stay one night in Novolympia. Rome needed to exchange messages with their boss.
PING
PING
PING
But things were interrupted by something more urgent.
Block Monitor There's a shapethief directly pathing here. None of the distractors have helped.
We need to alarm everyone!
TRAIL CAMERA 41
Overmonitor Let me see. We can't False Alarm.
Block Monitor The Drone Pestering failed. The shock prods failed. The data is there.
Overmonitor Switch it on.

TIER ONE ALERT! TIER ONE ALERT!
ALL NON-ACTIVE AND NON-ESSENTIALS TO THE CENTRAL AUDITORIUM.
THIS IS NOT A DRILL. ALERT! ALERT!

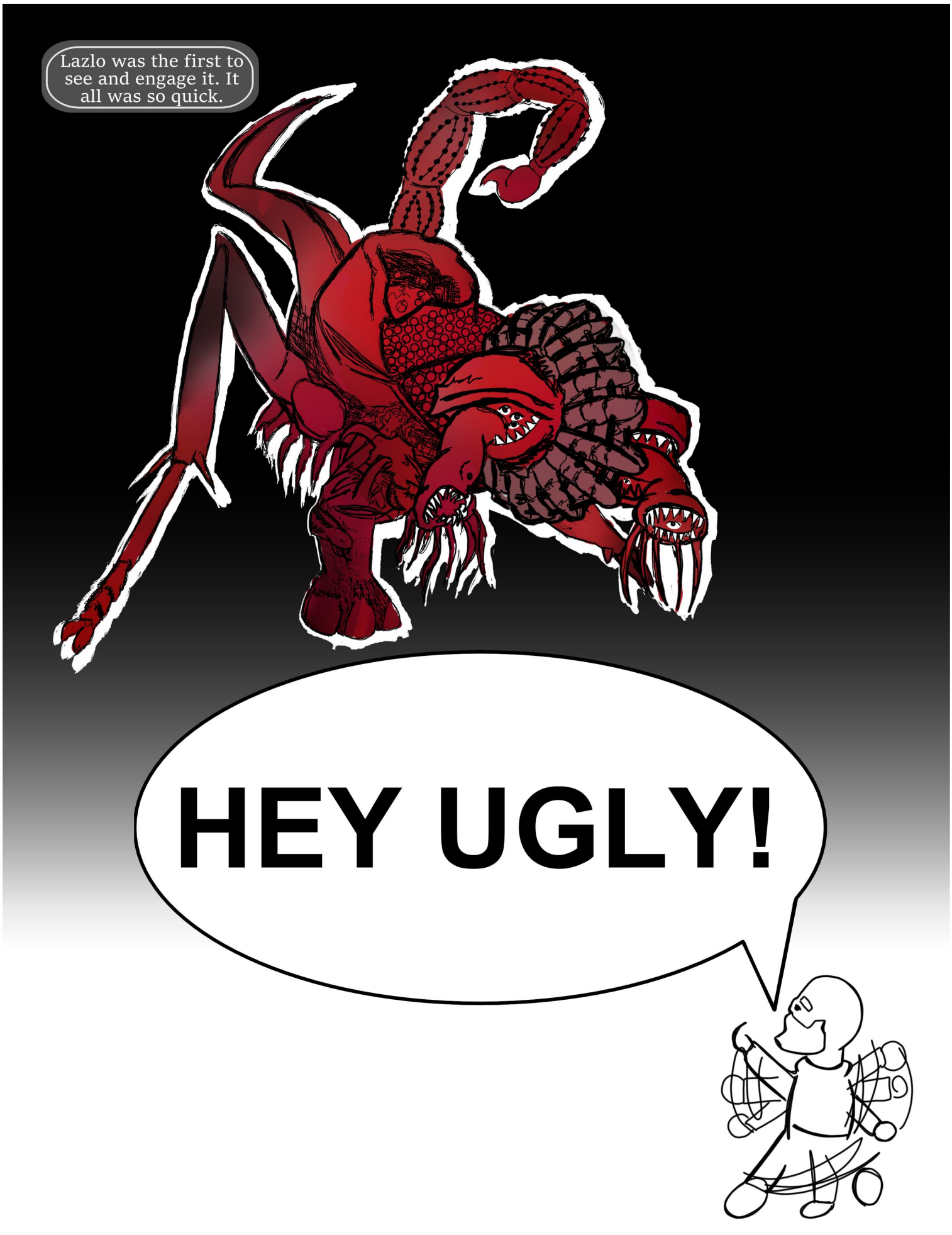




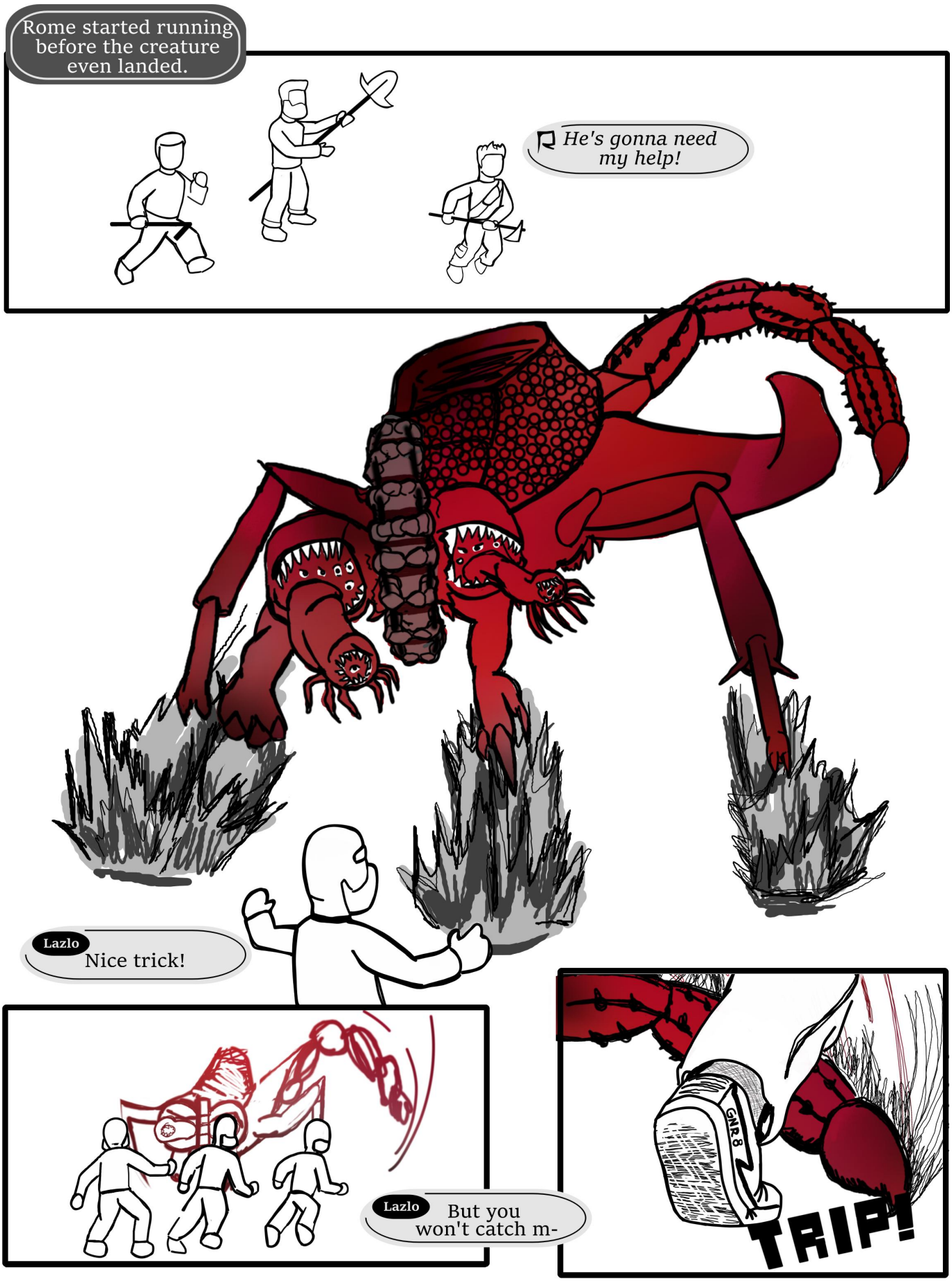

We can Kill it.
We have to rip the cog out.

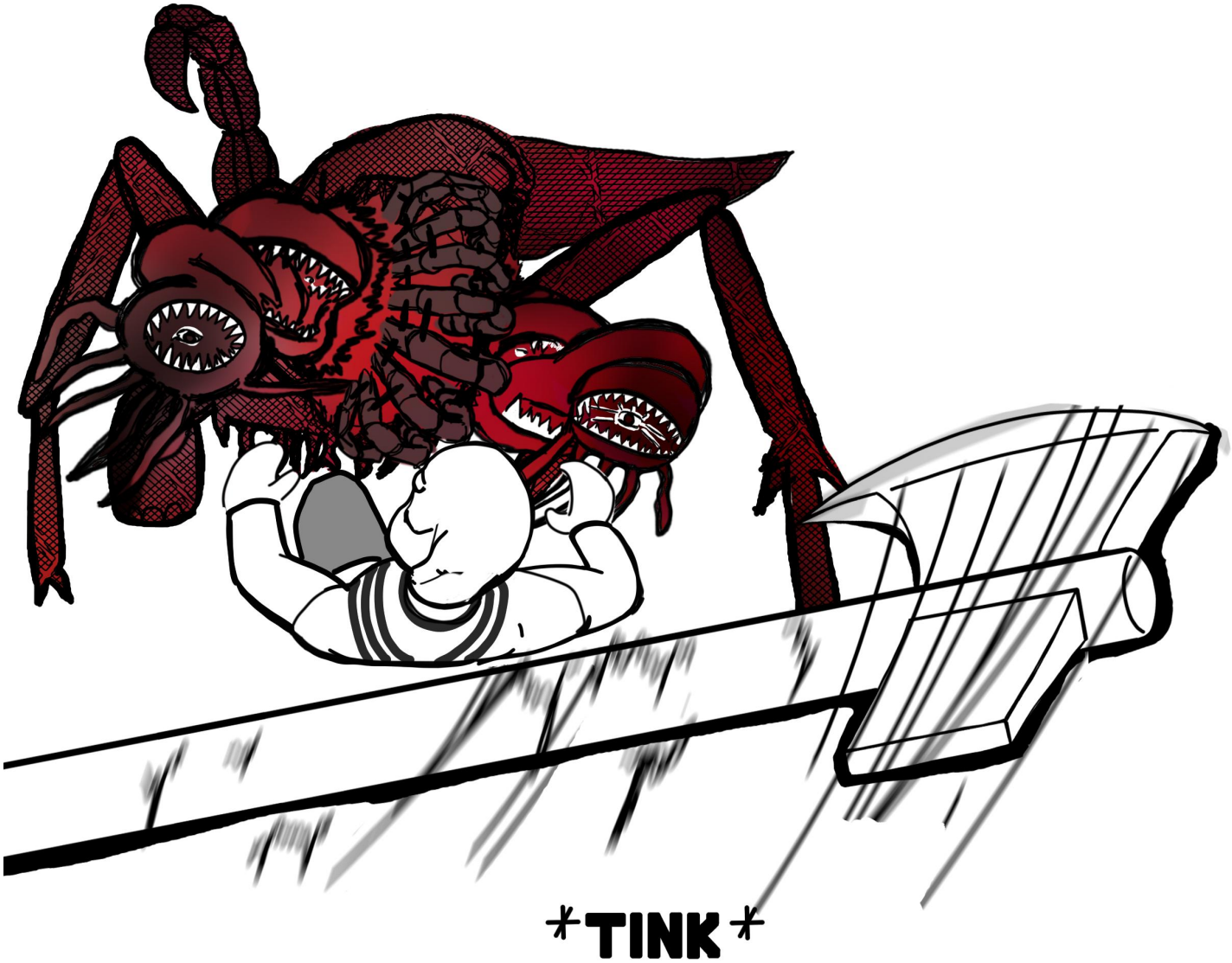

Why would we risk doing that?
...
You can't kill a Shapethief.
The room didn't like that.
WE?
Maybe?
Ha!
Be Serious.
Lazlo We're in a crisis and you're making jokes? Out of respect for our allyship I won't hit you upside the head kid.
This is not joke. I volunteer to help you with this mission!
Lazlo Don't be dumb. I can handle this.
I know. But our peoples need each other. I stand on our commitments.
I didn't have time to speak up so I looked to Jonah.
He was also perplexed.
The Herders accepted this and let him "help".
By making him lead the recovery team in case Lazlo failed.
A job which sounded like a snipe hunt to get him to shut up.
And because of our arrangement, Jonah and I got dragged in too. Our path to Portland depended on it.
~2 hours Away
INTERCEPT
LEAD IT OFF PATH
R
J
C
L
EXTRACT & ESCAPE
RETURN

