



Warning: This a novel of gnostic horror and dark urban fantasy. It contains graphic and explicit content of a sexual and violent nature, and as such shouldn't be read by: the under-aged, the faint hearted, post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers, mental illness sufferers, the morally conservative, and the religiously devout. If you are not included in the previously mentioned groups and choose to read on, it is important to remember that this is solely a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real incidents, organizations, faiths, or persons is purely coincidental.

Keys To The Kingdom





To Ryan and all those we've lost...





UNOFFICIAL
FAN-MADE
CONTENT

Compiled From Actual Play





Credits

Author

[Andrew Crag](#)

Dramatis Personae

Lucas Reynolds - Mechanoreceptor

Jorrit van Geesbaeck - Auburney

Sofia Alvez - Matehe & Tiffany Korta

Parvati Shankar - Blackfyre

Ricardo Carballal - tenro

Art

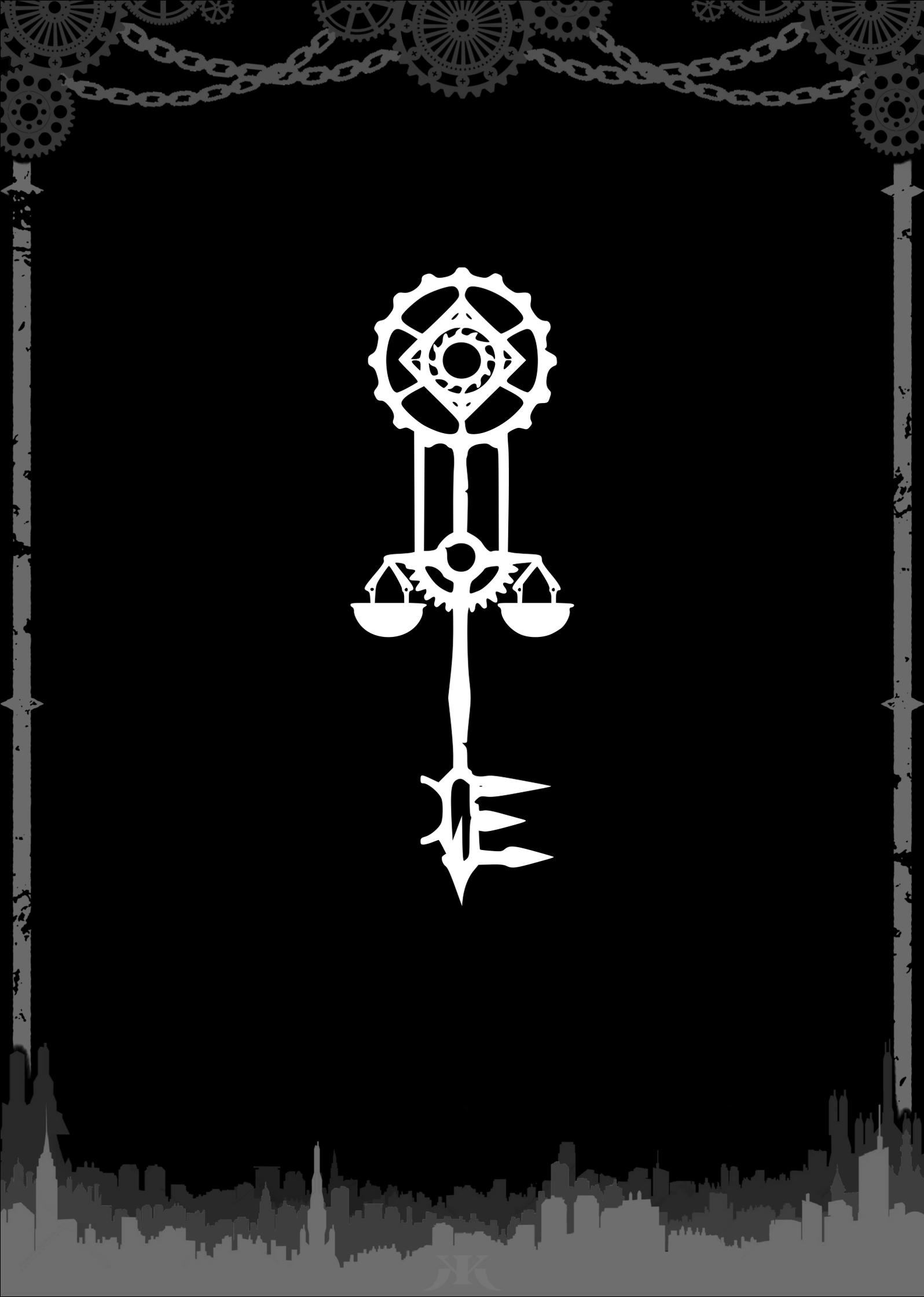
[darksouls1](#), [Gabe](#) - Cover, Retouch

Petter Nallo - Key Symbols

Poems

Aleister Crowley







Kabbalah



I'm staring at the corpse of a naked woman, her guts spread out from her open stomach. My companions and I are dressed in blood smeared catholic frocks, and I feel a distinct copper taste in my mouth. The hand touching my face in disbelief is sticky with gore, and I understand the taste when I see the Chicano puking his last meal. It is raw meat, raw meat from the fresh, steaming body laid out before us on an occult symbol, surrounded by candles. A crack in the nearby asphalt oozes a maroon light and echoes with hair-raising screams I never thought possible.

I look around the chamber, this asphalt basement lit up by candles on the metal furniture and stone stairs. There's a crack in the asphalt, with some horrifying screams coming out of it. The muscular black man jumps when we hear the knocks upstairs, someone yelling and announcing themselves as police. While he moves up to poke his head into the room above, the mulatto girl with bangs sits on the stairs. She grabs her head in her hands and sways back and forth in shock, while muttering mostly to herself.

"Is it happening again? Are we in the cult of Malkuth?"

The Chicano is done vomiting. He wipes his mouth with his sleeve, while checking the unconscious tweed dressed woman. I don't remember her fainting, but I can see she has a cut on her head the Chicano is pressing against with a napkin. A distinct familiar feeling hits me when I see the strapping man returning from above, his fists closed and arms flexed. Somehow I know he's a soldier, comfortably talking to us despite the surrounding lunacy.

"We're in some sort of synagogue."

"That makes sense. The symbol beneath the corpse, that's the Sefirot..."

"What the hell is a Sefirot?"

And we see her.





She is seated in an upper corner of the room, defying gravity, her skin flayed off her body, blood forming in a puddle underneath. We all stop and stare at this predatory figure, frozen in place, like children lost in the jungle before a tiger. I naively wonder if we performed a ritual to summon her to us and now she is waiting for some sort of command. With the police pounding on the door above our heads, I'm not the only one who does, but the soldier is the one to act first.

"Get us out of here!"

We hear the yelling departing while the basement asphalt melts away, the slab hosting the corpse morphing into a metal rack. It is the interior of a dark medieval dungeon, the walls lined up with various utensils, all sharp, all glistening. The room is lit by a forge of some sort, with the flayed woman pulling out a red hot metal poker from it. I try to move, but like the others, I'm tied down to one of the racks.

"I'm bored. If you're not going to tell me about your sins, we might as well be doing this."

She shoves the poker into my knee, then paces back and forth while still holding the other end in her hand. The pain is excruciating, I scream and gnash my teeth, one of which cracks. After doing the same thing to the Chicano, he speaks up.

"The woman... I woke up eating... who was she?"

She removes the poker from his knee, and stabs it into his liver. I can hear a rib snap from the heat.

"Your first victim in your quest for knowledge! Tell me, little sweet, was she a random nobody you stalked in the night? Or someone you knew and loved?"

Coughing blood, he responds, "This can't be real! I'd be dead!"



The flayed demoness approaches and fondles the Chicano's private parts while lifting the poker into his chest, forcing him into a wheeze.

"Oh, now, honey, don't worry! Of course you're dead! You've been a bad, bad man who made pacts with creatures from the dark! Were you expecting to go to Disneyland afterwards?"

The iron maiden in the corner of the forge-lit dungeon room shakes violently.

"And there's one of your best friends!"

Our torturer produces a threaded metal whip, and snaps it around one of the handles. The maiden opens up with a mess of blood and meat pouring out, what was once a beautiful Indian woman. One of her eyes is stuck inside the rusted spikes, the nerve still attached to the body. The victim falls forward, slamming into the ground, her crushed bones unable to sustain her. The fiend grabs her by the hair, and pulls her towards the Chicano, lifting her head up.

"Say hello!"

This painful grasp makes the maiden victim wince in pain as she locks a familiar-looking gaze on me. I know her name is Parvati, and the skinless beast seats on her body, resting for a moment.

"I'm glad you remember each other. All this torture sometimes makes people forget their own names. Now, where were we... Ah, yes... Ricardo was still looking for his perfect victim, to try out his newly found ritual. He made himself available to various assassins' organizations, hoping for his chance, which is how you met him, I think.





And Parvati, before you succumbed to restful sleep in the maiden you were telling me about your contract in Amsterdam. Something from a London crime ring, a hit against a prosecutor... He was investigating their money laundering bank, and they didn't like it. A most private person, but Ricardo heard about a supposed public appearance, at, where was it? Fundraiser? A party?"

Turned into furniture, Parvati grunts in pain when the Flayed thing lounges on her. I can hear her broken and crushed bones move around inside. She tries to block it out and answer in a voice hoarse from all the screaming, but her memories, like mine, must be hazy at best.

"...The opera, I think...."

"The opera, huh? Let's see what was playing that night."

Our surroundings change until the channels of Amsterdam are visible. Dressed in their finest clothes, the Chicano and the Indian woman walk past the canals. Parvati keeps pace with Ricardo, wearing a floor-length white dress with green accents, pearl studs, a garnet teardrop necklace and red heels. She has a purse in one hand and her hair done up into a braid.

Ricardo, now cleaned up, is a bookish man in his thirties, disheveled with a simultaneously tense and tired face, depression and anxiety warring over his expression. He moves stiffly though the layers of clothing and large overcoat that soften his awkward movements somewhat. The antiquarian takes off his hat to reveal brown hair and hazel eyes complementing his muddy, sweating skin. Her eyes set upon a round, well lit glass temple sustained by alabaster columns. The Dutch National Opera & Ballet has a hanging poster announcing the night's entertainment: Carl Orff's Carmina Burana.





They enter the foyer bustling with people and waiters serving champagne, ushers check tickets on top of wide, marble stairs, leading into the amphitheater and balconies.

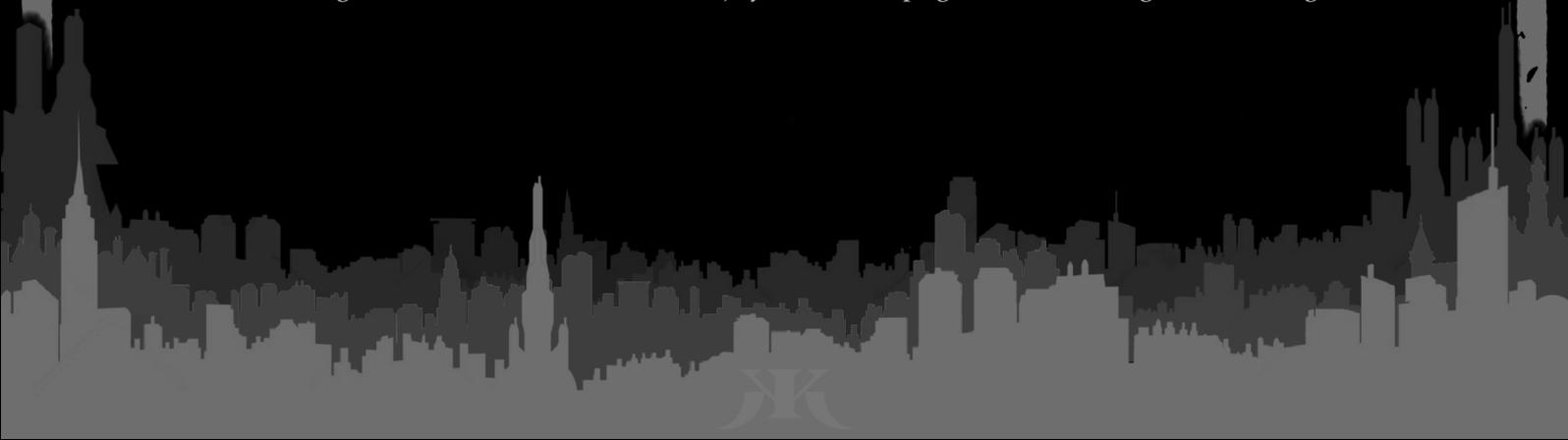
She looks at her companion and heads over to the interior, taking the tickets out of her purse on the way there. Once inside, she hands the tickets to the usher and waits for him to finish his routine, refraining from taking any champagne. The usher, a blond young boy dressed in a pompous red uniform, checks their tickets carefully. He directs them towards the second floor, a private opera box.

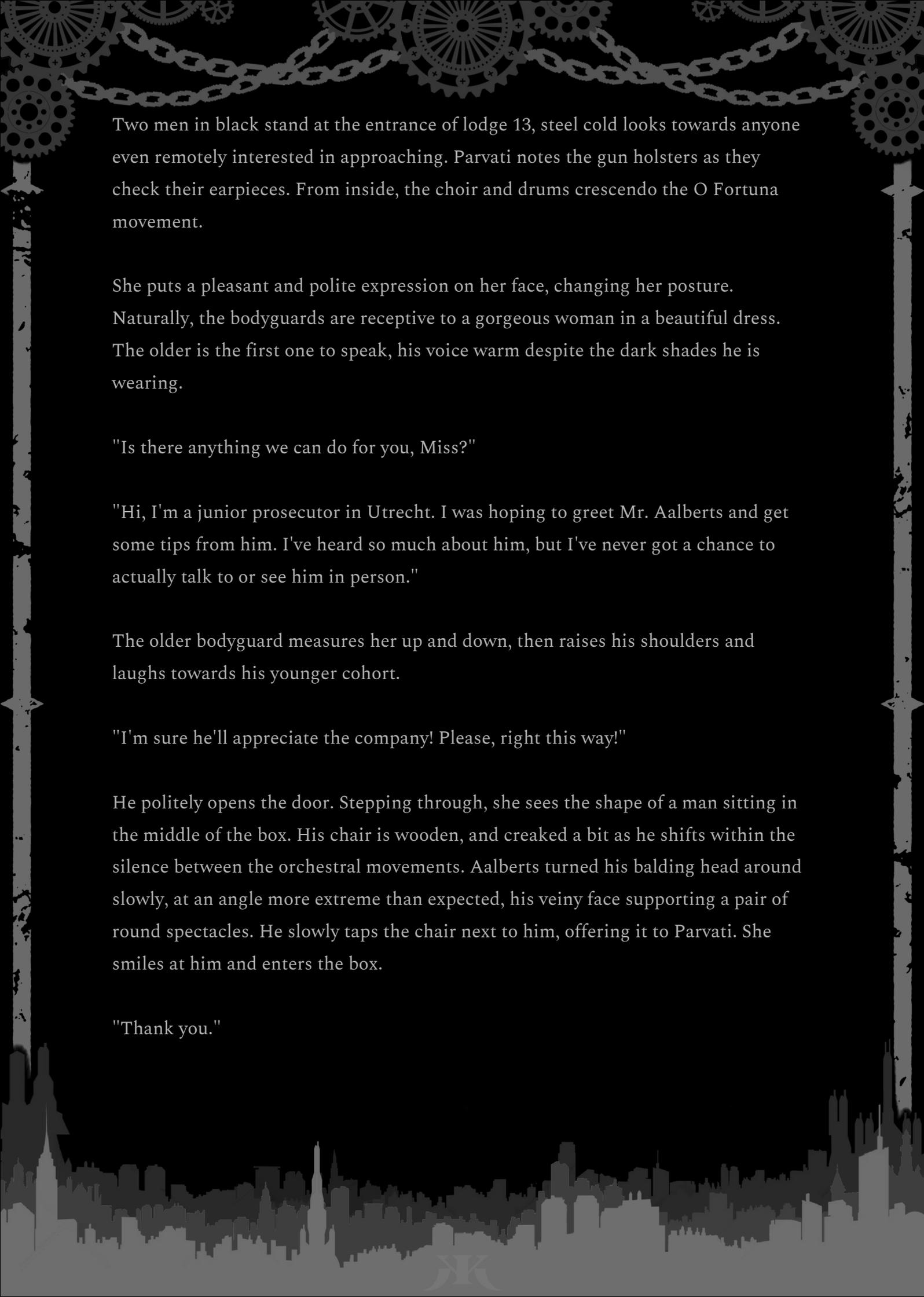
With the corner of her eye Parvati notices her target, Jael Aalberts. His obese body is visible even in between his numerous body guards, a collection of slack jawed men in black. A number of other people are lining up to shake his hand and talk to him.

Parvati studies Aalberts and the departure of his sycophant flock, hoping to catch a glimpse of where he is headed. Tracking them with her gaze as long as she can, a distraction arrives in the form of policemen entering the premises, talking to people while holding a picture. Parvati decides it is time to move and heads toward her reserved box, making sure to move at a normal pace to avoid suspicion.

Beyond the balcony the orchestra is tuning their instruments, while the guests in the auditorium downstairs are taking their seats. The entire box has been exclusively reserved and there is a bottle of champagne on ice. By the time the lights fade and the curtain opens, Aalberts is nowhere in sight, but she does see his bodyguards walking down the main corridor between the seats. The policemen are also inside now, checking from lodge to lodge.

After the curtain opens and the performance starts, she whispers to Ricardo that she'll be right back and tells him to enjoy the champagne. Then she goes hunting.





Two men in black stand at the entrance of lodge 13, steel cold looks towards anyone even remotely interested in approaching. Parvati notes the gun holsters as they check their earpieces. From inside, the choir and drums crescendo the O Fortuna movement.

She puts a pleasant and polite expression on her face, changing her posture. Naturally, the bodyguards are receptive to a gorgeous woman in a beautiful dress. The older is the first one to speak, his voice warm despite the dark shades he is wearing.

"Is there anything we can do for you, Miss?"

"Hi, I'm a junior prosecutor in Utrecht. I was hoping to greet Mr. Aalberts and get some tips from him. I've heard so much about him, but I've never got a chance to actually talk to or see him in person."

The older bodyguard measures her up and down, then raises his shoulders and laughs towards his younger cohort.

"I'm sure he'll appreciate the company! Please, right this way!"

He politely opens the door. Stepping through, she sees the shape of a man sitting in the middle of the box. His chair is wooden, and creaked a bit as he shifts within the silence between the orchestral movements. Aalberts turned his balding head around slowly, at an angle more extreme than expected, his veiny face supporting a pair of round spectacles. He slowly taps the chair next to him, offering it to Parvati. She smiles at him and enters the box.

"Thank you."



She makes her way over and takes the seat next to him, keeping her expression polite, though she injects a little awe into her whispering voice.

"Mr Aalberts, it's such an honor to meet you! I've heard so many good things!"

Aalberts speaks with a low raspy voice, monotonic, eyes unblinking.

"As delighted as I am by your presence, I'm afraid it will do no good to those who sent you. Please return to the Deckard de Brun Group and tell them I'm not susceptible to lust. I am still going to prosecute them to the full extent of the law. We can't have a Dutch Multinational money laundering for criminals around the world."

Parvati keeps his gaze on him, her smile remaining in place as she maneuvers a little closer, opening the purse before placing one hand on his thigh, gripping it. The other reaches into the purse and takes out a knife, after which the hand grasping his thigh quickly moves up to his mouth to close it as she leaned in to whisper to Aalberts.

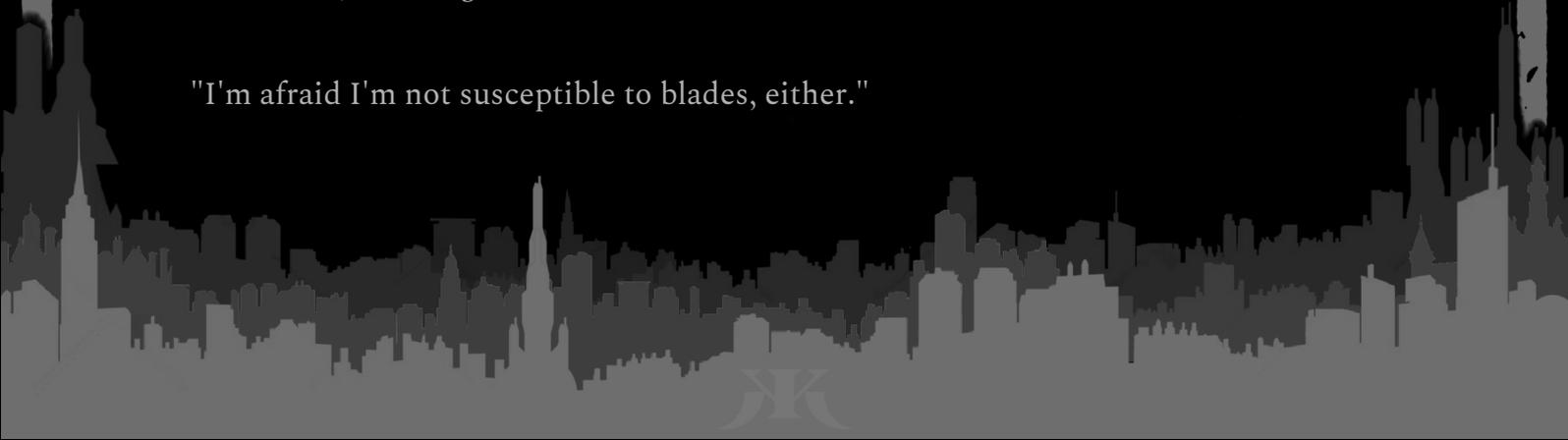
"My clients send their regards."

This said, she jabs the knife through the lapel of his suit toward his heart. Aalberts shakes for a bit, then stops moving.

Only to reopen his eyes a second later.

Something from his mouth strikes at her, something quick and slimy. Whatever it is, Parvati narrowly ducks, only her wrist grazed. The blow sends her knife flying downwards in the auditorium. The prosecutor rises from his chair and moves slowly backwards, blocking the exit.

"I'm afraid I'm not susceptible to blades, either."





Parvati glimpses around and decides to take her chances rappelling down the nearest curtain. It isn't as stable as she thought, breaking away might flight, landing her in the middle of the spectators seated below. Her fall is cushioned, but the people are outraged and grabbing on to her. A policeman in the distance sees the commotion. Parvati keeps calm, shoving at the people holding her in place to get out of their grasp while attempting to head to the other side of the row.

A few bumps and bruises later, Parvati has crowd surfed her way to the exit. On foot she's slower than she should be, her ankle sprained somewhere between the fall and the mob. A few police are closing in with the orchestra playing in the background. She determinedly heads in the direction of the stairs, ignoring her twinging ankle.

Parvati makes her way past the confused blond usher into the foyer, noticing a few policemen sipping coffees in a corner. They hear the news through the radio, unholstering their guns and turning towards her.

She looks at the cops out of the corner of her eye, and keeps moving, playing it cool. After a moment, she pauses and grabs her sprained, the pain too much.

The cops freeze as Parvati hears steps on the stairs behind her. Heavy, slow steps. Aalberts, flanked by his goons, is coming down the stairs.

"Arrest that woman! Arrest her now!"

One of the quicker cops points his gun at Parvati's head and yells "Don't move!"

She stops rubbing her ankle and raises her hands in surrender. The cops bound and cuff Parvati, hauling her into a police truck.





A few hours later she has been processed, and sits alone in an interrogation room. The assassin stares at herself in the specific double mirror, the chain cuffs tied to the table contrasting the pearl studs and garnet necklace. A tall blond, old enough to show wrinkles and dark circles under her eyes, enters the room.

"Kimm den Elzen, Detective. I assume this is you."

One of Parvati's old mugshots slid across the table, her full name written underneath.

"I want to talk to my lawyer."

"I'm sure you do, but that's going to get you nowhere. Interpol's got a rap sheet on you a mile long. You'll just be extradited back to India, and we both know what the prisons there look like. However, if you tell me about your employers, maybe we can arrange some sort of setup here, in one of our nice, comfy max security cells with cable TV. What do you say?"

"No deal."

"Your loss, honey."

Smiling contently, the skinless hellion leaves Parvati and Ricardo in the hell of their own personal memories. She watches the scene in the opera unfold, then takes a service door that opens up into a large tunnel, dragging me along in chains, pokers now piercing every one of my articulations. The flat sounds of steps on the concrete give way to wet slaps against mud, the corridor shaping itself into a deep warzone trench, bombs whistling on either side.



Flayed seems not bothered by this, and the soldiers running around seem to instinctively avoid her. Finally, she makes it to her destination. In the middle of the trench lie three people on their backs, their stomachs open, viscera pouring and tangling in the middle of the mud. Soldiers with thousand long stares step carelessly on the gut knot, pulling the mulatto woman and the black man closer together in agony.

"The children of Hareb-Serap are always good for a bit of fun. Just so you know, your friends are cruising, relieving their good times in Amsterdam. Are you ready to tell me more about what your Kult of Malkuth did there, or shall we continue on with the parade?"

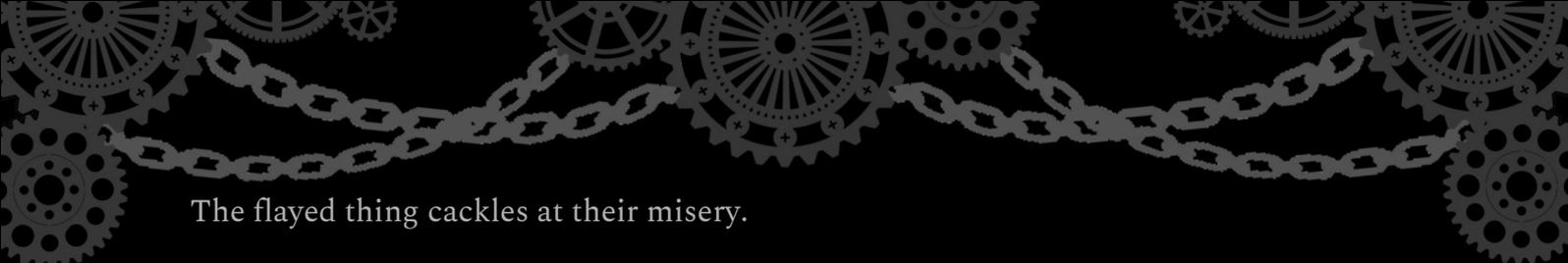
A platoon approaches in a hurry with the intensifying mortar fire.

The Latina absentmindedly pulls at her own strand of intestines, attempting to put them back where they belong, idly groaning. They coil around her hands. Her throat has nearly torn itself apart from the screaming and yelling from pain she has never known before. Mud and vomit mars her salt and pepper short hair, matted strands sticking to her sunken cheeks. She looks around for a weapon of any kind as she glances up in horror at the approaching platoon.

"What is this?! Where are we?!" Her voice cracks in pain as the tears in her throat are irritated by the small dialog.

Lucas ignores the wounds, and tries to pull myself out of the mess, ranting to himself.

"Can't be the worst thing he has been through, right...? That bomb, wasn't real...? Couldn't have been... What bomb is wired with nerve fibers? Who the fuck are these people? I need a gun..."



The flayed thing cackles at their misery.

"I so love it when they struggle."

Weapons within reach turn out to be either jammed or empty. The few who attempt to move grab onto the mud helplessly, sliding back into the muck. The platoon passes through you like a flooding river crushing your legs and your insides.

"Aw, you've lost your memories again. Good. It means the process is working. Now, let's give you a reminder, the three of you were in that synagogue on Nieuwe Uilenburgerstraat. One of the rabbis had just finished his nightly seminar, which only Sofia understood. And Lucas didn't pay attention to any of it. Instead he slept through most of it, and was on the phone for the last part. Who were you talking to?"

"Ph..p...Phone call?"

The pain of the fog enshrouds Lucas, and the trench melts around him in blood. He finds himself holding the receptor for a public payphone across from a canal.

"Yes... I g-got a job offer... after my Afghanistan tour... where it all went w-wrong... garrisoned in a synagogue...."

The vision is interrupted when my ears deafen from the sound of mortar fire that shreds the platoon before us. The flayed thing walks through the trench as if the bullets won't hurt her, nonchalantly crushing the head of a soldier, a smirk on her face. A tank rolls over us, and I feel my feet buried under dirt, my hands and head crushed by the steel tracks.





No pain lessened, it just changes, with insects burrowing in and out of my face as I claw it to remove them. Then we're in a swamp, dressed in a few primitive rags, a few of us supporting ourselves with a wooden club, swatting at the bug swarms. My pierced lips are dry, but the water looks unclean and muddy. I drink it anyway, and it tastes of disease.

"Shall we keep going? Or are you going to tell me about the cult?"

"If you mean to drag me through hell, then keep going bitch! This is child's play compared to living," the soldier speaks up.

"Fine by me."

I feel the cold wind chill on my cheeks as I notice my half frozen hand, fingers all the way black. So damn cold, I can't even feel it, barely noticing the wood and rope bridge before us across the ravine. I stare down at a bottomless pit, its walls steep and lined with jagged rocks. The safety and warmth of a cabin invites us on the other side of the ravine and the Chicano is the first to try and cross, with us following.

We hear a snapping sound and the wooden planks underneath our feet give way and we plunge in the darkness, the fall shorter than I thought. Both my legs crack on impact with the icy floor, and I see the others squirming and struggling, their broken bodies bleeding out over the ice. The flayed thing floats down from above and pokes at a few of us with her foot, checking to see if we're still breathing. It's an effort to stay conscious, but then I notice the broken bones jutting through my knees and I blank out.



Ricardo passes through the cold city, making his way down through the rainy streets and tourists. He finds a narrow red brick building wedged between two apartment blocks. A Star of David painted glass serves as a window. At the entrance, Lucas, the muscular ex-military man, is outside on a payphone, and salutes the newcomer.

Most of the attendees are pouring out. Ricardo lingers for a moment near them, eavesdropping on their conversation and studying them. He catches the rabbi alone however, moves with purpose towards him. An old goat, thin and white bearded. He takes off his round black hat and wipes his sweaty forehead with a napkin.

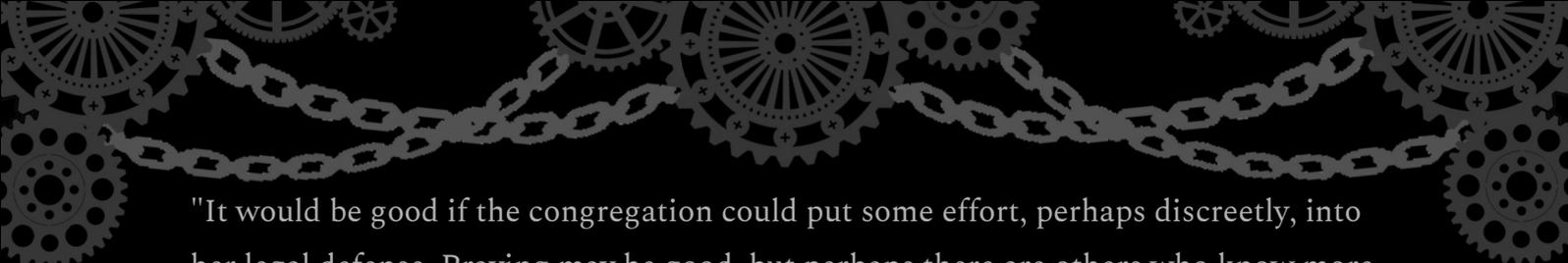
"How are you this evening Mr. Carballal?"

"A bit sad, Rabbi Tamir. As you may know, the opera ended unexpectedly," Ricardo says in a hushed tone.

"I have heard the news. I'm afraid this will just increase hostility to the Jewish community. As if our congregates didn't have enough to worry about with the whole Deckard de Brun scandal. Following the paths to Yesod has never been easy."

"Very true. So does anyone know anything about the specifics? The woman that was carted away for attacking him?" Ricardo pauses, and then continues with an insinuating tone. "He didn't look harmed to me."

"I'm not surprised that he wasn't harmed. I've recently talked to a reporter, Erhan Peeters, who investigated one of his car crashes, and apparently Jaël Aalberts emerged unscathed. As a religious man, I think there is something to this, but I am of limited knowledge. Perhaps I shall pray for guidance? Maybe the heavens will answer? I just hope it turns out this woman has no connection to the shareholders in my congregation. It would be a shame. I admit, it would have been convenient if Aalberts had just... gone away."



"It would be good if the congregation could put some effort, perhaps discreetly, into her legal defense. Praying may be good, but perhaps there are others who know more about this man and his... quirks?"

Aviram Tamir smiles, a secret understanding between the two.

"We shall see if the congregation has enough money to put towards her bail. In the meantime, perhaps you should visit Erhan. He lives in Houthavens, I've got his address here somewhere..."

The rabbi searches for something in his wallet and hands over some sort of business card.

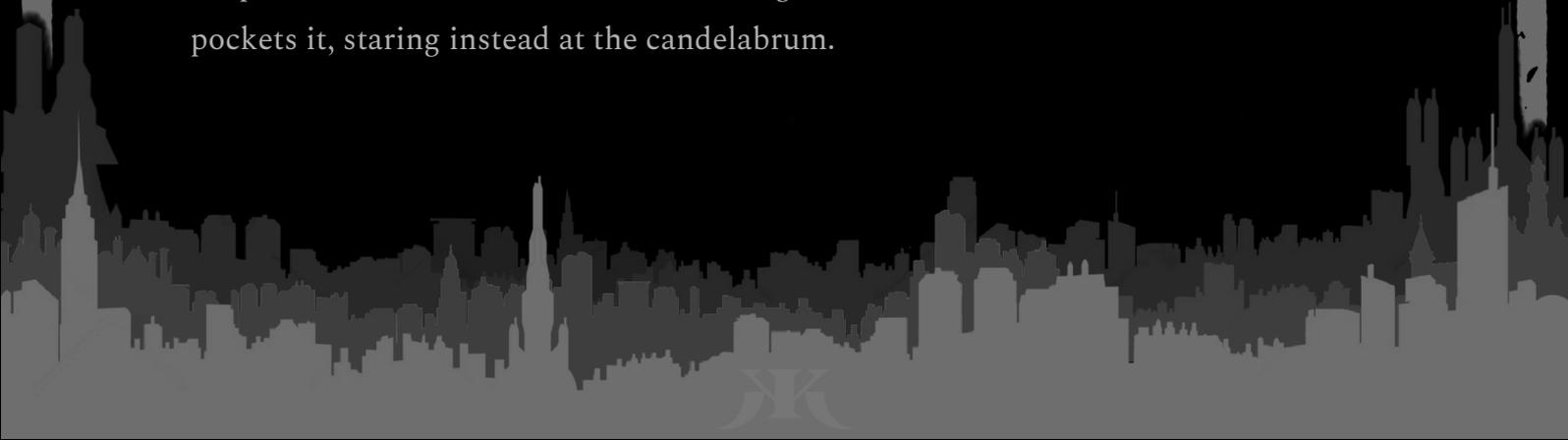
"I think I will. Thank you."

"Spare me a moment for a few congregants, then join me upstairs."

Some time passes before the synagogue empties. Ricardo approaches the rabbi's office, only to see a young woman depart. Her hair is tangled and her designer skirt is ruffled. As he steps inside, Rabbi Tamir is straightening out his suit jacket, unaware that his uncovered hair stands in 5 different directions. The walls are lined with bookshelves and pieces of art ranging from modern to medieval. Behind him a seven branched candelabrum is dripping wax on the table cover underneath the painted glass window.

"Sorry, had a bit of marriage counseling to wrap up. Here, a donation for our legally troubled friend."

He points to a check on the table with a significant amount written on it. Ricardo pockets it, staring instead at the candelabrum.





"The Menorah?"

"I'm surprised you know. I must admit, for me the Catholic faith is a bit strange. From that old, vengeful god of Sodom and Gomorrah to a forgiving Christ. I do like how the New Testament opens: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Am I remembering that right?"

"Gospel of John. Well said. But as an antiquarian I find the catholic faith is no different than anyone else's. Just another source of knowledge."

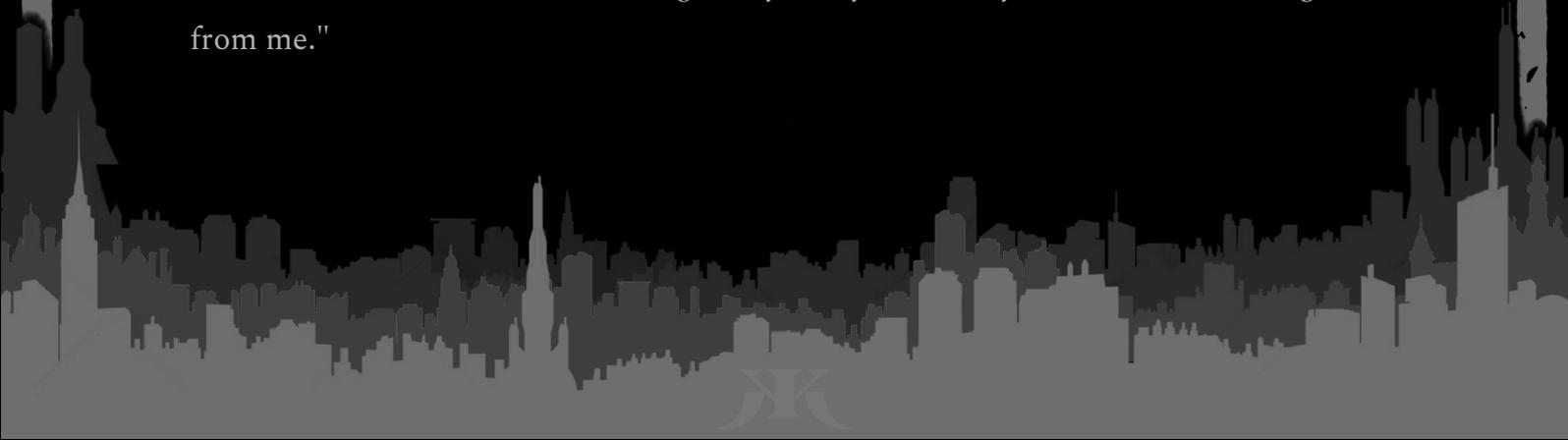
"I agree, and I doubt there is one single path to wisdom. The Kabbalah tells me that much. But I do find studying the differences fascinating. The Binding of Isaac, for example. Classic story, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on the mountain. Then, at the last minute, he changes his mind. Very anticlimactic. I long thought about what the point was with that one."

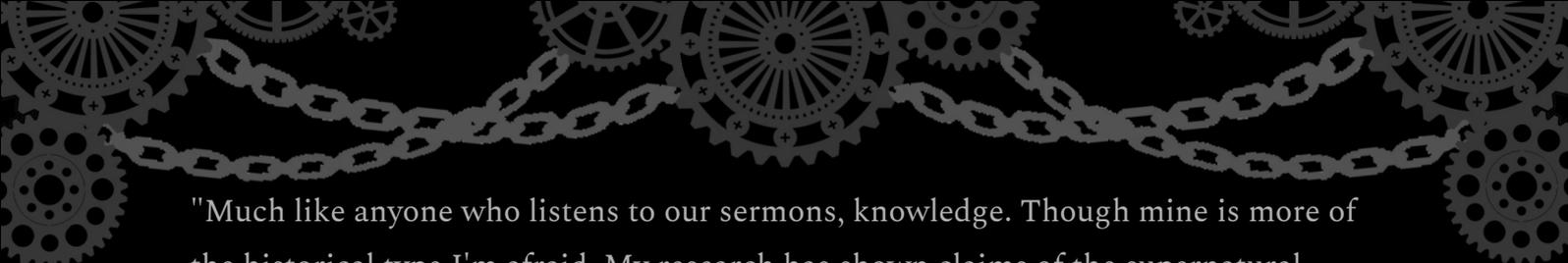
He picks up his black hat, and straightens the brim a bit.

"And eventually it dawned on me. It was a story of contrast. Much like your Christ, it showed a God that was merciful. We think Yahweh, what you would call the Old Testament god, as vengeful, and quick to anger, Christ the little lamb in comparison. But the point behind the Binding of Isaac is to show a merciful god that requires no human sacrifice, but only faith. So what, I wonder, came before Yahweh? If a god that smites Sodom and Gomorrah is merciful, what was the previous incarnation like?"

He puts the hat on a coat rack nearby.

"You've let me ramble on. The hunger in your eyes means you wanted something else from me."





"Much like anyone who listens to our sermons, knowledge. Though mine is more of the historical type I'm afraid. My research has shown claims of the supernatural around Amsterdam. Hauntings, demons, and the like. Rabbi, I was hoping you could help me with some of the history about the area or even your synagogue. It's much older than many buildings I have seen in the area."

"No worse demons than men, my friend. The Netherlands used to be a center of Jewish life, until the Nazis came. Anne Frank's house is not far away. This synagogue was itself the scene of a massacre. This is exactly what I'm trying, what we are trying, to prevent. Another pogrom, this time through media hysteria."

"I fear the media is a front for people to excuse their own faults. Rather than take responsibility for their own misguided ways, they blame the media or society for their inner issues. I apologize rabbi, I got on a small rant of my own. Can you show me the place of the massacre here?"

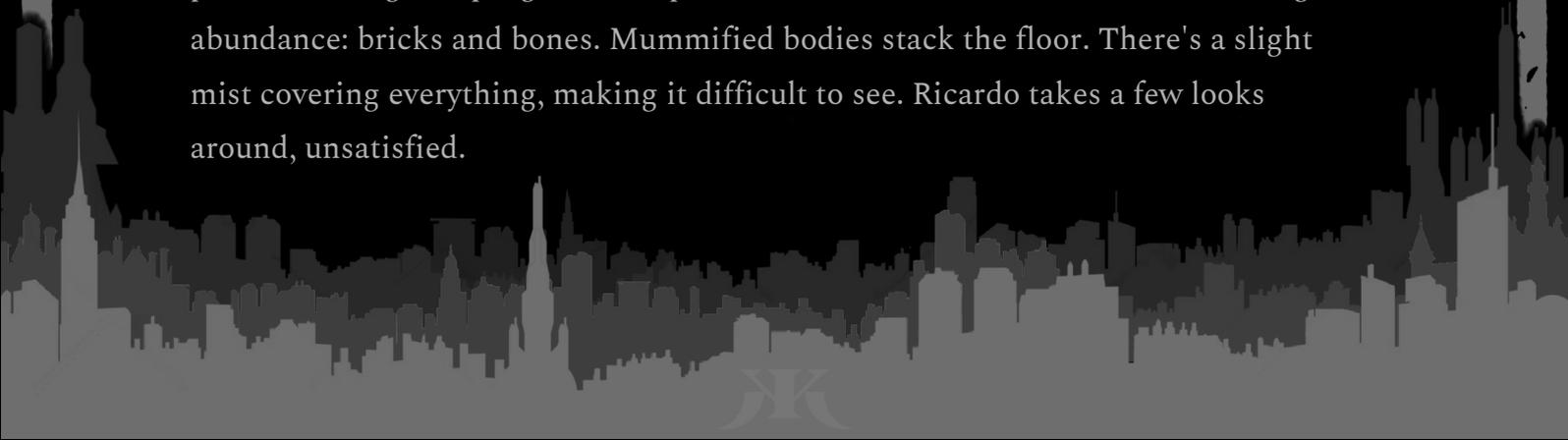
Tamir gestures Ricardo to follow him downstairs. The main floor is empty, the pews sitting in silent reverence of the altar.

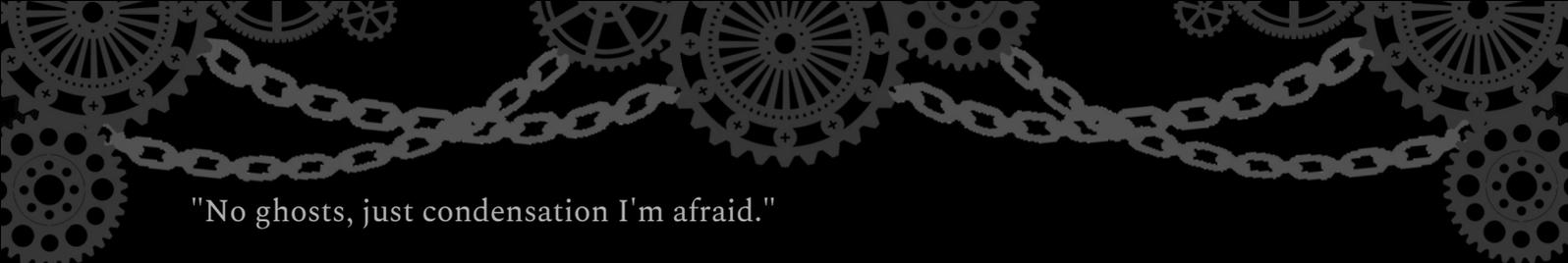
"This is where it happened. The Nazis came in and machine-gunned the whole congregation."

"What happened to the bodies?"

"Interred down below by a kind hearted gentile. Let me show you?"

Tamir closes his eyes for a moment, then leads him down a narrow, dark corridor, and afterwards through a set of stairs. Somewhere he flips a light switch, and a black power cable lights up a grated lamp inside a catacomb. The walls have two things in abundance: bricks and bones. Mummified bodies stack the floor. There's a slight mist covering everything, making it difficult to see. Ricardo takes a few looks around, unsatisfied.





"No ghosts, just condensation I'm afraid."

The Rabbi smiles. Then turns dead serious, clutching at his chest. His scratching brings shine to a strange talisman on a chain around his neck, a small golden gear inside a broken pocket watch.

"Someone is coming. You need to leave."

Preventing Ricardo speaking with a gesture, the Rabbi takes him upstairs, then points to the back door, while he heads back to the altar. But the antiquarian isn't easily dismayed, sneaking back through the corridor, watching from the shadows.

"Can I help you?"

Matthew turns to see who the rabbi is greeting: a tall blond woman in a coffee colored suit, knocking the floor with her heels. Around her, a cadre of police officers in fluorescent uniforms.

"Mr. Aviram Tamir, I presume. Kimm den Elzen, Detective, 47th precinct. We have a search warrant for your property here."

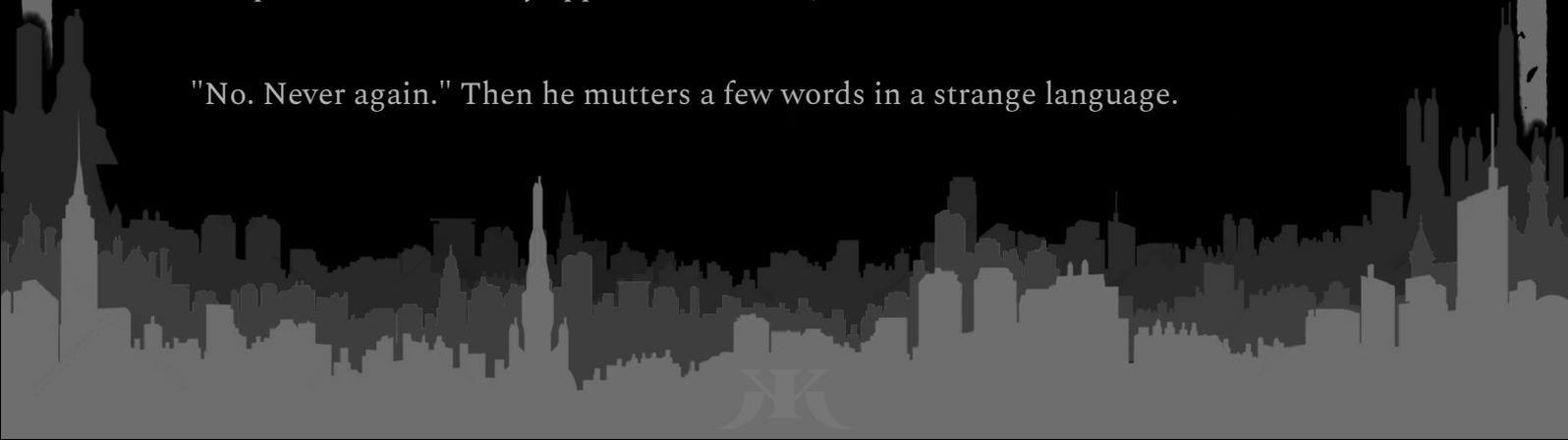
The rabbi is stumped.

"But this is a place of worship. We've done nothing wrong."

"A trusted confidential informant has supplied information regarding a possible murder on the premises. As the warrant says. So, save it for the judge... Cuff him."

The policemen forcefully approach the rabbi, who closes his fist.

"No. Never again." Then he mutters a few words in a strange language.





Wind picks up in the air, quickly turning into a howl. A of blue organic light phenomena rises from the floor, as if a flock of invisible diffused birds were flying circling upwards. Some policemen convulse. Spikes grow through their skin, and their teeth sharpen. They descend upon their brethren, who yell in horror. One of them tears the Rabbi's neck with his teeth, ripping out his larynx. In the commotion, a candle holder slams of a pew, setting it on fire.

Shocked, Ricardo departs for the back exit, slamming into Lucas.

"What's going on? Where's the..."

"Get your stuff, we need to get out of here. Now!"

A few moments later, the two reconvene outside, washed by the alternating lights of the abandoned police cars. There's a fire rising from the building, slowly drowning out the screams. A few people are attracted to the noise, and Ricardo and Lucas blend in.

"Here's a check for Parvati's bail. Pick her up now, before it bounces, then find some sort of accommodation."

"What are you going to do?"

"Look into our target. Figure out a weakness."

Content to leave them in their stupor, the succubus climbs out of the trench, smearing mud over her bloody frame and rattling the rail spikes in my knees. Flayed walks amidst the lines of barbed wire and anti-tank metal hedgehogs. As the mud slips away off her, she enters the jungle foliage, using her chained whip to cut through the branches vines. She finally makes it to the steps of a temple, decapitated head rolling down past us. Flayed climbs to the top, where the blue-painted mulatto woman sits tied to a slab, ritually disemboweled with an obsidian knife by an Aztec priest in a jade jaguar mask. The demoness caresses her half comatose face, waking her up.

"There, there, little dove. Time to wake up, Sofia. The priest is not even halfway done."

The pain must be unbearable. With as much effort as she can, Sofia spits out the blood and bile in her mouth and speaks to the demon her, voice croaky and weak.

"All this..." she croaks in her native Portuguese, "...is Aztec shit... that's Mexican you stupid fuckers! I'm Brazilian... completely different..."

"The clergy of Chomak have made a grave mistake. But we can forgive them this time, as they're refugees after all, and they're still doing a cantankerous job. Now..."

The fiend caresses Sofia's clitoris with her bloodied, moist finger. The jaguar priest smiles, rips through with the knife at the tempo of the mulatto's orgasms.

"...you were telling me about the cult of Malkuth, or the Seekers of Enlightenment, as you called them. It all started in a house in Houthaven..."



Erhan Peeters' body is hanging from the rafter of his house. Sofia can see he used his mountain climbing rope. The stench and black puddle at the bottom underneath his boots signals he's been dead for a while. The usual spare key she found underneath the flowerbed in front drops from her hand once she realizes her friend is dead.

Grabbing out her cell phone, she quickly takes a few photographs of the body and surrounding area. The place is a mess. Over the desk a research map has gotten out of hand, plastered with pictures of individuals. A wall has sketches with nightmarish creatures. The furniture is covered with scrawled paper. There's a sealed letter on his pillow.

A knock comes in at the door. Peeking outside through the side window the reporter sees a Chicano in a trench coat. Before she can do anything, he spots her, and slams his shoulder into the door, breaking it open. Sofia backs away, unsure, subtly hiding her phone in her back pocket. Ricardo throws his hand forward to point at her.

"Don't move. Identify yourself!"

"Thank god you got here, when he didn't answer I let myself in and found him like this." She has a slight trace of an accent but her English is near flawless.

"Come to think about it, who are you?"

"I'll be asking the questions, miss. You are the one in the room with a dead body." He pulls out his phone and proceeds to record the situation.

"Best start explaining, you really don't want the police here."

The reporter catches on.





"And if you're not the police why don't we let them sort this all out?"

"Answer my questions or continue stumbling head first into something a lot worse than you can imagine. Who are you?"

"Sofia Alves, Associated Press," she flashes her press pass to prove her identity, "I was to meet the poor Erhan Peeters here to help me with a story. So who would you be then?"

"Ricardo Carballal, private investigator. I was investigating a certain man, and this individual had information."

"Pleased to meet you. Are you the type that can tell me what happened here?"

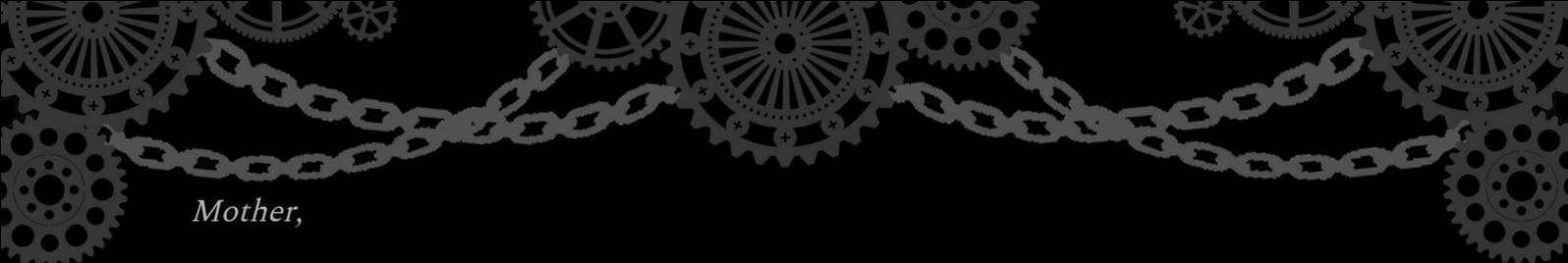
"Am I the type? Most likely. Will I? That is another question. Why, Ms. Alves, are you here?"

"Peeters had a story for me and said to look him up when I got to Amsterdam."

"Seems like we are in the same predicament then. Close the door. Maybe we can assist each other. Let's see what we have here."

Ricardo takes the sealed letter, and walks about the room with it. He gazes at each scrawled picture in turn, tapping the envelope on his temple with his right hand, taking pictures with the phone held in his left. Ricardo opens the letter and reads it aloud.





Mother,

I'm sorry for all the disappointments I've brought you. I shouldn't have sold the house and put you in the asylum. I thought you were crazy, but you were right. There are things in the dark. I've left you all my money. I just hope your Christ can save you more than his summoned angels.

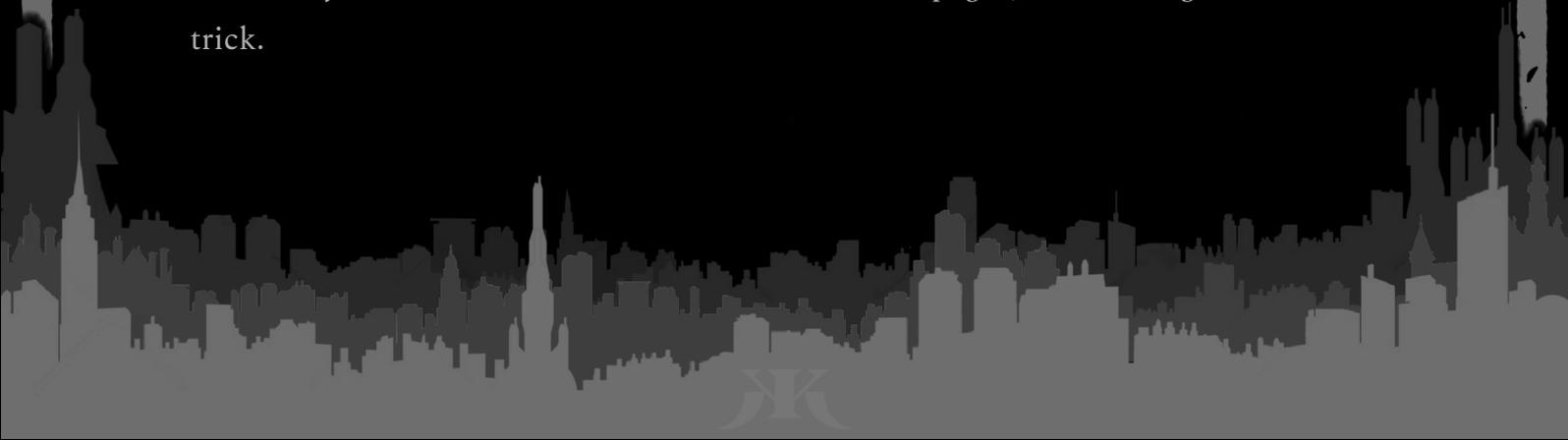
I can't take it anymore.

"Well, it seems he was correct. This data corroborates Jaël's seeming invincibility. He seems to have a fake address. It is in his name but he doesn't live there. Lots of mysterious deaths and disappearances at his law school. We should probably mail this to his mother."

Sofia's shoes clack against the floor as she walks further into the house. She shivers and holds her arms around herself when out of sight, reeling from the man hanging in the entranceway. Ricardo's phone vibrates once, but he says nothing of it. Sofia loops back to the main room and looks at the scrawled paper on the furniture.

The research map is pure insanity, but after a time the reporter pieces some events together. A set of pictures with CCTV timestamps show a car ramming into another, turning into metal wrecks, Aalbrecht rips the door, and walks out calmly. An associated insurance claim is filed, along with the receipt for a junkyard.

Sofia and Ricardo start picking up the notes. The paper is from an a4 printer stack, scattered everywhere. It smells of incense and wax. Talking among themselves, the two conclude the pages are a journal of sorts. Peeters was a bit of a sketch artist, so it's heavily filled with sketches. It's hard to order the pages, but Sofia figures out the trick.





The writing and pictures get increasingly more insane, desperate, and paranoid as the time progressed.. Some of the sketches detail nightmarish mechanical arachnid men, which the notes claim were violating him in his sleep. A sketch represents an alley the whole place turned into some sort of grindhouse of complex machinery, with limbs trapped between the gears.

The notes start mentioning strange books and rituals. Dark Net titles such as the Articles of Blood, Folio of Hancey, Revelations of Oder. A claim at how useless they are. There are also a number of sketches depicting a triangle inside a circle lined with Hebrew words. The triangle contains sets of pentagrams. There are various versions of chants. She's seen this before. Based on past experiences it looks like a summoning circle. Her intuition proves correct, as the more irrational notes detail conversations with a being called Enkisu. Hierarchies of angelic choirs follow. Peeters was a medium of sorts.

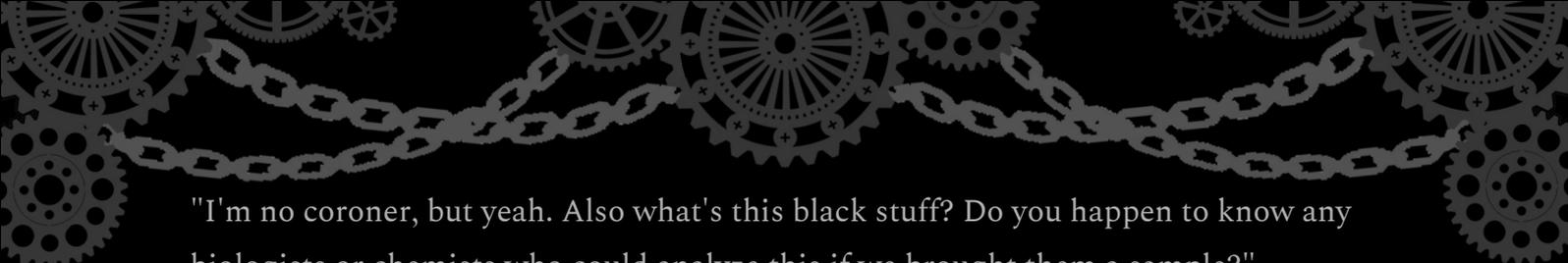
Sofia scans over the documents, putting them back in order and continuing to analyze them. Her eyes widen as she looks over the sketches and connections. Her eyes finally settle on the summoning circle, her thumb lightly tracing around the edges.

"It looks like he was being pursued during his investigation of Jaël, or at least he thought he was. I think he was attempting to protect himself, researching anything that could maybe assist him. Went through many avenues before settling on contacting an... Enkisu. Does that ring a bell, Carballal?"

"No clue. The body can't have been that long dead. Someone would have found him by the time advanced decomposition would have set in. Come to think of it, Peeters doesn't look all that decomposed. What is that black ooze flowing from him?"

Ricardo carefully takes off his leather glove, scratching his nose with the hairy back of his hand. Sofia answers him.





"I'm no coroner, but yeah. Also what's this black stuff? Do you happen to know any biologists or chemists who could analyze this if we brought them a sample?"

"I can probably find someone. You want me to do it?"

"No, I can manage."

When Sofia turns after picking up the ooze in a jar, her shoulder accidentally touches the corpse. It trembles, and something snaps. The midsection rips in half, and the legs drop to the floor, pulling the guts after them.

The ooze splashes her face. Biomechanical tubes mix in with the intestines. A lot of the room has dark traces of the ooze, even more than before. Sofia falls back, wiping her face off with the back of her arm. Past the window, in the night, something moves.

"Oh, oh my, we need to go! Whatever he was writing about, I think it's here."

Ricardo has yet to finish packing up everything in the room. But he does hear something brushing the live hedges outside. In a rush, he drops most of the documentation onto the puddle. It sticks like glue, smearing the paper. Something slams on top of the roof.

"Shit, at least I have the phone pics."

Everyone in the house exits through the back door into the poorly light suburban neighborhood. An intense feeling of paranoia sweeps through the group, a feeling of being chased.





The muscle car accelerates towards the sedan. As it slams into it, the steering wheel crushes the face of the middle aged man inside, and he flies through the window, his arms torn off. Lying on the asphalt, he notices Jaël Aalberts emerge unscathed from the car, carrying a child. He sticks his tongue in the boy's ear.

The scene repeats itself over and over. Mutilation, then a perverse showing of the fat prosecutor molesting the little boy. Above, blood pours on a road sign pointing to the highway, as a certain flayed demoness sits enjoying the spectacle, dangling me by a chain wrapped around my neck. When the man lies on the asphalt once more, it points and asks.

"Reliving fond memories, Jorrit?"

Spitting out blood and fragments of teeth as he wriggles, armless, onto his back to look at the glistening abomination talking to him, Jorrit is unable to form intelligible sounds. Only wetly gnashing groans emerge. His wide open eyes in the destroyed face are filled with terror, disgust, shame... and above all, hatred.

But not for her.

Breaking off eye contact with the demoness, Jorrit glances back to where he last saw the obese lawyer. And attempts to turn back on his belly and crawl in that direction...

"Oh, so you want one more crack at the ol' Lictor, do you?"

Who am I to say no?"

Flayed jumps down, stomping the mass of flesh that is Jorrit... and the loop starts again. In the dark, the detective realizes he's been half asleep behind the wheel, and he's made it to Houthavens somehow.



At the other end of the street, Jorrit slows down the car when he sees two people running towards him. Behind them, a gang of urban youth are doing that crazy French thing where they jump from roof to roof. The kids are good... too good. Something's wrong here.

One of the chased runs past the car, trying to make it to their own, fumbling with the key. A kid lands on top of Jorrit's hood.

"Oh Shit!!", he calls out involuntarily, as he pulls the wheel around, trying to avoid hitting them. He stomps on the brake. He swerves and hits a tree. Despite expectations, the airbag deploys, but the engine is dead.

"Ah, fuck! Fuck!"

Jorrit fumbles around for something, finds the pen he uses to fill out paperwork when on the road, and stabs the airbag with it, hard. Then he looks outside. The Chicano pulls on the door handle of his car, a coupe, while the other one urges him on.

"Hurry! unlock it!"

Bolting over the door, Jorrit gets out, service pistol drawn, looking at the youth gang.

"Hey, what the fuck! Police!! Stand down immediately you stupid piece of shit idiots!!!"

He doesn't take cover, and instead strides a few paces towards them, gun raised and pointed, intending to meet them heads-on. Suddenly they stop chasing their quarry, and approach Jorrit. Quietly, they surround him.

Purring.





The detective is confused for a moment but keeps the gun pointed at them.

"No closer! Hands where I can see 'em, boys..."

Their quarry, still breathing heavily, manage opening the coupe.

"Ah shit who is that guy? A cop? At least he has a gun."

The youth are docile, waiting for something. But there's a ferociousness in their eyes, something that unsettles Jorrit.

"Now what the hell were you thinking, running around... ah, nevermind."

He looks them over once more, quickly and professionally, then gazes over to the coupe. He grips his gun harder, and nudges it in the direction of one of them - as if he meant to push it in his face at the slightest provocation.

"Alright, here's the deal: You get the fuck out of here before I arrest the sorry lot of you for public bullshittery and assorted idiocy charges."

They don't seem to be moving, and are closing a circle around him.

"No closer I said!" The woman in the coupe understands the situation.

"Ricardo, they're gonna eat him. Do you have insurance on this rental?!" she asks, looking over at her from the passenger seat. The Chicano grimaces, turning on the car. He weighs the options of just leaving this man to his death. Gripping the wheel hard, he shifts the car into drive, aiming straight for the horde now surrounding Jorrit.





Ricardo steps on the gas hard, fishtailing the vehicle for a moment before charging it into the east side of the group around Jorrit. The car slams into the gang, giving Jorrit an opportunity to jump in. His eyes land onto the carcass of one of the broken youth. What Jorrit thought was a teenager with a broken leg now looks like a pale, hairless corpse. It's body is half-combined with rusty insect-like mechanical appendages. Attached to its torso is some sort of breathing apparatus, like a membrane. It reaches out a claw, and whispers.

"Master..."

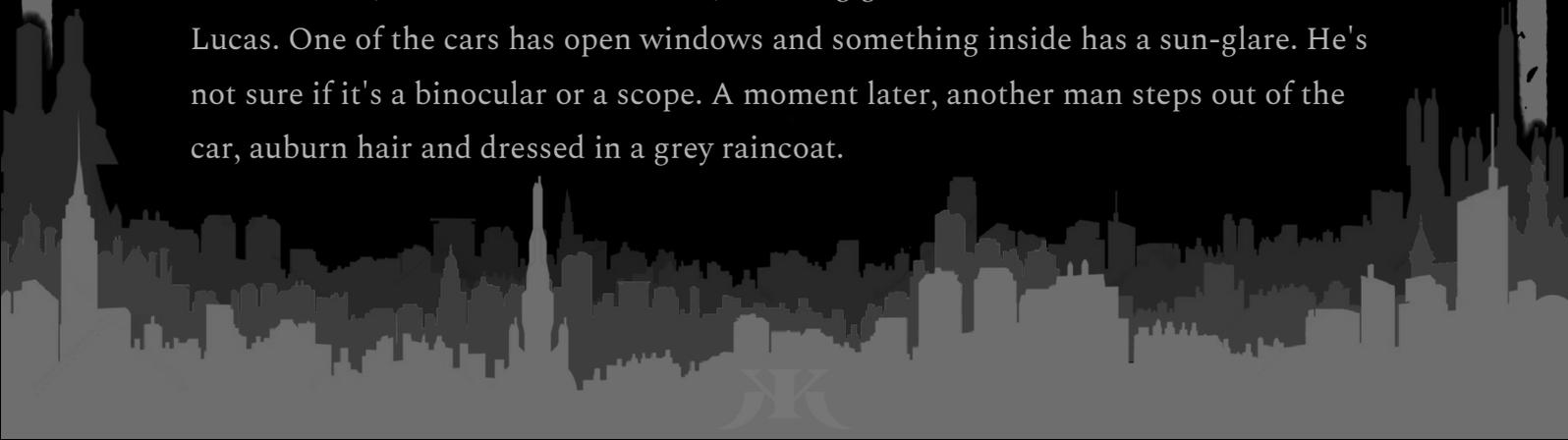
A distant sound breaks the detective away, finally hearing the Chicano screaming from the car.

"It's not a real kid! These things are monsters! Get in the car if you want to live! Otherwise, wait for more to show up! We aren't!"

He gets in the coupe. But his eyes only leave the horrid apparition when the driver floors it and the creatures disappear from view outside.

A metro ride later, Lucas sees the glass front of the rust titled police station. By the side, Lucas notices a couple of grey hatchback cars with a few individuals staring at the same scene, waiting. The mercenary steps in, and after some paperwork at the front desk, he recognizes Parvati along with a black man dressed in a blue business suit. He introduces himself as her attorney.

Lucas takes a look outside. The plain clothes observers near the grey hatchbacks take notice of this, and talk to one another, shooting glances in between Parvati and Lucas. One of the cars has open windows and something inside has a sun-glare. He's not sure if it's a binocular or a scope. A moment later, another man steps out of the car, auburn hair and dressed in a grey raincoat.





"Friends of yours?" Asks Lucas.

A sight of familiarity and surprise cross the assassin's face.

"Oh shit. Interpol. We need to get out of here."

"Don't worry Mrs. Shankar, they have no jurisdiction. I'll go talk to them. Wait here!"

When the blue suited barrister departs, Parvati grabs Lucas and pulls him in close, whispering in his ear.

"We won't get out of there alive if we run into them."

He pushes her away, laughing.

"Really? Interpol are doing wetworks now?"

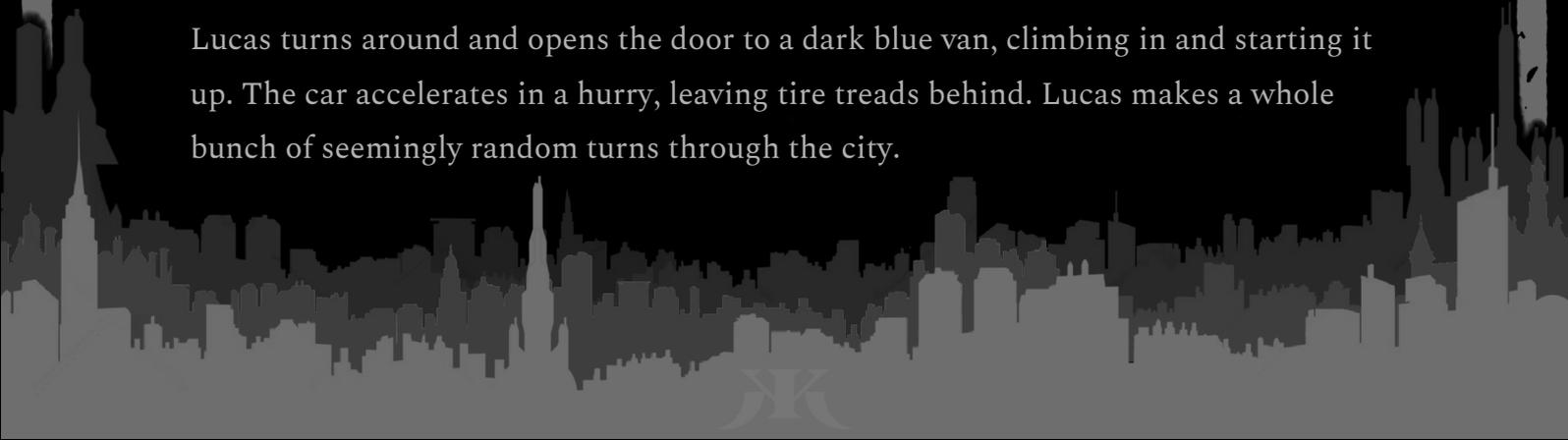
There is a look of cold determination in his eyes.

"Ok then. Good thing I don't ever enter a police station unarmed. What do we do?"

She drags him to a corridor where a fire escape map is drawn up. Lucas gets the idea. Pulling out a canister from his leather jacket, he winks at Parvati.

"Smoke grenade. Never leave home without it." He winks, before pulling the pin and tossing it. It rolls past the reception just the assassin pulls the fire alarm. They both blend into the crowd heading for the meeting point outside.

Lucas turns around and opens the door to a dark blue van, climbing in and starting it up. The car accelerates in a hurry, leaving tire treads behind. Lucas makes a whole bunch of seemingly random turns through the city.





"So what the hell? Aalberts?"

"I stabbed him through the heart, and a few moments later, he was walking down the steps of the opera house."

"Probably body armor."

"I don't think so."

He side eyes her a few times as he drives.

"Next time... we're not using knives."

"Obviously."

He rummages in his jacket a moment and passes her an energy bar. She takes it and unwraps the foil, biting into it.

"So who was the guy with the suit?"

"Someone who's been on my case for a few years. Nathaniel Hargrove, Interpol. He's got something personal against me. Don't even know why."

"Hargrove... Sounds like an asshole."



The Cosmos cafe is a low key affair at this time of night. Unpopulated except by a few backpacking Germans, a bit of smooth jazz plays in the background as a middle aged chain-smoking redhead tends the bar. As we enter and take a table, exhaustion sets in. Some warm coffee arrives, almost by itself. It's invigorating to the tired travelers.

Ricardo takes his gloves off, stuffing them in a pocket, and accepts the coffee. He sniffs it deeply and luxuriates in the warmth cradled in his hands as he closes his eyes before slowly reopening them. He looks to the others, each in turn. Parvati stares at him point blank.

"So, what happened to our boarding house?"

"It seems the rabbi was doing more than sermons in his synagogue."

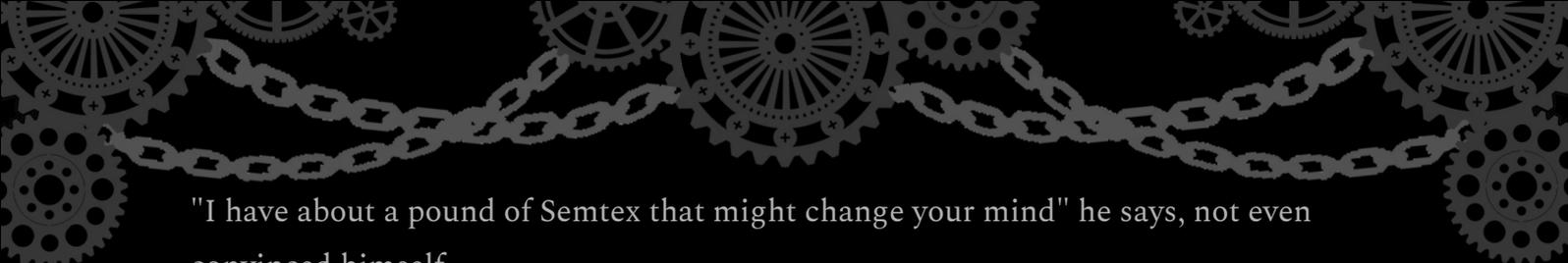
"I knew he must know more than he let on."

"The cops came, and he did some sort of ritual."

Ricardo saddles up in front of Lucas and Parvati and gives the rundown of the events at the station and the synagogue. When he comes to that weird blue gas demon part, he can't help but stumble over his words a bit. Finishing, leans back in his chair.

"Christ... man that place is probably crawling with cops right now. Why were they there? The Prosecutor knew? Sent them there?"

"Which means..." Lucas groans, "we are probably next. And we don't know enough to know how to end him."



"I have about a pound of Semtex that might change your mind" he says, not even convinced himself.

"Well, I believe there is a chance that may not work. But I don't know enough to be sure, and I don't want to bet my life on it."

Parvati looks to Lucas.

"Bit unsubtle, but it may just work well enough. I doubt anything on Earth can recover from a pound of Semtex, particularly in close proximity to it."

"OK well I can't talk you out of it. But..." Ricardo trails off for a second, turning to Jorrit.

"You're a cop, yeah?"

Parvati fixes Jorrit with a cautious, neutral stare at that, watching him.

"Detective... Detective Jorrit van Geesbaeck, 38th precinct...", he stares out the window, a lost thousand yard stare.

Ricardo snaps his fingers at him, but gets no response.

"He's a little... out of it, I guess. Today was his first time seeing this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?" Parvati asks him.

"Crazy sort of thing. So when we last parted ways, you were... otherwise indisposed, shall we say," Ricardo says, looking at Par. "Since then, I tracked down a lead on the target. There I met her."





He indicates Sofia, who lifts her arms defensively.

"Just what kind of conspiracy shit have I gotten myself into?"

"A cop and a reporter. This is the start of a nightmare," the Indian scoffs.

"I tracked down someone who was working a case where the Prosecutor walked away from a car crash. Unscathed. Well, that reporter was dead and this one was snooping around. We were attacked, got back in the car, cop guy here was surrounded by these monsters masquerading as teens. Sofia smashed the car into them, he was spooked, we picked him up, came here."

Parv gives Ricardo a sharp look at that.

"So tonight wasn't the first time he walked away from something that should've killed him."

"Nope. A knife to the heart was child's play compared to that wreck. Look," he says, holding up his phone with pictures of the pictures that were at the reporter's apartment.

Sofia gives a little sigh.

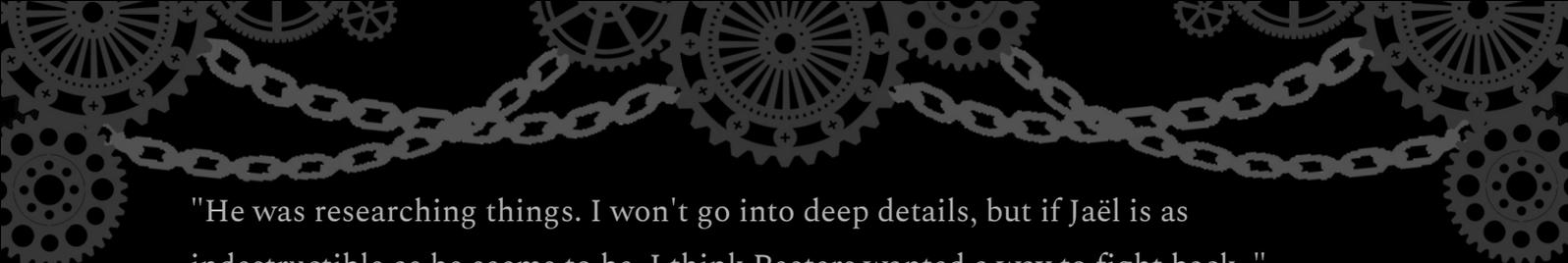
"If I ask what he is am I going to regret it?"

"Well, uh... I don't know too much except-" Ricardo says before Parvati cuts him off.

"Not human, and let's leave it at that."

Sofia finally comes out of deep thought.





"He was researching things. I won't go into deep details, but if Jaël is as indestructible as he seems to be, I think Peeters wanted a way to fight back. "

"So, did he? Find a way to fight back?" the Indian asks.

"There was a ritual. One detailed in his notes. He had contacted a being named Enkisun. It might have given him insight, but I believe the creatures plaguing him got the better of Peeters."

For a good long while, Jorrit has only stared at the group as if to judge whether they're utterly crazy or just pulling off some elaborate hoax to fuck with him, intermittently drifting off to stare in the middle distance. But after some time, it eventually sinks in for him. Little details that ring certain bells. He snaps upright, staring at Sofia, Ricardo, and Parvati in turn.

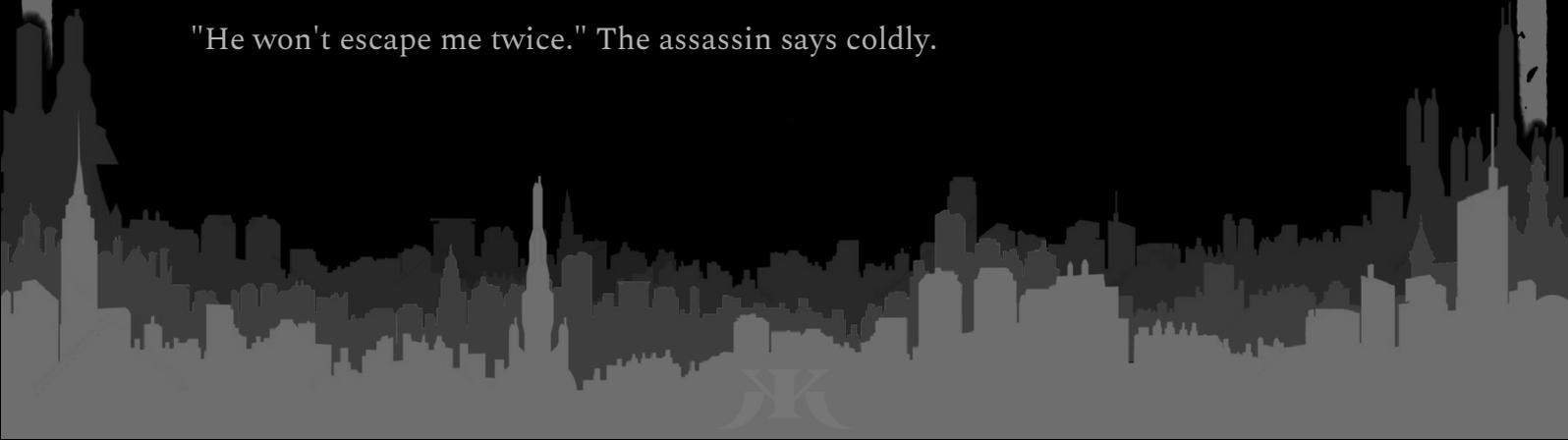
"That prosecutor?! You can't be serious!? Wait... those photos of that car accident. Lemme see them again? ... I know these..."

"Yes, that prosecutor. And do you know him?"

"Jaël Aalberts", his voice drips with venom when he speaks the name, "if only that car crash had killed him as it should have..."

"He put my brother Geeren in prison under false accusations. He died there. I've been investigating Aalberts ever since. I finally tracked down someone who had evidence on him. I was just on my way..." he trails off, obviously contemplating the ramifications of this man suddenly popping up in relation to all that has been seen and talked about here.

"He won't escape me twice." The assassin says coldly.





Jorrit looks Parvati up and down, twice, with a frown on his face.

"You're the woman from the opera!"

"Congratulations on figuring that out, detective."

Lucas snaps his attention to the cop.

"I was just going to the precinct to interrogate you! What made you do it? Is it true you're an international assassin? What did he do?! I mean, why isn't he dead?? And... how are you even here?!" His gaze has assumed a feverish glaze. He leans over the table towards you, intent on knowing all about it.

Parvati watches him, keeping her hands away from the pistol in reach.

"That's something I'd like to figure out myself, but the job's unfinished."

The detective waves away her vague phrase with an impatient flick of the hand.

"...so then, who paid you to do it?"

"Nobody paid her, yet." Lucas gets between them shooting Parvati a glance and shaking his head slightly

Jorrit eyes Lucas for a few moments.

"I'm afraid you misunderstand my intentions," his voice much calmer now, "I'm not asking who they are so I can arrest them or anything..."

"Why do you want to know who they are, then?"



"So I can express them my heartfelt thanks for at least trying - and offer my help with the next attempt!"

The mercenary expresses his doubt with a headshake.

"Look, I know what you're thinking," Jorrit continues after a moment, "dude's a cop, right? Gotta shut up in front of those, eh? You're not wrong, for sure. But tell you what, I'm the okay kind of cop as far as you guys are most probably concerned. But in return, gotta give me just a few answers to my questions, eh? Only fair, right?"

"...you want to go after this asshole Aalberts, yeah? As in, you really, really mean it?"

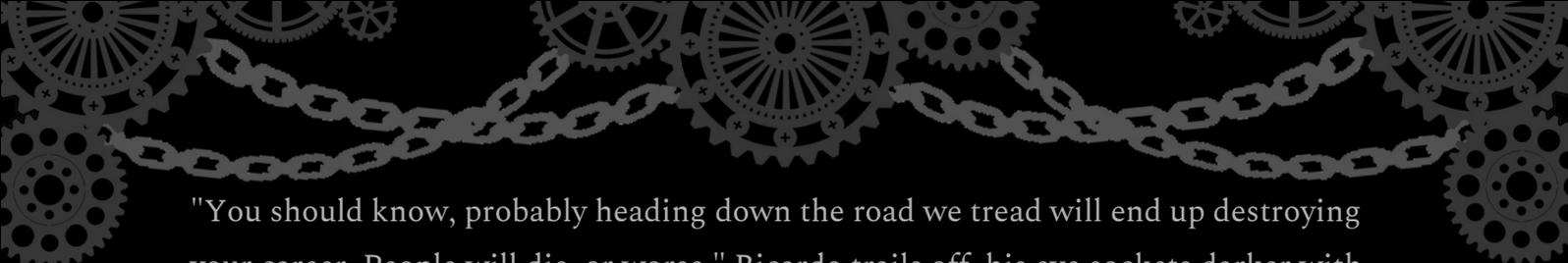
"I am giving you my word, but if you're serious about this, I got something even better that I could give you."

He puts a hand in his coat's inside pocket and quickly glances around the room, to see who all is paying attention right now. Once satisfied by that, he rummages in his pocket for a second, and takes out a folded piece of paper.

It's a photograph. Or a printed out digital photo anyways. It shows Jorrit himself, and two men, standing next to an expensive-looking car. There is an envelope in one of the men's hands. In a confidential voice, he explains.

"I took this from a file in the archives of the Vice Division, before the Internal Affairs Department finds it there and uses it against me. I took care to erase the original and destroy all other copies I could find. This is the last one. If I ever betray you guys, use this and it will end me... let alone cast serious doubts on anything I might be saying about you, on top of... you know, destroying my career and exposing me to my enemies..."





"You should know, probably heading down the road we tread will end up destroying your career. People will die, or worse." Ricardo trails off, his eye sockets darker with each passing day.

I take the photograph from Jorrit then look at it for a moment, then back at him.

"If you do betray us, I'll end you myself and I won't lose any sleep over it."

"Agreed, tough girl. Same here, should you break your promise and run off on some other mission instead, alright? So it seems we're finally on the same page, then."

Then Jorrit looks back at Parvati, expectantly hoping for answers.

"Not much to say," Lucas responds instead. "I'm trying to track down the location of a certain Abdul Haadi el-Nazar. He's an international weapons dealer with connections to terrorist cells. One of them wiped out my squad outside Kabul. Miss popularity here, just found out she's on the Interpol's most wanted list, and needs a few buckets of money to get lost. Our employers mentioned they would provide both of these."

"And what about you, Miss Alvez?"

"Tracked an international missing person's case to Aalberts. He's been covering up human trafficking into from Brazil to Eastern Europe. Peeters was my link to the case."

"I thought prostitution is legal the Netherlands." Lucas wonders.

"It is. If they're not minors."

"Shit."





"And I at some point used to be one of those minors."

"Sorry to hear that. So yeah, we're all interested in this guy. But I haven't been able to track him."

"Thought you were a detective."

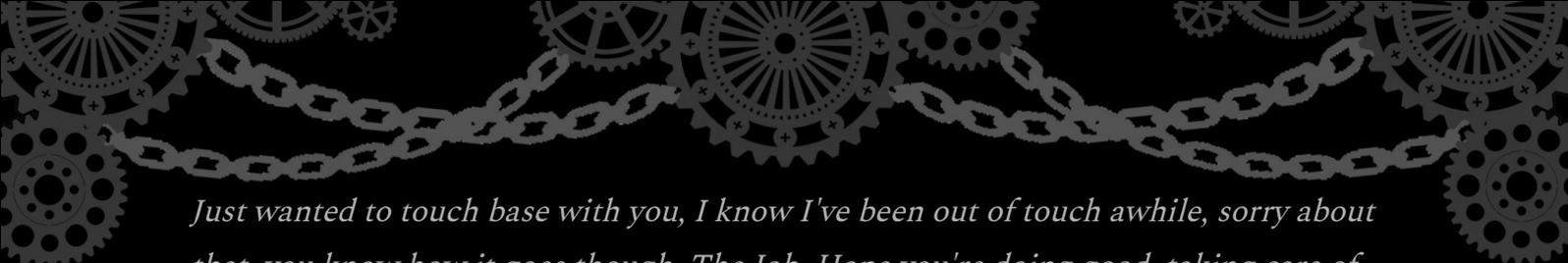
"I am. One of the best. Checked home addresses, phones, background. Turns out, he's a ghost. It's all P.O. Boxes and answering machines into tapped public pay phones. None of his alumni can remember anything specific about him. Tail him, and he vanishes into thin air. Closest I've gotten is somewhere in Bijlmer."