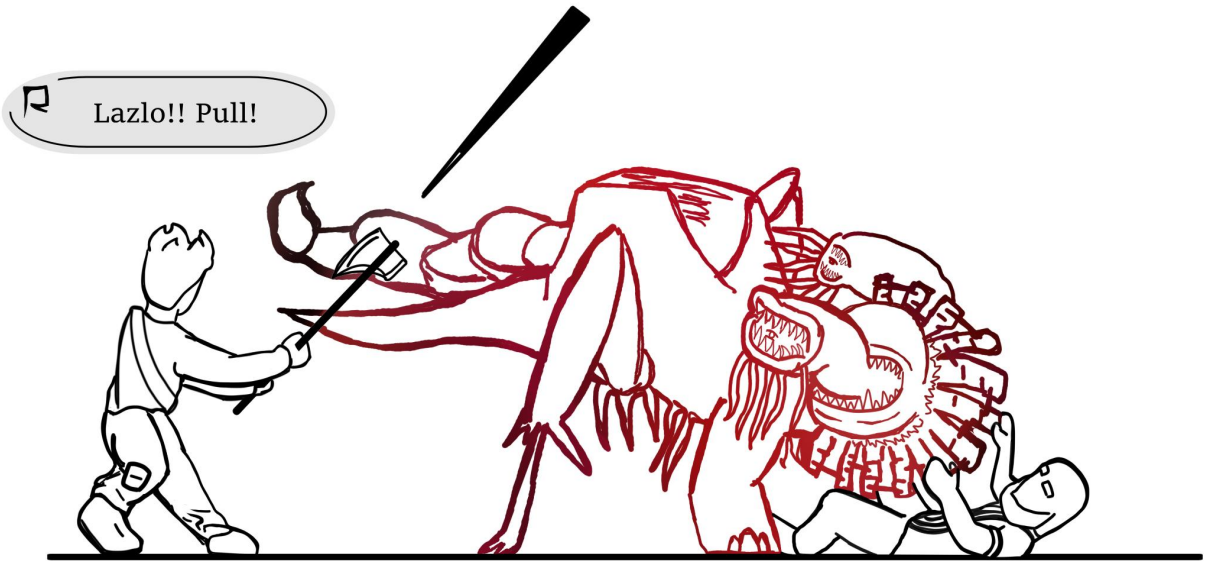

I wasn't please with the needless risk. I was frustrated when we were outfitted with old tools. But to some extent, I understood why he agreed to do this.
There's a force coming at us. We must meet it head on. We can only survive with each other.
The way he speaks, I think he understands one of my core beliefs.
Real leaders honor their commitments, no matter what.


Lazlo was the first to see and engage it. It all was so quick.
HEY UGLY!

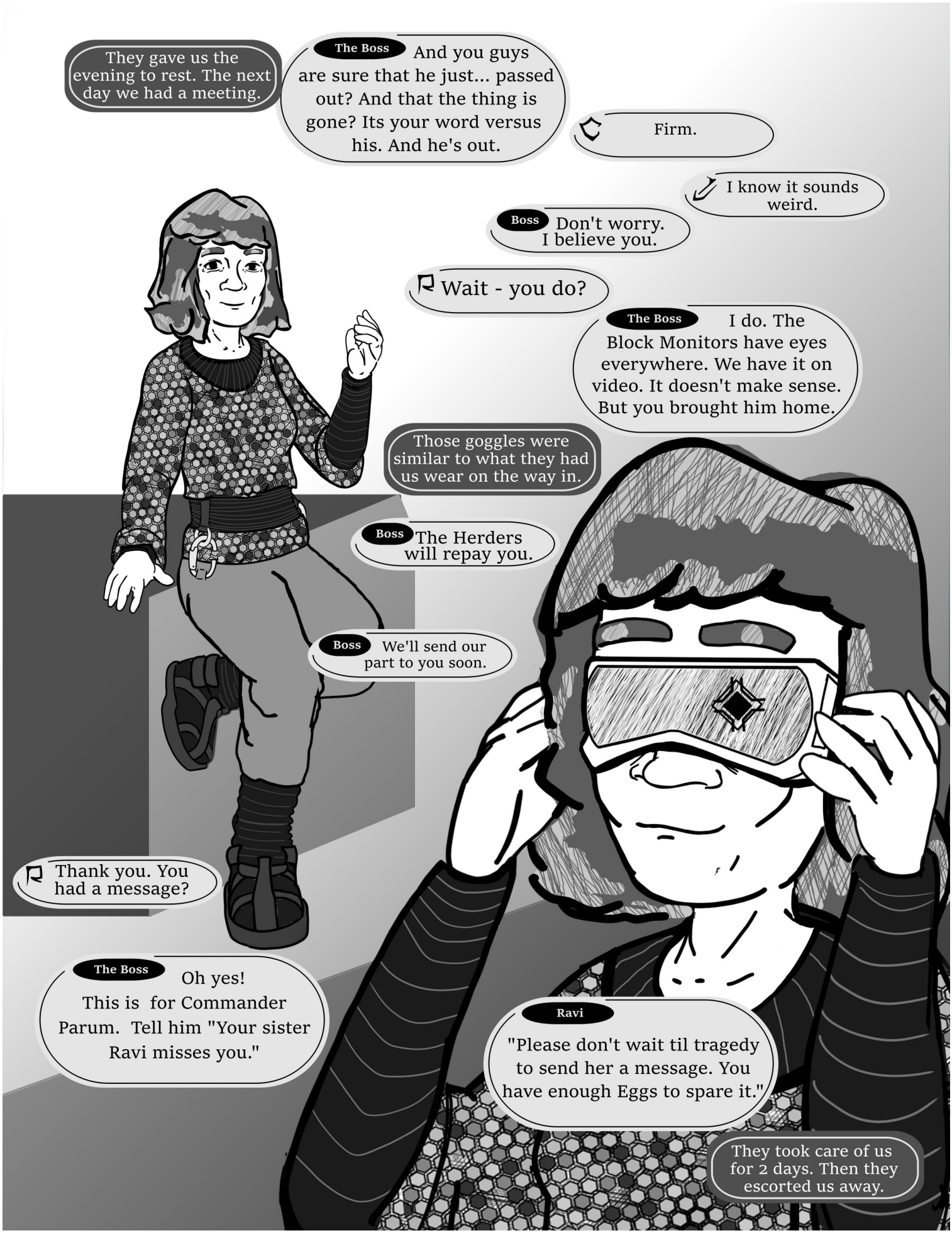

Click


Rome started running before the creature even landed.
He's gonna need my help!
Lazlo
Nice trick!
Lazlo
But you won't catch m-
GNR 8
TRIP!


TINK


Lazlo!! Pull!

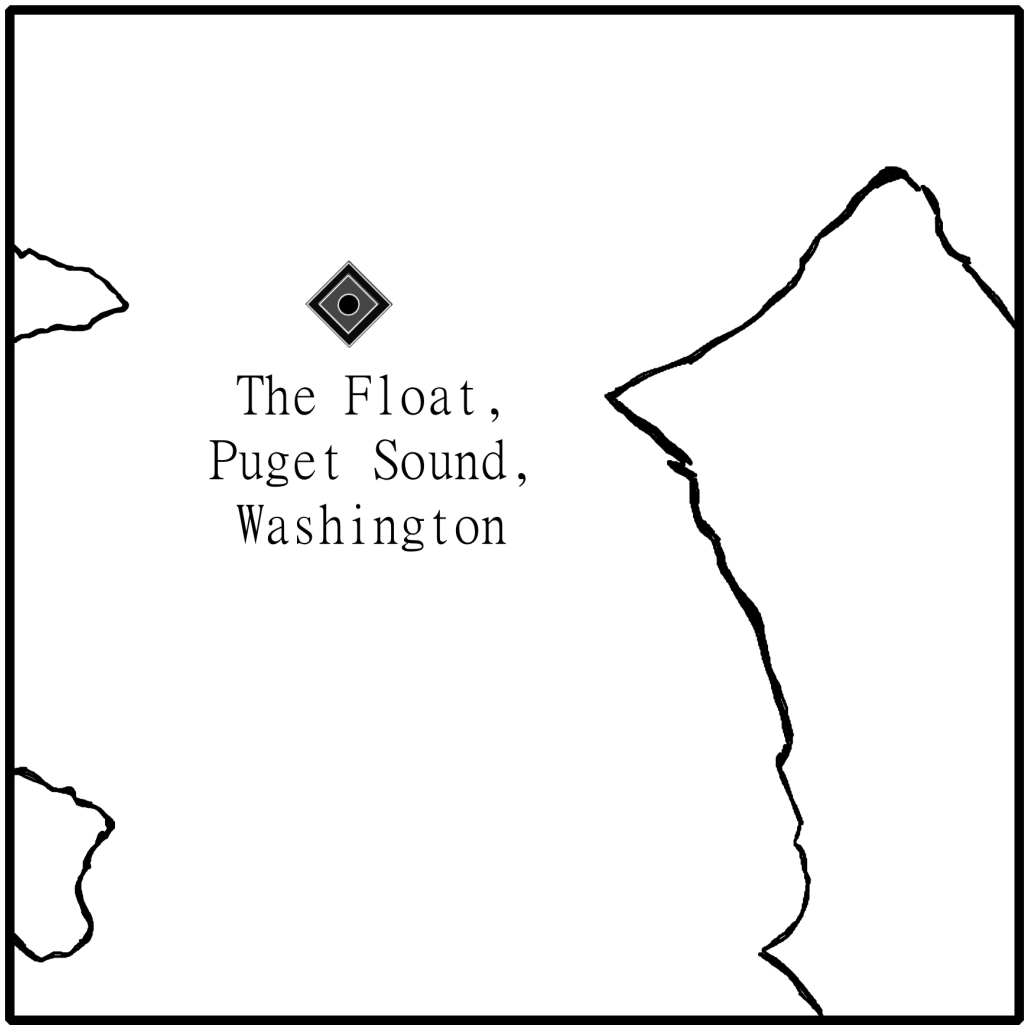

I didn't have the time to question why Rome's idea worked.
I was too busy being excited that it did.
SKAA AA AA
It stopped moving, like it had never been mobile in the first place.
It "fizzed" away quickly. Within a minute, it was entirely gone.
AA AAAA
Lazlo collapsed. We ended up carrying him back to base.


They gave us the evening to rest. The next day we had a meeting.
The Boss
And you guys are sure that he just... passed out? And that the thing is gone? Its your word versus his. And he's out.
Firm.
I know it sounds weird.
Boss
Don't worry. I believe you.
Wait - you do?
The Boss
I do. The Block Monitors have eyes everywhere. We have it on video. It doesn't make sense. But you brought him home.
Those goggles were similar to what they had us wear on the way in.
Boss
The Herders will repay you.
Boss
We'll send our part to you soon.
Thank you. You had a message?
The Boss
Oh yes! This is for Commander Parum. Tell him "Your sister Ravi misses you."
Ravi
"Please don't wait til tragedy to send her a message. You have enough Eggs to spare it."
They took care of us for 2 days. Then they escorted us away.


WIP
THE ANGEL
IS A LIE

I HAVE TO GO

November 4, 2097




It was odd to call it "calm" to travel back, but it was easier in a group. Jerome had a drone that he could operate.
It made it much easier to rest knowing we had an alarm for creature watch.
By this point I knew Cole's skills in survival were good. He could pick out good mushrooms as we walked and cooks them into soups.
What did you guys do? Before the Sudden Death?
My family had been urban farmers at the Minnesota Agri-City Metroplex since 2047 when we came to America.
We came from the Philippines as climate refugees.
Somewhat safe and well-fed.
I should be calm.
I joined the Construction Corps when I was your age. I helped build several cities. Now all my work is gone...
Where are you going after this?
I need to get to Portland.
My cousin left our group 2 years ago chasing a rumor. Now I am too.
I just need to get somewhere new. My old home is gone.
I kept thinking of that moment with Lazlo.
Jerome took off before I even recognized that he could be helped.
His grip wasn't great but at least it showed conviction.
And he swung.
I'm glad he was right.
I'm glad Lazlo wasn't torn to shreds. But I can't get over hoe he latches on to ideas. He kept talking about the cog.
Was that it? What's up with this kid? Is that why this feels so odd? Am I overthinking it? Or is there something wrong?

The strangest interaction happened a few hours before we got to our pick-up point.



Hey Jonah, can I ask you a favor?

Yeah man, go for it.

I mean one-on-one. It's... personal.

... okay, sure.

He pulled us far enough that Cole wasn't in earshot.





Sorry Cole, I promise its nothing bad.

Okay. Do what you must.

And his demeanor was serious, in a way that I hadn't yet seen.

Alright man, what's up? Cole could probably listen to this? Maybe he can help too?

I need to ask you specificallty for help.

As a matter of fact, I think only you can help me.
I need something from my Leadership, and you seem to have some sway over Contoller Kevin.





I helped him almost over 10 years ago. What could I possibly do for you that you couldn't ask him yourself?

It's a Floater thing.

"Living for the Colony" also means you cannot leave if you're not seen as capable of surving alone.

I need you to vouch for me.

I've been feeling a pull. I was out there with my dad when I was younger. I feel the need to find *something* out there.

I can do that, but why pull me aside?

I saw an earnestness and determination in his eyes as he said this; I believed him



Because I had a dream. In this dream, I asked you something, and it seemed to matter. So here it is.

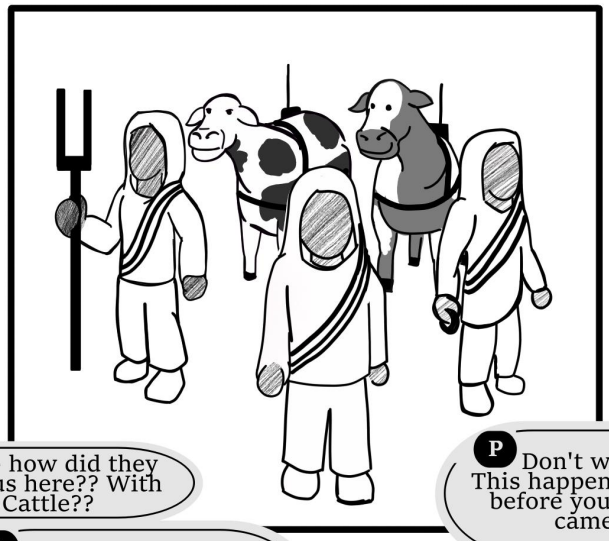
What would Cristobal do?

How did he know? He walked away after that moment. I was stunned.

We got back and they wrangled us into an immediate meeting with the Commanders.

A We already received both the good news and *TWO* cows. Some Herders dropped them off a few days ago.

The deliverymen said the extra was a token of their Gratitude.

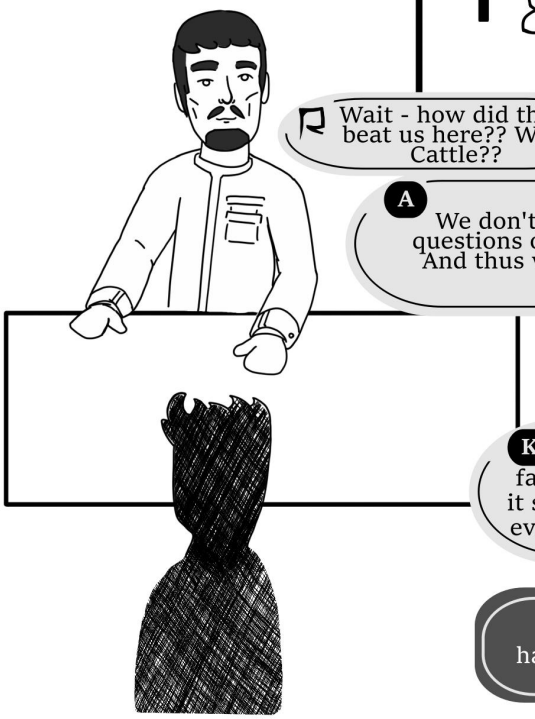


Commander Parum - Your *sister* send this letter.

She also said you should contact her more.

P Oh yeah. Ravi went to Novolympia during a scare relating to Genetic Diversity. Its not a big deal.

WAIT - how come this has never been brought up to me?



Wait - how did they beat us here?? With Cattle??

A We don't ask these questions of our allies. And thus we survive.

P Don't worry about it! This happened 15 years ago before you and your dad came to the -

This seems important! Why didn't I know!?

P Well its just... we don't see eye to eye on uhhh - its just. Uh...



K Commander Parum's family dysfunction aside, it seems like the trade was eventful. What happened?

Rome told them everything that happened, down to the smallest detail.

He would add snippets about his motivation, the mission, Floater Jargon.

His explanation was a bit roundabout, and Kevin seemed to think so too.



K Get to the point, Rome!

How was the mission? Why did they send two?

I bring all this up because I am going to ask you for something. So I want to have everything on the table.

He described the encounters and defeating the one who almost killed Lazlo.

He explained that it was likely that we got the second cow for saving Lazlo on that day.

This all made me so curious. My heart burns to know what is going own off of this boat. I have to learn.


I need to go out there.
A
You completed this trial.You are a Free Floater now.I suppose you *could* choose to leave, if you want to.
P
You... you would want to... Leave?
K
If this is all true, we can't, we shouldn't stop you from leaving..
Jonah, can you verify?
As unsettling as his comment had been, Jerome was right. I thought about Cristobal that night. He would have told the truth in this moment.
So I did.
Everything that Rome just said is true.
He led the mission with unexpected bravery.

The Floaters were true to their word. We asked for passage to Portland, and they arranged us to go there on *The Solar Icon*. It took roughly 3 weeks for it to come.

During this time, Cole and I made ourselve useful on board as man-power.

Cole and I had decided to do loan-labor for some months at The Grand Hope when we arrived. We'd work together until we had enough resources to part ways.

The plan was changed when Rome asked us to join.

I wasn't excited to include him, but the curiosity won out against my reservations.

I am not sure who this boy is. I don't know what he wants. But I know he knows about Cristobal. And that's enough for me to let him stay.

The Solar Icon was a show vessel. It had been built by some nation-corporation to be completely self sufficient.

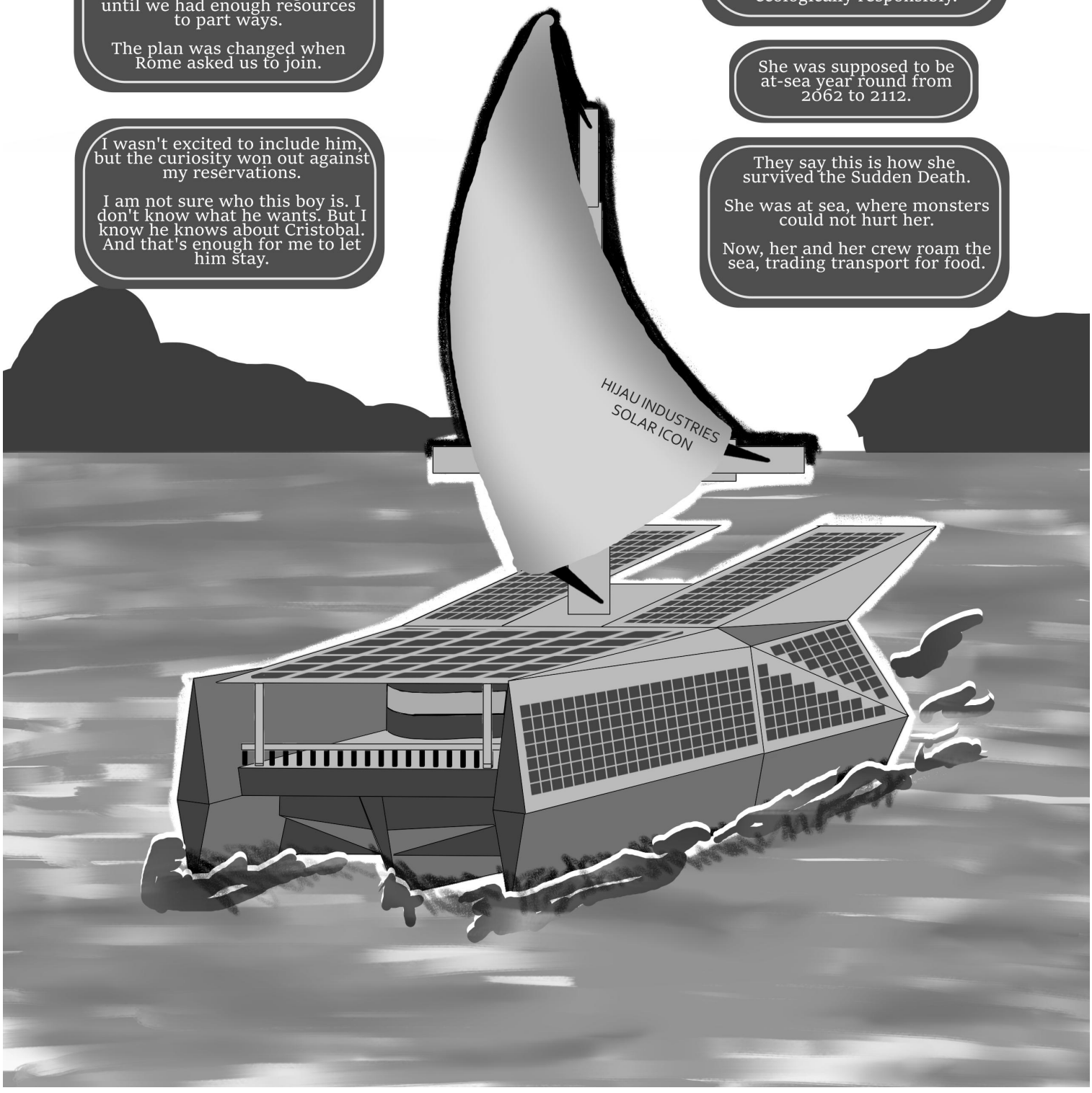
She was supposed to show a possible world without fossil fuels, where we could still travel ecologically responsibly.

She was supposed to be at-sea year round from 2062 to 2112.

They say this is how she survived the Sudden Death.

She was at sea, where monsters could not hurt her.

Now, her and her crew roam the sea, trading transport for food.



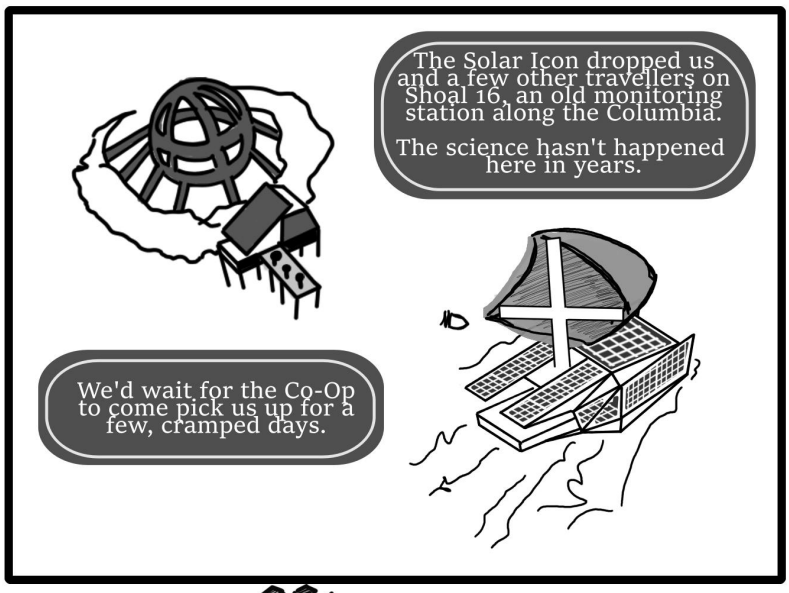
THE MUSEUM OF HOAXES

Dec 4, 2097

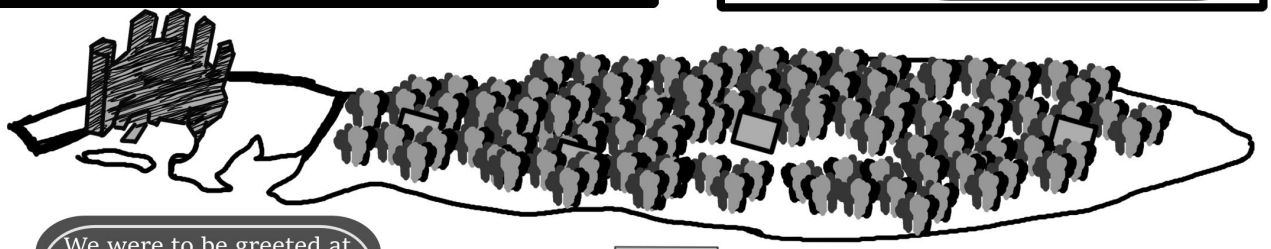
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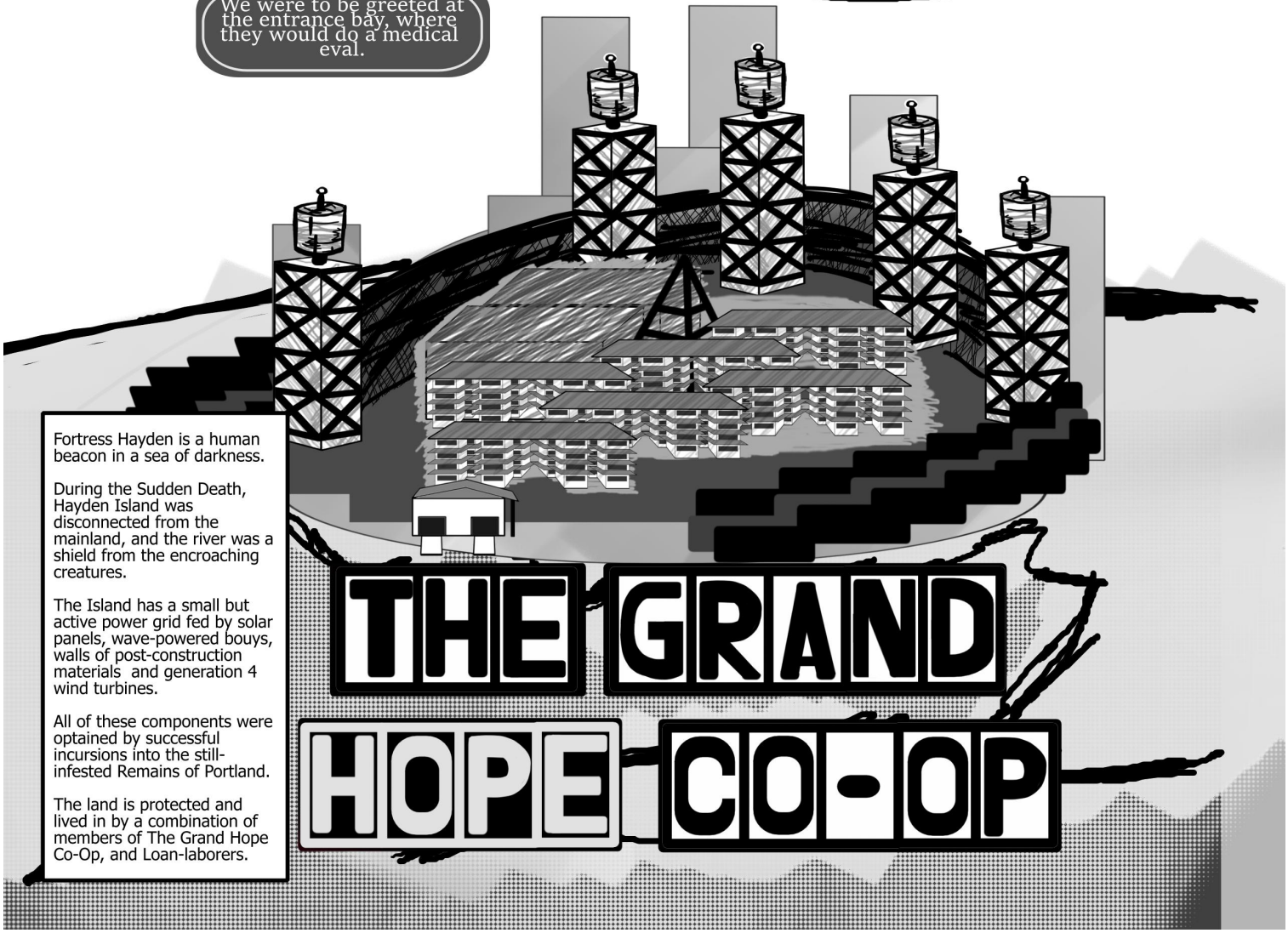
February 7, 2098