"Fuck. So we'll have to set up some kind of public hit again. Might as well sleep on it."

At the bartender's recommendation, the group checks into the hostel above. It's a cheap place with moldy green wallpaper, but at least it looks regularly cleaned. The clerk explains that they have an unoccupied shared room. After climbing a narrow set of stairs, a few of the investigators crash in the bunk beds, immediately knocked out. The rest fade out in front of the TV.

Lucas is the last to hold out, tapping messages on his phone, with a slight snuffle before he quickly covers his eyes with a hand.





Just wanted to touch base with you, I know I've been out of touch awhile, sorry about that, you know how it goes though. The Job. Hope you're doing good, taking care of Rusty is a task, I know. He likes to chew on just about anything he can. I'll replace anything he fucks up.

So anyway, I'm breaking protocol here, but I decided to take on a job, because it'll lead me to el-Nazar. Yeah I know you wanted me to drop it, but... I let everyone down, I've got to do this.

So, this job is really FUBAR. Just saying it might be the one that gets me. In which case... You'll find my will in the nightstand, taped under the drawer. Don't worry, I'll fight, not planning on dying just yet.

You know the rest... Love you.

After a brief moment in front of the TV receives a text back.

Like the song said, Lucas, if you're gonna be dumb, you gotta be though. Let it go. It's PTSD. Get yourself a therapist. Mine is proud I've got a pet, even if it's not mine. Says it shows emotion, attachment, and responsibility. I keep talking to her about you, and she wants to meet you. As do my parents.

I don't want you to solve this, but I understand if you need to. If you're going to go through with this, at least be safe. Have someone to back you up. And don't be a hero.

xoxo <3 <3 <3

P.S. Rusty keeps chewing on my slippers





Lucas has his feet buried in ash. Peering around, he sees dark flakes fall from the sky, and cliffs rising, intertwined with mosaical walls, spires, and pointed arches, forming a maze before him. Enormous myriapods climb the walls in and out of the canyons. Onto the horizon, a ziggurat of black basalt stands forlorn, and incantations can be heard from it.

Making his way through the ash, he descends through into a canyon, where an SUV is overturned and broken. His platoon lies wounded, defending themselves against the dark myriapods attempting to chew them. Lucas has been here before, that night, outside of Kabul. They all died, except for him and Cody. And somehow, they are alive again, here.

He rushes in, looking for a weapon.

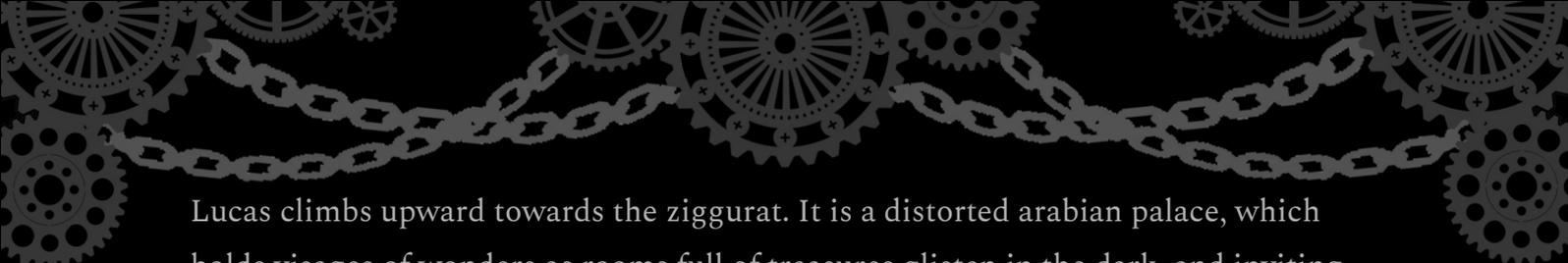
"ON YOUR SIX" he yells out, coming from behind them.

Lucas is equipped with his most ferocious arsenal. Despite his best attempts, the insects tear through most of his companions. There's just too many. The few soldiers still left alive beg for a quick death.

"No...no...not again" He stands there, shell shocked. When he moves, his feet drag slowly through the ash as if weighed down. Nearing the closest soldier, Bostic, he kneels down to him and cries, slipping the knife in between his ribs as he grips his hand.

After putting his brothers to rest, Lucas wanders the maze of cliffs and ruins. Days pass, cycles of night and day. The chanting accompanies him. An occasional creature attempts an attack, but the mercenary dispatches it with skill.





Lucas climbs upward towards the ziggurat. It is a distorted arabian palace, which holds visages of wonders as rooms full of treasures glisten in the dark, and inviting harems whisper. But there is also something sinister, as he passes through chambers of mutilations, and uniformed servants are at the beck and call of torturous djinn.

Finally, he steps into the throne room, where the Sultan, in his green turban and robes, his face covered by a mask, offers him a table full of black myriapod meat, cooked in all manner of ways.

His face is a twisted shadow of pain and sorrow when he finds this sultan, but he still manages a bow and a greeting in Arabic.

"May God give you health, master!"

Knives and swords drop from the many armed jugglers' hands when the sultan twists in surprise in his dusty throne. The incantations stop for a moment. A voice rises behind the mask, resonating throughout the halls.

"Hello, traveler. You must be tired after passing through my kingdom. Join me for a feast."

Lucas nods, knowing that a refusal would meet repercussions. He sits at his table opposite him, dropping the Arabic.

"I am very hungry"

The sultan is pleased, and the food, despite the look, is the best thing Lucas's ever tasted. He is obviously negotiating, having shown Lucas the best and worst of this realm





"Few men survive the maze. Still, you are trapped here, unless I command it otherwise. I would like to employ you. My opponent, Prince Köpfel, possesses the power of Al Khemi. I have heard that the waking world may have such knowledge. Retrieve it for me, and I shall grant you safe passage in the Dreaming."

"How could I refuse, master? I am only a humble servant." He continues eating, slowly. "May I ask a small favor in return? I have many enemies. I need to evade them." He takes a last bite and chews it for a moment.

The sultan strokes his chin for a moment, and Lucas gets the sense of a distorted face behind the mask.

"Once you've retrieved the Al Khemi for me, I shall teach you how to harness secrets from their slumbering minds. In this, there is power. I shall also pass on how to abandon your body and flee into the Dreaming, if ever need be."

"Your will be done, master. How shall I find this Al Khemi?"

"Worry not, mercenary. You will know. Wake up now."

Lucas down on something hard, and spits it out. On his plate, a severed finger and an ear. The blood in his veins turns to ice. Table and all the dishes consist of his butchered platoon. Lucas jumps up from his bed.





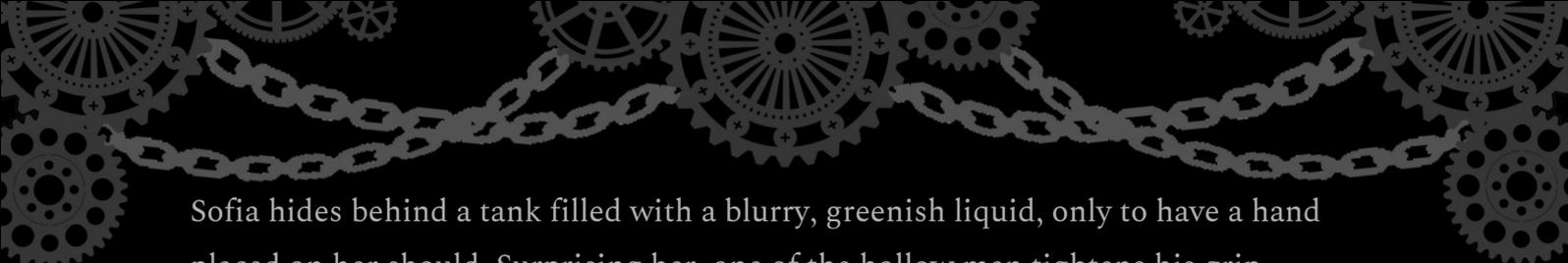
Hazy fog covers the crimson jungle, and the wet red foliage brushes against Sofia's skin. Despite the many insects buzzing, the forest is silent. Only an ethereal music calls out. Everything trembles as the source is revealed: a dark pyramid, rising through the mists. The scenery is blurry, but Sofia can make out movement on the rising layers. Smoke churns out of numerous alcoves, fires lighting up dancers, their shadows larger than life.

Her feet take her step by agonizing step towards the obsidian colored pyramid. The three blood moons in the sky serve as a guiding light to things hunting tonight. Way before reaching the pyramid, by the side of a waterfall where teathed lotus float and primates drink, Sofia finds a camp with few busy men in lab coats, their faces are covered in gas masks. The cry of a child can be heard.

Having come all this way to uncover the missing children's case, Sofia sneaks past the lab coats into one of the tents. A stench fills the place, and sounds of mechanical pumping fill the room. Children are hooked up to hollow machines, with tubes on their mouths and genitalia. A central machine has a pulpit grown out of some sort of resin, and behind it, playing with some dials, a skeletal, grey skinned creature with white eyes and a metal mask that meshes into its chest. The children are mutated, with extra limbs and cancerous growth. Some have postoperative sutures. The worst is the child crying, a mess of tentacles rising from its face.

All the reporter can do from crying out is biting her own arm. The thing at the pulpit hasn't noticed Sofia. The singing gets louder, approaching.





Sofia hides behind a tank filled with a blurry, greenish liquid, only to have a hand placed on her shoulder. Surprising her, one of the hollow men tightens his grip. Against her will, she is dragged out. As they descend, archaic, immense living machinery whistles and oozes. Somewhere at the bottom, a set of men and women in tubes are hooked up in a similar manner to the children above. After a beating to subdue her, Sofia is placed in the tank, tubes inserted in every orifice, and submerged.

Time passes. The singing gets louder. The tank drains, and a multiarmed blue woman with a thousand cut wounds on her body raises her from the tank. As she gives Sofia a kiss, the reporter notices her savior is bloated with pregnancy. Dropped on the floor, Sofia runs for the elevator, heading for the surface, getting more nauseous as she does so. By the time she sees the light again, she vomits larvae, and wakes up.

Ricardo runs through a dark subterranean cave sustained by columns inscribed with illegible writing. Patches of men in star filled robes perform rituals over glowing circles in which shadows play. Books rot on carved-in rock shelves in the wall, and cauldrons of bubbling substances are connected to machines. Further away, the cavern opens up into a massive dark sea, from which a clockwork tower ticks away, then suddenly sounds for midnight, resonating through the cave.

Ricardo tries to read the books, gingerly handling them with the care of a librarian. The symbols are indecipherable, and seem to have a life of their own. Ricardo, however, picks up hidden knowledge from them. Dark secrets of transmuted sexual energies from intercourses with young virgins. Dark secrets he already knew.





She's at best, maybe 15. Her hands are tied with a belt strapped to the ceiling above Ricardo's altar. The magician is fornicating away, struggling to maintain her wet, despite the tears streaking beneath her face mask. The tears turn to blood, as a pair of bleeding wings tear out of her back. The ritual is working, Ricardo thinks. Soon I'll hear the secrets hidden behind the Lie. At Ricardo's back, a red bearded man with a black-worm embroidered gambeson adjusts his monocle.

"Interesting. I've never seen this ritual before. I should keep an eye out on you."

He produces a fire red metal branding rod, and drives it into Ricardo's right buttock.

The pain shocks Ricardo awake. His cold sweat itches near where the brand touched, and the skin there has a rash. It looks like a combination between a cross and half-moon.

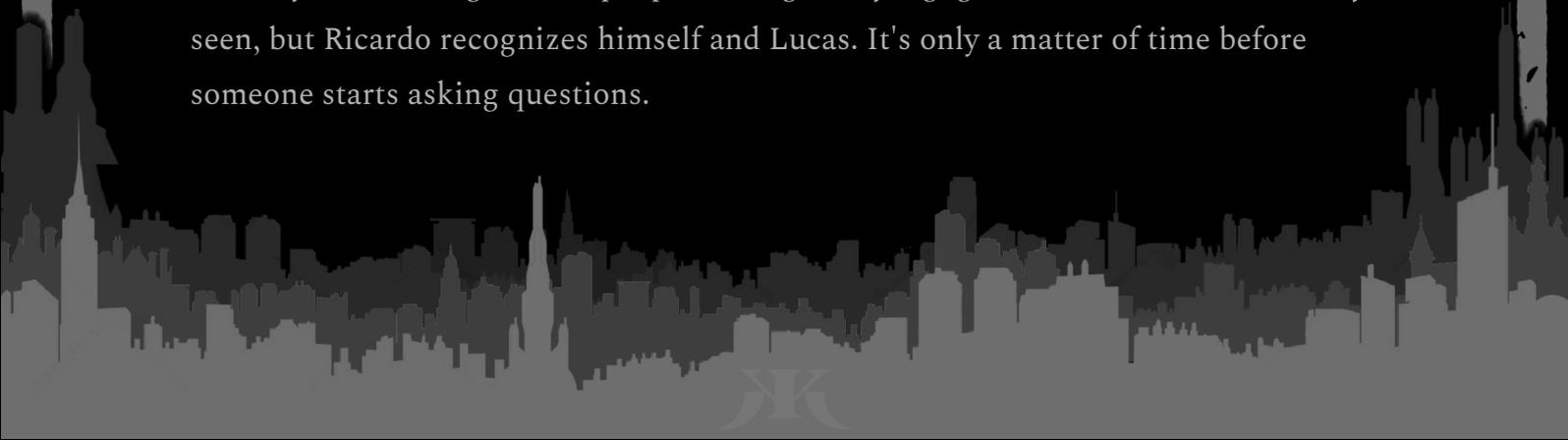
Dawn slowly creeps in, but the cold light of the rainy morning brings in no comfort. Outside, citizens are going about their daily lives. An old lady is walking her dog. A few schoolchildren are catching a bus. The large screen TV is showing news reports of politicians in red ties discussing. The heading reads.

"Deckard de Brun Group shareholders charged with conspiracy."

The news cycle over, and the next headline is more familiar.

Synagogue massacre, suspects at large

A blurry CCTV image shows people exiting the synagogue. Their faces aren't clearly seen, but Ricardo recognizes himself and Lucas. It's only a matter of time before someone starts asking questions.





An unknown number lights up Jorrit's phone. Outside, rain taps against the window. The detective, shaving with a disposable kit, picks up, placing it on speaker.

"Yeah?"

"Jesus Christ, Geesbaeck, finally."

"Hansen?" Jorrit stops shaving.

"I'm at Overamstel. Vice busted at my door earlier, claiming drug charges and murder accessory. The fuck did you do?"

The idea of his partner in prison wasn't encouraging.

"Fuck, die klootzakken!", Jorrit curses in Dutch, "They got nothing though, we clear as day, man. Just keep denying, stick to the story. I'ma look into it, talk to Benny maybe. You gonna be out again in no time" His voice intense and measured, attempting to calm what must be his partner the best he can.

"They're probably tracing you. Drop your service phone, and get the fuck out of wherever you are. And if you do end up seeing Benny, tell him to send legal counsel. They gave me one fucking call. You're it, Geesbaeck. Oh. And if I don't see you, it's been real knowing you."

"Take care man, I'll..."

There's a click, and the sound cuts out.

"Ah, fuck!"





There's a knock on the door. Sofia looks to Jorrit with wide eyes. He instantly gets worried and pulls his pistol, nodding at the reporter. Sofia takes a deep breath and moves to the door. She places her hand on the knob and plays up her feeble older woman voice.

"Hello? Who is it?"

She keeps the door closed, waiting for a response.

"Yes, hello, ma'am? Just wanted to let you know that the complimentary breakfast won't be available for much longer."

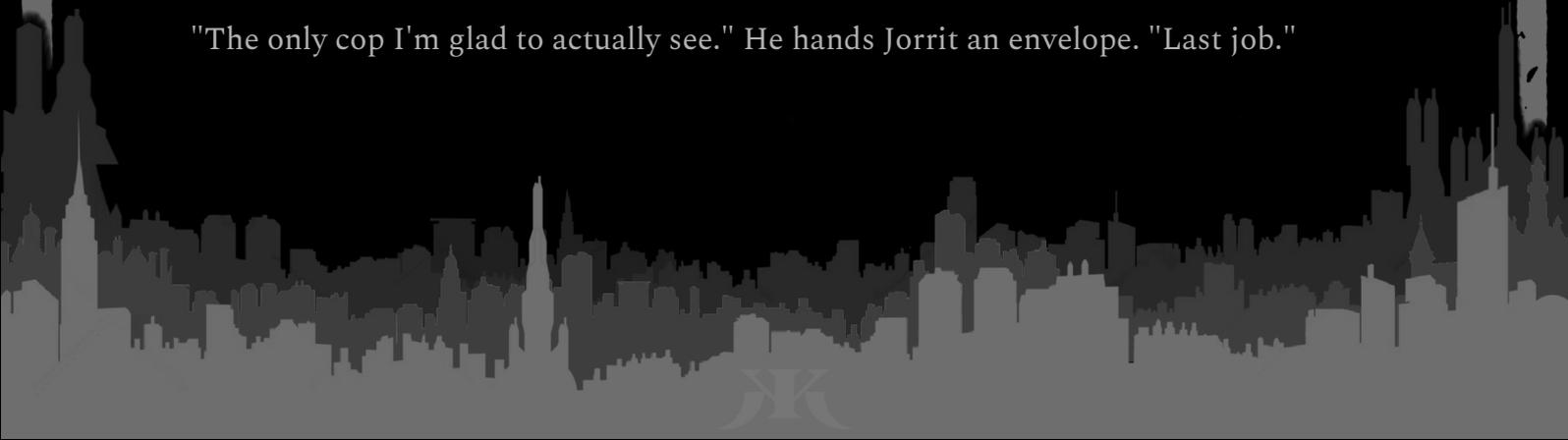
"Thank you dear, we will be down in a moment."

Lucas finally lets out that breath he's been holding the last couple of seconds Sofia waits for a few moments before turning back to the group. Jorrit wipes what's left of the shaving cream from his face.

"Pack up. We aren't safe here."

A quick breakfast and fashion run later, the group parks near a canal. Jorrit leads them down to a pier where a tour boat is anchored. It's an unextravagant affair, with a few seats and a low ceiling. On those seats are a number of thugs in sports clothes, most of them black. Their leader is a cut above, white as snow, nose pierced, neck tattooed, wearing a black t-shirt contrasted by a thin gold chain. All wrapped in a blue leather jacket with a tall collar. Benny is just getting off the phone.

"The only cop I'm glad to actually see." He hands Jorrit an envelope. "Last job."





He takes it, weighs it in his hands for a moment, but doesn't put it away just yet.

"Glad to see you too, Benny. But I'm not sure I can take this. Hansen is in trouble, and so am I gonna be, sooner than later. Gotta ask you a favor or three."

"Fuck, man, did ya think it a good idea to bring the hitte down on us? And you're asking for favors? Shiiiiit."

A few of the thugs move slowly to put their hands on the gun handles in their belt. Jorrit is having none of it, stepping to surprise them all.

"Broer, you know I love you but you gotta be kidding me - this isn't me bringing hitte your way, this is your moeite that my partner is taking the fall for, and I'm doing you favor warning you about it. They closing in on your ondernemingen, broer, and you better know this."

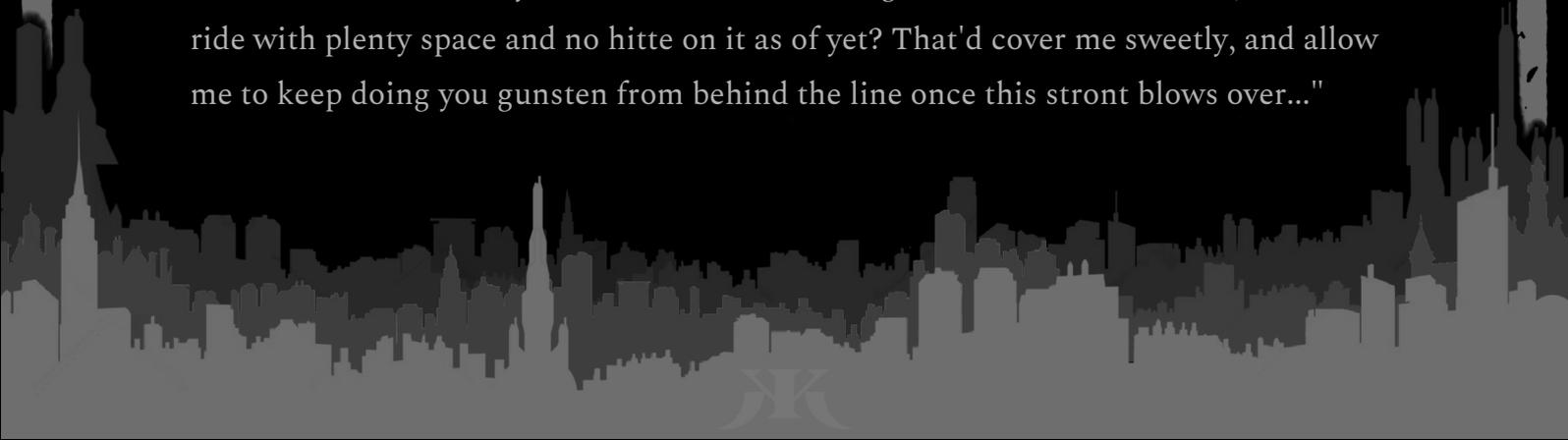
Jorrit pushes the envelope against his chest.

"If we're not in this together, none of us are gonna be in it at all much longer."

Benny raises one hand, while using the other to arrange his asymmetrical comb over. His men seem to ease up, especially as they catch sight of Parvati's gun and killer cold demeanor.

"Relax. Shit. Couldn't have come at a worse time. I'm sitting on a few kilos. Alright, I'll help how I can. What do you need, you bastaard?"

"Cool, broer. I want you to get legal counsel to Hansen - keep you in the loop what's happening at his end, and him a shot at getting out early before they pull him under in the bin. Win for everyone. Also a safe house to go down low for a stretch, and a ride with plenty space and no hitte on it as of yet? That'd cover me sweetly, and allow me to keep doing you gunsten from behind the line once this stront blows over..."





"Can do, broer! Aanholt, fetch the VW."

"Klaar, baas."

The thug in the Wu-Tang t-shirt relaxes, arranges his belt, and goes up the pier while Benny keeps talking.

"I can sort out the hideout. Give a moment, ya?" He picks up his mobile, and places a call. Once the conversation is over, Benny shakes the detective's hand and pats him on the shoulder in return.

"Got ya good digs in Bijlmer ."

The Wu Tang brother returns, and shows you the keys.

"Laten we gaan."

"Klaar wanneer jij het bent"

The van departs through the puddles of rain.



Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Stretching from the table, I use my fingernail, trying to scratch a bit of art into the wall.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

If only I had a harder, sharper fingernail I could trace a single line. If only my gangrenous, drained finger could bleed, I could draw a circle. If only my missing lungs could cough, I could spray a print.

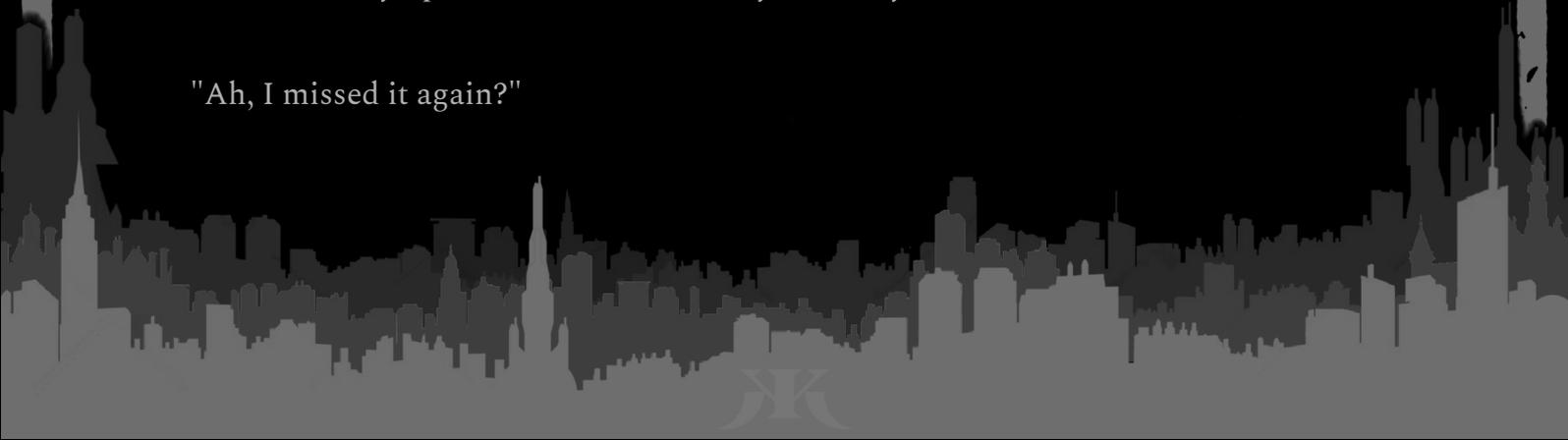
Something rips.

My struggle is interrupted when the butcher snatches a bit more of his liver with his hooves. The organ stretches like gum before relenting a piece, slapping into my open body cavity. In pain, I look at the bipedal pig's face, then at his canvas. It's an ideal, pastoral masterpiece. The pig uses the bit of liver to apply some more red to the apple sheperd girl is biting into.

Vivid and sublime, sober and surreal, comforting and troubling, it's perfect in every way I could never achieve.

A laughter emerges from his snot, echoing through the abattoir of carcasses lined up on hooks. I struggle for a bit, and my elbow pushes the cleaver off the butcher's table. The hooves beat on his skull in punishment, and the pig rages, destroying that beautiful piece of art. Even his squeals of the pigs' glass-shard pierced body resonates of symphonies so beautiful they make my ears bleed.

"Ah, I missed it again?"





Her. The demoness with no skin, passing through the row of hooked men and women, her hair sticking to the fresh meat, caressing the still living who scream out in pain.

Weakened, I try in vain to move my hand before the pig grabs it, and breaks it. The weakened bones snap easily. Flayed laughs. I feel all this has been going on forever.

"Did you just try to out-paint Ith'tuud? Some critic you turned out to be. And he's been trying his best to produce perfection. Look at him."

She strokes the tears on his face while he cries the sound of a violin.

"The very last of Togarini's clerics. And what are you, peasant, to criticize? You're barely useful as paint!"

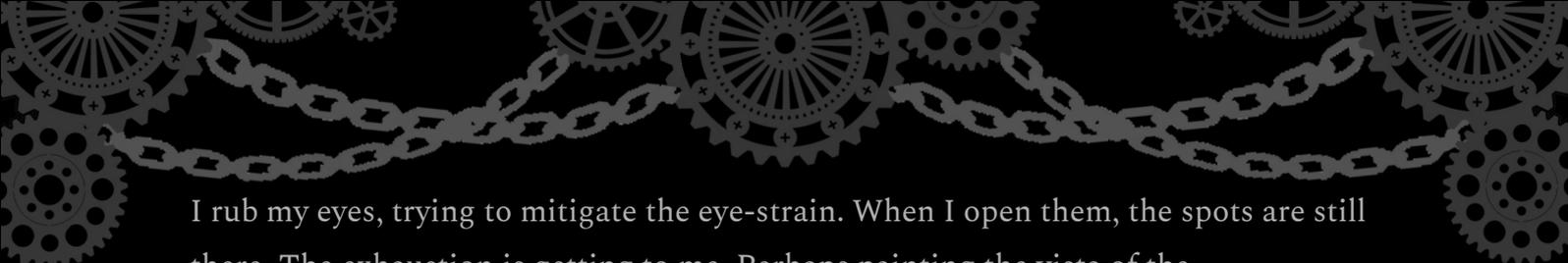
The succubi grabs my head and dislodges it from my body.

"Oh, no you don't you little poser. I'll give you another chance to be an artist. To paint the story of the Seekers of Awakening. You're going to start again from the beginning. Look."

Her fingernails crush into my eyes. By the time I open them, I awaken from my nightmare.

I wake up in a cold sweat with the sun rising outside my window through, light crawling inside the Bijlmer. It took at least ten minutes until my hands stopped trembling enough for me to roll a cigarette. I smoked it in the bathroom, my brain still trying to catch up with escaping the horrid nightmare I had. There was no way to shake the memories, it wasn't going away. So I did the only thing I knew to do: I painted.





I rub my eyes, trying to mitigate the eye-strain. When I open them, the spots are still there. The exhaustion is getting to me. Perhaps painting the vista of the neighborhood on such a large canvas was a bad idea. But I found those perfect little houses from the window of the gallery. There's one I especially like, an old brick building, with poison ivy climbing on the roof and the squatter lightning tagged on the side. It reminds me of my younger days, when I too was squatting. The eyestrain doesn't seem to go away.

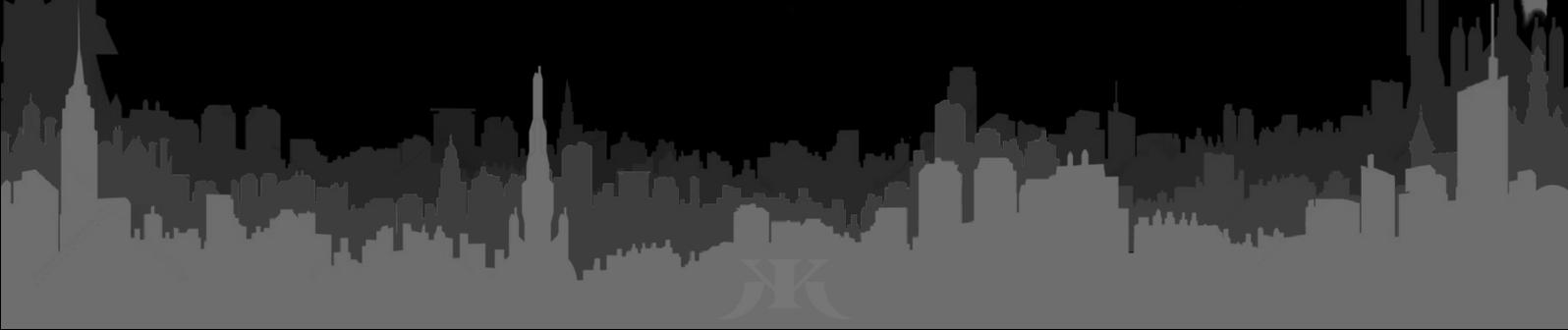
I struggle through and finishing my art. It's not a bad landscape, but now I see that in my creative fever I paid a bit more attention to that house than usual. The lighting is now azure colored, the vines more wild and out of control. There's even something glinting in the window, a dark shape staring outwards.

It's... not what I wanted. I don't know if the painting's good or bad, but it's not what I wanted. I know what I want, and I'm still empty inside.

After locking up, I exit the galleria, and pass through the shopping mall, choosing the closest exit. Behind me, the wide high-rise apartment block towers over the small commercial center, blocking the view to the rest of the city. In front, the park is cut by a bridge passing over a small pond.

One look at the inhabitants and I remember why I love the neighborhood. A set of polish people in overalls, hardhats, and steel pointed boots are hauling a ladder and tool bags as they head for work. A black businesswoman in a copper suit speaks in an African dialect on the phone. Further away, a collection of Dutch college kids have set up a few wooden stalls, and are selling homemade confectionery and decorative crafts.

Yet I can't seem to shake that feeling of dread. Perhaps it's the dark rain clouds, and the wind pickup up the autumn leaves announcing bad weather that's got me down after all.





After some sketches in the park, the sky pours all its ill intent on my head. Having just enough to purchase a coffee, I head for a nearby pastry shop. The waitress looks a bit in disgust as I hand her the coins. Further away, a balding, grotesquely obese man in a business suit sits almost unmoving in front of a large plate of waffles, reading a newspaper.

A drop dead gorgeous blond in a skintight red dress and push-up bra steps into the cafe, heels clicking on the glass floor. Passing the glass showcases of cakes and pastries, she shakes and closes her umbrella. Sitting down in front of the obese man, she lights a cigarette.

"You can't smoke in here."

The dress shoots a look that the waitress refuses to face, and leaves her to inhale. Satisfyingly blowing out smoke, the dress speaks to the obese man.

"I hear congratulations are in order for wiping out Yesod's bootlickers."

"It is done. Finding them was the problem."

"Yeah, you straight types are really bad at that."

"Toy with me not. You are here for a purpose."

"Yeah. And I can find them for you. If they're running from the law, they'll land somewhere with the Penose. My clutches, basically."

"My master will reward you."

"Oh, please, your Archons disappear all the time! I need something more substantial. Up front."



"What do you want, Samael bitch?"

The fat man's gaze wanders, and lands on me. I stand from the table, feeling something is not right. He keeps his round glasses on me, and cold sweat pours from my spine. Something's not right here. My knees go weak from the gaze, and I'm paralyzed for a moment. Just enough to hear the end of the conversation.

"You've got a few good boys locked up in the citadel. Drath'tan, for one... Helloooo?"

She whistles and waves in front of the fatman's face. He does not move. The dress turns around, nonchalantly looks me in the eye, and says:

"Oh, honey... did you just fuck up!"

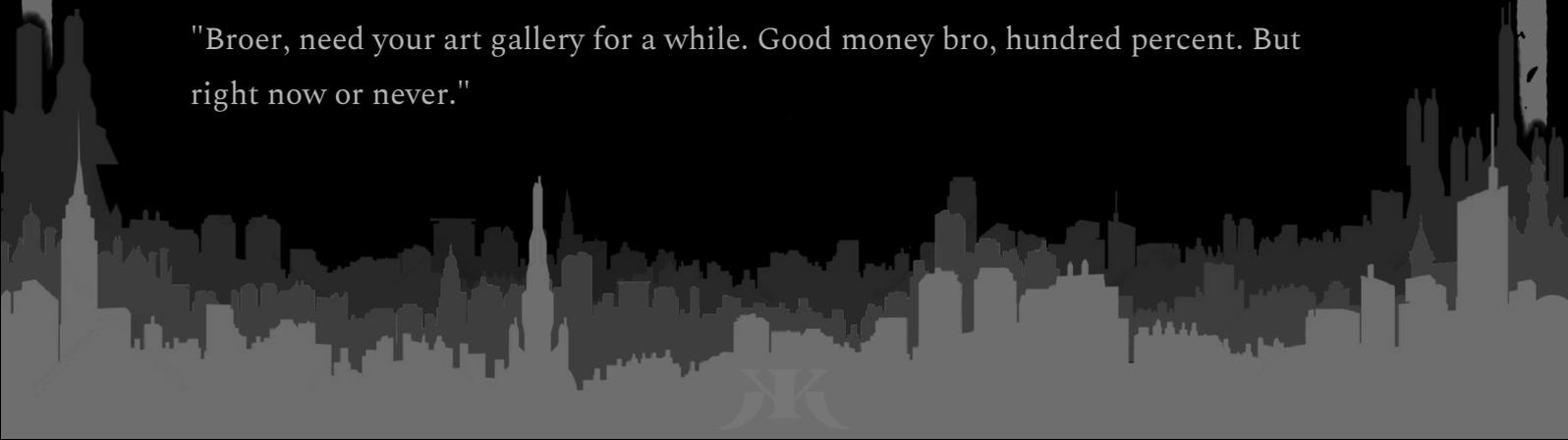
Her directness shocks me, and I back away from the table when I see my sketchpad with all my drawings on the table. Probably a month's worth of work.

The couple don't move. The woman is smiling. I bend to pick up my sketchpad, the first page depicting the cafe scene I've captured this whole time.

The sketch is monstrous. The fat man is an obscene pallid toad, with cancerous growths. The woman is a mesh of mutilated flesh and melted metal, with her lit cigarette hand replaced by a smoking machine gun fused to her body. My phone rings.

I panic, slam into the door, breaking some glass as I pass it. By the time I've stopped running, out of breath, I'm near the shopping complex. The phone rings again. Without thinking about it, I pick up. It's Benny.

"Broer, need your art gallery for a while. Good money bro, hundred percent. But right now or never."





"What do you need it for?"

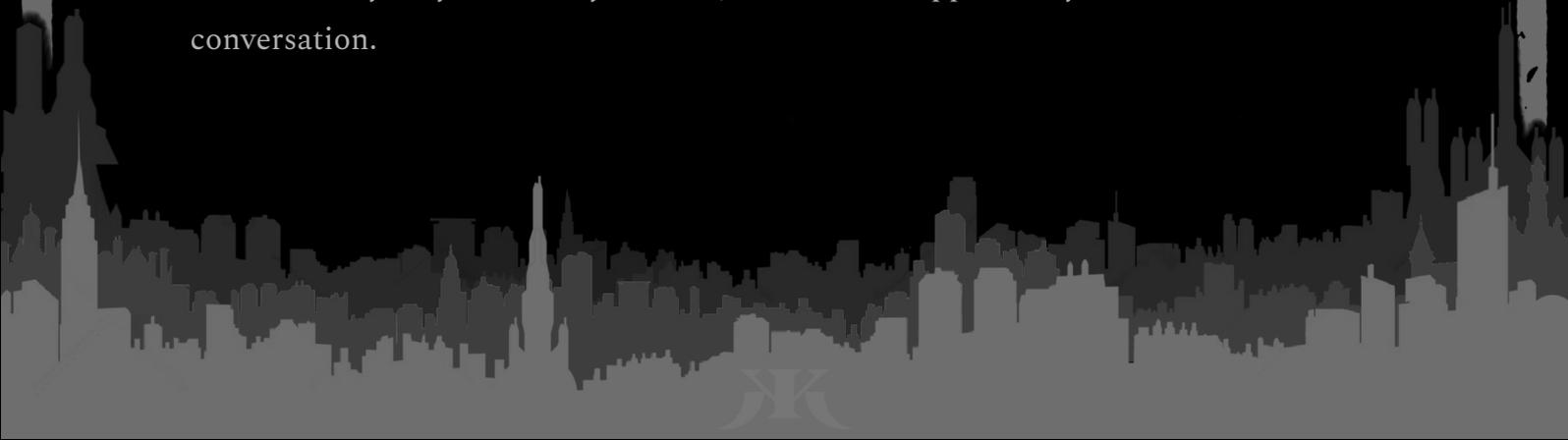
"The fuck you care? Ya in me for 10k, didnay?"

With no use protesting against my mobster boss loanshark, I wait by the window for the van to pull in front of the shopping mall. The group walks past the fashion shops, rides up the escalator, and meets me in front of the gallery. Aanholt hands over an envelope. The crowd steps inside, admiring some of my art pieces.

Since my gallery contains some peculiar artwork, to say the least, everyone spends a bit of time looking around. Afterwards I give them the tour of the wood paneled studio area above it, kitchen and living included. Then they get settled in making plans and conversing on the balcony overlooking the galleria below.

With a moment of reprieve after checking my guests in, I breathe a sigh of relief, and retire to my room to collect my thoughts. I turn towards the canvas, considering more work. I see it again, that thing in the window of the house. It's a dark silhouette, only now it has two points of light. They kind of look like a pair of round spectacles, just like the fatman in the... cake shop did. I doubt that those... things... will just give up their chase. Somehow I suspect that they're worse than any loanshark on my back.

Unable to look at it any longer, I go back to the living space and kitchen. Aanholt returns with a few shopping bags. Nodding towards Jorrit, he says: "Complimenten van de baas." He asks for the kitchen, then fires up the grill. Lunch and dinner consists of mushrooms, yam, cassava sauce, and a chicken so well fried it's almost burned. Everybody feels dizzy and full, so I take the opportunity to make conversation.





"So what are you working on?"

"Ah, well..." The muscled black man who introduced himself as Lucas scratches his head for a moment. "It's a movie, kind of a mix of The Wizard of Oz and Godfather. Lots of wizards and monsters and shit. By the way, anything from the creature department?"

The other man, who offered his name as Ricardo, looks up from his books to Lucas.

"Lictors, which is what I think the Prosecutor is, have a certain weakness. Each one is different. There is a story of one Lictor who was finally killed only by strangling him with a bronze piano wire. And all I can think of is that this one is particularly shy. He covers his face in photos, and he brutally went after the journalist we found hanged, who was in possession of photos of the Lictor that he did not cover his face in."

"I'll stick with the semtex and bullets. Might be easier to film."

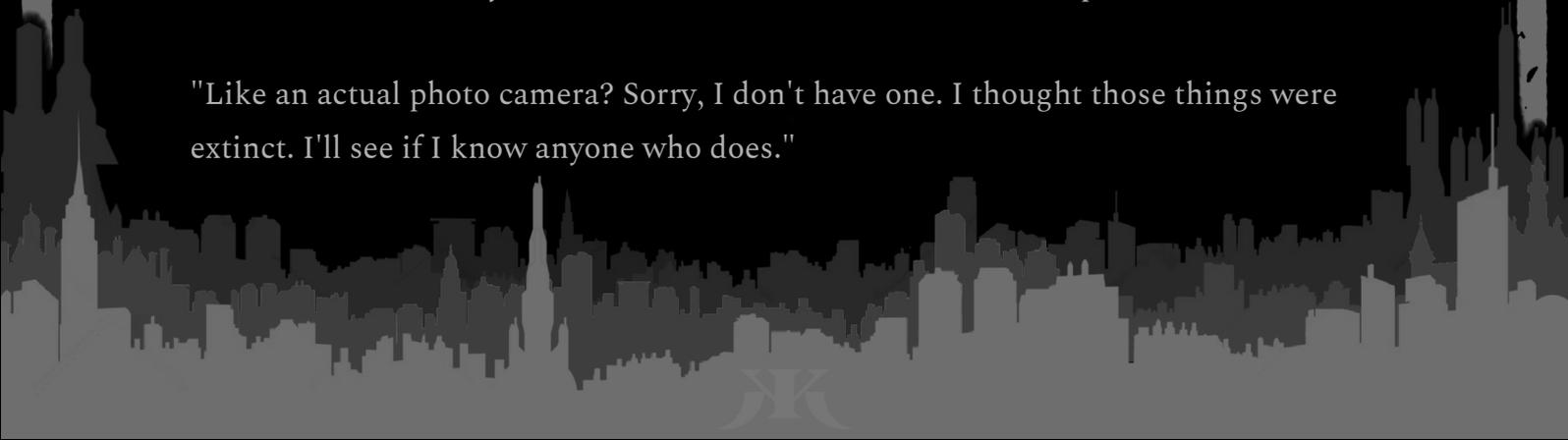
"Speaking of bullets, could you get some bulletproof vests for all of us?"

I study him for a moment. He looks more like a businessman, wearing an off-the-rack suit, overcoat, and scarf. He has a panama style hat that he usually takes off indoors and wears dress boots that look as if he cared for them more so than the overcoat.

"Maybe our new friend can." Lucas answers and waves over Benny's thug, arranging some details. Meanwhile, I get questioned by the Chicano.

"Sir? Could I trouble you for a camera or two? It is of utmost importance."

"Like an actual photo camera? Sorry, I don't have one. I thought those things were extinct. I'll see if I know anyone who does."





I'm still not sure how I feel about the painting, and I need to find some cameras. I put in a few calls, and two of my regular exhibition freeloaders show up, the punk/metal sculptor Bazooka, and the ever somber Dirge in his combat boots and leather trench coat. They bring a bottle of vodka, joking while waiting for the great reveal.

Bazooka whistles.

"Damn, son! Like, I knew you could paint, but this is quite good. It's completely normie, but at the same time it scares the crap out of me. I don't really agree to the idea of dangerous squatters, being one myself, but this, this works."

Dirge nods, quietly approving as always. He brushes his hair out of his eyes, and takes a closer look.

"What's that that whirlpool in the window?"

The shape in the window is gone, now replaced by a swirl of light. Dirge pokes a finger into my ribs. He hands me this old polaroid.

"I want it back intact."

"You're the best, man!" I check out the camera for a minute "I haven't seen one of these in ages. Where do you get the film for it?"

"Professional secret. But it has something to do with the fact that I took a photography class, and my professor had plenty to spare."



With official artist approval, I take it and hang it in the main gallery with the help of the two critics. Jorrit, sitting outside with Aanholt trading fucked up stories about hookers and drugs, sees the painting.

"Why... What... Why did you paint that?" He utters between pressed lips, suddenly paler than before and with a fixed stare at the artwork. His fists are clenching at his sides.

"It's the house across the street. First time I've painted it this way. Or noticed it, really."

The detective grabs me by the lapels and gets all up in my face.

"You... what have you got to do with this?! I'll... I'll do unspeakable things to you and your shit fucking gallery if you don't tell me immediately!!"

I find myself pressed against a wall, with Lucas prying the cop off me, trying to calm him down.

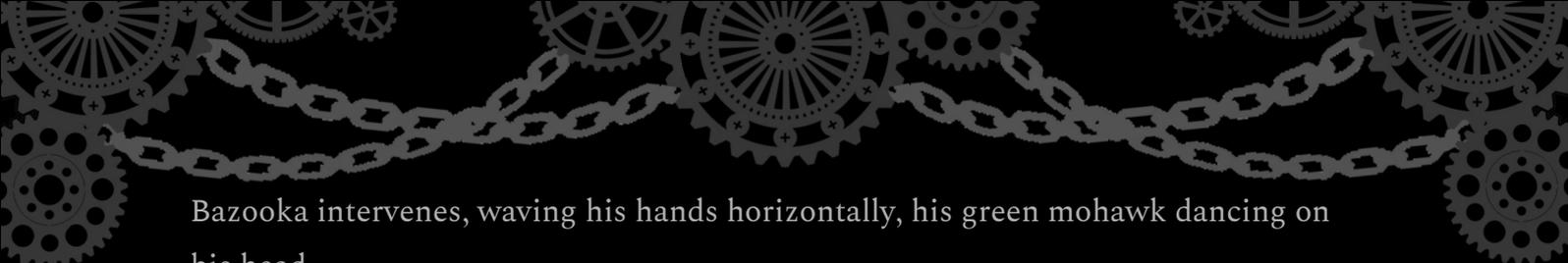
"What the fuck are you doing?"

My friends and Aanholt intervene, breaking up the fight.

"You got some explaining to do!"

"I'm not gonna be sleeping no more. This. Where is this?" He points to the painting again.

"That house over there!" I point to the suburb. " You lost it over a painting? Man, you need to check yourself into the looney bin!"



Bazooka intervenes, waving his hands horizontally, his green mohawk dancing on his head.

"Bozos, relax! It's just a fucken painting! Quite a good painting, but not worth fighting over! "

He points to the canvas, but it's different now. Instead of the whirlpool the shining round glasses are back, worn by a clearly inked face. The one from the diner. Only I didn't put it there.

"Wouldn't it be better to smoke a peace pipe, and forget about this?" Bazooka grabs the joint he kept above his ear, and swishes it around, whistling.

"Is that Aalberts?" Ricardo asks.

"I'm gonna do something about shit." And with that, Jorrit makes to march off.

"Huh. Guess not. Where's he going?"

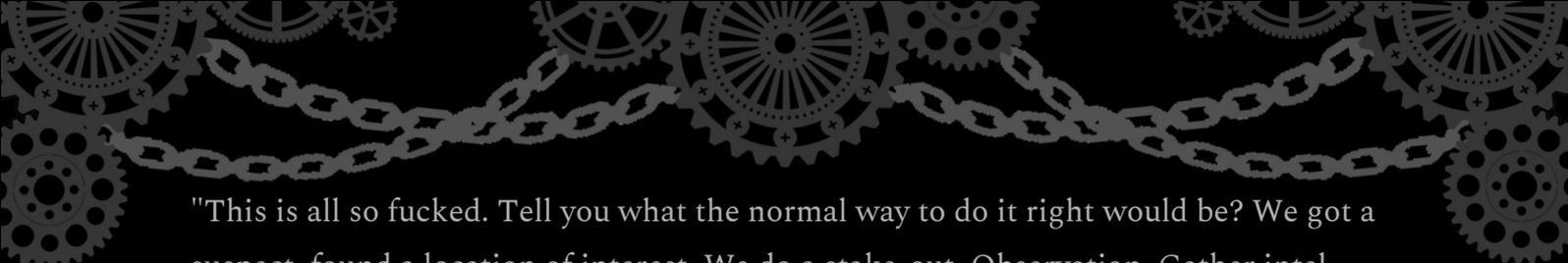
"Fuck! I know where he's going!" Lucas rushes to intercept him, grabbing his shoulder.

"You want revenge you dumb bastard? Then let's do it right! You go off all half cocked and we all die."

Shrugging off the hand from his shoulder with a gruff move, Jorrit nevertheless stops walking.

"Come on man, let's do this right."





"This is all so fucked. Tell you what the normal way to do it right would be? We got a suspect, found a location of interest. We do a stake-out. Observation. Gather intel. Get a good and solid team together, or just some vicious dudes psyched up for violence, in a pinch, and go take a look around in there. That'd be doing it right."

"Let's do that first... if the artist will let us. You need to apologize."

"And if the guy is actually there, we arrest. Or not. In this case, definitely not. And I don't even care if it ends my career, or me. I just wanna put a bullet in his stupid goddamn face. And then you can go tell Ricardo about his mystic weakness that I found."

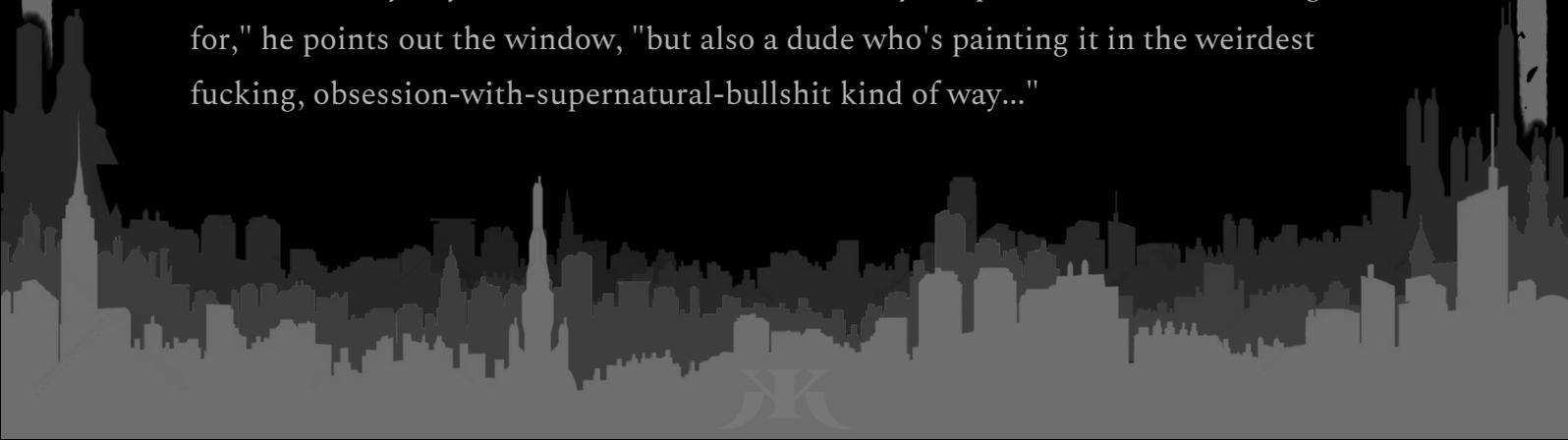
We all take a step out to the front balcony. Bazooka and Dirge, together with a small black kid with cornrows and an orange sleeveless parka have red eyes from the peace pipe. Aanholt comes in, says something to the kid, who cracks up, and gives Lucas a duffle bag. I catch a glimpse inside, a few kevlar vests.

"I am so sorry that happened. I mean, like, why did you paint that anyways? Why that house? So it's the view from your room, right, I get that. But...?"

"Don't know. Just did. "

"This... this is all too much of a whole bunch of coincidences. Call me paranoid, but..." He hesitates for a moment.

"...I end up with a bunch of people who, turns out, you're all into some business relating to Aalberts, no less. Then we draw heat and move into a random crib, provided to us by a random contact - who sure as hell has got nothing to do with Aalberts or any of you - and there we find... not only the place we've been looking for," he points out the window, "but also a dude who's painting it in the weirdest fucking, obsession-with-supernatural-bullshit kind of way..."



"So you're not theater performers then?"

Lucas sighs.

"No, not really. where shall I begin?"

Normally, Parvati wouldn't have paid any attention to a shopping mall Yoga center, but what must have caught her eyes was correctly written Sanskrit. It's a bit from the Bhagavad Gita.

You are what you believe in. You become that which you believe you can become.

A poster in front, with dates that seem to match this week.

Visiting holy man from India, Sri Lanka, Vikas Chipalunakar has spent ten years under the bodhi tree, seeking enlightenment. The man who performed the last rites to Arthur C. Clarke is coming near you. Karishma Yoga Center, Bijlmer Mall. Sign up now.

The yoga center is replete with candles and idols as only an Westerner would organize. Parvati recognizes a few of the most common ones: Shiva, Ganesha, the laughing Buddha. All side to side, irregardless of faith or hierarchies, without particular offerings. The place is nearly empty, just a set of unclean cheap plastic squares for a mat. But underneath the portrait of the three faced Lord Brahma, the yogi is demonstrating his skills. His chest to the ground, his feet and head are lifted upwards, forming a candle. He holds the posture, before reverting into a crossed leg position, and inviting you over.

"Namaste. Closer, sister. Do you still speak Hindi?"



"Namaste. Yes, I still speak Hindi, and it's nice to meet a fellow countryman, particularly one of your stature."

The yogi smiles when he hears Parvati speak.

"Ah, a Tamil. I would recognize that accent anywhere."

He then stands.

"As for my stature, as you can see sister, I'm quite short. Please."

He invites the assassin to join the class, and puts her through quite the workout. By the end, all the participants are flushed and breathing hard, while the yogi skips and jumps. The westerners take their turns offering their respects, flapping their lips. The yogi is patient with all the naive questions. Finally, when almost all the students are packing, Vikas approaches Parvati.

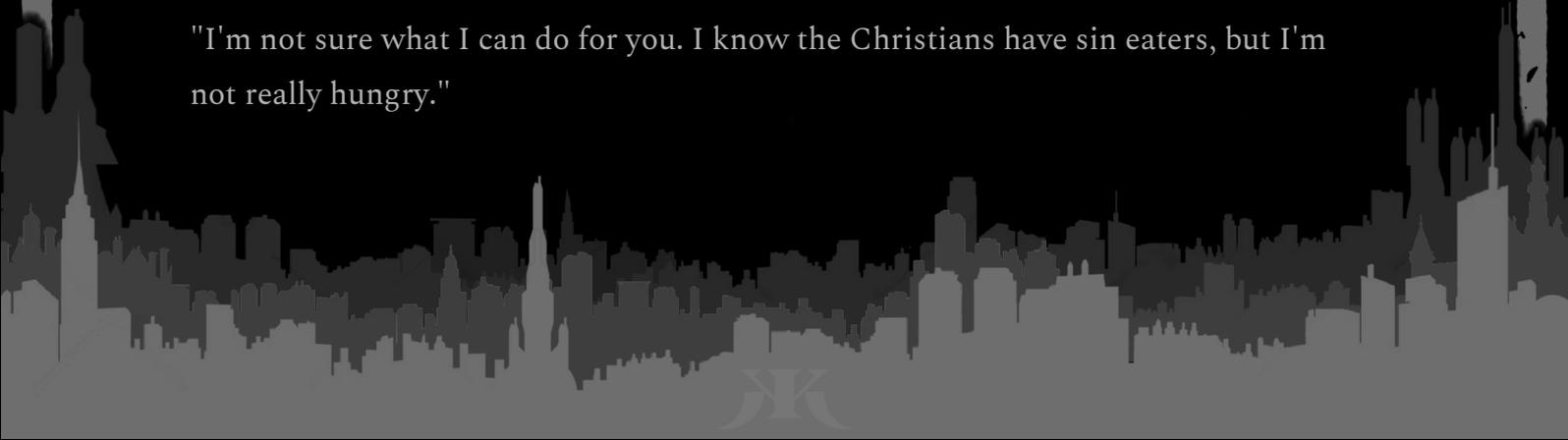
"Glad to have your company. Is there anything else I can do for a countryman?"

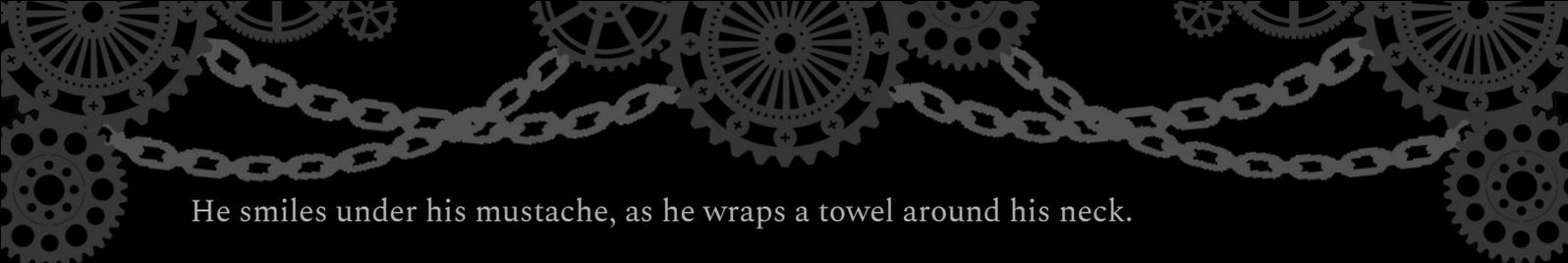
"Confession, perhaps. I know that a Christian priest would be more appropriate for this, but in a pinch, anybody will do."

"Join me for some chai."

The backroom is a complete antithesis of the yoga gym, a claustrophobic white crockery nightmare. There are a few stains in the corner, a dirty counter with a kitchen table made of metal. Vikas fills the green electric kettle with water, then pushes down the button, while he grabs the tea bags.

"I'm not sure what I can do for you. I know the Christians have sin eaters, but I'm not really hungry."





He smiles under his mustache, as he wraps a towel around his neck.

"At least listen, if nothing else. And if you really feel that way, then I'm sure I can find a Christian sin eater."

Vikas applies various powders to the final brew, not necessarily in a ritualistic fashion, but taking his time. The black tea is strong and spiced with cardamom. He sits down across the table, hands folded on the cup.

"Tell me your problems. Maybe I'll tell you mine as well."

"My...problems...I..." A breath is taken looking at the tea cup in Vikas' hands for a moment before looking up at his face. "If you've....discovered that someone is....a monster...metaphorically, or literally....what would be the best course of action?"

The yogi thinks for a bit, his eyes wandering.

"I don't know if anyone is really a monster. What is order to the spider is chaos to the fly. Of course, I'd rather be the spider than the fly."

He chuckles.

"But there's always the wheel. That is karma. The monster will get what he deserves. Here or in the next life."

There's a thundering outside, and the yogi jumps off his seat.

"What was that?"

"Gunfire..."





As negotiations, reconciliations, and epiphanies happen over the painting, Benny and his whole posse walks in. Bazooka is accompanying them with his hands up, held at the business end of a nine millimeter. The posse must be at least twenty guns strong, and they're all pointed at us.

"Sorry Jorrit. Got a better offer."

Lucas doesn't hesitate for a moment, ushering us ahead of him to the stairwell. He pulls a grenade in one hand, and a pistol in the other.

"Hold it right there, motherfucker. You shoot one of us, the rest of us will gun you down like you're nothing."

"Okay boys, let's play, you go first!"

"Man, you're stone cold killer. Here's what we do. You walk, but the rest stay."

One of the thugs cocks his autoloader, sweat forming on his temples. Lucas lets loose the grenade, and it explodes, halving the thugs closest together. The breath of the explosion throws Benny into a nearby sculpture. A few of the thugs fire, but the blast dust makes it impossible for them to hit their target. Lucas retreats up the stairs, his breathing is heavy, pushing anyone in his way upwards.

"Fuck, fuck fuck, run you bastards!" he yells, kneeling, aiming at the bend in the stairway.

My studio apartment balcony gives me an overview of the gallery. The thugs are finally regrouping, trying to find cover behind the exhibits. Benny stumbles a few times trying to get up, but hides behind a taxidermied cacophony.



I look for a way out and I try opening the grated window to the fire escape. It's stuck. I spot Parvati quickly heading over, pistol drawn, and pausing before the gallery. She hasn't been noticed by the thugs, but mall security is heading her way.

Jorrit keeps the thugs down with potshots at their cover positions, and a hail of bullets responds to Lucas's attempt to move forward. He tries to find a target.

Dirge is talking to the police on the phone. I yell at him to hang up, only to be deafened by the noise. The posse is getting organized. The potshots Jorrit was planting ricochet of the stairs. Parvati kneecaps about half of the thugs, but a security guard, probably the only one with a gun, has her pinned down a moment later. I turn when I finally hear Benny swear.

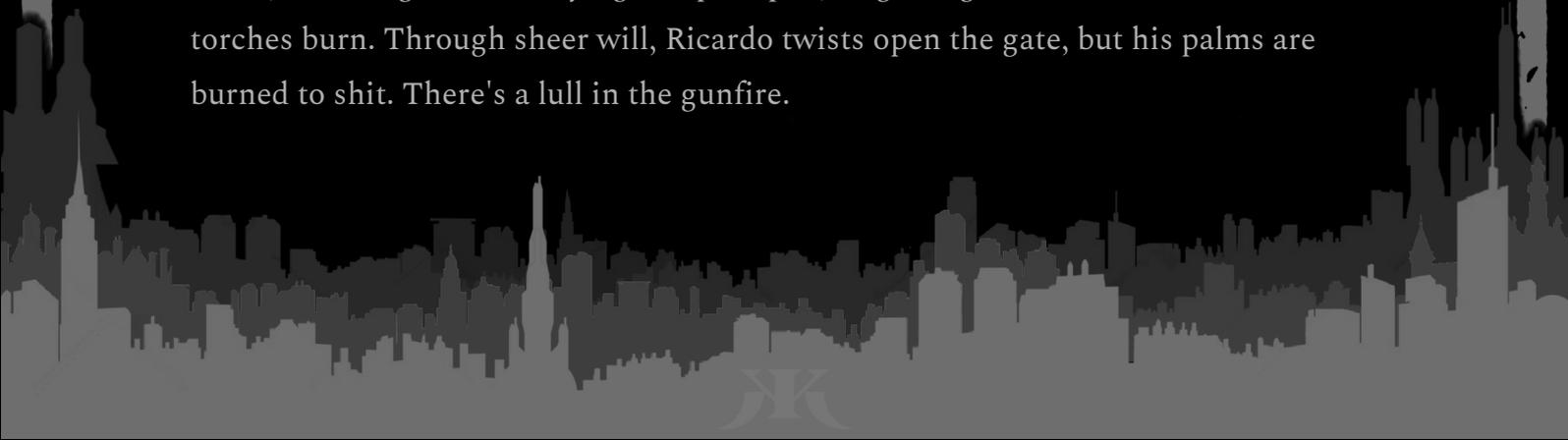
"Jij klooooooooooooooooootzak!!!!"

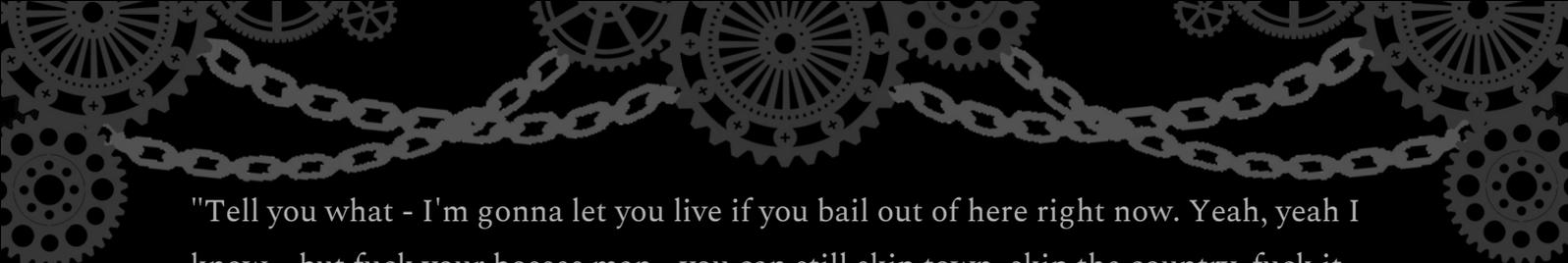
A bullet grazed his shoulder. I look for things to pry open the window. Ricardo points to Bazooka's bag, and I check it in a rush. All the tools a metal sculptor needs, from a circular saw to a drill. Everything except a crowbar. Of all the things...

Awake and still a little groggy Sofia is snapping pictures, cell in hand. I grab her away from the balcony, but notice the security guard is a bad shot. Jorrit tries to negotiate.

"You think again, Benny! Was that new offer really so much better?! See where it got you now!"

Ricardo puts on the welder mask, fires up a welding torch, and takes it to the glass of the window followed by the bars that are blocking their path. The torch heats up the metal, then he grabs at it trying to rip it open, forgetting for a moment how hot those torches burn. Through sheer will, Ricardo twists open the gate, but his palms are burned to shit. There's a lull in the gunfire.





"Tell you what - I'm gonna let you live if you bail out of here right now. Yeah, yeah I know... but fuck your bosses man - you can still skip town, skip the country, fuck it all... save your sorry hide. Last chance I'll offer you man! What do you say?"

"Alright broer! Alright! We're going! Just...don't shoot us."

Outside, Parvati takes careful aim, and blows out the guard's kneecaps, only to be tackled by his big rugby-fan partner in uniform. Parvati pistol whips the guard in the temple, knocking him out, she fires at the retreating thugs, but the gun doesn't work. She drops it.

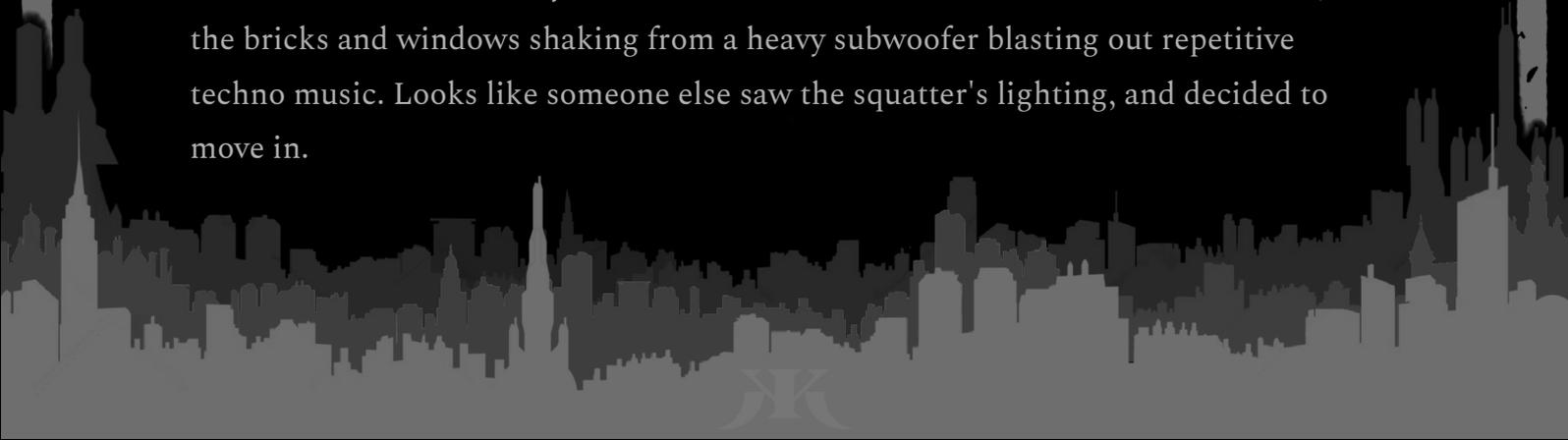
Everyone regroups upstairs, knowing there's only a matter of time before the cops come knocking. With both the police and the organized crime looking after them, a real and immediate choice becomes clear.

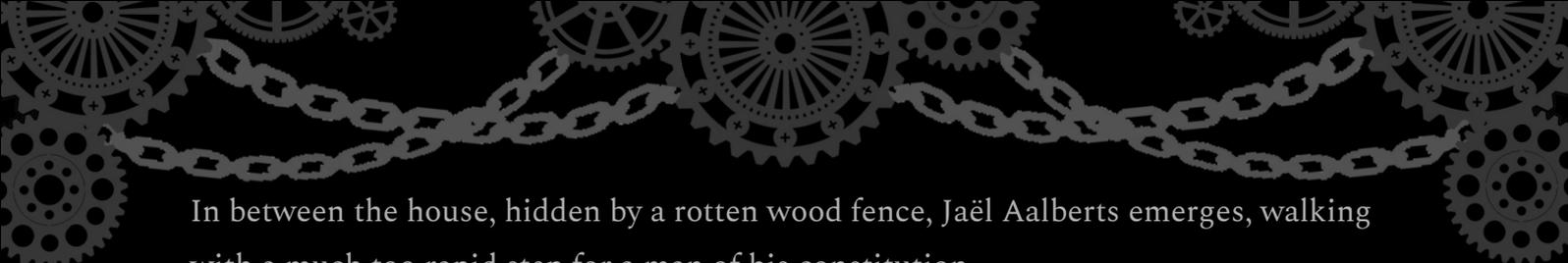
Blow town, or go after the Lictor.

I don't know why I choose to go with them. Maybe it's recognition, something about that house. Or the fact that the Penose boss I'm in debt to almost shot me up. Or that the heroin bricks he had me hide were under the floorboards of the galleria, now shot to all hell, ready for the police to inspect it.

We drive around the neighborhood through the night, considering our options. Late in the evening we settle upon investigating the prosecutor's house, and of course skipping town after that.

It must be at least 3 AM by the time we reach it. There's Music from the distance, the bricks and windows shaking from a heavy subwoofer blasting out repetitive techno music. Looks like someone else saw the squatter's lighting, and decided to move in.





In between the house, hidden by a rotten wood fence, Jaël Aalberts emerges, walking with a much too rapid step for a man of his constitution.

"There he is!!" Jorrit tries to open the door to the van as the others grab and stop him.

The prosecutor reaches the stairs to the entrance, looks up, and performs a few gestures. The music stops and the whole neighborhood is plunged into darkness. Everyone's devices go dead, even the van dashboard stops giving light. My eyes, adapting to the night blindness, watch as the door to the house opens, and the screaming starts.

To the light of the crescent moon, we move up to the windows, noticing movement. The detective lifts himself up by a drainpipe, staring into the elevated ground floor window. He ducks just in time, the glass shattering. Some college kid in a homemade sweater stained with blood, nose torn off, and fingers missing, comes halfway through. He vomits gore, looks me in the eye.

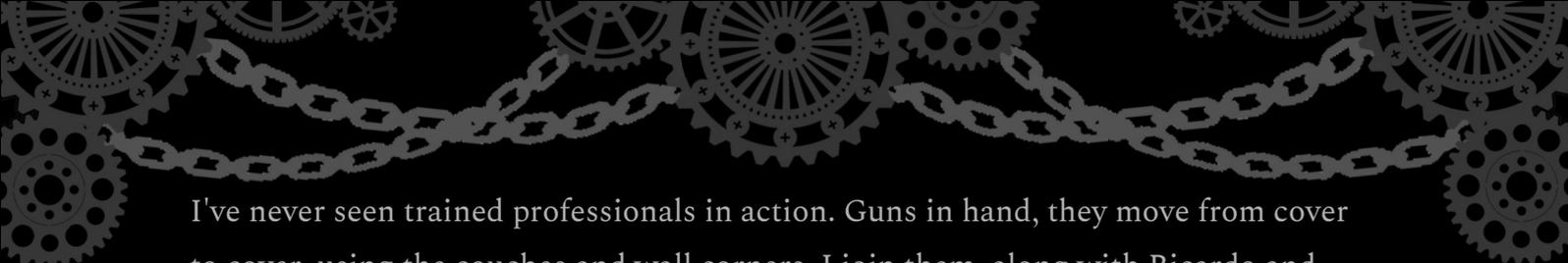
"HELP ME!!!"

Right before he gets dragged back inside. I hear heavy steps heading up the stairs inside. The prosecutor is heading upstairs.

"What the hell is going on in there?!"

Parvati stares inside through the main door, looking into a living room. Not as brave as her, I take only a peek. By the moonlight, it looks like most of the furniture has been emptied from the center, and only a few couches are lined on one wall, while a pair of giant speakers and a DJ pulpit lines the other. Past a low hanging wall is a kitchen, and the stairs beyond that.





I've never seen trained professionals in action. Guns in hand, they move from cover to cover, using the couches and wall corners. I join them, along with Ricardo and Sofia. Ricardo slaps his phone in frustration, to no avail. It's not coming back up.

Inside, trying to move quickly, I stop when feeling the warm, slippery floor. Puddles splash my ankles, and my boots have a tendency to pick up some sort of elastic, viscous material. Moving with speed on... what's left of the tenants... is tedious.

The floor protesting loudly under the slowing steps, the fighters make it to the low hanging wall. The rest of us watch from the entrance, eyes darting through the darkness. We stop, screaming resuming upstairs, passing through the trembling ceiling, even as bits of plaster fall on our heads.

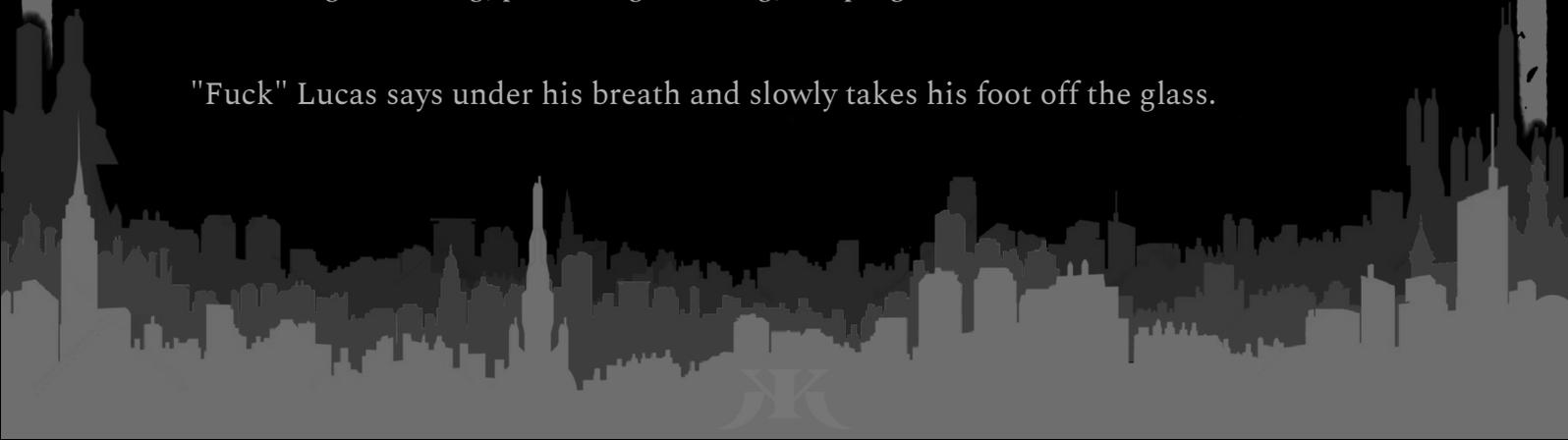
The shriek is violently cut short. Snapping sounds commence. It almost sounds like someone is breaking furniture with their bare hands. A bit of light emanates from upstairs now, reddish and flickering. The stairs aren't far away, only the kitchen remains to be passed.

A flashlight refuses to work, no matter how many times Jorrit smacks it with his hand. But he too notices that flickering upstairs, providing more and more light.

The light upstairs reflects on the kitchen floor like a sea of stars. I realize they're glass shards, most likely broken beer bottles. Behind Parvati, the rest of us have made it into the living room. Lucas passes something that looks like a grenade to the detective, and he moves forward, looking at the ceiling, oblivious. His first few steps begin with a crunch.

The stairs take a turn before going upwards. A fire upstairs is casting shadows. Something is moving, producing cracking, slurping sounds.

"Fuck" Lucas says under his breath and slowly takes his foot off the glass.





Parvati, catlike, jumps onto a sofa and crosses most of the kitchen, avoiding the glass. Jorrit and Lucas make a racket, but the cracking and slurping upstairs doesn't stop at all. Everyone else grabs any weapon at hand, either non-functioning flashlights, pipes, boards, chairs, or bottles.

We cross the stairs to the upper chamber. It was a bedroom, once. Now it's a charnel house of broken body parts, spread around torn and overturned furniture. The bed has been scavenged to feed a fire inside a torn beer keg in the middle of the room, which stands in an arcane circle scratched into the floor.

At the edge, chewing on a human hand, Aalberts, his shirt stained with gore.

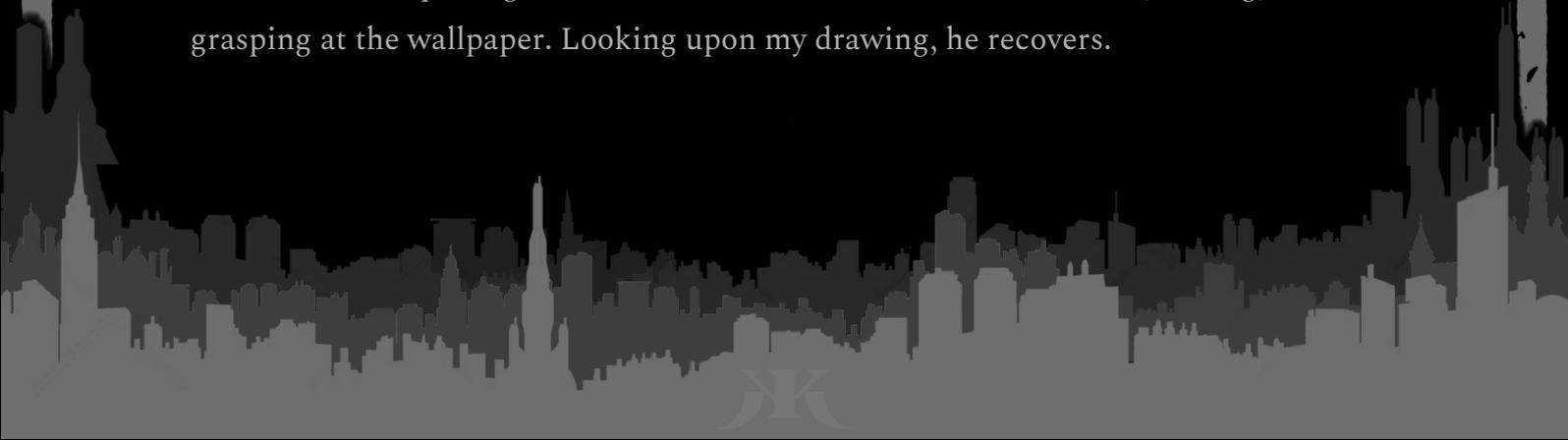
The prosecutor changes under the influence of the flames. His body grows more obscene, with a few extra redundant arms of his yellow, oily flabby skin. An underbite reveals sharp teeth, in which a severed arm still hangs. His belt is made of human intestines, and contains sharp blades as well as a foot and a skull. The Lictor croaks.

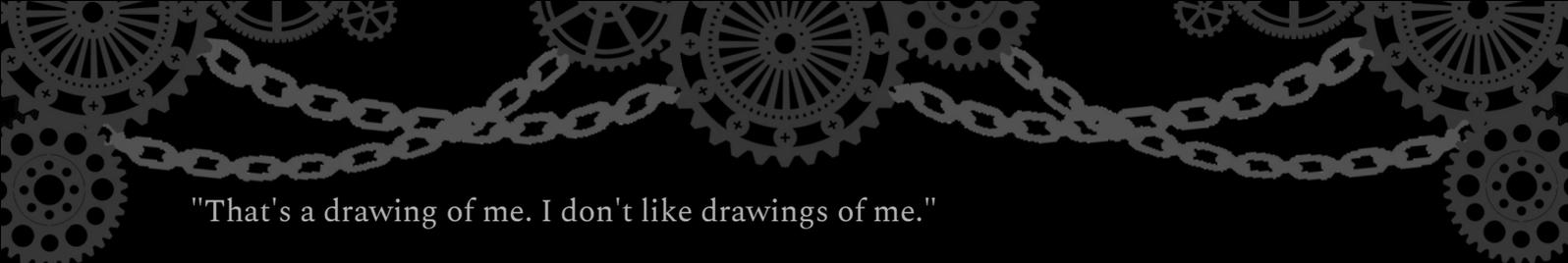
"Ah. Dessert."

Tears streak from my eyes, but I can't look away. It's too horrible to conceive. It can't be real. I am paralyzed to various degrees, feeling a range of insane emotion. The Lictor moves with amazing speed, his gut trembling as he advances forward.

I must be hallucinating from some of Benny's drugs or something, or I have really and truly walked into a waking nightmare. Almost in a trance I reach into my bag and pull out my sketchpad, attempting a portrait.

The force of the pelting bullets sends the creature back into a corner, reeling, grasping at the wallpaper. Looking upon my drawing, he recovers.





"That's a drawing of me. I don't like drawings of me."

Then launches into Parvati, ramming her, sending the assassin flying back towards the stairs.

Parvati rolls down the stairs, slamming into Sofia and Ricardo, knocking them off their feet. Only Jorrit, Lucas, and I remain upstairs to face the madness. The Lictor jolts his head upwards, sending that arm still trapped in his teeth down his throat. A greenish, foul smelling tongue escapes from the freed jaw.

"Artists deserve just rewards."

He gestures again, like he did at the entrance.

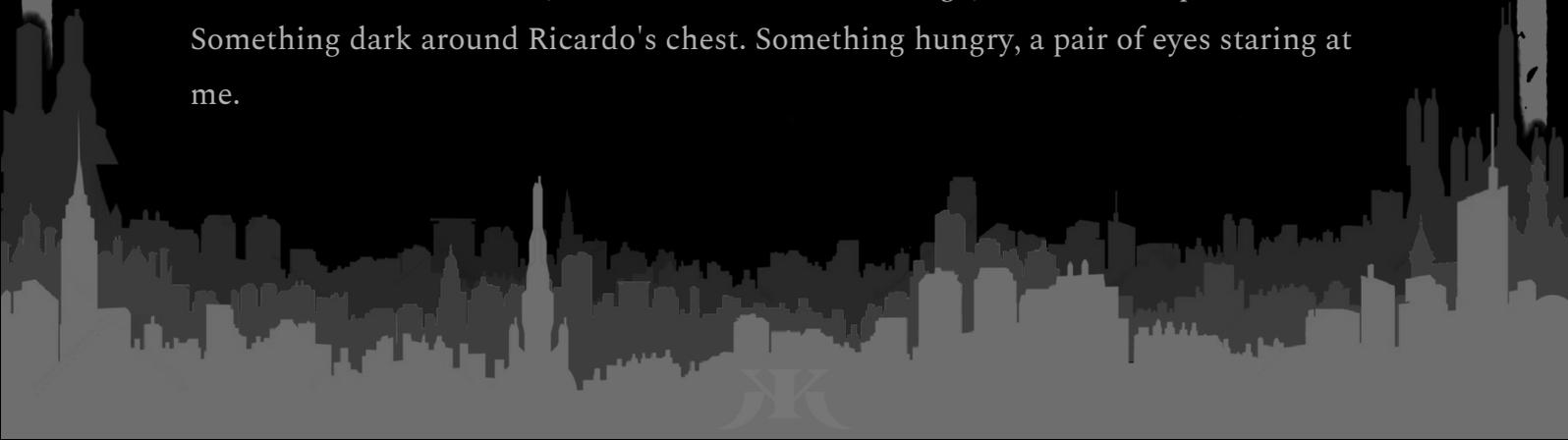
"This is for Geeren, motherfucker."

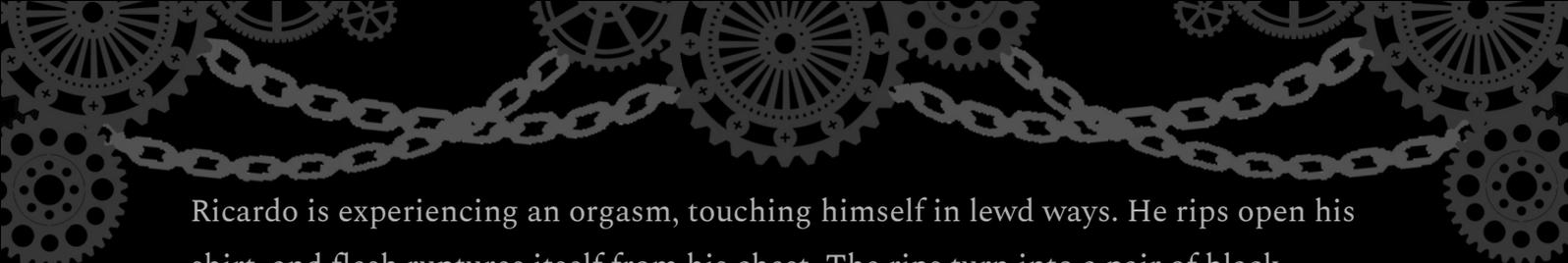
Jorrit fires his revolvers in unison, but I'm deafened by Lucas' gun. He introduced me to it: an old 12 gauge Pancor Jackhammer automatic shotgun. The red shells start flying as he peppers the lictor, tearing holes in its skin. Parvati joins in, recuperating from the stairs. The overall suppressing fire doesn't seem to bother the Lictor, but it interrupts whatever it's doing with those gestures, jerking his limbs around.

"Why... will... you... not... Die?!"

An unfortunate lull in the firepower occurs, as everyone mistakenly syncs their reload time. Jorrit finds a large cleaver somewhere in the insanity, but never has the chance to use it.

I stare down at his sketch, and see the exact same image, with one exception. Something dark around Ricardo's chest. Something hungry, a pair of eyes staring at me.





Ricardo is experiencing an orgasm, touching himself in lewd ways. He rips open his shirt, and flesh ruptures itself from his chest. The rips turn into a pair of black wings. A head with filthy raven hair follows, along with clawed fingers, tearing through the chest.

It's muscular, this thing. Wild, ravenous, razor sharp teeth, and freshly birthed in blood. It's there for a moment, then descends upon the Lictor, ripping off its head. Afterwards it recoils off the wall, assaulting me.

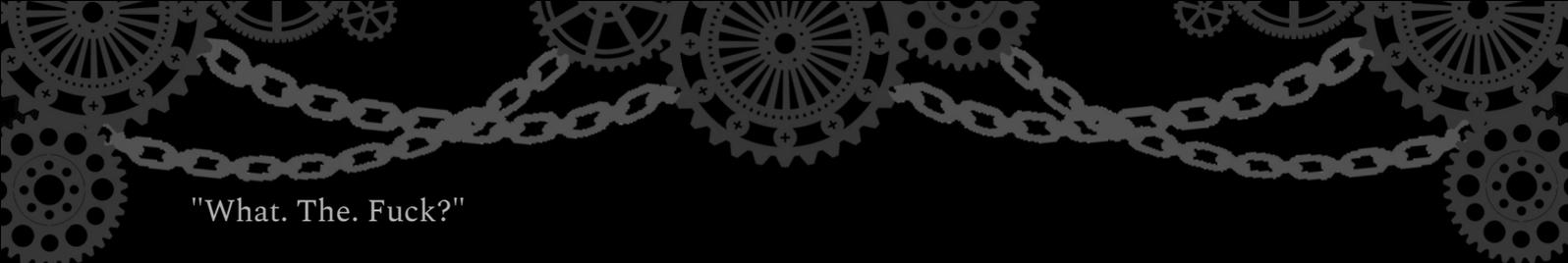
The Lictor's body, with a reptile instinct, finishes the gestures. The house shakes in an earthquake. Then it cracks in two, splitting, the bricks distancing themselves and falling one by one. The night sky warps and the stars disappear into a twilight sky. Around the house, buildings rise, rushing upwards.