THE GRAND HOPE CO-OP

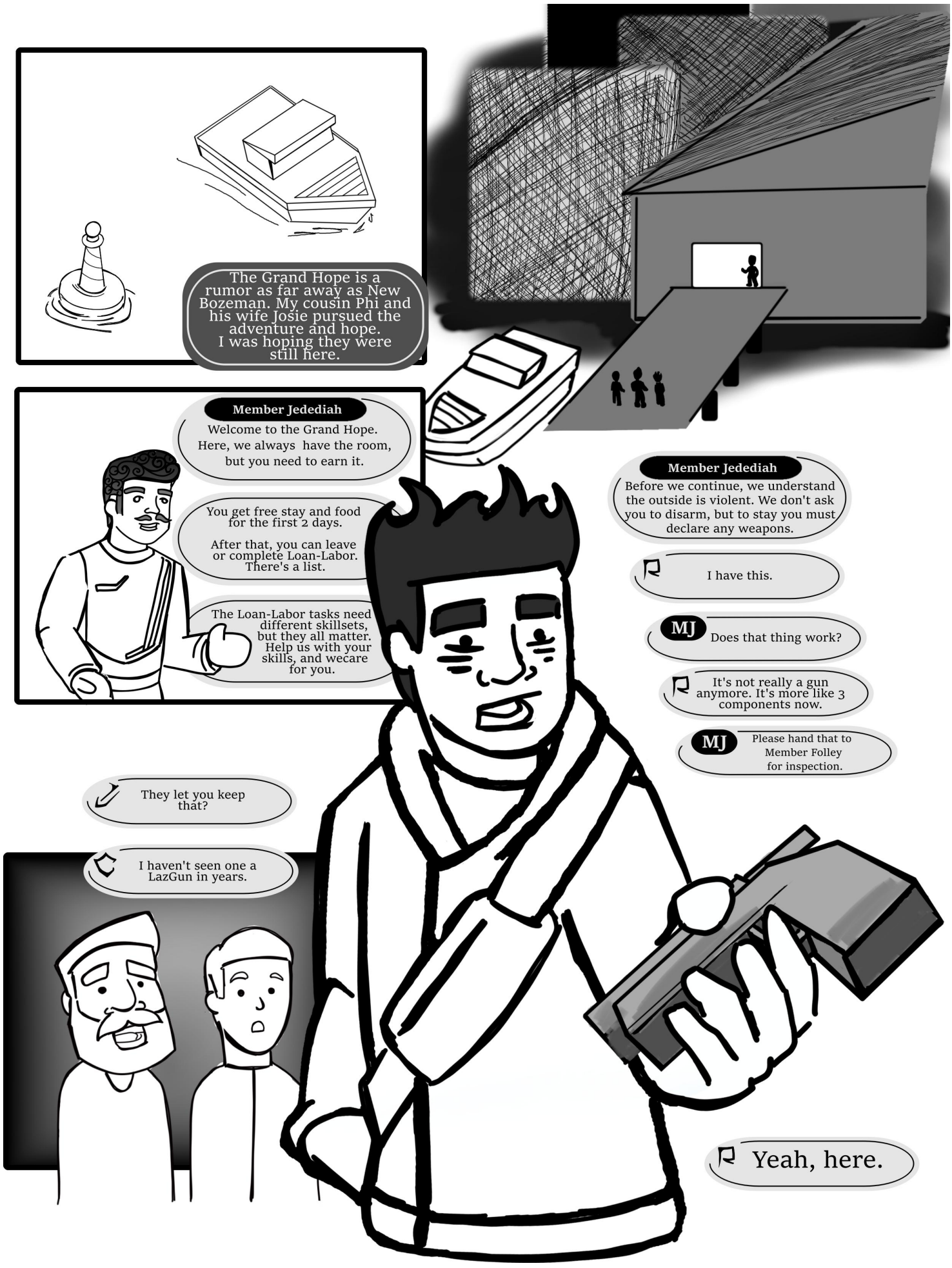
Fortress Hayden is a human beacon in a sea of darkness.

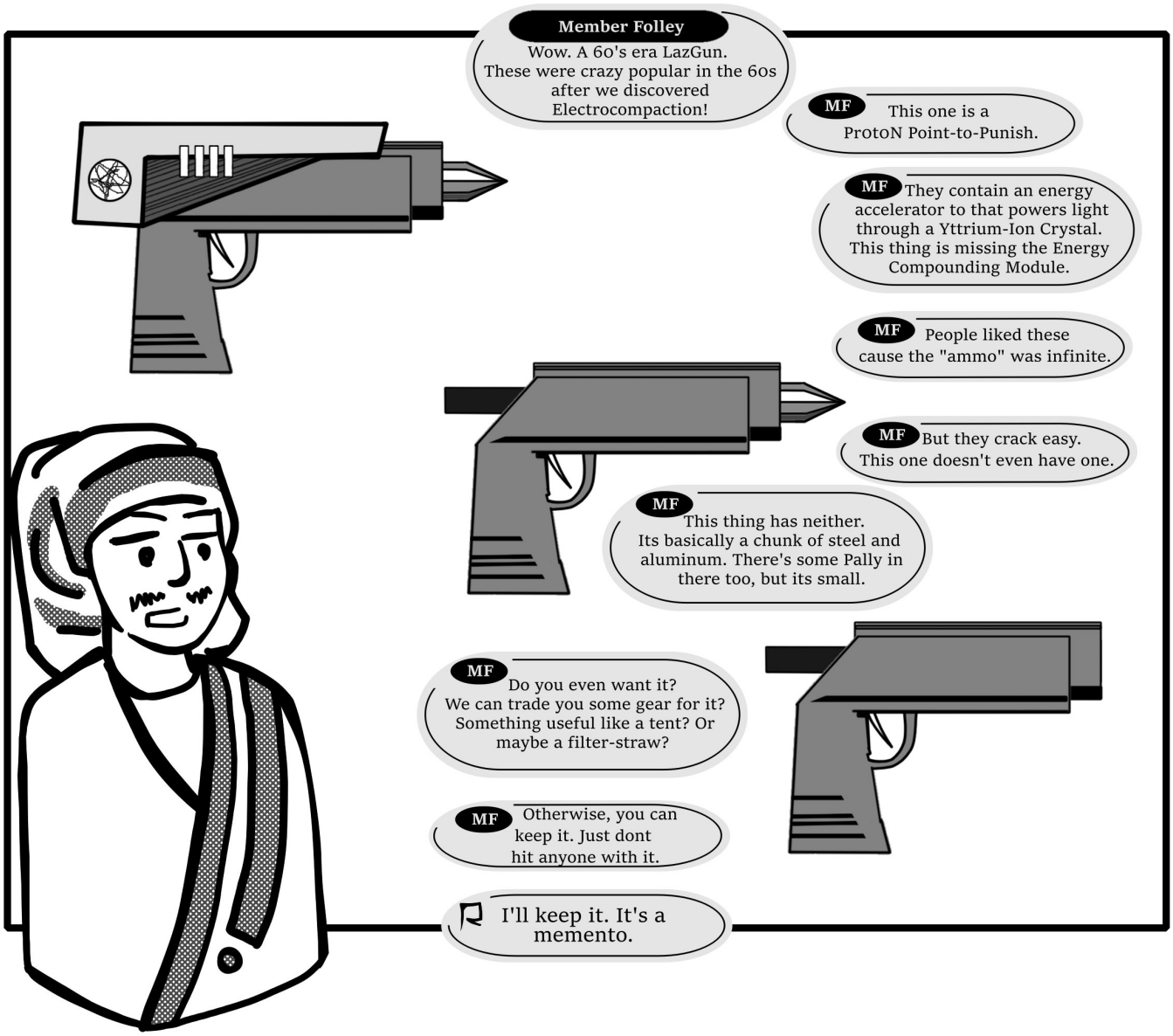
During the Sudden Death, Hayden Island was disconnected from the mainland, and the river was a shield from the encroaching creatures.

The Island has a small but active power grid fed by solar panels, wave-powered bouys, walls of post-construction materials and generation 4 wind turbines.

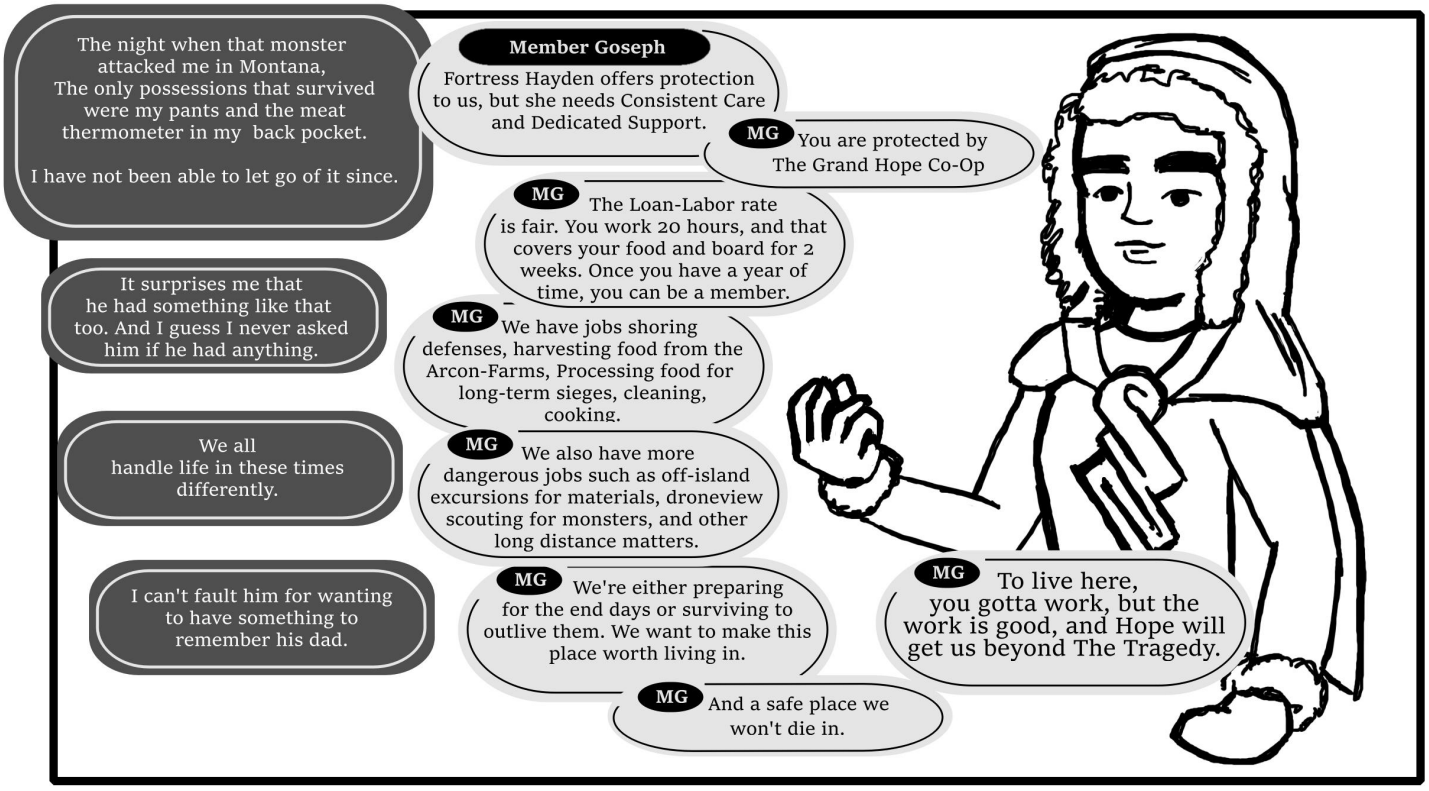
All of these components were optained by successful incursions into the still-infested Remains of Portland.

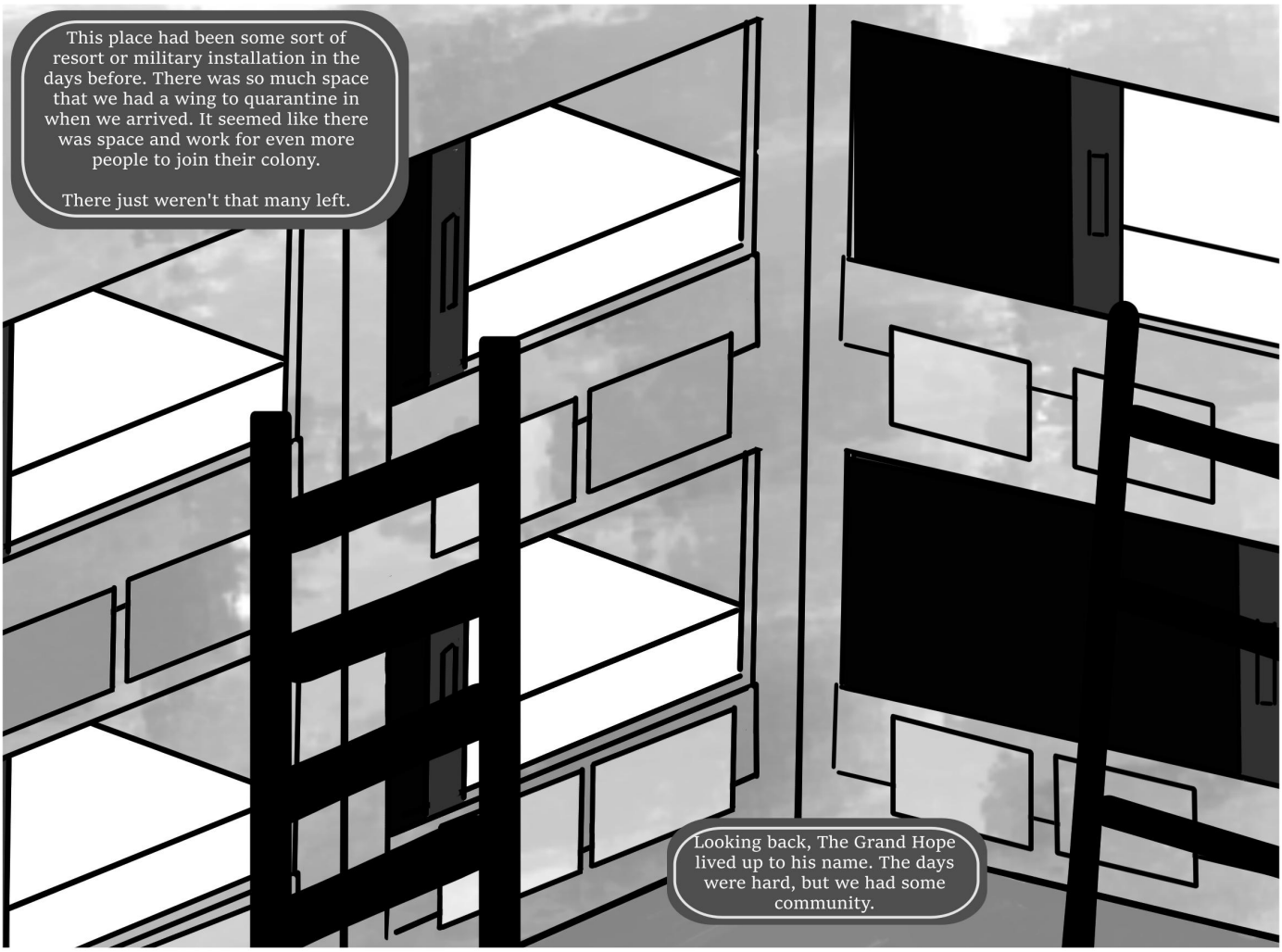
The land is protected and lived in by a combination of members of The Grand Hope Co-Op, and Loan-laborers.

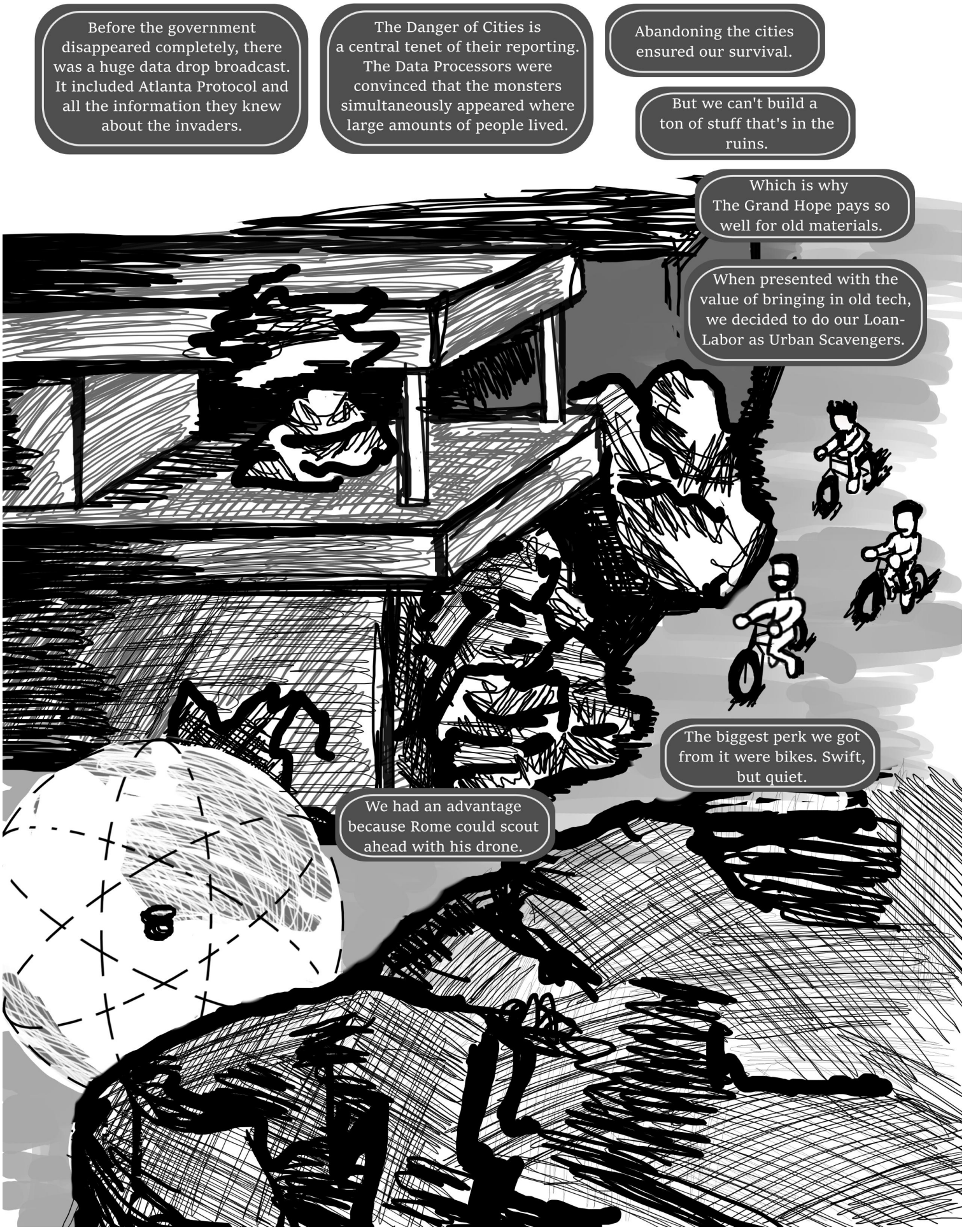

The Grand Hope is a rumor as far away as New Bozeman. My cousin Phi and his wife Josie pursued the adventure and hope.
I was hoping they were still here.
Member Jedediah
Welcome to the Grand Hope. Here, we always have the room, but you need to earn it.
You get free stay and food for the first 2 days.
After that, you can leave or complete Loan-Labor. There's a list.
The Loan-Labor tasks need different skillsets, but they all matter. Help us with your skills, and wecare for you.
Member Jedediah
Before we continue, we understand the outside is violent. We don't ask you to disarm, but to stay you must declare any weapons.
I have this.
MJ
Does that thing work?
It's not really a gun anymore. It's more like 3 components now.
MJ
Please hand that to Member Folley for inspection.
They let you keep that?
I haven't seen one a LazGun in years.
Yeah, here.


Member Folley
Wow. A 60's era LazGun. These were crazy popular in the 60s after we discovered Electrocompaction!
MF
This one is a ProtoN Point-to-Punish.
MF
They contain an energy accelerator to that powers light through a Yttrium-Ion Crystal. This thing is missing the Energy Compounding Module.
MF
People liked these cause the "ammo" was infinite.
MF
But they crack easy. This one doesn't even have one.
MF
This thing has neither. Its basically a chunk of steel and aluminum. There's some Pally in there too, but its small.
MF
Do you even want it? We can trade you some gear for it? Something useful like a tent? Or maybe a filter-straw?
MF
Otherwise, you can keep it. Just dont hit anyone with it.
I'll keep it. It's a memento.

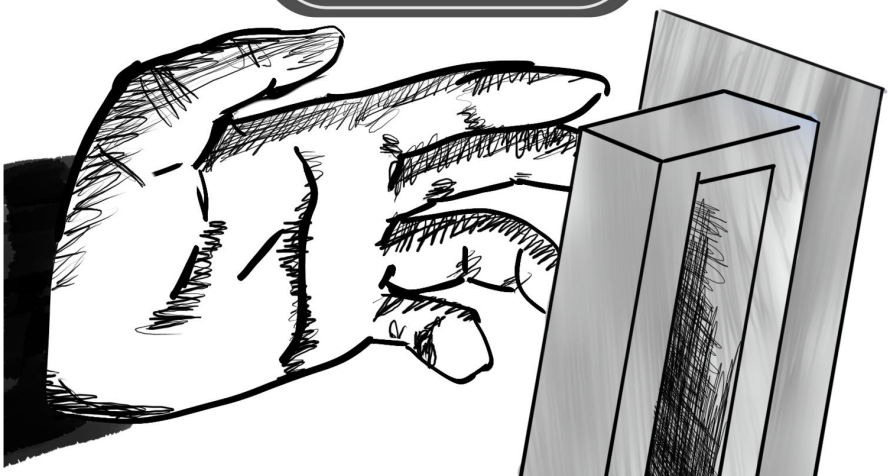

It was my dad's.
FZWORP


The night when that monster attacked me in Montana,
The only possessions that survived were my pants and the meat thermometer in my back pocket.
I have not been able to let go of it since.
Member Goseph
Fortress Hayden offers protection to us, but she needs Consistent Care and Dedicated Support.
MG
You are protected by The Grand Hope Co-Op
MG
The Loan-Labor rate is fair. You work 20 hours, and that covers your food and board for 2 weeks. Once you have a year of time, you can be a member.
It surprises me that he had something like that too. And I guess I never asked him if he had anything.
MG
We have jobs shoring defenses, harvesting food from the Arcon-Farms, Processing food for long-term sieges, cleaning, cooking.
We all handle life in these times differently.
MG
We also have more dangerous jobs such as off-island excursions for materials, droneview scouting for monsters, and other long distance matters.
I can't fault him for wanting to have something to remember his dad.
MG
We're either preparing for the end days or surviving to outlive them. We want to make this place worth living in.
MG
To live here, you gotta work, but the work is good, and Hope will get us beyond The Tragedy.
MG
And a safe place we won't die in.


This place had been some sort of resort or military installation in the days before. There was so much space that we had a wing to quarantine in when we arrived. It seemed like there was space and work for even more people to join their colony.
There just weren't that many left.
Looking back, The Grand Hope lived up to his name. The days were hard, but we had some community.