The city goes on forever, abyssally wide and empty streets howling with a wind that echoes through the soul. Nearby, an absolution promising impossible cathedral, overshadowed by an oppressive brutalist corporate tower. In the distance, an organic arcology of black resin keeps growing, veins pulsating. And, in front, a cube-like citadel with bodies hanging from poles and huge storm pipes flowing with sludge.

A few of the group have fainted. Ricardo, whole and naked, is having a fit, foam flowing from his mouth. I feel the black winged creature embracing me, my eyes rolling as it rubs my groin. It has feline eyes and razor sharp teeth, lips wet with the Lictor's green blood that try to kiss me. Its breath smells of putrefaction.

The Lictor's corpse lies a bit further away, in the street, ooze flowing from its grotesque body. It shakes a bit, before the neck cavity relents the arm, chewed and half digested. Lucas vomits while Ricardo wakes up from his seizure, disoriented.





"What. The. Fuck?"

I gently try pushing the thing with the black wings off me, or at least stop its attempts to remove my clothing.

"Are you motherfucking kidding me?!?" His voice screeching, Jorrit looks in utter disbelief between the unreal surroundings, the dead prosecutor-monster, and the newly appeared monster who just stole his revenge from him in such a swift, careless, and utterly inhuman manner.

He picks up the cleaver.

Far away, a building fissures, then collapses, crashing down into a cloud of dust. The black wing cares not for my attempt to push it away, now ripping at my belt. The antiquarian's eyes come into focus, just as howling can be heard on the streets. Something approaches, hurried slapping footsteps on the asphalt echoing off the buildings.

"What the... leave him alone!"

Jorrit assaults the monster with his cleaver raised high overhead. Given its preoccupation, the blows to its skull cave it in, splashing Jorrit in the face. The chopped off skull then pours blood onto my lap. Ricardo sees the corpses of a few of the squatters, and improvises some rags to cover himself. The howling is getting louder, and slaps, closer.

With the creature dispatched, I'm on my feet.





Jorrit turns back to the lictor-monster. Already dripping with gore himself, he starts hacking at its still lifeless body, delivering his messages of revenge, finally and for good. The corpse turns to absolute shreds as a pack of wild dogs turn the corner, with deformed eyes and fruit-sized ticks in their furs. Thankfully, they feast on the corpses, howling for the fresh blood, scarfing the body parts down unchewed. Voices can be heard in the distance, and something like a dog whistle.

I stagger away from the dogs, dragging Jorrit with me, away from the dead Lictor.

"Lucas, Parvati are you alright?" he whispers hoarsely over his shoulder.

"What... what *is* this place...?"

Ricardo thinks about what he knows, searching for an answer. Parvati has one ready for him.

"I....don't know...."

The voices are getting closer, sounds of metal scraping on the asphalt, the mutts finishing their meals. Church bells ring in the distance from a massive hill, peppered with acropoli. My first instinct in the face of this onslaught of unfamiliar and threatening impressions is to hide. The house is gone, nothing but rubble and dust.

"We must be hallucinating. It looks like Jung's collective unconscious. I think. Don't quote me on that."

"Oh, good." Parvati responds, sarcastically.

A parade is getting closer, metal scraping. Lucas frantically searches what's left of the Lictor's body, trying not to provoke the dogs at meal.



"We gotta get out of here." Jorrit herds the dazed Sofia. Parvati answers him.

"I agree."

She looks around, then at Jorrit, nodding to him and gesturing to something nearby.

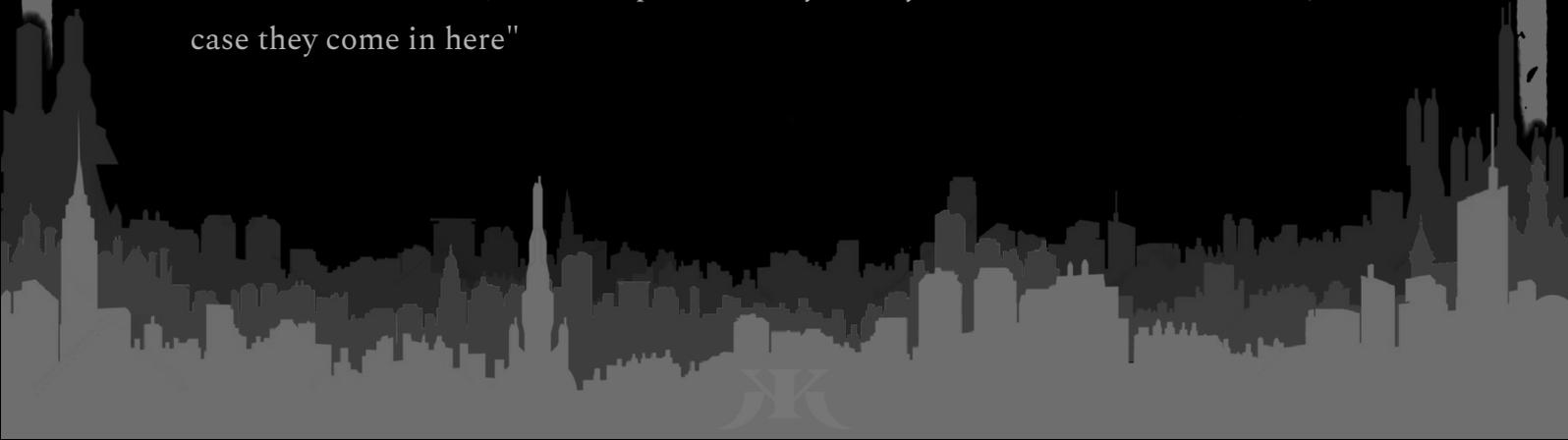
"That building."

We rush to the cathedral. An empty place, the pews smashed and light beaming in from the painted windows. Its architecture is of bone, as if it was a gigantic whale that had swallowed us whole. The shrines are monumental fossils, the painted windows showing legions of men sacrificed slaying these great beasts. The main altar is a skull of a reptile, immense in size, shark-like teeth open. Inside, sitting on a bone throne, a mummified body covered in wraps with a skull helmet, holding on to a sword.

A general screaming and harrowing occurs outside while we shut the door. The parade is stopping here for a while. I glance through a bit of fragmented glass. There's a cage on wheels, dragged by a great mollusk, something of a snail with many carnivorous mouths on it. In the cage, emaciated men, women, and children in tattered rags, in puddles of excrement. The herdmen are beautiful creatures, but encased within organic metal armors that curb outwards into skewers and blades. The parade seems to have stopped, some herdmen wrestling and chaining back the dogs, others going through the rubble. I turn to the rest of the group, breaking in sweat, along with Jorrit, who is ghost pale.

"What did you see?" Parvati motions towards the window herself.

"Don't... don't look!" Jorrit whispers hoarsely. "Everyone find somewhere to hide, in case they come in here"





Pale and wide-eyed, Jorrit seeks refuge in the shadow of one of those columns along the wall, the massive ones that arch upwards like whale ribs.

The herdmen are taking their time, poking through the rubble with their metal spears. They seem to be searching for something. Two of them are arguing in a language I don't understand, pointing at the citadel.

The mummy in the skull altar moves.

Sofia looks around, slightly wide eyed, taking in the decor and architecture of the cathedral. She has a vague idea of what has transpired, but confusion and anxiety is written on her face.

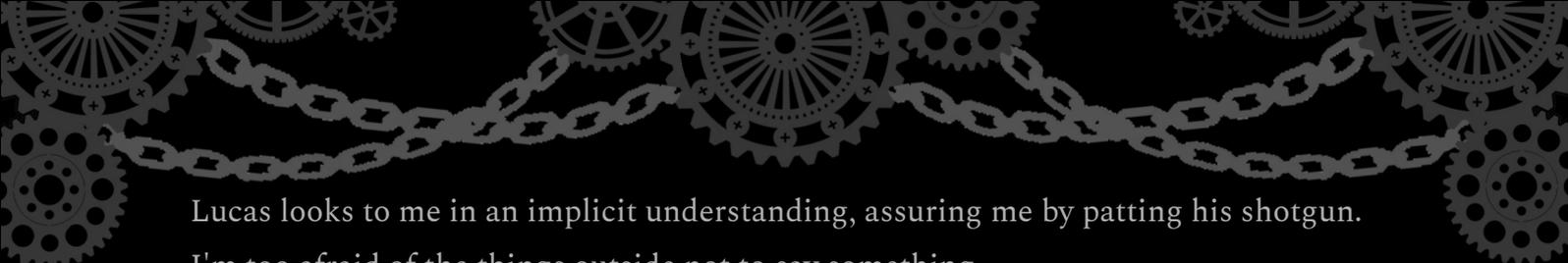
"What in the hells is this?!"

Pistol in hand Parvati also dodges behind a column, the weapon somehow still secure in the chaos of the transition. As the thing approaches, Ricardo's muttering lecture falls silent. Lucas looks like he wants to find an alternate exit, but the thing is blocking his way, moving slowly, dragging a bastard sword along with it. It almost seems a knight templar, straight out of the horrible battles in the painted glass. It speaks, its voice trembling, and nobody understands it.

"Mhoro? Ndiani ariipo? Ndinokunzwa iwe?"

Cleaver still desperately clutched in both hands, Jorrit jerks around as it speaks. Paying attention only to the front door, he hadn't noticed it standing up. Parvati doesn't move, just keeping her gun trained on it. Ricardo makes himself small, hiding behind a pillar or pew or something, waiting for one of the others to deal with this thing.





Lucas looks to me in an implicit understanding, assuring me by patting his shotgun. I'm too afraid of the things outside not to say something.

"Please help us!"

The bone-mummy trips on something, and falters for a moment. It then uses the bastard sword to stand up, suddenly seeming frail. Moving carefully, it reaches out with one hand, then stops, raising it.

"Ini ndaizviziva. Mumwe munhu akazouya."

It points towards the voice it heard, and signals it to come closer. Sofia calls to me.

"I think he is a knight of some sort. Or at least the hollow shell of one. He might be following some chivalrous code, but I am unsure as to what he wants. Most likely protecting this place after death."

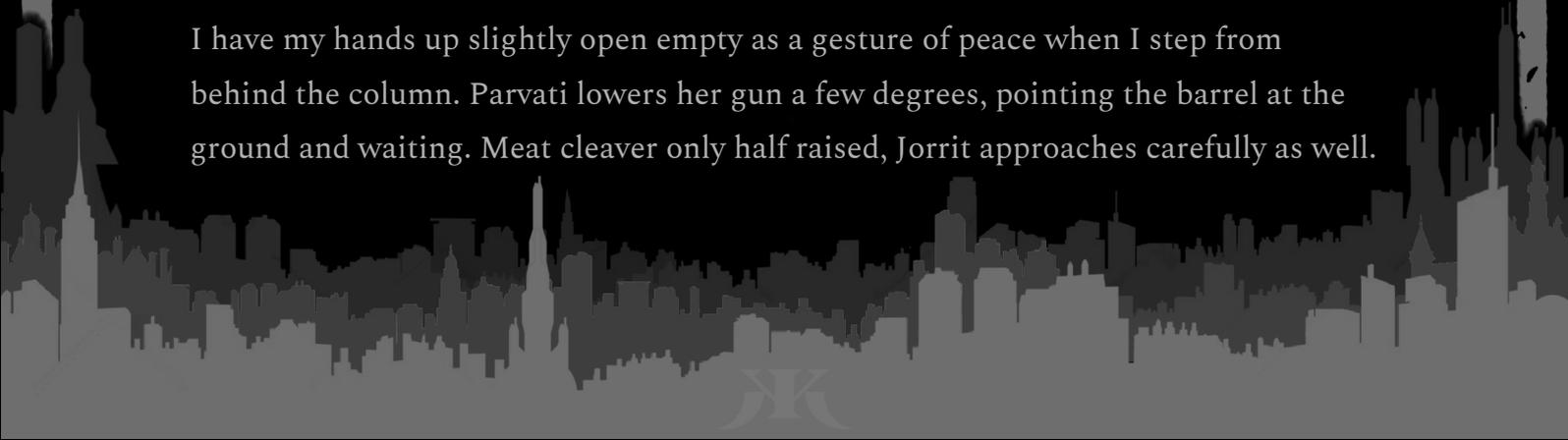
That being said, she remains crouched between broken pews, waiting for me to act. Cursing to myself, I ask it if it understands us.

The knight then points to Sofia, and becomes agitated. The language is impossible to decipher, but the creature keeps waving those who reveal themselves to come closer. Outside, the hounds still howl, and a child starts crying.

Lucas takes the first brave step, approaching the mummy, slowly. Sofia follows, coming out of hiding and giving the knight a low bow.

"We do not mean to intrude on your sanctuary, we come for shelter from outside."

I have my hands up slightly open empty as a gesture of peace when I step from behind the column. Parvati lowers her gun a few degrees, pointing the barrel at the ground and waiting. Meat cleaver only half raised, Jorrit approaches carefully as well.





"I know a local crime lords' or power brokers' habits when he sees it - and this... *thing*... clearly commands some authority here... or thinks it does, anyways."

The mercenary, brave beyond a doubt, closes in and tries a greeting in Arabic. The creature grabs the sword handle with both hands and lifts it, apparently with some effort. I can see a sigil on the pommel, a triangle of sorts. It then chants, plunging the sword into the floor, scraping the bone plates, sending out a silent shockwave. A few of us vomit, and I can hear it most clearly, finishing the chanting.

"...bestow upon you the Gift of Babel."

It laughs between its sharp teeth.

"Welcome, welcome pilgrims! I have slept eons awaiting your arrival! Have you brought offerings?"

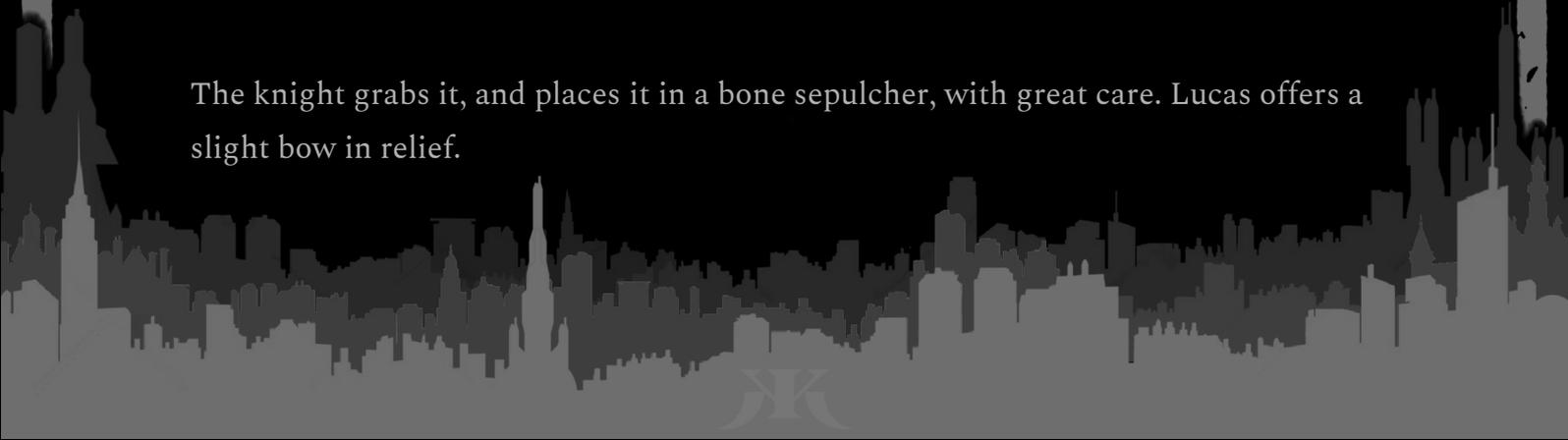
Sofia falls to her knees, emptying what she had left in her stomach. She retches a few more times before looking up to the knight. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and stands back up.

"Offerings..." She looks to the rest of the group.

Lucas perks a brow and grimaces, not having what he thinks it wants but nods and pulls a carbine from his bag and offers it to him, hoping.

"Ah, a weapon for future crusades! Thank you, traveler! The templars shall use it well. I offer blessings to you, and all your generations to come. May you slay many foes!"

The knight grabs it, and places it in a bone sepulcher, with great care. Lucas offers a slight bow in relief.





Jorrit doesn't know where this is coming from, but he reaches underneath what's left of his coat and jacket and dislodges the police badge from his belt. It obviously means nothing to him anymore. Or rather, it means a lot, but it doesn't feel like he should have it any longer. Wiping it clean with a coat-end, he offers the faux-golden token to the creature.

I hand it a drawing from my sketchpad, which I'm still somehow in possession of. Parvati just holds out her assault rifle, probably empty of ammunition.

The mummy grabs the badge, and feels it.

"Ah, a sigil of your house, Geburah. May his laws forever guide us."

He then sniffs my drawing. It's the one with the raven creature.

"Holiest of holies, Art! Of warfare! Old battles, to be cherished."

Taking Parvati's assault rifle, it shrieks.

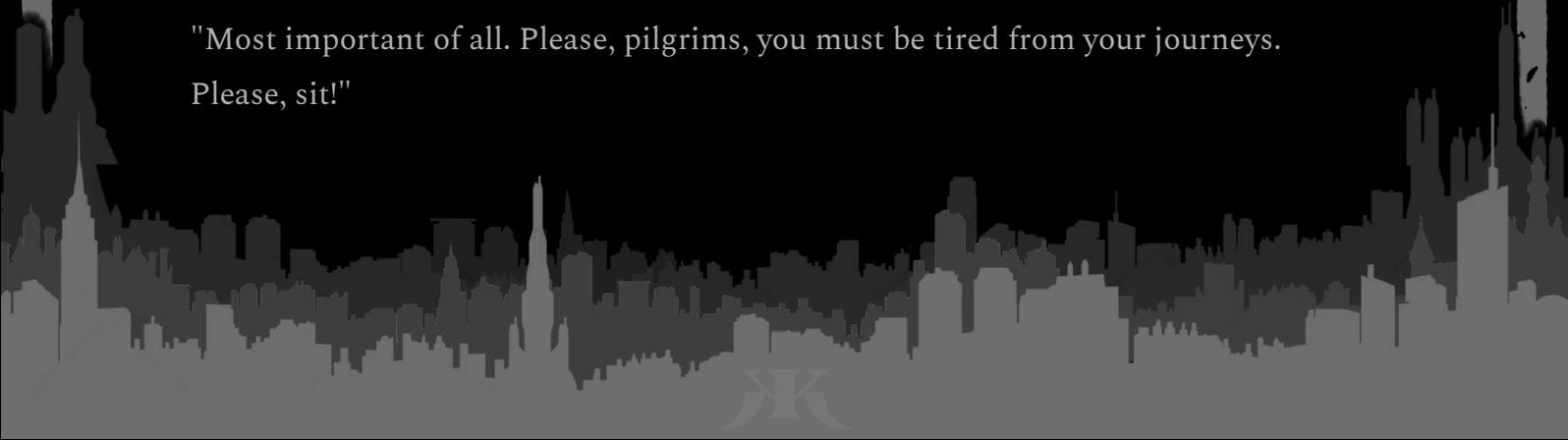
"Many foes have died of this blade. I salute you."

Sofia pauses, a look of sadness crosses her face as she takes out her red book with all her notes. Rough sketches, writings, everything she has seen so far in Amsterdam, and even before. She approaches the knight with an outstretched hand.

"Knowledge and secrets are what I offer."

The creature sneers with pleasure.

"Most important of all. Please, pilgrims, you must be tired from your journeys. Please, sit!"





It points to the broken pews, oblivious of their state. Lucas moves to find a spot on the broken seat, still staring in awe at this knight creature.

"Thank you Lord." Unclear if he is talking to the creature or a higher power, Lucas is truly exhausted.

This is surreal. But focusing on what's happening in here keeps my thoughts off what I've seen outside. I sit, beside Jorrit. Somehow, everyone finds a piece of furniture that hasn't decayed, and rests for a bit.

"May I ask Lord, what is this place?" The creature then.

Leaving the sword in the ground, the templar gestures widely, turning around, head tilted back.

"What else? A temple of Man! A tribute to his tribulations, and victories. Do you not recognize his grandeur?"

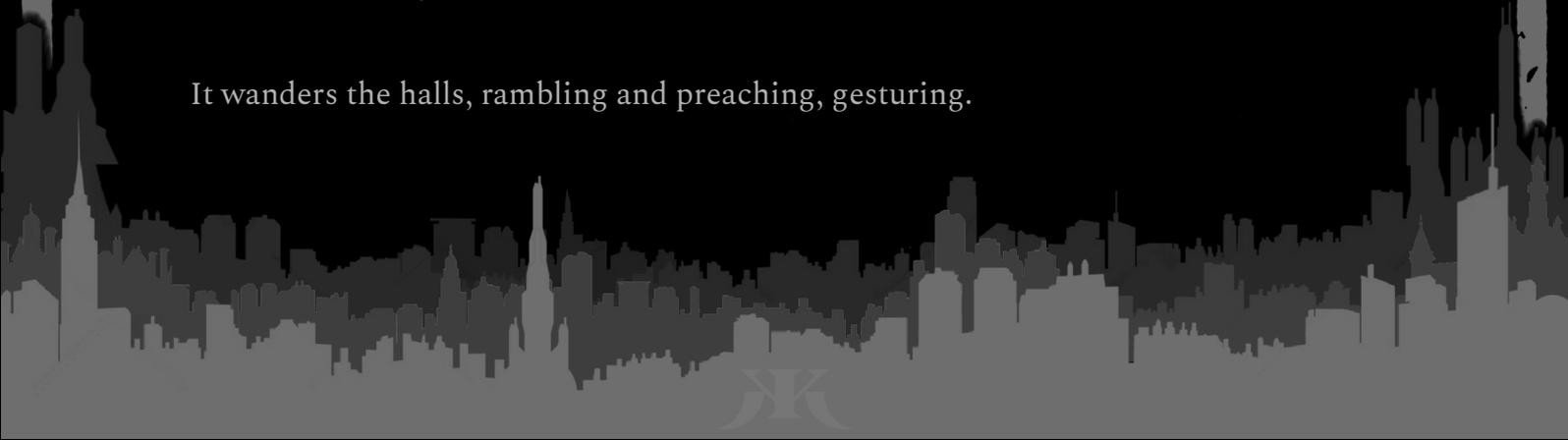
"Of... course?" Jorrit leaves a pause.

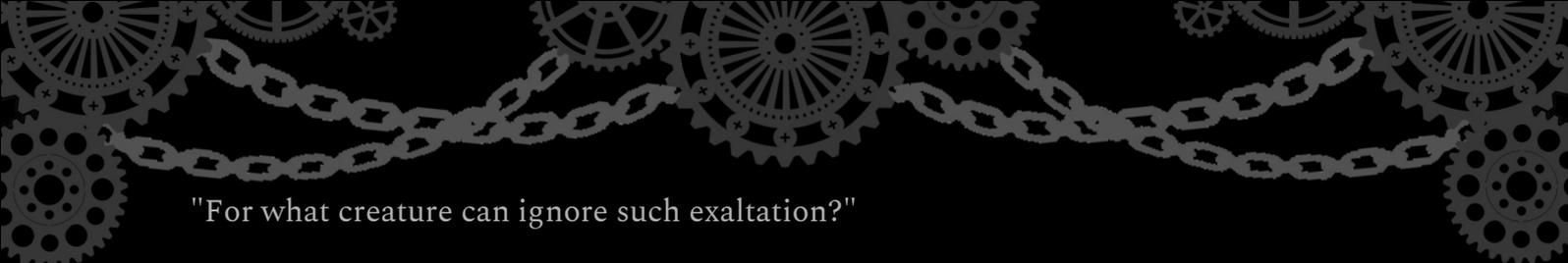
"It is... a magnificent construction..," he continues, eyeing the gigantic reptile skull the knight emerged from, more dubiously than in awe.

"It is magnificent sir." Lucas confirms, his eyes moving from one part of the cathedral to the others. "Wait, you said you were waiting... For us?"

"I was placed here to wait for pilgrims, yes. Their number has dwindled with time. I do not remember the last one. But I rejoice! Travelers have arrived again, and more shall arrive soon, I'm sure of it!"

It wanders the halls, rambling and preaching, gesturing.





"For what creature can ignore such exaltation?"

Ricardo puts his hands in the pockets of his clothing to see if there is anything in there. There's a metallic rattle, a set of keys, probably belonging to one of the college kids, whose clothes he is wearing. The templar is exhausted after a bout of compliments, and returns to the support of the sword, breathing heavily. Jorrit grabs his attention.

"Those... those outside... are they pilgrims too?"

The knight listens to the parade.

"No, just servants. They dare not step inside, as I would strike them down. Last they tried, I added their bones to the temple."

"Pilgrims for what?" Parvati asks.

"Out of the many worlds, they come, to see and listen. To worship Man, the Archons, and the Demiurge. For who else can claim Divinity? Not those wretches outside!"

It spits in disgust. A flicker of dust. I breathe out in relief. I understand nothing of its sermon-sounding ramblings about divinity, but "they dare not step inside" is at least a small comfort. Parvati, unrelenting seeks information.

"Who are the Archons and the Demiurge?"

Jorrit looks like part of his brain investigates the possibility that he is really on some drugs that Aanholt has put in our food, and either lying unconscious in the gallery, dreaming all this.





Perhaps we really went to the house with the vines, where the acid kicked into full gear, and now we're probably in some church, talking to an old priest...?

These people outside might be protesters or just some local thugs having a street party. Yes, that's right. Think your way through the horrible hallucinations. This is all just the drug doing this to us.

If only it wasn't all so scary. So real...

"Do you know how we might return home?" I ask, hoping for an end to the nightmare.

"Ah, home? Already? I..."

The knight gestures the sword in my direction.

"Yes. The road is not far."

He then reacts in delay to Parvati's question.

"The greatest of the Men! The Sefirot table! Most honored of all! Those who conquered countless worlds, and built this, the City of Cities, Metropolis! Long live their memory!"

I look at Jorrit in dumbfounded lack of understanding. The puzzled expression on my face tells him that I consider whether he just really said that to me, or if he is even really here... I cannot figure it out. I'm shaking without noticing it.

"I see." Parvati doesn't, actually, the confusion showing on her face at the knight's rambling. I try to get the knight to focus again.





"Where is this road, then?"

"Metropolis..." whispers Ricardo.

The knight gets lost in thought, grasping the blade's handle. Then it speaks again, his voice resonating in the halls.

"I understand. You do not wish to soil yourself with that filth, begging for scraps! This would have never happened before the Demiurge's absence! Servants, wandering the streets! Unthinkable!"

It then ponders a moment more, grinding its teeth.

"I can lead you to the tunnels. You can then take the path of the stone faces, past the Colossus of Bronze. There, there you shall find the way home! Return, and tell them of the glory of Man! So that they may come here, and commune, and learn!"

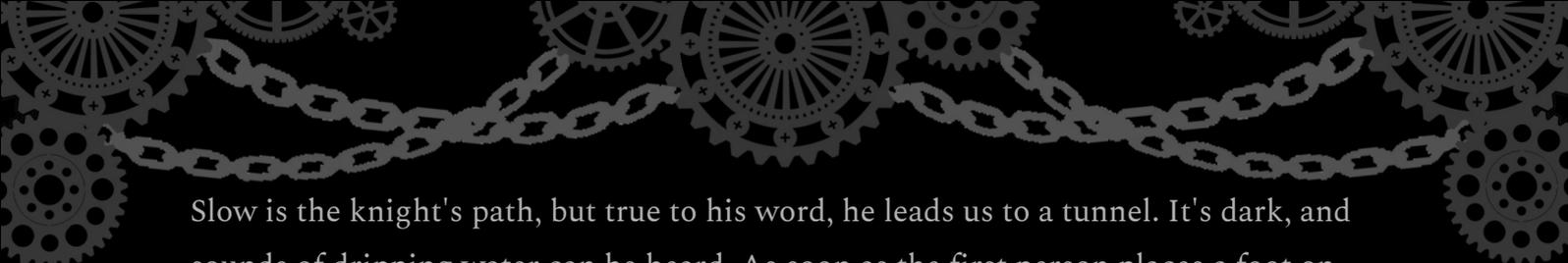
It points to the back of the church. I stand up, pulling my coat tighter around myself against the chill in here. Sofia nods and stands, wringing her hands together as she looks around.

"That would be much appreciated, thank you."

"How do we leave when we are ready?" Ricardo asks, looking to the mummy-knight. He stares once more at the stained glass, showing worlds of indescribable beauty burning during the crusade of Man.

"You shall walk! The Archons have made reaching the city difficult, but leaving easy! Such was their genius!"





Slow is the knight's path, but true to his word, he leads us to a tunnel. It's dark, and sounds of dripping water can be heard. As soon as the first person places a foot on the stairs, the front door breaks open. Herdmen, pouring through, spears at the ready, hounds sniffing the air.

"You dare ! Filth! Go! I must caretake of these vermin!"

Seeing this, Jorrit flips his phone out and takes a picture of the nearest stained-glass window, wordlessly showing it to Ricardo. Sofia let's out a yelp as they come through the doors, quickly ushering the others forward.

"Hurry! Hurry!"

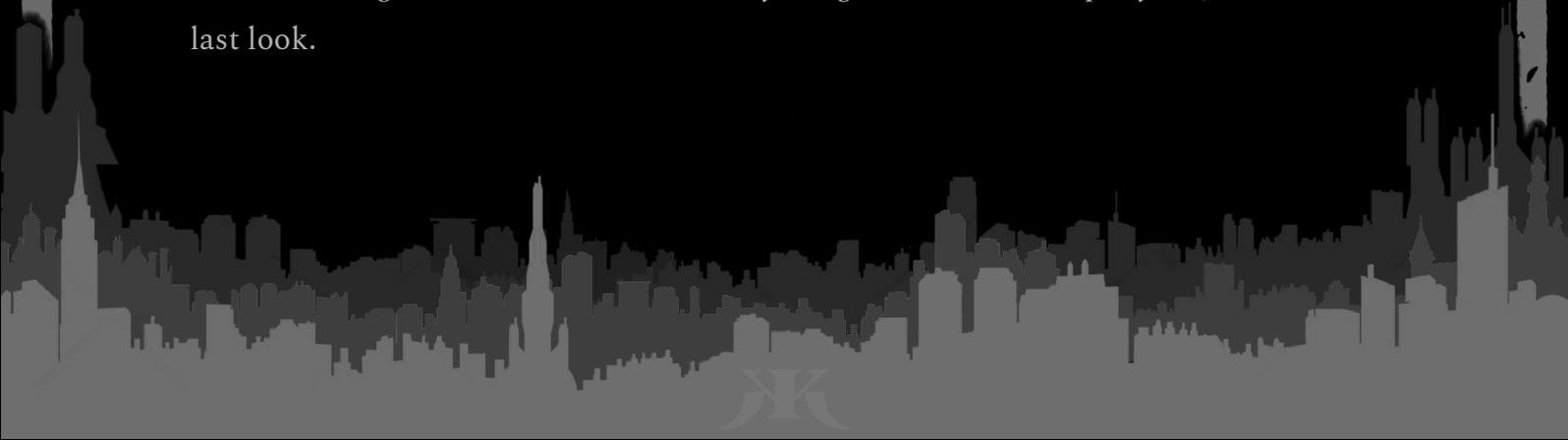
"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit - they're in here!" Jorrit panics, fleeing down the stairs, having seen what's outside. He tries again to switch on the flashlight.

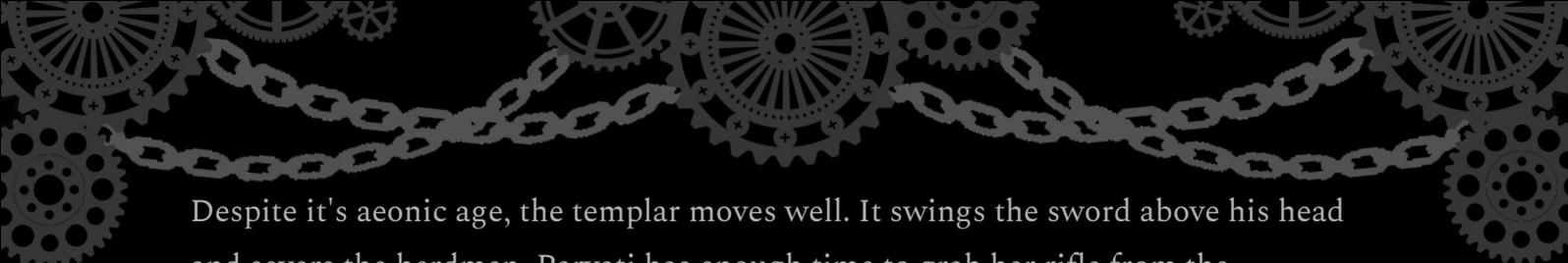
"My gun would be helpful here." Parvati looks at the knight.

"No! The holy offerings must be consecrated! Leave, and send more pilgrims! I will handle this, as it is my duty!"

Continuing with his speeches, he moves to meet them. The tallest of the herdmen looks down on the knight, twisting his spear. He may be smiling, but it's impossible to tell, since he has no lips. I swear there's something familiar about him. Something I've dreamed of.

A ray pierces the darkness. Jorrit's flashlight works. The ceiling of the tunnel is low, but a person can still run in it. The detective skips ahead through the tunnel, understanding that to remain is extremely dangerous. I can't help myself, and take a last look.





Despite it's aeonic age, the templar moves well. It swings the sword above his head and severs the herdmen. Parvati has enough time to grab her rifle from the sepulcher, and runs down the stairs. I see the herdmen leader taking aim, and putting a spear through the templar.

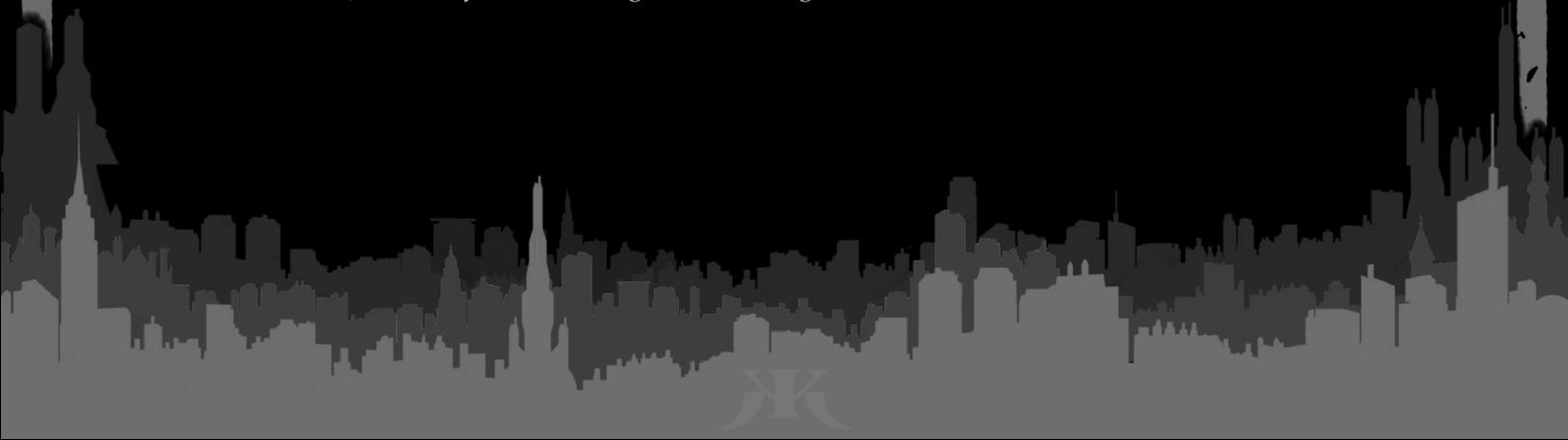
I don't notice the one flying towards me.

The spear pierces through my gut, cutting through the Kevlar. I fall down the stairs, bleeding, as Parvati kneels near me. A rumble is heard, and the tunnel starts collapsing. Lucas scoops me up then runs into the tunnel.

Jorrit is leading ahead and beckoning Sofia and Ricardo after him. Still splattered with discolored, stinking gore, and now armed with an oversized meat cleaver, Jorrit is anything but a confidence-inspiring guide or leader. But he waves his flashlight around and strides ahead. If anything were to come upon us, it would run into him first.

Lucas has me in his arms and even weighed down manages a good pace. I move in and out of consciousness. Nothing follows through the dense rubble, nothing but dust. Despite our worst fears, the tunnel ends in twilight. Once more we find ourselves on the gargantuan, empty streets. This time near the organic arcology, but one of us spots a stone face on a wall.

And so we pilgrims tread, in search of home. For hours we follow the faces, fearing any sound echoing in the distance. Unknown architectures and infinite complex machinery lines the city, and strange things fly above. Finally, we find the unmistakable colossus: a melted hoplite of rusted bronze, underneath which we pass, as something hopeful happens. They hear average conversations in a language we all understand, but only a few recognize: Portuguese.





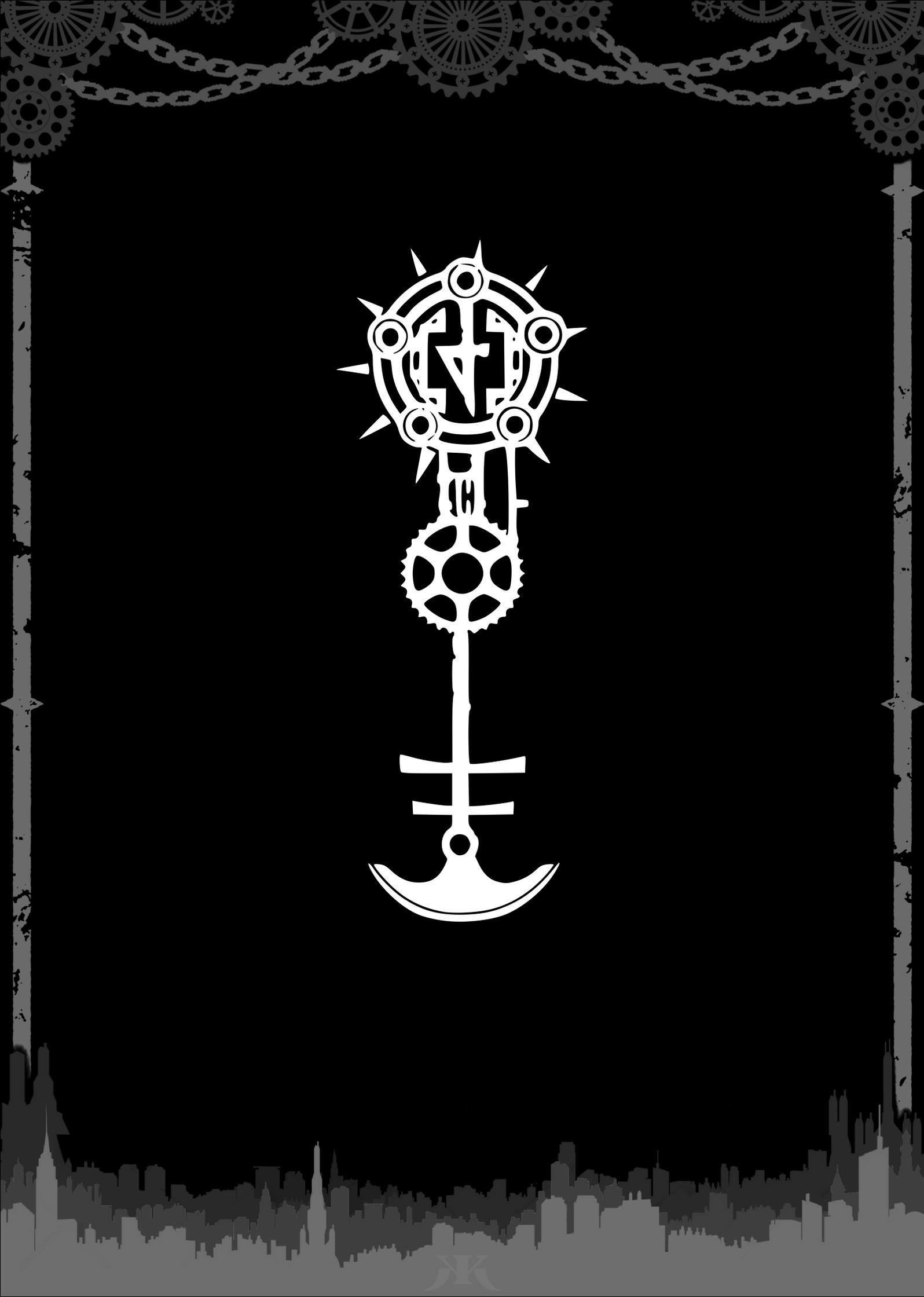
Descending, the heat increases, and we find ourselves on a downward slope in a shanty town with narrow alleys. A team of shirtless mulatto teenagers are kicking a ball around on a roof. An old man smokes a pipe, content to outlive the sun.

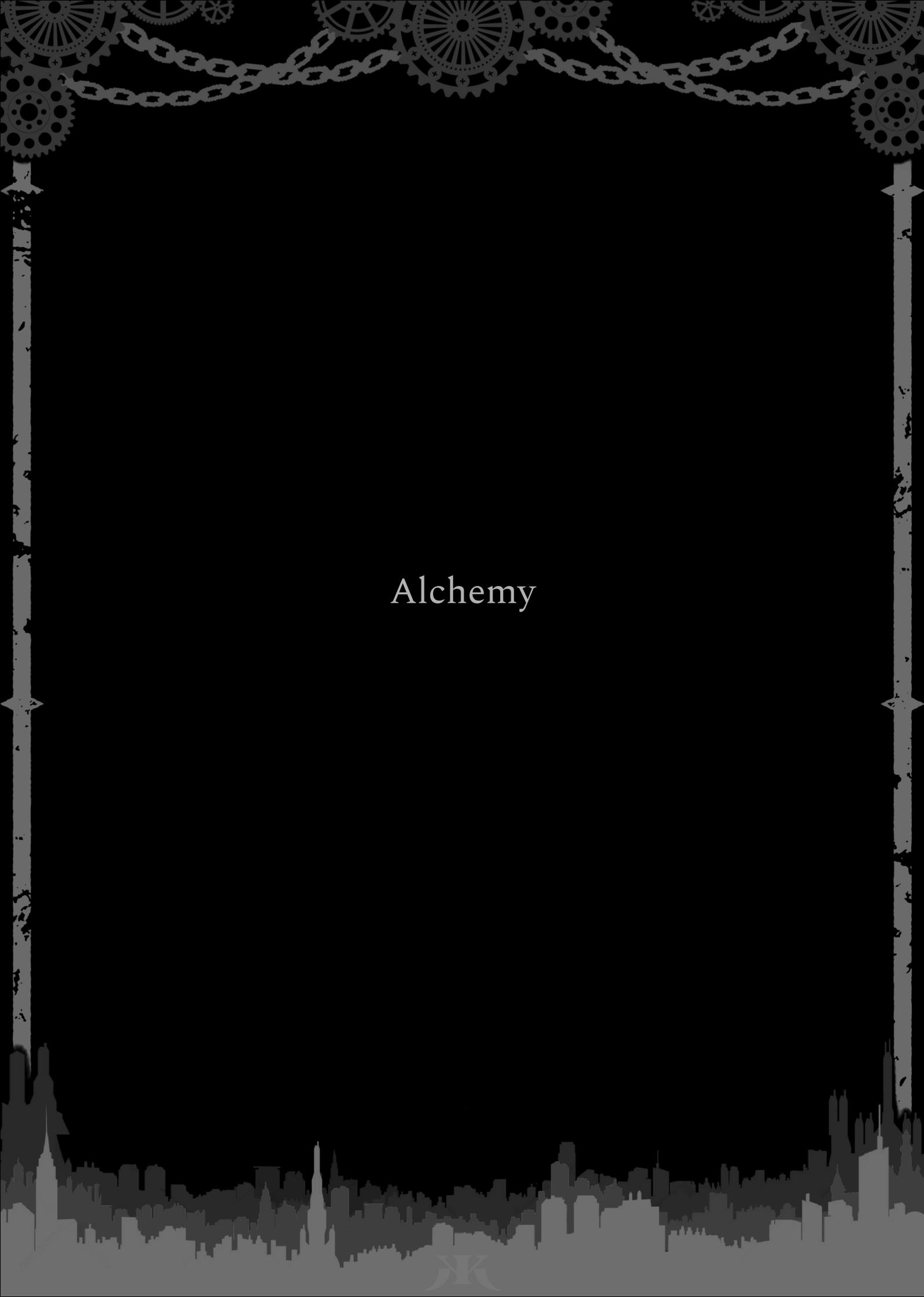
Something vibrates in Lucas' pocket. He pulls out his cellphone, which he'd forgotten. He sets it on loudspeaker.

"Mr. Reynolds? Congratulations on solving the Jaël Aalberts problem. Money has been wired to your account, as well as that of Ms. Shankar. We've already sent you a text with Abdul Haadi el-Nazar's location. Now, we have a new job, if you're up to it. We want you to locate and recover Doctor Camila Braganza, a person of interest. Check your inbox, we will send you intel on the target."

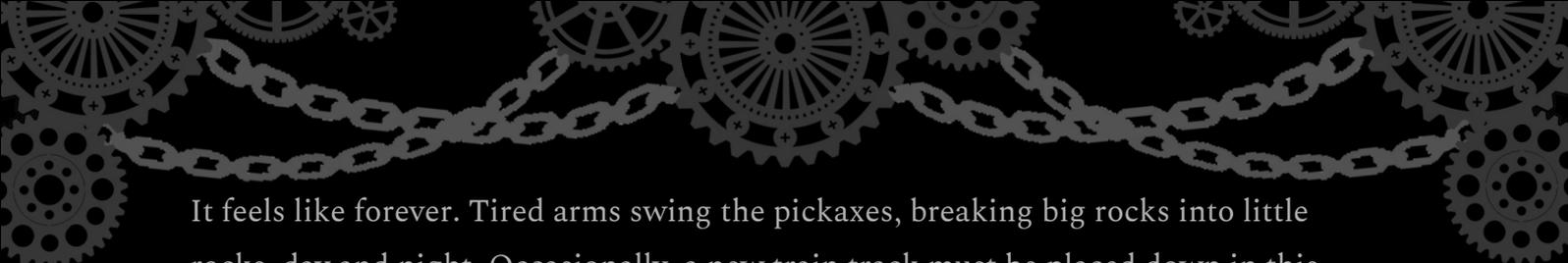
A click sounds, and the call is interrupted. A notification jumps down with the email. I am slipping in and out of consciousness, bleeding out. While the others try to patch my wounds, I am struck with the recognition of how unreal this all is. The twilight sky turns into a rising sun, heating the asphalt, releasing heat waves. The environment melts, and the heat causes a delirious fever in the group. For a moment, we are elsewhere.







Alchemy



It feels like forever. Tired arms swing the pickaxes, breaking big rocks into little rocks, day and night. Occasionally, a new train track must be placed down in this desolate, scorching wasteland. That's when the belted, eyeless masters rip some ribs, a spine, some tibias from one of the workers. The rest of the slaves then carefully place them down, while the "donor" is set back to work. When there are no more bones, the husk is used as food for the rest of the chained up slaves. All in the name of a train that never comes.

Within the crowd of slaves, we have been on the same chain as far as they can remember. We've become millions of miles of tracks. We've consumed each other in a million banquets. The yellow scorpions have pierced our genitals and our eggs have hatched. Locusts have ripped our flesh, and dust storms have sown our naked muscles with salt for months. Always a new season of horror, yet always the same. Breaking big rocks into little rocks, day and night.

But what's this? A new trial on the horizon. The supervisor is coming. The work becomes harder, faster. The whips tear more flesh, the meals are fewer, and more rotten. The tracks are laid with more care. Sleep is a myth, whispered amongst the slaves as the belted masters, naked and fornicating, warn of the supervisor's arrival.

Skinless, she arrives one morning, but the work doesn't stop. Big rocks, to little rocks. Flayed looks behind, and lets loose a long whistle.

"That's all? I could have built that in my sleep. You Gamichicoth boys are lazy."

The eyeless masters giggle, then whip those who think this is respite.

"And these, you say, these here, are the worst workers? Shame on you. Don't you know the train is coming?"





Parvati lifts a hand briefly to wipe the sweat away from her eyes before swinging the pickaxe at the stone in front of her. A whip bites at her skin through the ragged outfit she's wearing, making her wince, but she doesn't stop despite the strain on my aching muscle.

At the new voice, she briefly casts her gaze in the direction, swinging at the rock while watching the supervisor out of the corner of her eye, waiting for the voice to finish speaking. Parvati's voice, hoarse and cracked, responds.

"What train.....?"

Flayed waits for a moment, then spots Parvati.

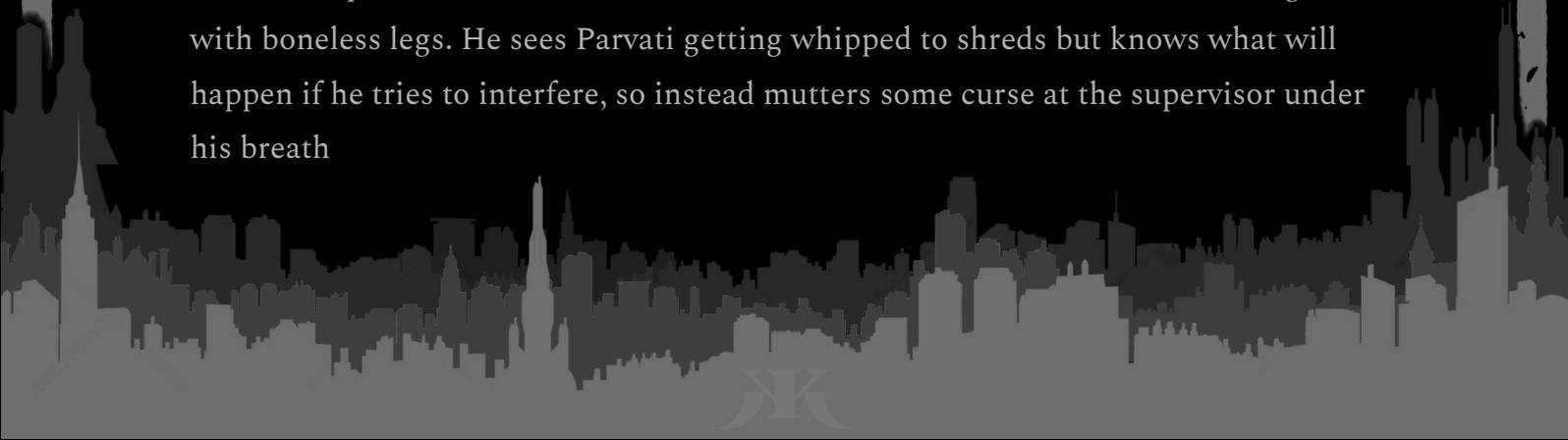
"That sounds a lot like you're questioning our expansion. Whip her."

Parvati falls to her knees as the belted men lash, tearing chunks of flesh until the ribs are visible.

"Who do you think you are, some sort of Seeker of Enlightenment? We've got important dignitaries coming on the train, to discuss the Last Cycle. And you're sitting around on your ass, while the track remains unfinished?"

The pain is overwhelming, and Parvati briefly loses the grip on her pickaxe as she falls onto her knees, grabbing it up. The voice of the woman or thing in the background is barely heard through the haze of pain, but she struggles to her feet, raising the pickaxe and ignoring the throbbing in her side.

Lucas is broken already, but not enough for the slave drivers and those hostile barbed whips that continue to bite at his flesh because he can't move fast enough with boneless legs. He sees Parvati getting whipped to shreds but knows what will happen if he tries to interfere, so instead mutters some curse at the supervisor under his breath





Ricardo futilely attempts to continue working despite missing several key bones at this point.

Sofia sluggishly swings her own pickaxe, the force of the downswing barely able to cut into the rock. Her skin is papery, graying, bruised. Blue veins visible underneath the skin. Chunks of hair have fallen out, the rest a stark grey. Infected wounds permeate her back and legs, a sickening stench coming from each.

"Ah, so that's your excuse, you lazy bastards! You were daydreaming! Who did you think you were, pilgrims? Masters of Alchemy? No! You're garbage, working on this railroad track! And you're not even finished! Well, it's too late now! Here comes the train!"

True to the supervisor's words, the chime of a locomotive can be heard. It's a thing of skin and chitin, arm-propelled by thin limbs ending in skewers. The passengers are trapped in writhing maggot bodies carried in segmented chitin husk wagons. They enjoy it, their mutilated faces blissful with smiles. And in front, the locomotive's plow is a set of razor sharp teeth, devouring the track workers.

"Tell me what you were dreaming about! Tell me before the train hits! And maybe I can save you!"

We chained open our mouths, right before the train strikes us, bringing incredible heat.





It really is as hot as hell in Sao Paulo. Even now, at night, as the runaways sit in the small hall of the terreiro, they're still sweating. Yet the black women in white dresses dancing around the idol don't even perspire. Everyone is singing and clapping along with the drums, keeping the energy of the ritual in.

The Heliopolis favela has been a safe haven. Everyone turned up in the Netherlands APBs, either with several accounts of murder or as accomplices. Here, nobody asks questions. We aren't sure how we can speak and read Portuguese, but we do. It's made things easier.

Everyone is somewhat distracted by their own thoughts to follow the ritual. Even Sofia, who wanted to see the Candomble priestesses, sleeps, stirring from her nightmares. She wakes up with a jolt, panic in her eyes.

Ricardo takes stock of himself. He looks at the women dancing, trying to force himself to focus.

"The Lictor gone, but so many dead."

Sofia wakes up, her hands going to her neck and face. She rakes at the skin with her nails for a moment, her mind still trapped in the dream. Scratches from her long nails mar her frail skin as she pulls them away. Her heart beats quickly, she gasps for air, feeling her face and throat with her hands.

"A dream..." she mutters to herself. "Just a dream..." She looks up at the women, watching them swirling and singing. She let's the act of the ritual calm her mind, but her body still trembles.



But for me it's still a dream, and I look around, thoughts drifting to the recent events in the Netherlands even as my eyes land on the dancers. I barely pay attention to them, instead turning to look at the others. I can see into their hearts and minds.

Everyone is exhausted and disheveled. It's been maybe a week since we arrived in Sao Paulo, and found some lodging in the favela. Since then it's been mostly resting and recuperating.

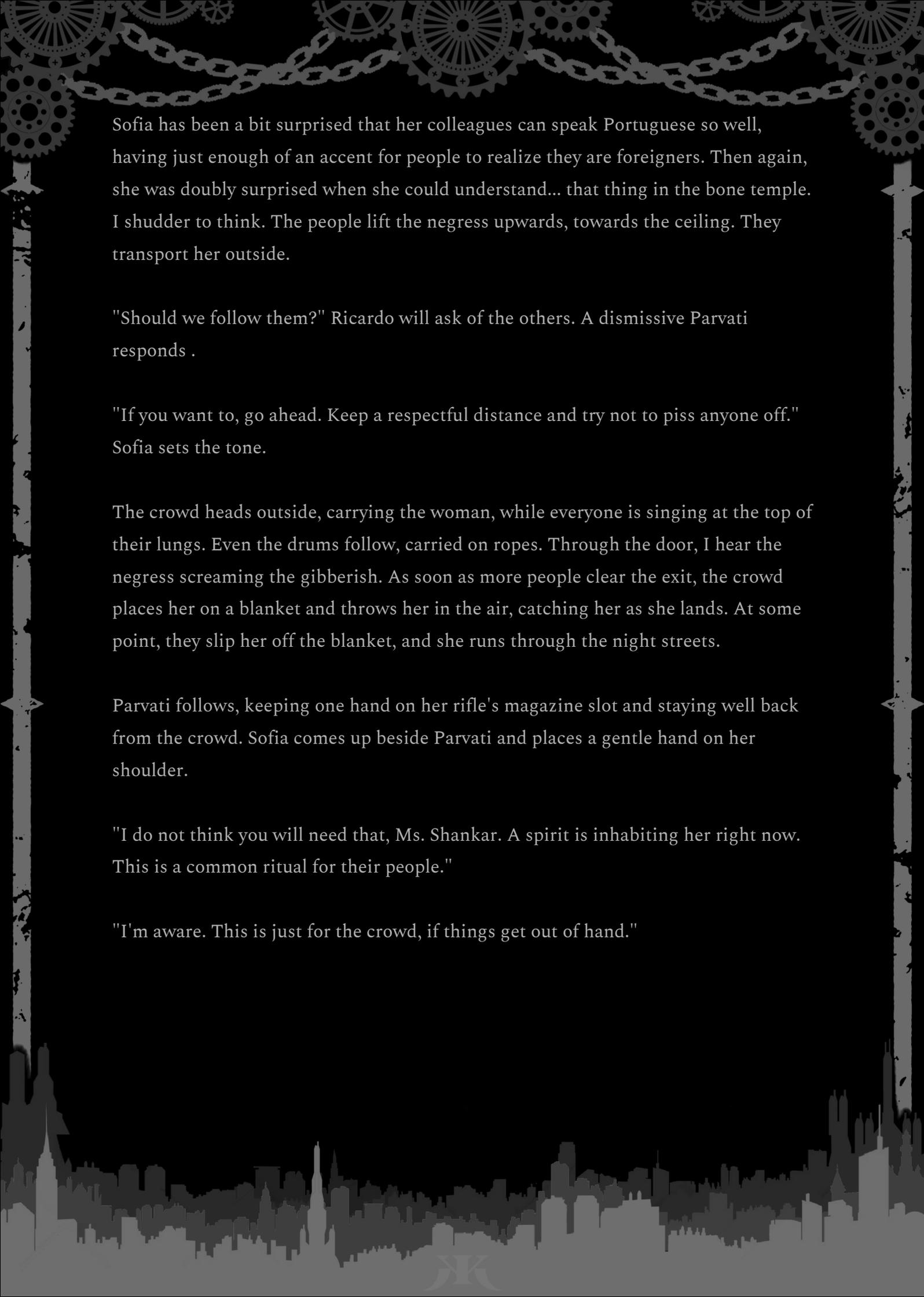
While a few of the locals are on the side, feasting at the cheap banquet honoring the spirits, the negresses continue to shake to the hypnotic rhythm of the drums. The head priestess, a bulky woman in a cloche hat and heavy makeup, suddenly shaking in an unnatural manner. She rolls her eyes, trembling, and speaks in tongues. The drums intensify.

The reporter tells us that she has seen this many times in Yoruba based religions. Currently, a spirit is inhabiting the priestess. In the past, Sofia has always been skeptical of such manifestations, blaming them on hypnotic trances, adrenaline rushes, and auto-suggestion. Recent events, however, have made her a bit more receptive, and now she's not so sure.

Ricardo's been hitting the books hard since his "incident", trying to figure out what happened. He complements Sofia's explanation with his own bit of reading on Candomble. It revealed that their priestesses let themselves be possessed by orishas, spirits that obey and emerge from the one god Oludumare. By appeasing these spirits, they turn into protectors instead of tormentors.

The ritual is reaching a climax, as the singing and clapping intensifies. Even those feasting on the fried meat join in, and most people jump to their feet, singing.





Sofia has been a bit surprised that her colleagues can speak Portuguese so well, having just enough of an accent for people to realize they are foreigners. Then again, she was doubly surprised when she could understand... that thing in the bone temple. I shudder to think. The people lift the negress upwards, towards the ceiling. They transport her outside.

"Should we follow them?" Ricardo will ask of the others. A dismissive Parvati responds .

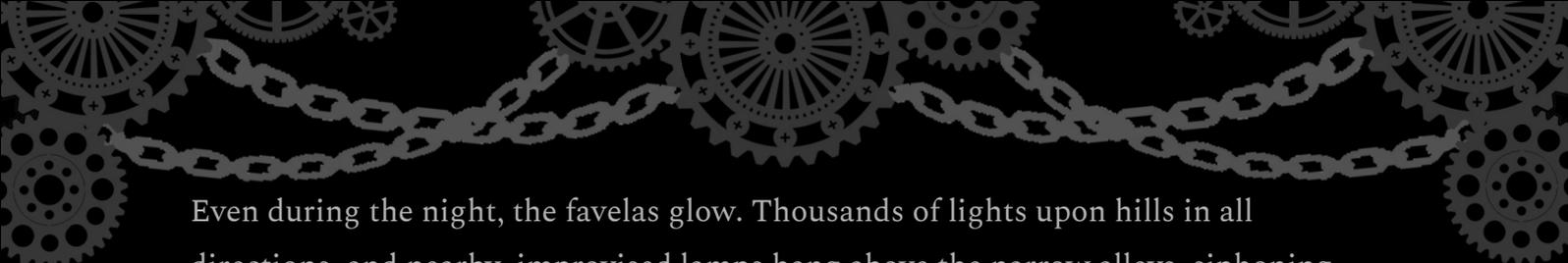
"If you want to, go ahead. Keep a respectful distance and try not to piss anyone off." Sofia sets the tone.

The crowd heads outside, carrying the woman, while everyone is singing at the top of their lungs. Even the drums follow, carried on ropes. Through the door, I hear the negress screaming the gibberish. As soon as more people clear the exit, the crowd places her on a blanket and throws her in the air, catching her as she lands. At some point, they slip her off the blanket, and she runs through the night streets.

Parvati follows, keeping one hand on her rifle's magazine slot and staying well back from the crowd. Sofia comes up beside Parvati and places a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I do not think you will need that, Ms. Shankar. A spirit is inhabiting her right now. This is a common ritual for their people."

"I'm aware. This is just for the crowd, if things get out of hand."



Even during the night, the favelas glow. Thousands of lights upon hills in all directions, and nearby, improvised lamps hang above the narrow alleys, siphoning the city's power supply, lighting the street. The worshipers pour through, following the priestess. Somewhere in the distance a party is going on, the music barely audible past the drums. A few men join in the crowd with musical bows, making a raucous jangle. From somewhere, a pig is let loose. Watching from above and making our way across the rooftops, we watch the priestess give chase.

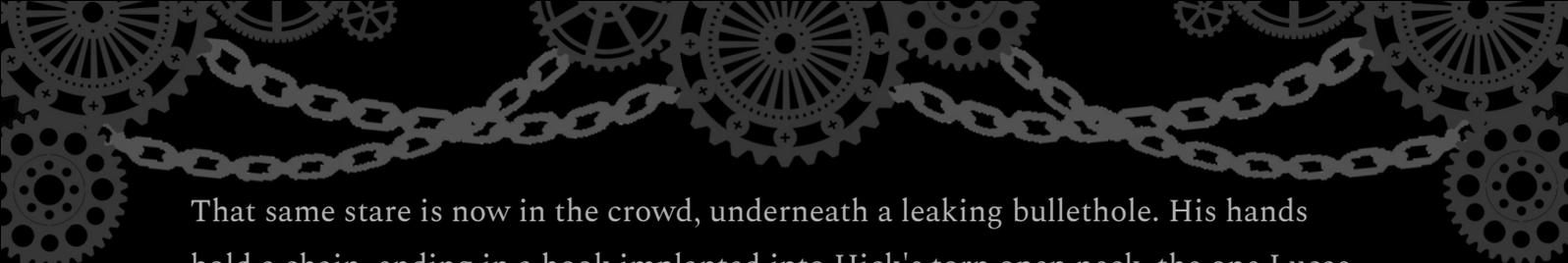
Taking on a muted, chanting quality, the music jerks, step by step. Squeals can be heard from the pig, trying to escape it's chaser. But the priestess is fast, predatory, and nimble, climbing over obstacles like no woman of her build should. She finally catches up to it, plunging her fingernails in it's greasy skin. Tearing, she gorges on raw flesh, the animal wailing in agony.

The crowd cheers covering the sounds of the feasting, then finally turns quiet. Finishing her meal, the priestess goes limp, and a man nearby catches her. A few people lift her up, and start passing her through the crowd. Her dress is now stained red, and she sleeps, content. The procession lights candles. Everyone moves in somber silence, carrying the priestess back to the terreiro.

Lucas watches, unhinged, as the experiences of the past few days have left him weathered. His mind wanders of the horrors he's seen, the horrors that have killed so many, and spared him.

The mercenary's mind wanders to dark places, remembering that valley, the horrible things in it. Of all the grim things, he just can't forget the look Gonzales had on his face when he shot him. It was a mercy kill, but Gonzales stared as if Lucas let him down, betrayed him somehow.





That same stare is now in the crowd, underneath a leaking bullethole. His hands hold a chain, ending in a hook implanted into Hick's torn open neck, the one Lucas slashed when he ran out of bullets. Hicks is crying, a semi-transparent sock over his face. They're still both in uniform.

By the time he opens his eyes, the soldiers are nowhere to be seen. The procession slowly moves upwards, and the fugitives along with them. Heading back to their seats, Jacob stares down at the two folders he brought. One detailing Camila Braganza, our current target. The other, Abdul Haadi el-Nazar.

Lucas stares at both folders for a long moment before reaching into his pocket and pulling out the unopened pack of cigarettes, camels in a hard pack to be precise, he opens them and puts one in between his lips, holding it there while he digs for his lighter. He's almost too distracted with the memories of recent events, much less the past, to think straight.

The Braganza folder contains a picture of a woman that's beautiful, but a bit over the hill. A small cut over the left side of her lips went unstitched, and prominent chin gives her a serious look. Lucas has had ample time to piece together the documents detailing her life. A certificate meant she was adopted by a Miguel Pereira Souza, and the address follows. A diploma for Faculdade de Medicina USP qualifies her as a pharmacologist. There's a resident attendance worksheet at the Heliopolis hospital. She was divorced from Diogo Carvalho Barros, last known address in Jardim Vergueiro. By the looks of things, she's around 70, so the picture must be of when she was younger.

Once the procession is over and the priestess carried away, Jorrit, who has been tagging along but seemed lost in thought most of the time, approaches Sofia at a convenient moment.





"Uhm... can I talk to you for a minute? It's..." he looks around, to check if they are not overheard by any strangers, "it's about the Lictor."

"What about it?"

"You see, I've been talking to Ricardo for a bit, and he told me a lot about them, or what he knows anyways, and it... well to be honest, it has me worried. He says they are 'interlopers from outside our world' and that they 'usually hold positions of power'. He doesn't know where they come from, but if it's from, you know, the outside then..."

"I concur."

"Well then, we can never really be safe from them, can we? They're masquerading as people, right? Isn't it just a matter of time before they come after us, even here...?"

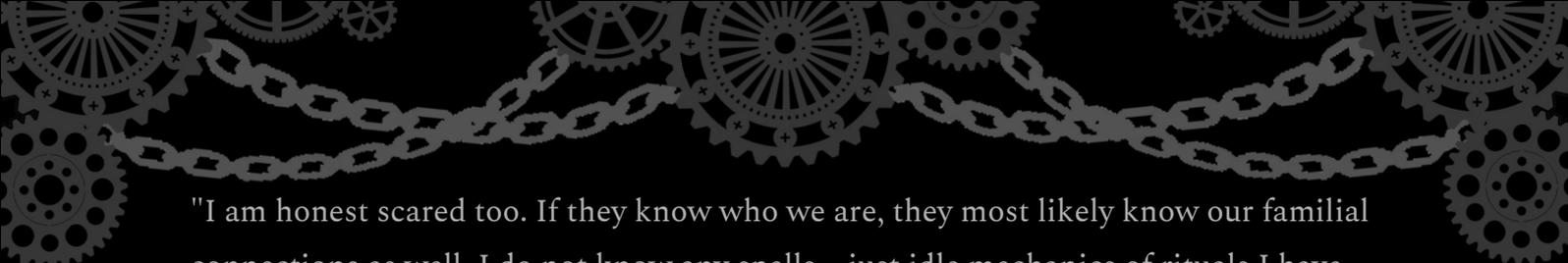
His tone clearly betrays that he still doesn't fully understand, but also doesn't want to dwell on how we all even got here. Then he composes himself before saying his next piece.

"So I think we need... I don't know what - but we need something. Isn't there some way we could... detect them? Like, can we figure out who is one and who isn't? Do you know of any, I don't know, tests... or magic spells, or ...something?"

He trails off, clearly out of his waters and not knowing how this kind of conversation is even conducted. But looks at you hopefully, and with fear in his eyes.

Sofia takes a deep breath and puts her hands on either side of Jorrit's shoulders.





"I am honest scared too. If they know who we are, they most likely know our familial connections as well. I do not know any spells... just idle mechanics of rituals I have witnessed and participated in. I do not know how we are to detect them besides keeping eyes out on anyone paying too much attention to us. Maybe... Maybe Ricardo and I could work on something. There has to be something to help us in this."

A spark of hope lights up in the former detective's eyes. He latches on to the chance of there being something, anything, that could help them feel a bit more in control of their situation.

"Thank you." The simple reply is heartfelt and dripping with relief. I was going to look in on our friend Anders in the hospital. He..." Jorrit's meaningful gaze says 'you know what he did...' but he doesn't put it in words just now.

"You should do that. I'll check out this Enkisun business with someone who knows his shit."

The sleeping negress is placed on a bed somewhere in the back room, and the younger helpers draw the curtains while also preparing a fresh set of clothes. Many of the locals return to their meals, and carry on with conversations. A young black man in a yellow football t-shirt tunes up the an old-style tape stereo, and a rapid flurry of smooth bossa nova notes follows. Some of the slackers pick up their girls and give them a whirl to the pace of the tune.

Lucas closes the folder with a sigh, the cigarette has burned away in the ashtray with only a few puffs taken from it. He reaches for his pack to get another one and it just ends up hanging from his lips while he reaches back into his bag... coincidences. Nerves have prevented Lucas from looking into the el-Nazar folder until now. He opens it and starts to read that one as well.





Lucas glimpses a picture of el-Nazar surrounded by Brazilian thugs. As he peruses, an understanding forms about Brazilian criminal and paramilitary organizations. Stemming from Comando Vermelho, a left wing prison resistance movement during the military dictatorship, the paramilitaries have allied with the criminals and drug dealers in order to gain support. Since then the group has splintered and grown, currently into several such "Comandos", infighting. Largest and most active in Sao Paulo are the Primeiro Comando da Capital, for whom el-Nazar is a supplier.

As he sits, lost in thought, Ricardo's eyes catch on to a sparkling blue dress covering a pale skin. A young girl, maybe 16, dances furiously with the black slackers who elbow each other to take turns. She's quite the dancer, her high heels insufficient to stop her dynamic, hip-swaying movements. Transfixed, Ricardo unconsciously moves a bit closer, as his heart grows with desire.

As the party continues and intensifies, there is movement behind a curtain. The deep voice of the Candomble priestess can be heard, tired, but commanding. Far away, a few gunshots ring out, but the assembly cares not, dancing away.

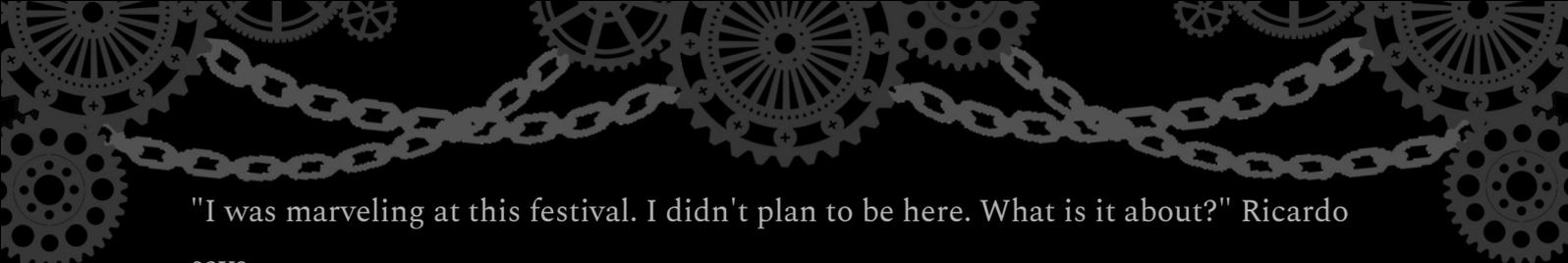
Ricardo approaches the girl in heels who sees him approaching. A smile widens on her face as she steps closer. She opens up her arms, greeting the antiquarian.

"Hey, stranger! Finally one of you mans up enough to have a dance with me. What took you so long?"

Brazen, for her age. Infectious, she grabs Ricardo's hand, leading him into dance, and even an old bookworm like Ricardo remembers how to move his feet. The antiquarian hardens as the girl rubs against him, wanting more.

Further away, the head priestess emerges from her chamber with a change of clothes. Her white dress is gone, replaced by a flower covered black dress. Nobody seems to mind.





"I was marveling at this festival. I didn't plan to be here. What is it about?" Ricardo says.

Jumping up and down, the teenager replies with elation.

"Wow, your Portuguese is really good! Yeah, that was pretty hard core, with the pig and all? It's a Festival of Ogun. You strangers might know him as Saint George. A lot of people talked to the priestess about having this, and she conceded. They hope Ogun will ease up on the violence in Heliopolis. Where are you from?"

"Ah, I am from New York. What is the violence about?"

"The gangs have been fighting with each other about every week. Add the police on top of that, and the favela is about to explode. What better time to make an offering to the spirit of war? Look, I'm trying to forget about all this tonight. Get us some beers and let's go somewhere, and you can tell me about New York!"

The rest of the slackers, most of them tall muscled black men in white, sweaty shirts, all give Ricardo dirty looks as he keeps the girl's attention.

"Beers, yes. Let's head to the market. You have bodegas here?" Ricardo will go to any corner shop and buy some beers of her choice.

Julia, as she introduces herself, grabs Ricardo by the hand and leads him to a non-stop corner store, built into somebody's home. There's no real signpost or price tags, only a display of merchandise, and a functioning fridge.





The beers are cheap and cold, money exchanging hands in between the antiquarian and a fat shopkeeper in a wifebeater. After opening one and gulping a good part of it down, she drags him to an improvised basketball court, empty this time of night. A series of questions follows. Julia getting increasingly drunk, her body not used to processing alcohol. She leans more and more into Ricardo, who trembles as their skins touch, and feels constricted by his clothes.

"Ah, we should go somewhere else, not outside. Shall we head to a hotel?"

On the basketball court, drunken slurs escape Julia's mouth.

"I wanna stay here. Maybe go back to that party in a bit."

She tries to get up, and staggers a bit trying to walk.

"Well you'll have to lay off the beer if you plan on walking around the party any more. Shall we take a break from drinking and have a party of our own?" Ricardo says. Good one. Not creepy at all, Ricardo.

Julia looks at the antiquarian confused, then smashed her beer bottle against the wall. Clearly out of it, she heads up for the party. Ricardo's heart skips as she moves further away, and something inside stirs. He's still stiff under his belt, so much so that it hurts.

"Ah, fuck. Another loss. Can't get arrested here, I don't even know the local laws, assuming the cops even follow them and don't just beat me senseless" Ricardo thinks, dejectedly. He departs and buys some more booze for a personal party. He makes it back to the hovel he inhabits, a patchwork of steel and wood. Inside, he turns on the fan, and collapses into bed.



Ricardo awakens floating in a vast sea, the twilight sky above him. He knows he is dreaming and sees countless islands floating in the distance, each within reach. On the horizon he feels the pull of a waterspout, but he feels danger there.

Ricardo shakes himself out of the fleeting moment of peace, floating in the ocean. He hadn't been to the ocean in a long time. The real ocean, anyway. One can hardly enjoy the ocean in New York, rife with the stench of seagulls and refuse. Ricardo swims towards the nearest of the islands that appear safe relative to the danger presented by the waterspout.

His feet walk on the beach as it morphs into a carpet, a tickling texture the antiquarian recognizes. The fog of the island gives way to his old New York apartment, with Sue taking a cheap lasagna out of the oven. Memories of a happier time, before the divorce.

"Sue, uh... how was your day?" he asks of her, slightly unsettled by the transition.

Sue answers, describing her long day at the reception. Ricardo listens in, before the brand on his back burns, reminding him of his captor.

He shifts to a cavern with a ceiling lit by crystals, revealing a marketplace below. Aberrant creatures wander through the stalls, trading putrid merchandise. Here a deformed goblin fused with a metal cart is offering mushrooms. There, a weaponsmith with railroad spikes in his head hammers away. Carried by naked slaves on a stretcher, a limbless Mongol in golden clothing inspects goods. The stench clears as a beautifully white young woman with distorted features and covered in cuts enters, carrying a metal censer on a chain, spilling out blue smoke. Ricardo feels attracted to her, in more ways than one.





Ricardo, keeping an eye on the enchanting woman, inspects the goods the weapon smith is hammering on, and feels in his pocket for any money or jewels. Ricardo's finds a single lead coin, its faces smooth and featureless. The weaponsmith has a collection of starknives, coiling blades and spiked chains. A customer approaches, a grey humanoid with crystal spikes rising out of its body. There's a mask on its face, tied to an apparatus in its gut. The weaponsmith bows, and offers his wares, from which the masked being selects a scalpel, sharper than a razor.

The crystal spiked master pays with a leaden coin, to which the weapon smith bows, and takes without looking. It then palms the scalpel, and leaves, with the grotesque crowd parting out of its way as it moves. The weaponsmith, his eyelids sewn shut, starts working again in the light of the forge, his muscles bulging.

Ricardo walks up and bows to the weaponmaster. The blind smith nods in return, and silently waves towards his wares. Further away, two imp-like creatures with bleeding root horns hassle over merchandise in a language you don't understand. The tower in the center cavern sounds a fixed hour, the gong resonating through the cavern walls.

The antiquarian points to the spiked chain and offers his lead coin. The smith takes it and hands Ricardo the weapon. It moves like a snake and coils itself around his arm. The pain is sharp, and the gongs get louder. Ricardo wakes up to the sound of an alarm clock.



Parvati returns to where Lucas is, looking at him for a moment before turning and making sure she has a line of sight on the others.

"Something on your mind?"

Lucas looks up when Parvati approaches, he looks restless and the worry lines in his face seem deeper.

"Hmm?" he pauses for a moment as if collecting the words he needs. "Yeah, a bit. So we just walked through a minefield of terrifyingly weird shit only to wind up on the other side of the planet?" He waves his arms towards the window and the sight of Sao Paulo. "And now, to make shit even more weird I get a call from Ops asking me to find this woman."

He hands Parvati the folder.

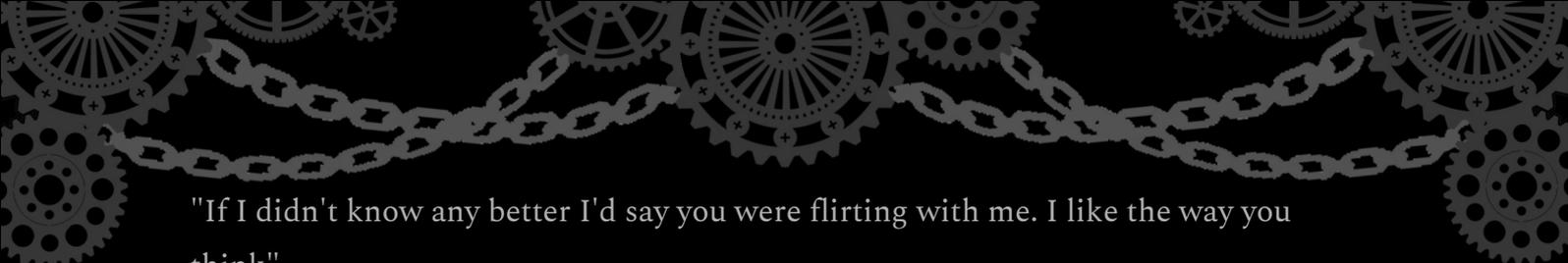
"On top of that I've been after this el-Nazar guy for over five years and he's always proven to be a real slippery fuck... and they are both in Brazil? How is this possible?"

Parvati listens to Lucas before taking the folder on the woman and opening it, leafing through it.

"I'd say it's a coincidence, but there's no such thing."

She moves after Lucas, listening to him speak about Nazar and scanning the immediate area before responding.

"Then we play it smart, booby-trap his car or his house when he isn't there."



"If I didn't know any better I'd say you were flirting with me. I like the way you think"

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not. Maybe I'm being practical."

Lucas tries to think back on the file. Nothing in it gave el-Nazaar's address. He only has a few pictures and the intel to go on. Primeiro Comando da Capital is heavily invested in the drug trade.

Lucas continues to gather his things, half wondering if it's just Parvati and him now that everyone has split up.

"Might be safer for them that way. el-Nazar will wait, Ops has a little priority here. Man, how about proper hotel for tonight, with a proper shower and a proper bed?"

"Sounds great."

Scrolling through hotel listings on his phone, a number of options pop up under the search engine, most of them sponsored links, prices increasing along with the star rating and distance to the beach. The only thing that Lucas actually recognizes is a Hinton Hotel, somewhere downtown. Most of them require a credit card. Lucas opens the encrypted chat app with the cage symbol and types out.

In Brazil, Need New Shoes.

An email with account details to a crypto-currency bank arrives. A valid visa is attached. Seems like ops has solved the problem. Lucas books a room. He glances at Parvati for a moment, clicks 2 beds, then hails a Taxi.

"You ready?"

"For a while now."





It's nice to finally take a hot shower in a room that isn't composed of metal sheets. Definitely worth the risk. As an addition, the complementary soap smells nice. Lucas and Parvati watch from their tower, the city a constellation below. It seems peaceful from up here. The two know it's not.

While Parvati was in the shower he took it upon himself to have a service deliver some fresh clothing, same style of course, he excuses himself to the balcony with a couple of those mini vodka bottles. When she is dressed he says "I guess we'll take a trip first thing in the AM. Jardim Vergueiro... Check out that last known address." He downs one of the bottles.

"You know..." he pauses for a moment, finding his words again "el-Nazar isn't a paid gig, it's personal, I mean I'd be happy for the help, but it's not your responsibility"

The indian assassin finishes her shower and gets dressed, looking over at Lucas on the balcony. "It's personal, hm? What did he do to you?"

"He supplied the bomb, thing, that fucked up my whole unit, not sure how Cody and I escaped it. Never seen anything like it. Like... it had a heartbeat?"

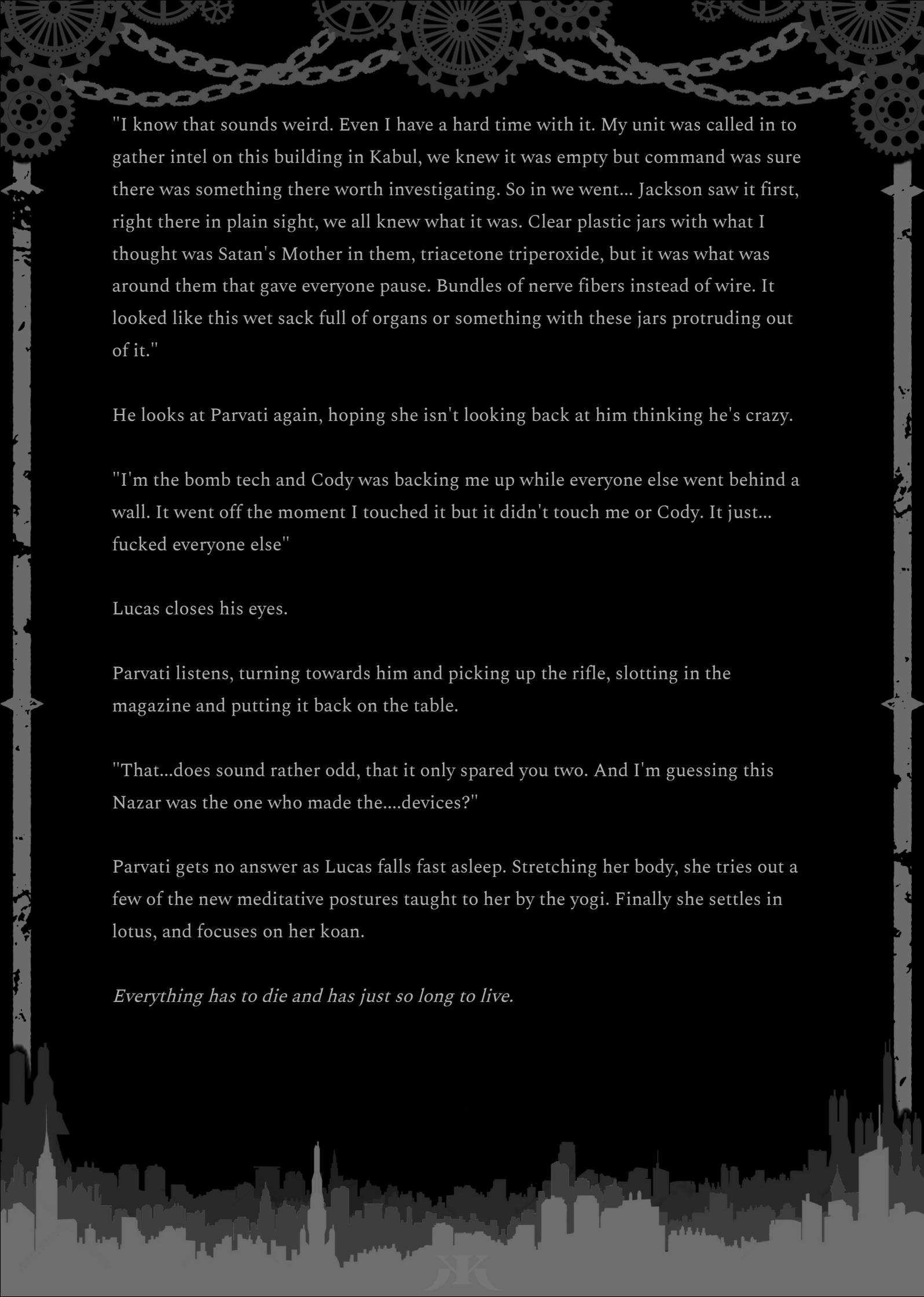
He sighs, the weight of the memory pressing down on him, and walks back into the room to lay down on the bed.

Parvati listens, moving to a table and setting a rifle on it before taking out the magazine and checking it.

"What do you mean it had a heartbeat?"

He rolls over on his side, resting his head on his hand.





"I know that sounds weird. Even I have a hard time with it. My unit was called in to gather intel on this building in Kabul, we knew it was empty but command was sure there was something there worth investigating. So in we went... Jackson saw it first, right there in plain sight, we all knew what it was. Clear plastic jars with what I thought was Satan's Mother in them, triacetone triperoxide, but it was what was around them that gave everyone pause. Bundles of nerve fibers instead of wire. It looked like this wet sack full of organs or something with these jars protruding out of it."

He looks at Parvati again, hoping she isn't looking back at him thinking he's crazy.

"I'm the bomb tech and Cody was backing me up while everyone else went behind a wall. It went off the moment I touched it but it didn't touch me or Cody. It just... fucked everyone else"

Lucas closes his eyes.

Parvati listens, turning towards him and picking up the rifle, slotting in the magazine and putting it back on the table.

"That...does sound rather odd, that it only spared you two. And I'm guessing this Nazar was the one who made the....devices?"

Parvati gets no answer as Lucas falls fast asleep. Stretching her body, she tries out a few of the new meditative postures taught to her by the yogi. Finally she settles in lotus, and focuses on her koan.

Everything has to die and has just so long to live.

Lucas is outside the large double gates of the black palace. He stares at a city, sloped towards a black sea in which the half moon above is reflected. Canals of shit run down the convoluted alleyways built by houses covered in mosaics. Myriapods and other insects crawl upwards on minarets and spiraling towers. The people hide themselves with white, dirty shawls. A naked boy in a collar runs past Lucas, pushing a cart filled with body parts. The body parts of his fallen comrades.

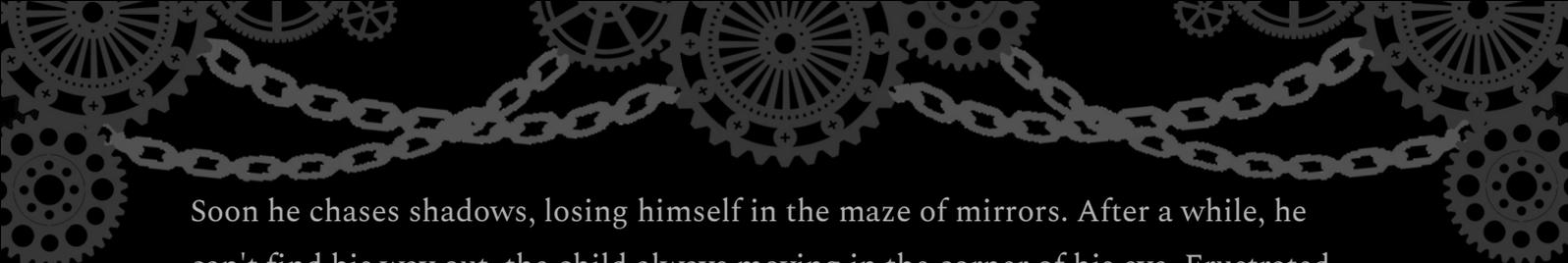
Lucas is confused for a moment, unsure if he just left the palace or if he was walking to it. He pulls a mask up over his nose to hide the stench of the surroundings and decides on a direction. Just as he's about to knock on a door he stops.

There is something portentous about the house. It stands out in the mosaical structures around it, as it's a simple white abode building with wooden frame, the end of the beams sticking out in lines. There is a shine that escapes from its flat roof. A collection of moths rise towards the moon.

With the ash dragging his feet, moving to the house takes forever. Suddenly, he's standing in front of it. There is no door but just a simple curtain protecting the inside from the elements. He draws the curtain back slightly.

"Hello?"

Behind the blue rhombus patterned curtain lies a room full of mirrors, all reflecting each other. The light of the moon sends beams traveling through a few, and Lucas notices the months following them. A flicker occurs when something interrupts the beams for a moment. A childlike hand snatches one of the moths. Intrigued, Lucas enters.



Soon he chases shadows, losing himself in the maze of mirrors. After a while, he can't find his way out, the child always moving in the corner of his eye. Frustrated, he smashes the mirrors until exhaustion. Panting, he turns and sees the child in another reflection. A blueish, red-eyed naked body with mutilated genitalia and open veins where the moths nest. The child in the mirror throws dust in Lucas's eyes, and he wakes.

Her thoughts and memories pass her by, tempting her tranquility.

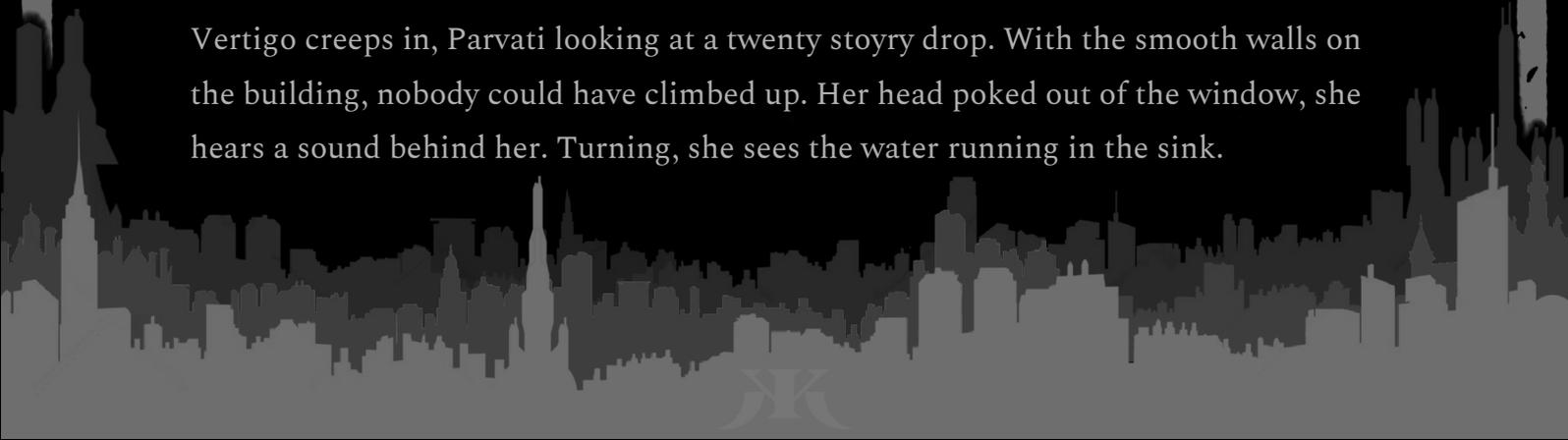
Balanced and stable, Parvati's thoughts point towards Hargrove, and how far away he is. She wonders why she let him live. Her life would certainly be easier with him out of the picture. Then again, he is a known constant, following meticulous methodologies. Perhaps she's grown comfortable. Or is it Kriyamana, the unfolding destiny, that guides their dance? Both of them with a part to play in the Wheel? Parvati sees another thought taking shape, a sound. An insight occurs, not a memory, but a perception, in the here and now. She opens her eyes, hearing something moving in the bathroom.

Parvati snaps into alertness, grabbing the rifle and heading toward the bathroom, cautiously peeking around the corner.

She finds nothing, the air inside still hot from the showers. A few moths are coming in through the open window, along with the cool night air. Parvati doesn't remember opening it. The moths cluster around the lamp above the steamed mirror.

Parvati goes to the window, looking outside for any sign of who opened it.

Vertigo creeps in, Parvati looking at a twenty stoyry drop. With the smooth walls on the building, nobody could have climbed up. Her head poked out of the window, she hears a sound behind her. Turning, she sees the water running in the sink.





Parvati turns at the new sounds and lifts her rifle, reaching over to shut the taps off with a free hand, one at a time.

A hand reaches out of the mirror, grasping Parvati's wrist as she turns the taps. It's riddled with holes crawling with maggots. A moth flies out of one, even as the hand drags Parvati towards the mirror.

Struggling, Parvati tries to hit the arm with the rifle stock. It lets go of her wrist, but grabs onto the weapon, and pulls it inside the steamed mirror, leaving a faint outline in the condensation.

Parvati stares at what happened for a moment before going to wake up Lucas, shaking him. He's suddenly gasping, gripping anything solid nearby as if trying to climb out of a hole.

"What what no what?"

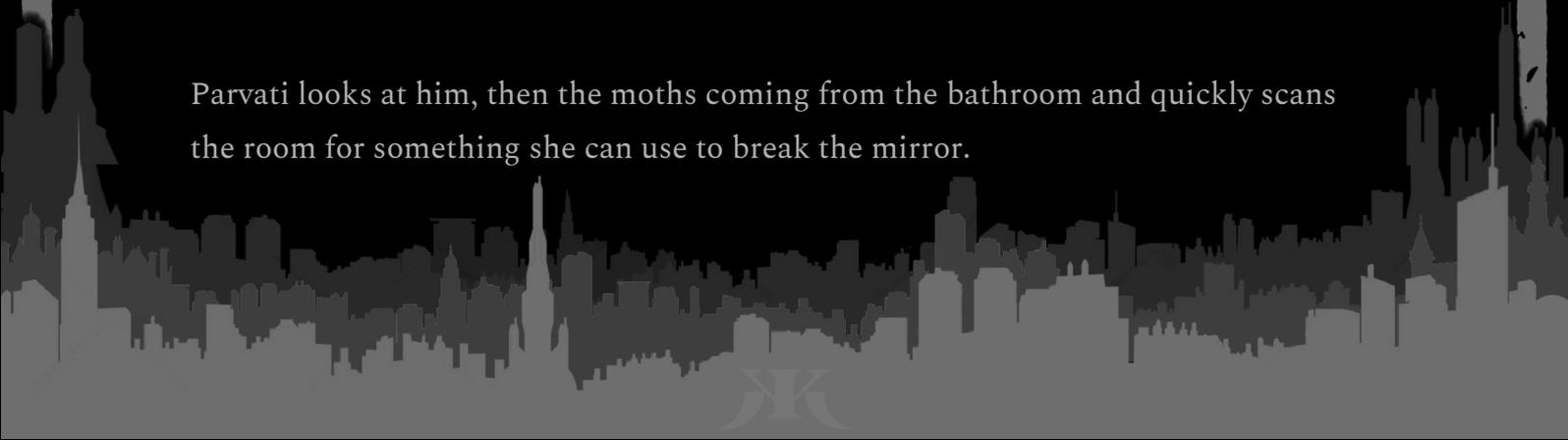
"This place is.....possibly haunted. I was grabbed by a hand in the bathroom."

With horror, Lucas realized he can't move, paralyzed by some unknown force. All he can do is talk, and watch the unfolding events. Another noise resonates from the bathroom, the sound of a mirror cracking. Then a couple of footsteps on the sandstone tiles, approaching. A flurry of white moths begin spilling out of the bathroom door.

Lucas struggles against the unseen force holding him down, eyes wide in terror as he recognizes the fluttering things pouring from the bathroom.

"The mirror... Break the mirror"

Parvati looks at him, then the moths coming from the bathroom and quickly scans the room for something she can use to break the mirror.





Parvati could throw any number of things at it, if she could see it. The flurry obscures a direct view, the moths so thick they give the impression of a living thing, filling in the doorway. Not content to just stand there, they commence flowing up the ceiling.

The assassin breaks a leg off a wooden chair, and heads into the moths, keeping her head lowered against the storm as she heads through them. Parvati swings wildly, hoping to hit the mirror.

Impact. The mirror shatters, and the moths rush towards it, dragging Parvati along for the ride. She hits her head on the bathroom cupboard, recoils, then falls down. Finally able to breathe but bleeding from the cut on her head, she turns around, back against the sink. Daylight seeps through the windows, as Parvati, exhausted, sees Lucas, fallen out of bed, slowly overcoming his paralysis.

Lucas lets out a grunt, slowly coming around, trying to get himself upright. He stumbles to the bathroom to see Parvati leaning, bleeding against the sink. "I thought this was going to be over, fuck"

He shakes his head, still seeming unsure of himself and moves to take a closer look at the cut on Pars forehead

The cut is nothing serious, a small mirror shard still glued to her forehead. As Lucas removes it, he catches an impression of a red eye, blinking, before he drops it.

"Fuck... what have I done?"

He stares at the broken mirror all over the floor.





While admiring the african idols on the wall, their eyes grim with the secrets they keep, the reporter tries to piece together what she knows about occult warding and revelation.

She grabs her phone from her pocket, glancing over her 15 missed calls and 30 text messages. Scrolling through her contacts, she finds a "Xavier Casado" a man she had been in university with, and a man she had a few small flings with through the years. She knew he transferred down to one of the universities in Brazil, no doubt for his love of young women. She presses the call button without hesitation and listens to the other line ring.

At the other end of Sofia's phone, fumbling can be heard. The speaker scratches, and finally a groggy voice picks up.

"...ello? Do you know what time it is? Jesus! Who is it?"

"Xavier! My apologies for the late call." Sofia tries to sound apologetic over the phone. She wanders outside of the party, plugging her exposed ear with a finger in order to hear her compatriot.

"I do hate to be a bother, especially this early in the morning, but I am doing some research down here in Brazil. Namely Sao Paulo. I am looking for particular books dealing with ritualistic behaviors involving the summoning of entities to make pacts with. I am attempting a new hypothesis in my research and this seems like the ticket."

"Oh, it is Sofia Alvez by the way. You remember me, do you not?"



The voice on the phone reacts to the call with enthusiasm.

"What? Sofia? In Sao Paulo? Today? I must be dreaming. Damn, you should come over to the shop. I'll text you an address. Bring some booze."

Sofia checks her inbox. It's not far, just a bit out of the favela. She stares outwards, trying to spot the downtown towers. Taking some alcohol from the party, she slips out through the crowd and into the streets. She checks the address and looks around, navigating through tight streets and people to get to her destination.

Her feet taking her downwards, she can see improvements as the altitude drops. City lights, sewer grates, and buildings that aren't patched together appear more frequently. She passes under a highway and follows a well lit multi-lane street.

The address proves to be a shop on the ground floor of an antique red apartment block. Occult paraphernalia lines the display windows, mixed in with bongos and cheap toys. A knock resolves in an open door, with Xavier Casado standing in it, wearing pants, a cowboy hat, and a sleeveless leather jacket.

"I can't believe my eyes. What the hell are you doing here?"

Sofia smiles widely. It was nice to see a familiar face after all this time.

"Research! I must say it has been a hell of a time so far. It is so good to see you." She clutches the alcohol tightly as she wraps her arms around Casado, bringing him into a friendly embrace.

"Damn, cachaça? What, suddenly switched from martinis to caipirinhas? Please, come in."





Inside it's even worse. There's a huge black pentagram on the wall, and the shelves are lined with scented candles. An entire rotating magazine rack is filled with astrology books and conspiracy magazines. Xavier notices that look in Sofia's eyes, then laughs and pulls out a couple of glasses from underneath the counter.

"Don't look at me like that. Not all of us are lucky enough to be touring the world. Some of us are eking it out as assistant professors, still trying to get tenure."

He pours the drinks, then puts the bottle down, ringing the glass counter. Staring back with a serious look, he says.

"How the hell have you been?"

Sofia looks around the shop, slightly taken aback by how deep he has gone since the two last met. She looks to him and steps forward, taking a deep drink before responding.

"I have had some extra time on my hands since the divorce. And if you want to be a freelance reporter who doesn't know where the next meal is coming from, I'll sign you up."

She gives him a smirk as she takes another sip. Her nose scrunches at the taste but she swallows quickly.

"I am impressed with the setup you have here.

Xavier downs his drink, and laughs.

"Starving bohemian here or there, what does it matter? Let me show you some stuff."





Leading on, they head into a basement. The stairs are cold, but at the end Xavier switches on some lights. The basement is a marvel. The walls are lined with rare occult tomes, everything from Hermetic Corpus to 777 and Other Qabalistic Writings of Aleister Crowley. There's a simple white circle painted into the floor, and an altar against a wall, upon which a Greek bust of a woman is placed. The sword, crown, cup, wand, ring, it's all there.

Sofia stops at the bottom of the basement, looking to the walls with amazement. She takes a couple steps forward and pauses, looking back to Xavier.

"I... wow... this is amazing Xavier. Have you... tried any of the rituals in any of those tomes there? You have the perfect space for it..."

Xavier grabs his beer gut, laughing.

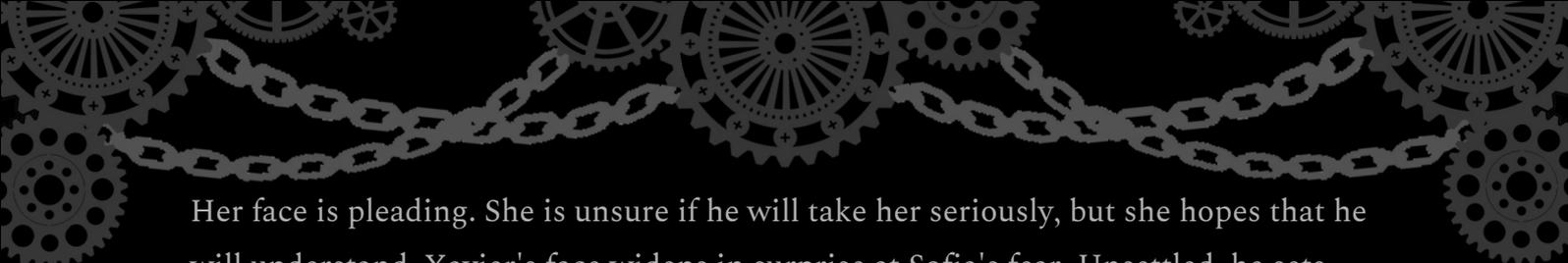
"What are you, nuts? Of course! I tried as many as I could. But very little of it works. It's hard going, you usually build your own methods. It helps if you believe in this stuff, which I know you don't."

He takes another sip out of his drink. Deadpan, staring at the altar, he mutters.

"The fucking helps."

Sofia taps her index fingers together a few times before coming up being Xavier.

"I have seen some things in recent years. Recent weeks even. Things that contradict the writings and studies I have published. I still have small doubts on certain things but... I need your help. I need you to help me learn to protect myself against the... the things out there."



Her face is pleading. She is unsure if he will take her seriously, but she hopes that he will understand. Xavier's face widens in surprise at Sofia's fear. Unsettled, he sets the drink down on the altar.

"Saint Mary, Mother of God. Look Sofia, protection from what? I mean, I'll help how I can. But it sounds to me like you've got a real problem on your hands."

"Something called... I think it was a Lictor? There are many of them apparently. I do not know everything yet. But I ran into one, and then I saw this place, I still do not know if it was real or not. These last few weeks have been terrifying to say the least, and I just need something to protect myself. Whatever it takes."

"Sofia, what the hell is a Lictor? I mean, what are we talking about here? What exactly are you trying to accomplish? You need to be able to visualize a spell, at least. There are many forms of protection."

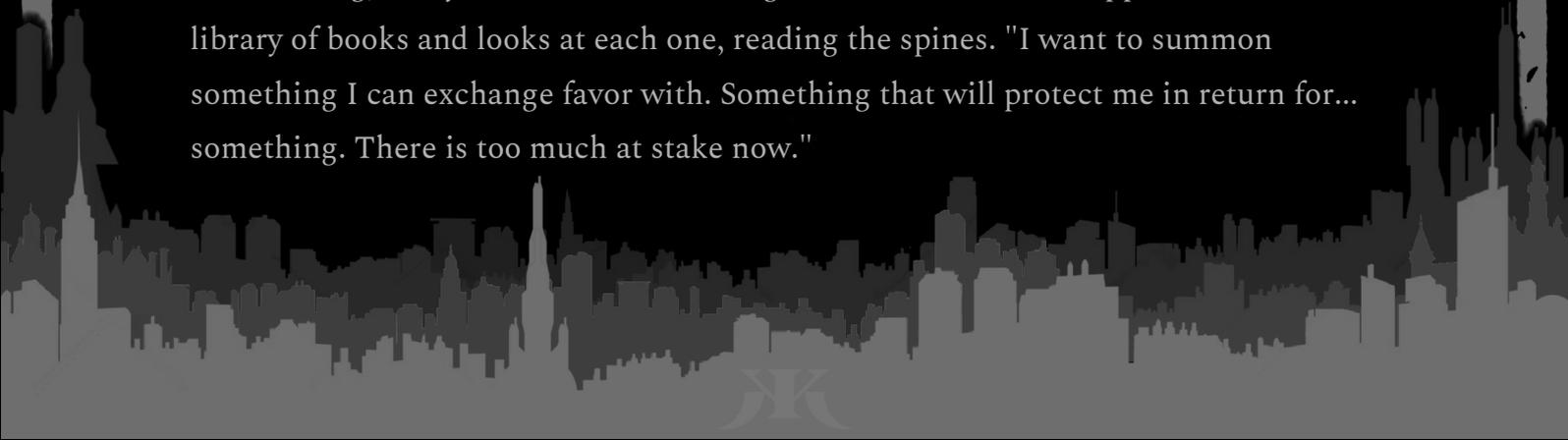
Sofia panics for a moment.

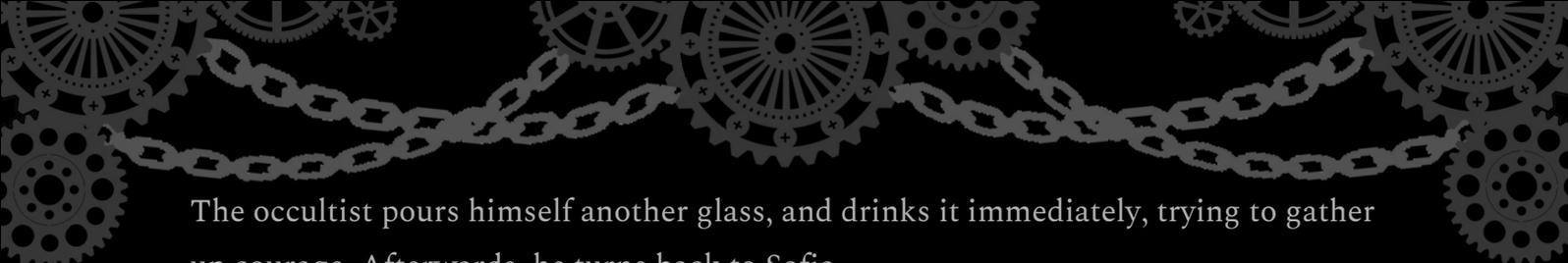
"Never mind about that. It has been a while since I slept. I... I need to summon something. Something that will help protect me. Something I can speak with."

Xavier looks in the direction of the library, thinking.

"Ok, look, I'm willing to help. But I've got to warn you that my specialty isn't this. I've never done a summoning, not since I was a stupid kid, drinking in cemeteries. All I've done is a bit of influencing people. As far as I can tell it worked. What are you trying to summon?"

"Influencing, really. You will have to enlighten me on that." She approaches his library of books and looks at each one, reading the spines. "I want to summon something I can exchange favor with. Something that will protect me in return for... something. There is too much at stake now."





The occultist pours himself another glass, and drinks it immediately, trying to gather up courage. Afterwards, he turns back to Sofia.

"We could definitely try for a guardian, then. Got any entity in mind, or do you want to peruse and take your chances?"

Sofia pauses for a moment, thinking back to the hanging man in Amsterdam.

"Enkisun? I read the name somewhere."

"Fuck it. Let's try for that, then."

Xavier takes a piece of chalk, then draws inside the circle. It's a pentagram lined up with other, smaller signs. After finishing, he lights three candles, one red, one white, and one pink. The magician places a black blanket on top of the symbol, then sits down on it. Finally, he undresses, and writes a few occult signs on himself with a permanent marker. On his chest, Enkisun is engraved. He sits, waiting. When he sees Sofia looking on, he says.

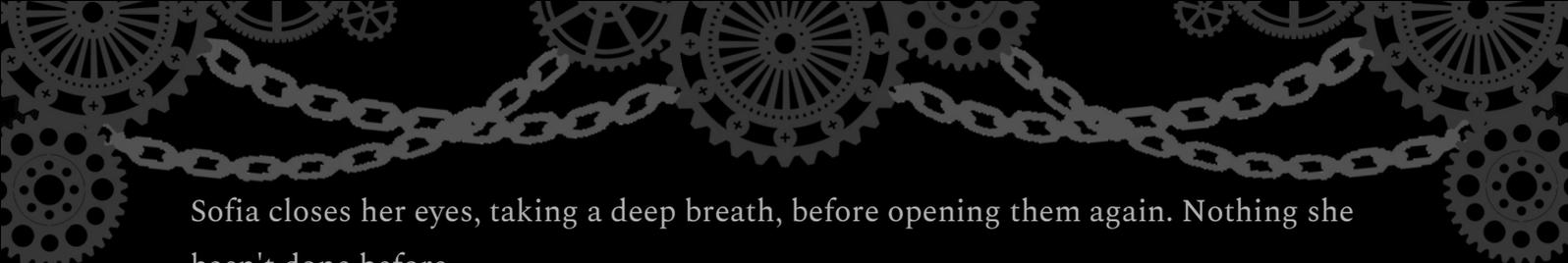
"I'm gay. I'll probably need some... stimulation."

Sofia stands there a little surprised at the revelation Xavier has given her. She stands in silence for a few moments before looking towards the stairs.

"Do you... want me to find a boy to bring in here? Or do you want to close your eyes and pretend I am one?" There is some humor in her voice, but she was genuinely curious as to what Xavier wanted her to do or get.

"Well miss journalist, a blowjob would be nice. I'd rather not get my regulars involved in this. If you get me going just climb on. Oh, before we begin, do you have a favorite poem? It helps if you recite it."





Sofia closes her eyes, taking a deep breath, before opening them again. Nothing she hasn't done before.

"Just like old times." Sofia removed her own garment, letting it fall to the floor. She slowly walks to Xavier before dropping to her knees and wrapping her lips around him. It is unpleasant for her but she pushes through until he is ready. She pushes him onto his back before climbing on, awkwardly angling him inside.

"Sorry, it has been a while."

Xavier grunts as Sofia pushes down on him.

"I think it's been... a bit longer for me... Last woman I was in... was my mother..."

They both have a bit of a laugh, and before long, Xavier is rubbing Sofia's breasts. She feels wetter, and he thrusts upwards with more ease. The bodies heat up as the candles melt away. Sofia forgot how virile some men were. She's a bit surprised when Xavier lands her on the back. Pushing forward with greater and greater force, that masculine need for deeper penetration, he soon accelerates. It hurts a bit, and she tries to get him to ease up.

Sofia is surprised at how much she had started to enjoy being with a man, and she allows herself to enjoy. As she rides on top of him, her hips getting used to the movements, she recites a poem, one that she has read many times.





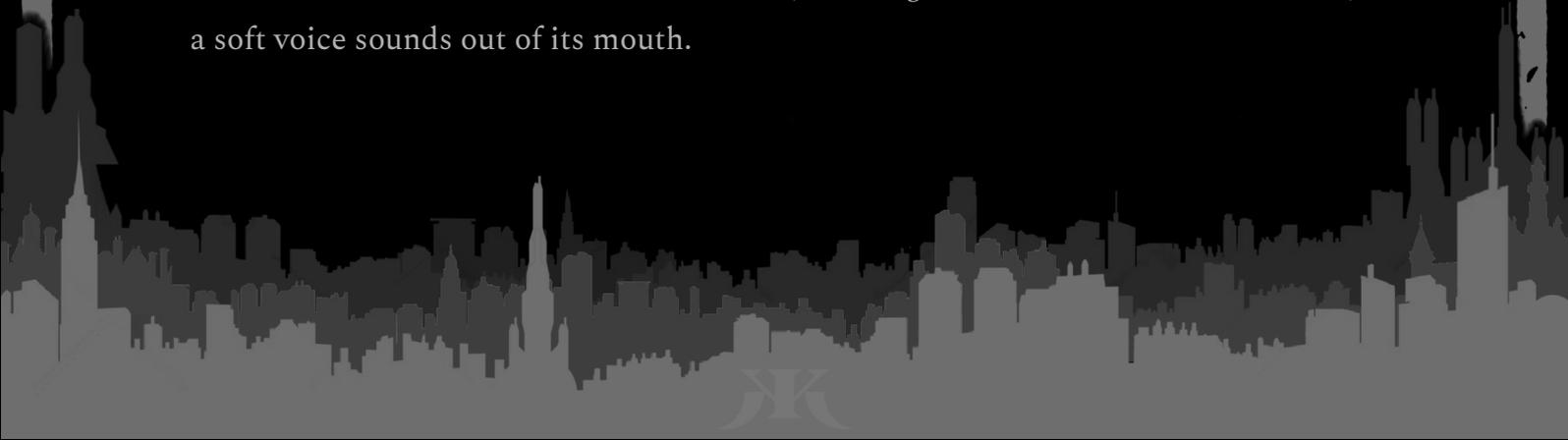
"Ah! my proper lips are stilled.
Only, all the world is filled
With the Echo, that drips over
Like the honey from the clover.
Passion, penitence, and pain
Seek their mother's womb again,
And are born the triple treasure,
Peace and purity and pleasure.
- Hush, my child, and come aloft
Where the stars are velvet soft!"

But his face has changed. He's no longer focused on her, but rather inward. Just trying to please himself. Before her very eyes, he changes. Even as she orgasms, his ribs twist and dilate. Something rips, and a set of bones raises from his back. His chest bleeds, an open wound in between his ribs.

Sofia tries to get away, but steel grips hold down her hands. She's being impaled now, and it's no longer pleasant. By the time a set of bloody white wings, here and there cleaved to the bone, raises fully from his back, half his face is gone. His eye drops, rolling on the floor.

As things get more heated, and Xavier transforms, she battles between the pleasure and the absolute horror that is in front of her. Her heart beats quickly as the roughness and pain increases, the urge to scream constantly suppressed. All she could manage were meek moans and groans as she was being impaled by the creature that came from Xavier. She responds to the winged thing, her voice raspy and trembling.

The creature lifts her in the air with a hand, one finger in her mouth. As she moans, a soft voice sounds out of its mouth.





"There's no reason to be afraid. You're beautiful. Beautiful flesh."

It removes the finger, allowing Sofia to talk.

"Y-you are Enkisun?"

The soft words that escaped Xavier's mouth make it even more frightening, as the inhabiting creature spreads its wings. It calmly gazes around, taking in its surroundings. Breathing as if unaccustomed to the air, it speaks once more.

"Yes, my delicate child. Enkisun is my name."

Its hand still on Sofia's throat, it turns her head, inspecting her face.

"Who are you?"

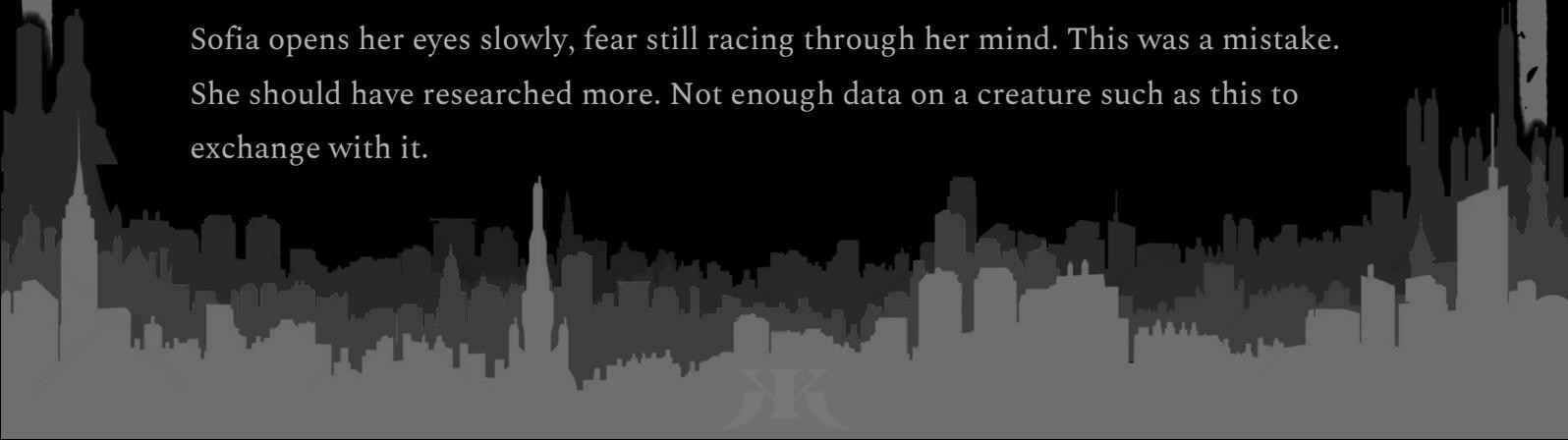
Sofia's eyes look over the creature holding her, her body trembling in its grasp.

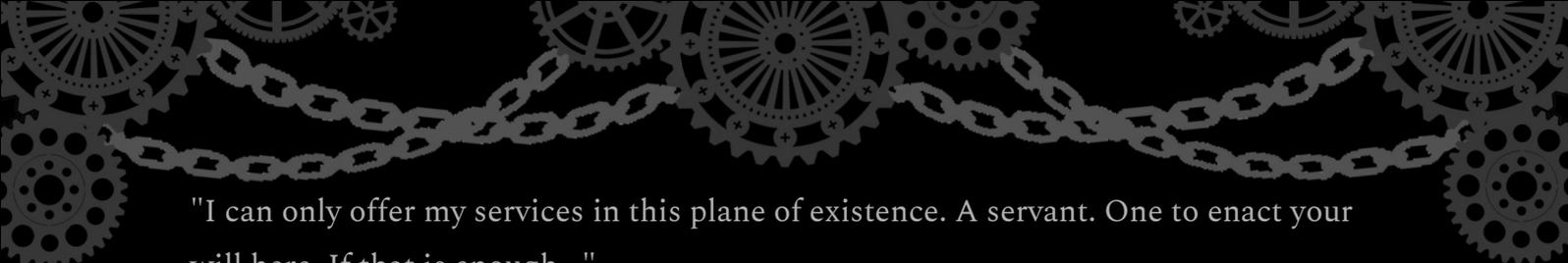
"Sofia..." Her words are only slightly louder than a whisper. "Sofia Hopkins. I wanted to make a deal with you."

The miscreation shivers, spraying bits of flesh and bone on the walls and books. Then the creature formerly known as Xavier brings Sofia in closer. She shuts her eyes in fear, and feels a tongue licking her cheek and ear.

"Sweet child. Abandoned by your god, what could you ever offer to an eternal being? Pleasures of the flesh interest me not. You're not even of pure breed, I can taste the mixture of Gaelic and Visigoth peasants in your sweat."

Sofia opens her eyes slowly, fear still racing through her mind. This was a mistake. She should have researched more. Not enough data on a creature such as this to exchange with it.





"I can only offer my services in this plane of existence. A servant. One to enact your will here. If that is enough..."

Xavier's corpse flings her to the floor, then starts pacing the room. It looks curiously at the libraries, then opens a book, perusing.

"A servant. I've not had a servant in Elysium in some time. Perhaps you can prove useful. What do you want in return?"

Sofia struggles to her knees, resting on them as she looks up to the winged monster. "I want to be able to protect myself and those around me. At the very least to be able to spot those who do not belong here. The... Lictors. I want to be aware of them when I see them, or something along those lines."

The thing inhabiting Xavier's corpse drops the book on the floor, then moves onto the candles. It places a hand on the flame, waiting for the flesh to burn. It eventually extinguishes.

"The Lictors. You want help against your jailers. How quaint. I shall grant your wish, child, if you perform a service. The line of Braganza once ruled this city. Now they are hidden, and I wish to find them once more. Retrieve a vial of their noble blood for me. Over it, I will bond you to my service. "

Sofia bows her head and nods. "O-of course. I will find them. I will bring it." She gets up from her kneeling position on shaky legs, feeling some drying blood between her thighs. She moves to her clothes, flecks of blood and bone have spread to them. She winces as she puts them back on, wracking her brain on who would be part of this Braganza bloodline.

"It is settled then."





Xavier's corpse collapses onto the floor, inert, even as a breeze blows out all but one of the candles.

Sofia clutches her chest. She didn't expect Xavier to be a victim in this. A stone settles in her throat as she feels the guilt. She moves to his wall of occult books, deciding not to waste the opportunity to take some of them and see if she can find anything on the Braganza. She wipes away a few tears that had formed as she takes the only lit candle, using it to browse the books.

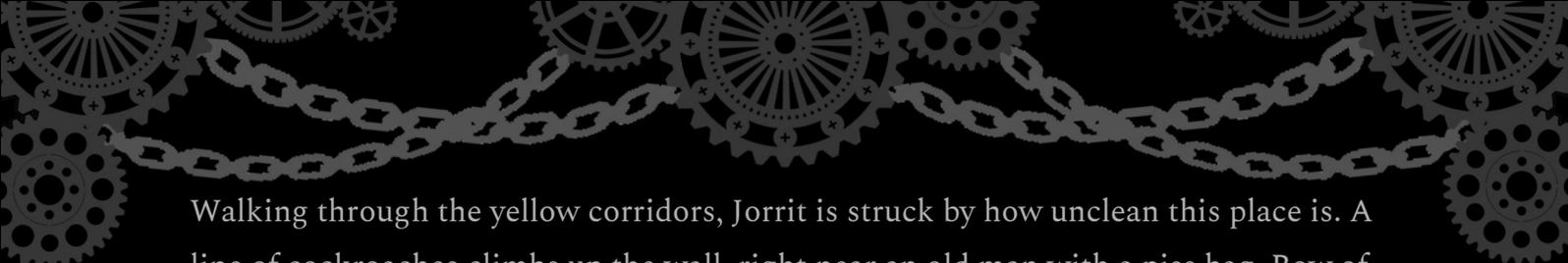
Looking at the library, Sofia realized that she could easily spend years reading through all this. But one of Xavier's lovers is bound to come looking for him sooner or later.

Sofia tries to pick out the most important and old looking books, shoving them in one of his bags along with the idols he had around. She makes note of the circle in the center of the room, now decorated with Xavier's blood. She takes Xavier's keys from his clothing and attempts to remove all traces of her from this space.

Jorrit treads down the narrow alleys, watching as two patchy cats cross his path. Sitting on a signpost above, a couple of boys measure up the detective as a mark. They change their minds when they meet his steel gaze. Asking around, he quickly grabs the landmark, a tall block of 7 floors due east. He winds through the alleys heading for the Heliopolis Hospital.

It's an old building, built during the 80's. There's nothing of beauty in it, just practical concrete. A few ambulances sit in front, one with the hood open, the driver working on it, chest bare as his fluorescent overall is tied around his waist. A rat flies by in the corner. A few nurses are smoking cigarettes, gossiping on their breaks.





Walking through the yellow corridors, Jorrit is struck by how unclean this place is. A line of cockroaches climbs up the wall, right near an old man with a piss bag. Row of patients with emergencies are waiting in line, hoping to see a doctor. Further away, a couple of cops are talking to the victim of an assault.

He asks around about Anders. The older nurse is surprised, and lifts her hands out her pockets. She fixes her bonnet, and Jorrit can see bags under her eyes, even as she sips some more coffee. The nurse listens carefully, then gives him directions to both the postoperative recovery. The elevator is out, and Jorrit takes the stairs.

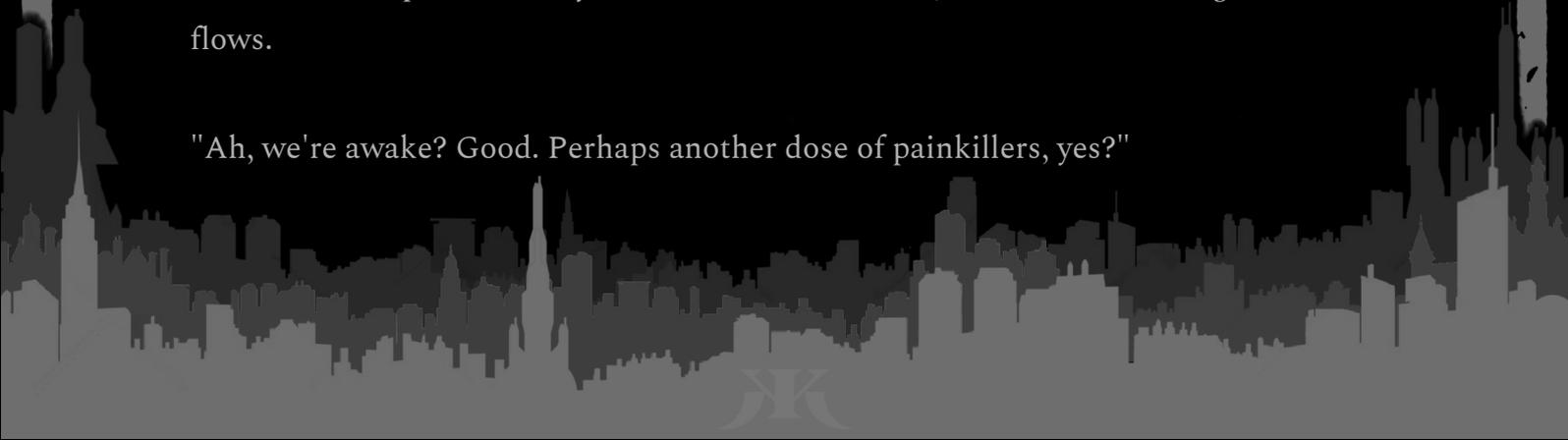
I wake up in a hospital bed, IV in hand, torso bandaged. It isn't the cleanest place, with green cracking plaster and a moldy sink in the corner. The IV bag stands on a coat hanger, white paint peeled off to reveal rust behind it. Nearby, a wooden nightstand reveals a cockroach climbing out of it. A few more patients share the room, unconscious.

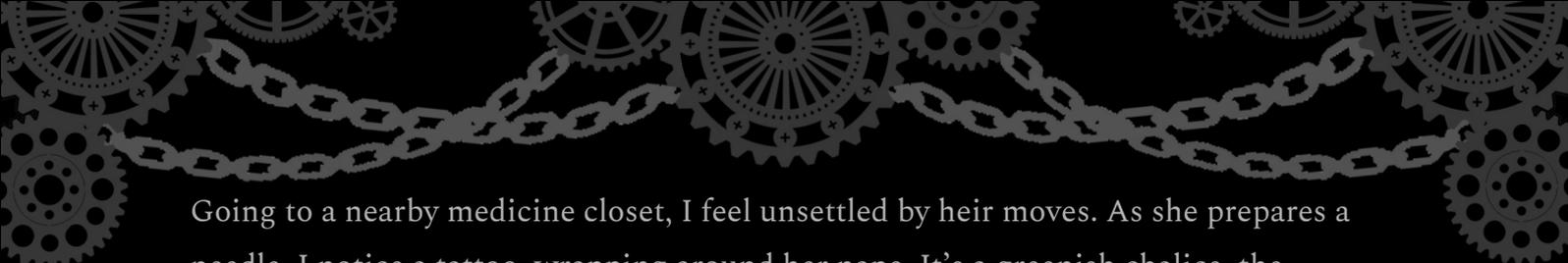
The bandages at least are clean, although I feel the itch of a few stitches underneath. Moving is hurtful, but manageable. For a moment, I relax, then remember all that transpired. My friends, dead. The gallery, most likely lost. My whole life has been ruined, since I saw that house.

Somehow, I find a way to rationalize it all away. It's just a misunderstanding, after all. At least this place seems somewhat normal. I shudder, trying to forget that city and the things in it.

A nurse comes in, whistling a tune with flair, a pad under her arm. Neatly ironed, her uniform is complemented by an old fashioned bonnet, underneath which golden hair flows.

"Ah, we're awake? Good. Perhaps another dose of painkillers, yes?"





Going to a nearby medicine closet, I feel unsettled by her moves. As she prepares a needle, I notice a tattoo, wrapping around her nape. It's a greenish chalice, the rusting ink unrefreshed in years. Something similar sat in front of woman in red, in that horrible caricature he painted. The nurse is filling up something that suspiciously looks like a tranquilizer.

The nurse has the injection prepared. Green liquid stirs inside the syringe, shaking under the tap of a fingernail. I want to get out of the room. The only excuse I can think of is asking for a bathroom, as there isn't one in this salon. Perhaps on the way there I can figure something out.

"Don't worry, this will only be a minute. Then I can help you to the bathroom. You're a big boy, you can hold it in for a bit longer. You're fine now, but without this tranquilizer you'll be in pain shortly."

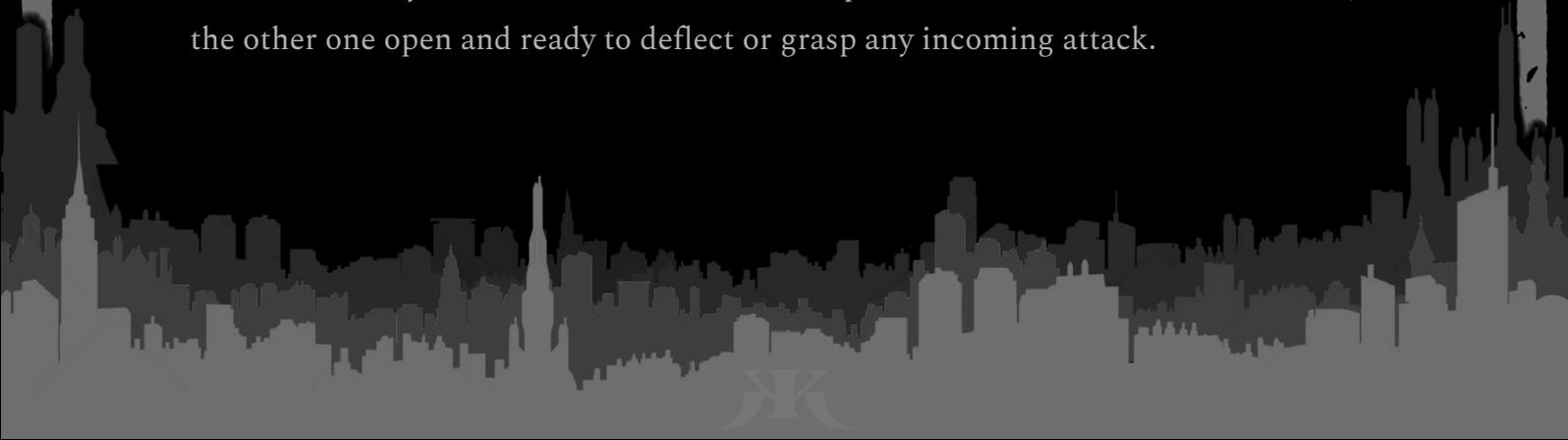
Ignoring her, I get on my feet, flinching from the pain inflicted by bruising and stitches. I slip past the nurse, panicking, not looking where I'm going, slamming into Jorrit outside. We land on the corridor on all fours, rubbing our heads at the point of contact.

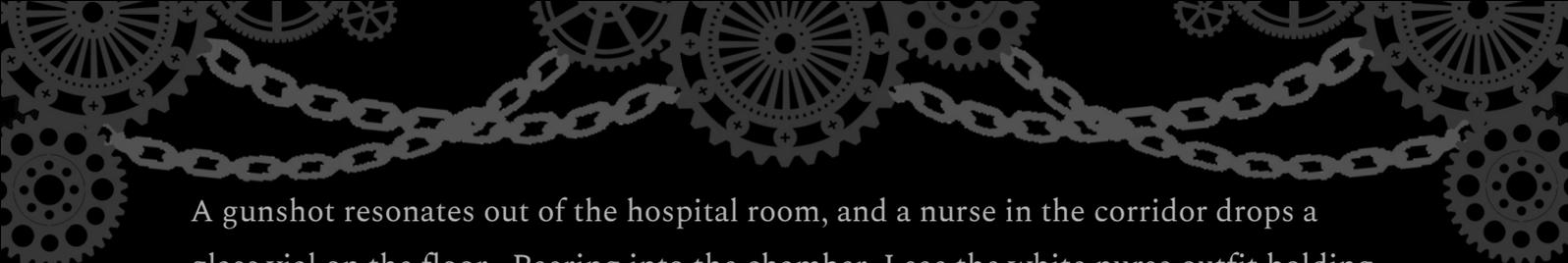
"The nurse, she's out to kill me!"

"Ouw! Goddammit!", Jorrit recoils from the impact, then reacts alarmed but confused. "Huh? What? She seemed harmless, mostly just tired and old...?"

"Not that one. The one inside the room."

Even more alarmed, Jorrit peeks into the room. He picks up on my panic and fear, and instinctively raises his arms in a defensive position - one hand balled into a fist, the other one open and ready to deflect or grasp any incoming attack.





A gunshot resonates out of the hospital room, and a nurse in the corridor drops a glass vial on the floor. Peering into the chamber, I see the white nurse outfit holding a revolver with both hands, the barrel smoking. The shot has missed the detective by inches.

Without thinking, Jorrit rushes her. Diving in underneath her gun, he bodily tackles her, sending both crashing to the ground in a struggle to control the weapon. The revolver rolls away from them.

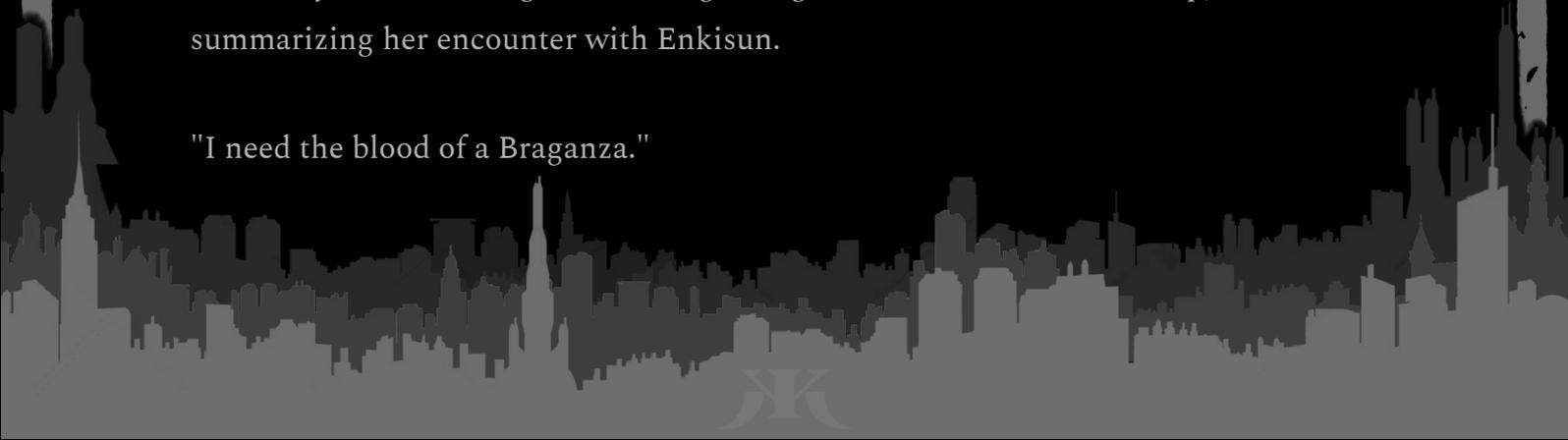
Enraged, Jorrit beats and pummels the nurse until her face is unrecognizable. Panting, he sits on an empty bed, knuckles wrecked, head bleeding. A sudden epiphany hits him, that we're not alone in the hospital.

It is too late to be discreet anyways. Jorrit grabs the gun, and ushers me towards the nearest exit, in a hurry, wiping blood from a head wound out of his eyes and inadvertently smearing it all over his face in the process. I call Lucas, who gives me a hotel address.

By the time Ricardo and Sofia arrive, the blinders have been pulled down and the ceiling fan has been turned on at full power, with no success. With time to reflect on our situation, I can't help but wonder what all the connections mean. I feel hunted around every corner by strange things in the dark, and reality itself seems to be slipping away. As Lucas and Parvati describe dreams pouring out into reality, my mind keeps returning to the Lictor's charnel house.

Too many of the investigators are beginning to break down. We catch up, with Sofia summarizing her encounter with Enkisun.

"I need the blood of a Braganza."





"So you need us to kill her? Ops said it's more of a bag and tag." Lucas says.

Jorrit notices the tv is open. Someone's phone caught a picture of his face while he was dragging Anders down a corridor. The police are now looking for him as a suspect after he brutalized a nurse. Everyone realizes that if they figure out who he is, Interpol won't be far behind for the rest of them.

Sofia shakes her head.

"No... no... It requests blood only. It never specified death. As long as I have the blood I can complete the ritual to Enkisun. Once that is complete it will assist me."

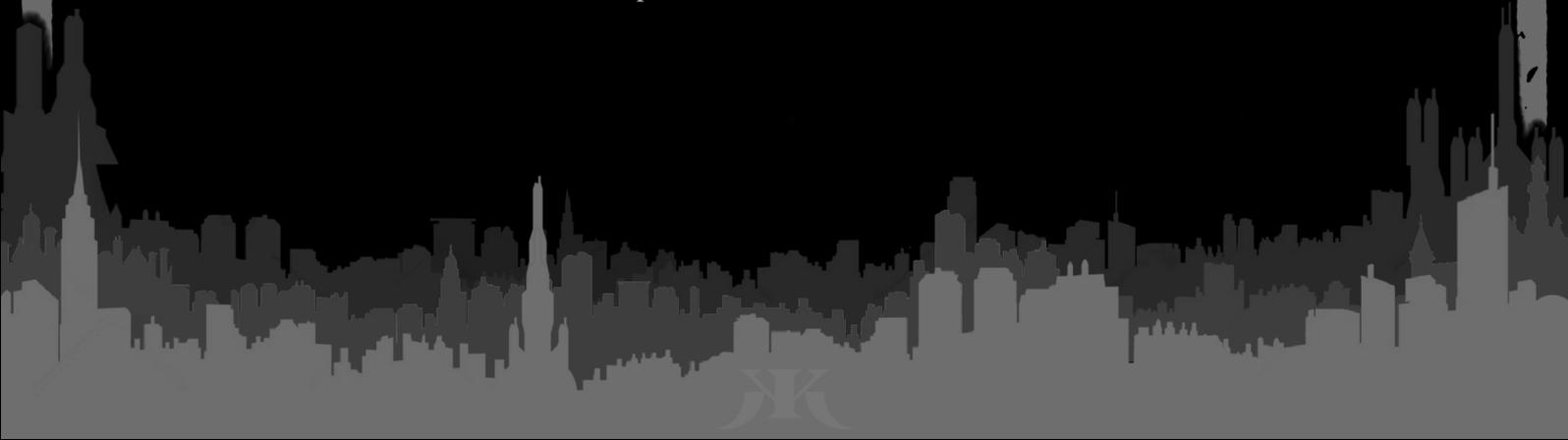
They are interrupted by the TV, a news broadcast continuing.

"Another gun battle in the Heliopolis. 5 people were killed and 31 wounded in the conflict between Primeiro Comando da Capital and Terceiro Comando. Sources report the conflict escalated over drug territories in the favela. When asked, Lieutenant Colonel Diogo Carvalho Barros had this to say... "

A nubian officer in a black uniform and military cap is speaking into a red microphone.

"We've asked the mayor permission to intervene. BOPE have had great success in Rio de Janeiro, we trust that similar success can be found here. Against such violence, only a military armed and trained force can prevail."

The news anchor continues her presentation.





"Protesters and council representatives claim that lending the Special Police Operations Battalion jurisdiction could lead to escalation of violence rather than a decline of it. Bianca Pinto Braganza claims the answer is increasing social support to the poor of the city..."

An auburn curly haired woman with azure earrings and an Armani business suit appears on screen.

"It's obvious the problem is drug related. If we focus on drug education and prevention, it will solve itself."

"Mrs. Braganza refuses to give credence to allegations that people have gone missing after treatment in Nova Vida recuperations centers, claiming elopement on the part of the patients. Whether or not this is true, Nova Vida is still facing malpractice lawsuits. Instead, Mrs. Braganza's efforts are focused on tonight's fundraiser event at the local Zoo, with some of the richest Paulistas and city officials attending, claiming the event will raise money for the favela NGOs."

The newsreel trails onwards, speaking of poverty and a city suffering.

"That's the woman. Looks like she hasn't aged a bit." Lucas rubs his chin.

Parvati turns to look at the news, watching the screen closely before looking at the others.

"Well, it's time to get dressed and arm up."

While the fighters plan their moves, I approach Ricardo.

"I could use some help."





I hold out a slightly crumpled piece of paper. On it is a drawing of two monstrous figures, the diner sketch of the prosecutor as the Lictor and the machine gun woman.

"I saw them in Amsterdam. They were mentioning Samael and Drath'tan."

"In the Talmud, Samael, the Poisoner, is the fallen archangel of death, rider of the serpent. There are multiple versions floating around. In one, he planted the tree of knowledge. In another, it was he who tempted Eve to eat from it. He appears in the Book of Enoch, but he is more amply described in the medieval Treatise on the Left Emanation. If I remember correctly, there he is part of the Qlifot, a shadow of the Sefirot, detailing the impure aspects of creation."

"Poisoner. That would explain the chalice on the nurse at the hospital."

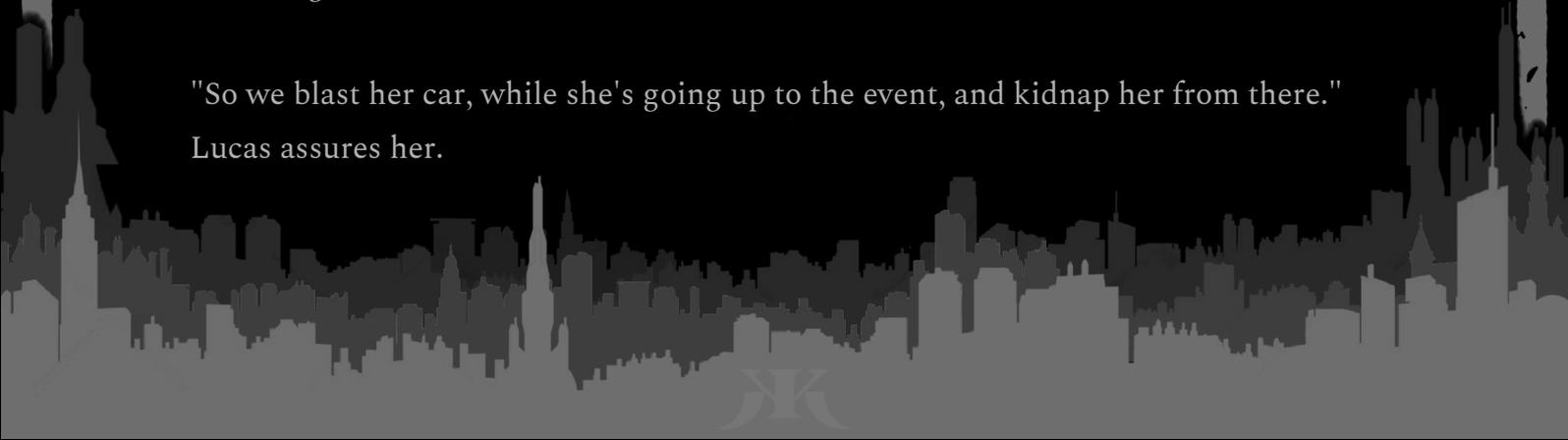
Another hour passes before Lucas emerges, with a disguise he hopes will hold under scrutiny.

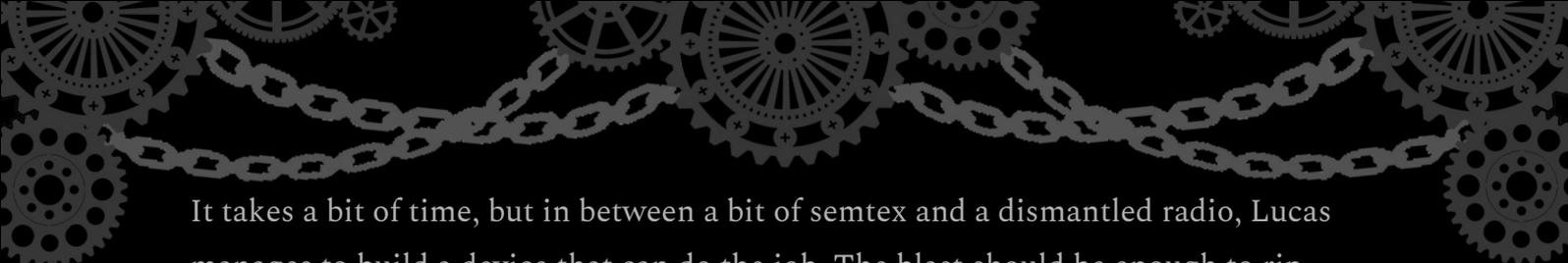
"Well, we don't have to get her at this event. But this is the only time and place we know she will be. We could capture her and drain some blood, or just chop and arm off and get blood out of it."

I try to look for a map of the zoo online. The Zoo turns out to be a gigantic park, spreading over some 800 000 square meters. It's an hour away by drive, just enough time to make it to the beginning of the ceremony. A quick study shows the fundraiser is being held at the reptile house, and is invitation only.

The reporter makes some calls, but after 15 minutes she is increasingly frustrated. The Braganza are an old money family, wealthy beyond measure, the event only open to the high elite.

"So we blast her car, while she's going up to the event, and kidnap her from there." Lucas assures her.





It takes a bit of time, but in between a bit of semtex and a dismantled radio, Lucas manages to build a device that can do the job. The blast should be enough to rip through a car.

As we enter the reception hall, black uniform swat troopers surround us, pointing their weapons, yelling instructions to kiss the floor. Without many choices, we conform and are cuffed, black sacks placed over our heads.

Metal shunts of van doors ring in my ear, and a short time later, I am pulled out and forced to walk. Finally, I am sat down, and the masks are taken off their heads. A warehouse, lit by a few lamps. A bald, black man with his hands behind his back in his late 40's stands in front of them, in a black kevlar vest that barely contains his muscled chest. His helpers splash the fugitives with buckets of water, and he brings his pure brawn arms forward, holding a picture. He shoves it into Jorrit's face: it shows the beat up nurse, and the cup tattoo on her nape.

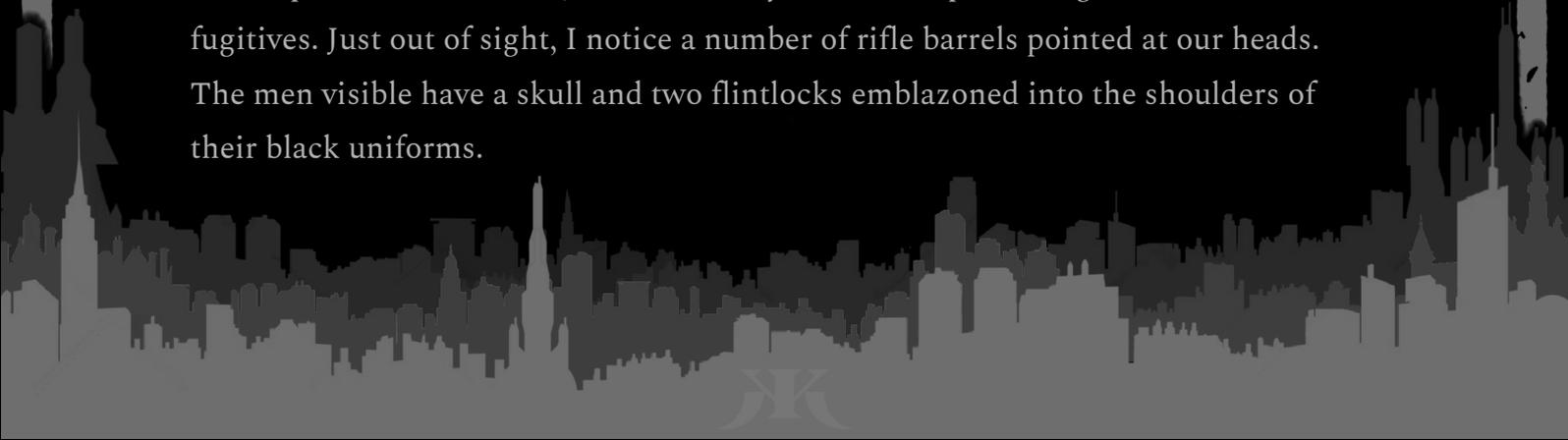
"What can you tell me about this?"

"Huh... Looks like your mom got a real weird tramp stamp?" Jorrit cracks a joke.

One of the black uniformed men smacks him. Outside of the cuffs, nobody is tied down. The leader breaks into laughter.

"Looks like we caught a live one here, boys! And he speaks Portuguese to boot! Maybe this little fish will grant me three wishes!"

His helpers snicker as well, even those beyond the lamps shining down on the fugitives. Just out of sight, I notice a number of rifle barrels pointed at our heads. The men visible have a skull and two flintlocks emblazoned into the shoulders of their black uniforms.





"Jorrit van Geesbaeck. Narcotics detective in Amsterdam. Divorced. Suspected of drug trafficking, and a suspect in multiple murders. Last seen in the Netherlands six months ago. Since you're Dutch, I'll just call you herring. So tell me little herring, are you going to grant my first wish and tell me about the not-even-a-nurse you beat half to death?"

"See, guys - that's why I keep telling you not to get into that whole online dating thing! They hog all your data and sell it to random people on the internet - and now look where it got me..."

Another hit. My eyes ask Jorrit to stop, but he just smiles. Sofia looks around with wide eyes.. She shivers from the water splashed on her and lightly tugs at her wrist. Ricardo remains silent for now, waiting for the time to escape. Lucas stays quiet, offering his rank and number.

I recognize the insignia as belonging to the Special Police Operations Battalion. A police tactical unit, especially made for the urban warfare in the favelas of Brazil. They're famous for using lethal force and working on the boundaries of the law.

Their leader continues, unhinged by the remarks.

"Lucas Reynolds, an Afghanistan veteran, the only other survivor of his platoon. I'm afraid this slick salmon slipped away from the bear's grasp one too many times. Seems like I won't be getting my first wish. How about you, catfish?"

He gestures towards Parvati, showing her the picture of the chalice tattoo.

"Can you tell me why ever since these guys showed up in the Primeiro Comando, the violence on the streets of my city has been going crazy?"

"I don't recognize it, I'm afraid."





"Parvati Shankar. World class assassin. Silent and contract bound. Content to sleep at the bottom of the lake. That's the big fish, done. Would any of the other goldfishes attempt to solve my second wish, and tell me about this gang?"

"Could you get one of these waiters to bring me a beer" Jorrit says as he takes a glance at the picture, then to Parvati, shrugging.

Silence settles in for a moment after the retaliation for the comment. The gun barrels in the shadows haven't moved an inch.

"Looks like I'm not getting my second wish either. Now, for my third wish: Can anyone explain to me why a group of people from various backgrounds, to the artistic to the criminal, as well as these chalice tattooed bastards are all looking for that bitch of an ex-wife of mine?"

Lucas finally speaks.

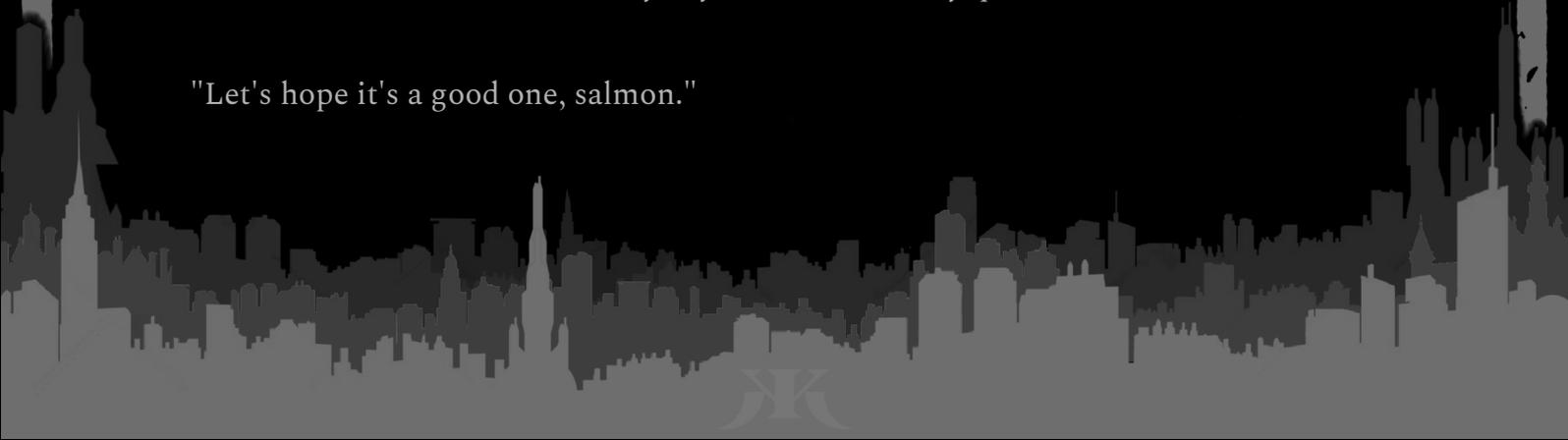
"I'm looking for her because I'm getting paid to. I can say that she wasn't going to be harmed in any way, my employers wanted her intact. As for the tattoos and all, no idea."

He approaches closer to Lucas, measuring up and down.

"What I don't understand is why, if you're all looking for the same person, you're also at odds with one another. Who is this employer of yours?"

"The usual mercenary black ops recruiter. Could be a shadow government organization, could be the US government, the CIA or anyone with the money." He looks back to the man. "Now maybe you can answer my question?"

"Let's hope it's a good one, salmon."





His helpers laugh again.

"What's your stake in all this is?"

The leader paces the room, looking each of us in the eye. There an unwavering determination lying there, a will to move the ages. He's witnessed Lucas calling his bluff, but doesn't seem particularly bothered by this.

"Allow me to introduce myself and my team. Me and my men are the only thing left that can save this city from devouring itself. I am Lieutenant Colonel Diogo Carvalho Barros of the Special Police Operations Battalion. But you may call me the fisherman. I've cast my net wide, and caught you all, under the assumption that you are my enemy's enemies. Help me, and I can put off Interpol off your tails for a little bit longer. If not, I think I'll have you all for dinner."

He points to the shadows, and I can hear the rifle hammers being cocked. Lucas isn't impressed.

"I don't think any of us here want any more violence in your city than you already have. We're not here to kill people. Not right now. We're here to find the woman and do the job that we need to do and we'll get the fuck out of your hair. Now, maybe we can help or maybe we can't. Not until we know what the specifics of what you need are. Until then I can't promise you anything."

Lt. Colonel Barros stands for a moment, pondering, his hands gripped behind his back.





"Perhaps I've overestimated you. Maybe you've got less of a picture than I have. Let's see if we can clear the waters. In short, this is what I know. A new group has infiltrated the Primeiro Comando, these guys with the tattoo. Ever since they've shown up, the violence in the streets has peaked, and they've been aggressively looking for Mrs. Braganza. The higher ups of the city don't seem to mind at all, but I've assumed this was to keep it all business as usual. In the meantime, you all show up. A collection of international fugitives, last seen in Amsterdam, hired by unknowns to track this woman. You seem to be at odds with the Primeiro Comando. The motivations behind all this escape me. Perhaps you could enlighten me."

"Hmm, as far as I know, our only connection to that tattoo is the woman that assaulted one of our own. Do you know any more of the organization?"

"They seem to be under the direction of a certain el-Nazaar, a Saudi Arabian gun-runner resettled here. My informants tell me he's more or less the power behind the Primeiro Comando, supplying them with weapons. Recently they took down one of our surveillance choppers with an RPG. I haven't seen this before."

"Motherfucker. I think you just found an ally, Colonel."

"Who are the Primeiro Comando" asks Ricardo, now braver.

Lt. Col. Barros closes in uncomfortably on Ricardo, his breath landing on his face.

"I keep forgetting you're not from around here. The Primeiro Comando are a drug running cartel in the city. Usually, they just protect their own network, most of their leaders long past ambitions such as upsetting the political order of things. Until this el-Nazaar guy comes long. The minute I ask the mayor for a warrant to bring him down, he puts me off to the side. They seem more preoccupied with their private parties than the bullets flying in the favela. I think they're having one now."



"Does el-Nazaar ever attend these private parties?"

"I don't know whether el-Nazaar's got some involvement with the political inner circle. I doubt it, seeing how he's the opposite of the Paulista high elite. I know my ex-wife had some personal connections to a few of them. I somehow ended up drunk, unable to remember things."

"Do you normally drink so much you can't remember, or was this unusual for you?"

"If I were to think back, my wife had been grooming me. Advice here and there about how to talk to my superiors, where to press the advantage. It sort of reminded me of The Art of War, the espionage part especially."

He stops for a second.

"Braganza never aged. Not in our twenty years of marriage."

"Then she's probably influenced you with rituals. Can I get something to wipe my eyes?" Ricardo asks.

Lt. Colonel Barros snaps his fingers, and a few dry rags get slapped in his face. Continuing, Barros speaks again.

"I'm not a big believer of the orishas. But I've seen enough to put my mind on edge. You're telling me the ceremonies the rich of Sao Paulo perform have something to do with it? My men have been staring off at a distance, while Miss Braganza has been throwing her parties...."





"Well, for all the good it'll do... because no one ever believes me anyway... I believe that there is something we might call 'magic'. Not all of it that you see or hear of it is necessarily real, but there is a considerable amount that is real. I mean, any amount above zero percent being real is significant enough, but still..."

"Wait, wait... I'm not exactly all clear on the politics here," Jorrit hesitates, "so, do you think the Comando and Nazar are in league with the mayor against whatever the Braganzas and their NGO are secretly cooking up? Or is that bullshit because some other explanation makes more sense?"

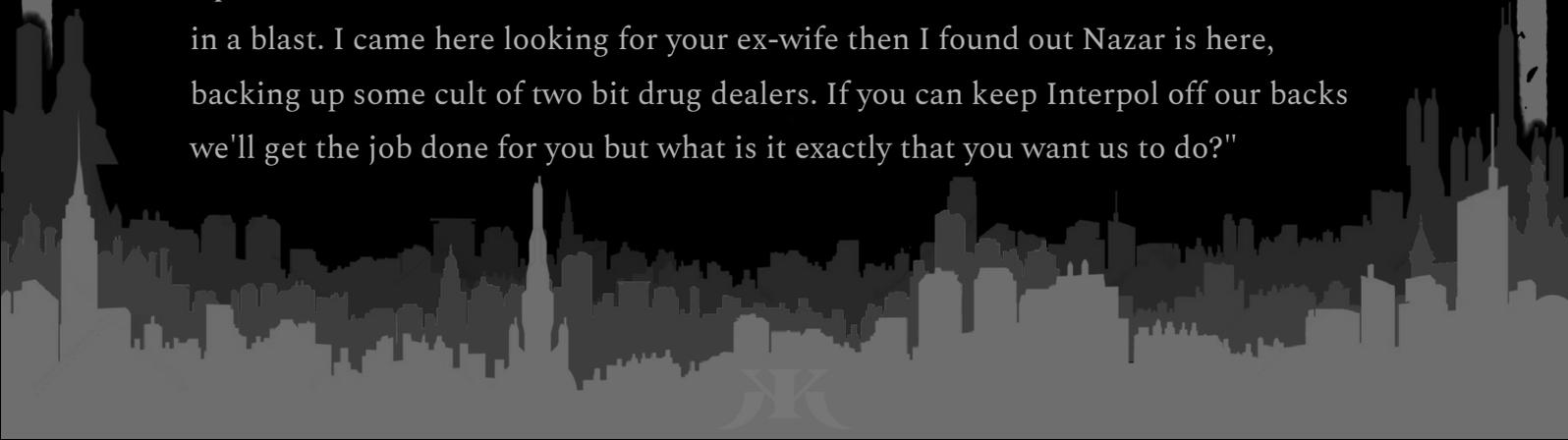
I find my hands uncuffed, rubbing my wrists to get the circulation going.

"I think your theory has some merit, Mr. van Geesbaeck. While they smile and shake hands, each of them is profiting from one end of the drug dealing. The mayor's reaping in the drug pay-offs, while Braganza's getting rich off the drug recovery NGOs. How my wife and el-Nazaar figure into all this, I'm still unsure. As for allies, Mr. Reynolds, I need someone who can operate outside the law. Someone the politicals don't know. You fit the bill."

"Oh, so it's not some of 'em against the rest of 'em... it's all of them in with each other... against you?"

"I'm not sure they're working together, or just taking advantage of the status quo. Braganza's been after the mayor's office for years, but Carvalho's got too many allies. I think that if I can tie proof to either one, I can shake up the power structure enough to get some real changes."

"Well colonel, it seems this whole situation is getting weirder by the moment. I have a personal stake in this business now. el-Nazar is the reason I'm one of two survivors in a blast. I came here looking for your ex-wife then I found out Nazar is here, backing up some cult of two bit drug dealers. If you can keep Interpol off our backs we'll get the job done for you but what is it exactly that you want us to do?"





"I need someone to dig into Braganza's NGOs. I think Mrs. Braganza is throwing an afterparty for the Zoo exhibit at her villa, for the select elite. I've got some floor plans for old slave tunnels, the ones the Braganza abolitionists used. Naturally, I can't be officially implicated."

"Right, you can't do anything without a warrant, but if some civilians uncover something, you can act on it. Plausible deniability." Jorrit concludes.

"Precisely."

"We need this 'arrest' covered, our gear returned." Lucas takes a quick look at everyone.

"We've confiscated your car, which we've found is full of weapons. As for your arrest, don't worry. You were never arrested in the first place."

"Will we be able to venture back to the hotel you abducted us from? Or has that place been compromised now?"

"Nobody will be looking for you, at least for a while. If anyone checks bank accounts, it might be a problem. This blacksites should be our meeting point."

Lucas continues planning the insertion, while I make sure Jorrit is alright. He's nursing his broken nose and cut eyebrow with a napkin.

"Why didn't you just keep quiet?"

"They were going to make an example out of someone either way. I know I can take it. You, Ricardo, or Sofia couldn't."



It's good to smell the cold night air after a brief detention. Everyone spends some time with Barros, explaining what they need. An old style camper, white and stenciled with hippie peace signs, is soon parked in front of the warehouse. Inside, it has two briefcases with radio surveillance equipment, and a few easy to use surface stick microphones. Barros gets behind the wheel.

The richer the neighborhood, the sparser the lighting. Barros climbs the winding roads, then parks in front of a crumbling mine shaft. The wood has long collapsed, only the rusty metal framework remains. It's pitch black inside.

"That's the place. Somewhere in there is a way into the villa."

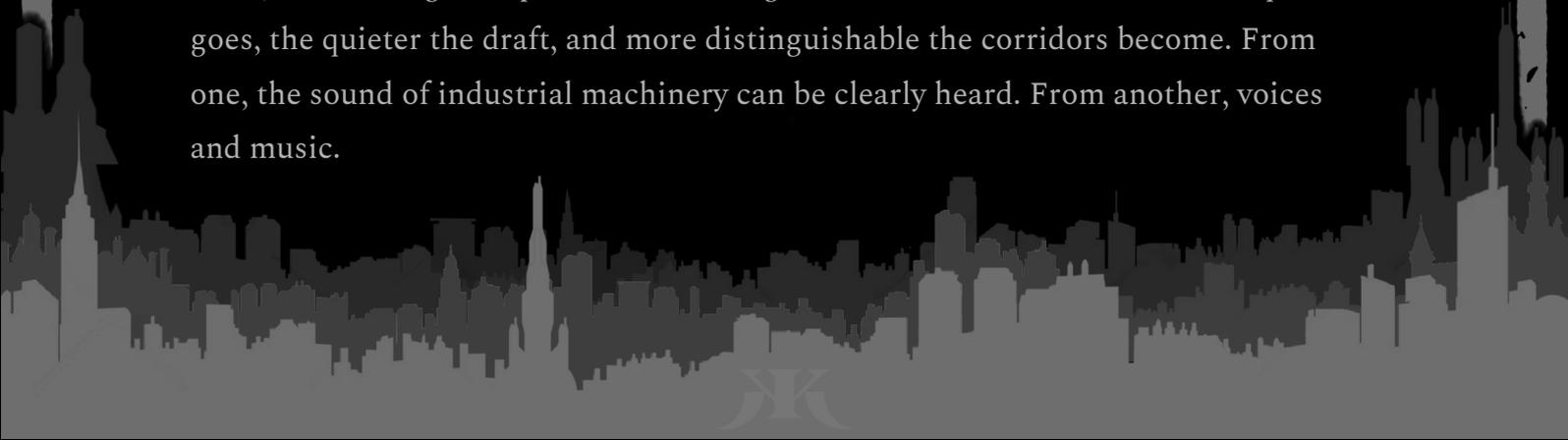
"This ought to be terrible." Ricardo says.

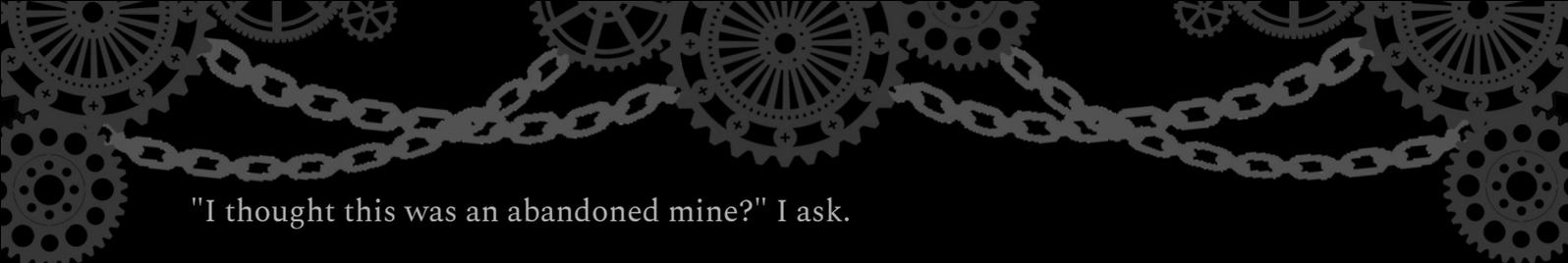
"Don't be a pessimist," Parvati corrects him, " but yes, it probably will end badly."

Lucas doesn't say anything through the ride, he's too busy paying attention to the paths the group is taking. Once parked outside the mine, he grabs his gear, doing a last minute check. He takes one of the cases that Barros has provided. He nods to Barros.

"We'll call you when we know more".

We tread through the tunnels, flashlights in hand. Footsteps echo on the labyrinthine rail tracks of the long depleted gold mine. A few signposts are labeled according to some sort of grid system, its meaning lost. With only sound to guide them, the investigators point their flashlights in different directions. The deeper one goes, the quieter the draft, and more distinguishable the corridors become. From one, the sound of industrial machinery can be clearly heard. From another, voices and music.





"I thought this was an abandoned mine?" I ask.

"Maybe hitting the industrial part can drop the lights at the party?" Ricardo offers.

"There are many ways to skin a cat."

The tunnel in the direction of the industrial noise changes. Soon, we stare at walls of concrete, newly built. Power lines stretch above our heads, and we stop in front of an open bunker door, with a sigil above it. A set of runes, surrounding a sword going through a knot of barbed wire. The runes read "Harvesting Halls", in a language I don't recognize. From inside, gurgling can be heard. We carefully peer beyond the entry corridor, stepping on suspended railings of a vast hall.

Beneath, a mix of greasy tubes, steaming pipes, and resin. Half alive machinery holds imprisoned men and women, some with their limbs cut off. Life sustaining machines keep these souls alive. Among them walk gray humanoids with gas masks and ringed cabling intermeshing with their flesh. White crystal spikes rise from the creatures, shining as they move among their victims, adjusting the apparatuses.

"The Hollow Men, I thought they were just dreams!" Sofia reacts before we silence and pull her back.

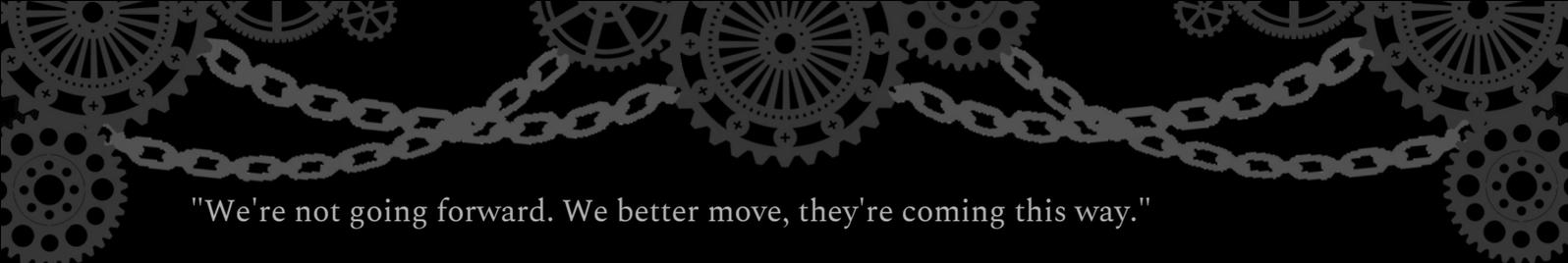
"They've appeared in my dreams as well. What have they done in yours?" Ricardo says, once we're in safe distance.

"They were protecting me, but as a devil you know kind of deal."

"No judgment. So... what do we do here?"

"Go back the way we came?" Jorrit says in a hushed voice, clearly unwilling to cross through that door based purely on Ricardo's reactions, who gives us more incentive to move.





"We're not going forward. We better move, they're coming this way."

Quickened steps lead us back the way we came, winding through the tunnels. There's music, and it gets louder, a staccato violin concert accompanied by a piano, covered by the voices. It isn't long before we find ourselves in a cistern, where the music reverberates from above. Light streams down into a murky pool, smelling of stale meat, and rot. Everyone covers their noses. There's a ladder at the end of the cistern, leading up to the opening with the light.

Far behind, I can hear them. The Hollow Men must have caught our scent, the mechanical whirring of their footsteps approaching. From above, something drops in the hole. It splashes the water, revealing skeletal human remains, some still fresh. Among them, worms, feasting on the meat still hanging onto the bones.

"Wow, they're eating people." Ricardo whispers. "Neither option is good, and I'm not sure they're at all different than what we will find above."

Parvati takes a look at the bones, then at the ladder.

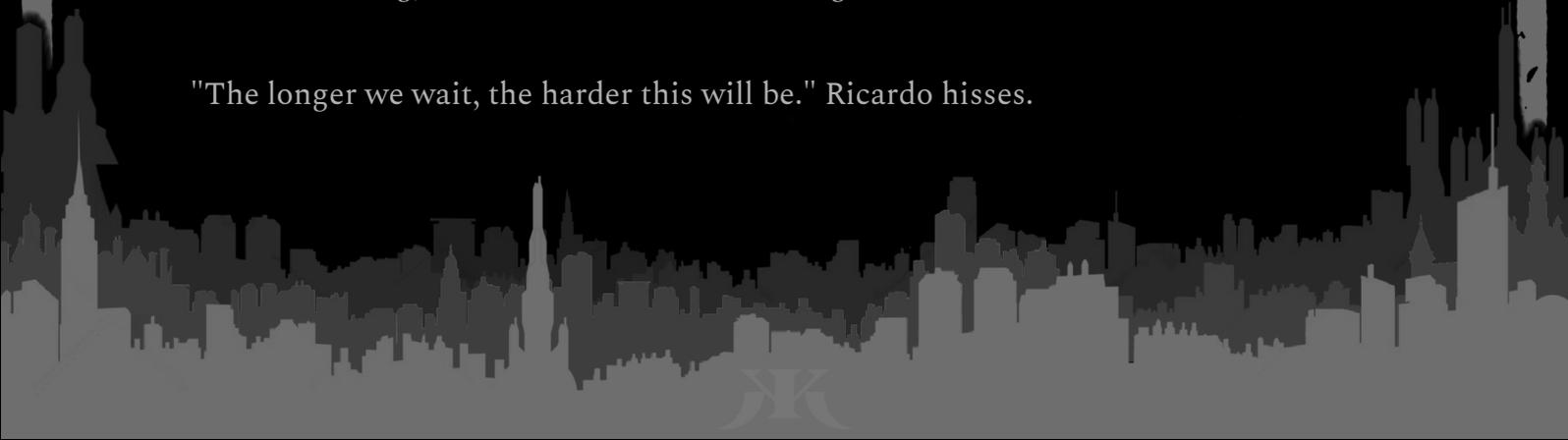
"Let's go up. I doubt any of us wants to deal with our pursuers."

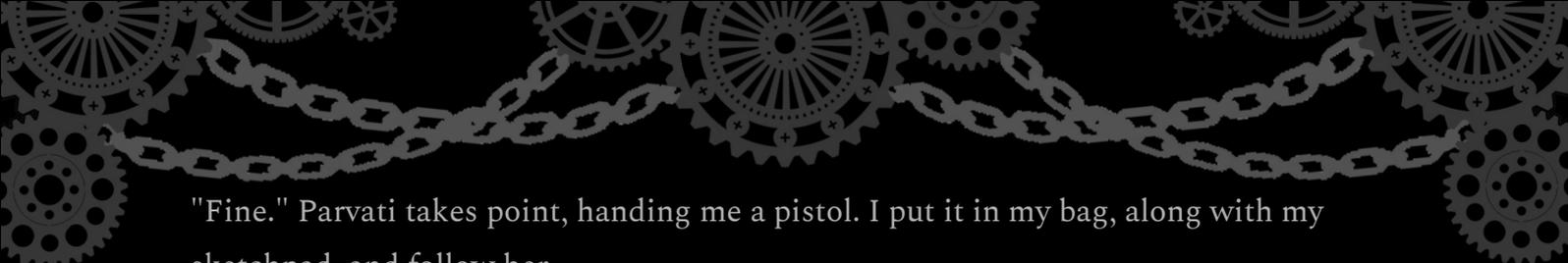
Sofia is trying to process exactly what is happening, trapped in a dreamlike state for a moment before she snaps out of it.