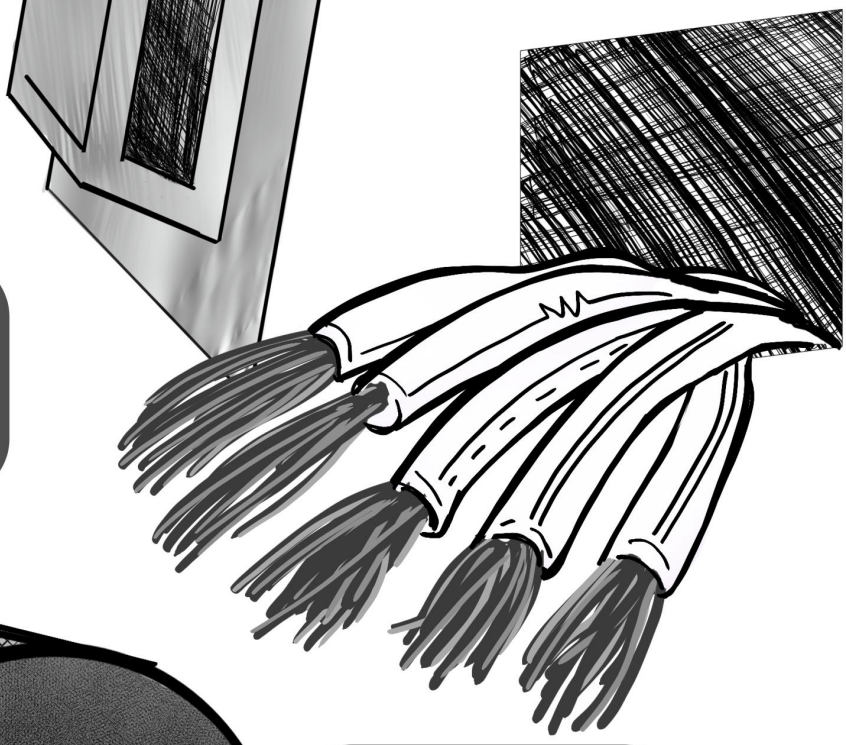

Before the government disappeared completely, there was a huge data drop broadcast. It included Atlanta Protocol and all the information they knew about the invaders.
The Danger of Cities is a central tenet of their reporting. The Data Processors were convinced that the monsters simultaneously appeared where large amounts of people lived.
Abandoning the cities ensured our survival.
But we can't build a ton of stuff that's in the ruins.
Which is why The Grand Hope pays so well for old materials.
When presented with the value of bringing in old tech, we decided to do our Loan-Labor as Urban Scavengers.
The biggest perk we got from it were bikes. Swift, but quiet.
We had an advantage because Rome could scout ahead with his drone.

Jonah was a builder in his original life. It made him really good at identifying good opportunities.

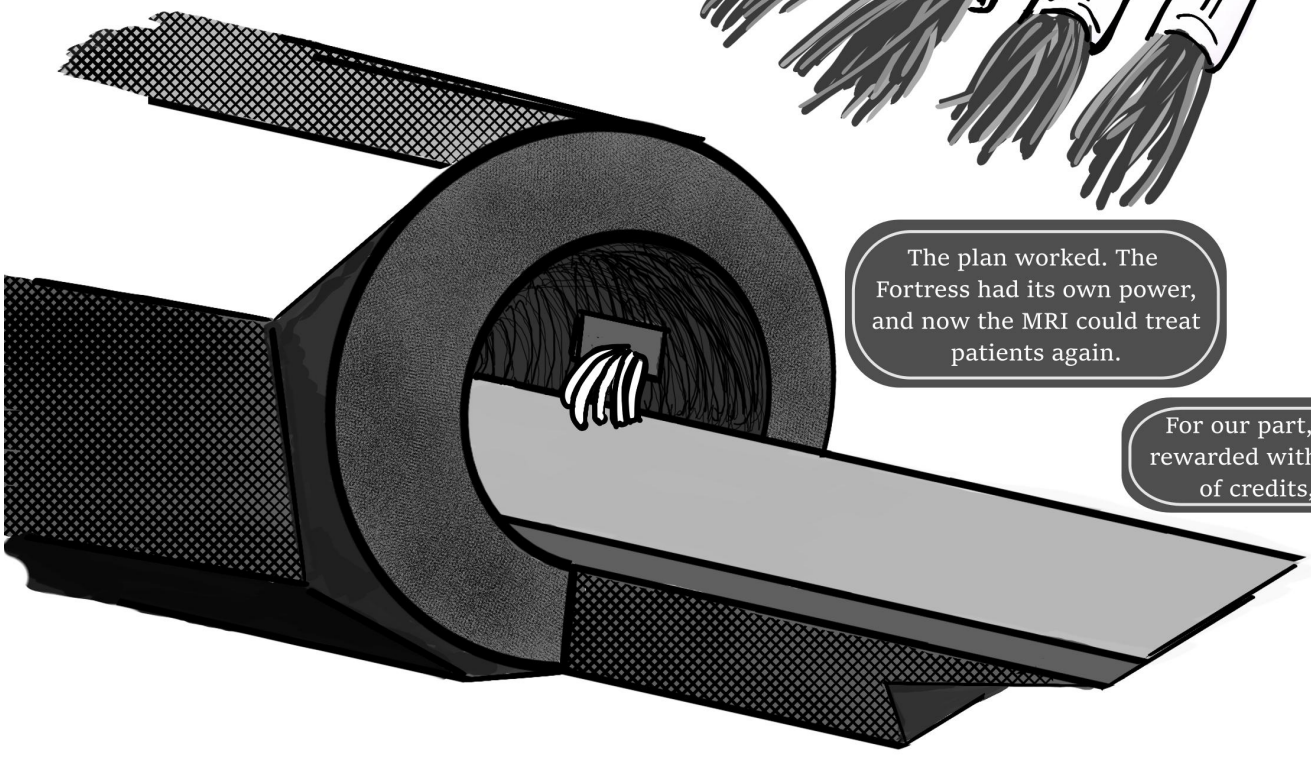


In one of our early expeditions, he found a good source of untapped copper wire.

Which was connected to a much more valuable resource: A depowered but functional MRI Machine



The Co-Op asked us to render a long list of parts from it, so we returned multiple times over several days. The intention was to restore their own machine using the parts we brought.



The plan worked. The Fortress had its own power, and now the MRI could treat patients again.

For our part, we were rewarded with 3 months of credits, ***each***.

Life was good. For a brief time, we had everything.

Being Scavengers worked for us so well, that we kept doing it. Thankfully we didn't run into anything odd.

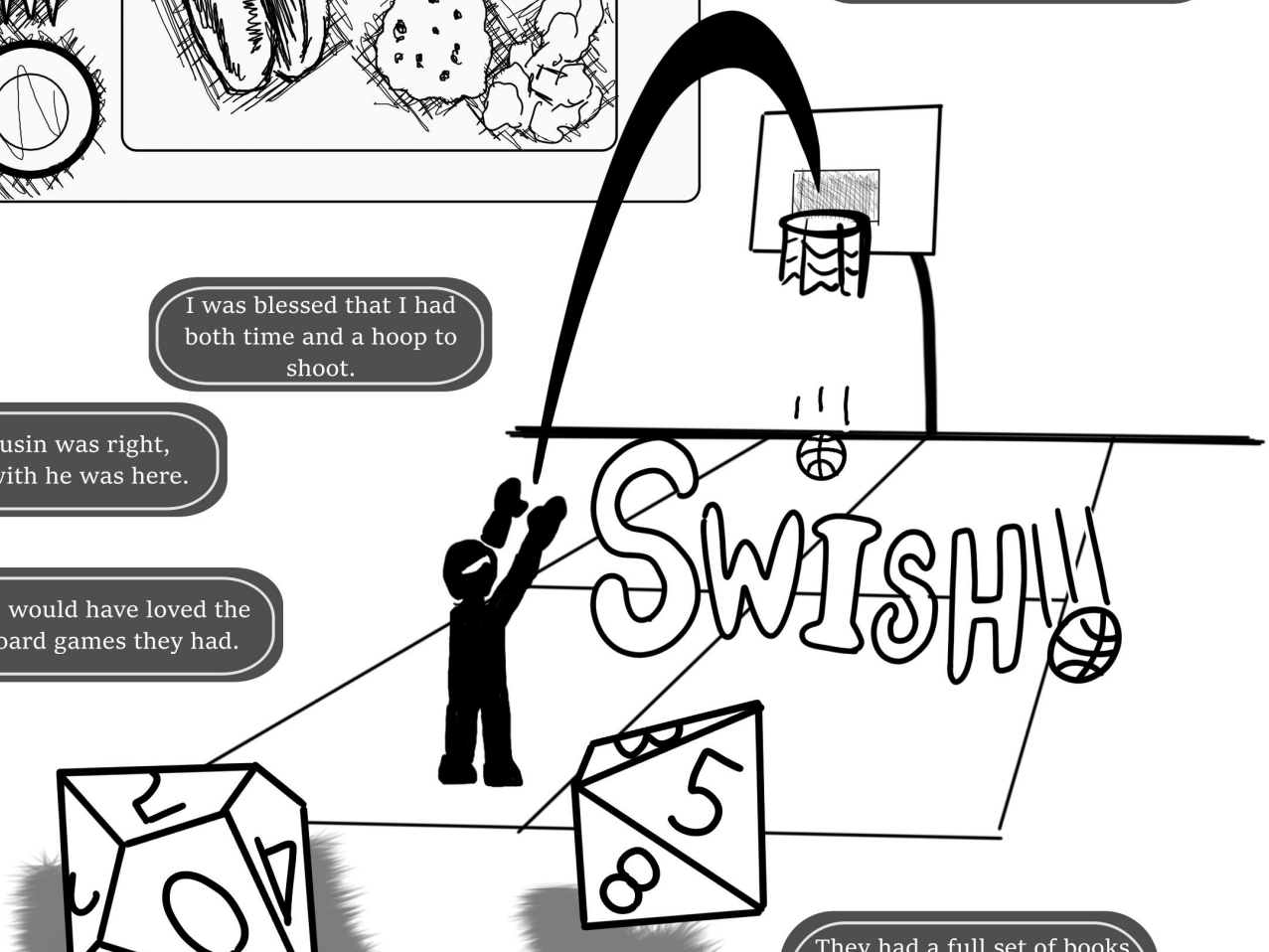
We had access to everything! Clean water, fresh onions, superbroccoli, breads, and gelli cubes from the food machine. Within the fortress, life was good!

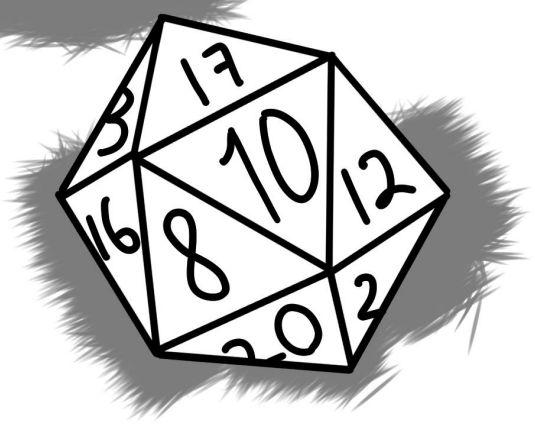


I was blessed that I had both time and a hoop to shoot.

My cousin was right, I just with he was here.

He would have loved the board games they had.



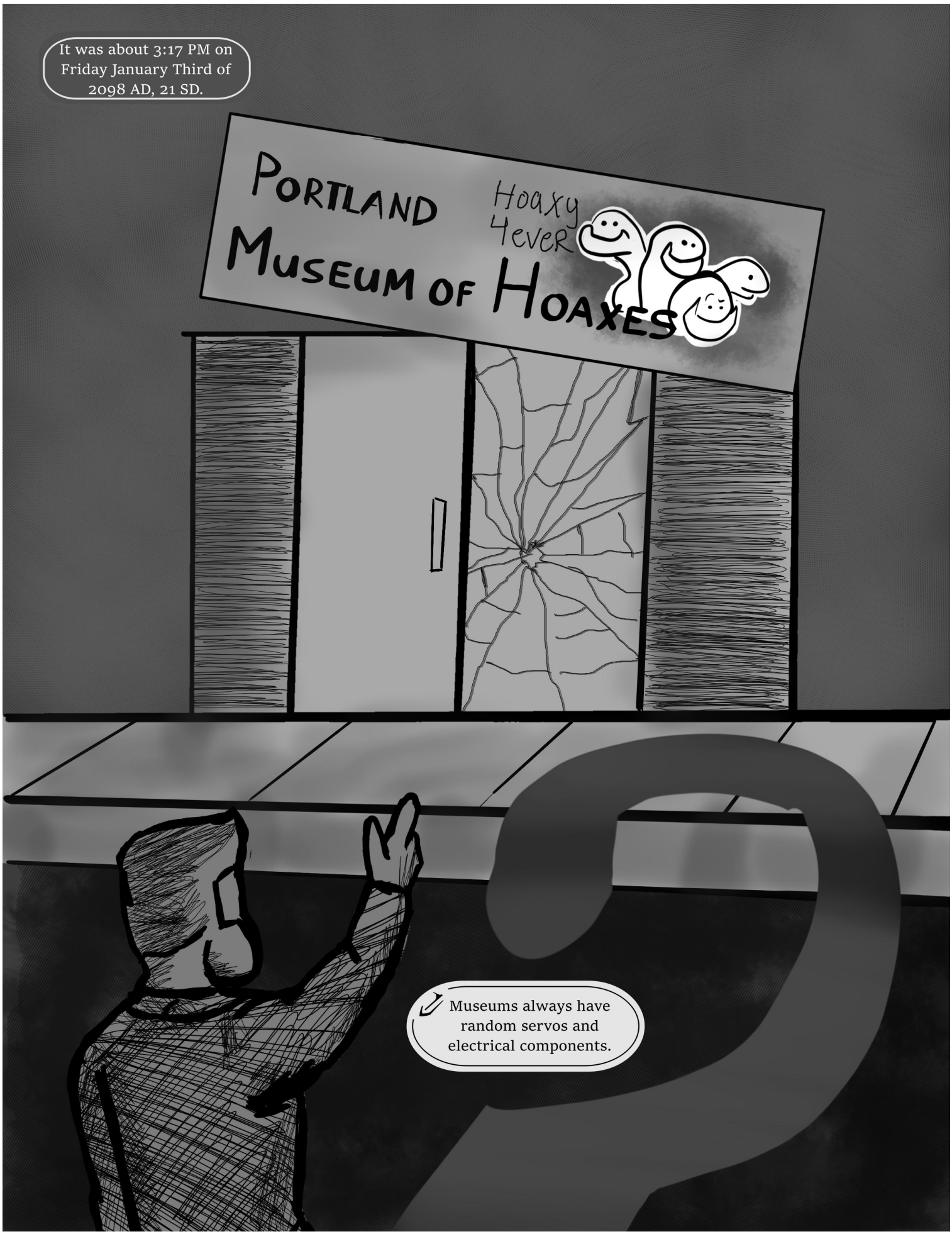


They had a full set of books for an old game called "Dungeons and Dragons: 10th Edition"

"Now featuring the Mystic!"