"Yes, let's keep moving."

Her words ring throughout the cistern, with the infiltrators looking at each other, wondering who will be the first to go up the ladder. Another piece of bone drops from the ceiling, while the mechanical noises get closer.

"The longer we wait, the harder this will be." Ricardo hisses.





"Fine." Parvati takes point, handing me a pistol. I put it in my bag, along with my sketchpad, and follow her.

Holding a rifle in one hand, the assassin heads up the ladder, steeling herself. Coming after her, I see a kitchen that's more of a butcher's shop. Sharp meat cleavers lie on wooden boards, resting, their work finished. On two central slabs, tonight's meal has already been prepared, leaving behind fleshless remains. One of the butchers is working on an oven, clad in dark red velvet robe. The rest depart for a candle lit living room. There, someone is holding a sermon, but I can't make out the words.

Parvati glides across the kitchen floor, and slits the butcher's throat. A freckled, older man, he stares back in fright as the assassin covers his mouth. His eyes beg for a chance at life, hands struggling against the grip. It takes a minute for the body to go limp, during which I inspect the contents of the oven. On spit roasts, turning, organs. The trays contain a pair of brains simmering in oil.

The others climbing up into the kitchen see Parvati holding the velvet robed corpse, bleeding out. She's staring into the flames of the oven, lost in thought. Outside of the blood stained instruments and some puddles on the floor, the place is mostly clean. A few cockroaches climb out of the same garbage disposal everyone arrives through. Past the door, the sermon continues, a woman speaking.

The antiquarian offers vague whispers that cannibalism is either associated with curses or stealing magical abilities from other beings. A chorus responds with a chant to something the preacher says.

"Praise the flesh", the voices scream out. Parvati hears this, and finally lets the body slip onto the floor.





Jorrit sticks against the door, and peaks around the corner. I join him, and see a massive dining hall, crystal candle lit chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Underneath lies a hexagram, painted into the hardwood floor, its center a circle, which contains a single brazier. Inside, a few skewers roast. Around the symbol are long tables, covered with white embroidered table linens, food, and drinks. Standing behind these, at least twenty people hold their glasses upwards, in toasts, as their priestess walks in the center of the makeshift table arena.

"Did not Man have a body in the Garden of Eden? Our flesh was holy even before the Fall! "

The cloaks they wear make it impossible to decide if they have any weapons. But I do recognize the woman giving the sermon, having seen her picture in Lucas's folder.

The detective signals 'twenty people, not sure if armed' back to Lucas and Parvati in basic police hand signs. The woman continues her discourse, a fiery passion behind her words.

"For centuries, the alchemists have searched in naught for the Philosopher's stone, without even once looking onto themselves. The Divine meat is transformative. Only we, the Order of the Abyss, have mastered the flesh's power, and now, with this spell, ever closer do we move to complete the Tome of Worms."

She holds up a book from the table, its cover made of human skin.

"You have caught immortality. Now, let us seek out to control reality itself. A fragment of the starman's work remains, and with it, we can create a portal to his time of death."





Parvati looks at Jorrit, signaling him to sneak around the room to try and flank the priestess. Ricardo takes the robe off of the dead cook and puts it on, then walks into the room. Braganza takes skewers from the brazier, passing them to her followers over the table.

"And I anoint you as Children of the Abyss! Feast, and let the Divinity pass through you! Channel it forth, so that the gate to Paradise may be opened!"

A windy chill passes as the robed figures eat, blowing out a few of the chandelier candles. The rest preoccupied with the ritual, only I notice a carpet of cockroaches now stretches out to the table with the remains, thickening each minute.

Ricardo mills about among the robed persons, hood up as they are, and grabs a skewer as they are passed around like office party birthday cake. Once he does that, he moves out of the crossfire area, waiting for the others to act. Lucas curses under his breath and finally moves forward, still crouched down, next to Jorrit.

Those anointed take down their hoods, grab a skewer, and dig in. Their eyes lighten up with a baleful glow, and the brazier's flame takes on a blue hue. Braganza chants while her apprentices eat.

"The mighty sound of forests murmuring
In answer to the dread command;
The stars that shudder when their king
extends his hand,"

Rustling from the kitchen table. The remains are submerged under a swarm of roaches. Small cracks can be heard as they cleave out the carcass, almost as if a voice was whispering.





Then the eyes of the cannibals begin to glow, the flames change color, and the cockroaches begin to whisper. Jorrit grabs his gun even tighter than before. It only serves to drive home the weapon's uselessness in the face of what he sees happening all around us.

My mind recoils from the cannibalistic doings and I focus on the bugs in the same room with me. A paranoid, insane thought manifests unbidden. Fucking cockroaches. They've been following me ever since that hospital.

I turn towards the oven. A jerry can in the corner contains something flammable, the source of the fire inside the altar. The discarded clothes of the victims, set to one side, seem like good kindling. Under the weight of the insects, the table bulges, and falls. The swarm rises, whispering as it does.

"THE fLESh of faLLeN GOdS..."

Ricardo's eyes turn feral once more, and the illusion tears for us. The robed figures are human, but Braganza is not. Her stomach is torn open, guts pierced by needles connected to tubes and vials stapled to her meat. The liquids flowing through the tubes have a radioactive greenish glow. Lips and eyelids long gone, she offers her apprentices the skewers from her clawed hand.

A look in the swarm's direction makes me treble. A man, sewn together from various parts, rises from the floor, the seams crawling with roaches, twisting and shifting, morphing his body.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sights I've seen. Trapped between two kinds of hellspawn, my mind snaps under the pressure, and I let out a scream loud enough to wake the dead. The cannibals stop their chanting, looking at the kitchen door, even as the swarm pours more of itself into the humanoid remains.





I do it. Pouring the jerry can over the pile of clothes, I light one large piece after another on fire, and throw them onto the swarm-figure. Burning, the swarm rolls forward, towards the open door, shrieking curses. An apprentice steps through the door, and a jet of flaming roaches slaps out past me onto him. His flesh sears and boils.

"sUBlIME Pain. the aRChoNs HAVe SenTeNcEd thE clergY of Golab to dIe. you sHALL peRIsh WITH THEM."

The rest of the robed figures hesitate for a moment.

"Keep chanting, you fools!" Braganza yells.

But a few draw knives from their sleeves, or approach with what's left of the skewers, hoping for deserts. Ricardo stumbles backwards from the horrifying Braganza, throwing the skewer of god-meat away.

"She! She is not human!"

Lucas stands when the chaos erupts. He hands off the carbine to Jorrit and pulls his patrol rifle from his bag. He switches the selector to full auto and walks into the room. Together, they fire upon the chanting cannibals. The carbine's muzzle downs a few of the apprentices rushing towards the door.

Parvati flings the cleaver at the closest of the robed figures. It sticks into the skull, taking a bit of effort to remove. Just as she does, the insect swarm rushes through the door, invading the dinner hall. She barely has time to dodge.

Unpreoccupied by the violent chaos around her, Braganza continues reciting.



"His awful hand to bless, to curse; or moves
Toward the dimmest den
In the thick leaves, not known of loves
Or nymphs or men;"

Ricardo, unhinged and neurotic, fixates on her words, and finishes her sentence.

"Or nymphs or men?"

He spouts gibberish at a breakneck pace, sweating profusely like a man possessed and on amphetamines.

"Only the sylph's frail gossamer may wave
Their quiet frondage yet,
Only her dewy tears may lave
The violet"

Terrified of the unnatural formation of insects, I step up to the creature and pour more jerry can fuel out over the already flaming monstrosity.

Parvati jumps out of the way of the swarm entering the dining hall. It rips into the tables, taking out a third of Braganza' apprentices. Table covers catch on fire. Their numbers reduced, those left panic, throwing whatever is at hand towards the flames. I splash what's left out of the jerry onto the burning insects, their mass reducing in the consumption.

A shot Parvati makes hits her target, and blood pours out of a hole in Braganza' forehead. Skull parts and brains compliment the painting of a conquistador standing behind her. The blast interrupts her, but her mouth continues to move and hands to gesture. Most of the swarm has been dissolved away by the flames, and now the cannibals turn their attention to us.





In all the chaos, Lucas' shot on Braganza misses. Noticing him, she grabs one of the few left skewers and bites into it, muttering something to herself. Lucas looks like his life slipping away, wrinkles forming on his hand as her wound closes.

Another of Parvati's shots tears through Braganza' knee, bringing her down to the ground. Unhinged, she continues the chant.

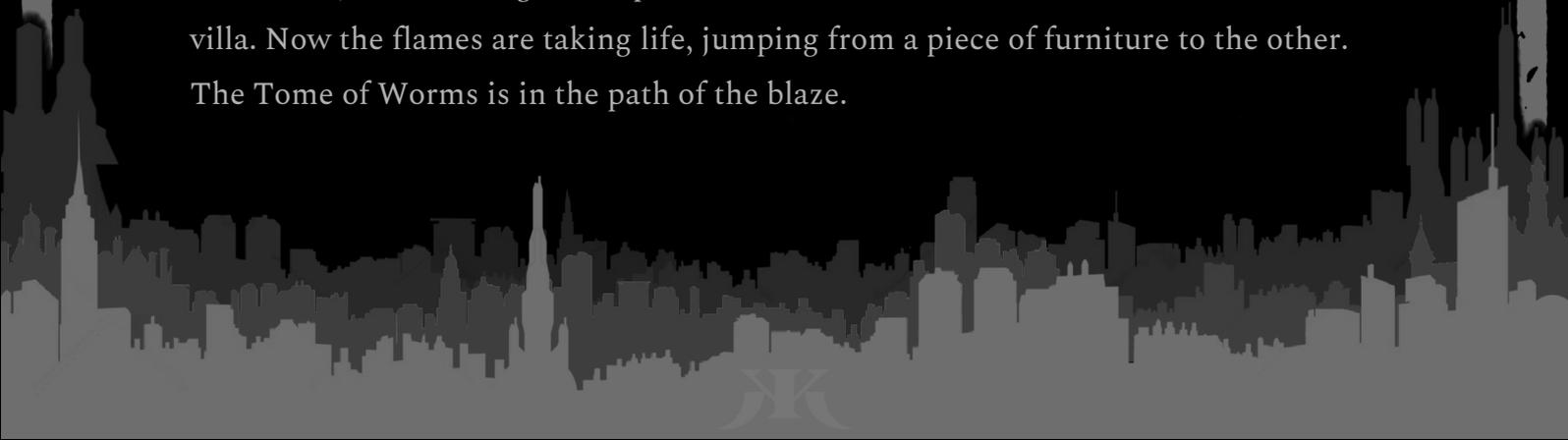
"The mighty answer of the shaken sky
To his supreme behest; the call
Of Ibex that behold on high
Night's funeral,"

Lucas nearly drops his rifle. The pain in his hand is overwhelming, but he makes a last ditch effort to stop Braganza from saying anything else, aiming for her face.

Crawling on the floor, she drags herself towards one of the dead cannibals, biting into one of their corpses. Lucas' rifle tears through the sorceress, but too late. The impacted chunk of meat absorbs the bullet, and her skin stretches with bulging bone underneath. Parvati's shots get buried in the bone somewhere, and the paulista socialite, now horrendously deformed, continues chanting. Jorrit reaches her, but faces a mess of flesh. The few cannibals still left descend upon him.

Parvati curses, then moves toward the sorceress, turning the rifle around and driving the stock at her skull to knock her out. Lucas drops his rifle, and decides to rush her pulling his knife. The blade breaks in Braganza's throat, interrupting her spell. She gurgles, then her thick bony crown slams into the floor.

Savagely, Parvati keeps ramming her rifle stock into what's left of Braganza's face. Leaderless, the robed figures depart the fire that has overtaken the curtains of the villa. Now the flames are taking life, jumping from a piece of furniture to the other. The Tome of Worms is in the path of the blaze.





Jorrit attempts to evade both the remaining cannibals and the flames, moving back towards the others - firing short bursts from the carbine to make way where necessary.

Ricardo grabs the book just as a wooden beam slams down on it from the ceiling. He's left with only a few pages, including the one it was opened at. Jorrit spots a way through the flames, where the remaining cannibals retreat through.

Lucas gathers, from Braganza's neck, what blood he can in his hands, pleadingly looking for Sofia. He finds her trying to fight off one of the remaining cannibals, ramming a knife in his eye.

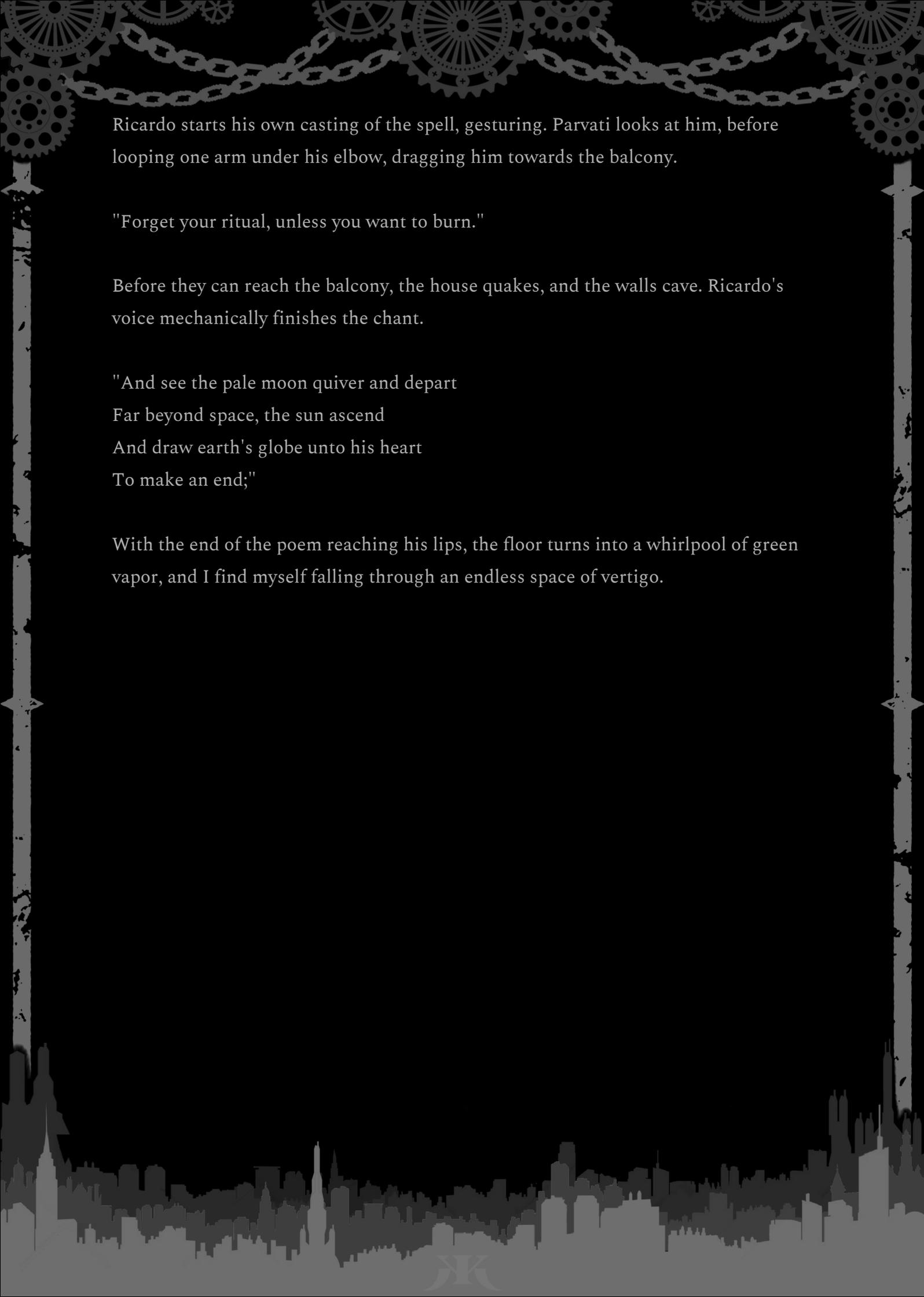
Hearing his call, Sofia grabs a few vials of blood from Braganza's leaky, bony corpse. It takes precious minutes, with the flames surrounding the room. The smoke is so thick I have trouble seeing, heat so powerful I can feel it on their skin. Lucas sounds a call for a retreat.

The doorway to the kitchen has been cut off while we grabbed what we needed. There's a way through the villa, flames burning around a wooden frame door, occasionally giving a lick inside. I notice the symbols moving on the torn page held by Ricardo. His cat eyes twist, the tome calling to him, speaking of power.

Lucas moves towards the only exit available, content to let the place burn. He's holding out a lamp yelling at us to follow. Lucas is touched by the inferno, his shirt catching on fire. Lucas throws his still burning shirt on the ground, ripping off some of his skin with the melted fabric.

"The balcony! Get to the balcony!", Jorrit yells as he runs to the door, pointing the way where the cultists went over.





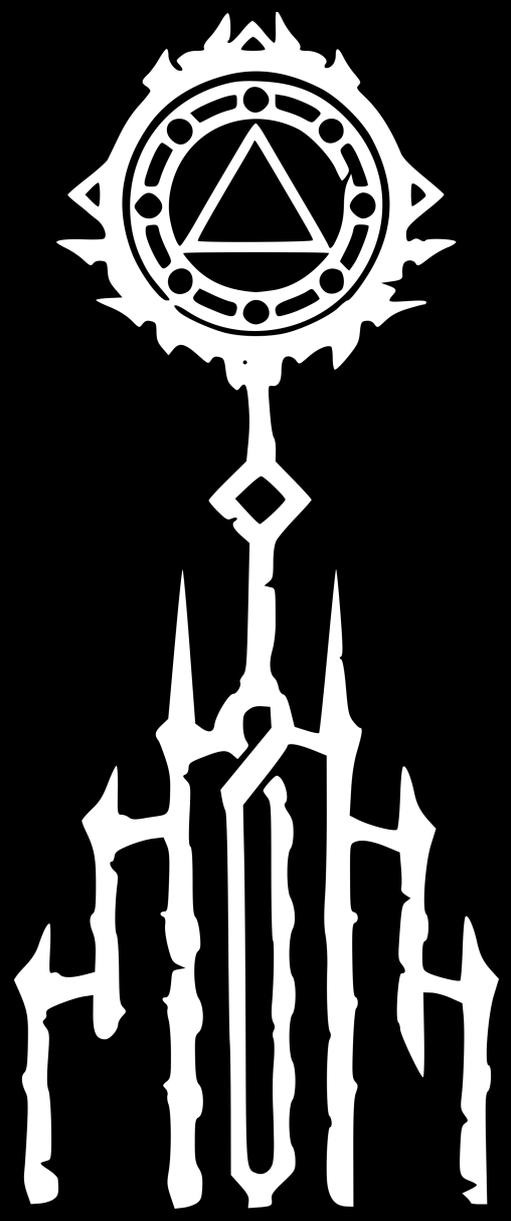
Ricardo starts his own casting of the spell, gesturing. Parvati looks at him, before looping one arm under his elbow, dragging him towards the balcony.

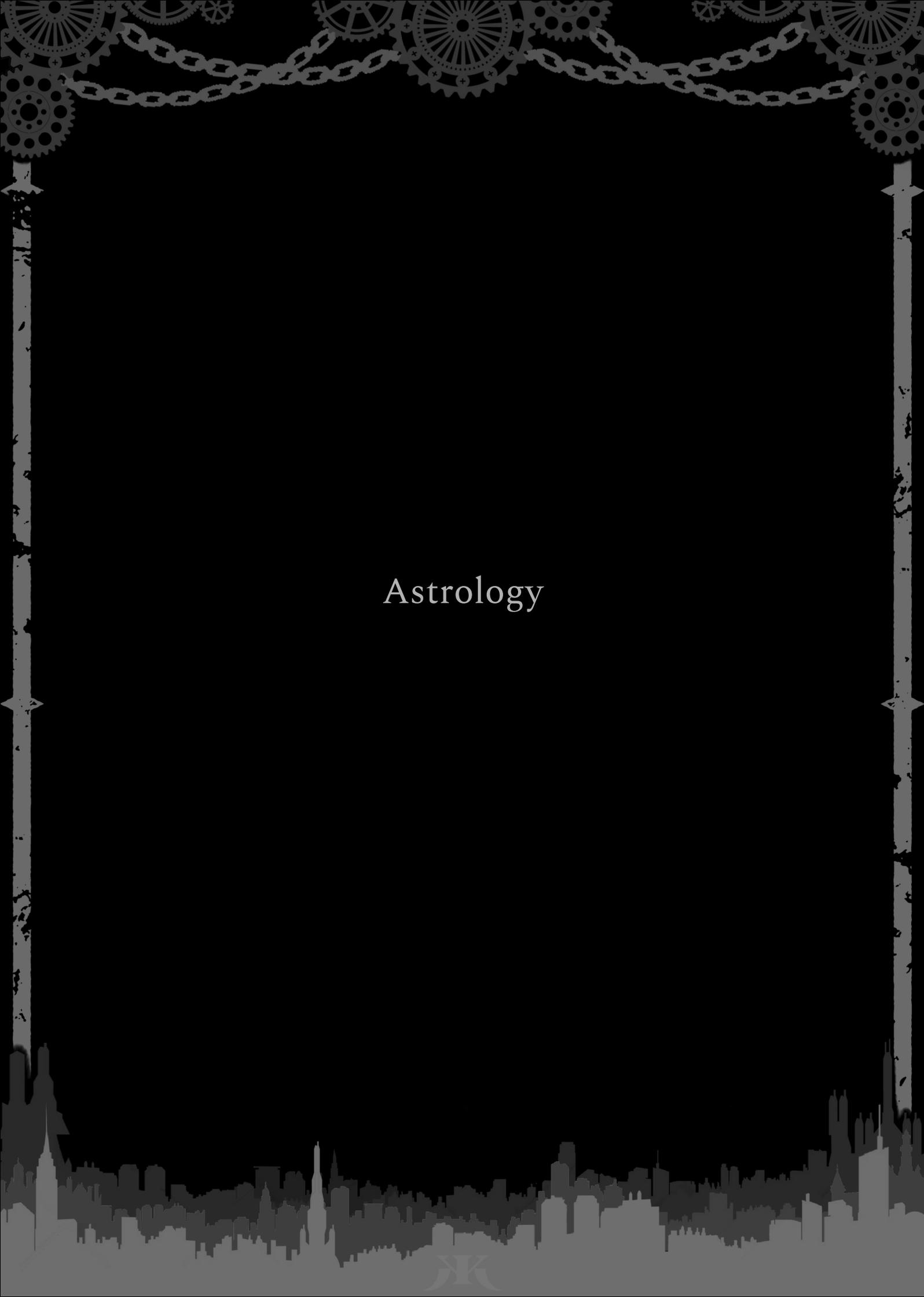
"Forget your ritual, unless you want to burn."

Before they can reach the balcony, the house quakes, and the walls cave. Ricardo's voice mechanically finishes the chant.

"And see the pale moon quiver and depart
Far beyond space, the sun ascend
And draw earth's globe unto his heart
To make an end;"

With the end of the poem reaching his lips, the floor turns into a whirlpool of green vapor, and I find myself falling through an endless space of vertigo.





Astrolology



It isn't the wheels dropped on ankles and leg bones that grind us. Nor the amputations, with or without guillotines. Rats in buckets and burning at the stake are pleasures. The grind comes from the crowd surrounding the gallows. Friends, family, and foes listening to the litany of a priest describing every detail we have committed.

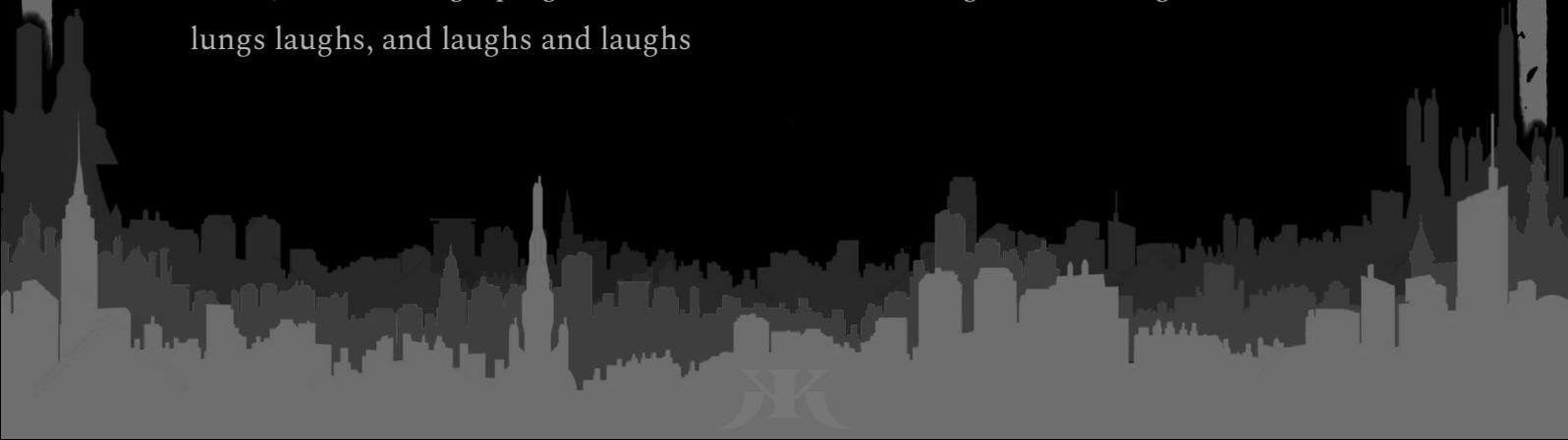
Even now, being boiled alive in a common cauldron, the shaming continues. The black nuns, with crucifixes melted into their skins, poke us with spears, keeping us from rising out of the water. Where the metal touches skin, boils filled with pus appear.

Even now, the accusations, spite, insults and spit continues to fly on-stage. Every regret, reproach, moment of weakness, it is all laid bare before the judging mob. The tricoteuses, Glasgow smiles forever imprinted on their faces, knit scenes of suicide by shotgun. Further away, one of the sinners sees a puppet show depicting a girl abused by her father. Even the gingerbread man's candy shows all the abortions the tortured have performed.

Throughout it all, the priest, his head stretched into a book inside a metal frame, continues the long list. In solemn silence, the nuns move forward with their tasks. And the spectacle continues.

Ricardo struggles for air, hot as it is. Worn down beyond all composure by the unending grind, Jorrit can be heard murmuring "...I tried... I tried..." in a defeated manner, under his breath. He is long past yelling or screaming it however, and even longer past expecting any response from the tormentors except more, and crueler, punishments.

Lucas, in between gasping for air to breathe and sucking down boiling water into his lungs laughs, and laughs and laughs





The litany of blame continues. We watch through the crowd, expecting. There, through the peasants, the thing they're looking for appears. Bright red against the sea of rags and muddy skin, the demoness dances. She twists and turns through the mob, picking up sins and laughing forward.

Stepping on the stage, Flayed knows all the secrets. She inhales, taking in the night air.

"Do you regret your sins? Are you ready for your confessions?"

Parvati looks at the nun prodding her with a spear, pushing her away from an attempt to try and get out of the boiling cauldron. When the flayed demoness appears, she turns her weary and exhausted gaze, giving the creature a lingering look.

"Never. And for a long time now."

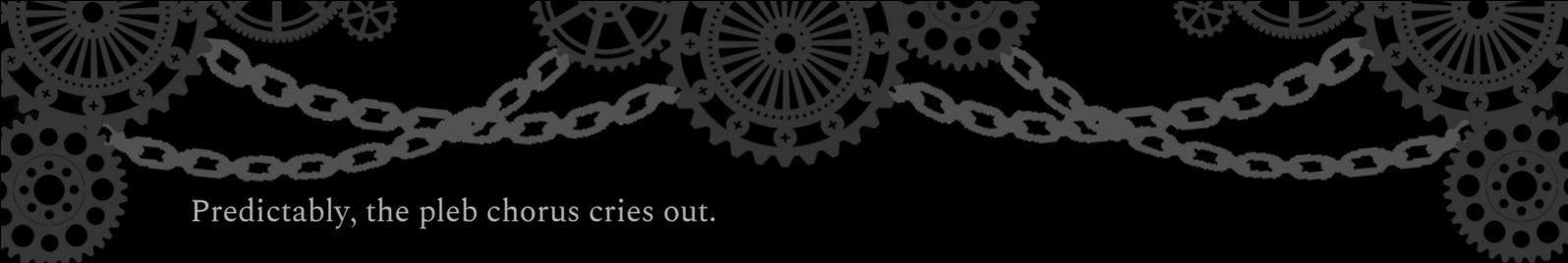
"It was... a needed... ritual." Ricardo exhales at the demoness. Approaching the cauldron, she is eerily satisfied with their answers.

"No sinner can be absolved without regret. We must now bow to the wisdom of the crowd."

At her spinning, the clouds in the sky part to reveal a night sky, dripping with stars.

"Those before us stand accused of masquerading as High Astrologers. They led everyone to the Way of the Stars, the false prophecy of Awakening. How does the crowd plead?"





Predictably, the pleb chorus cries out.

"Guilty!"

Flayed turns back to the seven.

"The verdict, you've heard. But your confession might still be of use. Tell us, tell these nuns of Golab, what you did with their favored Razide, and we'll spare you the worst. The mercenary lifts his head.

"I blew her ass back to hell."

Flayed laughs and Lucas's defiance, spiting the silent nuns.

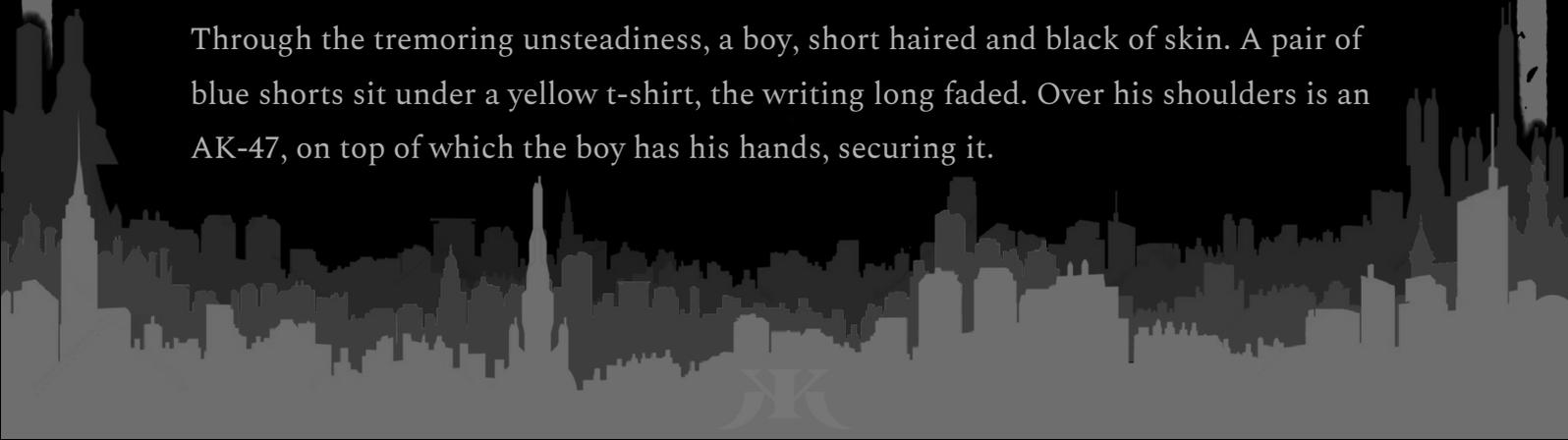
"Looks like the nuns should have let you simmer a bit more! No matter, we'll see where she went on the Way of the Stars!"

Spears pierce the tortured, pushing them all into the green liquid. Bubbling ooze gives way to an electric viridian mist, submerging everything.

Falling is endless, until we hit the ground. The impact and nausea puts everyone in a semi-conscious state. Through the haze, the dusk settles into the surroundings, a set of dry bushes around a dilapidated ruin of brick and adobe.

While struggling to regain balance, we see Borges regrow flesh, and crawl to another nearby ruin, leaving a blood trail behind.

Through the tremoring unsteadiness, a boy, short haired and black of skin. A pair of blue shorts sit under a yellow t-shirt, the writing long faded. Over his shoulders is an AK-47, on top of which the boy has his hands, securing it.





Ricardo rolls over to his side, the first of several agonizing steps to get up.

"Where is this?" He asks of the boy as he gets a knee and an elbow under himself on the path to standing on two feet.

The child chews on the straw in his mouth, considering Ricardo's words.

"Masaka. You're lost, whitey. You should be careful. There's a man hunt on."

"For who?"

"Tutsis. Grandpa says we're hunting Tutsis."

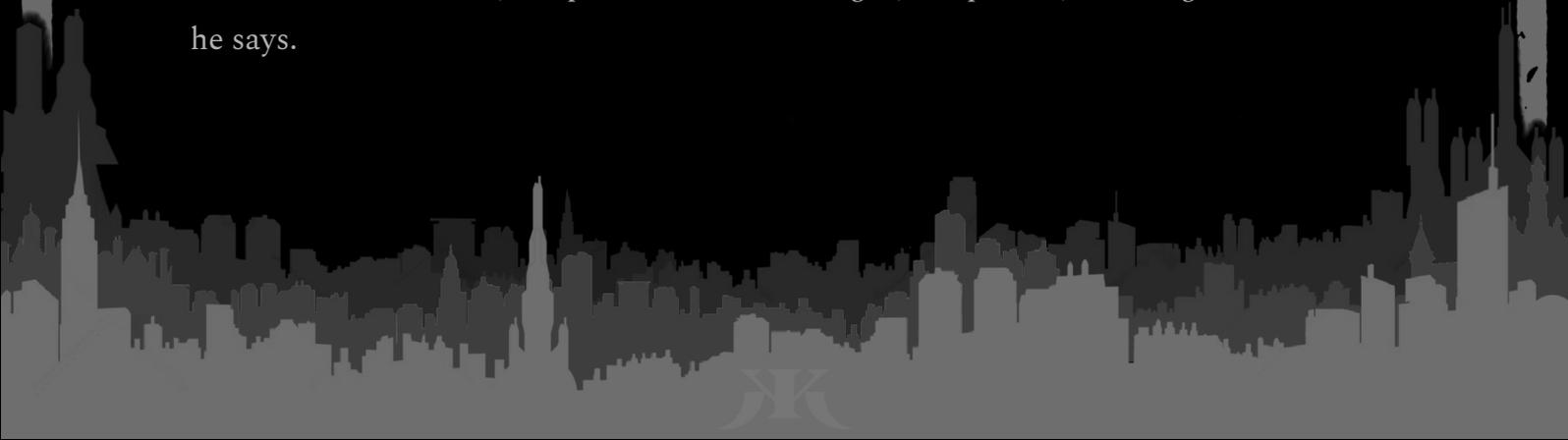
"Oh, that sounds familiar. You are Hutu?"

I keep an eye on Borges, watching her crawl off and wincing a little as I rise to my feet. My gaze moves toward the boy and his AK-47, giving the gun a wary, cautious look.

The boy nods, slowly, still holding his weapon, still looking at everyone, deciding what to do. Borges is no longer in sight, but the blood trail leading elsewhere into the ruins is still there.

Lucas ignores the pain and goes after Borges. The boy, while armed, isn't a concern for him. It's easy enough to follow the blood trail. Lucas finds her resting against an old fireplace, wheezing, still regrowing, still weak. There's something animalic in her breathing, eyes catching mine, making my heart skip a beat.

Lucas closes in on her, tempted to kill her outright, but pauses, kneeling down to her he says.





"Give me a reason not to end you"

For a moment, Borges looks unphased. Then her breathing picks up. She remembers something, a fear older and greater than Lucas.

"You'll never find your way home without me."

The mercenary grabs her by still growing hair and drags her bodily back to the others.

"We may come to a bargain."

She's reformed much of her body, but Lucas isn't letting go of her hair, dragging an unconscious Borges behind through the dried mud then tosses her into the center of the group.

"Where will you go? Is there a city around here?" Ricardo says to the boy.

Looking at Ricardo, the boy points behind him. Past the trees, on the hill, a slum rises into a city. A few cement high-rises pierce the sky, along with smoke rising from the streets.

Jorrit looks confused. But he manages. Although a deep frown appears on his face, telling tales of a silently seething anger that builds up behind his still bruised and slightly swollen face. He keeps a tight hold on his gun, as if he means to use it soon, just can't quite make up his mind on whom, just yet.

Ricardo realizes he is still wearing cult robes over his clothes, he takes them off and stuffs them into his backpack, then looks to Lucas.

"Weren't you going to kill her or something?"





"I still might though" He then takes out his phone while rolling Borges over with his foot so he can snap a photo of her. Almost instinctively he tries to share it, then stops himself, announcing his phone signal is down. Sofia confirms.

Borges is slipping in and out of consciousness as her body heals. Even though she's knitting together faster than anyone's seen, it will still take some time for her to recover completely. Until then, her schemes remain a mystery.

Ricardo's hands go back to the page he saved from the fire, one he still holds now. He tries to recapture that brief moment where he thought of it as a portal. It was so easy then, and so hard now. When he speaks, all I can muster is intense dread, thinking over the immense power he has in his hands, and where it has landed us.

"Hmm, perhaps she is right. I have no personal quarrel with her, so her disposition I will abstain from weighing upon. However, if she could teach me the rest of the ritual, that would be great in us getting somewhere else."

The should-be corpse under Lucas's foot, slowly, rapidly knitting itself back together draws irritated gazes from Jorrit. That boy, standing around there with his gun shouldered oh-so-leisurely, chewing his straw, however, he is somehow even more irritating right now.

"And you?" his voice grating with barely suppressed anger, "What are you doing here?!" Jorrit eyes the boy suspiciously.

The boy initially has no reaction to Jorrit's question. Voices can be heard in the distance, along with a sharp scream.

"You won't last 'till morning, white man."





Stepping out of sight behind a crumbled yellow wall, he vanishes. True to his words, the sun is gone and night slowly settles in. The antiquarian is the first to move us.

"Whatever caused someone to produce that scream will likely be after us forthwith. There's a slum over there. In these parts I imagine a gun serves as an adequate passport."

Lucas kneels down and puts the zip ties around Borges wrists, and while he's at it he stuffs a wad of bandages from his first aid kit in her mouth and ties it around, gagging her. He slings Borges over his shoulders and looks around, trying to find anything that could act as shelter in the darkness.

I take a better look around, trying to solve that knot in my stomach. A path through the cracked mud leads upwards to the slum, which we could reach before darkness falls. The bush surrounding the ruins of the old town we're in is rife with voices, men coordinating each other on a hunt. The voices in the bush get louder.

"We head for the town. I say fuck it, why hide? We are well armed, we're not a small group. And the first motherfucker that tests us? We kill him with overwhelming violence"

"You know what - killing some asshole with overwhelming violence doesn't sound like such a bad plan after all, right now." Jorrit's features harden as the anger returns. His posture and tone of voice signals agreement with Lucas's plan.

Having decided on a course of action, we pace quickly towards the city. On the way there, all we see is wreckage, the remains of shops and faded advertisement boards left standing.





After the torrid heats of Sao Paulo, the respite of dusk shade is welcome. A slow gust builds, throwing some dust around. The voices in the jungle disappear, replaced by monkeys. For a while, everything is peaceful. It only lasts until we reach the city limits. A signpost greets us

Kigali, POP. 300000 HUTU!!!

The Hutu is graffitied on with something green. Past it, the bodies begin along the path. Slaughtered people, some unrecognizable. Beyond the signpost is a roadblock. Some people in uniform are checking paperwork. A larger crowd wield machetes, waiting for something. Lucas side eyes Ricardo and Jorrit.

"Only two options here gentlemen, around or through."

"Around, and we will assuredly be discovered later. Through is what I think best." Ricardo hesitates. "That said, I am not particularly good at either."

Lucas stops for a moment and pulls out a few bills from his stack of US dollars, he hands Jorrit the Assault Rifle he's been carrying and breaks out the Carbine.

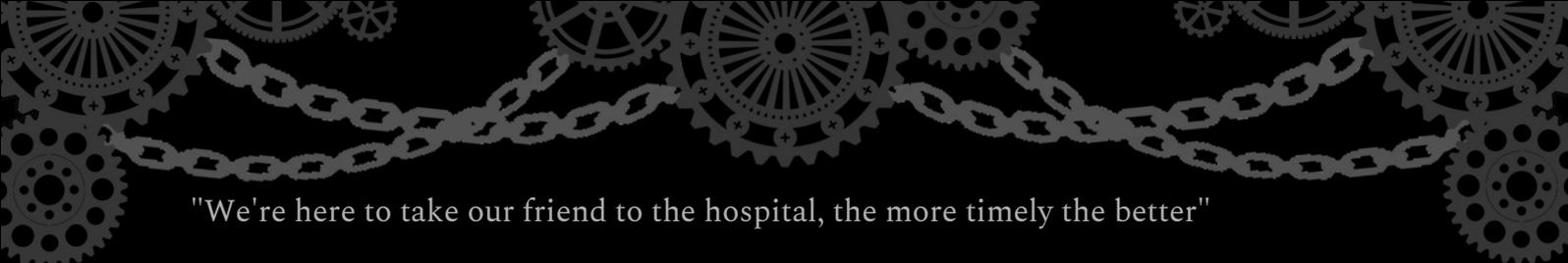
Upon approaching, one of the men in a military brown camo uniform signals them over. I distinctly notice the lack of any military rank markings. Followed by the animalistic eyes of the machete wielders around him, he speaks.

"Tutsi or Hutu?"

"American" Lucas steps up.

"I thought they evacuated all the whites. What are you still doing here?"

Lucas slips the man a couple of hundred dollars.



"We're here to take our friend to the hospital, the more timely the better"

Pocketing the money, he smiles in Lucas's direction.

"Ah, carrying one of your wounded?"

The negotiation is interrupted by crying and yelling. A woman's clothes are being ripped apart by the machete wielders. They drag her before the soldier.

"Ah, trying to sneak in, cockroach? Hey, whitey, I'll make you a deal. Waste this bitch, and I'll tell you where you have to go."

Lucas doesn't waste the energy to fight this, and simply shifts his body over and shoots her right in the face. He looks back at the soldier without regret.

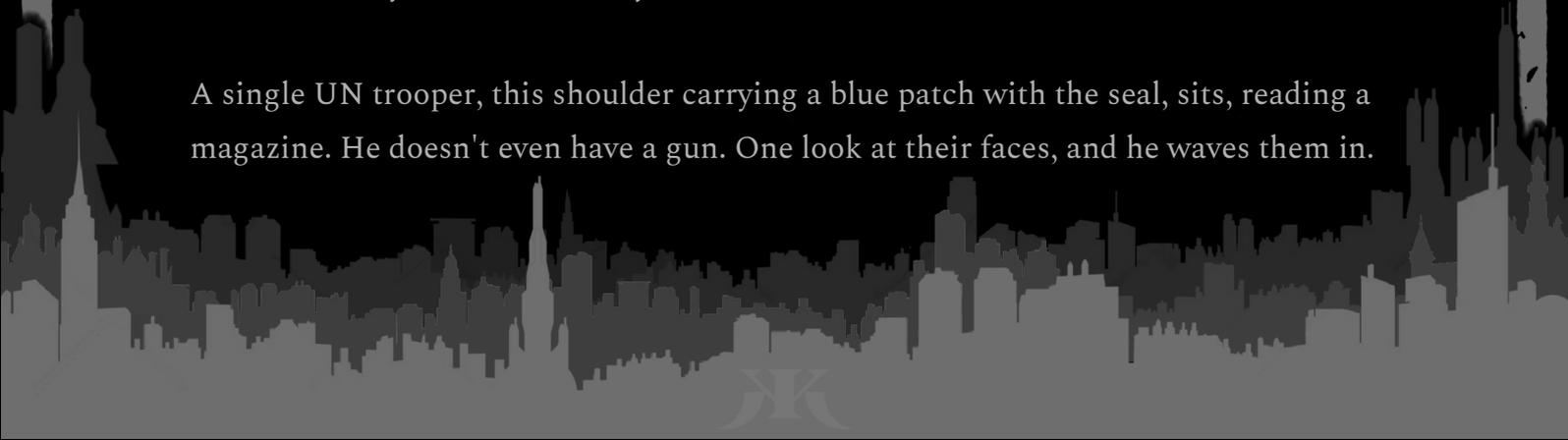
"You were saying?"

A smile crosses the man in camo's face, teeth like ivory. He laughs, and a few of the others join him.

"I would have let you walk even if you hadn't done that. You're one stone cold killer, americano. The guys at the embassy will help you out. KN 8 avenue, across from the Public Library."

Corpses litter the unclean, and often unpaved streets, like newspaper or candy wrappers. The travelers have seen much in their wanderings, but the sheer scale of it is astounding. With no vehicles moving through, only shouts and wails cut too short break the silence of the streets. Lucas breaks down crying when he sees the US flags on the embassy. The others carry him in.

A single UN trooper, this shoulder carrying a blue patch with the seal, sits, reading a magazine. He doesn't even have a gun. One look at their faces, and he waves them in.





It's an office, a normal office in all the terror. Pictures of friends, family, and pets sit on four desks. A brand new xerox machine stands in the corner, and three older men in a business suit are answering coil corded phones. Coordinating them is a short haired middle-aged woman with an annoyingly mundane Californian accent. I can't help but notice the calendar is set for June, 1994.

"I.. I had to" as much as he tries to fight back the tears. He's only human after all. Ricardo takes the lead.

"Excuse me, is there a safe place we can stay for the night? And a phone we could use?"

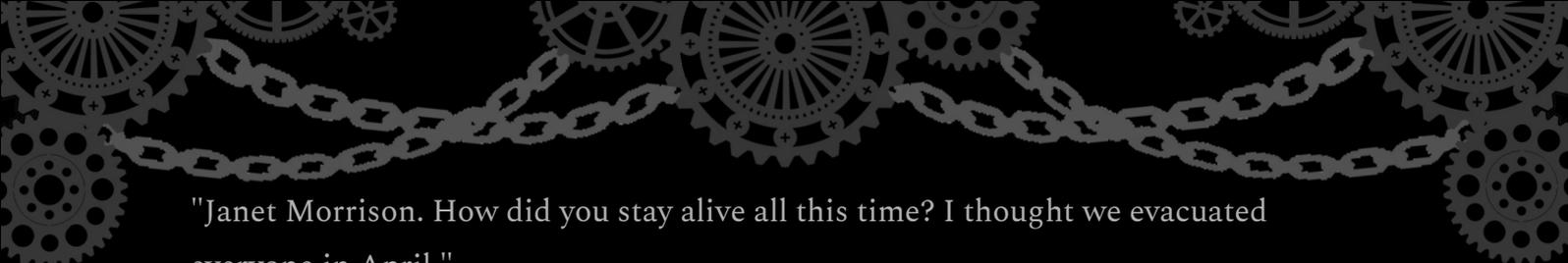
The woman raises her head from the stack of papers she's dictating from. She takes her glasses off, and stands up, looking at the travelers.

"Oh my god, you're Americans! You're alive! Who the hell are you people, where have you been all this time? Phil, prepare the beds in the meeting room."

"Thank you. Truth be told, I have a hard time believing I am here myself. It feels as if I woke up in the jungle moments ago. I could use some sleep, and maybe to call my folks back home, let 'em know I'm alive. My name's Ricardo."

I turn toward Lucas, putting a hand on his shoulder and giving him a sympathetic look before letting go and continuing onward with the others. I look at the woman at the desk, sighing a little at being called an American, but I don't bother correcting her.

Parvati's eyes wander around the office, fixing on a young man, one of the helpers. She seems to recognize him. While the ambassador extends her hand to Ricardo, amazement crosses her face.



"Janet Morrison. How did you stay alive all this time? I thought we evacuated everyone in April."

"I... I don't remember. I feel as if I have been in a fugue for quite some time. "

"Jesus, your plane crash? It's genocide, pure and simple! The Hutu are wiping out the Tutsis! The UN forces are completely undermanned and underequipped! We've been petitioning the US government for help! Nothing so far!"

"We have some injured, as you can see. Is there a phone in the meeting room? Can we call the states?"

The helper returns from the other room, carrying some trays with food.

"Beds are ready, figured you people could do with some sandwiches."

The ambassador finally lets go of Ricardo's hand and retreats to her office. She digs through the paper to find the phone, picks up the receiver, and shows it to him.

"Anywhere you want to call, go right ahead."

The embassy staff promise to secure transport out of the city in a day or two, then leave us alone. We get settled into the meeting room. Despite being air conditioned, the stench of death and blood is still present. Underneath portraits of presidents and ambassadors, tables have been removed, and beds have been placed in their stead. The sheets are clean and fresh, making everyone forget where they are for a moment.

In a bathroom nearby lies a mirror in which the travelers can see how exhausted and disheveled they look, after a day of fighting. Some choose to crash into the beds directly, and call it a night, but soon find themselves facing their horrible dreams.





Still awake, I hear Ricardo make a large purchase of computer companies stocks via telephone. Some of the ones he asks for haven't gone public yet, or don't exist yet, and he plays it off as if he must have gotten the name wrong.

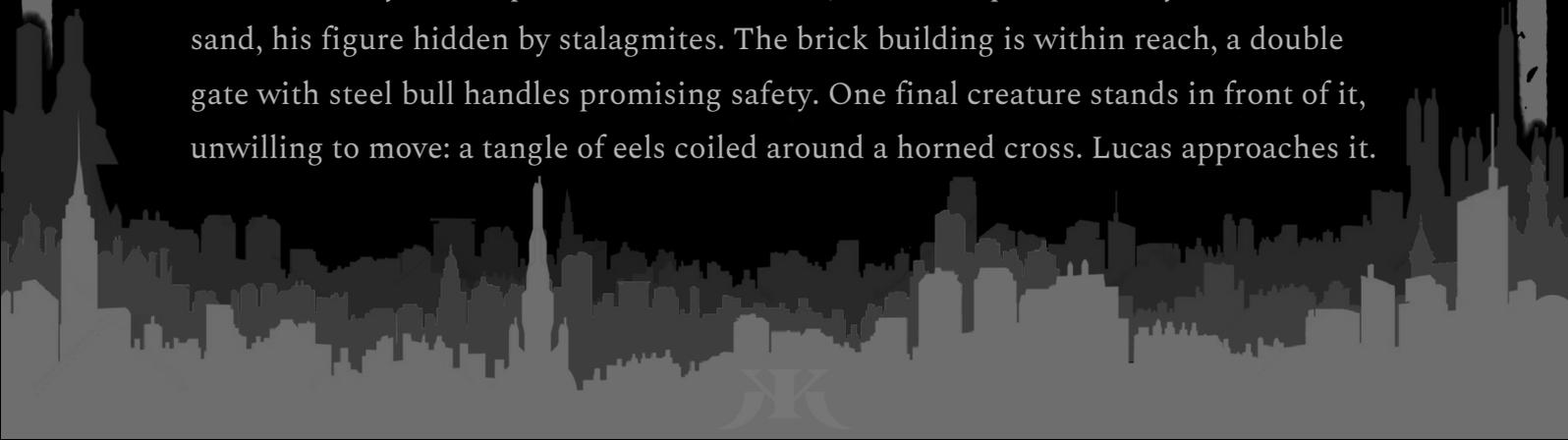
He puts them in a trust, and then goes to the bathroom to look at his haggard face in the mirror. He has grown a beard, now salt and pepper, after days of not shaving. Pale, nearly grey skin, dark circles around his eyes. A tired and haunted man. He goes to sleep in the bed next to mine.

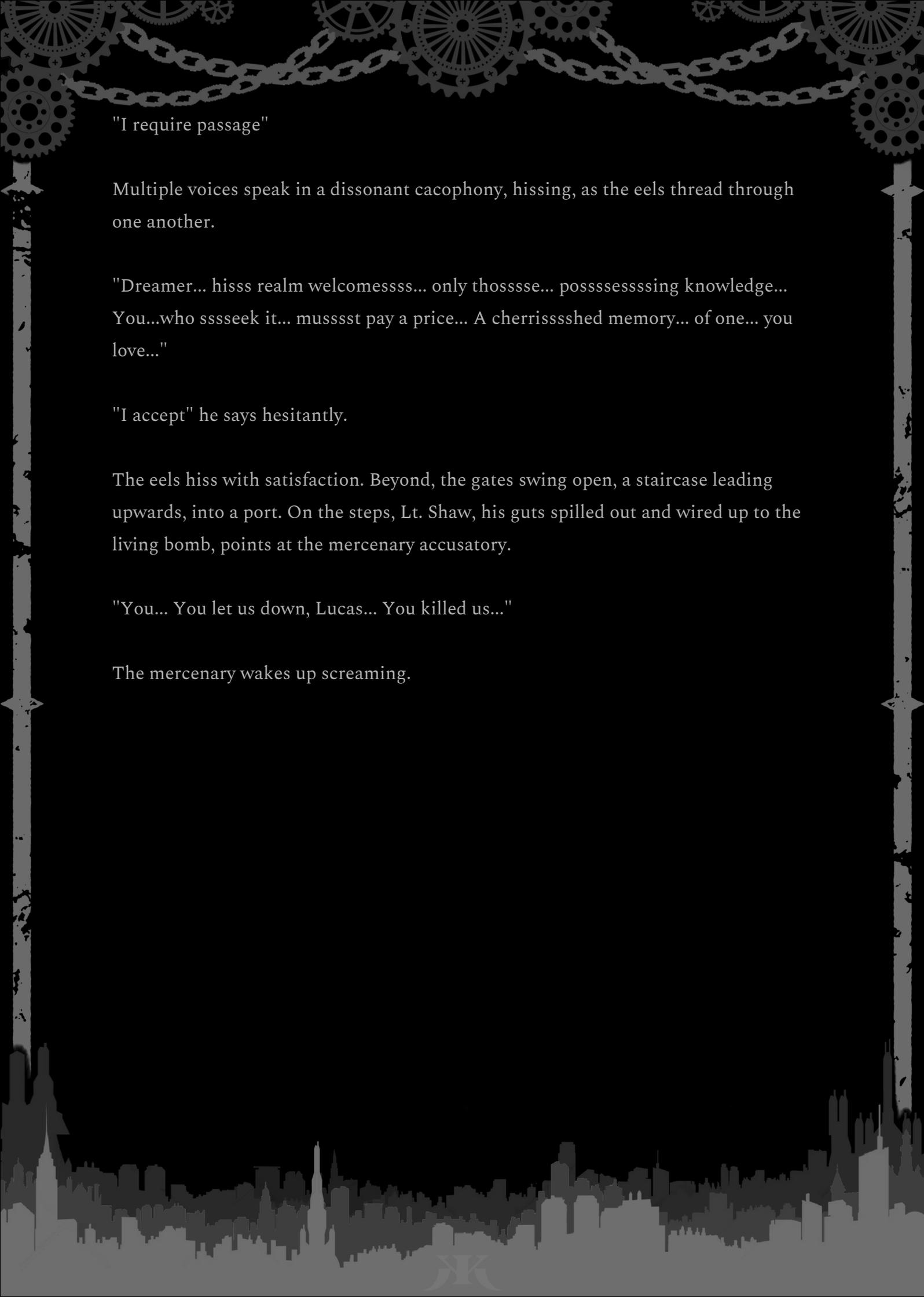
Warm waves crash into Lucas, waking him on an obsidian beach. Turning on his back, he sees stalactites of salt, and hears a clockwork ticking echoing. He rolls once more, and stands up, noticing the body parts that have washed up with him. Among the rocks littering the beach, creatures move, preying on each other. Freakish things, combinations of bats, snakes, men, and lions, meat brutally fused together, throbbing under the effort to move. They stop their game of prey and quarry, watching Lucas crawling on the sand.

Stumbling to his feet Lucas quickly looks around to find anything that he can defend himself with. He eyes the beach in both directions before making a move towards the cliffside.

Running past the creatures would mean certain death. They appear to react to sudden movements, their misshapen eyes focusing on quick moving prey. Beyond, Lucas can see a brick structure, rising out of the water. He tries to stay low among the stalagmites partially in and out of the water, moving toward the building.

The mercenary sneaks past most of the beasts, his footsteps muffled by the obsidian sand, his figure hidden by stalagmites. The brick building is within reach, a double gate with steel bull handles promising safety. One final creature stands in front of it, unwilling to move: a tangle of eels coiled around a horned cross. Lucas approaches it.





"I require passage"

Multiple voices speak in a dissonant cacophony, hissing, as the eels thread through one another.

"Dreamer... hiss realm welcomessss... only thosssse... possssesssing knowledge... You...who sssseek it... mussst pay a price... A cherrisshed memory... of one... you love..."

"I accept" he says hesitantly.

The eels hiss with satisfaction. Beyond, the gates swing open, a staircase leading upwards, into a port. On the steps, Lt. Shaw, his guts spilled out and wired up to the living bomb, points at the mercenary accusatory.

"You... You let us down, Lucas... You killed us..."

The mercenary wakes up screaming.

Ricardo finds himself before a fountain. He looks at his hand, he sees the spiked chain coiled around him, biting into his hand. Before him is a dried fountain, the statue an abyssal sea creature, rusted green. A giant reptilian flap opening into a face, preparing to devour a child in its webbed graspers. Beyond it are mercury and lead veins, mined by naked half stunted pygmies with hammers, their hands trembling. Lighting their work, a robed, teeth creature burns with a purple flame.

Ever curious, yet wanting nothing to do with the burning creature, Ricardo allows some blood to drop from his hand into the fountain. At the bottom of the dried up well are coins of all makes and ages. He sees a few roman Aureus, some Asian pierced copper, American silver dollars, and many others he doesn't recognize. The pygmies get agitated as they uncover something in the rock. It's a beautiful looking woman. Julia, in veil and naked, gets chipped away out of the stone.

Under the purple flame of the fanged living torch, the pygmies bring her out. A few are playing with themselves, tongues sticking out of their deformed faces. Spread out on her veil, she's dead, but the antiquarian can still hear her call his name. Behind him is a trickle of water, coming from the fountain.

He attempts to take the body. The pygmies pelt Ricardo's knees with their hammers. It's easy enough to fight them off, but the living flame moves his way, fangs chattering. Stealing a look at the fountain, the antiquarian sees it filling with water, and the statue seems to have moved, the child now in its open mouth.

Kicking at the dim-witted pygmies, Ricardo sidesteps the burning creature, scowling at the smell of charred flesh. He reaches the fountain with Julia's corpse, submerging it beneath the clear, warm, water. Her cheeks turn red as she slowly comes back to life. The miners pour onto him, in protest over their lost treasure.



Picking up a pygmy is easy enough, Ricardo smashing his head against the statue, ringing the rusted metal. The amphibian has no wings, and sits there, inert, still locked into that same position of biting into the infant. The burning fanged monk blazes a path through the miners, carbonizing a few with its purple flame. It reaches the antiquarian, and attempts to lay hands on him. In the fountain, Julia grows dark raven wings.

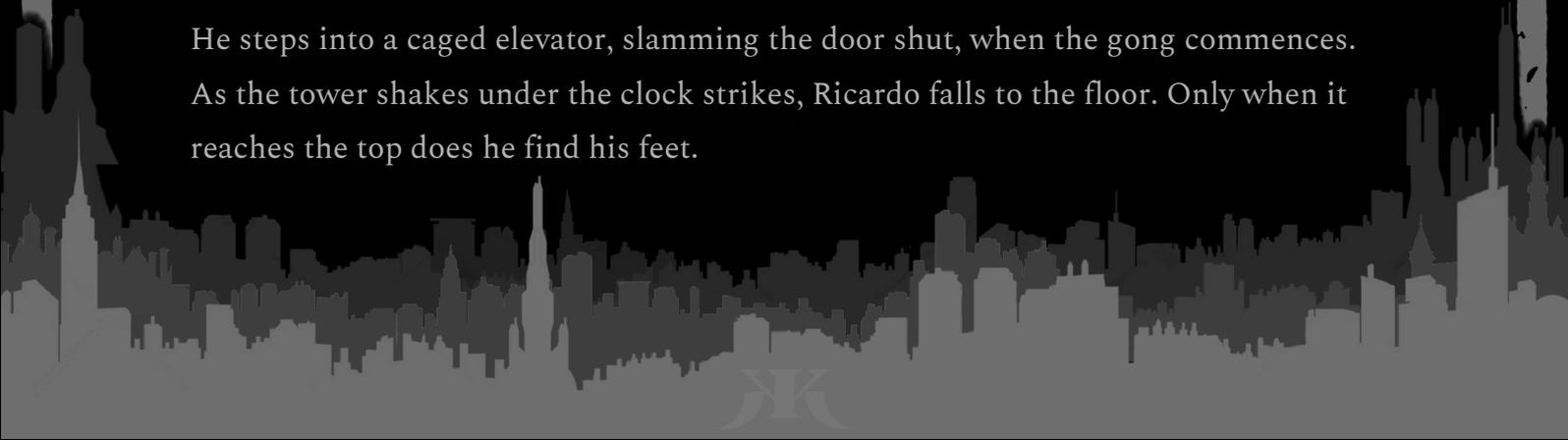
The heat pushes Ricardo backwards, and he trips into the fountain. Trying to leave, a webbed hand presses on his chest. He turns to the side, seeing Julia opening empty eyelids, only meat behind them.

Dragged out of the cold, Ricardo looks at the waves to see raven feathers floating on the waters. His knees suddenly smash against bituminous marble tiles, making all his bones ache. A reptilian hand is gripping him by the collar, and it's attached to an amphibian beast that's half bronze clockwork.

The clock ticks are louder, and the alleyways they pass by are full of sable columns and pipes with lucent fluids. Imps, controlled by tubes worked into the pipes, move to feed fuel to boiling cauldrons and drop sacks of ingredients. Looking past the creature, Ricardo sees the clockwork tower, not far. Closer now, he can see the base is a nexus of pipes, the central node for the entire cavern, the fluids moving in unison with the ticks.

Ricardo catches onto the arm, pulling himself towards the creature. Flailing about, his fingers grip into a cogwheel on its leg. Ripping it out, it comes loose, with a stretching tendon behind it. The amphibian falls, the skin crown on its head fluttering. It tries to move towards its prey, but Ricardo is long gone towards the tower.

He steps into a caged elevator, slamming the door shut, when the gong commences. As the tower shakes under the clock strikes, Ricardo falls to the floor. Only when it reaches the top does he find his feet.





Inside, an anatomy slaughterhouse of hybrids interlaces with glasswork and bookcases. The pipes and tubes connect to a lead throne. Upon it sits a single man, whose black-worm embroidered gambeson Ricardo recognizes.

"I had hoped my creature would bring you to me, Mr. Haig. I needn't have bothered."

"You! Who are you?" Ricardo asks, neither approaching or running away.

Wiping his monocle, the gambeson presses a lever on his throne. Liquid courses through a colored pipe, setting many gears in motion. Below, the town reacts to the gongs of the clocktower.

"They call me Ensel Kopfel. And you're the one possessed, waltzing through my realm."

"Ah, I am not sure how I am here while dreaming."

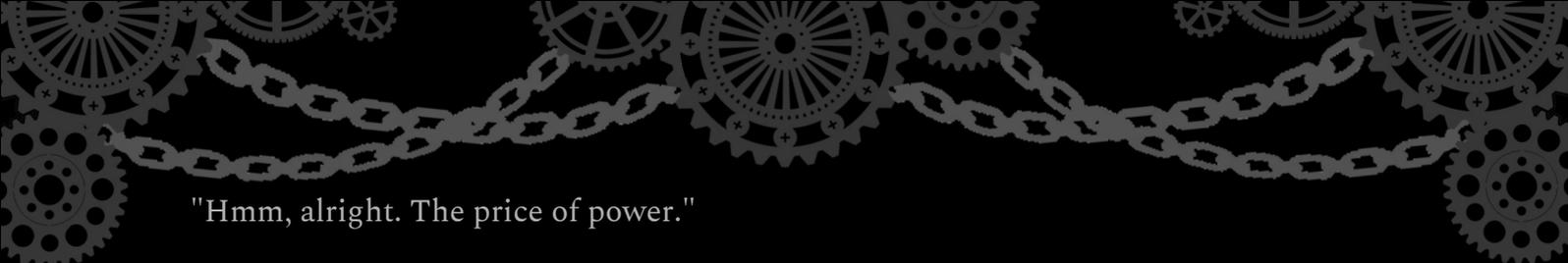
All the chemical agitation stops as the cauldrons simmer down.

"Where else would you be? Your desires draw you to my dreamworld. Those who strike pacts often arrive here, sharing or drawing wisdom."

"Ah, I see. So this is a place of wisdom? Then I am in the right place, I'm sure."

Kopfel smiles, putting his monocle back on. On a surgical table nearby, a frog squirms under electrical influence.

"Quite. Regrettable that others, not wanted here, invade my dreamworld as well. Another trespasses, hoping to gain secrets I've spent lifetimes acquiring. Hence your summoning. You're to eliminate him."



"Hmm, alright. The price of power."

Stroking his beard and crossing his legs, Kopfel relaxes into his throne.

"I knew you were a man who understands. I've seen the pacts you weave. You'll find him at the docks, this servant of the Sultan al-Sufi."

"Hmm. Alright, I'll head over there."

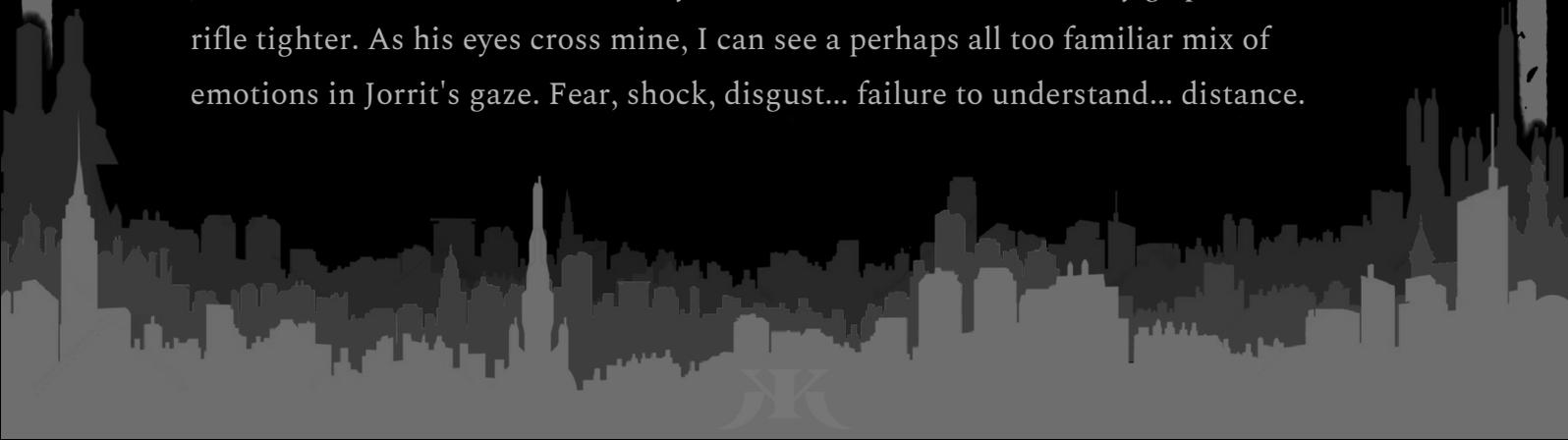
Only phials litter the room. They are labeled with symbols, not words. Ricardo considers, then picks a silvery liquid, with a sword symbol. Ricardo looks back at Kopfel, who, understanding, nods.

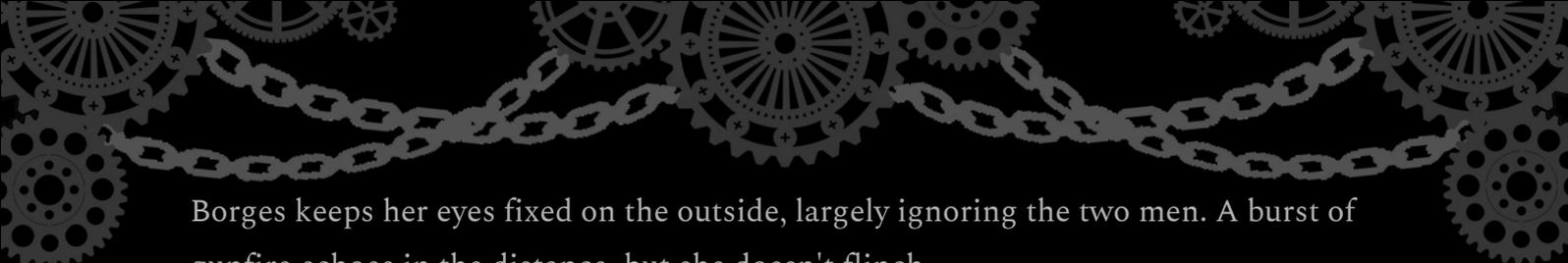
The quicksilver moves, spreading to his arm. The chain comes alive, using its weight to pull Ricardo. It then attaches itself to the electric frog, and drags the antiquarian to it. Ricardo can't move away. The frog morphs into a young girl, who melts into Ricardo at the hip. An acid burn wakes the sweating occultist.

Few get a full rest on account of the screams outside. With the morning air, they finally die down. Everyone is half asleep, with Lucas almost dozing off, his carbine at the ready. Halfway to dreamland, he watches Borges rise from her bed, and slowly moves towards the window. She parts the blinders and stares outside, towards the roads paved with blood. Lucas looks up at her.

"You enjoy this?"

Jorrit flinches when Lucas suddenly starts to talk. He unconsciously grips his assault rifle tighter. As his eyes cross mine, I can see a perhaps all too familiar mix of emotions in Jorrit's gaze. Fear, shock, disgust... failure to understand... distance.





Borges keeps her eyes fixed on the outside, largely ignoring the two men. A burst of gunfire echoes in the distance, but she doesn't flinch.

"All that meat, wasted. The divine, lost in their little games of purity... As if it matters in the end. Only the silence of the bones endures."

Lucas doesn't seem to be touched by the scale of the horror going on outside. People killing each other is nothing new to him.

"Okay lady, whatever, I didn't bring along for a poetry recital, I just want to go home, how do we do that?"

She turns around and stares Lucas in the eye. There's something torn in her look, but determined. Lucas's seen it before, that thousand yard stare, but this time it's focused on a distant point.

"You perform the ritual. With the book gone, you'll have to find Chadu. He's the one that made the spell in the first place."

"Where is Chadu?" Ricardo speaks from his makeshift bed, an inflated air mattress. Borges slowly moves her eyes towards him.

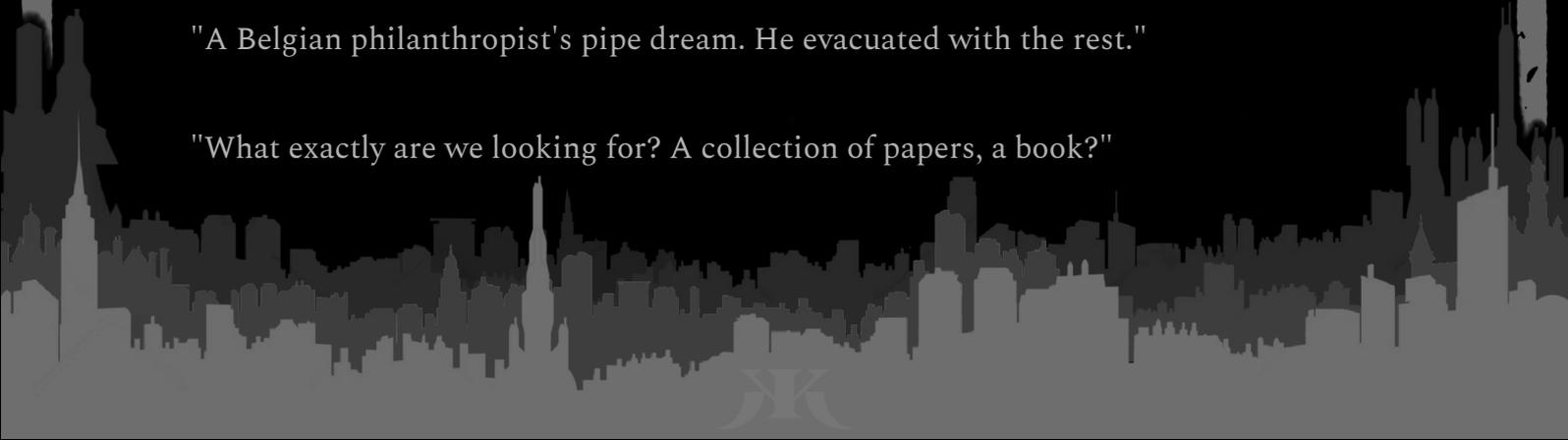
"Somewhere beneath the bodies. He went missing here. They found his notes at the old planetarium. We don't have long."

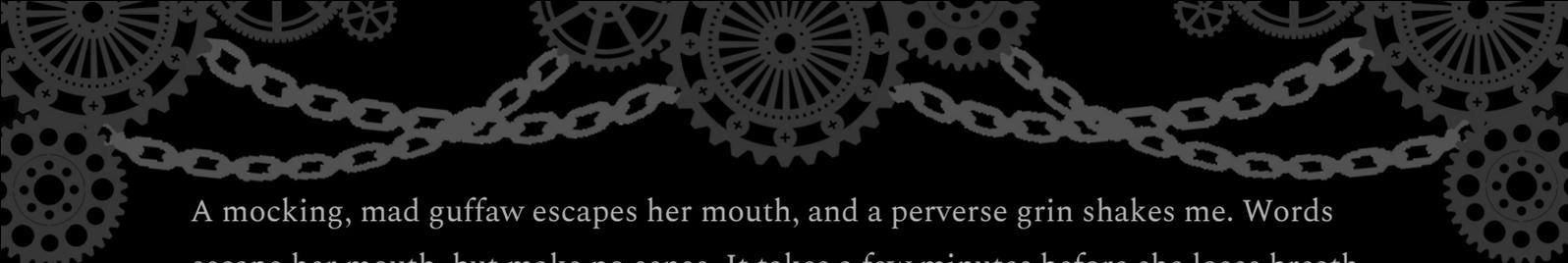
"They have a planetarium in this hellhole?"

The sorceress scoffs, shaking her head, eyes glazed as they meet Ricardo's.

"A Belgian philanthropist's pipe dream. He evacuated with the rest."

"What exactly are we looking for? A collection of papers, a book?"





A mocking, mad guffaw escapes her mouth, and a perverse grin shakes me. Words escape her mouth, but make no sense. It takes a few minutes before she loses breath. Coherent sentences form between the pants.

"You really are... just a piece of flotsam on the ocean, aren't you? I didn't throw myself in the past... to pick up his notes.... The greatest sorcerer of all time is... within reach... Why bother with flakes when you can get the meat?"

She loses patience. Her body, now at full strength, shivers, then moves. I have no time to finish speaking before she steps over the plates on the meeting room table. Somewhere in the transition she grabs a knife, and she dives off aiming for my face.

My inertia when talking to the others helps. My body, oriented away, slips from the bed in fright, landing on the floor. The knife pierces the wallpaper and, in her rage, Borges drags it downwards. It tears the wall.

Too slow to interfere, but startled by the sudden outburst of attempted violence, Jorrit unleashes a short burst of bullets from his assault rifle - but it's aimed ineffectively at the ceiling.

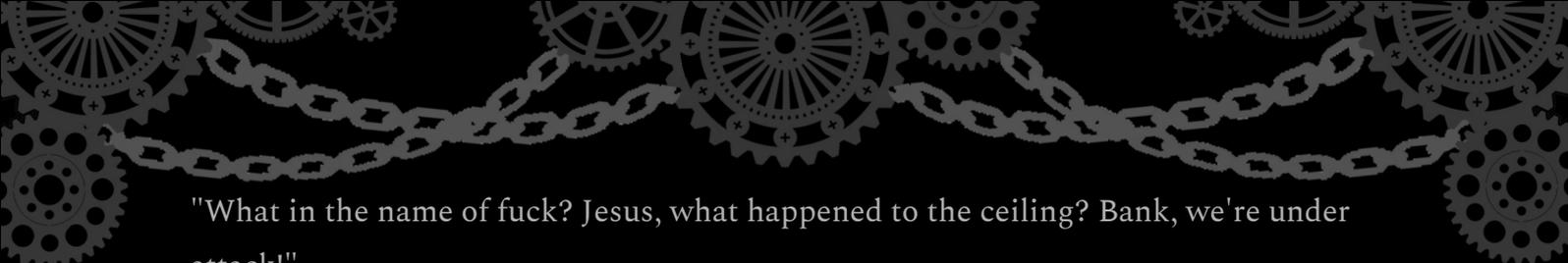
"You wanna die one more time, bitch? I will make it happen."

Her rage subsides between Jorrit's threat and the dulling edge of the knife. Borges steps off the bed, flashing her teeth in a strange way towards me.

"I'll consume you raw, boy! Just you wait and see! Turn your back, and I'll rip out your spine!"

A panicked middle-aged junior bureaucrat, in his modest shirt and loosened tie, comes through the door.





"What in the name of fuck? Jesus, what happened to the ceiling? Bank, we're under attack!"

The young security agent Parvati eyed comes in, pistol in hand. Precise moves betray his training. He stares at the holes in the ceiling. Then he gazes at Jorrit's smoking gun.

"Are you a moron? Thank god for the fake ceiling! That thing could have ricocheted!"

Jorrit mumbles something about "... really vivid nightmare...", keeping his eyes cast down. Never really leaving Borges out of his sight.

Gun still trained on the detective, the agent's words are slow and carefully chosen.

"I told Morrison we should have disarmed you. She thought more guns would mean more security. I'm stripping you of your weapons while under our roof. Slowly put the weapons on the floor, and back away."

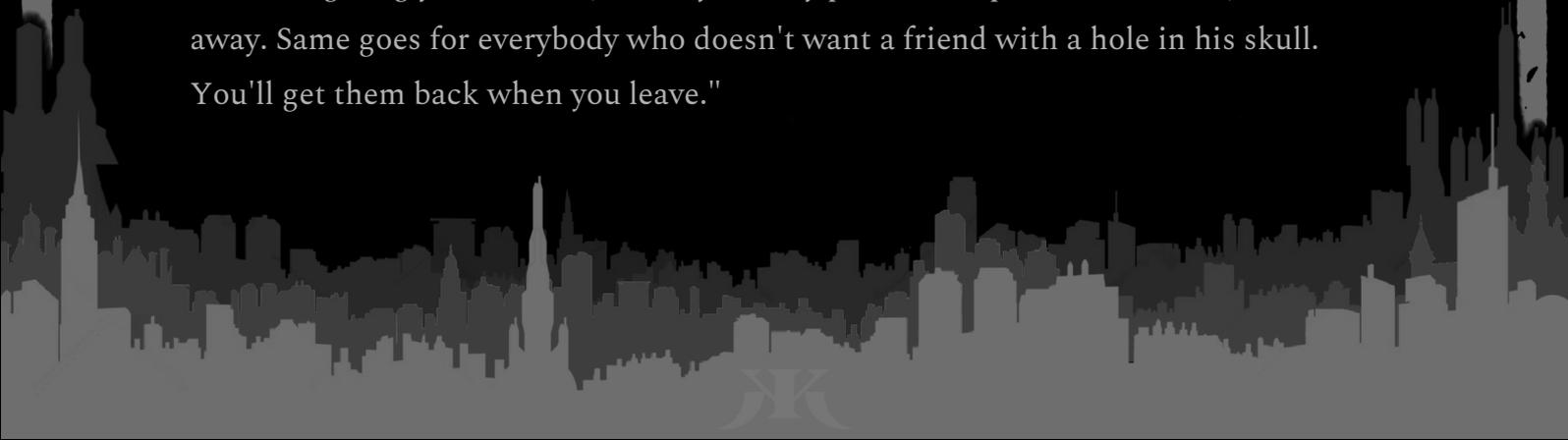
"No."

The agent pulls back the hammer on his autoloader, still pointing at Jorrit's head. The click is audible throughout the room, stopping everyone in their tracks.

"Nobody moves."

A moment passes.

"I wasn't giving you a choice, cowboy. Slowly put the weapons on the floor, and back away. Same goes for everybody who doesn't want a friend with a hole in his skull. You'll get them back when you leave."





Lucas isn't about to give up his weapon.

"You might get him but you'll be next and I don't think you can get all of us before you hit the floor"

The agent considers Lucas's words for a moment, his aim set in stone. After an eternity, he relents.

"Looks like you're leaving, your friend here last. Pick up your shit, and move out slowly, one by one."

One by one, we step outside, the detective being the last to hear the embassy doors closing. A jeep with two UN soldiers passes by. Otherwise, there are no cars on the street, just disarrayed men with mad looks, carrying clubs and knives. A metal barrel churns out a bit of smoke at the corner, the embers giving their last. Ricardo protests.

"Ok, that could have gone better. At least most of us got sleep. To the planetarium then?"

Borges laughs as everyone tries their phones for GPS. Nobody has a network signal. Looking at each other, we realize they don't have a map either. Nearby, a group of young men check garbage bins for people hiding.

Ricardo turns to Borges, asking, "do you know where it is?"

She walks confidently towards the rising sun, defiant. The young men begin to follow the procession, but something dissuades them. They return to the hunt, leaving the travelers to their devices. Uphill, bodies fill each alleyway, a pile at each corner, blood pooling in gutters.





It doesn't take long before green rusted dome appears. A few houses surround it, one of them burned down, charred remains inside. The door is locked with a chain and lock.

Lucas looks at the chain and lock and kind of scans the building to the left and right. He unzips his bag and fumbles around in it for a moment.

"Anyone have a crowbar?"

"I do not. Perhaps one of these enterprising young men do." Sofia jokes "Or we can find something appropriately sturdy."

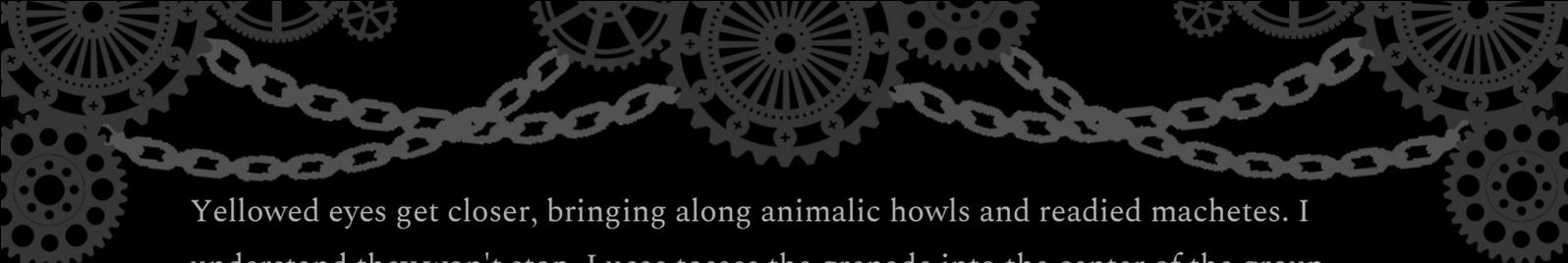
I notice more armed men looting a store. They're throwing bricks in the windows, enjoying it more than the actual robbing. The violent display is down the street, and they haven't taken notice of the planetarium yet.

A nearby pipe, soaked in blood, lies near a corpse with a caved-in face. The colorful blood-stained dress betrays her as a woman, even as maggots wriggle through the skull. Lucas grabs the tool, jams it between the door and the chain, and tries to force it.

Down the street, hearing the muted sound of the chain rustling in the breath of the blast, the killers break off from their distractions. As one, they begin running towards the dome. A small throng, arriving in force, shaking up the dust with their bare feet.

Lucas signals everyone to get into the building he's standing at the door holding a grenade in his hand. The throng isn't stopping, and the chain still holds. With Lucas holding the grenade, Sofia picks up the pipe. Lucas holds the grenade up in the air and pulls the pin. He doesn't let go of either one.





Yellowed eyes get closer, bringing along animalic howls and readied machetes. I understand they won't stop. Lucas tosses the grenade into the center of the group and runs just far enough to escape the radius.

Shrapnel flies as eardrums shatter. Most of the throng is dismembered by the grenade. A few, scattered around, survive. They pick themselves up and, unfettered, continue picking up speed. The door chain still holds.

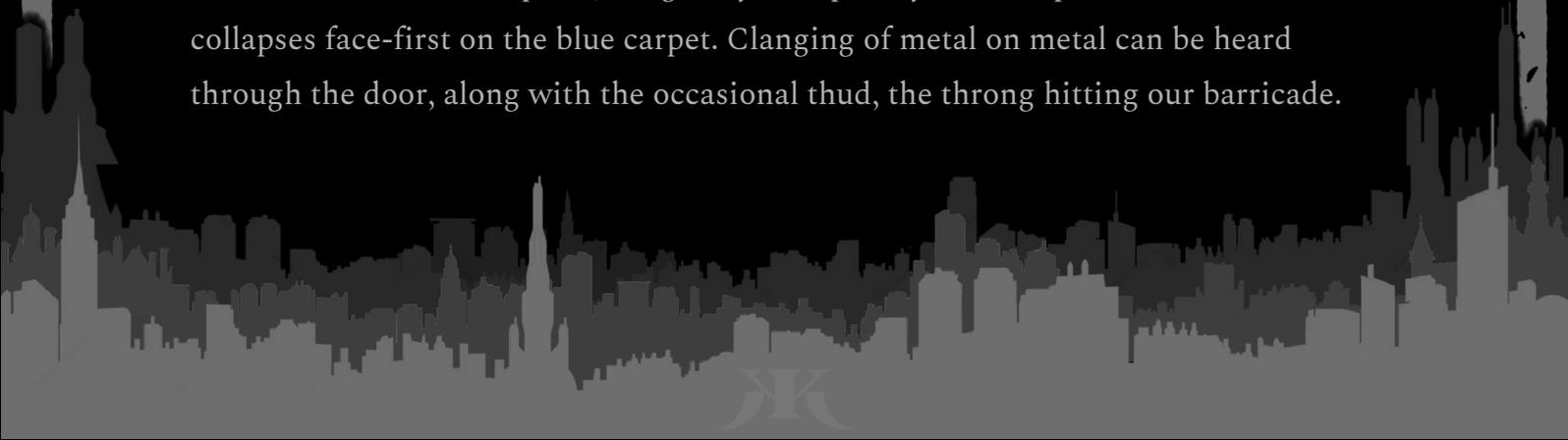
While Lucas rumpled through the floor for a weapon, Sofia, helped by the others, jumps down on the pipe. The chains break and the doors slam open under the weight of the group, but not before one of the machete butchers rushes Parvati.

The assassin defends the blow with her pistol, the plastic bending. A few more Hutu arrive through the alleys, undaunted by Lucas's suppressing fire. She looks on as the rest of the travelers pile into the building, while a thin thread of yellow eyed butchers with blood on their hands separate Parvati from Lucas, even as she kicks the one in front of her, picking up the rusted machete.

Her general fitness is better than the emaciated, untrained African amateurs. She outruns them for a time, terrain being the only hurdle, turning the corner and vanishing.

On the other side, we drag Lucas inside, then scramble within the unlit dome, looking for things to barricade the door with. Borges enters an epileptic fit after crossing the threshold. The ceiling lights up with her convulsions, the stars forming arcane constellations. She pukes gore, and falls to her knees as her eyes bleed and melt.

While we barricade the place, Borges' eyes drip away like two pieces of hot wax. She collapses face-first on the blue carpet. Clanging of metal on metal can be heard through the door, along with the occasional thud, the throng hitting our barricade.





With that taken care of, we look towards the open balcony, where Parvati can be seen fighting.