We got about a month of good searches and nice living.

But we found something serious on our eighth excursion.


It was about 3:17 PM on Friday January Third of 2098 AD, 21 SD.
PORTLAND MUSEUM OF HOAXES
Hoaxy 4ever
Museums always have random servos and electrical components.

This place had cool stuff! It had examples of 200 years of fakes and scams, up til the 60's.

There was a replica of The Cardiff Giant from the 1860's cool, but no electric stuff in it.

There was a statue of Bigfoot from the 1970's. His plaque made him seem benign.

All the descriptions made him seem like a creature. More like me than *them*.

There was a broken electric display with labels referring to 2010's Clean Coal Campaign.

I'll harvest that. Keep going.

There was a display for The Eller Jenz Tapes, which alleged that the president was having sex with aliens.

There was a scam in the 2030s called Olympus Mons. It was an Unregulared Supermedicine.

During this time people wanted to believe it would work. But it was mostly carcinogenic.

Finally, we found something. There was a stone tablet on top of a digital pedestal. Those always have copper.

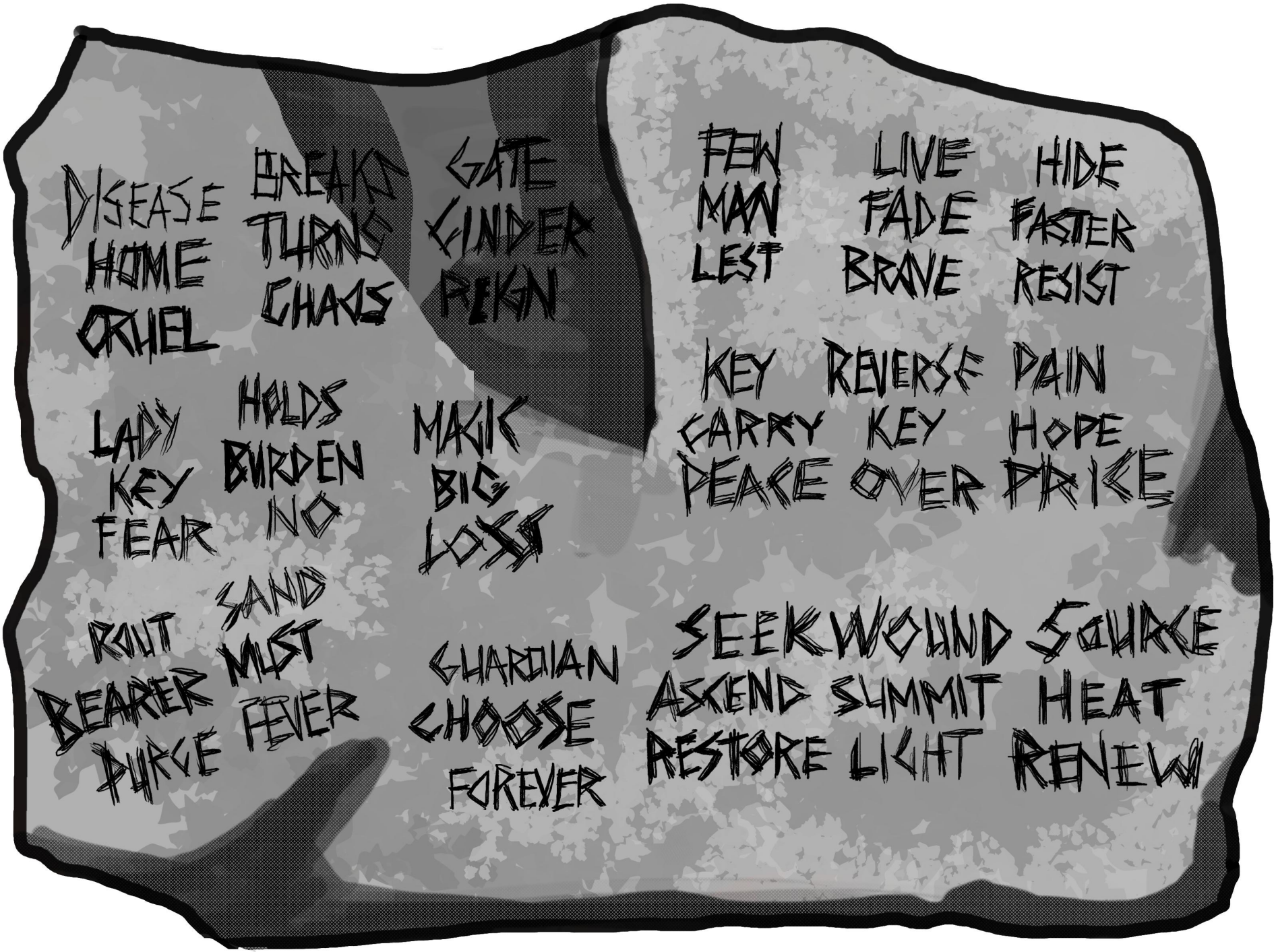
Sort of cool the scam was in Tagalog. Very Inclusive.

Can you help me remove the glass?

Yeah, I got you. Was just enjoying the read.

Gilbert McDaniels was an American Treasure-Thief from the 1800's. In 1852 during an expedition to Equador, he found his eponymous andesite tablet. It was called a hoax immediately because it had assorted English words carved on it. He always claimed the tablet to be real and ancient. He died having never recanted its authenticity.

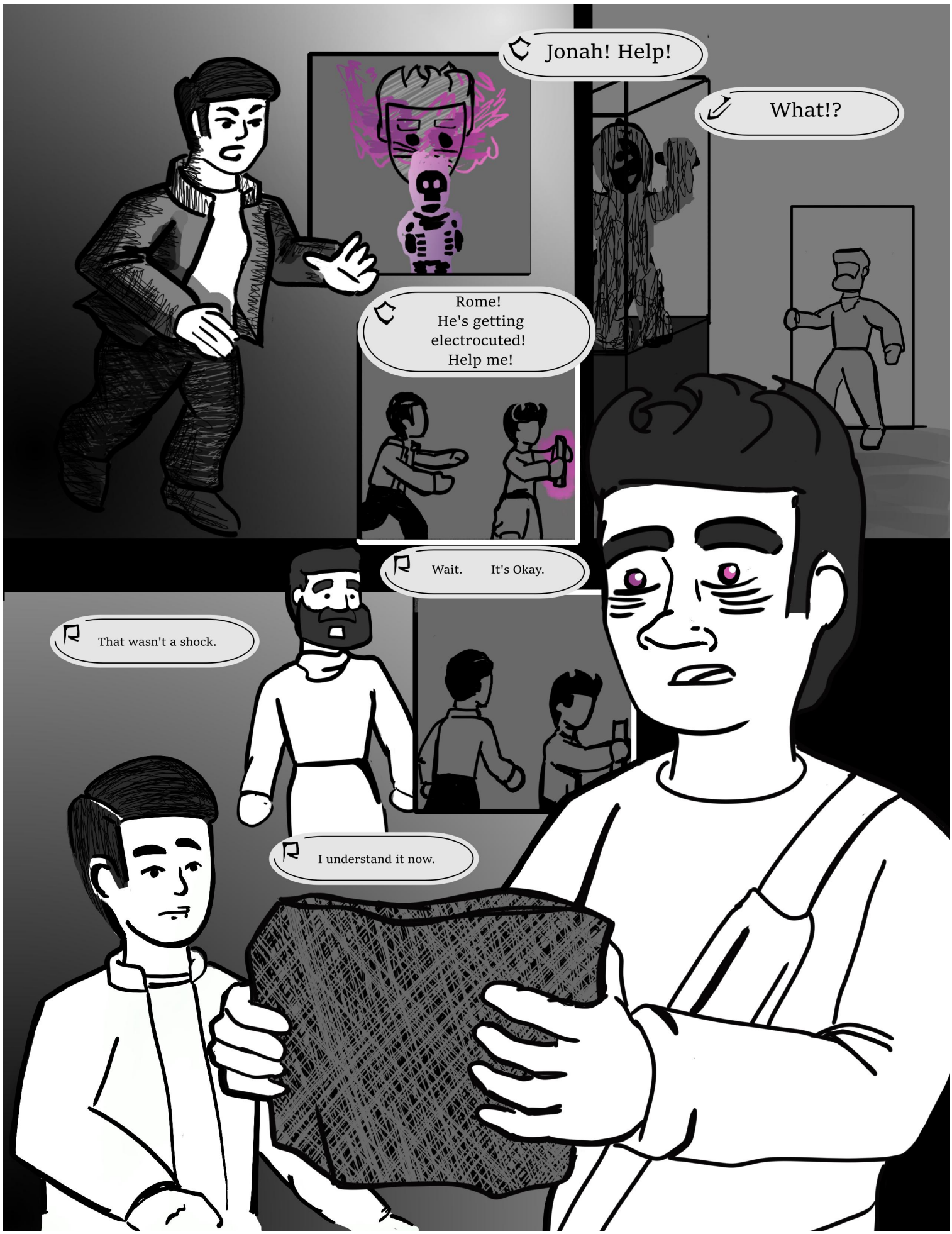
In 2032 another similar tablet was discovered in the same region, instead with words in Tagalog. This was named The Tablet of Manny, after the first.


DISEASE
HOME
CRUEL
BREAKS
TURNS
CHAOS
GATE
FINDER
REIGN
FEW
MAN
LEST
LIVE
FADE
BRAVE
HIDE
FASTER
RESIST
LADY
KEY
FEAR
HOLDS
BURDEN
NO
MAGIC
BIG
LOSS
KEY
CARRY
PEACE
REVERSE
KEY
OVER
PAIN
HOPE
PRICE
ROUT
BEARER
PURGE
SAND
MIST
FEVER
GUARDIAN
CHOOSE
FOREVER
SEEK
ASCEND
RESTORE
WOUND
SUMMIT
LIGHT
SQUARE
HEAT
RENEW


It all happened so quickly, and I saw it from start to finish.
Let me grab the
...rock.