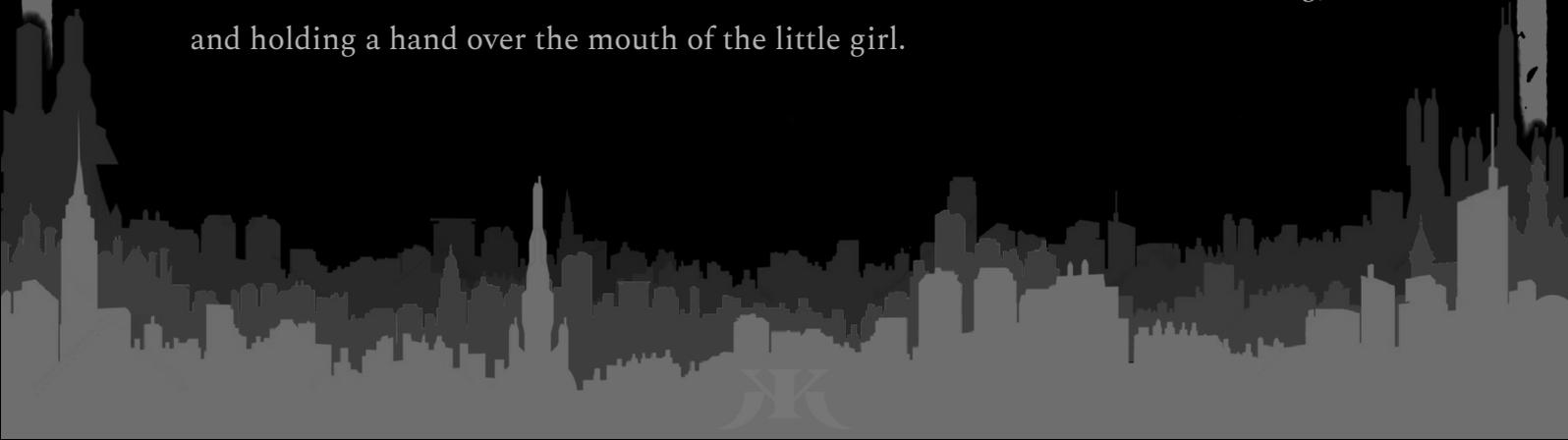
A series of swift machete strikes send the climbers back down, their arms and skulls fracturing in the landing. A gunshot focuses our attention, but Parvati spots a rifle in one of the butcher's hands. Ducking to avoid the shots, Parvati gets pushed inside by a Hutu. Ricardo climbs up with a stanchion that can block the balcony door mechanism temporarily, if he's fast enough.

On her back, Parvati fights for inches holding onto the butcher's axe. Spit sprays her face as the blade comes closer. She pokes his eye, the axe blade landing on the floor. With a free hand, she grabs the machete, and stabs him in the head. An imperfect hit, and the blade breaks, but the madman backs off.

Ricardo blocks the exit, but is beset by Parvati's opponent. Furiously, the Hutu brings down the axe onto Ricardo, landing a hit on his collarbone. Ricardo faints as the axe buries in his shoulder, sliding into the floor and dragging the weapon with him.

Parvati, weaponless, rises from the floor. She sees steam rising from the man, his ripped shirt revealing a burn forming on his back, the shape of a snake eating its own tail. She buries the machete stump in the burn, killing the butcher, but also ripping the symbol. The rest move to barricade the balcony.

Catching their breath even as on the outside the rain of killing instruments continues, the travelers look around. The planetarium ceiling is still glowing with arcane, unfamiliar constellations. To one side is the entrance to the museum, the other signals an employees only area. With eyes adjusting to the lighting conditions, the travelers notice a woman and a child in the middle of the seats. She's shaking, and holding a hand over the mouth of the little girl.





Whatever the stellar lightshow did, I suspect Borges is truly and permanently dead. While Lucas is busy trying to sew Ricardo's neck, the rest are building up the barricades. Pelting the doors are sharp instruments and blunt clubs, trapping everyone in. The mother and her child are in a state of shock, both shaking with sweat and tears.

`To one side is the entrance to the museum, the other signals an employees only area.` Jorrit moves to secure those entrances, signaling whoever is not too busy fortifying the barricades to come along and help. If he gets a chance he'll peek into those adjacent areas. Hostiles are of course the first priority, but anything of note or out of the ordinary will be interesting to spot.

A quick glance at the rooms tells me they're empty and have no additional exits. The museum is filled with astronomy exponents. The employee area is part deposit, part office.

"Wasn't there supposed to be someone here?" I ask. "Greatest magician of all time or something...?"

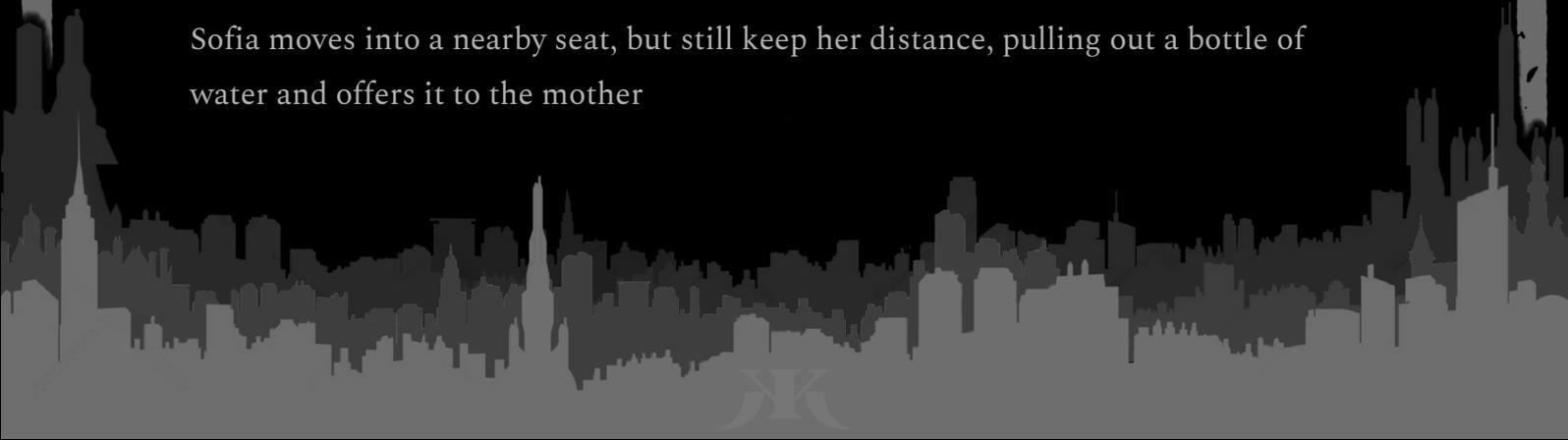
Lucas looks up "Yeah, Chadu something or other. Chadu Kibugali, the Starman"

Sofia slowly moves around the seats toward the Mother and child, his hands held up trying to look non threatening.

"Hello? We're here to help, are you okay?"

Fear is the only response as to her approach, the woman clutching the girl closer, and screaming.

Sofia moves into a nearby seat, but still keep her distance, pulling out a bottle of water and offers it to the mother





"Here, it's going to be okay"

Sutured and bandaged, Ricardo wakes up, more due to the adrenalin still coursing through his body. Slowly, he picks himself up again, his face a mask of pain. Soon he's slowly walking around, supporting himself with chairs. Everyone is absent minded, their thoughts on all the brutality they've witnessed.

Sofia continues being calm and helpful towards the mother and child, and gives her a ration bar as well.

"I know that this is scary, but we need your help. Where is the Starman?"

The girl can't be any more than 7 years old, and is playing with her pigtails. Slowly, patiently, and with great effort, Sofia pries words out of the woman.

"Chadu, he, he saved us! He left us here... while he, he, he went to pick up my son. At, at his school."

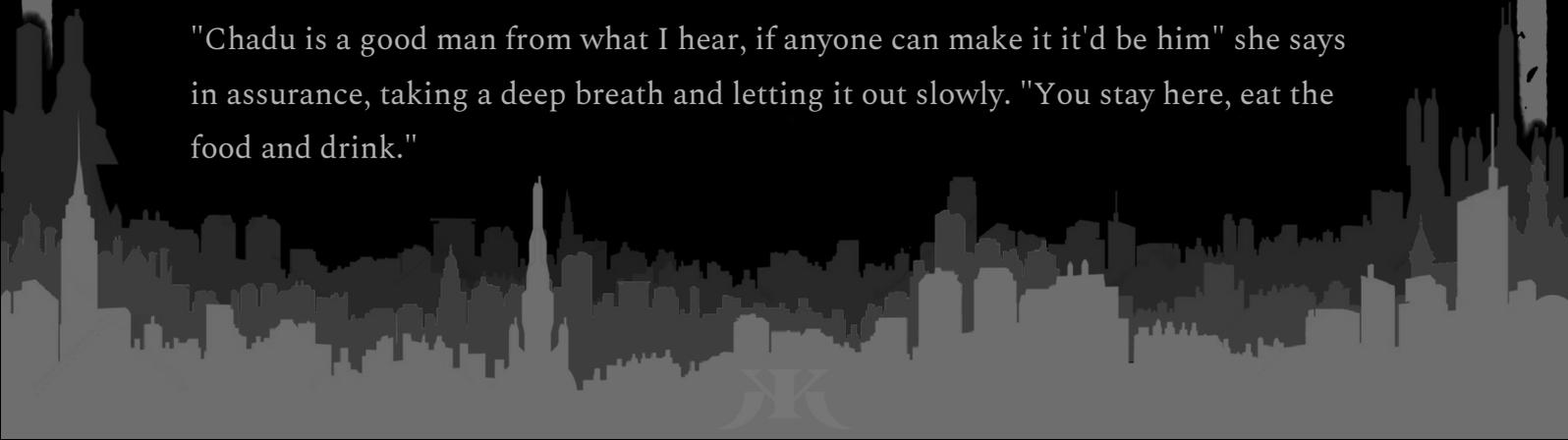
"Son of a bitch" Sofia whispers under her breath. "How far away is that?"

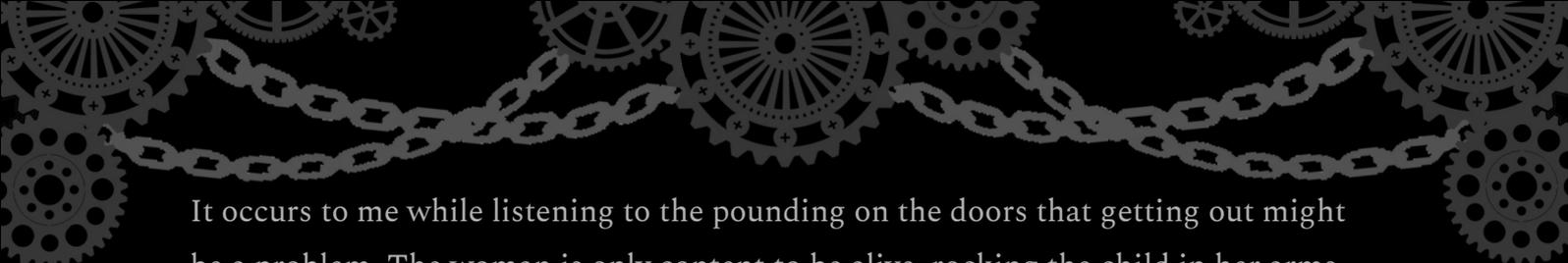
She gives the little girl a piece of chocolate and a slight smile before turning back to her mother.

"I won't let anything happen to you, but we need to find him"

"Its, its, Rilima school group, in Gikondo. Not far, but he's, he's been gone for days... I, I, I don't think he... made it..." She grabs the girl for comfort and more tears course her face. Sofia nods solemnly.

"Chadu is a good man from what I hear, if anyone can make it it'd be him" she says in assurance, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "You stay here, eat the food and drink."





It occurs to me while listening to the pounding on the doors that getting out might be a problem. The woman is only content to be alive, rocking the child in her arms, while the girl eats Sofia's chocolate.

The mercenary walks around until he realizes the constellations are losing glow. A projector in the middle of the room, something like a dark hexagonal ball, sends out the projections. It stands on a pedestal, large enough inside to accommodate machinery and an operator. Whatever the source of the magic, this device likely has something to do with it.

A control panel stands right outside the pedestal, strangely inactive. The buttons are those of an old arcade game, and only the power button is lit red. There's no reason the lights should be on, and Sofia points out a grate on the pedestal. There is a brief look of panic in her eyes as she looks at this thing before hunkering down and moving the grate.

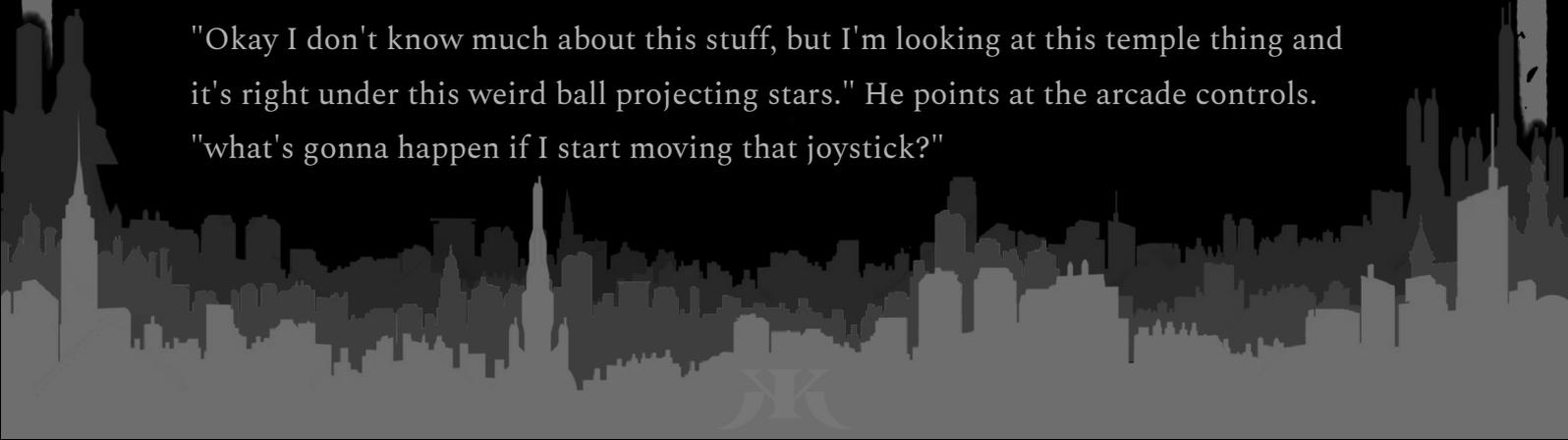
There's little light inside, but Lucas produces a flashlight, revealing an altar. A small wooden table carved with circles spiraling within each other, equations tying them together. Where it meets the wall a broad ape skull is placed, missing its lower jaw, unlit candles set in its eye sockets. Some items litter the table: an ivory wand, a knife, a small circlet, some ancient navigational tools. Although clean, there's a distinct smell of blood in the place, something I've come to recognize.

Sofia takes some pictures quickly of the designs and equations on the wall. Ricardo recognizes the temple of a magician. But it's something different than he's used to.

Sofia rubs her face and pinches her brow. She checks to make sure she has the vials still before getting up and moving to Lucas, who offers his opinion.

"Okay I don't know much about this stuff, but I'm looking at this temple thing and it's right under this weird ball projecting stars." He points at the arcade controls.

"what's gonna happen if I start moving that joystick?"





Sofia frowns and looks to the joystick, before looking to Lucas with an eyebrow raised. "I will need more information than that explanation, Lucas."

Lucas shows Sofia the photos as well. "Fuck Doc, I think this is some fucked up time thing? A time machine?"

"I will keep that in mind." Sofia flips through the photos and sees if any of the symbols spark a memory.

The photographs display a mashup of Hermeticism, Yoruba practices, numerology, and actual math. Sofia swears that some of the equations are related to gravity, but she has no clue how. The spiraling circles is a nice touch. Both outwards and inwards, they can act as both protective and projective. Overall, she suggests several lifetimes of occult knowledge were poured into the altar, with no manual to explain it. She doubts the control panel has anything to do with it. Marveling over the photographs, she takes the phone away from Lucas to zoom in and get a closer look.

"This is a marvel unto itself. Beautiful carvings detailing a vast wealth of knowledge. So much is contained here- wait a moment... This ice box, did you see it?" She returns the phone to Lucas, shoving it in his hands and up to his face. She indicates to the ice box with a bony finger. "Here! Here! You see it?"

Ricardo crawls inside, retrieves it, and checks the contents. With enough examples of how magic works, nobody is surprised. Among kilograms of ice are organs wrapped in plastic, and we can guess what kind.

Stumbling from room to room, I find a large, leaking air conditioning ventilator in the office. Looks like it connects to the outside, probably through a small ventilation shaft. The place is a collection of books shelves about astronomy, as well as various incomplete props. Cardboard planets and cut-out astronauts flank a desk swimming in paper.





I tear the vent grating off and throw it to the side. Crawling into it exploratorily to see where it leads. The shaft is cramped and hot, probably from exposure to the sun. Before long, I'm sweating, breath heavy. Reaching the end, there's a grate leading to the street outside. The area looks clear. I direct the others to it, and Lucas goes through to check it out.

Not wishing to go outside, Ricardo peruses the library in the office, hoping to find something. Hidden among serious books of astronomy are Chinese horoscopes and conspiracy almanacs. He shows us annotations on the margins, some comments on the protective spells.

"If I had to assume, I'd say Borges was done in by a protection spell of some sort. She began to convulse and melt immediately upon entry. It seems as if Chadu was not only anticipating, but strongly dislikes creatures such as her."

On the exterior, Lucas births out of the ventilation shaft, the midday sun at zenith. In front of a shoe repair store with a round scissor shop sign, a lone man stands. He's using a whetstone to sharpen his kukri, careful not to get any sparks on his shirt. Sitting down on a plywood box, he stares at his sandals, which have seen better days.

Lucas pulls his own knife from its 3d printed sheath and silently sneaks up behind him, putting the knife to his neck. The other hand moves to the man's mouth to silence him if he tries to scream. Feeling the blade biting into his throat and a hand muffling his voice, the kukri carrier doesn't struggle, waiting instead for indication.

"Tutsi or Hutu?"

Not able to see the color of the hands holding him from his angle, the man mumbles Hutu. Further away, Lucas can see the ravenous butchers pacing in front of the planetarium doors.

"Get in the vent."





Jorrit sees a kukri drop in first, then a black face shows up through the grate. A pearl smile, marked by tooth decay, shows up on the face as he spots the woman and child. When drops in from the grate, his face grimaces and back steams. He crouches, as if in pain, with the detective pointing the rifle at him.

Most of the steam rising from the man is coming from his back. His shirt sizzles away, and a symbol becomes evident, a tattoo made of burns and boils. It almost looks like a snake, eating its own tail. The man is in pain, but not in immediate danger.

The snake coils itself around another symbol. The burn cauterizes into edges, forming a gemstone, even as the conscious canvas writhes and foams at the mouth. The antiquarian pulls up his tablet, and sifts through his collection of symbols.

"It appears that the protection of this place keeps their kind out as well. Perhaps the safest building in this town. That said, it seems that Borges died almost instantly, perhaps due to her level of power. I wouldn't recommend summoning anything here."

He describes a reference that fits the description. The snake eating its own tail is the Ouroboros, a representation of renewal cycles. It's an old symbol, originating from Egypt, and passing into modern magic by way of the greeks. The gemstone, a diamond if he had to guess, is a symbol of power, and often of violence. This contrast leads the antiquarian to think of Shiva, the Supreme Creator/Destroyer.

Drawing some parallels to the Kabbalah, the closest concept is in the Qlifot, the shadow Sefirot. Epitomizing eternal power can only mean Thaumiel, the corrupted shadow of order. The canvas passes out, with the symbol settling in, the protection charm having done its job.





"I think any of those outside creatures coming in here will die, and we could disrupt the altar below which would end the protection but will almost certainly remove our best chance of getting back to our time. And also endanger the woman and child, but they'd also be in danger of taking them out of this place, as the protection spell works. So... I suggest that we leave the protection in this place, leave the woman and child here safe, and go ourselves to go find Chadu. Then return here."

"We'll still have to deal with the fuckers outside the door. They're not far." Lucas interjects.

Jorrit checks the fridge in the office. It looks sparse, a few sandwiches still left. Judging by how fast the girl ate that chocolate, whatever was in there was probably consumed by the single mother and her offspring. Looks like a prolonged stay isn't on the books.

"Between that protection thing and some explosives... Okay, here is my idea, Near the door I set up four blocks of semtex, all with whatever debris we can find attached. Jorrit and Parvati will take side positions under cover at the entrance in flank. We get the kids to the other room, block that off..."

The plan is made. Lucas moves the entryway and starts to write out some maths, old school like with a pad and pen. He can see the door shudder as they bang away at it, but tries his best not to let that distract him. he grabs a couple of broom handles and jams them into place to make sure the door only opens so far if it does open. As soon as those are put in place he breaks out the semtex, positioning a few small blocks of it like a claymore mine. Angled toward the opening.

"You bitches ready?"

"Yes. And don't call me a bitch." Parvati responds, without glancing at Lucas.





The mob is stunned for a moment, not expecting the door to actually open. It passes, and they rush in, meeting the shrapnel, tearing through them. Everyone goes half-deaf with the detonation bouncing around the room. When it dies down, someone is screaming. The mother.

Whatever is left of the mob isn't shy about stepping on the body parts. Those yellow eyes, baleful, thirsting for blood and death, move forward.

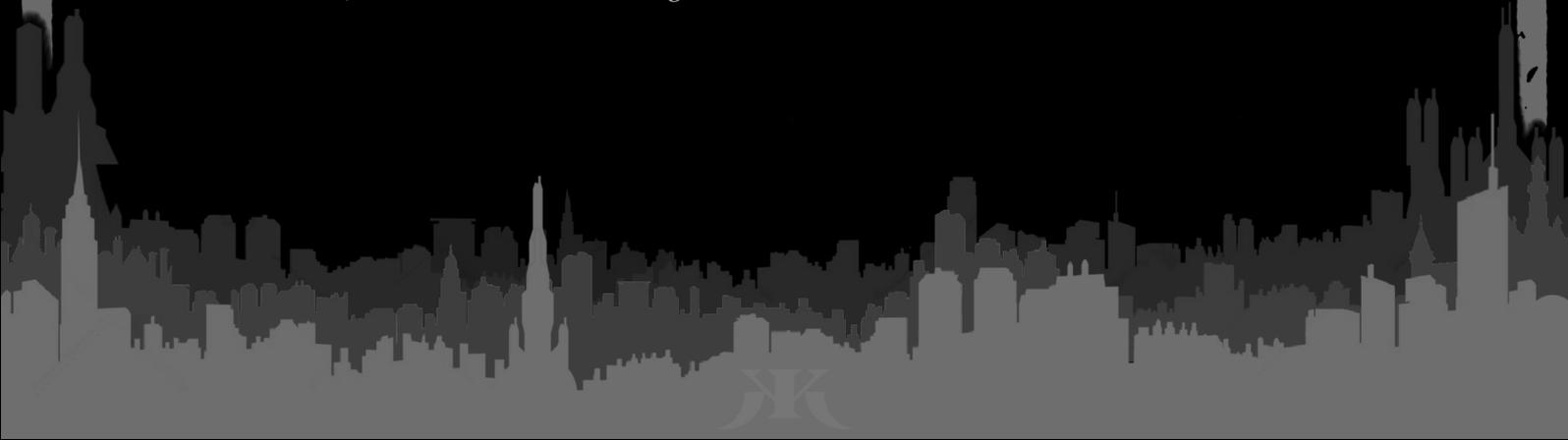
Cushion textiles float through the air in front of the blinding exit. Lucas, Jorrit, and Parvati open fire towards it, mowing down anyone who enters. It's maddening how the butchers step in the line of fire, no regards for their safety. A good ten minutes pass, until every last one of them is dead.

The trio of shooters look at the empty clips around their feet, their ammo gone. It's quiet for now, but someone in the distance must have heard all that. And the mother won't stop, joined by the girl's cries.

Lucas nearly trips over the dead Hutus, and someone behind him steps on a machete. The streets are empty for now, just some onlookers from the nearby buildings poking their head out. Dust flies through the sun, now falling towards the evening.

I look around and realize most of the roads aren't even paved. There's an old Belgian frog nearby if we can hotwire it. It won't fit everybody. All we have is the school the mother mentioned. The one Chadu went to, and never returned.

Those going open the car, checking the dash and interior. A key falls out of the visor. Everyone piles in, and the engine stammers and chokes a couple of times. Thankfully, the car starts moving on the unpaved road. After managing to calm down the mother, she leads us to the neighborhood of Gikondo.





It takes an hour navigating through the city. Cars are overturned and burned, corpses in blood puddles on the street. Avoiding the checkpoints is also tricky, but Buyesha, the mother, guides us well. A postal worker, she knows the city. The neighborhood is a suburban area on a lazy hill, and they pass a pond. Its waters are red, bodies floating everywhere.

Not far away, the school is a campus with single floor buildings made of brownish brick. Like vultures, a set of armed patrolmen in khaki military uniforms march back and forth. Their advance is seemingly stopped by a single sedan, inside of which are two people. One of them is the first white face the runners have seen since the embassy.

The people in the sedan look like civilians. I swear the white one of them is wearing a catholic priest frock. Marching somewhat aimlessly, the soldiers don't have UN markings. They look like the ones at the checkpoint earlier. A child can be seen looking through the blinders of the nearest building.

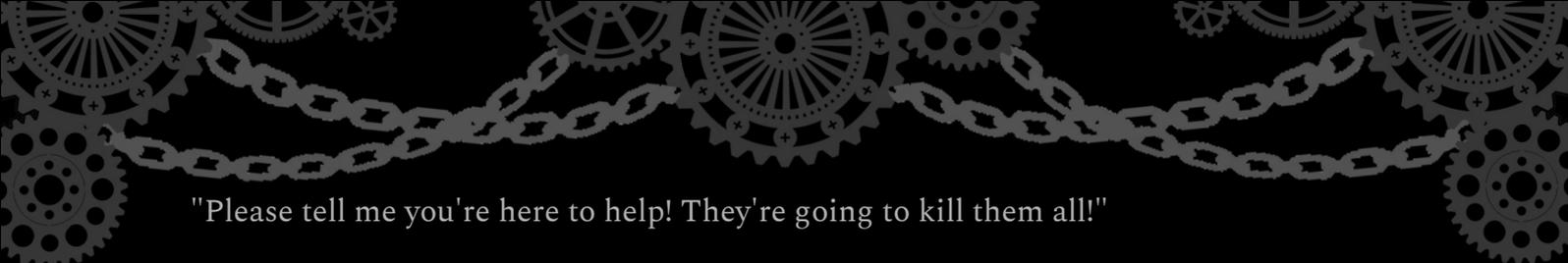
"Is one of them Chadu or someone you know?" Jorrit leans out the drivers window.

"No, I don't know these people. Wait, I think one of them might be a UN soldier."

The priest is surprised to see him. He lowers his window, ready to talk. Buyesha peeks past the window, careful for the soldiers not to see her.

"Father."

I think back on how Buyesha described Chadu, a black South African, kind, lean, and dyed blonde. The other man in the car has a bodybuilder build, wears sunglasses, and shows a shining smile when the priest speaks. Not Chadu.



"Please tell me you're here to help! They're going to kill them all!"

"Actually, we're looking for someone. But how can we help? Who's gonna kill whom, where?"

"The children! Somehow, with us here, they don't want to do it. But we need to get them out of here somehow."

"Okay, shit yeah, let's get inside."

The priest is a young man, balding despite his age.

"I can't go inside. I'm sure if I move from here, they'll storm the place."

"You got a guy called Chadu in there too, by any chance? Black man, lean build, blonde hair. Nice guy."

A recognition surprise crosses the white man's face.

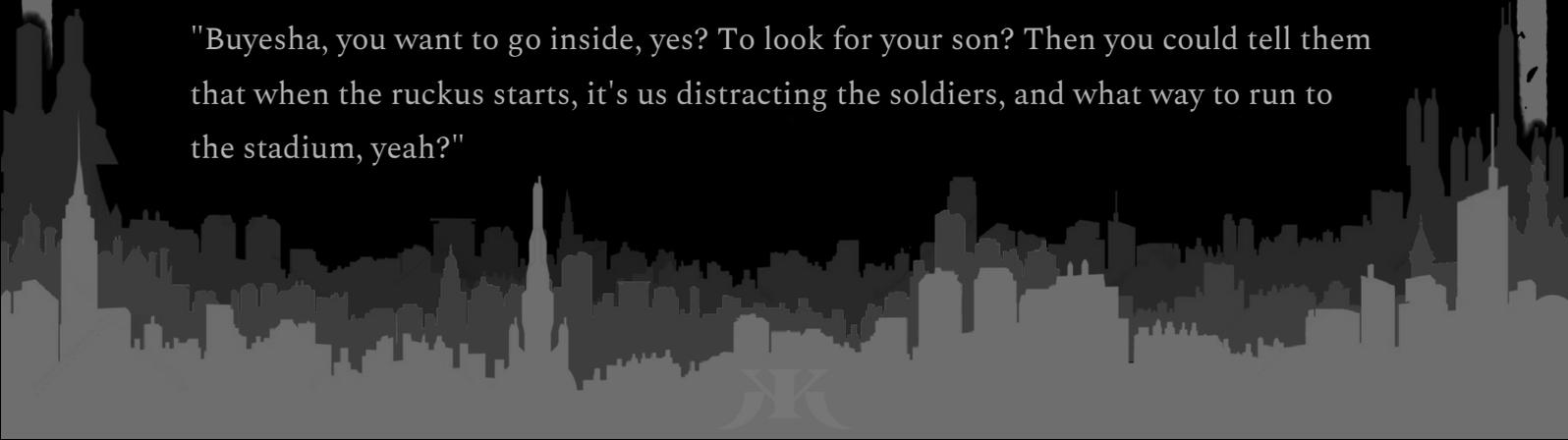
"Oh, yeah, Chadu. He went looking for help. I think the UN have a safe zone cordoned off at a stadium nearby. Did he send you?"

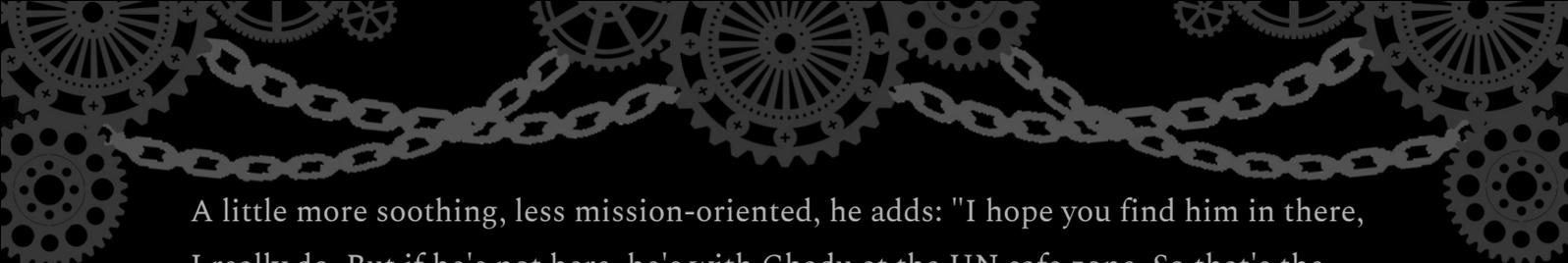
"Yeah, no. We're looking for him... and this woman's son... How many kids have you got in there?"

"Must be at least a hundred kids in there, with some teachers."

"We've got to get them out of there." The detective turns to the mother.

"Buyesha, you want to go inside, yes? To look for your son? Then you could tell them that when the ruckus starts, it's us distracting the soldiers, and what way to run to the stadium, yeah?"





A little more soothing, less mission-oriented, he adds: "I hope you find him in there, I really do. But if he's not here, he's with Chadu at the UN safe zone. So that's the place you wanna go then."

Buyesha nods in agreement, stepping out of the car. The soldiers look on, hands on their rifles while she hurries to the building. They seem to be waiting for something, and a few look at the priest. Jorrit sees hesitation. They don't seem to have that same sickly gaze as the butchers. Parvati seems skeptical.

"Who's going to act as the bait this time?"

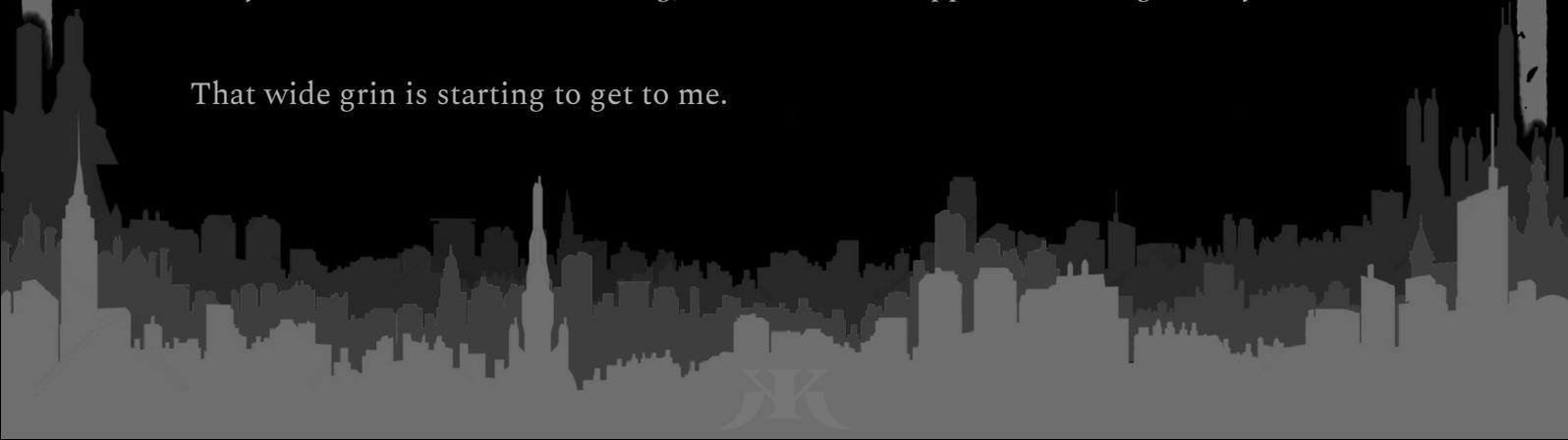
"I think we all are. We're only two shooters but we got a car. I think we're doing a drive-by shooting. That should attract their attention enough, and we're mobile so we can keep drawing them..."

The UN soldier in the priest's passenger seat opens the door and gets out. His smile is still there, untouched by all the carnage, as he gets out of the car. He's wearing green camouflage, with a beret and the UN seal on his shoulder. He nonchalantly approaches the Belgian Frog, leans into the window, pulls down his sunglasses, and asks.

"What's the plan, big man?"

"We turn around and act as if we're driving away. You stay here with the priest. Buyesha inside tells the teachers to get the kids running towards the stadium when the soldiers are distracted. Which we will do, driving by and shooting at them, again and again if need be. If there is more than one group nearby, hopefully they will hurry to each others' aid when one group is getting shot up. We'll try to draw them away from one side of the building, to allow those trapped inside to get away."

That wide grin is starting to get to me.





"I like your plan, and it sounds like you've got the firepower. What do you want us to do when the party starts?"

"Can you radio your base at the stadium or something? Let them know they're coming and to be ready for pursuing soldiers?"

"... or... send out support, dare I ask?"

The soldier laughs at the support statement.

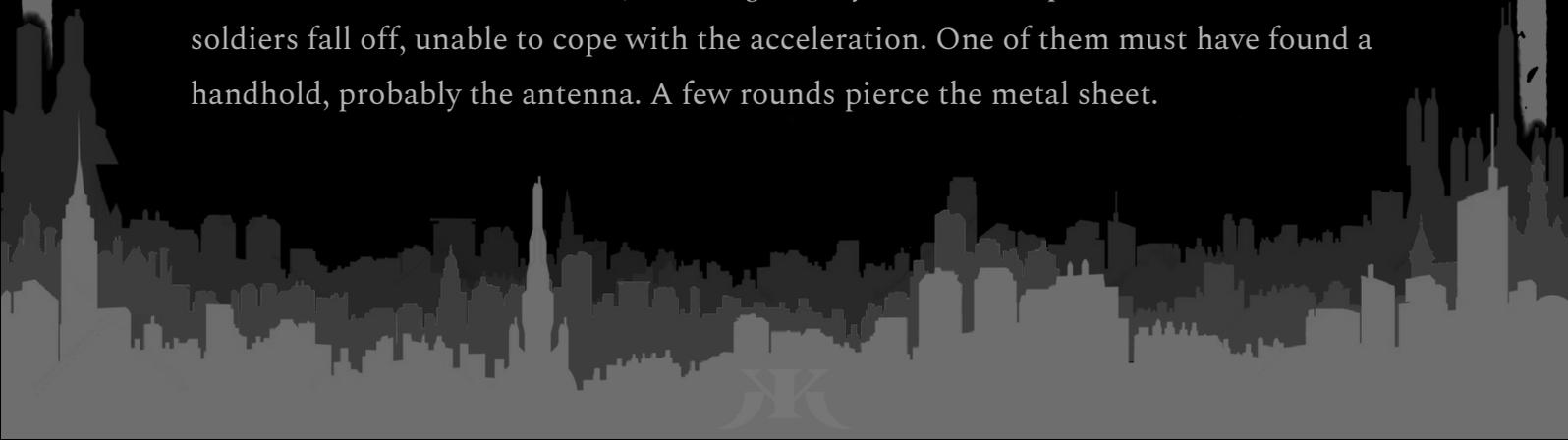
"We've been asking for support for three months now. The UN council and the US are ignoring us. I'll radio Dallaire that we're coming up. If you can distract them, I'll get them to safety. Just keep them busy. Hopefully the stadium's not been compromised."

"That's the plan."

With Ricardo gripping the wheel, Parvati and Jorrit grab on to their weapons, loading what little ammunition they have left. They get a thumbs up from the UN trooper, then move to the end of the street, which is fortunately solid pavement. Ricardo presses the gas pedal, and the frog leaves a bit of rubber trail.

Ricardo slams on the acceleration, but the old Belgian frog isn't sturdy enough to keep steady. They plummet through the crowd of soldiers, breaking it up, catching a few on the windshield. Jorrit smashes his head against the dashboard, falling unconscious. The car slows down enough for a few to catch on, then accelerates out of the crowd. The nearby military truck starts up. On the roof, banging can be heard.

The assassin aims it at the roof, listening for any movement up there. A few of the soldiers fall off, unable to cope with the acceleration. One of them must have found a handhold, probably the antenna. A few rounds pierce the metal sheet.





Ricardo takes a bullet, and blood sprays the already broken windshield, making it impossible to see. The car derails, throwing Parvati's aim off, but she fires anyway.

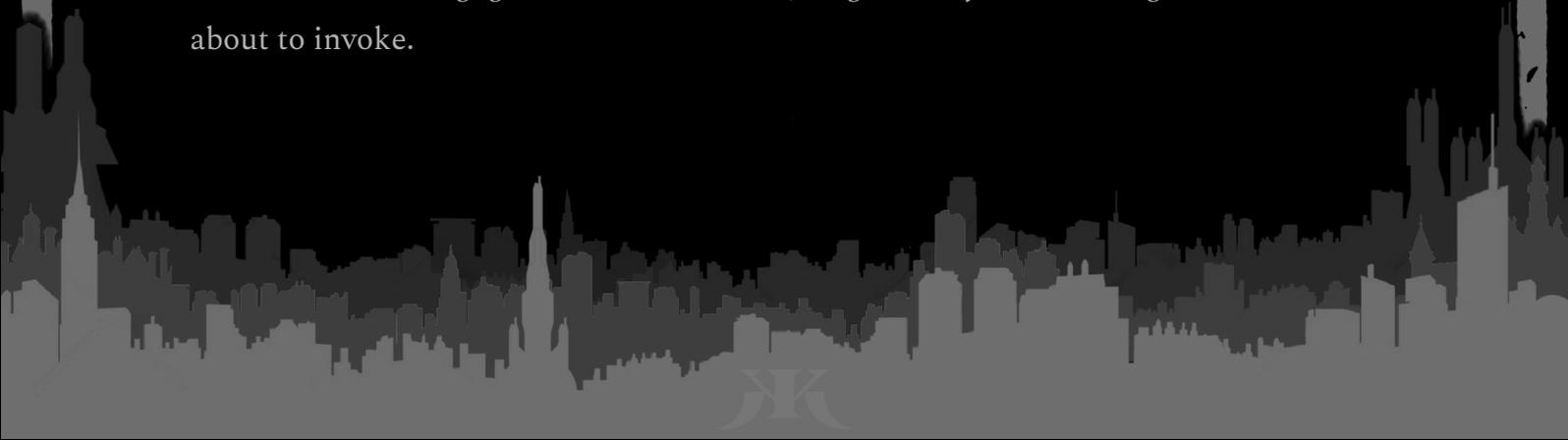
Blood trickles down through the holes made by the gun, red lines dancing in the draft coming in through broken windows. The body slides off the back, leaving a crimson trail on the rear window. Machine gun fire whizzes by, the soldiers in the truck taking shots.

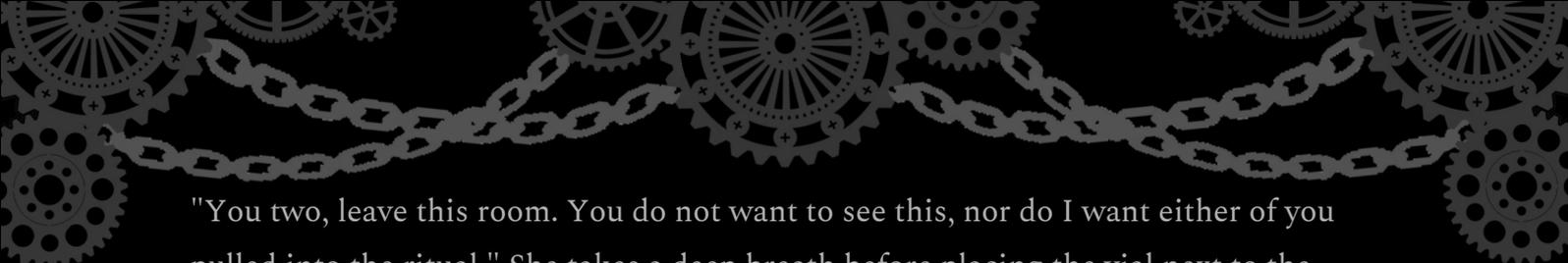
A bullet shatters the rear view, and the assassin acts instinctively, aiming her gun at the driver. An expert shot, it goes through his neck. The truck's wheels turn sideways, and it slams into a nearby fence, overturning. Wounded and unable to see where he's going, Ricardo loses control of the car, sending it into a spin.

Through a miracle, Ricardo regains control. Looking towards the truck, there don't seem to be that many survivors. Down the street, the rest of the soldiers are coming their way. The antiquarian breaks away the windshield. The frog still works, and Ricardo presses the pedal, heading back to the Kigali planetarium to pick up the rest. Hopefully they can all make the stadium in time for the rendezvous.

Sofia, not wanting to risk interfering with whatever Chadu has left in place, is building her own circle. Calmly working one the carpet with a piece of chalk and some markers she found in the office, it looks like it will take a while.

With the help of Lucas, she drags a number of the corpses around the circle, joining them and making a ring of bodies. She drags what is left of the Borges woman to the center, using the remaining flesh and blood to trace out the lines and symbols. She takes a moment to gag outside of the circle, disgusted by the foul magics she was about to invoke.





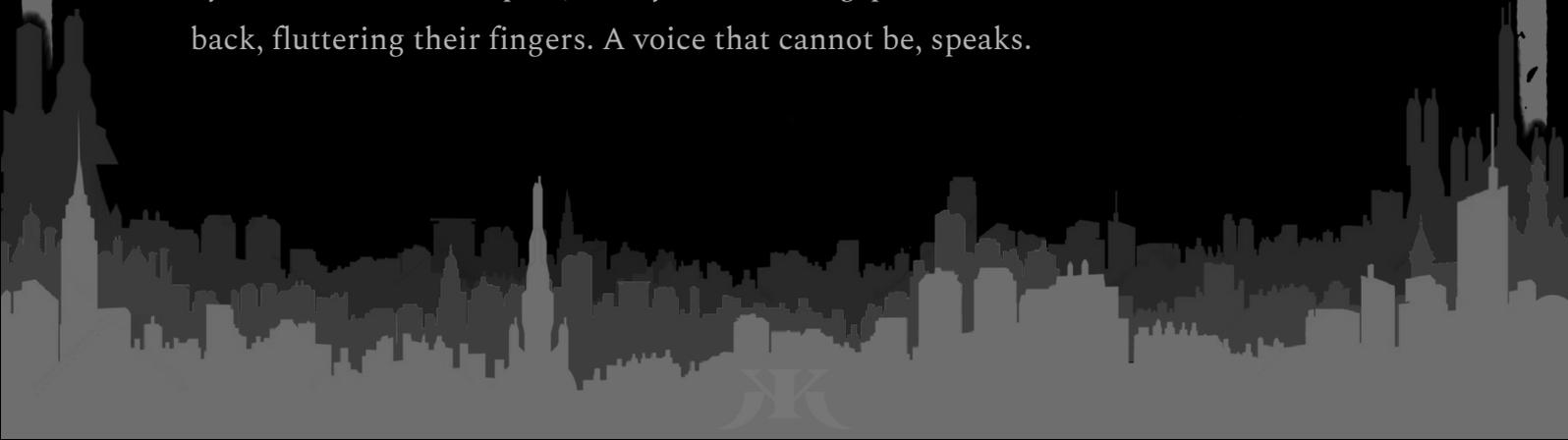
"You two, leave this room. You do not want to see this, nor do I want either of you pulled into the ritual." She takes a deep breath before placing the vial next to the circle. She makes her way to the side of the room, placing her clothes in a small pile, neatly folded.

Sofia approaches the circle, rubbing her bare arms. She feels her hairs stand on end and a shiver go down her spine as she kneels down within the circle. Taking the vial into her right hand, she places her left palm flat onto a symbol. She takes another deep breath before starting to chant.

"The serpent dips his head beneath the sea
His mother, source of all his energy
Eternal, thence to draw the strength he needs
On earth to do indomitable deeds
Once more; and they, who saw but understood
Naught of his nature of beatitude
Were awed: they murmured with abated breath;
Alas the Master; so he sinks in death.
But whoso knows the mystery of man
Sees life and death as curves of one same plan."

The planetarium is silent. In disbelief, Sofia repeats the incantation. Still, nothing happens. Frustrated, she recites the poem over and over. After a time, her throat gets dry, and she gives up, wondering what's missing.

One of the corpses moves. A jerk, and an arm is lifted. The bodies around the circle flick and flop their arms, like weed in the wind. One tears away from its host, then crawls towards Borges. The rest follow suit. The melted meat, faceless but reinforced by the limbs of the corpses, slowly rises. A wingspan of severed arms rises from its back, fluttering their fingers. A voice that cannot be, speaks.





"I smell magic here. Strong magic. Where have you brought me, child?"

"A place protected by strong magics. Protecting against those outside who wish to attack us. This was the safest place." Sofia isn't so sure herself of where they are, only that it is in chaos. She continues to kneel where she is, looking up to the creature now formed in blood and bone. She trembles, but she stays in her place. "I have what was asked of me. The blood of the Braganza." She holds up the vial of Bianca's blood.

The meat moves and talks, defying the rational mind. It paces forward.

"I can feel the magic through the barrier. I can smell the blood. It is sweet. You've done well."

A stump with a few fingers, the others melted, extends towards Sofia.

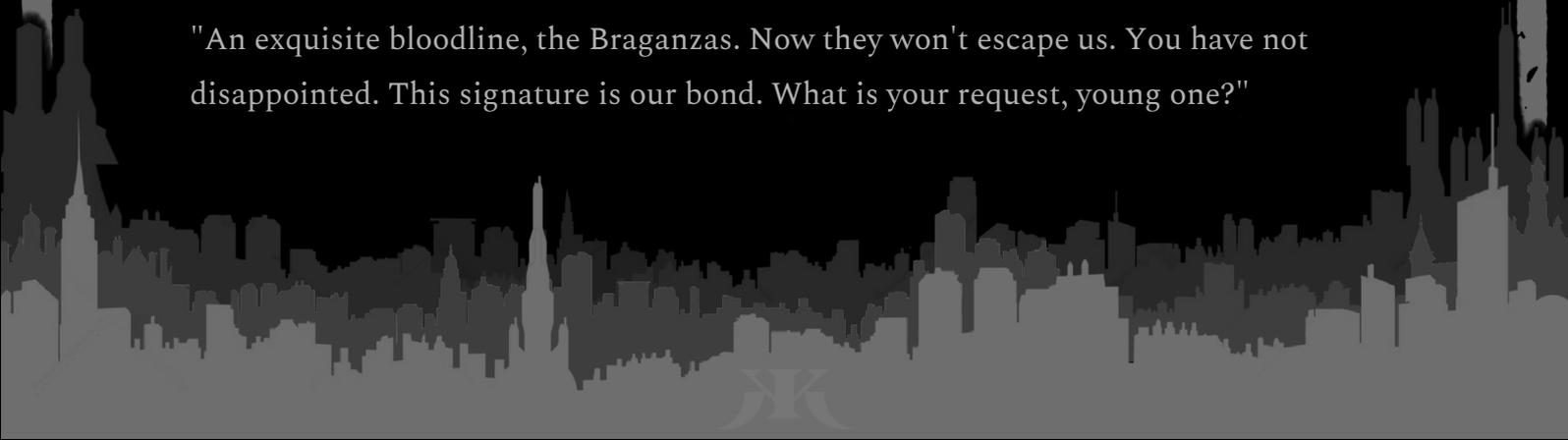
"Give me the blood, and I shall reward you with what you wish."

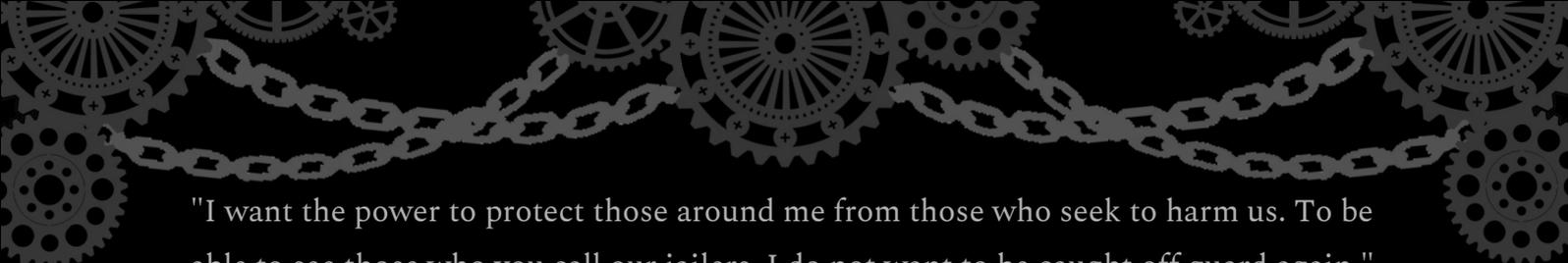
Sofia steels herself while looking at the creature, having her fear meld into the back of her mind. Her face hardens as she takes her right hand and places the vial in the fleshy hand.

"Thank you. I plan to accomplish more in the future."

Lazily but carefully, the hand breaks the top of the vial. A deformed, elongated tongue slithers out of the dripping, melting jaws. The vial's content gets poured over the tongue, palpitating the area where it lands. All of the meatsack shudders when the blood is gone.

"An exquisite bloodline, the Braganzas. Now they won't escape us. You have not disappointed. This signature is our bond. What is your request, young one?"





"I want the power to protect those around me from those who seek to harm us. To be able to see those who you call our jailers. I do not want to be caught off guard again."

A coarse laugh escapes the meat, broken by sudden pauses. The wings beat once more, and the entity paces around the circle.

"A brave one. The Lictors have servants. Foremost are the animals. Splash your jailers with their blood, and they shall be revealed. Because you amuse me, child, I shall grant you power. An aspect of me will aid you when you consume these feelers."

The fingers on the wing flutter.

"But take care. Each summoning will cost you. Was there something else?"

Sofia shivers, but watches the creature pace around.

"Yes there is. We are trapped here in the past. We need to get back to our time. How can we do this?"

It stops for a moment, and bits and pieces of flesh drop out of the shape. Then it paces once more, the vicious tongue somehow formulating language.

"I forget that you are still limited. Having no need of it, I do not possess this power, but I can guide your path. Chesed's Citadel, now abandoned, contains a machine. It is a dangerous place, so choose wisely. I can open a gateway to the Citadel, with your next consumption."

The meatsack collapses, the dread around the area simmering down. There are plenty of fingers left on the corpses if one is inclined to cut them off. Each one, an opportunity to summon Enkisun, with the next one providing a gate.





Sofia gets up from her kneeling position before walking a slight ways from the circle. She vomits the contents of her stomach onto the ground before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She makes her way to her pile of clothes, quickly putting them back on before looking to the office.

"You may return! I need some assistance with... fingers..."

Lucas, waiting around in the office at Sofia's request, hears her calling him. He came through the door expecting. Sofia moves towards Lucas with a hand outstretched. "I need a knife."

Lucas hands her his knife without question. Sofia takes the knife and quickly moves back to the circle. She digs the knife into flesh, carving through bone and slowly slicing off fingers. Sickening wet sounds can be heard as she butchers the meat.

As if on cue, a blood-stained, formerly green car slowly wheels into view. The windows are busted out, Ricardo is holding one hand on the wheel and the other over a bullet wound. Jorrit is passed out in the passenger seat, while Parvati has free reign over the back, loading bullets in a clip. Back window is busted. Woman and daughter nowhere in sight.

We patch up our wounded, and under the cover of the approaching night feel safer to travel. Exiting the planetarium, we see rats cropping up from the sewers to chew on the bodies. Somehow fitting into the frog, using a map found in the office, the frog starts towards the Nyamirambo stadium.





Less populated streets don't reassure, making the city only seem more explosive. Strange birds and monkeys can be heard through the gardens, though none can be seen. Only the rats are brazen enough, with a banquet the massacre prepared for them. The frog hits a few bumps in the road, accompanied by crunching sounds when a body part finds its way under the wheels.

It all comes to a stop near the spotlight list stadium, four UN soldiers guarding the entrance. We are waved through, and told to head for the main pavilion. Surrounded by rows of blue painted seats, a collection of tents are fixed on the grass, lit by a few campfires. The people surrounding these seem dejected, hopeless.

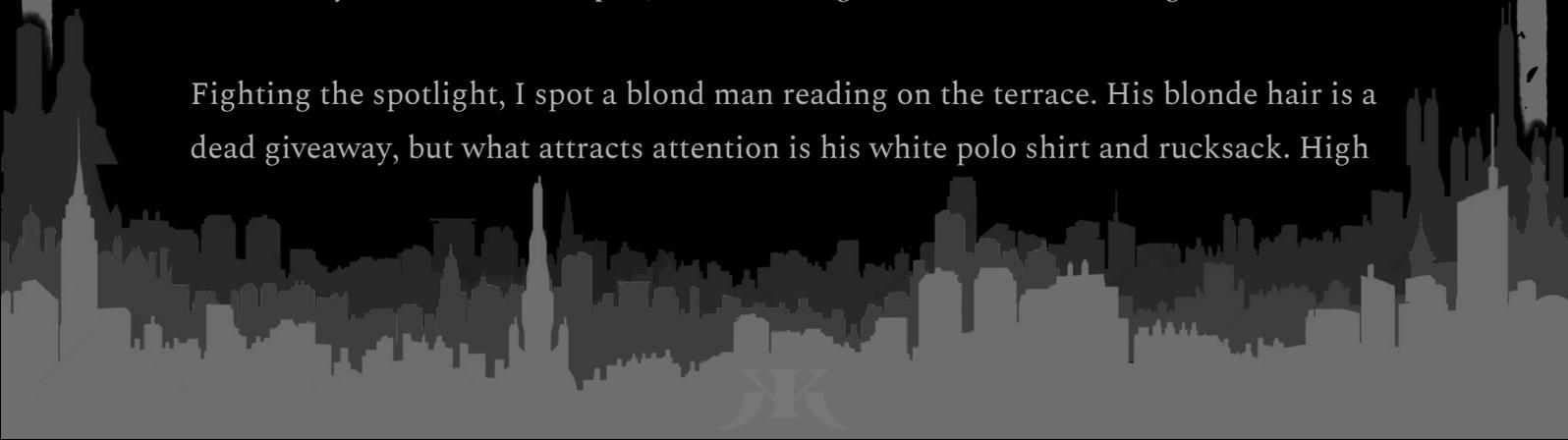
Part of the kids are pushing a ball around, twenty to a team. Many others are reunited with their families, having meals around the campfires. Buyesha's braided hair and striped shirt stands out, handkerchief in hand, cleaning her son's face. Her little girl is playing a form of hopscotch, built for them in the grass with the nearby chalk machine.

I actually manage a little smile as I point it out to the others.

"Look, they made it to here, at least. Now to find Chadu, I take it...?"

Searching for someone who fits his description, we inventory the place. Too few soldiers, and too poorly armed, guard some 300 men, women, and children. One moustached foreign commander inside a military tent is on a radio phone, giving order. Only one entrance is open, the rest being closed under massive gates.

Fighting the spotlight, I spot a blond man reading on the terrace. His blonde hair is a dead giveaway, but what attracts attention is his white polo shirt and rucksack. High





up in the terrace, Chadu will spot anyone approaching. I point him out to the others in the car with me.

A boy is there, sitting on the grass on the edge of the football field. No more than 15, he's chewing on something, looking into the distance at the kids playing. Lucas approaches him, which prompts the boy to stand up. The mercenary kneels enough to get on his level.

"Wanna make some money kid?" He takes his wallet out and thumbs out a couple of bills. "We need to talk with Blondie up there on the Terrace, if you can let him know that we'd like to talk I'll give you this now," he stuffs the bill into the kids hand, "and the rest when you relay the message. Yeah?"

He stares at the bill for a moment, not sure what to do with it. Finally, he pockets it, and asks for the message.

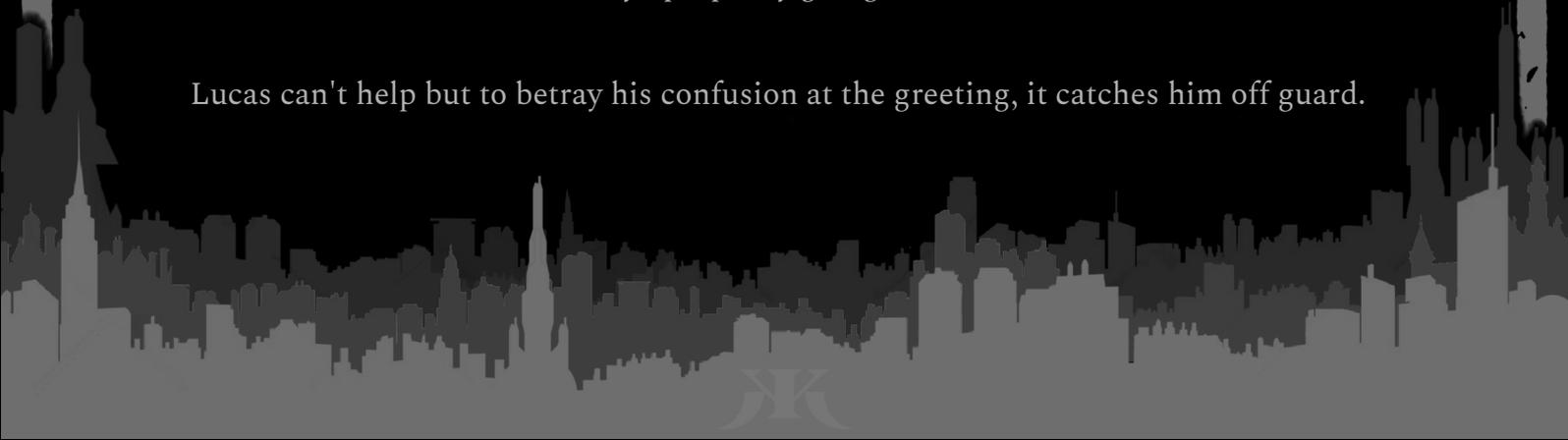
"Just tell him we'd like a moment of his time"

The kid's sandals slap the cement when he runs up the steps with the message. Chadu isn't too worried when he sees him coming up, and listens to what he has to say. Looking past the young boy, he stands up and smiles, waving to the rescuers, inviting them upward.

We follow the boy upwards, taking in few paces to reach Chadu. The wizard is a lot younger looking than he expected, having a college student look. Beige pants with a buckled belt flow over a set of brown leather shoes. A stylized thornbush blankets the cover, with "The Name of the Rose" emblazoned in red.

"If it isn't the Seekers of Enlightenment. I never thought the Cult of Malkuth would make it this far. How's the Tokyo prophecy going?"

Lucas can't help but to betray his confusion at the greeting, it catches him off guard.





"Ah, hmm... Could you elaborate on the Tokyo bit?"

Lucas looks at Ricardo, still a bit confused about this enlightenment thing, but lets him run with it. Chadu is confused himself for a moment, his face sad, his gaze lost in the floor. A laughter ultimately escapes him when he stares back up, with a regained grin.

"Shit, must have been ages, last time I saw you, where was it, Prussia? Napoleon's campaign? No, Germany, the 40's. You took down Hod's Citadel while the Russians stormed the Reichstag. I asked you how you did it, and you told me the Tokyo prophet on the videotape showed you the way."

Not seeing recognition, he laughs again.

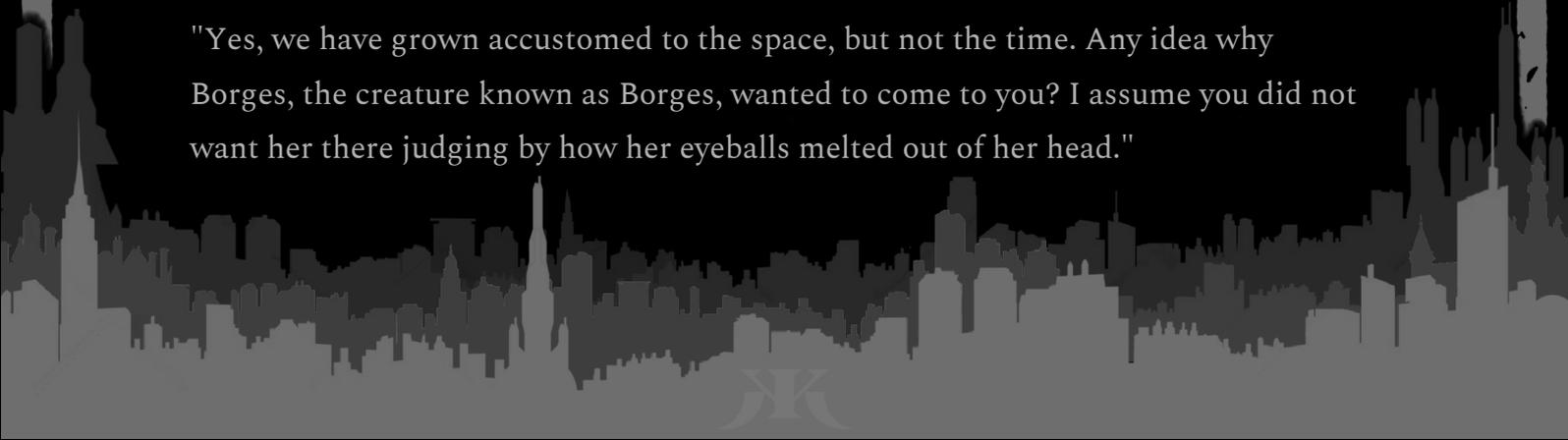
"You're not the ones. It was your... should we call them elders?"

"I see." Ricardo ponders. "We appear to have been cast through time back to this year and through space from Brazil to here. That said, we are still learning of ourselves. I have been accused of being in Malkuth's cult before. We now seek our way to our own time, and were led to believe your ritual was capable of it. We have been trying to find you."

There's something mocking in his riotous laughter that lands him in a blue plastic seat, holding his abdomen.

"Cast back through time? No shit? That's news for you guys? Like naked babes in the woods. Yeah, my ritual probably had something to with it. I recognized it the last time you used it."

"Yes, we have grown accustomed to the space, but not the time. Any idea why Borges, the creature known as Borges, wanted to come to you? I assume you did not want her there judging by how her eyeballs melted out of her head."





Finally his cackling stops, with Chadu taking a break to gasp for air. He stares out onto the football field, where the soldiers are distributing rations.

"I'm not surprised. Not surprised at all. We are approaching the limit. With the Last Cycle upon us, a lot of people are looking for an escape. It's all prophecies and mad dashes to accumulate as much power as possible."

"Ah, I see. So what happens then? What exactly is the Last Cycle?"

His eyebrows raised, the sorcerer sucks air through his teeth.

"Fuck if I know, man. There's the usual talk of prophets and the apocalypse. But it's everywhere. I even met a crazy motherfucker in the Alps. He had an arrow in his ribs and, between coughing blood, even he told me about it. Based on his clothing, it was during the early Iron Age, I think. Used his village to travel."

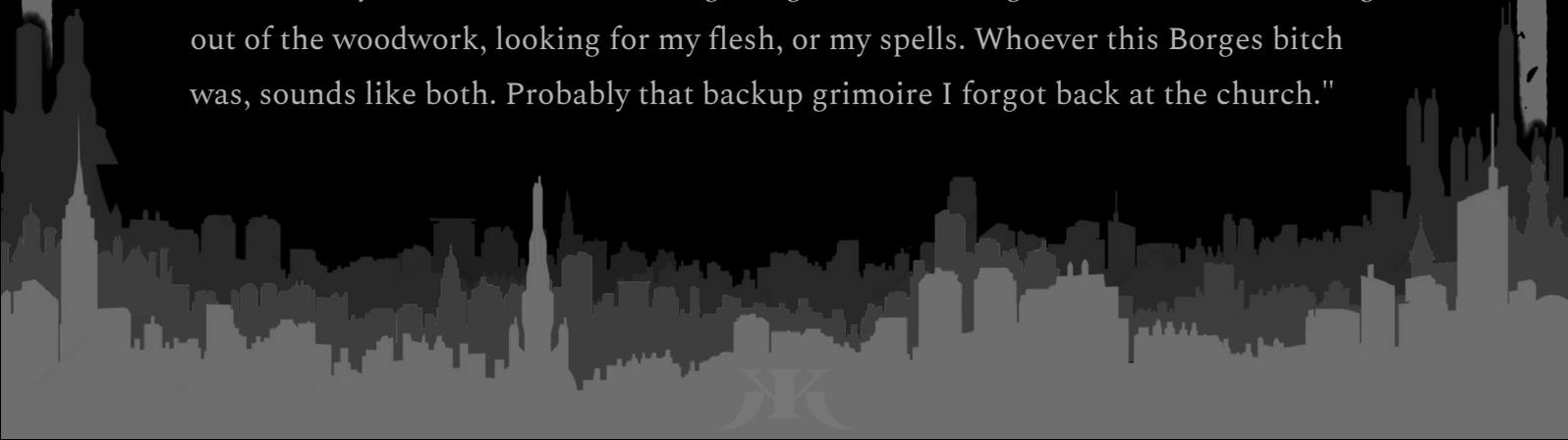
"Borges wanted your flesh, to gain your power" Lucas rubs his forehead in frustration. "I don't get any of this. enlightenment, last cycles, prophecies? We need help man, not cryptic messages from beyond time and space."

Ricardo seems to understand more than us.

"Ah. So you plan on using this stadium then? To go back before the cycle? Or does it exist outside of our linear time?"

Chadu laughs again at Lucas's line, then, deadpan serious, points to Ricardo.

"Looks like your friend here's starting to figure it out. I've got motherfuckers coming out of the woodwork, looking for my flesh, or my spells. Whoever this Borges bitch was, sounds like both. Probably that backup grimoire I forgot back at the church."





He takes a deep breath, and a sip of water from a plastic canteen on the rucksack.

"Got to keep moving. That's why I cut a deal, to speed things along."

A construction utility sound puts the UN soldiers on edge, heading towards the back gate.

"Cut a deal? With whom? To what end? What does the tome of worms have to do with it?"

"Aye, there's a few worm recipes in there. I can see why some amateur would call it that."

A cold shiver passes up my spine when I catch Chadu's look. I've seen that sort of mad conviction before, and the answer following it is even worse.

"Thaumiel. Or his extension here, in reality. At my age, you get a bit sick and tired of doing everything yourself. So, I fed him victims, and in return he allowed me to ride the wave."

The back gate buckles, something massive ramming it. Someone's screaming orders, and the people are running.

"The shadow of order. So that is the meaning of the ouroboros. You intend to step outside the cycle of rebirth? Not a bad plan. Why get eaten if you can help it? Take us with you. We have gotten this far knowing nothing, and with leftover books and pages. Imagine where we can end up with more."

Chaud raises his hands when Lucas pulls his pistol and aims at his head.



"Whoa, whoa, do you have any idea what you're doing? You're setting yourself up for perpetual damnation here. I already told you we're supposed to meet some other time. Besides, you've got bigger problems. Here's ol' Thaumiel now."

The gate bursts open, and a bulldozer rolls into the stadium grounds, driven by a yellow-eyed bearded man in a flak jacket. From the other side, machine gun fire isn't enough to stop the machetes cutting down the refugees. Lucas whips out his other hand, intent on grabbing Chadu by his collar.

"If we die, then your bullshit is pointless!"

"Hmmm sounds like if you kill him then it's some kind of time paradox. Best not to, otherwise..."

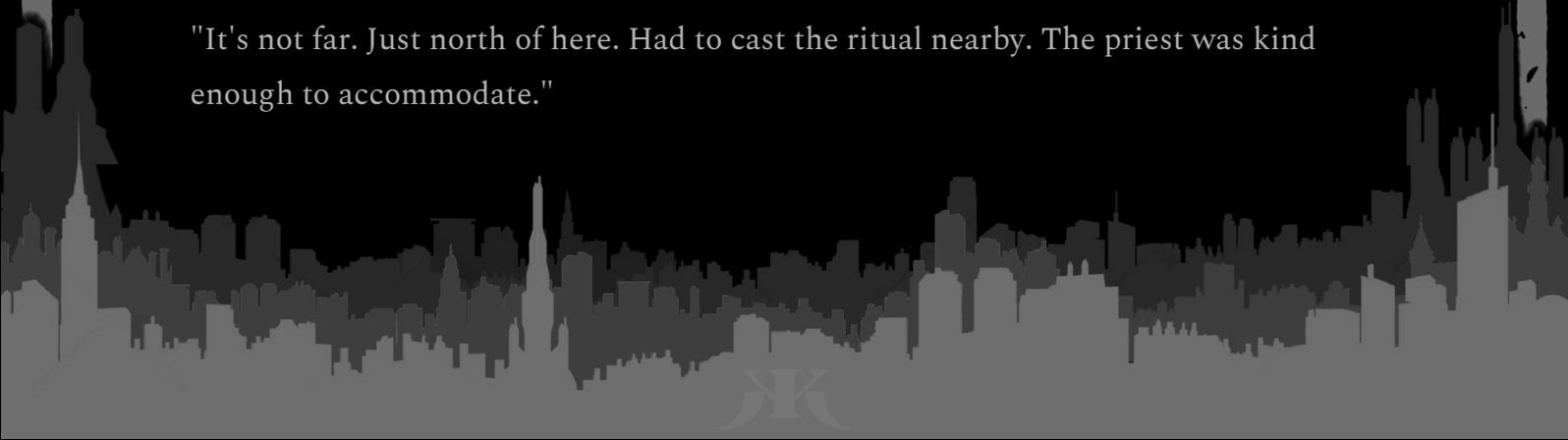
Lucas releases the bastard magician and starts scanning the area for the mother and her kids. Loosened from Lucas's grip, Chadu takes some time to breathe, while the football turf receives a crimson irrigation.

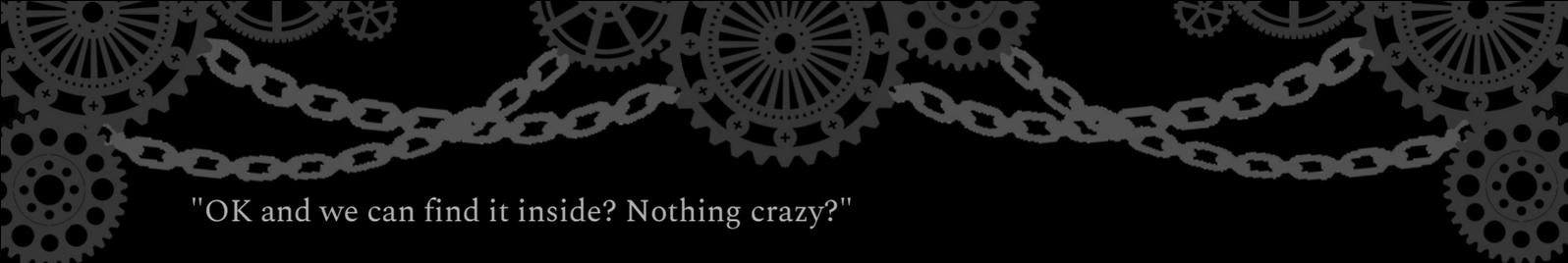
"Yeah, I think we're supposed to meet, so I'll help. I can't take you with me, the journey's too far, and takes too much energy. Just for this trip I had to cast a protection spell, why I forgot my grimoire at St Vincent's. But you can take it. That's St Vincent's Pallotti Parish. Priest there was a Hutu sympathizer. The good shepherd gathered the lambs up for the slaughter."

"How do we get there from here?"

Chadu looks on impassively, then at the sky, where stars fall toward the center of the stadium.

"It's not far. Just north of here. Had to cast the ritual nearby. The priest was kind enough to accommodate."





"OK and we can find it inside? Nothing crazy?"

The sorcerer gets up, unbuttons his shirt, and walks down the stairs, with Ricardo following. Above, the stellar rain intensifies in pace with the musk of gore filling the stadium.

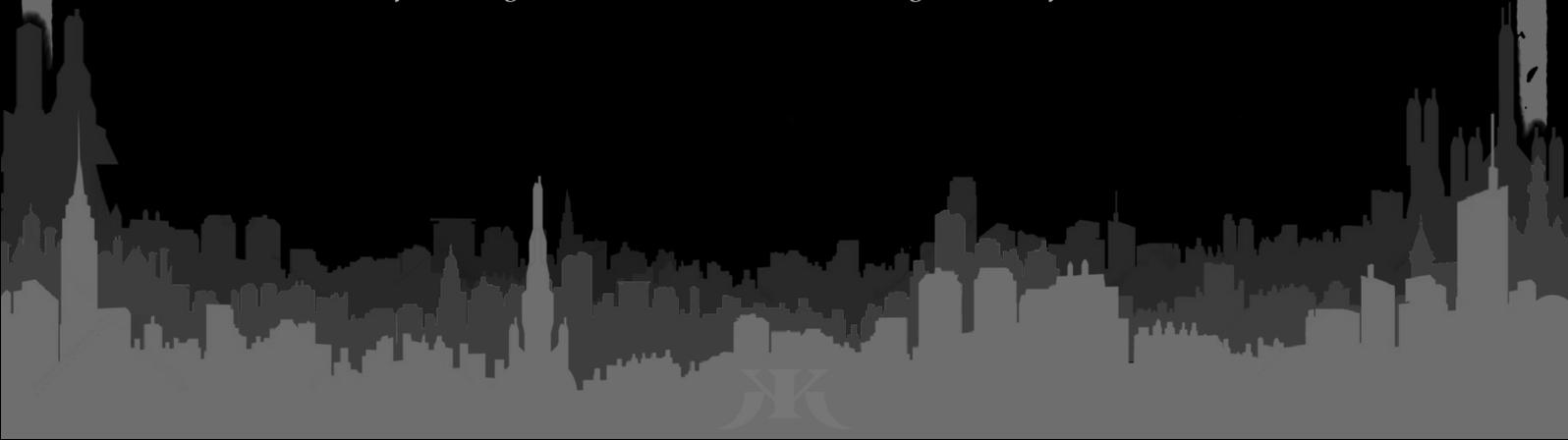
"Oh, plenty of crazy, alright. That priest was mad. I left him there, still cutting away at the bodies. If he's smart, he'll try some of the rituals. But I'm betting he's just another of Thaumiel's enraged now."

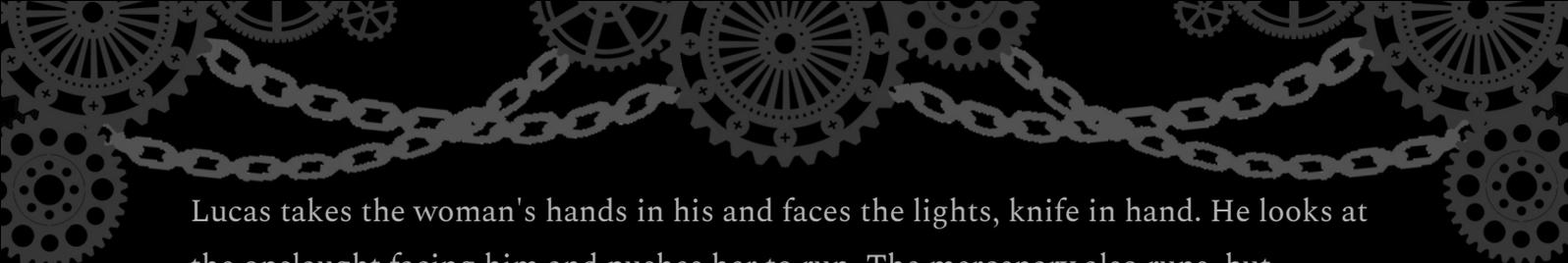
"I'll find Buyesha. See you fucks in hell" he yells as he makes his way back down the terrace. Lucas slips on someone's entrails as he comes off the steps, and a mad-eyed butcher swings at his head.

The mercenary rolls on the grass, now wet, avoiding the blade. Somewhere in the movement he loses his pistol. Lucas scans the field, looking for Buyesha and her children. Around him, people are dying, shot, slaughtered. A woman looks me in the eye as she has her hands cut off.

I look up, thinking there must be a way to climb down the other side of the stadium wall. Looks like a stainless steel frame is holding up the commentator's cabin, offering a way out. One last look at the football field, where Chadu is stripping naked, walking towards the center of the field. He's untouched, and enjoying the blood rain, in unison with the hail of stars above. I can't hear the incantation over the dying screams of the Tutsi crowd.

Lucas, feeling a burning bloodlust within his heart, tears through the enraged like paper, and reaches the mother. She's as scared of him as all the others, but they're both blinded by headlights. The bulldozer is heading their way.





Lucas takes the woman's hands in his and faces the lights, knife in hand. He looks at the onslaught facing him and pushes her to run. The mercenary also runs, but towards the bulldozer.

Climbing up towards the commentator stand, I find a technical shaft of cables underneath. It has a ladder heading downwards into the stadium, leading out to a fenced backup power area. There's a hole in the chain-linked fence which leads outside.

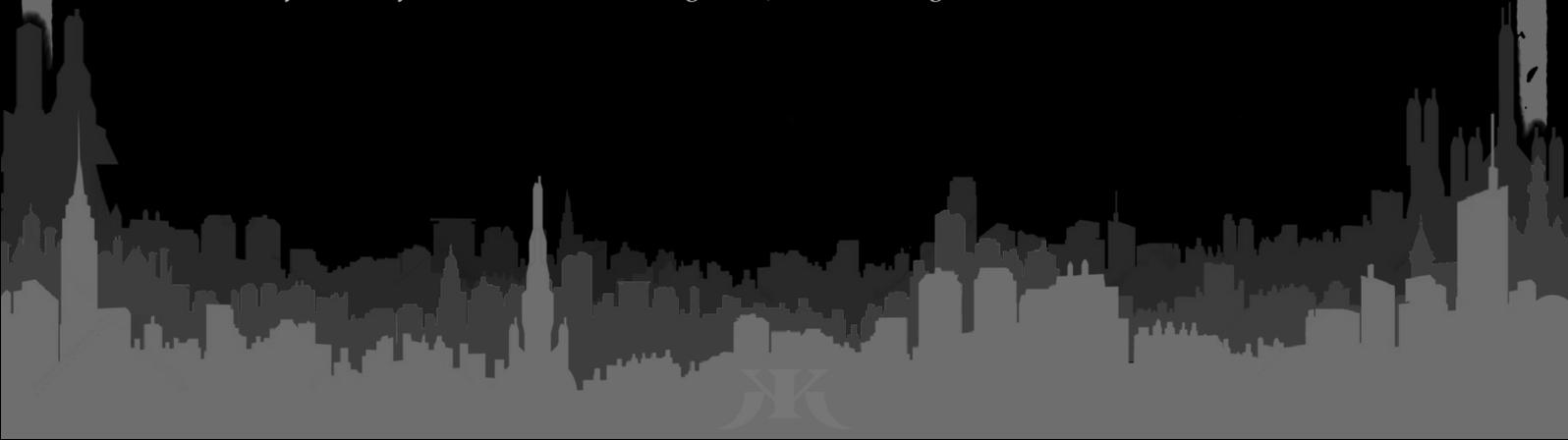
The height gives me an overview of the stadium. I have seen combat and violence, but this is something else entirely. Somewhere on the edge of the field women are molested and children executed. The machetes keep drawing down until there's nothing but meat left.

I hold back vomit, easy since I haven't eaten much in a while, and see Lucas attempting to climb the bulldozer. The man on top grips a rifle from underneath the seat, ready to fire. Parvati moves to help towards the middle of the field, before she's beset by the enraged.

The assassin, besieged on all sides, has her torso slashed by a blade. It cuts deep. Parvati's kevlar is torn, and a wide slash covers her chest from shoulder to hip.

I catch a glimpse of Chadu, now drenched in red, before he shoots up in the sky, joining the other stars. Further away, Lucas climbs the bulldozer, and stabs the yellow eyed man in the neck. He vomits blood, then, unaffected, aims the rifle at Lucas.

Lucas kicks away the rifle, and takes the knife out, a gush of blood chases the blade. Those yellow eyes follow him throughout, unflinching.





I climb downward, but it's dark inside the technical shaft. A loose, rusty step on the ladder breaks, landing me between the suspension frames. Ricardo lands next to me in a mesh of cables, some of the vibrating with electric current. We are trapped in a maze of electricity, with both the exit and the gasoline generator out of reach. I peek through the benches.

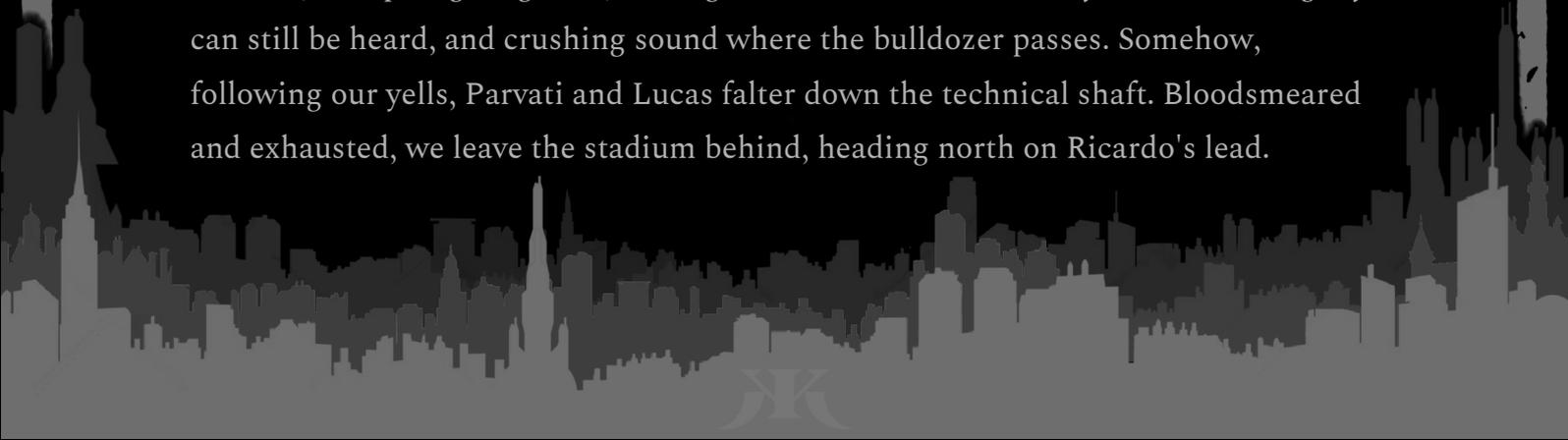
On the bulldozer, Lucas is transfixed on a beast. Two hunks of flesh, barely sewn together with razor wire, each hold a set of eyes, blinking in disarray, the grotesque face ending in a fanged, broken grin. The multiarmed torso is padded with rusty chains, cutting into the flesh. Some limbs end in scythes, on which newborns are impaled. Steam comes out of the mouth, so hot it makes Lucas' skin burn with rashes.

The crowds of butchers surrounding Parvati tear their hair out, screaming and weeping. Even the army of this thing can't stand to see it for long using their own machetes to open their own throats. With a corner of my eye, I see it grab Lucas by the head, and hurl him towards the ground.

With the enraged preoccupied, Parvati picks up a fallen machete and finds her way to Lucas in no time. He's miraculously unharmed, thanks to a soft landing on the blood filled grass. The sound of shifting gears sets the bulldozer in motion towards them.

She drags Lucas out of the path of danger, pulling him to the terrace stairs, against his wishes. Ricardo finds a loose power cable, the rubber around it an isolator. Lassoing it around the live wires, he pulls them down, freeing the path to the chain link fence.

Outside, the spotlights go out, leaving the field in darkness. Only the howls of agony can still be heard, and crushing sound where the bulldozer passes. Somehow, following our yells, Parvati and Lucas falter down the technical shaft. Bloodsmearred and exhausted, we leave the stadium behind, heading north on Ricardo's lead.





"Follow me. We are going to a church with possibly a crazy machete priest. But there is a protection spell there that should protect us from this madness."

Lucas fights but not much, he's exhausted, clawing at the earth behind him, crying about making up something, but eventually he's too far gone to struggle.

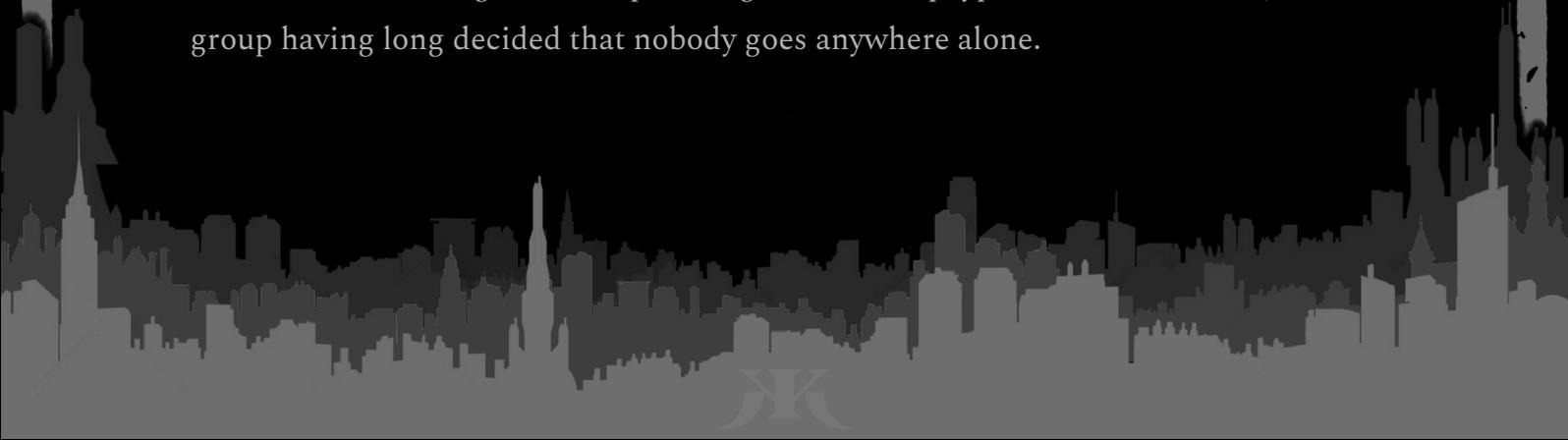
It's all quiet in the night, except for the rats, fighting over the meat cluttering the streets. Here and there the electrical network still works, and we skirt from light to light. A lamppost shines on a corpse with limbs cut off, already rotten with maggots. The barber's pole twists hallucinatory, with the barber himself in a chair, his throat sliced. Blood leaks onto the white cakes from the chef gown of a baker, her body over the display case, her back torn by cuts, a broken blade sticking out. Inescapable carnage, all left putrefying in the streets.