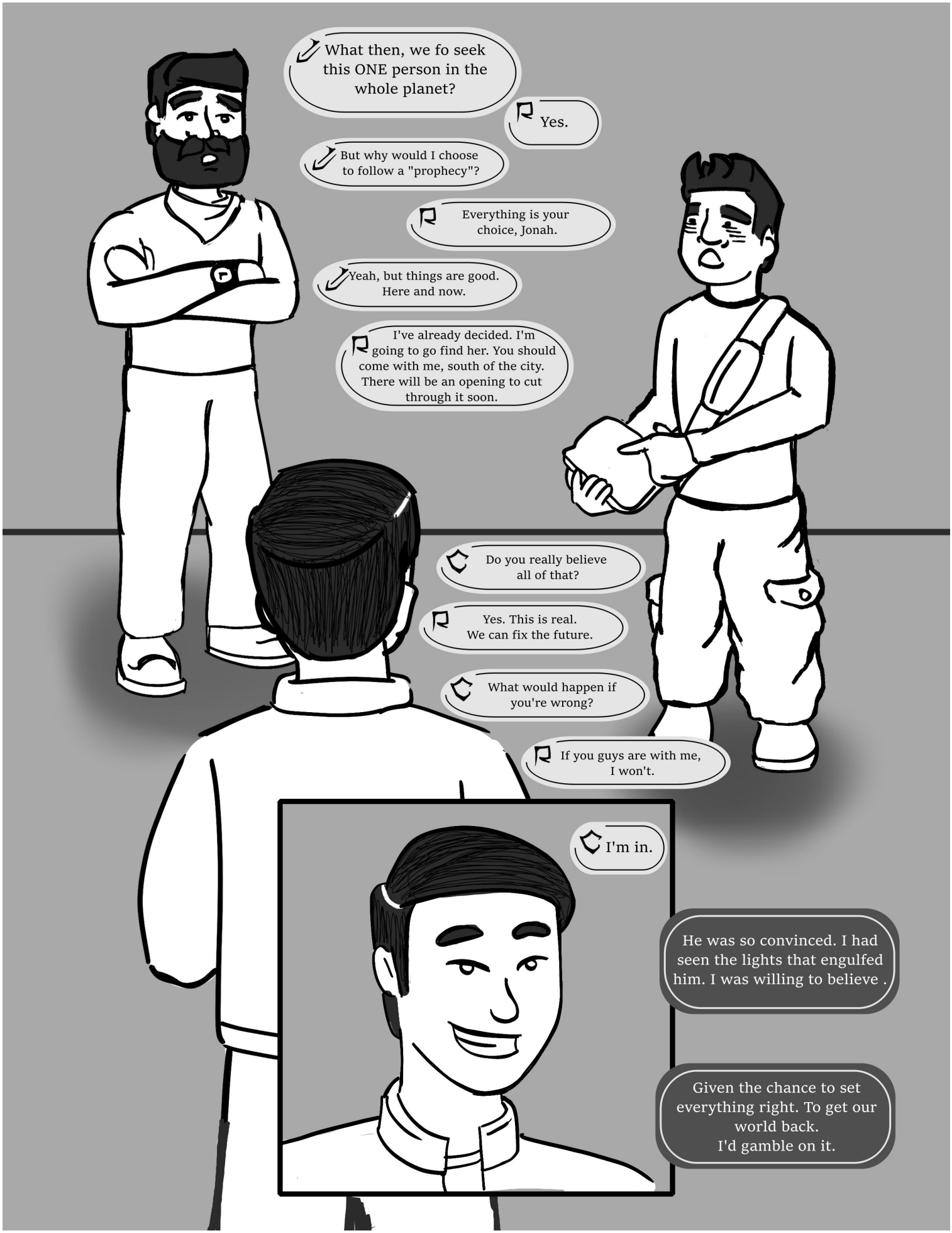
WIP




Jonah! Help!
What!?
Rome!
He's getting
electrocuted!
Help me!
Wait. It's Okay.
That wasn't a shock.
I understand it now.


Man! What!
I just saw some of the electricity coming off of you.
Yes. I know.
...
I think something is trying to talk to us. Through me.
Something has been giving me information. **It still is.**
The dreams aren't just dreams.
Wha?
I don't think this is a hoax. It's a prophecy. We were meant to read it. Look here:
DISEASE BREAKS GATE
I think That's the creatures. They came and ruined humanity and will eventually kill us all.
That's bleak.
It doesn't have to be. Look here.
LEST BRAVE RESIST
And your evidence for this is a stone tablet?
You want us to believe something is telling you the future, man?
Yes! it told me the Cog, It told me to come here.
You need to rest, I know you believe all of that, but the shock -
You guys survived in Montana that night because of magic. Cole needed to be impervious, Jonah needed to be powerful. You chose to survive and your bodies channeled magic from the winged turtle monster.
You didn't get lucky. You ***chose***.
Did you talk to him about that?
I hadn't.

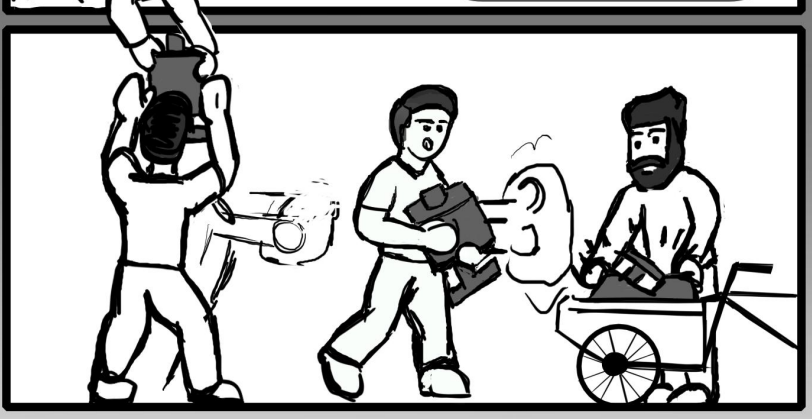

There's more.
This part here.
I think its literal.
LADY HOLDS MAGIK
We can experience magic.
But this woman, This
bearer of the key,
She can weild it.
She can send them back.
We must
find her.


What then, we fo seek this ONE person in the whole planet?
Yes.
But why would I choose to follow a "prophecy"?
Everything is your choice, Jonah.
Yeah, but things are good. Here and now.
I've already decided. I'm going to go find her. You should come with me, south of the city. There will be an opening to cut through it soon.
Do you really believe all of that?
Yes. This is real. We can fix the future.
What would happen if you're wrong?
If you guys are with me, I won't.
I'm in.
He was so convinced. I had seen the lights that engulfed him. I was willing to believe .
Given the chance to set everything right. To get our world back.
I'd gamble on it.

Jonah was skeptical, but eventually sided with us. We decided to prep as much gear as we could.

We kept up the loop a few weeks.

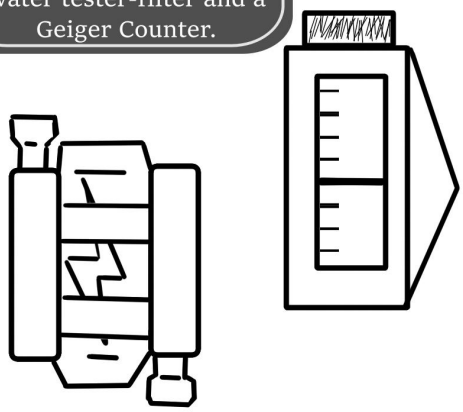
Loot tech from buildings, avoid monsters, bring it back to the Hope.

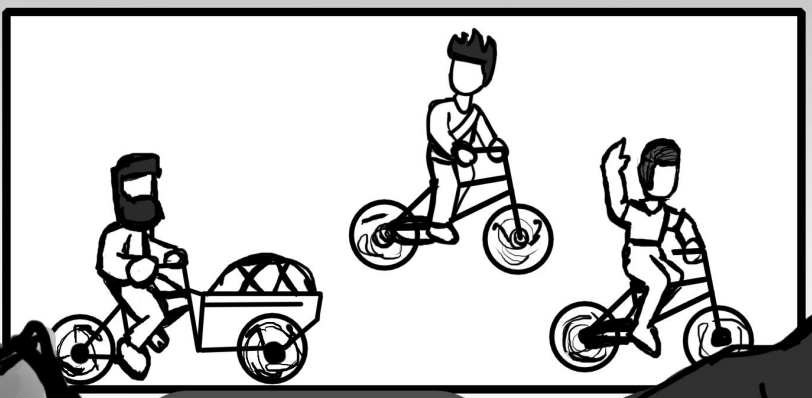


We ate good and converted our meals to credits.



Which we used to buy a water tester-filter and a Geiger Counter.





The day came for us to leave, and I knew I made the right choice when I looked back.

The Hope was but a light in a sea of Darkness, that could engulf it any day.

I fear the Members are right - One day the Fortress will fall. Theres too much out there.

Unless we act.
Grandma always said to do what you can to help others.



What is this tablet about?
What are the monsters?
How will they find this woman?

All that and more will be answered when the full version of Bearer of the Key is released!

In 2024, I made the decision to write a comic book that I feel only I can make, and started ideating.

Bearer of the Key is the resulting idea, mixing within it my love for science and my beliefs in hope, duty, and justice.

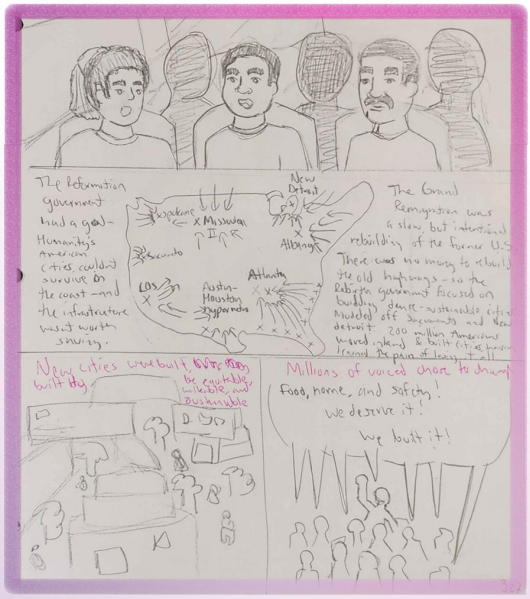
I have been working on this during all my free time since, and finished my first draft in March 2025. This arc is the work I have done since, and I will continue working til I have translated all 487 draft pages.

I am working now on the rest of the book, aiming for 2028 release. If you would like to support my work, join my mailing list!

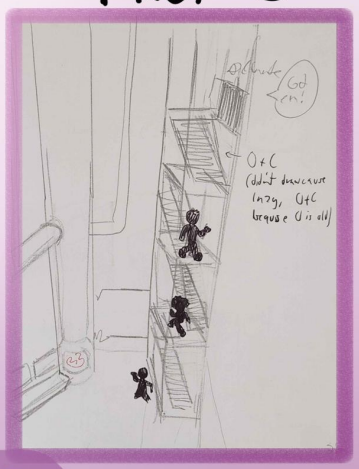
One day, I will finish this book. Until then, hope all goes well for you, Far Traveler.

--- PROF G



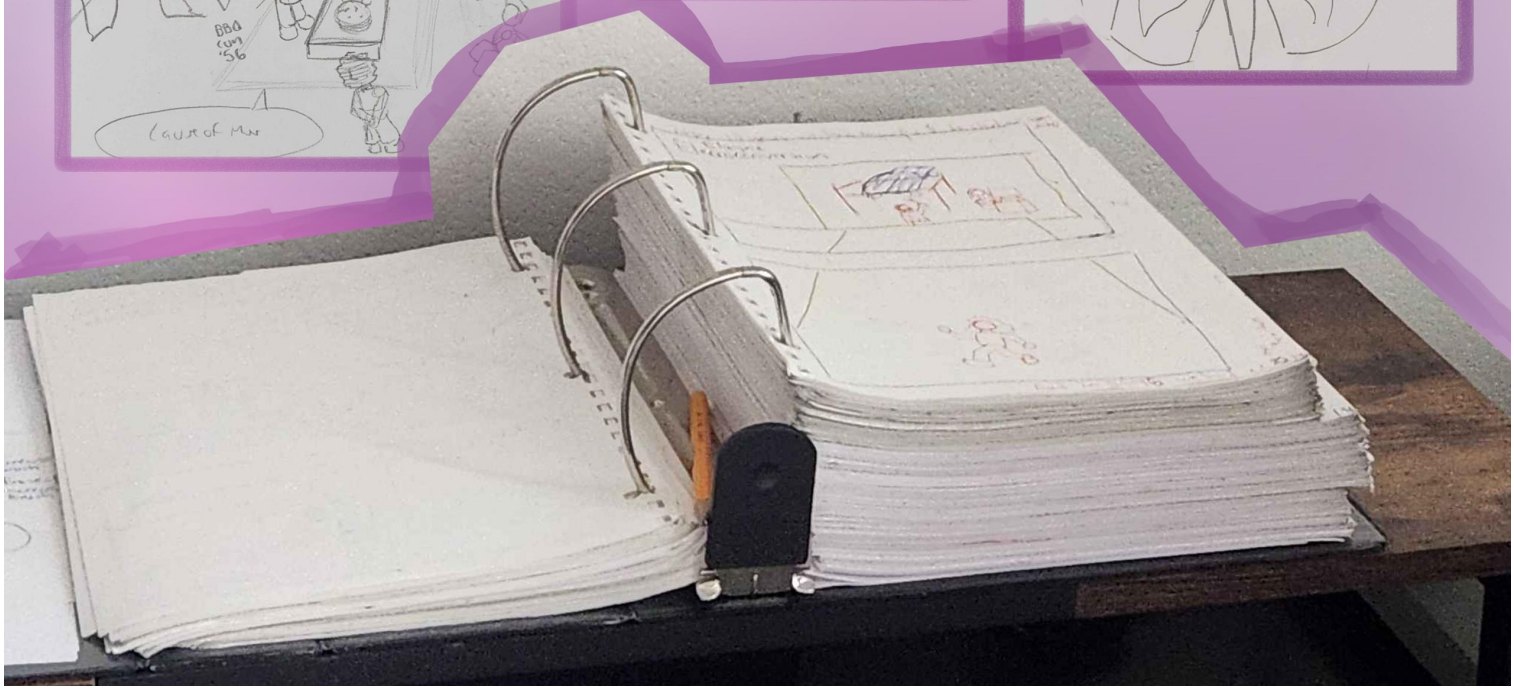












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