A small fountain with a marble angel statue is surrounded by a small park, bodies sleeping in the reddish water. Beyond it, the trail of cadavers leads to a newly constructed post-modern asymmetrical church of glass, steel and sandstone. No water flows in the fountain, and the only source of light is a strobing streetlamp further away, above a set of payphones. A voice can be heard from the church, fanatical but faint.

"What's the plan?", I whisper hoarsely, "Raid the place, shoot everyone who's giving us trouble, fetch the magic book... and use it to get back to our own goddamn time?"

"That's the hope." Jorrit replies in a toneless whisper, his jaw set grimly against the prospect of more violence up ahead.

"But first... gotta take care of something right quick..." and with that, he walks towards that strobing streetlamp that lights a row of payphones. I follow him, the group having long decided that nobody goes anywhere alone.





The payphone booth has a strange resonance, and I can listen in by leaning my head against it. A few coins swiped from the planetarium office do the trick, and soon Jorrit is connected to an operator. Opting for a collect call, a few clicks pass before he's connected to an actual phone ringing. Someone picks up at the other end. "van Geesbaeck residence, Jorrit speaking."

"Uuuuh..." he clears his throat. "Uhm... listen up, yeah?"

At the other end of the line a tv can be heard in the background. Someone else is speaking, another child. The one on the phone is confused.

"Ummm, mom and dad aren't home, can I take a message?"

"Okay, so - you don't know me, okay, but I'm a friend of your mom and dad, alright. This is about Geeren...", again, he hesitates... "Is... is he there? Is he alright?"

A pause follows, the boy looking for his words.

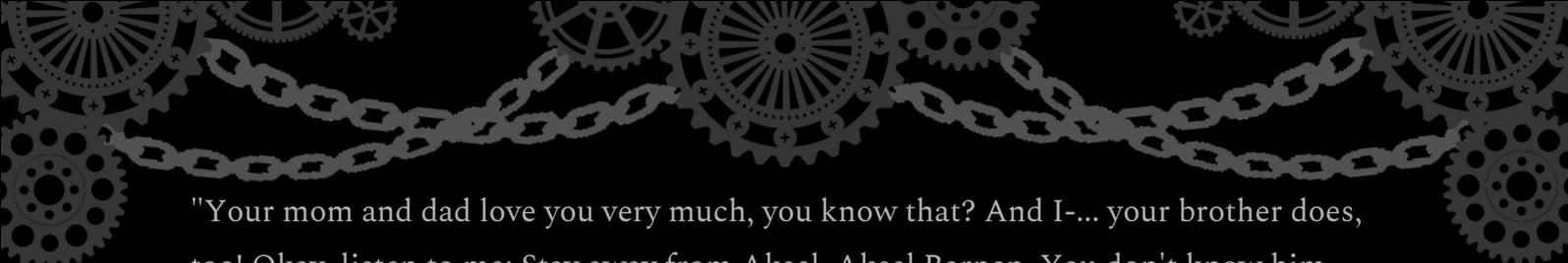
"... he's watching the TV... do you want to talk to him?"

"Yeah, can you put him on for a minute?"

Jorrit forces his voice to sound much calmer than he looks. Shuffling is heard through the receptor, passed among hands. An even younger voice can be heard now.

"Yes, hello?"

"Ge-... Geeren...", there are tears on his face now.



"Your mom and dad love you very much, you know that? And I-... your brother does, too! Okay, listen to me: Stay away from Aksel. Aksel Barnen. You don't know him yet, but you will, not too long from now. The guy is bad news, even though he will seem like the coolest dude you ever knew, right?"

Jorrit can't help but let out the desperation in his voice. Whispers can be heard at the other end of the line. An unsure voice comes back on the phone.

"Umm, okay? Would you like to leave a message for mom and dad?"

"Yes! Yes. See, your dad asked me to look into this for him... but he may not remember right away, it was a long time ago... You don't have to understand right now, but you have to tell him! Keep Geeren away from Aksel Barnen! That guy is bad news, okay? You have to tell your mom and dad!"

Geeren is scared the next time he answers, but seems to understand the importance of sending the message.

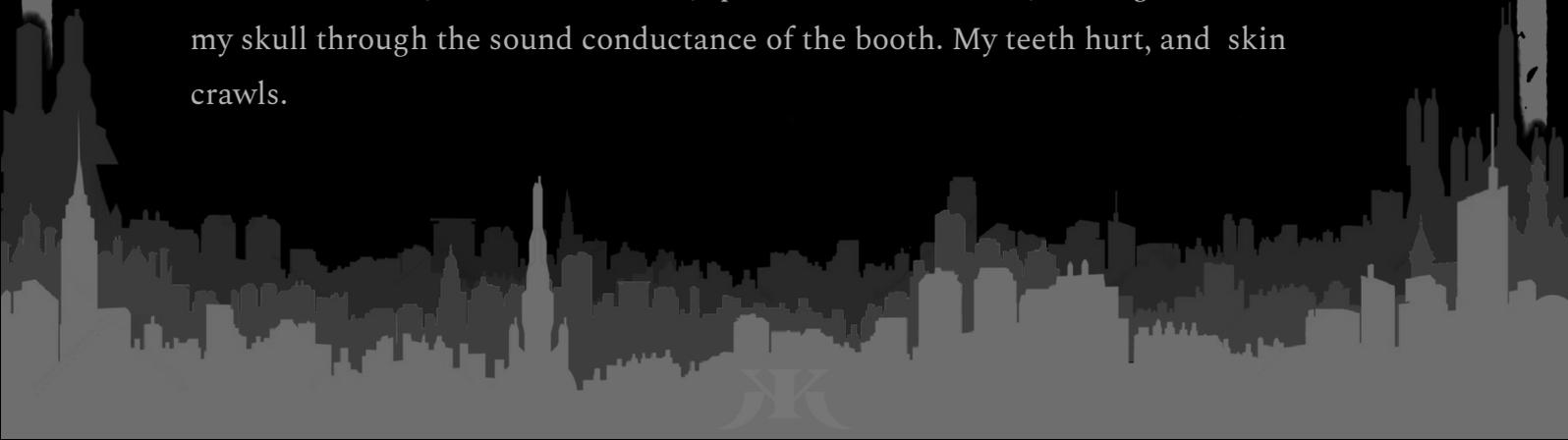
"Ok, I will. Goodbye now."

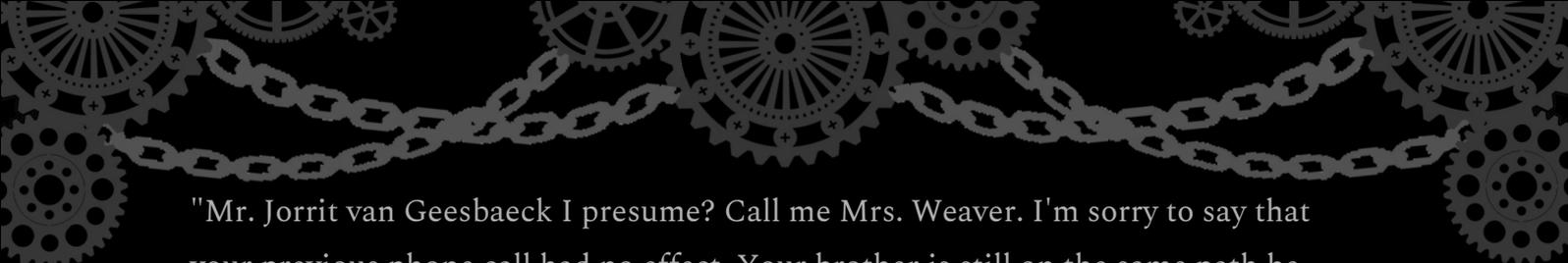
The phone hangs up, and Jorrit puts the receptor back, then tries to exit the booth. The phone rings again.

I freeze. Turn my head back to look at the phone. For a seemingly endless moment, Jorrit hesitates. But of course he picks it up.

"Hello?"

A woman's voice, smooth and suave, speaks at the other end, rattling the bones in my skull through the sound conductance of the booth. My teeth hurt, and skin crawls.





"Mr. Jorrit van Geesbaeck I presume? Call me Mrs. Weaver. I'm sorry to say that your previous phone call had no effect. Your brother is still on the same path he never was. Both of you are simple cogs in machinations larger than you know."

The voice takes a moment to suck out of a cigarette.

"I can, however, help in that regard. Both by changing his destiny and offering you a chance to strike back. Of course, this means you'll be in servitude to me, and you'll have to pay up."

Her first words feel like getting gut-punched by god himself. I'm betting Jorrit knows that feeling all too well. His face hardens.

"Yeah", he simply grunts into the phone between gritted teeth. "What do I have to do?"

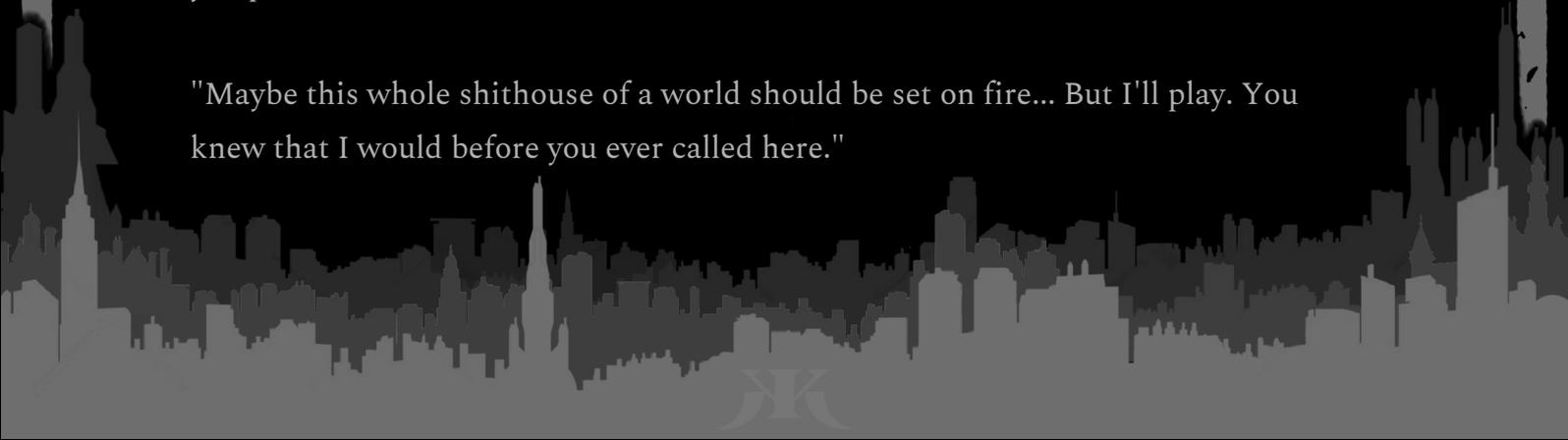
Mrs. Weaver is pleased, letting out a purring sound.

"Your associates, the Cult of Malkuth, are in search of something. Once you find, bring it to me. Don't take too long, as being in my service will erode you. To seal the deal, place the phone speaker on your left forearm."

"Wait - what are they - we - searching for?"

"Naturally. You have no conception of what you're doing. Like most children playing with a set of matches, you'll set fire to the house. But with the matches in the right hands, well... Make no mistake, Mr. van Geesbaeck. You're all heading to your doom. At least this way your brother can be spared. Now, the speaker on your phone arm, if you please."

"Maybe this whole shithouse of a world should be set on fire... But I'll play. You knew that I would before you ever called here."





His voice is flat, fatalistic resignation overshadowing any joy at a refreshed hope for a better fate for his little brother.

"But fuck with me, and it is you who's gonna burn."

With that, Jorrit pushes up his sleeve, then presses the speaker to the inside of his left forearm.

I see him grimace in pain the receptor burning arm before removing the phone. A tattoo is left, a circle, with another one inside it, at the top. One line crosses through both of them. When he sees me looking, he instinctively hides it. The voice in the church speaks louder, in intonations.

An idle sketch I started shows the cross above the church as black with an eye in the center. The strobing streetlamp casts shadows, some inside the church. Through the open doors the painted glass flashes on something moving. A person, somewhere in the back.

"The priest in there is likely crazy. We'll have to stop him." Ricardo says, making no move to go in first.

"Perhaps. And they're dangerous, as are we."

"Damn right, as are we." Jorrit appears resolved and ready to move. "Ominous chanting from inside has so far usually meant that the less time we waste, the better, right?"





We carefully stalk closer, checking the place out. Coming closer, I can see bullet holes piercing the building. The windows were high enough to avoid damage, but the door has been breached. Past it, a set of candles light up the preaching lectern. An grotesquely overweight pastor, fat sweating in the rushlight, reads sermons from a book. Pews leading there house the parishioners, now dead and decomposing. With the strobing light, I can see the entrails smearing the floor, rats scuttling about.

Jorrit pauses at the entryway. Unsure of this grotesquely fat human is human at all. He exchanges a gaze with Lucas, thinking the same thing.

"You wanna go in first, while Parv and I cover you with shooting at it through the windows? Or should I take point? Your call, man."

Lucas nods and takes a step inside the bullet ridden entryway. As soon as Lucas is a few meters in, Jorrit runs in as well, swerving slightly in another direction so we fan out into the room. Ricardo goes in and hooks to the right and sticks along the wall, looking for something.

The sandstone stairs and floor caked in gore muffle our steps. The priest is preoccupied by his lecture, a bit of wind blowing through the candles. Terrible words, a perverted sermon escapes his mouth.

"And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

It's all interrupted by rifle fire, rupturing the lectern, sending him flying back into the cross. A strobing flash shows the wooden christ tumbles onto the floor, catching on fire from the candles. I recognize the leather cover book by the flame, in the wrecked lectern: The Tome Of Worms.



The sketchpad fills up quickly, showing thousands of faces in the cathedral wall. The priest is a man living amidst some sort of clay mold, clawing at his heart. Around him, the corpses have their eyes open.

"Aim for his heart!"

The strobing light and small fire doesn't help the aim. Standing, the priest's shoulders seem ripped by bullets, but his heart is still there.

"The devil approaches! But fear not, as Corinthians shows us the way. No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

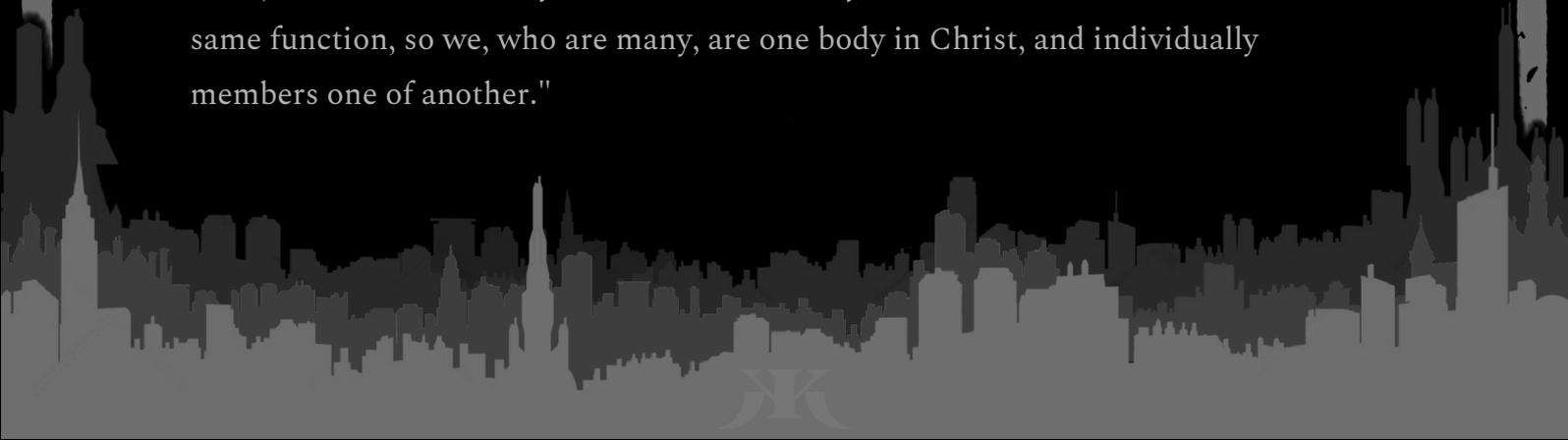
Waving his arms in the air in mad passion, his wounds heal, and his chest becomes larger.

Lucas gets behind one of the pews and props the rifle on it for stability, taking a moment and a breath as he aims for the Lictors heart. He squeezes the trigger as he exhales.

A bullet opens up the priest's skull, but what puts him on his knees is Lucas's shot. Grasping his chest, he breathes heavily, and crawls behind the cover of broken lectern, taking the grimoire with him.

The assassin and detective both close in, each intent on placing the final shot. From behind the lectern, a wet voice spits out one last sermon.

"For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."





I see the parishioners moving, their arms trying to grab those in front. Lucas starts firing on the corpses as they start surging forward towards the cop and the assassin. "Move you bastards, behind you!" he yells

Without the power to even rise, the corpses grasp empty air as the two flank the stage. Arms are ripped apart by Lucas's suppressing fire, old and rotten. Jorrit and Parvati, each coming from one side, see the priest against the lectern's remains, bleeding and gasping for air. The grimoire has a red handprint on the page, glowing in the burning sculpture. Smiling, the priest lets out a few words.

"What a wonderful book. Such things in it. Too bad the transformation didn't work. The lord giveth, and the lord taketh away."

Before the two can fire, rats burst from his chest, eating him from within. The corpse rises, the rodents coordinating his movements.

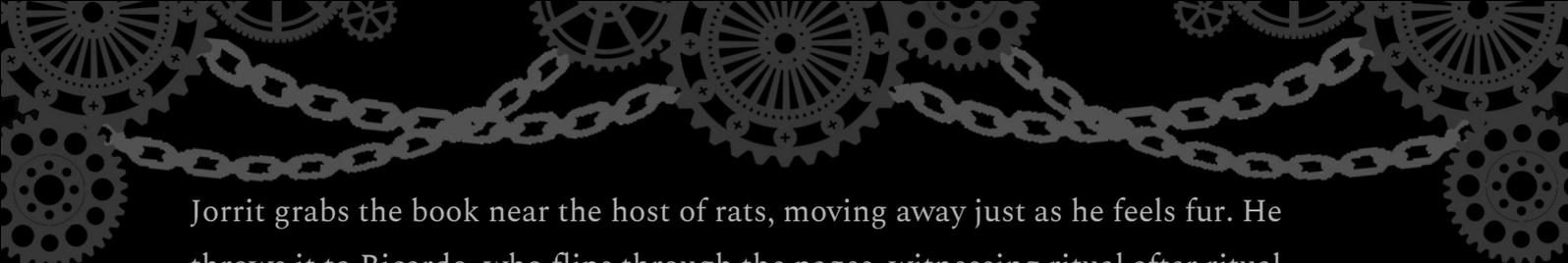
"oNcE MorE ITAstE fLESH Of FalLEN gODS. FalSe LICtor. oNLY VIRtUE iS shoWiNg THE patH To THE EnemieS OF tHe aRcHOns. prePaRe to dIe"

I recognize the voice. The thing in the mansion. I drop the sketchpad and use the only available material - blood - to paint a mural. While I work, the thing speaks.

"I cANNOt Be dEstRoYEd. I aM tHe WiLL of the arcHONs, LEft herE To ProTECT tHE LIE. the flesh iS TEMPoRARY, aNd oNLY iT cAn bE ruined. i HaVE yOUR smELl NOW. but teLL ME, wHerE Is ThIS wONdERful PLACe? where CAN i FIND SUCH A gATe?"

Frozen by the beauty of the painting, the host stands still. A thousand red eyes staring at the heavenly clouds, promising salvation. The rats swim over what's left of the skin, diving and surfacing within the rib cage. For a moment there, we stare, before realizing what they are looking at. It's a painting of paradise.





Jorrit grabs the book near the host of rats, moving away just as he feels fur. He throws it to Ricardo, who flips through the pages, witnessing ritual after ritual. Parvati's pistols explode the eyes of the corpse holding it together, shattering what's left of the skull. But the host, unhindered, is moving towards the chalk drawing on the wall.

Flipping through the pages, the antiquarian finds what he's looking for. Like me, Ricardo does his best to make the diagram with what is at hand. The symbol takes shape beneath their feet. I've seen it before, a hexagram, its center a circle, which contains a single flame.

With the host still captivated by the painting, we pull the burning embers in the middle. Everything looks complete, with everyone nervous and exhausted, listening to the rats chew. Only the final steps are needed. I wonder about the destination.

Sweat forms on his brow when he realizes what else is still needed. The incantation, and actually eating the meat.

"We must eat the flesh."

There is an abundance to choose from, none of it too fresh. Except the body of the host, if something can be salvaged from the rats.

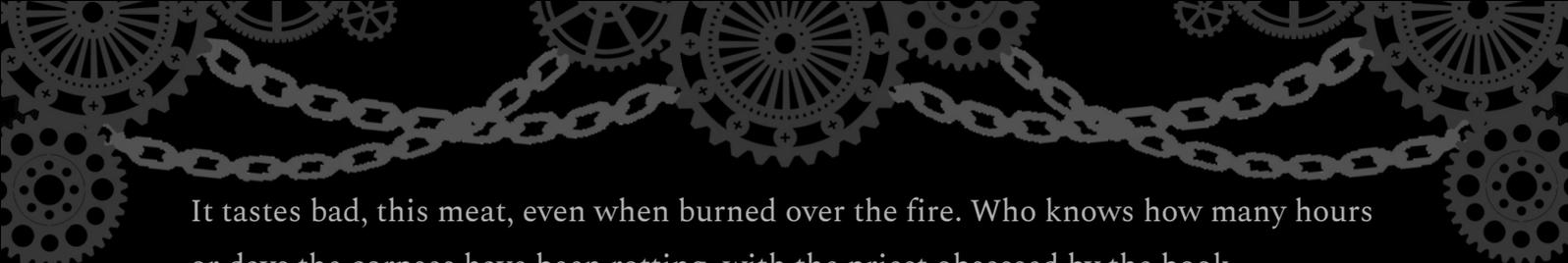
Lucas sighs and looks around for a human corpse, butchering the leg for a good chunk of meat.

"How much?"

"Same as in Sao Paulo. About a skewer."

We force ourselves to eat.





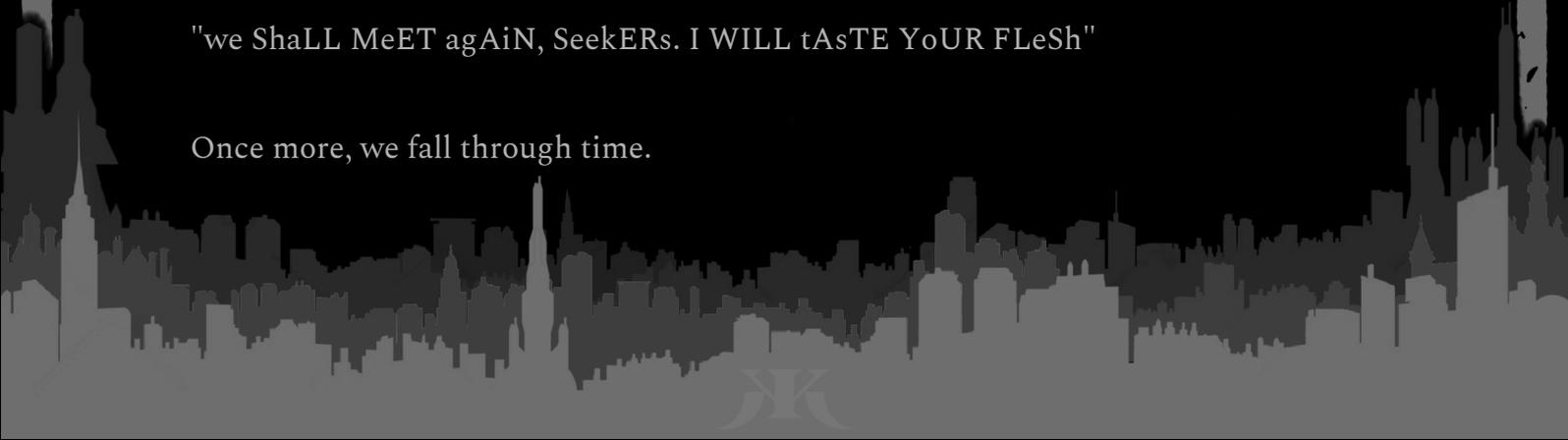
It tastes bad, this meat, even when burned over the fire. Who knows how many hours or days the corpses have been rotting, with the priest obsessed by the book. Somehow, everyone holds it down.

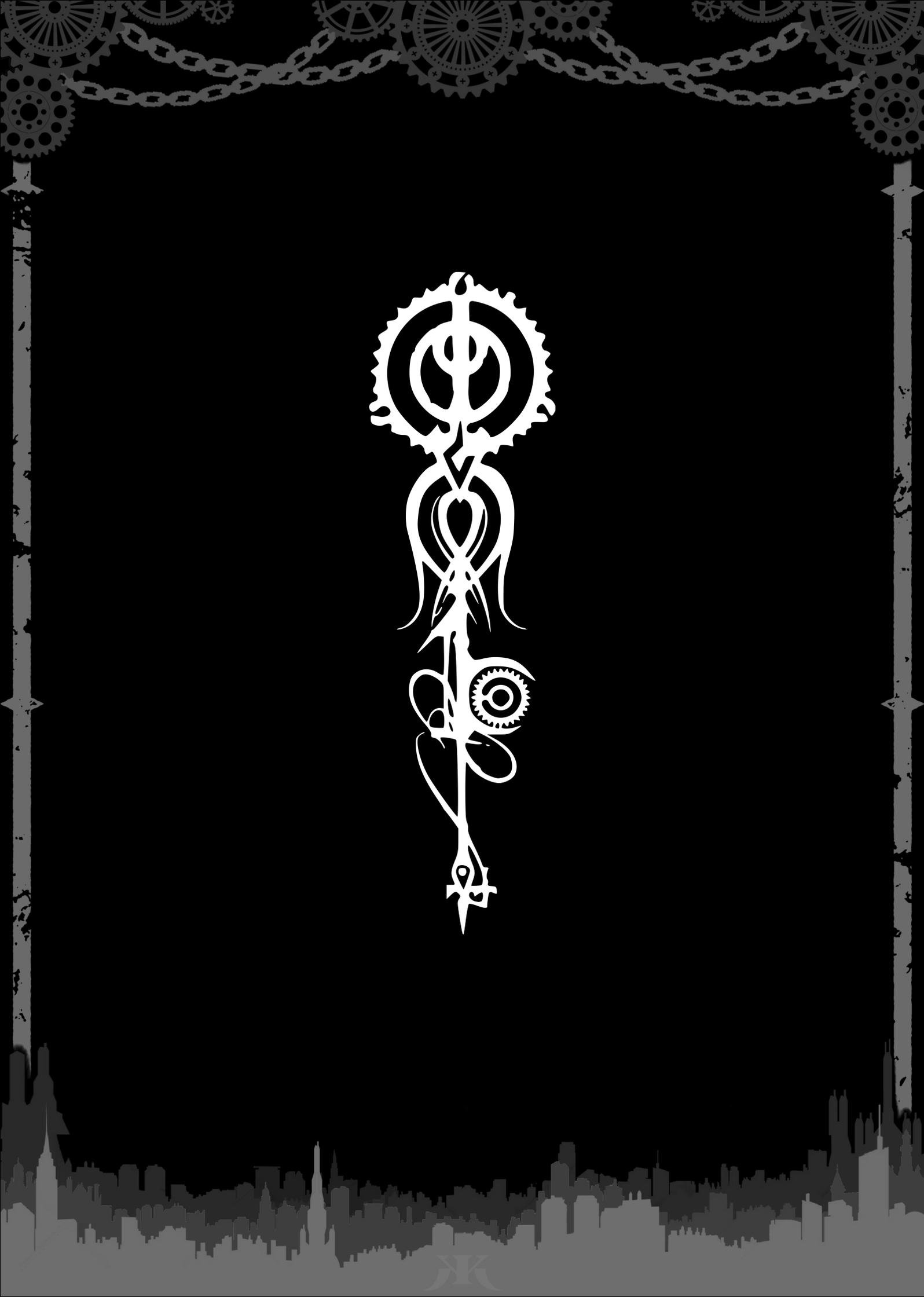
"A vision of flushed faces, shining limbs,
The madness of the music that entrances
All life in its delirium of dances!
The white world glitters in the void, and swims
Through the infinite seas of transcendental trances.
Yea! all the hoarded seed of all my fancies
Bursts in a shower of suns! The wine-cup brims
And bubbles over; I drink deep hymns
Of sorceries, of spells, of necromancies;
And all my spirit shudders; dew bedims
My sight -these girls and their alluring glances!
Their eyes that burn like dawn's lascivious lances
Walking all earth to love -to love! Life skims
The cream of joy. If God could see what man sees,
(Intoxicating Nellies, Mauds and Nances!)
I see Him leave the sapphrine expanses,
The choir serene and the celestial air
To swoon into their sacramental hair!"

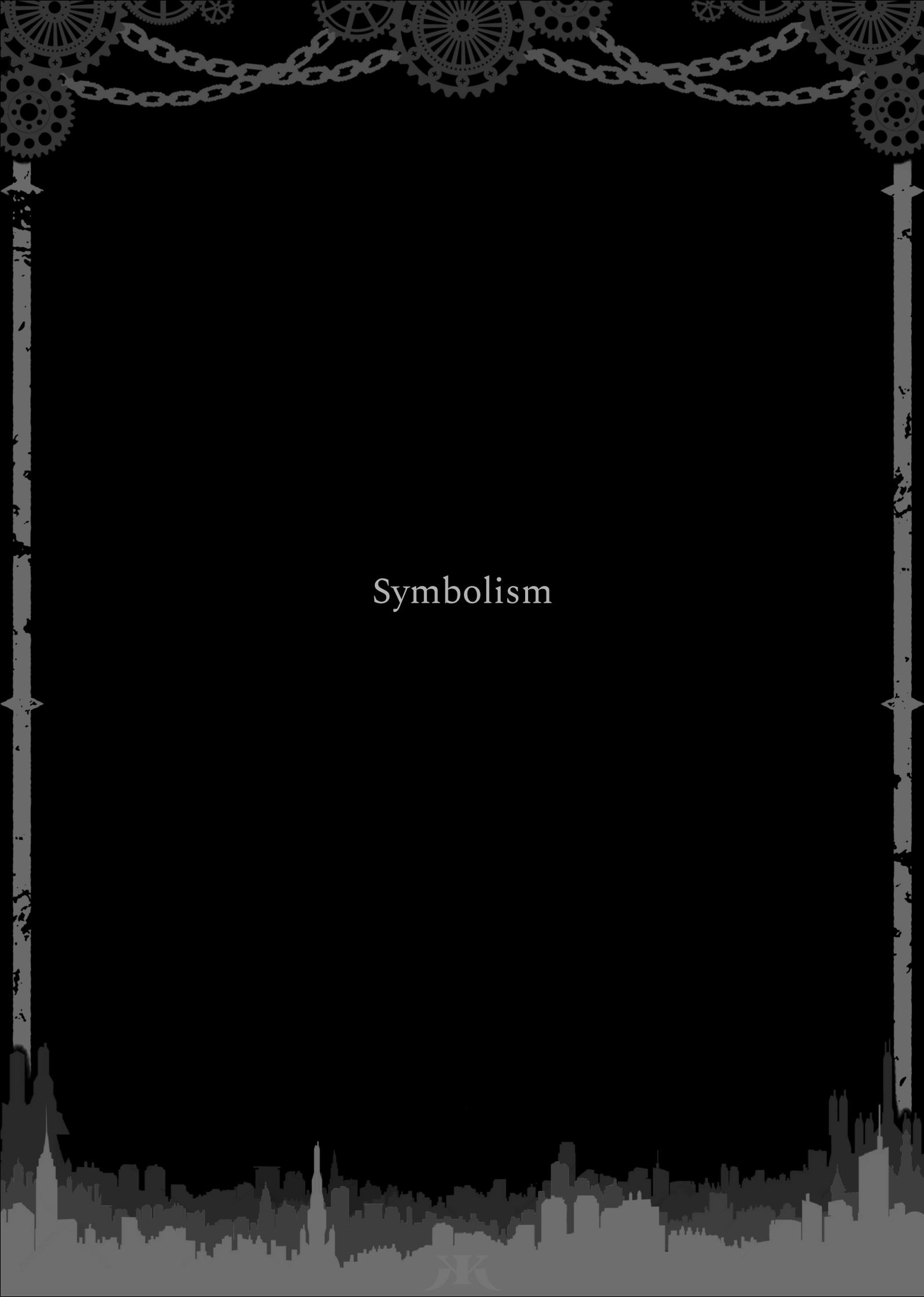
The smoke escaping from the fire in the middle of the chamber turns green. Nausea sets in, as if the meat inside everyone's stomach moves. A noise, getting more distant, can be heard from the host of rats. It turns around, and walks towards the magicians. The floor turns to wax, melting into a whirlpool, like the one before. Ricardo hopes he got the spell right. The host speaks.

"we ShaLL MeET agAiN, SeekERs. I WILL tAsTE YoUR FLesh"

Once more, we fall through time.







Symbolism



Hard black mucilage segments bind into walls, moving and breathing. Vast halls with floors covered in fog are only interrupted by basins of pus. Rivers flow from raised carapace beds where things that once were people suffer. Each ventricle saloon brings a new ailment, the beds moved in and out. The nurses, dressed in leather medical gowns, are ailing themselves. Loose pieces of meat fall off them, with maggots writhing within the wounds. Enjoying their suffering, they inflict themselves with new diseases tested on the patients. They cry petrol, but cry with joy, at each new success that changes their bodies.

We have been passed from salon to salon on carapaces, each room new sickness. Countless intestinal parasites have eaten our intestines, starving us. Scabies and ticks larger than fists have broken and rashed our skin. Bubonic plagues have covered our bodies, and lungs have collapsed under tuberculoses. Through it all, the nurses have dismissed our suffering, injecting us with poisons. The latest malady has left us immobile, a leprosy breaking our muscles and bones. Alone for a moment, we stare at the raised fortress where the head nurse sits.

Ricardo lazily rolls to the side to get a better view, his eyes incapable of expressing pain any longer. Jorrit just spits and curses, hostile towards the head nurse although it is of course meaningless, mumbling insults through parched, broken lips and clenched teeth.

Lucas lips part slightly, the skin cracking as he does, trying to speak but the pus runs into his mouth instead. His face covered in boils hides his will, but his eyes are still alive. Parvati just stares at the head nurse, her eyes gummed over with boils and her mouth too dry to speak, much less draw in air.

The head nurse, fused to a chitinous, fenced protuberance resembling a fort, mixes chemicals in murky glass cylinders. A set of insectile, segmented legs ending in surgical tools constantly operate and improve her. She approaches the spiked microphone in front of her, her raspy voice echoing through the halls.





"Visitor for the Seekers. Please interrupt all treatment."

Distancing themselves, the nurses light red, bleeding cigarettes, the smoke rolling onto the floor. A valvic door splits open, and that familiar demon enters, parting the mist with her legs. She's changed since last we saw her. Two rows of horns line her head, and her fingernails are claws. She leans down, looking at each in turn.

"Tsk, tsk. Still feeling sick? Have the nurses not cured you of your delusions of Enlightenment?"

Obviously pained by the dry coughing and heaves of bile, Lucas lets out a noise that can only be taken as a "fuck you".

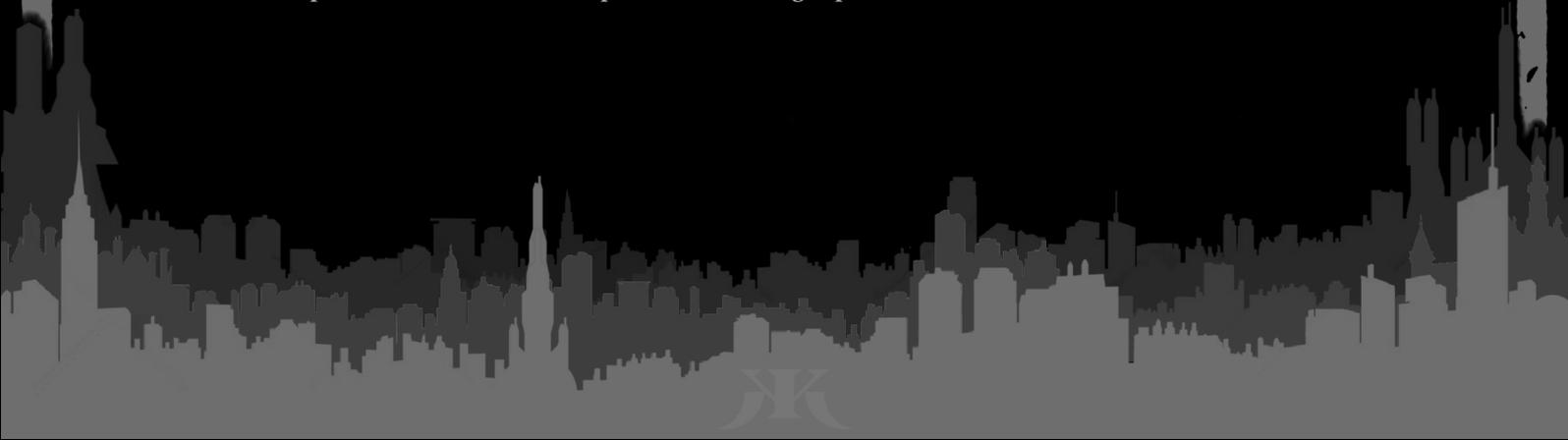
"One day I'll be on the other side of this."

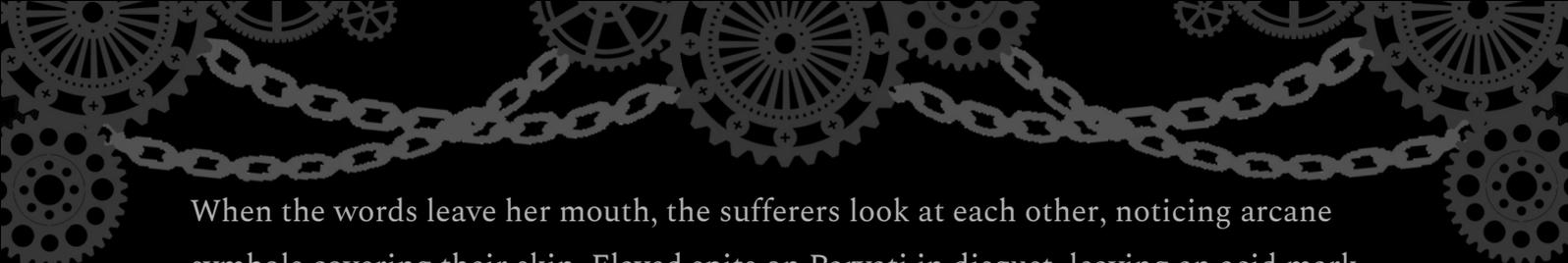
Flayed bursts a boil on Ricardo's eyelid in response, licking her lips while she does it. A perverse grin reveals razor sharp teeth.

"Is that what you think? That you're somehow going to rise above your station, your condition? You're clearly still suffering. I try and I try to show you all this Enlightening is just a disease in your heads, but you keep on spitting out the same bile. Nurse, I left them in your capable hands, and there's still no result?"

The head nurse writhes in her throne, speaking once more into the living microphone.

"We've tried our best Nahemothian science, but to no avail. Despite our best treatments, the patients are still delirious. Occasionally they lie, but our treatments reveal repressed memories expressed through particular skin irritations."





When the words leave her mouth, the sufferers look at each other, noticing arcane symbols covering their skin. Flayed spits on Parvati in disgust, leaving an acid mark behind.

“More of this symbolic garbage. All this pain can be ended in an instant. Are you sure you want to continue with this delusion that you’re Mavens of Symbolism?”

Lucas persists, almost as if the knowing suffering of hell is preferable to the unknown sorrows of reality. A smile plays across broken lips, because she will never really understand.

"You're just afraid of us", Jorrit mumbles stubbornly, "...and you should be..."

I hiss in pain as the acid burns at my skin, keeping my eyes on the demon all the while.

"Afraid of you?" She scorns. It turns into a jeer, climaxing into a rapturous cackle. The nurses join in, preparing and testing the syringes, which shoot out yellowish serums.

"Why would I ever be afraid of poor deluded fools? I'll let you have your little fantasies of symbols that explain things. But sooner or later you'll have to wake up from your lies."

Needles close in, their sting sharper than it should be. A fever set in, and with it come the hallucinations. A febrile boil transforms the room, cherry flowers blossoming to reveal Tokyo neighborhoods.



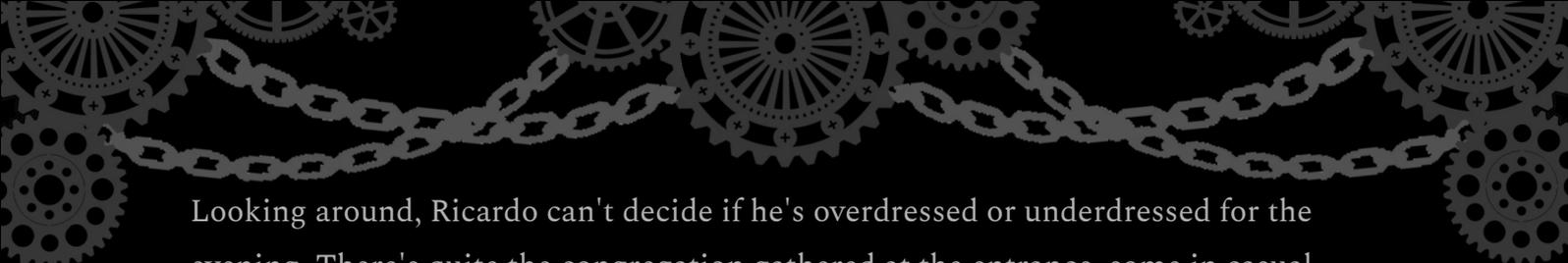


Things have changed since our late return. Ricardo suspects it was either the stale flesh or his wavering thoughts that brought us to Sao Paulo two years late. We tracked down Lieutenant Colonel Diogo Carvalho Barros, only to find a lowly police bureaucrat. He had no recollection of us, Alice Braganza, or whatever went down at the Braganza villa, now a high-rise. Neither had there been any sign of disturbances in Amsterdam, with the string of murders gone.

The antiquarian found himself rich, his investments having paid off in spades. But things lurked in the shadows, and each and every one of us was haunted by something. Ricardo, along with Sofia, took to studying the grimoire, it's horrible human flesh based spells taking a toll. He used his newfound wealth to purchase copious chemical cocktails to help him sleep better.

Remembering Chadu's words about a Tokyo prophet and a video tape, the antiquarian used his wealth to fund an expedition to Japan. Now, he and Sofia stare at the red arched entry of a Buddhist temple, bathing in the light of the setting sun. Tokyo is full of prophets, and the antiquarian hopes that this one will provide some answers.

Ricardo had taken to dressing nicer, suits being ubiquitous for men in Tokyo, the prices far more tolerable than in more casual western nations, and access to tailors wider. Not to mention sleeping better, and he had decided to keep a short-clipped beard. That said, his messenger bag was filled with a variety of substances and he had added a newer tablet with a nicer screen and more memory to store his expansive collection. He had purchased an external battery after a worrisome bout of low-battery anxiety had set in during his time in Rwanda.



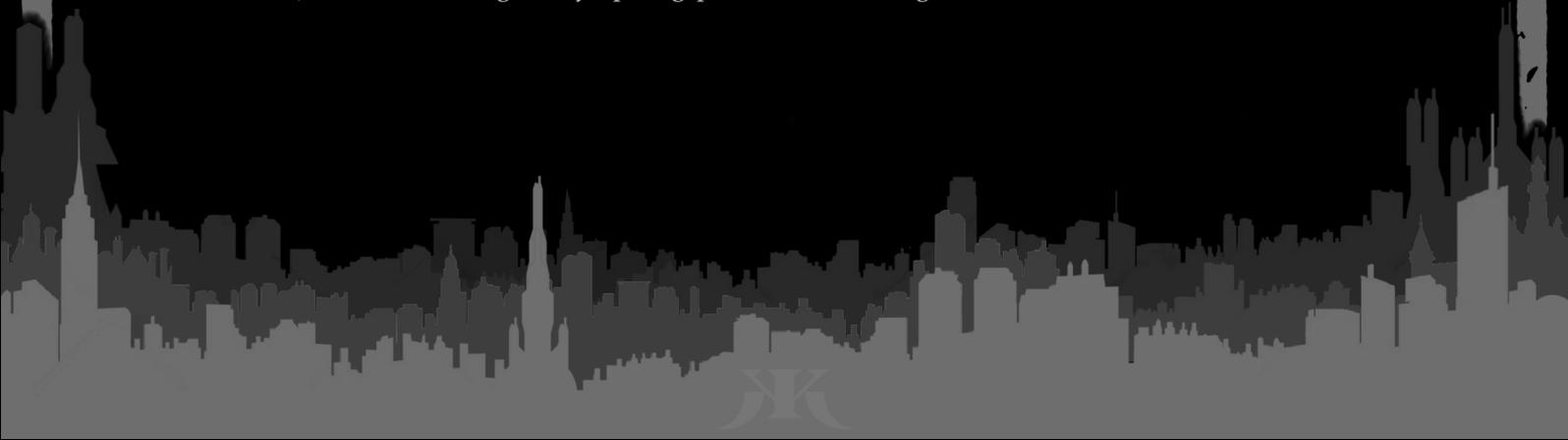
Looking around, Ricardo can't decide if he's overdressed or underdressed for the evening. There's quite the congregation gathered at the entrance, some in casual wear, others in stylish kimonos. Everybody is lining up to get into the temple, probably something to do with this festival he's heard about. By the looks of things, the wait might be long, hours even.

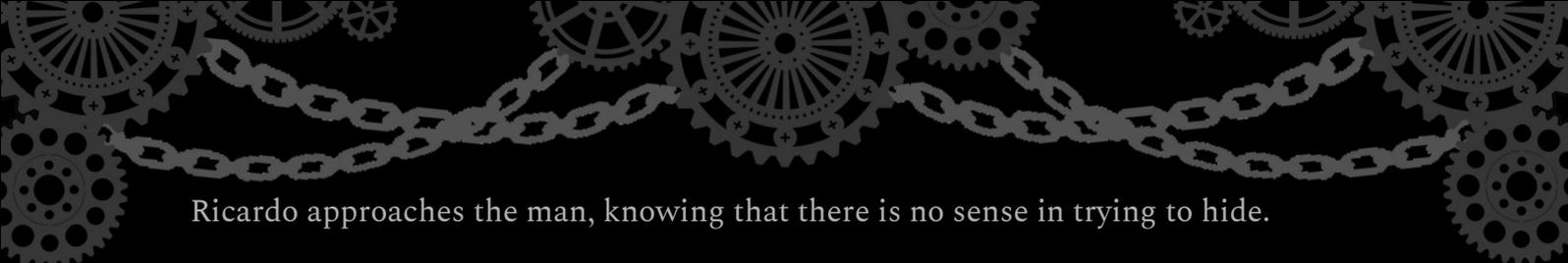
With Sofia half asleep from the jet lag, the queue is already getting boring. Someone must be reading Ricardo's thoughts because a yakitori cart shows up. The salesman is dressed in sleeveless patterned traditional wear, and peddles caramelized squid. There's also an offer for hot sake, but the glasses look somewhat dirty. Ricardo spots an owl hang off a branch of a nearby blossoming plum tree. Its reflective eyes are staring straight at him.

Ricardo buys a bottle of hot sake, wrapping a towel around it to keep from burning his hand. Looking back at the owl, he gives it a mock toast before taking a few sips from the tiny cup that came with the small ceramic bottle. He doesn't worry about the dirty glass, but gives the yakitori cart a bit of a berth, his memories of Sao Paulo still relatively fresh, as he pushes forward with the rest of the crowd.

Another half an hour passes with the line inching away. Some children nearby are playing with annoying plastic laser guns. The battery powered screech drives even their parents insane, and makes Ricardo climb up the wall. Worse, that sake and all the drinks he had earlier are taking their toll. He feels hungry. Ricardo asks Sofia to hold their place in line, and he goes to get some food.

Exploring for a street vendor that doesn't seem disgusting, Ricardo spots a path between the nearby graves. It looks like it leads to the back of the temple, but it's watched over by a single priest, a square hat on his head. With round spectacles on his face, he's brooming away spring petals from the graves.





Ricardo approaches the man, knowing that there is no sense in trying to hide.

"Ah, a moment of peace in the bustling celebration." he says by way of making conversation. Caught by surprise, the monk stares back. His face is old, but the eyes betray him as a young man. He forgets his cleaning for a while, measuring Ricardo's rumpled suit.

"Yes, indeed. I often find peace among the ancestors. Forgive me, but you have excellent Japanese for a foreigner. I meet a lot during the three shrine festival, and such proficiency is not often. Are you a student here?"

"No sir, but I have somewhat of a gift with language. It is very helpful to learn things in other countries. Though not a student, I do try to learn. How do you find living and studying here? What does this occasion celebrate?"

Turning the broom in his hand upward, the young monk's brow furrows.

"You know the language so well, but not the culture? Even more strange, foreigner. The three shrine festival honors the three founders of a nearby temple. Held for three days, spirit shrines are paraded through the city. They bring out the most important three on Sunday. The city is expensive. I am from Okinawa, and training to be a priest, but the stipend is small. You seem well off. Are you a salaryman?"

"No, I used to run a bookshop in New York. I just noticed that it is more affordable to get a suit here than it is back home, I assume because so many more people wear suits here. Is there some prophecy involved with the festival? Or were the founders prophets?"

Leaning against a grave, with the broom over his shoulder, the monk relishes an excuse to avoid work.





"Ah, no, the festival is just a cherishing of the three ancestors of the Sensō-ji temple. But you're in luck. One of the residents here at the Gokoku-ji temple has studied the I Ching. That's why most of the people are waiting in line. If you queue up now, you might see him by mourning."

"Oh, the people are hoping to have their fortunes read or something? I was looking to find a place to eat when I spotted a path leading back here. I had hoped it would get us ahead of the line."

The monk cracks up, leaning forward on the square tombstone. His broom almost slips out of his grip, brushing his face.

"Ah, sorry, but you're definitely a foreigner. You could cut the line through here. However, this is considered very impolite, and would get you a rejected audience. Only if you were a guest of honor, a holy man, could you do so. Especially unannounced. But I'll tell you now, the wait is worth it. Matsuo's the real deal."

"Ah, fair enough. In America there is always some impertinent way of doing things, but I wouldn't want to sully my audience tomorrow then. I'll leave you in peace and try to get some snacks for my friend and I."

By the time Ricardo returns with some food that's actually edible, the line has moved forward. Sofia has been applying her talent as an orator again, and impressed people through her stories. Ricardo hands her some spring rolls and poppy dumplings, and finally makes it inside the temple. A soft draft blows through the candles as he passes the laughing buddha shrine, passing through incense smoke. In a central chamber, surrounded by offerings, is an old man with a fu manchu and golden robes. He is meditating.





The people are mostly leaving the meditating man alone, passing along to the shrine to leave offerings. Not many are preoccupied with having their fortunes read. One woman bothers him, and he gives her a quick read with the help of some sticks spread out on a blanket before him. She thanks him profusely, leaves some Yen in a bowl, and departs.

"Ah," Ricardo thought, "One of the men that I have perhaps come to see."

Ricardo heads over to the man, giving him a polite bow and setting some yen in the bowl. The man looks at Ricardo, then talks in a broken English. He is joyful, and welcoming, waving the antiquarian closer.

"American, yes? Fortune? Love? Business?"

Ricardo responds in Japanese to let the man know casually that he can use his more comfortable native language.

"Mexican American, yes. As for the future, I wonder of what will become after death, true death, escape from the cycle of rebirth. What is 'The Tokyo Prophecy'?" he asks, kneeling on the ground in front of the man, intent on hearing the full breadth of what he has to say.

Stroking his beard, the monk stares into Ricardo's eyes, something unsettling about his gaze.

"These are hard questions you ask, stranger. Many men have sought the Pure Land. Do you think you are worthy of it? Is that the prophecy do you seek?"

"I seek many prophecies, perhaps. Knowledge of all sorts, and I believe this particular one to be one I knew at one time, and then no longer. I believe I am on the path to make myself again, perhaps in the Pure Land as you call it."



Throwing his sticks on the blanket once more, the wise man turns his head to Ricardo.

"Ah, I see now. You are one of God's lost children. Banished from the Pure Land, you seek to return there. The Tenfold Path lies before you."

"Ah, that makes sense, given what I have re-learned. Can you see how far along I am? I have seen much, but I have seen even more that I do not yet understand."

Without flinching, the wise man continues.

"Young grasshopper, I do believe you're fucked. Many have walked this path before, and it has brought only ruin. I can point you in the right direction, but I'll want something from you."

"Ah, what may that be? I have foreseen, possibly, what I think is my ruin. But I want to know how I got there, and perhaps avoid it."

Matsuo packs up the sticks neatly, placing them in a ceramic jar. Then he stares Ricardo dead in the eye, waiting for a window where no one can hear him.

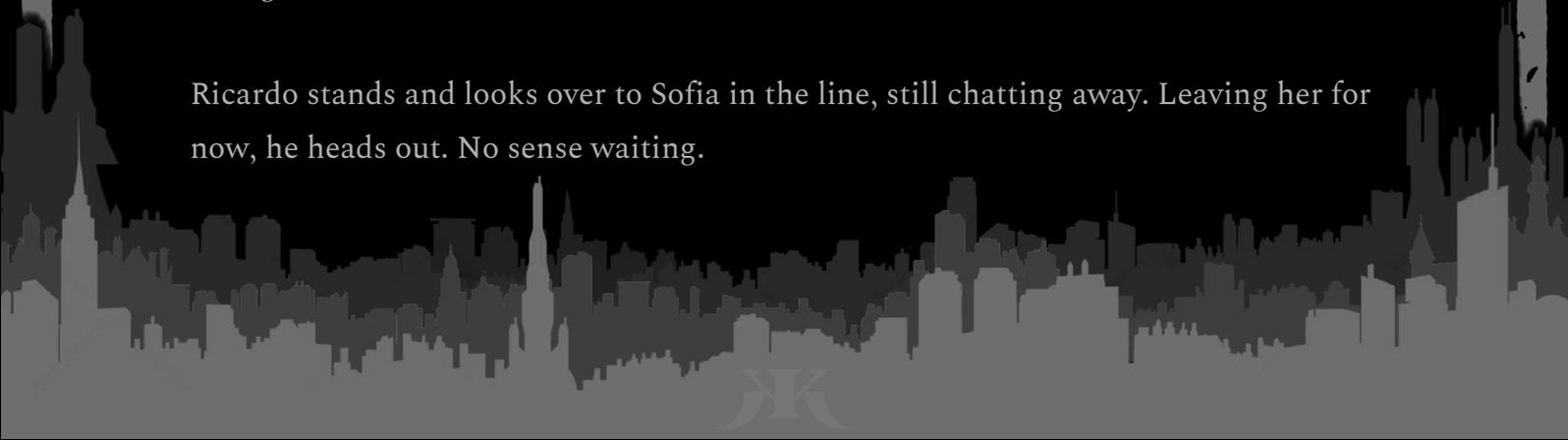
"I'm tired of these weak offerings. Bring me the fresh heart of a child, and I'll tell you what you need to know."

"Where should I meet you when I find what you want?"

"The cemetery will be fine."

"Alright. I'll see what I can find."

Ricardo stands and looks over to Sofia in the line, still chatting away. Leaving her for now, he heads out. No sense waiting.



Tohto Bunkyo hospital isn't all that different from what Ricardo has seen in the west. People with various problems from broken feet to head wounds are waiting in line. The nurses triage them, taking in the most severe cases first. One thing that strikes him is the short line to fill in the paperwork compared to the states.

Next to the set of colored couches is an electronic touch display and, with a few taps, Ricardo gets what he needs. Separated by access levels, the morgue in the basement, a children's ward sits on the second floor, and a surgical area on the fifth. A nearby elevator with an electronic touch card provides rapid access, but escalators are also an option for the patients.

Ricardo takes the escalator to the fifth floor. The climb takes a while, but Ricardo reaches his destination, reaching the central dispatch for the surgical center. A nurse looks away for a moment, and Ricardo takes an opportunity to take a peek over the counter. It isn't enough, and the nurse returns, looking at him suspiciously.

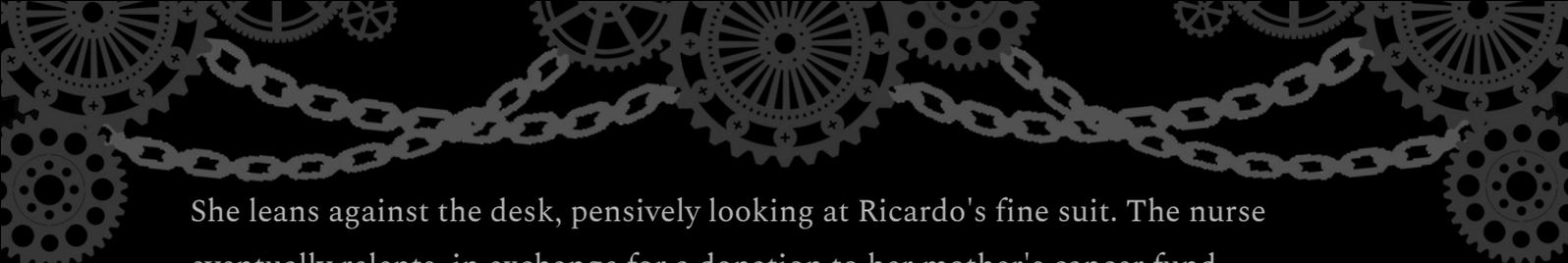
"Excuse me sir, what are you doing?"

"Oh, ah, trying to see if there was a heart transplant being done." Ricardo pauses, quickly thinking of a plausible lie. "My young niece was killed recently, and her heart was to be donated. I heard that it was to be used tonight. I wanted to see the recipient, if possible."

Blue hair escapes the nurse's cap, and she stares down a schedule sheet. Catching herself a moment later, she turns to Ricardo.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I can't just hand out patient information like that. It's best you discuss with the doctor you consented the donation with."

"Alright, I take it there's no way you'd change your mind?"



She leans against the desk, pensively looking at Ricardo's fine suit. The nurse eventually relents, in exchange for a donation to her mother's cancer fund.

"It's room 43. I think Arika is undergoing anesthesia."

Ricardo reaches a gloved hand into his pocket and hands her a decent wad of notes, and his condolences for her struggles before leaving the desk and heading down the hallway. Taking care not to get too close, he looks on to the procedure.

Ricardo peeks through the operating room window, a wire reinforced panel of glass. Left alone for the anesthetic to take effect, young Arika is half naked. Ricardo can feel the passion rising within him, the beast inside stirring at the sight.

Taking a deep breath and biting his lip, Ricardo resists the temptation. Something rages inside of him, raw desire barely held in check. When the antiquarian opens his eyes, his hand is on the door handle. Through the window, a doctor and two nurses in green gowns are gathering around the girl. Ricardo speaks to the beast within him.

"Get me the girl's heart, whole and fresh. Do whatever you want to the others inside the room."

A sharp pain in Ricardo's chest puts him on his knees, and his shirt slowly soaks dark red. Raven wings tear through the fabric, and a wet footstep moves through the open door. While Ricardo catches his breath on all fours, the screaming starts.

By the time he rolls on his back, the feral beast throws a still beating heart on his chest. Ricardo catches the desperate eyes of a nurse, asking for help when the creature embraces her. It crushes the woman in its arms, teeth sinking into her throat, the other hand ripping her dress. Other doctors and patients from nearby rooms show their heads through open doors.





Ricardo backs into the room and collects what he can use, out of sight of the door while listening to the moans of the nurse and the flesh ripping, hoping that the beast's frenzy takes it outside into the hallway. The young girl's corpse lies ripped in two on the floor, rib cage torn apart. Footsteps can be heard outside the hall, rushing towards the room. There's another exit here, but Ricardo moves slowly, the fear taking hold.

Turning his back to the horror, Ricardo finds an organ transplant container. He packs the heart in ice, then goes into the ready room, sinks still smelling of soap. With a doctor's gown and mask on, he has no trouble reaching the main hallway, with security rushing past him. The antiquarian wonders how long the beast will rage.

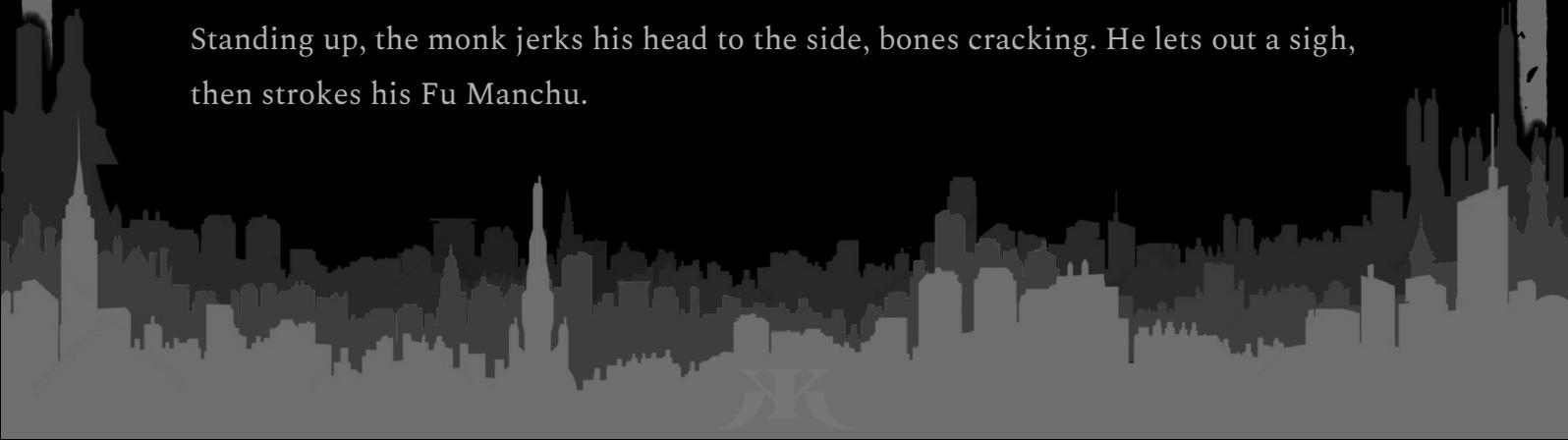
Ricardo finds a taxi, but the parades make it impossible for it to navigate the streets. The driver apologizes profusely, then spares him of whatever fare the meter had tallied. Still in the doctor's outfit, Ricardo watches one of the mobile shrines almost falter when a young boy loses his grip.

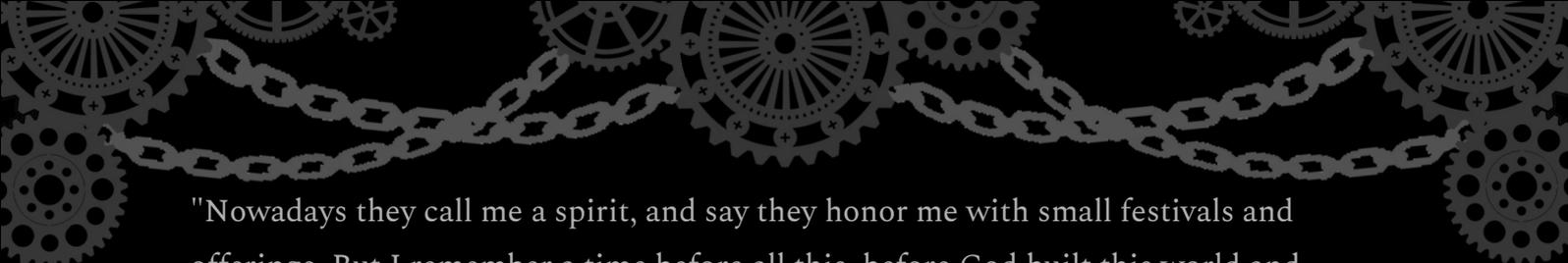
Ricardo pushes through the thick crowd and heads towards the graveyard and whatever terrible creature has disguised itself as a monk. Candles barely light the pillar tombstones marked by hiragana symbols. A moment flies by while Ricardo's eyes adapt to the night blindness. But his contact is there, crouching among the graves, rocking back and forth. Two yellow eyes reflect the radiance, but for a moment Ricardo swears he saw more.

"You're back, grasshopper. Have you brought it for me?"

"Yes, I have. What manner of creature are you, if I may ask?"

Standing up, the monk jerks his head to the side, bones cracking. He lets out a sigh, then strokes his Fu Manchu.





"Nowadays they call me a spirit, and say they honor me with small festivals and offerings. But I remember a time before all this, before God built this world and abandoned us. I was a god then, a god of the forest, and there wasn't anything I didn't know. Only they cut the forest down, tree by tree, until they trapped me here. Now, the heart..."

Ricardo proffers the cooler to the monk, opening it so he can access its contents. Not paying attention, the monk opens the plastic box, picking up the heart.

"Ah, it's cold! No matter, no matter!"

Slurping sounds commence, and it only takes a moment before the organ is gone. A satisfied belch escapes his throat, more downtone than Ricardo expected.

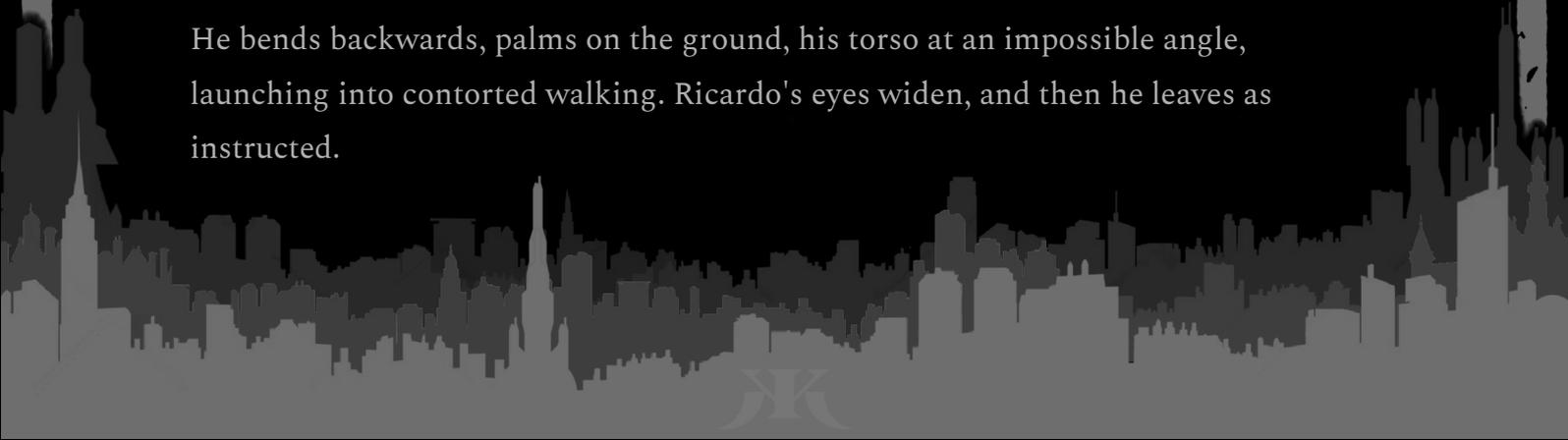
"Ah, it's been so long. I can finally see again. There, there are your prophets. A set of boys called the Thirteen Moons, their home is something called Marz. Divining a truth beyond mine in old videotapes. Find them, and you'll find your prophecy."

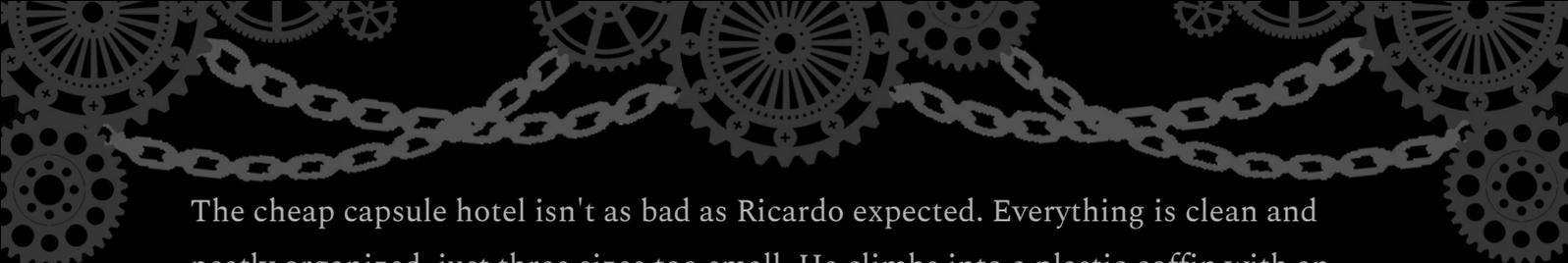
"Thank you. What or who are the Hollow Men beings that exist outside of the reality that I normally see? I have encountered them all over."

Dancing in the candle light, the monk places his hand on one of the flames. Smoke escapes his skin, but he doesn't seem to care, trapped in ecstasy.

"Kings of the underworld, last of their kind. Looking to spread their seed, without success. They're the ones who hold the keys to the Labyrinth. They can go anywhere, but find no solace. One of those little ironies. Now, I've filled my part of the bargain. Leave me, I've business to attend to."

He bends backwards, palms on the ground, his torso at an impossible angle, launching into contorted walking. Ricardo's eyes widen, and then he leaves as instructed.





The cheap capsule hotel isn't as bad as Ricardo expected. Everything is clean and neatly organized, just three sizes too small. He climbs into a plastic coffin with an inbuilt tv, and hits the web for "Thirteen Moons" and "Marz" while someone in the other capsules watches a loud cartoon.

A summary internet search shows old concert advertisements for a club named after the planet. It's somewhere in Shinjuku, and he remembers that Parvati and Sofia are staying at a hotel there.

After he sends a text to his allies, Ricardo falls asleep watching washed up American actors doing soda commercials.

Boiling heat rises from the noodle pots of the cramped bar/restaurant, and one of the chefs opens a window. Busy with patrons watching a sumo match on tv, Jorrit enjoys his beer, thinking of how things have changed. Geeren, still alive, sends him another text message about his latest start-up, an online skateboarding shop. Klaas is still moonlighting, and out of prison, but those string of murders never happened. Staring down at the mark on his hand, he sees dark veins spreading from it, and wonders how much time Mrs. Weaver left him to deliver.

The other stool at the bar table is occupied by Lucas, enjoying a noodle soup and reading through documents. On Ricardo's payroll, he financed investigators to track down el-Nazaar, only to find him all over the world. He was in Brazil, that is true, and he missed him in that two year window. Also Russia, Afghanistan, Liberia, Yugoslavia. Wherever there is conflict, el-Nazaar is there, supplying weapons. The latest reports have him in Japan, supplying Yakuza. From the open window outside, drums can be heard over the roar of the crowds.





Lucas loosens his tie a little bit. The suit, even if expensive, is smothering in the damp heat. His glasses are perched on his fingers as he pinches the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. His frustration is half paperwork related and half constantly looking over his shoulder. He takes the glass and downs the last half of the cheap Asahi beer.

"Tellin' you Jorrit, he's here somewhere, I wouldn't be too bold to say that he's always going to be where we are."

"Yeah, wouldn't surprise me in the least - not after all the shit we've seen happen 'coincidentally'..."

"So, your contacts say he's hanging with the Yakuza now...? Any idea on how to approach, yet?"

While Lucas considers his answer, Jorrit meditates some more on the things back home. What really troubles him is a complete lack of signs that Aalberts ever existed. Like many other things, he's disappeared, but that doesn't lessen the detective's distaste of the Lictors. He knows they're still out there, waiting and watching, destroying lives.

Digesting their meals, the two lose themselves for a moment in the tv show. Although muted, the prompt displays the nationalities of the upcoming fighters. The Mongolian, smaller than his opponent, spreads dust on his chest. Staring him down is, of all things, a Bulgarian wrestler, confident and monolithic. Outside, the drums intensify and the crowd is slowly pushed aside.

Somehow, the two expected the festival to be a bit more peaceful. Something's going out outside, with people pushing and shoving. An almost naked man passes, covered from head to toe in tattoos. A few more follow, along with a woman, all works of art. Lucas and Jorrit have heard of Yakuza and their ritual tattoos. Seeing the painted demons on their skins is another matter entirely.





They pass the window of the restaurant, following something along with the crowd. A few wear robes to cover from the cold, and Lucas swears he sees a knife scabbard attached inside. Only the crowd remains in view, encouraging, repetitive intonations passing near the window.

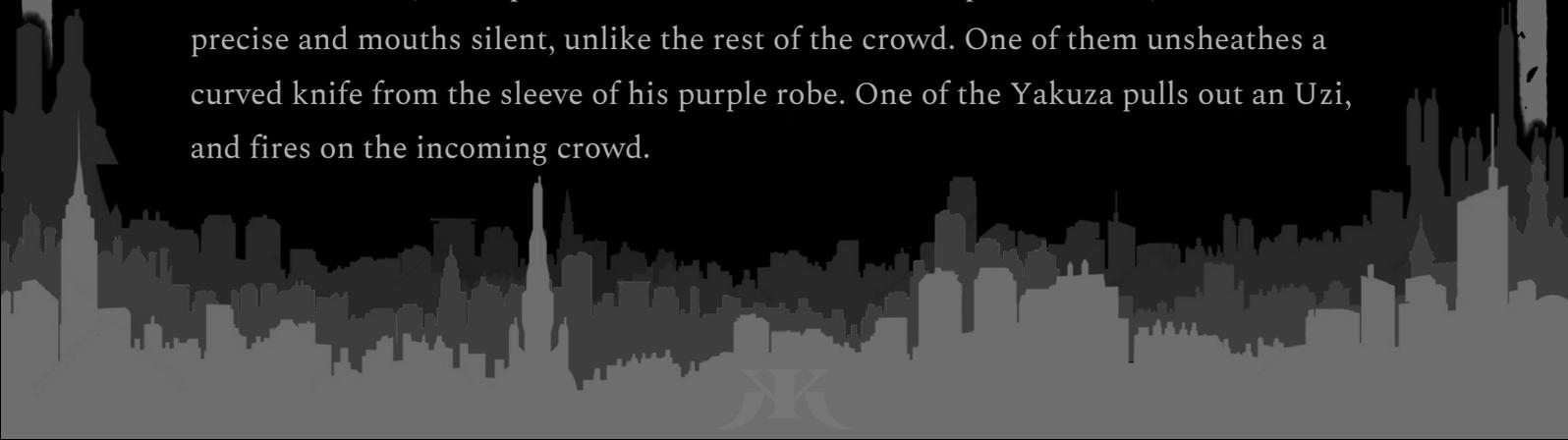
Something of the tattoos lingers in Jorrit's mind too long, the face of a demon on the back of a woman in a black bikini. But behind the face, hidden in the pattern is something Jorrit has seen too often: the Sefirot, in multicolored ink, etched onto the woman's back. He jumps from his chair once he comprehends what he saw, but the Yakuza are long out of sight.

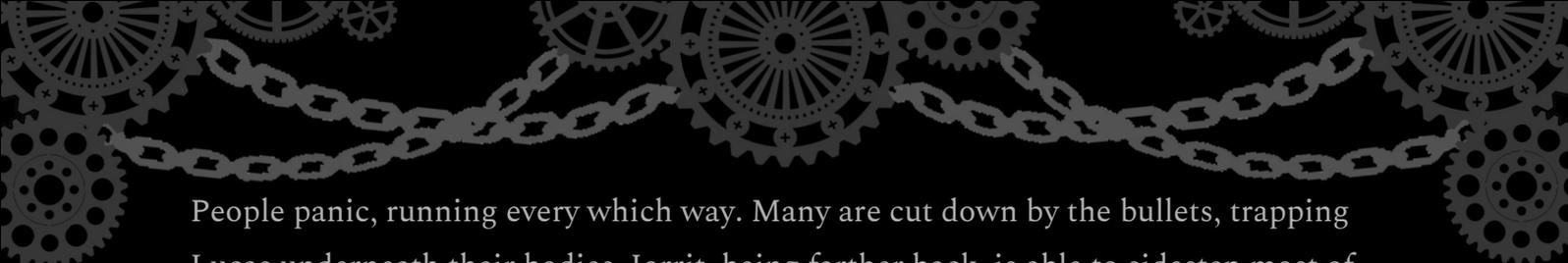
"Speaking of coincidences...", Jorrit frowns - and drops a few bills on the table, gazing out the window in the general direction they went.

The two cultists step into the street, and are swept up by the crowd. A boisterously drunk man wraps Lucas in a blue and white kimono, encouraging him to move forward. Jorrit looks on towards the center crowd, where everyone is pushing and shoving. The participants seem to be competing in carrying the handles to a portable shrine. It's almost violent, with bodies slamming into each other, chants being hypnotically repeated. The yakuza are following the shrine.

Standing on his toes, Jorrit's nordic height gives him an advantage in the crowd. He notices Lucas, with the ceremonial kimono on, is generously elbowed closer to the shrine. The mercenary isn't that far off from the Sefirot woman. Further ahead, he spots another group of tattooed men, forming a wall in the path of the shrine.

With limited movement in the crowd, they find themselves brought even closer to the Yakuza wall, who spot them. Those with the shrine push forward, their moves precise and mouths silent, unlike the rest of the crowd. One of them unsheathes a curved knife from the sleeve of his purple robe. One of the Yakuza pulls out an Uzi, and fires on the incoming crowd.





People panic, running every which way. Many are cut down by the bullets, trapping Lucas underneath their bodies. Jorrit, being farther back, is able to sidestep most of the people coming his way. The two Yakuza camps cut into one another, yelling Kiai, waging a small war on the streets.

Staying low, ducking through the crowd, Jorrit pulls his companion from the bodies. Nearby, the shop owners are crashing down their shutters, with only one left open, struggling to close it.

"Fucking..." Lucas crouches into a run, half pushing Jorrit, half covering him
"Crazy..." making his way toward the open door "bastards".

Helping each other, they reach the toy store before the owner closes down the shutters. The shopkeeper is too panicked to throw them out, Lucas holding his side, having caught a bullet.

Someone else made it to the store: the Sefirot woman. Her stomach has been cut, and guts are strewn out. Knowing she doesn't have long, she grabs a necklace from her neck, and shows it to the seekers, uttering a single line before she expires.

"Tell boss Okuyama... I died with Honor..."

When she is beyond talking, beyond breathing, Jorrit takes the necklace from her. It's a jade tiger. Turning to Lucas as he wraps it in a piece of cloth or tissue, he repeats that name she mentioned.

"So, Boss Okuyama... that tell you anything?"

"Runs his rackets from the Paraja Casino..."

Lucas gives the shopkeeper a quick glance to make sure they are uninjured, but says to Jorrit.





"We need to go, now, can't afford this attention".

"You're probably right", Jorrit shakes out of it, and makes ready to go. He snaps a quick picture of the tattoo, just to make sure.

With the owner cowering behind the counter, the two move towards the back of the shop. There, a supply exit leads into an abandoned back alley, steam coming out of a sewer grate. Nearby, a few abandoned electronics complement the local garbage bins. Lucas looks down the alley in both directions and settles on the way taking them away from the shop and the violence. Lucas points at the pendant in Jorrit's hand.

"What did she say to you?"

"Hmm, not much. Boss Okuyama - we should tell him she died with honor. And Paraja Casino. Sound like there's something there connected to that Sefirot ink... Could be nothing, but... 'no coincidences', remember?"

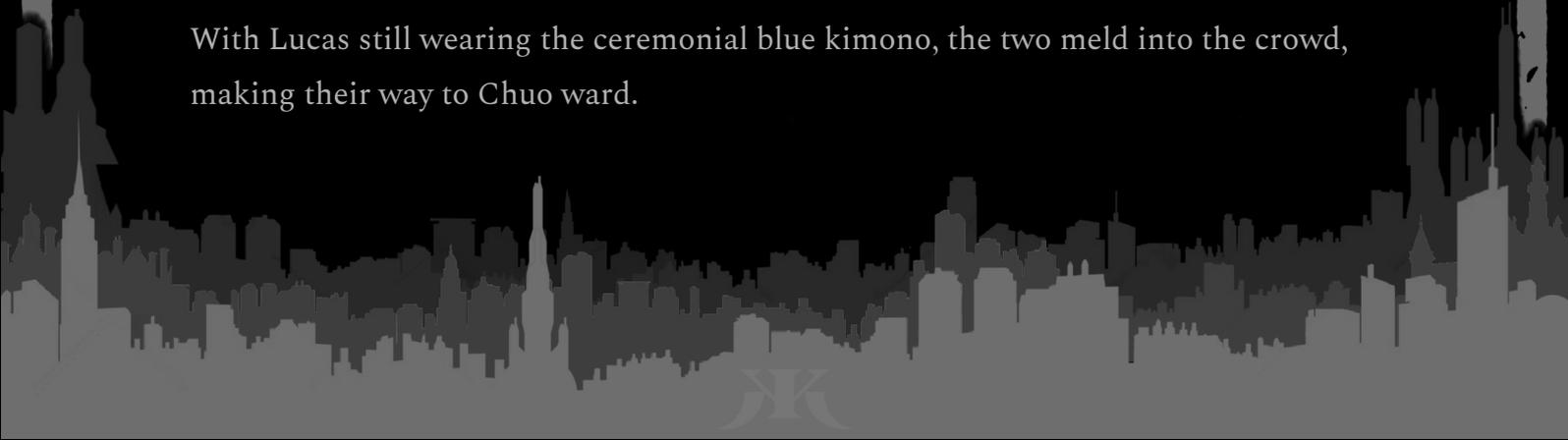
"Paraja Casino, That's in Ginza. I was stationed in Japan briefly while in the Navy. Wanna check it out? The girls will buy us drinks.." he chuckles a bit

"Hehe, sure why not. Any idea which Yakuza clan the jade tiger thing belongs to...?"

"Honestly man, I have no clue, but this is one of those dying wish kinda things and we don't do coincidence anymore" He's following the alleyways back to the main streets where he checks his Google Maps

"Least we can do is honor that, maybe get in on the good side of these guys?"

With Lucas still wearing the ceremonial blue kimono, the two meld into the crowd, making their way to Chuo ward.



The mercenary recognizes the clock above the Wako store, and it isn't long before they find the casino. Greeted by uniformed playboy bunnies, they stare at the uncountable slot machines decorated by moving anime characters. The low are pulling levers, wasting their coin, while the big spenders are around card tables, losing hand after hand. A few spike haired thugs in grey suits guard the red carpet to the VIP area.

Lucas heads toward the Bar proper, practically dragging Jorrit along with him. He sits and orders 2 Sapporo Yebisu beers.

"We'll attract attention here in a moment, not sure rushing right into the VIP area is a good idea" He keeps one eye on the bartender and the other on the thugs.

Sipping at the foam, Lucas studies the guards at the door. Judging by their gait, they're packing heat. An old school phone rings behind them, an annoying ringtone. Someone yells orders. Lucas sits there, calmly taking in the scene, trying to overhear the orders yelled.

Most of the phone call is unintelligible, but the tone is obvious, carrying over the j-pop background. There's anger in the deep voice, no, more than anger, pure hate. A few hostesses exit the VIP room, not daring to stare backwards. The phone flies past a bodyguard's head, it's screen smashed to pieces.

"Bring me Saiki Niwa's head on a platter!"

Taking a look at each other, the goons decide against heading out. They seem shaken, afraid, but they don't move from their post. Not long after, a man in a white suit exits the VIP room. Chasing him are insults hurled by the voice. Lucas stands, he's a bit unsure of this move, but approaches the white suited man, being respectful but hardly submissive.



"Okuyama"?

Confounded by Lucas' directness, the white suited man doesn't think before he speaks.

"Uhhh, no. The boss is really pissed right now, I wouldn't bother him. The Takumi-gumi just attacked our men at the parade, and his first lieutenant's missing."

Lucas nods and bows slightly.

"I believe we were there" he motions at Jorrit. "This lieutenant" he sighs "A woman?"

"Yeah, Manaka, how did you... oh, wait, you really were there, weren't you? If you've got news, I can get you to see the boss, but be careful, he's in a mood."

"I'll be on my best behavior"

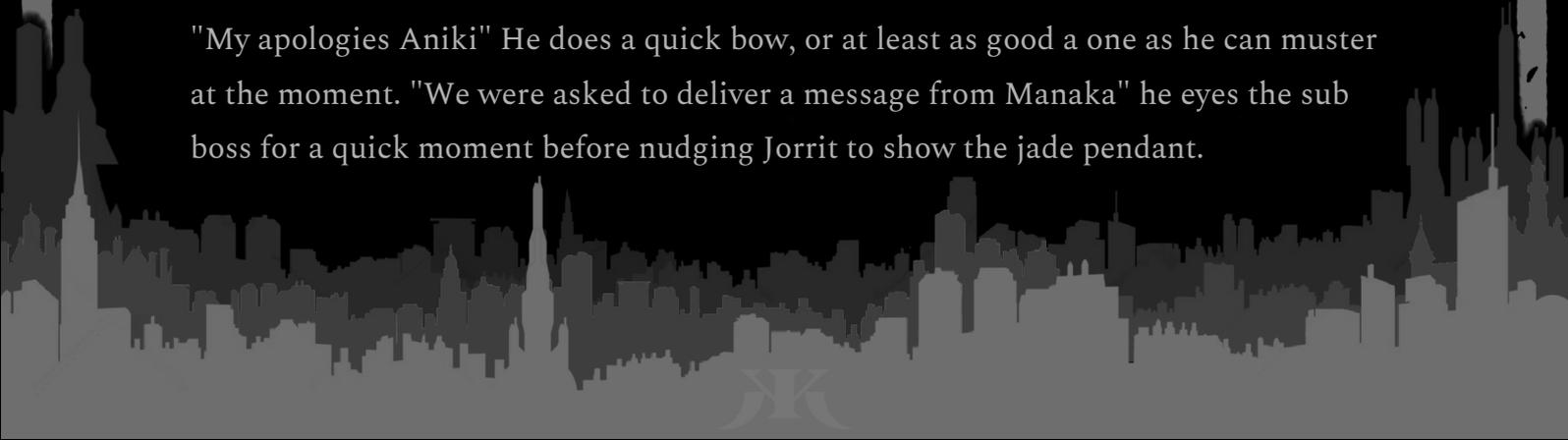
Following the white suit, Lucas and Jorrit enter the VIP den. There's an open champagne foaming in a bucket of ice, flanking a round beige cushioned couch. Deforming the piece of furniture is an obese man smoking a cigar, with a Hawaiian shirt in a purple suit.

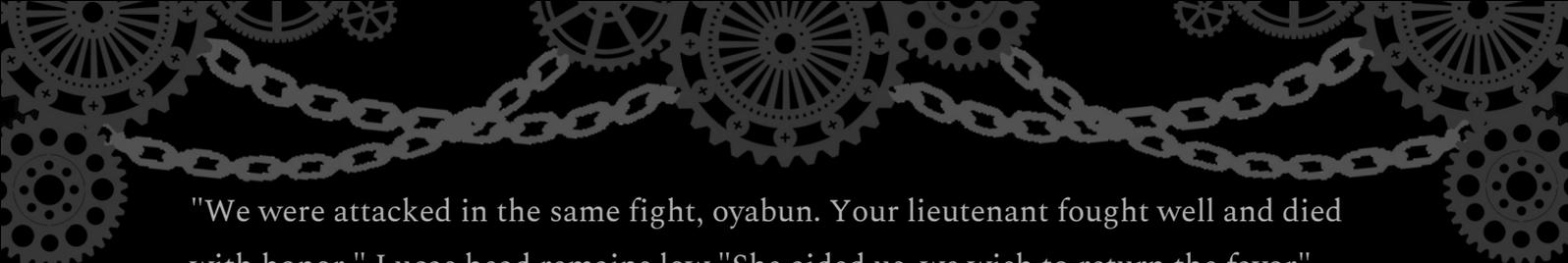
"The fuck do you want?"

"Boss, news from the festival. They saw Manaka..."

Lucas gets elbowed forward.

"My apologies Aniki" He does a quick bow, or at least as good a one as he can muster at the moment. "We were asked to deliver a message from Manaka" he eyes the sub boss for a quick moment before nudging Jorrit to show the jade pendant.





"We were attacked in the same fight, oyabun. Your lieutenant fought well and died with honor." Lucas head remains low "She aided us, we wish to return the favor"

The boss measures Lucas, then pronounces the sentence expeditiously.

"They're spies from the Takumi foreign bitch! Cut off their balls!"

A set of thugs grab hold of Lucas and Jorrit, dragging the latter away to a separate room.

"I don't want to kill your men" he says while dragged away.

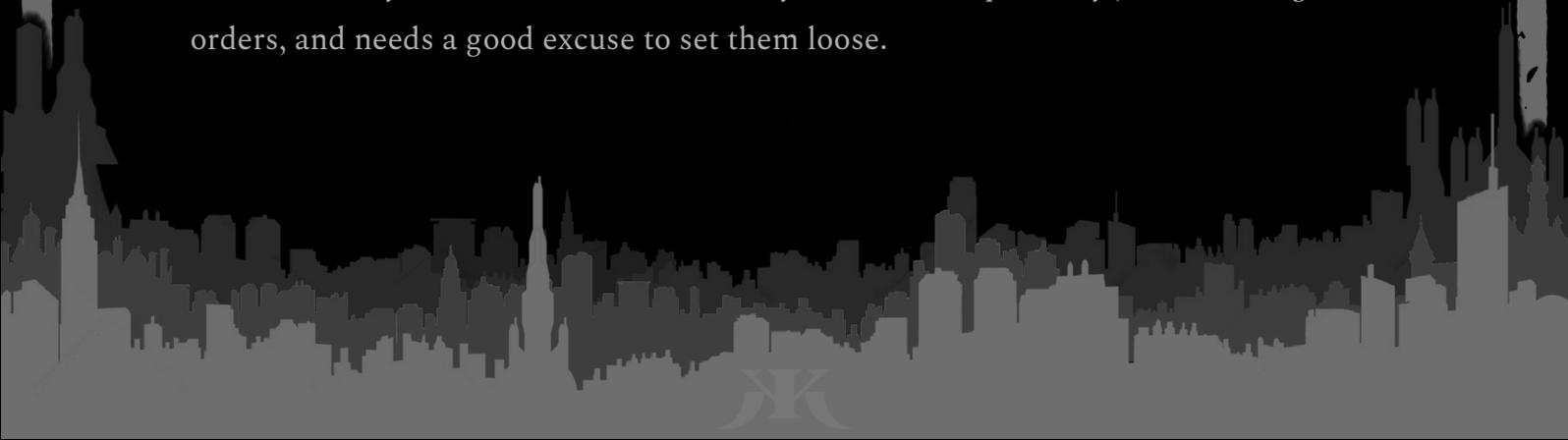
His temporary ally in white slips on a brass knuckle.

"You won't."

The blow knocks Lucas out.

The white suit leading them, a collection of thugs drag Jorrit to a back room. It's filled with metal beer kegs on wooden pallets and old out of order slot machines. Lucas' unconscious body is thrown on a mattress, probably next in line for the beating. The detective takes a beating, the thugs working him over. Only the man in white stands apart, smoking a cigarette.

The detective inhales with each blow, and absorbs most of the punches. His captors are either not trying that hard, or in the habit of using their hands. By the pensive looks of freshly shaven face belonging to the white suit, Jorrit can tell that he isn't convinced they're from the other Yakuza syndicate. He's probably just following orders, and needs a good excuse to set them loose.





The jade tiger is still with Jorrit, the string wrapped around his hand. Nobody bothered to take it from him. Contrary to the Yakuza he's seen in the street, these men have their tattoos fully covered by clothing.

When there is a little ebb in the tides of the punches and kicks, Jorrit uses the moment to call out to the white-clad man. He extends his hand, fist clenched around the jade tiger pendant, its string wrapped around the hand and wrist.

"Look, we honestly got nothing to do with your enemies from the other gumi - we just came here to give this to you because Manaka entrusted it to us upon her honorable death."

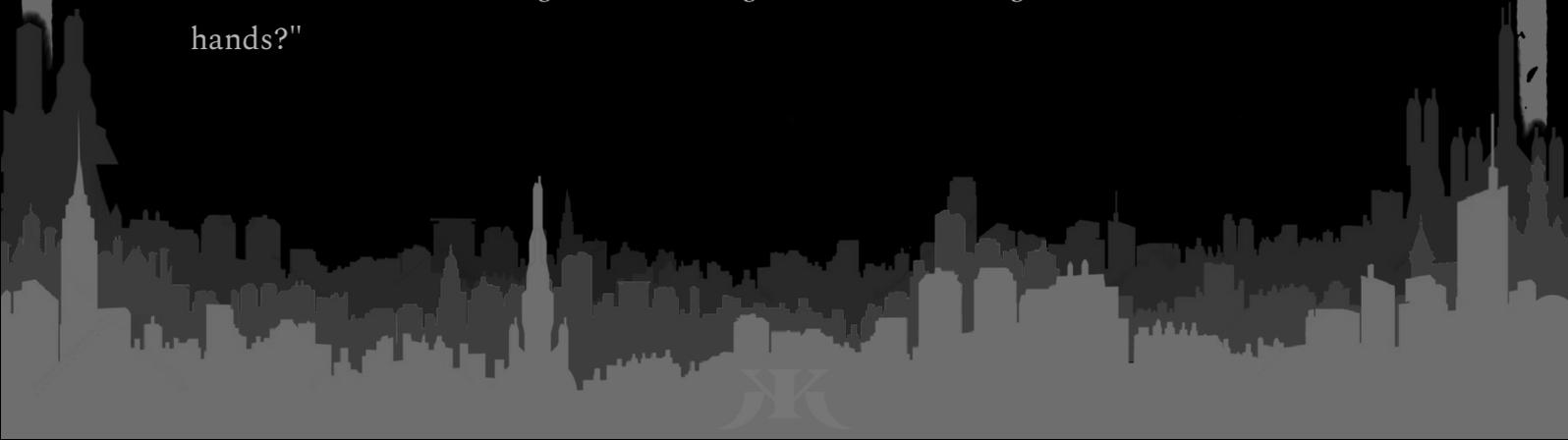
With that, he opens his hand and lets the pendant fall out to dangle on its string, clearly visible to all present. The lieutenant raises his fist and lets out a sharp order to stop, then comes closer, inspecting the talisman.

"That's Manaka's alright. She was originally with the Triads, and it was a leftover from her old life. But why she would give it to a foreigner of all people, I don't know. Explain yourself."

Jorrit shrugs and snorts some blood up his nose.

"We were at the parade, when the Takumi-gumi attacked your people in the middle of the festivities. It all went very fast, so I'm afraid we couldn't make any difference in the firefight one way or another. But we... Manaka and I discovered some common interests between us during her last minutes on this earth. Something to talk about for a little while I tried to comfort her as best I could."

"Guess it was either using us as messengers or risk it falling into her enemies' hands?"





The white suit thinks deeply for a moment, with one of his subalterns asking him what to do. The lieutenant rapidly silences him with a remark and a hand feinting a strike.

"Let's say I believe you. What did you find in common during your talk?"

"Uhm, this may sound ludicrous to you, but... it was one of her tattoos. A sefirot tree symbol, if you know what that is?"

Hesitating for a moment, the Lieutenant nods his head.

"I'm sure it's a Triad thing. She must have included it within ours. Looks like you're well traveled, did you spend time in Hong Kong?"

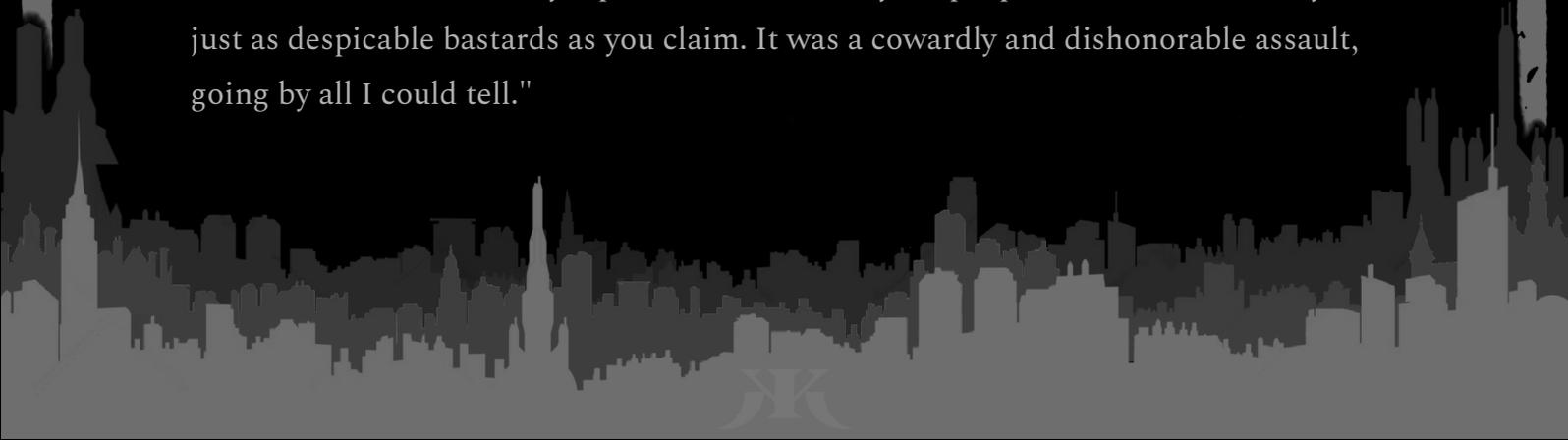
"It's actually an even more western thing. She was a seeker of the same kind that we are", Jorrit makes a gesture indicating himself and Lucas.

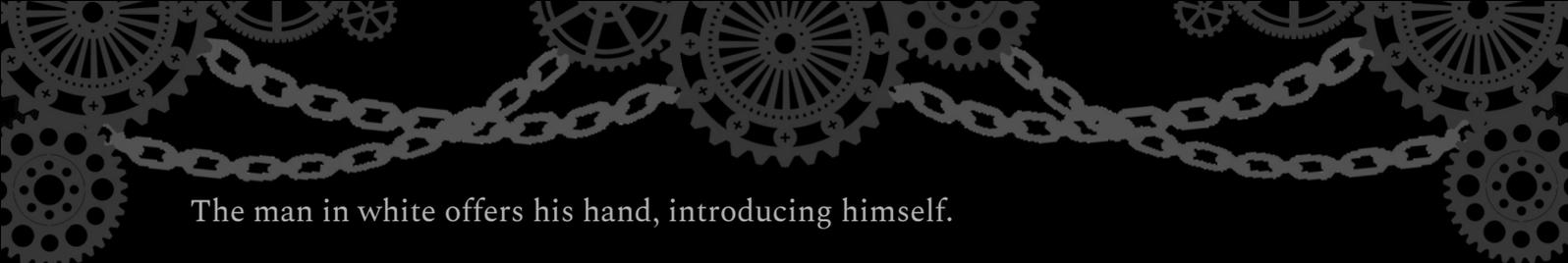
"I haven't visited Hong Kong, no. But my journey has taken me to other places across the globe, both interesting and terrifying ones..."

The lieutenant shakes his head in understanding, while his underlings back away a bit.

"She was always a more spiritual person. It's only fitting that she died on a night dedicated to the spirits. Too bad it was at the hand of those traitorous Takumi bastards. All this over a damn videotape. Shameful, honorless. I doubt the old man would have wanted this."

"I didn't see them take any tapes or the like from your people... but I am sure they are just as despicable bastards as you claim. It was a cowardly and dishonorable assault, going by all I could tell."





The man in white offers his hand, introducing himself.

"Big Tuna. Don't ask. Guess I'll let you go. I'll square it with the boss somehow, once he calms down."

A text pops up from Ricardo.

Meet me in the morning at Marz in Shinjuku. Got a lead on the Prophecy.

"That'd be swell, yes. So you won't mind if I call myself and my friend here a taxi, then?"

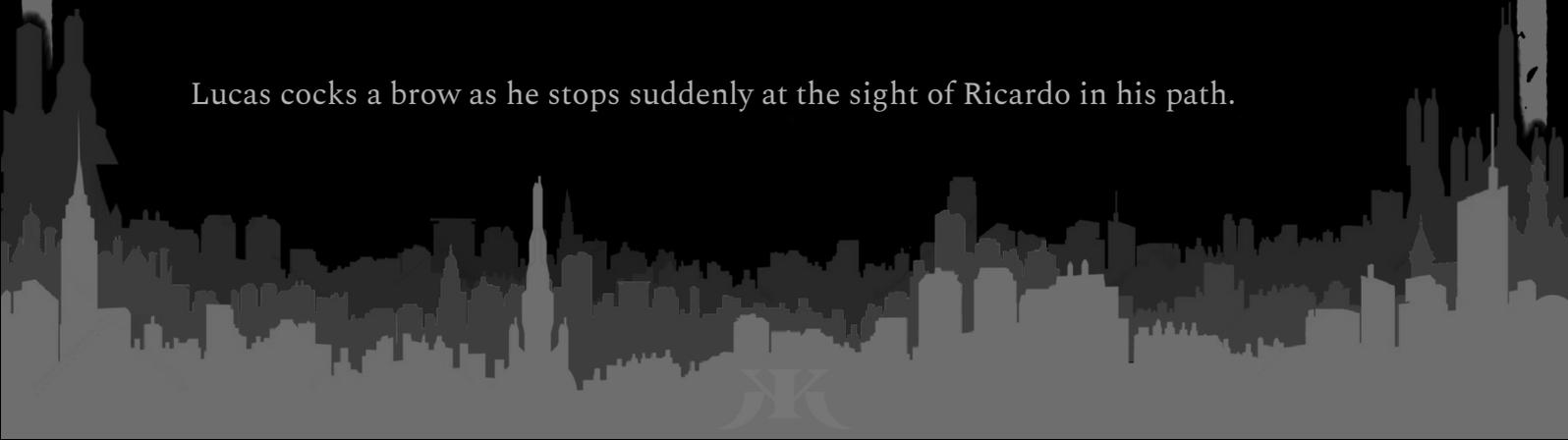
He adds a gesture offering Manaka's pendant to him. Tuna grabs the pendant almost in a ceremonial fashion, folds it, and puts it in his pocket. Before long a taxi arrives, then heads for Shinjuku carrying two passengers, one of them asleep.

With the gate closed behind him, Lucas walks up the stairs lined up by his dead comrades. They scream accusations at him, until he climbs out into a mechanical damn. Massive chained wheelbarrows operated by sewn together men raise and lower gates, allowing ships passage. The sails are in all colors of the rainbow, with cargo of boiling cauldrons and spices.

The dead follow him, relentless in their recriminations. But a passage opens, and Lucas enters a city of pipes and chimneys. All the obsidian tiled paths lead to a tower, the clock on it ticking with precision. It strikes a fixed hour, and Ricardo materializes out of a wisp of steam from a pipe. He's in the way.

"Lucas, ah, what brings you here? Haven't had one of the others appear in my dreams before."

Lucas cocks a brow as he stops suddenly at the sight of Ricardo in his path.





"I don't think this is your dream, not anymore than I think its mine."

"Well, I assure you that it is *me*, though I imagine that is what I would say if I *weren't* me as well, so that doesn't help. What brings you here? This has, to some extent, been my destination for some time and the entities I have been in contact with are not keen on *intruders*."

"I was told by the mapmaker this Kopfel guy could be found here. I need some information from him."

Ricardo pauses for a second.

"It seems that we are in the classic unstoppable force/immovable object situation. You want info from Kopfel, he wants me to eliminate an intruder. How about this: You tell me what you want to know, and I will learn it as best and as soon as I can, but for now you go away. This way, you don't have to attack me."

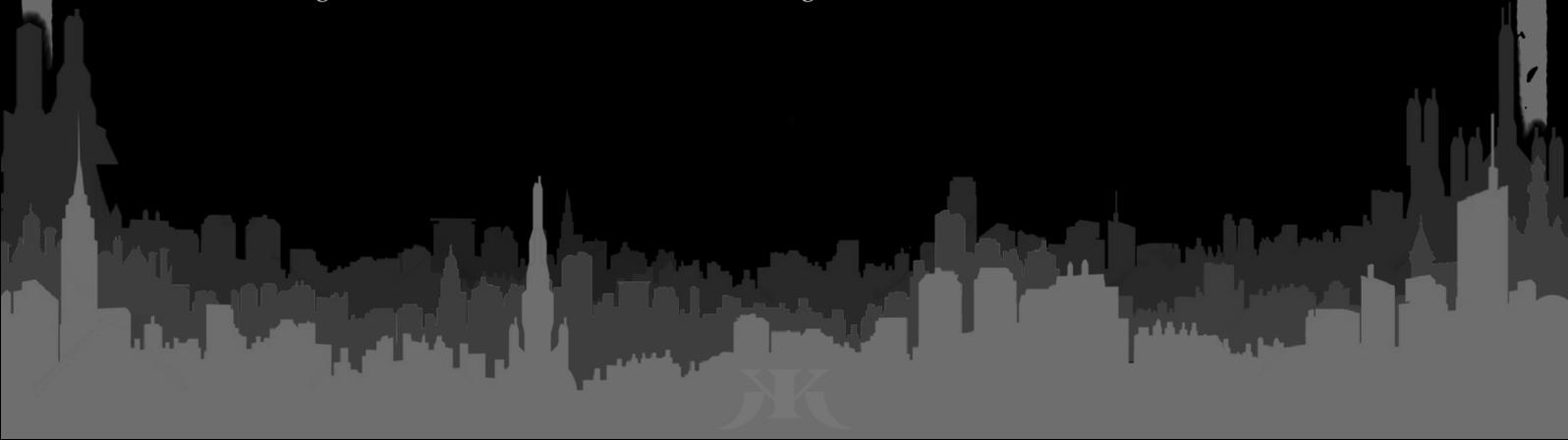
"So you have met him?"

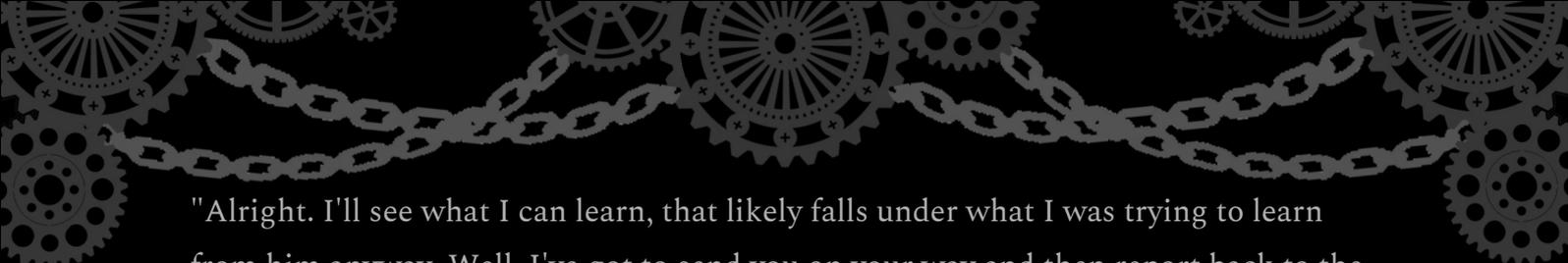
"Yes. Even before I knew his name. Kopfel, alchemist of Thuringen."

"We're both being played as pawns here, there is another game afoot and we are expendable, but for the sake of our friendship I'll agree to your terms this time. If your machinations prove fruitless though, no guarantees the next time."

"Sounds good. What is it you seek to know from this man?"

"I am supposed to find this Al Khemy, not here, but in the waking world. I got sick of waiting for it to make itself known. Thought I'd ask the source."





"Alright. I'll see what I can learn, that likely falls under what I was trying to learn from him anyway. Well, I've got to send you on your way and then report back to the boss."

"Just curious, before I go... What did your master promise you?"

"Just wisdom. I didn't imagine you would be the one he wanted me to eliminate as payment. As I recall, he claimed you were a servant of Al Sufi."

"The Sultan, yes".

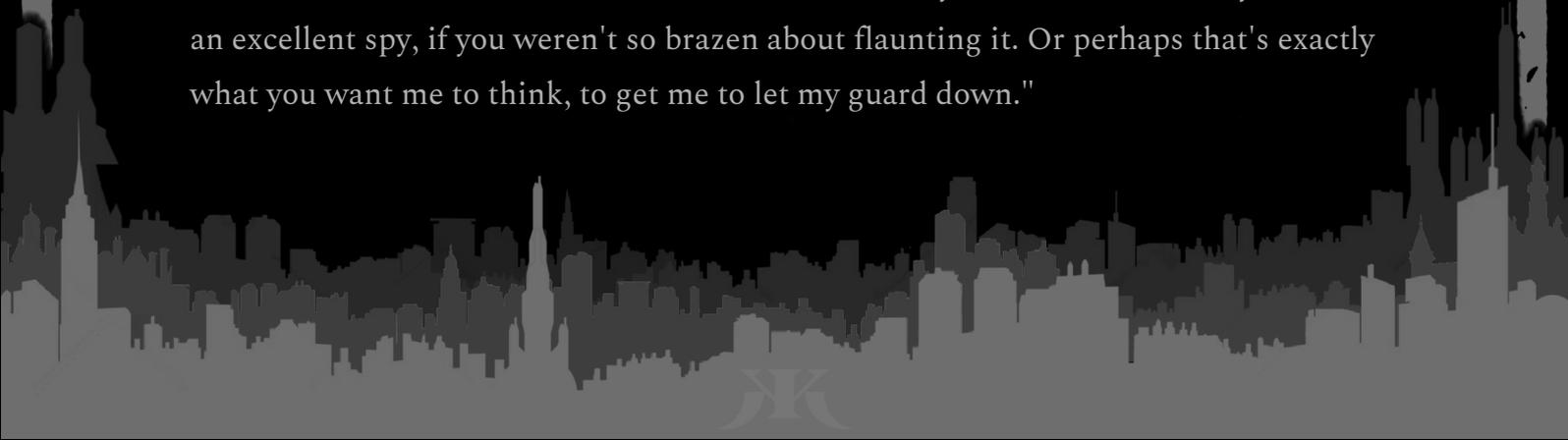
More dead soldiers materialize from the shadows, heading towards Lucas, surrounding him. They pile on, whispering accusations, louder and louder until they turn to screams. Many hands tear at the mercenary, ripping him apart.

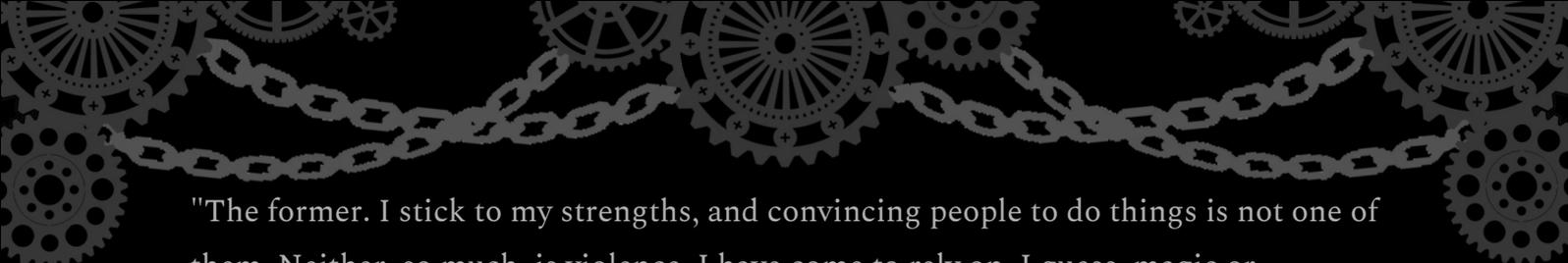
Once Lucas is swallowed up by the soldiers, they disperse into the shadows. A factory whistles in the distance and sewn together men bring out barrels full of foaming chemicals. Ricardo makes it to the central tower, following them as they pour their haul inside sewer grates at its base. The golden patterns formed by unfamiliar, faded signs glow as the grated elevator takes him upwards. Before long, he finds himself in front of the piped throne, a lightning flashing in the window behind Kopfel.

"Well, the intruder has been sent elsewhere. He was indeed from the sultan. Is that some other being that you are at war with?"

The alchemist stands, then turns towards the window, admiring his realm.

"Sultan Al Sufi sent this intruder then. And he is also your friend. I'd think you were an excellent spy, if you weren't so brazen about flaunting it. Or perhaps that's exactly what you want me to think, to get me to let my guard down."





"The former. I stick to my strengths, and convincing people to do things is not one of them. Neither, so much, is violence. I have come to rely on, I guess, magic or whatever it is called in this... plane?"

Kopfel wraps his arms behind his back, silent for a second.

"Al Sufi is trying to appropriate what isn't his. The idea, the concept of Alchemy in dreams, belongs to me. Without it, my realm is his realm. He's one of the many princes who try to control every aspect of the dreaming. I must be constantly on the lookout for spies and intruders. It's a trying task that never ends."

"Can you not send him a false alchemy that will ruin him when he tries to use it?"

Kopfel turns his head, towards the antiquarian just as one of the silent lightnings arches through the cavern ceiling. A grin appears, lead shark teeth revealed, shining blue in the light, cracking with electricity.

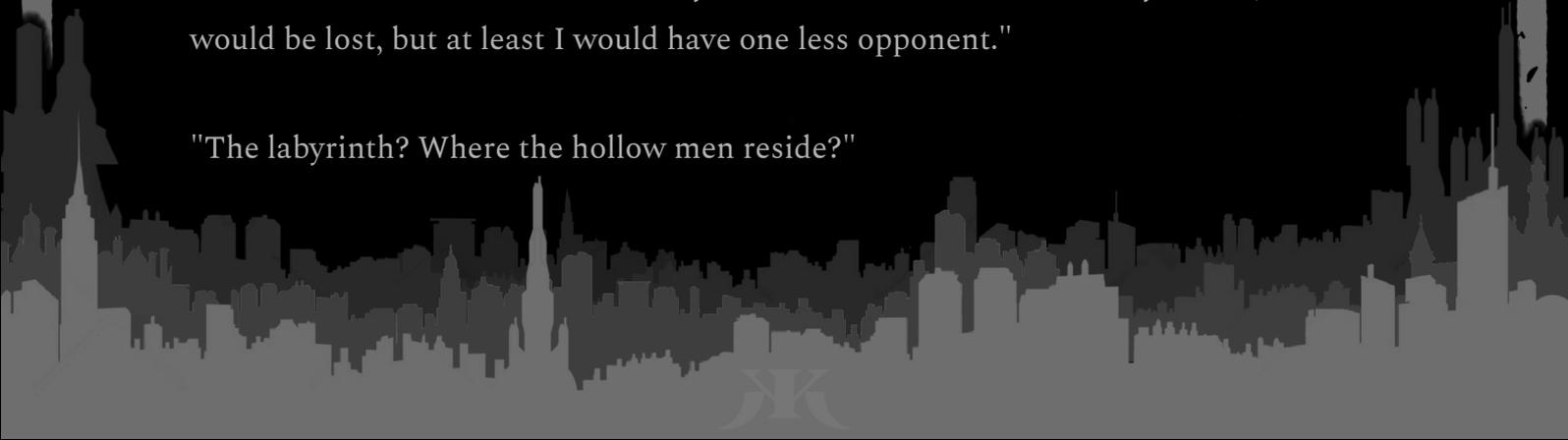
"A most curious thought. Perhaps your friend could deliver it. Do you have any suggestions?"

"In my last time here, I touched a vial and it had some bad reactions. A false idea. Probably would need it to kill the Sultan, if that is possible. If my associate delivers alchemy and it kills the sultan, then you could offer him a deal. I'd rather he live, his propensity for violence in the real world is quite useful."

Kopfel walks between his exponents, pacing slowly, admiring the electrocuted hybrids.

"The Sultan is the master of the Labyrinth in all its forms. If I destroyed him, it would be lost, but at least I would have one less opponent."

"The labyrinth? Where the hollow men reside?"





Once more Ricardo sees the shark-like smile, with Kopfel picking up one of his experiments. It walks without the electrodes, and the prince pushes it out a window.

"I do not know. Many of our realms are, or were, reflections of the waking world. Perhaps these men you speak of are its basis, or mere dreamers themselves. Your friend sounds like the perfect instrument of destruction. Head to the waking world and rally him to our cause."

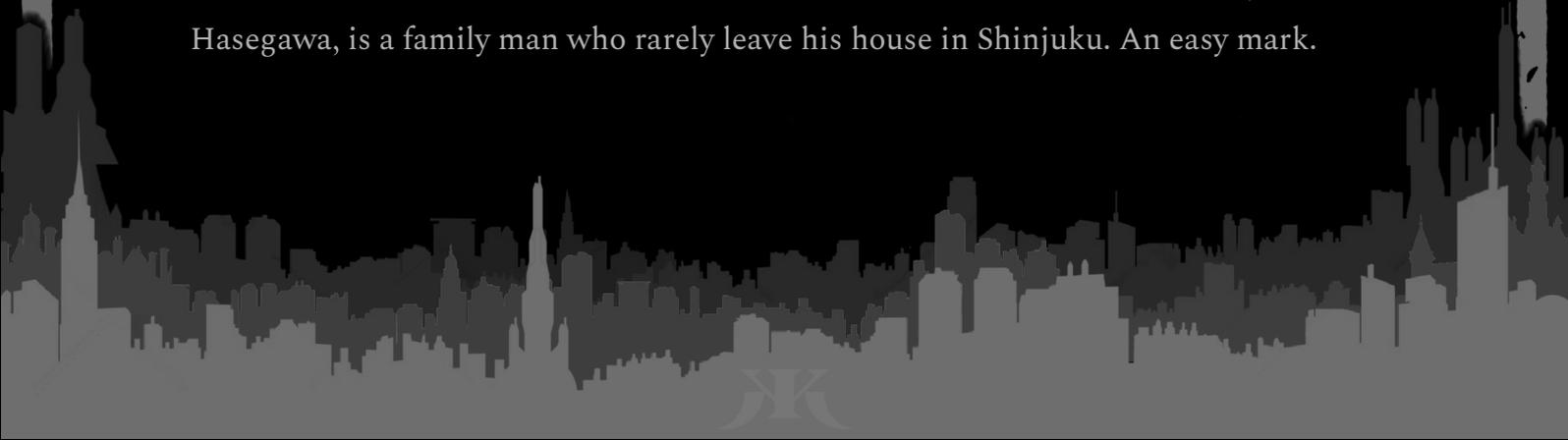
"Alright. If I may be so bold, the price has been paid and now we are moving forward. There was talk of you imparting to me wisdom and power."

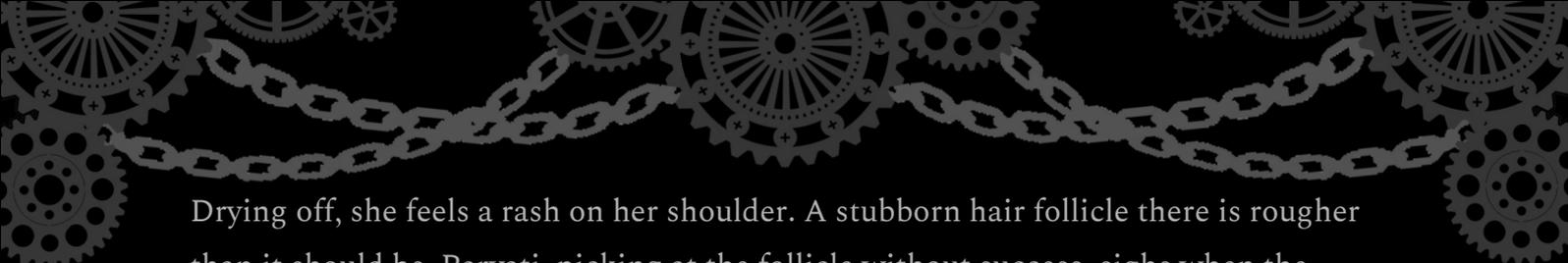
"I already have. Why do you think you have such ease moving through dreams now? I can also send allies to aid you, and transport you from place to place if need be. These tasks are difficult for me, so don't ask them often of me. You're mine now. Don't falter, or fall astray, I will know. Go now, and find your friend, and convince him to bring ruin to the Sultan."

Ricardo nods, and wills himself awake back in his capsule in Bunkyo.

Parvati steps out of the shower into the cramped Higashi hotel room, wrapped in a towel. Through the thin wall, she can hear Sofia snoring in the other room. The assassin thinks that dark Latina sleeps way too much, but her connections were useful in Brazil.

With no Alice Borges to deliver, and Hargrove on her tail, Parvati's cashflow was low, until Ricardo offered her a job. Now she's in Japan, moonlighting as a local assassin. Turns out a few local councilmen need to be eliminated. The latest, Atsushi Hasegawa, is a family man who rarely leave his house in Shinjuku. An easy mark.





Drying off, she feels a rash on her shoulder. A stubborn hair follicle there is rougher than it should be. Parvati, picking at the follicle without success, sighs when the snoring subsides. She rubs at the follicle before going to the bathroom to get a good look at it in the mirror, having taken the contract info with her.

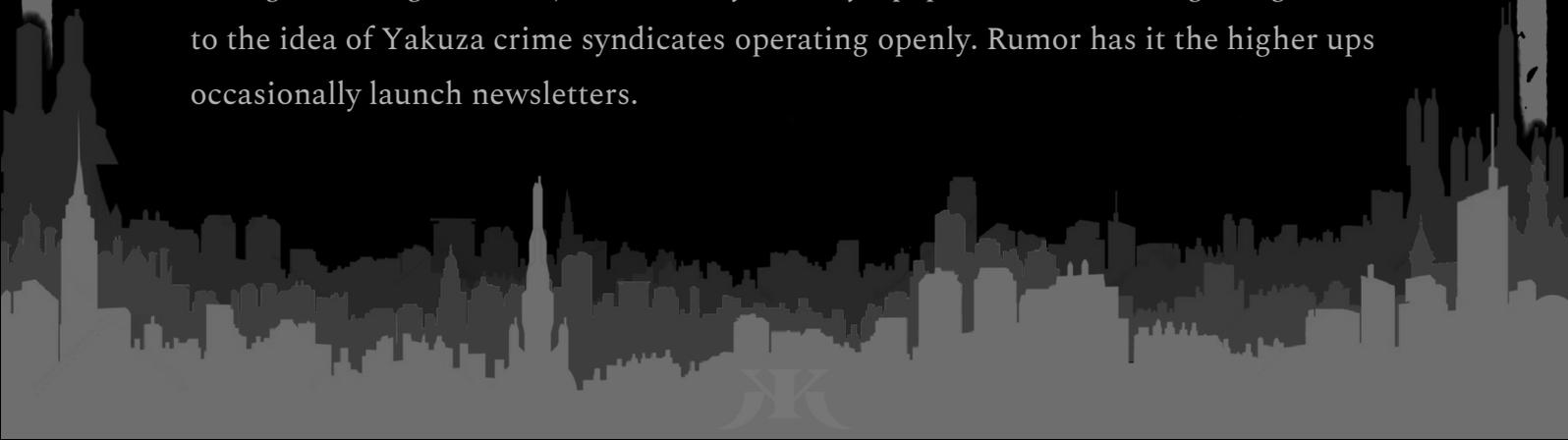
The assassin's not been comfortable with mirrors since the moths in Lucas' room. But there's been nothing for a while, and all that stares back is a determined, cold stare. Looking closer at the follicle in the light, it's color is different than her usual jet hair. It's almost auburn, an ugly thing, out of place, contradicting her skin.

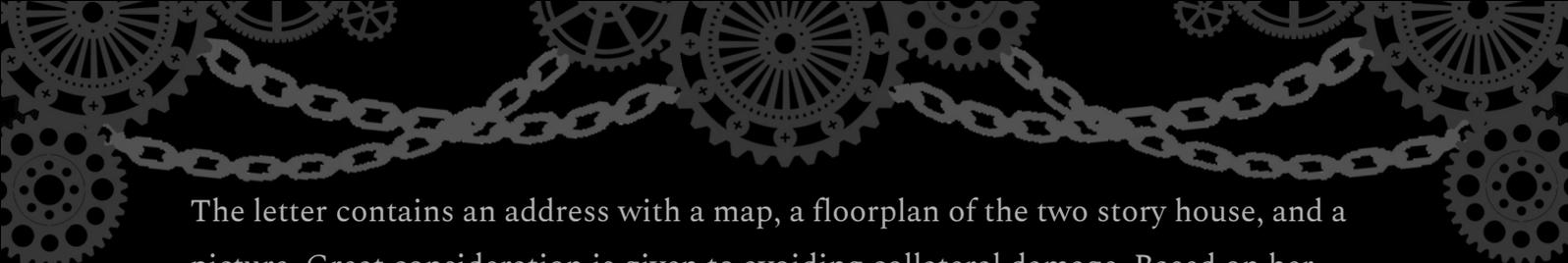
She makes an attempt to pluck it out, reaching toward the spot and setting her jaw a little as my fingers reach the afflicted area. After several attempts, her fingers keep slipping, a bit more painful each time. Parvati stares at her fingertips, now brazed by small paper cuts, with a hint of red.

She opens the medicine cabinet and uses some rubbing alcohol to disinfect the scratches, wincing at the slight burning sensation. When done, she looks around the still-open cabinet. A complementary hygiene kit from the hotel contains tweezers, nail clippers with attached a file, and a small scissor. Focused on her annoying defect, Parvati barely hears drums of the festival outside.

It's no use. The tweezers keep on slipping, and the entire area around the hair is sore. A drop of blood forms around it on the last try, just as Parvati drops the tweezers in the sink. She mutters a curse in Hindi and wipes off the blood with water before grabbing a towel to dry it, heading into the living room to look over the contract information once more.

It's strange looking at a contract for murder, with clear stipulates an signatures. Stranger reading it in Kanji like it was yesterday's paper. Parvati is still getting used to the idea of Yakuza crime syndicates operating openly. Rumor has it the higher ups occasionally launch newsletters.





The letter contains an address with a map, a floorplan of the two story house, and a picture. Great consideration is given to avoiding collateral damage. Based on her phone, it's just around the corner. She pulls a case from underneath the bed, opening up to a small collection of professional firearms. Ricardo's deep pockets have their advantages.

Looking over the selection of weapons, she picks one of the pistols out and conceals it beneath her jacket before going to take one last look at the map before heading out for my job.

An elegant but simple golden glow emanates throughout the hotel lobby, contrasted by green couches. It's calm is balanced by the people outside, who are almost pushing and shoving each other in the agglomeration. The assassin, used to large crowds, navigates through them like a shark through water, tracking prey. Shadowed by high rises occluding the setting sun, Parvati finds it, the house. A tower, its first and second floors have arched rooftops, so typical of classic Japanese architecture. Oddly enough, there are no security guards in sight, only high walls and video cameras.

Parvati circles the place a few times, and finds an angle where the security cameras don't intersect. There's a vestigial power box nearby, covered in graffiti. It breaks open with ease, but it's filled with used up fuses. There's nothing actually working in it, and she suspects most of the cables are underground. Unlike India, she hasn't seen a single one in the sky.

She frowns and decides to go for the delivery hatch, staying out of sight of the camera above it. It's easy enough to break the lock, Parvati cutting it open with a portable cutter. Lifting the hatch, she feels a heavy hand on her shoulder, stopping her. A policeman in street uniform, fixing his hat, speaks disdainfully.

"Hey you, what do you think you're doing?"





She turns, dropping the bolt cutter and driving her palm at the underside of the police officer's jaw. The blow lands perfectly, the hat tipping off his head. Parvati grabs the limp policeman, and drags him inside the basement. Leaving him between two barrels, she quickly makes her way into the mansion proper. Through the window outside, she sees the garden adorned by a pond and a water mill. The rooms are dark and silent, with all the lights off. A cat crosses her path, lazily stopping to clean itself. She stops for a moment then steps over it.

Within the spacious kitchen with a marble table, Parvati finds an ample selection of knives. She chooses one well balanced, and light-weight. A small press against the back of her hand spells sharp. Past the row of stoves she sees a tv light reflecting on the walls, and she knows the living room is next.

With a pair of kitchen mittens, Parvati moves into the living room. Her steps without sound, she approaches a wide screen tv covering the wall. In front of it sits an armchair, with a hand visible on the armrest. With a steady hand, the blow lands directly in the heart. There's only one problem: the target already has his throat open.

Victims don't usually come pre-dead. The sliced throat is expertly done, in one swing. A professional swing that only a master can attain after years of practice. And that master is behind the armchair: a bald man in a suit, with a scarred white eye. Holding a short sword, currently descending towards Parvati's face.

She parries with her kitchen knife, which breaks under the force of the tanto. The one eyed man instinctively draws backwards, falling into a guard, waiting for a riposte.

Parvati takes out her pistol and shoots him, aiming for his heart.





A bullet lands and the man is thrown against the wall, unmoving. Parvati comes in closer, and the bald man has no breath, and isn't moving. Confident in her kill, she ransacks the body, only to have her gun hand sliced by the rising short sword. Her pistol drops, as golden teeth shine from the television's blue light, as Parvati steps back, gripping her hand.

"This should be fun."

Using his blade to stand up, the killer crawls up the wall. Parvati hisses in pain, dropping the pistol. She tries for her gun, only to have the tanto swung at her from the ceiling. One-eye doesn't want her to draw it. Despite her best evades, Parvati can't reach the gun without getting slashed.

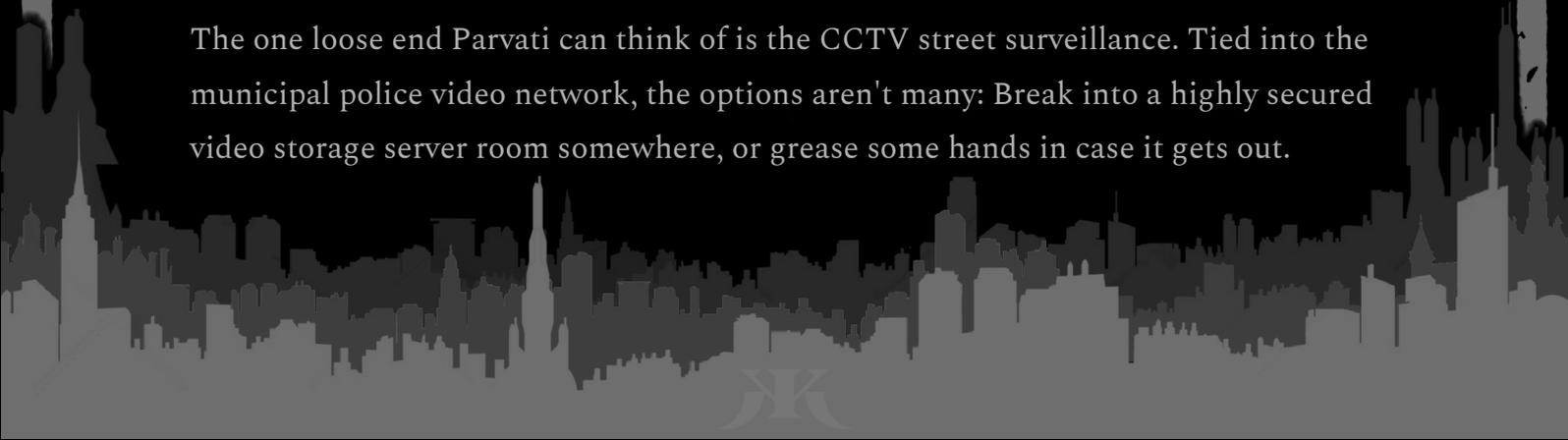
She changes tactics. Parvati's catlike reflexes help her grab the blade between her palms, protected by mittens. She pulls down, but the one-eyed killer lets go of the blade.

"OSOM!!!! We'll play again some other time, I'm late!!!"

He scuttles across the ceiling to a ventilation duct, breaking through it, and somehow squeezing in. Parvati's not sure how he, or it, contorted itself to fit through. Looking down, she sees a stylized jigsaw puzzle piece on the hilt. It looks more like a razor blade.

Before exiting through the hatch, Parvati hears a sound coming from the wooden barrels. A moan tells her the policeman, the only potential witness, is waking up. She stops, and heads over to him, knocking him out again. The mind wanders when she stares down at him.

The one loose end Parvati can think of is the CCTV street surveillance. Tied into the municipal police video network, the options aren't many: Break into a highly secured video storage server room somewhere, or grease some hands in case it gets out.





The unconscious cop is about the same height and build. Ten minutes later, the assassin has donned her uniform, and pulls the hat down over her eyes, checking his ID badge and documents in the wallet, exiting through the hatch.

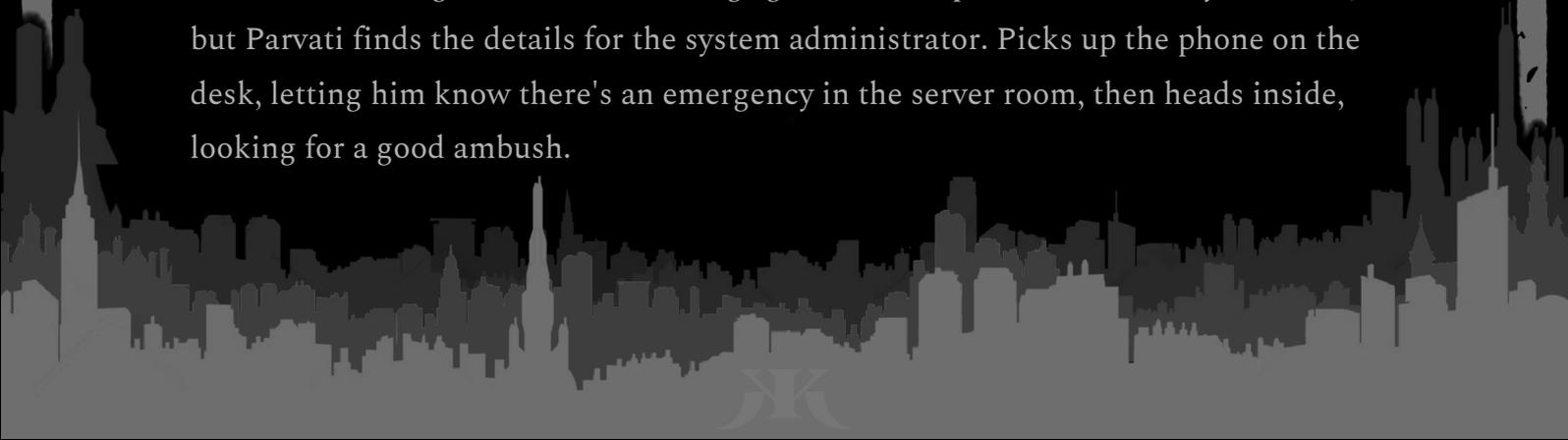
Walking around Shinjuku, Parvati has to swim in the ever denser crowd joining in the festival. A good fifteen minutes are wasted waiting for one of the suspended shrines to pass, a golden amalgam tied with purple rope. Fifteen more, and she's looking at the bright lights of the local precinct, a monolithic grey tower with a window grid.

Rather than going through the main entrance, she chooses the parking lot. Passing underneath green neon guarding sleek police cruisers, Parvati enters the precinct using a magnetic pass card. Rows of cubicles spread endlessly across the floor, with a few people around a water cooler.

A rudimentary map shows the server farm at the top of the stairs. Parvati takes the elevator, leaning into a corner, concealing her face with the peaked cap. The doors open to a reception desk, behind which are two people: a thick spectacled bureaucrat, and a sleeping muscle head.

She keeps her head down after taking a quick scan of the reception desk, murmuring a greeting as she passes, grabbing a set of keys while the desk jockey is preoccupied with whatever online distraction he is engaged in. The third key opens the steel door, beyond which rows of computers blink. Separated by a glass pane is a line of terminals, login prompts at the ready.

She checks the desks for notes of passwords, opening each drawer in the hopes that I'd find something useful to make things go faster. No password is readily available, but Parvati finds the details for the system administrator. Picks up the phone on the desk, letting him know there's an emergency in the server room, then heads inside, looking for a good ambush.





The assassin prepares herself for a pasty white computer nerd, waiting to strike him first thing when the elevator doors open. Instead, they part ways to disclose the cold barrel of a gun. Holding it, a grey haired man. Hargrove has seen better days, but that cold, determined stare is still there, bolting her down.

"Funny how those face recognition algorithms work. It's been a while, Mrs. Shankar. Back away towards the wall please."

Banks doesn't fuck around, giving clear indications, his aim still unwavering despite the wrinkled veins on his hand. Parvati complies.

"It's been quite a chase, Mrs. Shankar. I don't know if you remember, but we've met once before. Rwanda, '94. I promised myself that if we ever caught up again I'd find out what your secret is. You haven't aged a bit all these years."

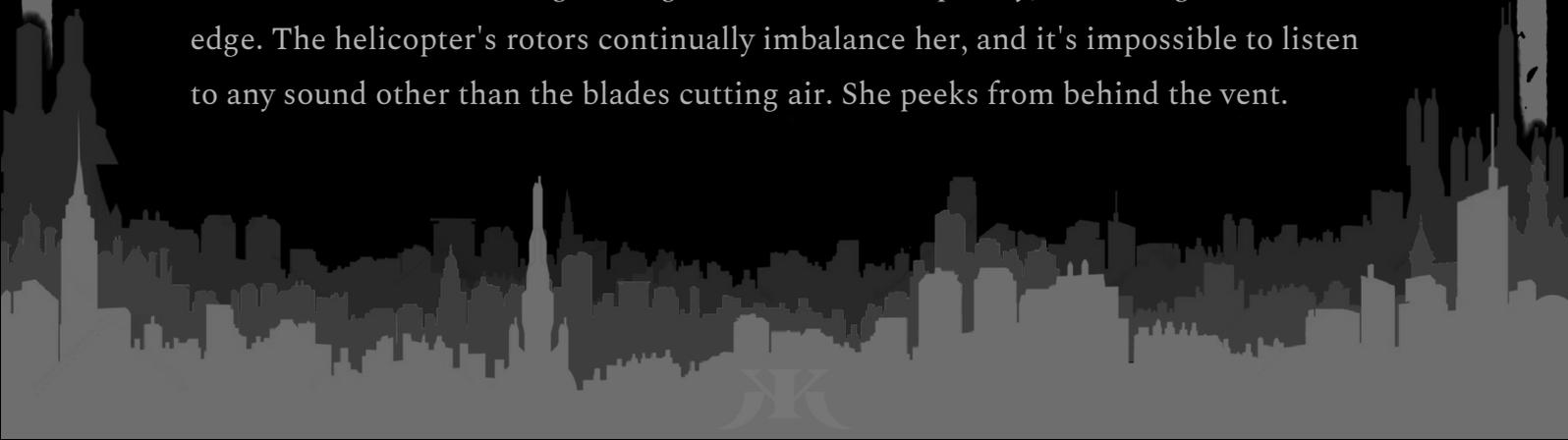
"Clean living. I avoid meat, do a lot of yoga and exercise."

"Bull-fucking-shit! Nobody looks like their early thirties thirty years later!"

The door behind them opens, distracting Hargrove. Taking the opportunity, the assassin dodges through the stairway door, a bullet whistling above her. A few shots follow, slamming into the closing door.

Kicking through the fire escape door at the top of the stairs, Parvati finds herself on the roof. Her hair is picked up in the wind blowing from a nearby helicopter rotor, the vehicle gearing up for take-off. Banks and his backup can't be far behind, but at least the rooftop provides plenty of cover between the ventilation exhausts.

There's one vent that's large enough to cover her completely, but it's right at the edge. The helicopter's rotors continually imbalance her, and it's impossible to listen to any sound other than the blades cutting air. She peeks from behind the vent.





Banks rushes in, alone, his eyes captured by the roaring helicopter, now rising from the platform. She flanks him while he's distracted by the helicopter taking off. With his head in an armlock, the assassin watches the door open again. His backup, consisting of Tokyo cops, point guns and shout predictable orders to desist. The agent joins in, shouting from the headlock while being used as a shield.

"It's over Shankar! There's nowhere to go! Just give up."

She turns towards the backup, keeping him as a shield and yelling in his ear over the helicopter.

"I don't think you actually believe that. Tell them to stand down and I'll let you go as soon as I get out."

A spotlight is attached to the helicopter's front, with its tail painted in the precinct's colors. The tail has no rotors, and only the pilot sits in the glass cabin, slowly departing the landing platform. Hargrove relents, just as Parvati spots a nearby advertisement leading to the neighboring roof.

"Jesus Christ, stand down! She means it, she's a damn killer!"

The cops keep aiming, not sure they should take orders from a foreigner. The assassin drags Banks up to the edge, unceremoniously throwing him over to his death while making the jump. Landing on the plastic advertisement, it buckles, crashing with a trail of sparks. Parvati is hurled into the next building, crashing through a window into an empty office.





When Parvati comes to, she's tied to a chair, inside a freezer with a few torn pigs hanging. It's freezing cold, her head is sore, and the ropes are cutting into her wrist. Despite her flexible and easy to dislocate wrists, she can't break loose. The knots are expertly done, and the only result is more steam coming out of her mouth. A rusty hinge sounds behind her, and then heels clicking on the metal floor.

A short haired Japanese woman comes around the chair, wearing a black suit jacket with a pushup bra and no shirt. She takes a drag from a cigarette in a wooden holder, holding one hand underneath her other elbow.

"That's impolite, crashing into my office like that, little fly."

"I had to make a quick getaway. Your office was the closest thing."

She blows smoke in the assassin's face.

"Away from the bird's beak into my little web. So, if you want to live, let's hear you beg."

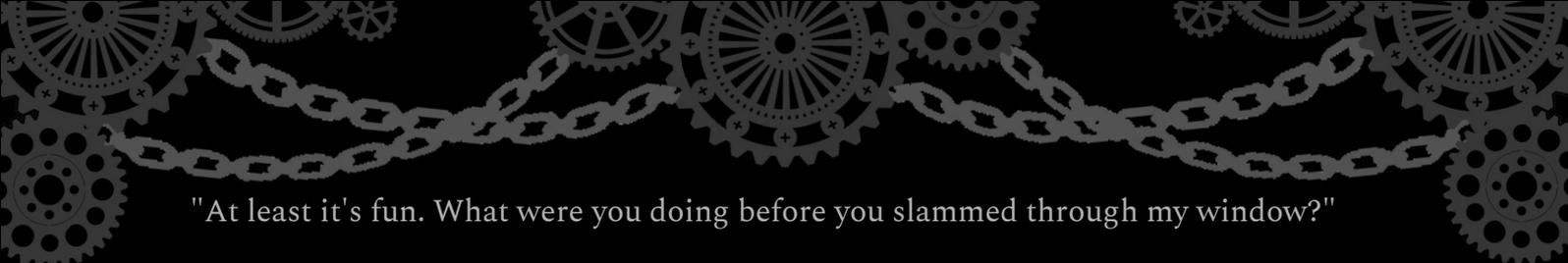
Parvati turns her head away from the smoke, coughing a little, before looking back at the unknown woman.

"Beg for what, exactly? Mercy? Pity?"

Leaning in, Parvati can see her short hair has bits of white in it.

"That's funny. They usually beg for their life about now."

"Most people would, yes, but I believe everyone has to die sometime. Including me."



"At least it's fun. What were you doing before you slammed through my window?"

"Escaping the police after running into a familiar face."

"Well, aren't you an item. Since you're so brave, I'll let you go. But I want you to find something for me. It's a videotape some boys stole. They call themselves the Thirteen Moons. Kill them, retrieve the tape, and I'll solve your police problem."

"Done."

Biting her lower lip, the woman is enchanted.

"Good, I've got myself a new puppet."

She leans in, and kisses Parvati's neck. It burns, and the assassin blacks out.

She comes to between rotting food remains and wasting wet cardboard. A set of school kids in uniforms holding a kite laugh at her. Her neck hurts, and is even more sore when she touches it with her hand. A piece of mirror shard in the trash heap shows a burned symbol, two circles, one inside the other, crossed by a line.

Judging by the surrounding skyscraping business offices, she's still in Shinjuku. It's towards early morning, but the sun hasn't risen yet and some of the crowd, mostly drunks, are still lingering.

Nestled between the high rises is a small traditional house, with a patch of bamboo trees for a garden out front. Carved above the entryway is Mannenyu Bathhouse in katakana. At a table nearby, half-naked full body tattooed men are playing a game of cards. Yakuza, uncharacteristically displaying their tattoos. She sees no weapons however, and they seem preoccupied with the game. The hiragana on their skin corresponds to the Takumi syndicate, her latest employer.

She heads toward the bath house, and one of them makes a comment about the banana peel on Parvati's shoulder, the others laugh. Disgusted, Parvati flicks it away, and pushes the double doors open. The subservient hostess inside wears a tightly wrapped pink kimono dress, and bows numerous times. She offers Parvati a private steaming chamber and jacuzzi, and asks if she wants an erotic massage. When Parvati declines, asking only for a cleanup, the young girl is disappointed, but obliging, leading her to a jacuzzi in an interior chamber. It's a high tech tub surrounded by traditional wood and paper panels, everything spotless. With a water temperature that's just right, Parvati closes her eyes, ready to fall asleep for a bit.



Her rest is interrupted by something cold landing on her hand. A blonde boy in sportswear is leaning his sword there, blade oriented towards her neck.

"The boss wants to see you. Move it!"

She looks at the boy and sighs, getting out of the tub and drying off before putting on a robe, following him. Her escort is a complete amateur, putting the sword on his shoulder, turning his back. She follows his golden locks, thinking how easy it would be to snap his neck. Now cleaner and using the robe to clear the water, she sees that pesky hair on her shoulder again.

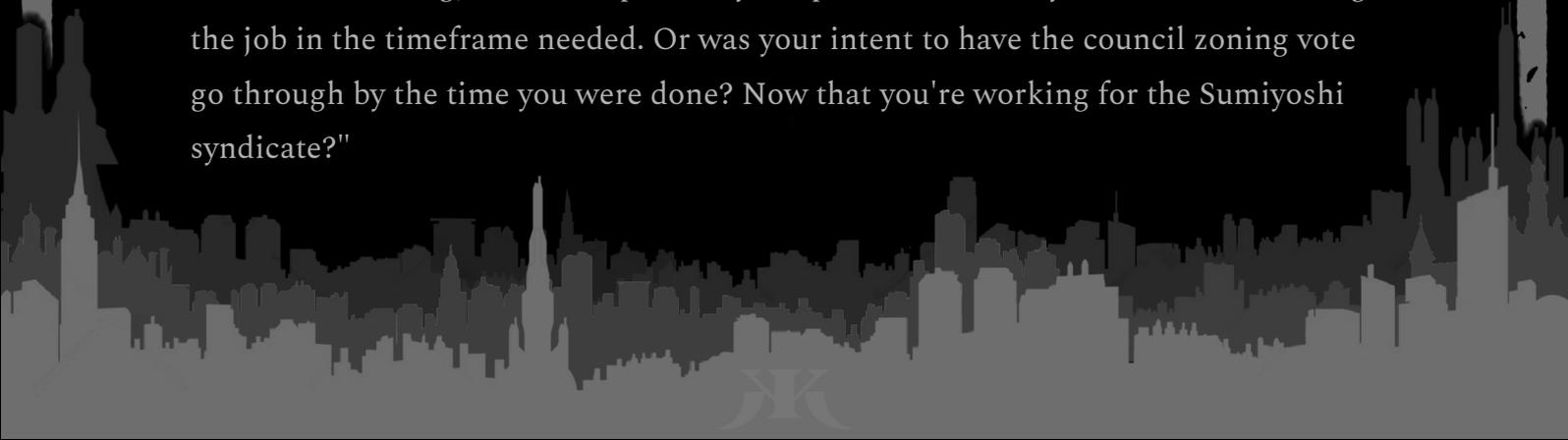
No time to do something about it is given to her, as the boy slides open a door to a massage area. Sitting on a couch is a blue haired man in a striped suit and fedora, with a Caucasian woman in a red dress by his side. On a nearby chair, with his feet and hands on the seat, the bald one-eyed contortionist freak sits. The boss, his hand leaning over the woman's back, tilts his head back and speaks

"Greasy Legs tells me you botched the contract you took with us. What are you doing here?"

"I didn't botch it. Someone seemed to have gotten there first and killed the target." She looks at the bald man sitting in the nearby chair. "And tried to take my head off."

Greasy Legs smiles, showing off his golden teeth, then fingernails something caught in his teeth. With the corner of her eye, Parvati catches the woman leaning in, whispering into the boss's ear. He nods.

"You took too long, and were spotted by the police to boot. My hitman was finishing the job in the timeframe needed. Or was your intent to have the council zoning vote go through by the time you were done? Now that you're working for the Sumiyoshi syndicate?"





He points to the symbol on Parvati's neck. She keeps a calm demeanor, understanding what had happened, and gives the speaking man a nod.

"I prefer trying to get in unnoticed. Unfortunately, I got spotted, and I had to improvise. I had to make a choice to survive. This was it."

Golden boy leans forward from his seat, supporting himself on his sword. It scratches the wooden floor as he screams in haste.

"Let me end this insolent foreign bitch!"

Greasy legs and his chair both jump up with excitement. The boss is more tempered, waving his troops down.

"It's a foolish thing, marking yourself in a visible place. We usually hide ourselves." He uses a finger to open his shirt, displaying a razor jigsaw puzzle tattoo. "Now that you belong to the Sumiyoshi, nobody else will hire you."

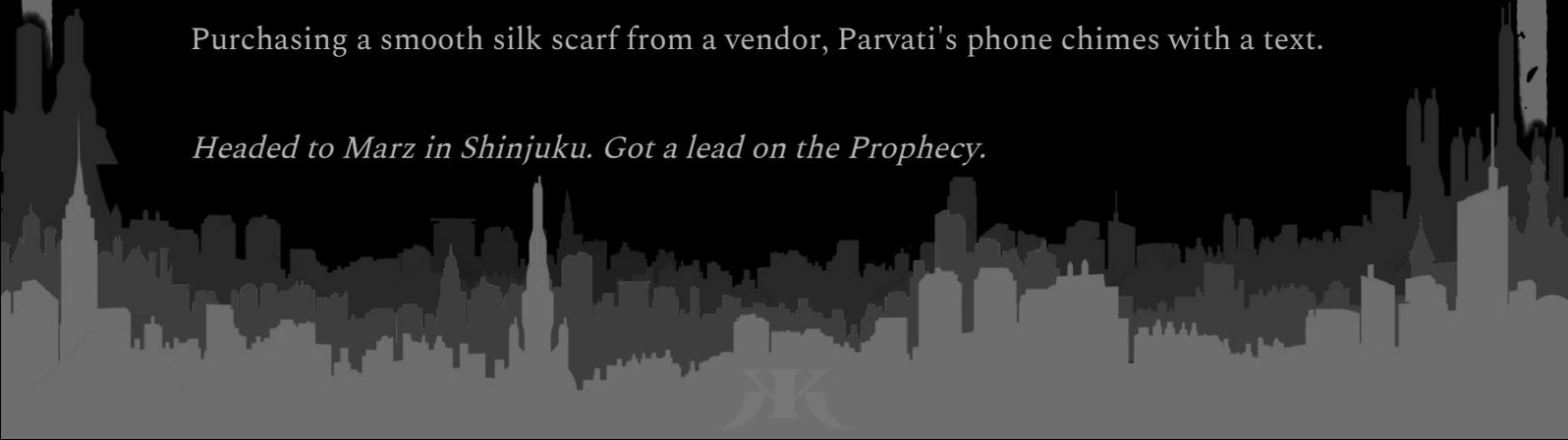
"I didn't choose the location of my marking, but your advice is appreciated. The contract has been fulfilled, one way or another. Let's skip my fee and call it even."

"Agreed. Get out."

Before departing, Parvati takes one last look at the woman in red, who has an amused look on her face. She seems a bit more than the local decorum, and the way she put words into the boss's ear was too easy. Especially for someone who's both white and foreigner. There's something familiar about her. The assassin leaves the bath house cleaner and wiser.

Purchasing a smooth silk scarf from a vendor, Parvati's phone chimes with a text.

Headed to Marz in Shinjuku. Got a lead on the Prophecy.





Harrowed, Sofia's skin is ripped by the thorny undergrowth, the red moons lighting her path. She knows in the back of her mind that the Hollow Men are catching up to her, to retrieve what's theirs. Traveling along the path of a river, hoping to encounter something, she trips and falls. By the time she's back on her feet, Sofia finds herself in a clearing riddled with spiderwebs. Above, in the canopy, people wrapped in silk scream for help.

Despite efforts to avoid, her foot gets stuck in the web. The whole clearing moves, as something black descends from the canopy. She would be beautiful, if not for the throbbing, bulbous body, extended hairy sickles out of her limbs and slobbering chelicerae. She chitters.

"Warm. Fresh."

With her approach, the hollow men in their masks also show up. They form a chain with their arms, and one of them reaches out to Sofia, offering his hand. With a little reluctance she reaches towards the hollow men.

As the chattering gets louder and the chelicerae get closer, Sofia catches a symbol on the throbbing torso: two circles, one inside the other, both sectioned in half by a line. As the hollow men embrace her, the chattering becomes deafening, and she feels two stings in her neck.



She wakes to three crimson moons line up in the sky, each chasing the other, their watchful eyes reflected in the valley's basin. Trees are being torn apart by industrial machinery, clearing the way for the structures of the hollow men. Inside a glass cube, Sofia stands suspended liquid with a gas mask feeding her air from moving bellows. Tubes feed into her vein and stomach, now bloated, but she is awake and free to move. Outside she sees the biomechanical scientists working on glass domes where specimens of jungle creatures are being studied.

Fighting down her fear, she reluctantly bangs on the glass to get their attention. One of the creatures takes notice, and breaks away from the vivisected ape. Staring from some gauges connected to the tank and Sofia, he turns some dials. The tubes shake, the machines letting out jets of steam.

Her guts feel uncomfortable, something moving inside. She rips off the mask, heads for the top of the tank where the water line is, and takes massive breath before screaming at them.

"What the every loving FUCK have you done to me?"

Unable to keep surfaced, Sofia's scream is instantly muffled by the foul tasting liquid rushing in. She begins to suffocate and drown, with the mask launching bubbles in the fluid. She dives back down for the mask. In her frenzy for breath, she damages it and cuts her face with the shards. The tube slips from her hand, and Sofia feels her lungs and throat filling with goo. On the other side of the glass, the hollow man watches, unmoving.

Bracing herself the best she can, Sofia kicks her feet against the wall of the chamber. The glass breaks, polluted water rushing outwards, with Sofia slamming into the creature. Tubes painfully tear from her body, and when she tries to find her feet the hollow man thing grips her arm. More are running towards the newly formed puddle.



Instinct cuts and Sofia knees her captor in the groin. The kick lands, but there's no effect. A twist in the creature's wrist sends a lightning of pain down Sofia's arm. Surrounded by the hollow men, Sofia notices dancing shadows move behind them. An exhausted last bit of defiance distracts them.

"If you going to do it just fuckin' get on with it."

The hollow men raise scalpels, silently ready to strike. But the dancing shadows are quicker, gutting them with ethereal blades. The largest comes closer to Sofia, and she recognizes the singing. It's the same one from the pyramid. Not knowing if her saviours are any better than what she'd previously faced, Sofia runs for it, not looking back.

Her skin rashed and pulsating with pain from all the poison ivy she ran through, Sofia eventually stops to catch her breath, until she trips against the steps of the obsidian pyramid. Music is emanating from the top, the voices of women carrying long notes. Fires are guarded by suffocating men with wet cloths over their faces. Dancing on every level are war painted women, arms amputated to stumps.

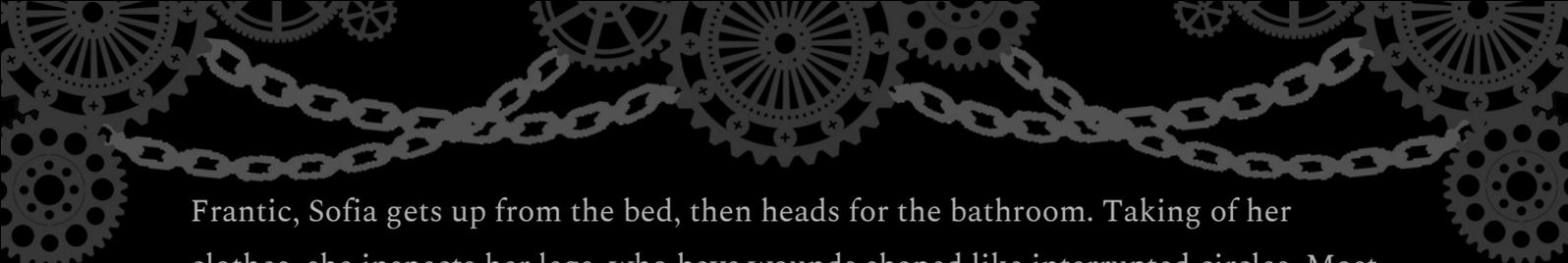
"Well this day just gets better and better!"

A small clearing with soft grass and moving orchids is the most isolated spot. Walking into it, it isn't long before Sofia feels a sharp pain in her abdomen. It keeps thrumming, each time more powerful than the last, and she hits the ground. Blood rushes out from between her thighs, and tentacles coil around her feet. She awakes in her hotel room in Shinjuku.

Sweating, Sofia takes off the blanket, looking down, checking her body. There's blood in the bed, and it's coming from her pelvis.

"Ah fuck!"





Frantic, Sofia gets up from the bed, then heads for the bathroom. Taking off her clothes, she inspects her legs, who have wounds shaped like interrupted circles. Most of the bleeding, though, is coming from her genitalia. She wonders if this is what a spontaneous abortion is like.

The modern Japanese convenience offers Sofia too many options for the shower. When she finishes, the electronic clock on the desk displays 6 AM. An unanswered text from Ricardo calls for a meeting.

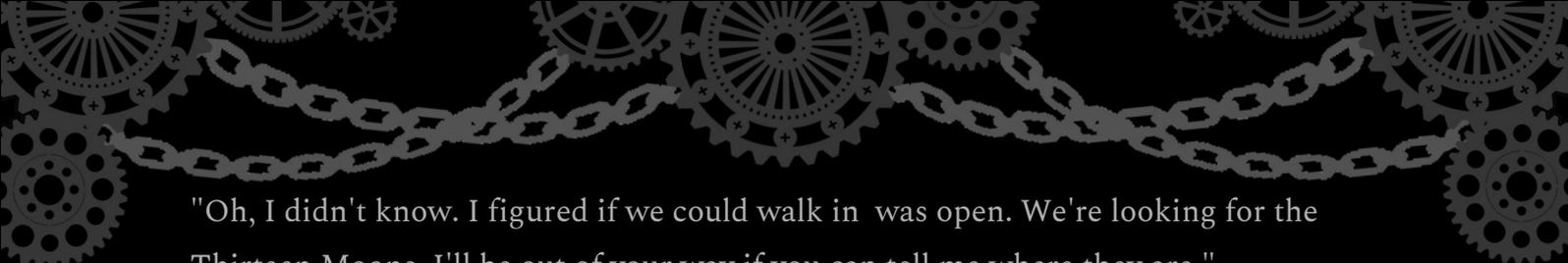
It's still early in the morning before we reunite on a strip of bars in Shinjuku. The sunrise cuts through the avenue, a stream of cars stopping at a triangular pedestrian crosswalk. People scatter in all corners of the intersection when the lights all turn green.

Marz is a humble looking bar from the outside, nothing more than a round blue neon signpost under the door. Inside is an entirely different matter. Lights turned dim, loud metal music invades the ear. Two youngsters with masks and leather jackets go by, heading for outside after a night of binging. At the end of the narrow corridor lined with band posters is a dance floor. A part of it is a raised stage, with a projector displaying a video of a metal band juxtaposed with writhing maggots.

Tending bar is a chunky looking man in corpse paint and chaotic eyeliner, closing up. His only client sits on a stool, passed out on the table. The place is empty now. Ricardo orders a drink, an Irish Coffee. The bartender looks at him accusatory through the face paint. He puts his hands on the table leaning forward, trying to be menacing.

"Ah, not fucking now man, it's seven in the morning! We're CLOSED!"





"Oh, I didn't know. I figured if we could walk in was open. We're looking for the Thirteen Moons. I'll be out of your way if you can tell me where they are."

He sighs and gives up, going to the coffee machine and grabbing a bottle from the wall. An Irish coffee slides over to Ricardo, and it looks like he made one for himself.

"Damn Americans asking me about obscure bands at dawn. Anyone else want anything?"

Sliding through his phone, muttering the name Ricardo just gave him, the bartender puts it down and gets to work when we order the same. Some sort of Japanese slasher film plays in the background, schoolgirls being cut down by a monster. Out of earshot of the bartender, Ricardo explains.

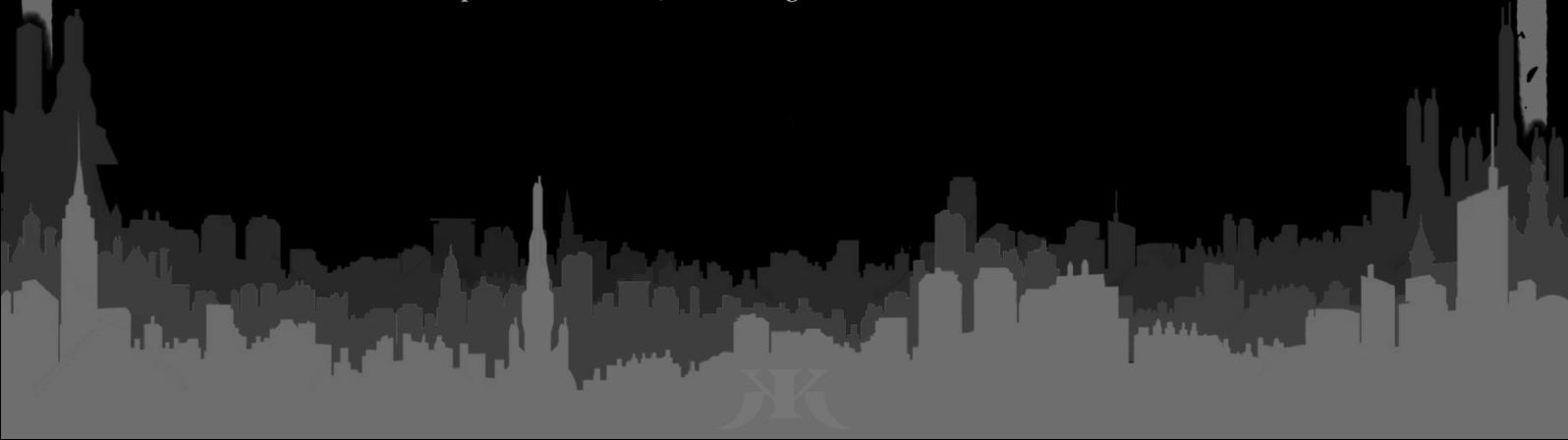
"This place is my only lead on the Thirteen Moons, a band that has some relation to the Tokyo Prophecy and the tapes they were on."

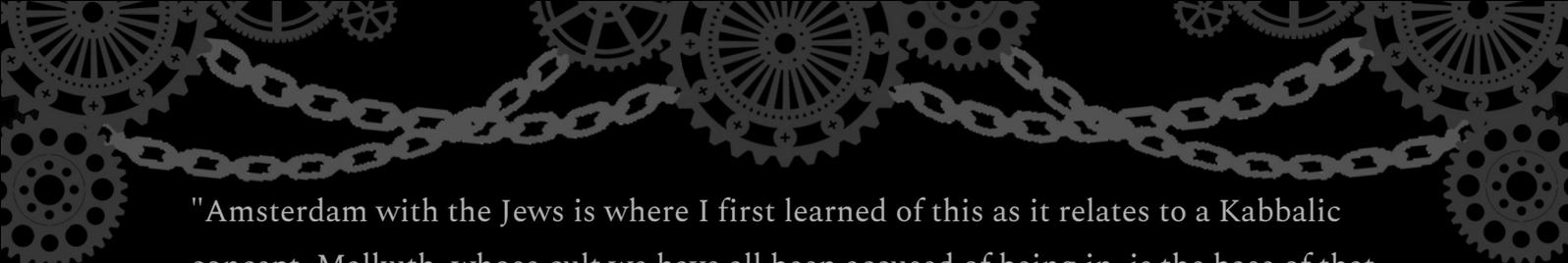
He then leans back in his chair, sips his drink. Parvati looks over at Ricardo, adjusting her scarf a little.

"Any idea what the Tokyo Prophecy is?"

"That is kind of what I am trying to figure out. It's all connected. The Sefirot. The Crusade that the templar knight mummy mentioned to us down below. Each of these locations has something to do with the members of the Sefirot. I have to do more digging on that to really put forth an airtight case. Each location and time is like a 'stop' on a pilgrimage, but a more cosmic pilgrimage."

He takes another sip of the coffee, checking the notes on his tablet .





"Amsterdam with the Jews is where I first learned of this as it relates to a Kabbalic concept. Malkuth, whose cult we have all been accused of being in, is the base of that tree. The Tree of Knowledge. Next," Ricardo continues rambling, finishing his coffee.

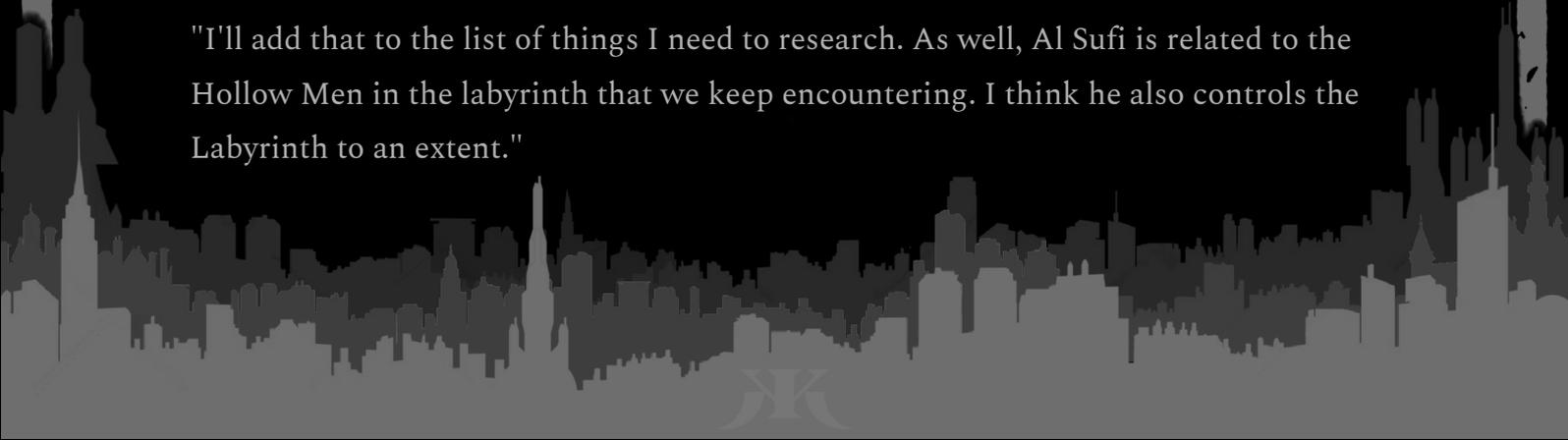
"Next is the tattoo of the rusted chalice. We ran into them, where, Sao Paulo was it? That is related to Samael, the Poisoner, the fallen Archangel of Death, the Rider of the Serpent. In this regard, the serpent may relate to the ouroboros tattoos we saw in Rwanda. Well, Samael, in some stories, planted the tree of knowledge. In other versions, he tempted Eve to eat from it. He's part of the Qlifot, the shadow of the Sefirot, and they represent impure aspects of creation."

"Samael or someone related to him and that tattoo are also possibly related to the first lictor. They're the ones that have mankind trapped in this.. reality that we call.... reality. Now, on a somewhat tangential note, the Hollow Men. They were encountered in Amsterdam at Peeters' apartment. They were encountered in Sao Paulo under Borges' villa. They were encountered in Rwanda too I think. They hold the keys to the Labyrinth, which I think is a real place. They're referenced in several myths. Sometimes called troglodytes, or they might even be related to more general tales of kidney thieves and body snatchers. They kidnap children and maybe use them somehow to keep their inbreeding low. This may be a conflict as I have also heard they cannot spread their seed, though they try. Well anyway, they sound like bad news and we keep coming across them as an adversary."

Lucas just sips at a cup of coffee, listening, he perks up a few times.

"Don't forget el-Nazars connection to this Herab Serap guy, an incarnate? Also this Alchemy thing... not Jewish but still..."

"I'll add that to the list of things I need to research. As well, Al Sufi is related to the Hollow Men in the labyrinth that we keep encountering. I think he also controls the Labyrinth to an extent."





"So if he controls it, and they have the keys to it... it stands to reason that he is in some way in charge of them or related to them."

Now essentially speaking a different language of previously unmentioned terms, Ricardo continues speaking.

"Kopfel basically has the patent on alchemy in the dream world. Al Sufi is trying to be the Edison to his Tesla. Steal his ideas and take credit. I am all the more inclined to not side with Al Sufi since he is related to these Hollow Men we keep encountering. Like you said, we are pawns in a game between larger forces."

We spend some time discussing recent events and catching up. There's a change in color with the projection, another cartoon playing. This time it's a reversal of the previous one, a pink haired schoolgirl the central character. Her brutal decimation of research facility security guards are intermixed with slices of life scenes. Clouds of cartoon blood turning to red mist frequently explode on screen.

Returning with phone in hand, the bartender still stares at the screen while he speaks.

"There we go, the Thirteen Moons. I remember these guys, complete amateurs. One of those bands that posts stuff online, but never actually plays a gig. They rarely meet, see, just send each other samples. Only had one show, about two months back."

I look up the band on my phone. Parvati gives the bartender a slight nod of thanks, briefly looking at the TV screen and watching the school dismembered security guards before turning back to him.

"Have any of them showed up here recently?"





"Oh, no, these guys are those types of extreme shut-ins. Hikikomori. Your Japanese is good enough, so I think you've heard of them. Not in school or with a job, 24 hours a day in the house. Japan's lost generation. Anyway, not seen them since the concert. Quite good live, now that I think of it, better than I expected."

Corpsepaint wipes the counter while I check the search results. Thirteen Moons only has a single album, Malkuth, available through streaming services. Scrolling through the playlist, only five songs are listed, but their titles sound familiar somehow.

1. Taming Gaia
2. Elysium
3. Abandonment
4. Chesed's Destruction
5. The Chosen

Their facepage has even less information, some surreal artwork of broken, melting mirrors reflecting monsters. A single picture of the three singers on the stage shows them dressed in punk leather styles with black mohawks. The About section has a record company listed, Onyx Productions, with a Nippon style address of increasing precision.

I hit play on the album, one earbud in my left ear, the other dangling as I holds his phone up for everyone to see the album art and title.

Clearly using a synthesizer, the intro song progresses at a rapid beat with the vocalist screaming lyrics. There's something hypnotic in the dissonant industrial sounds covered by guitar riffs. I rest my eyes for a moment, thoughts wandering to a lush green valley.





Continuously growing and swaying in the wind, tall grass is cut by huge reptiles with carapaces, fangs, and horns. They're heading for a procession of skin-grafted circuitry cybernetic knights and self-mutilating blade fashion princesses. One steps in front, a banner attached to her back, a broken mirror. A metallic dress sits under her spear-pierced chest, a crown cutting into her head. Raising her hands, she takes control of the herd, and they move to her orchestrations.

When she closes her fists, the herd tears into itself, fluorescent blood splattering. The vines grow into the open beasts, and the procession applauds.

Surprised by how vivid an image the music creates, I open my eyes. I try to get the image out of my head and feel bile in my throat. Looking at the phone, only the first song has finished. Jorrit looks concerned.

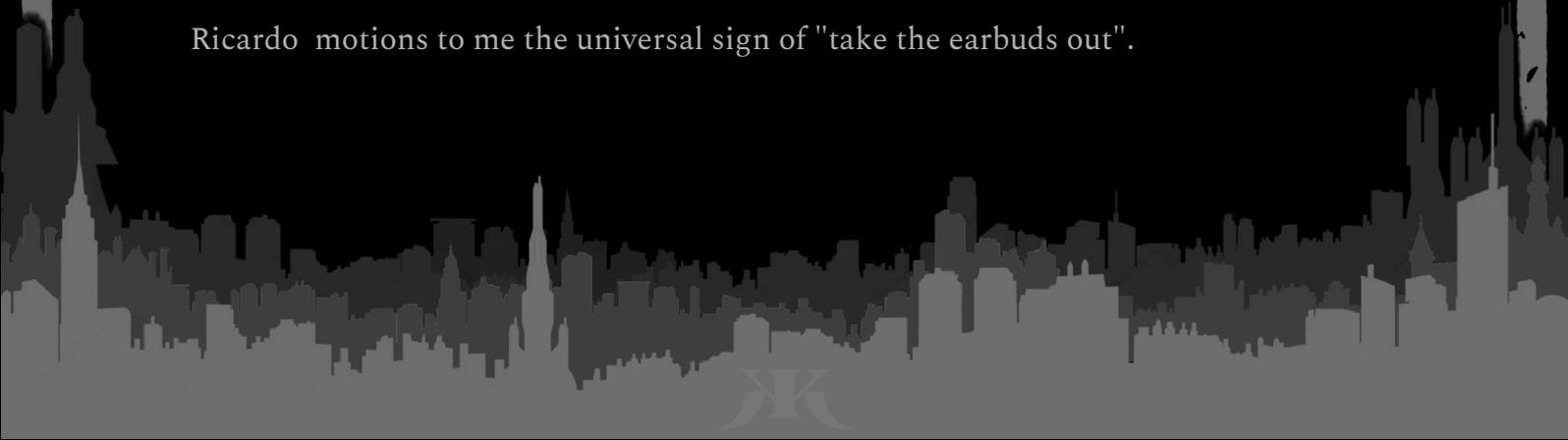
"Erm, you okay man?"

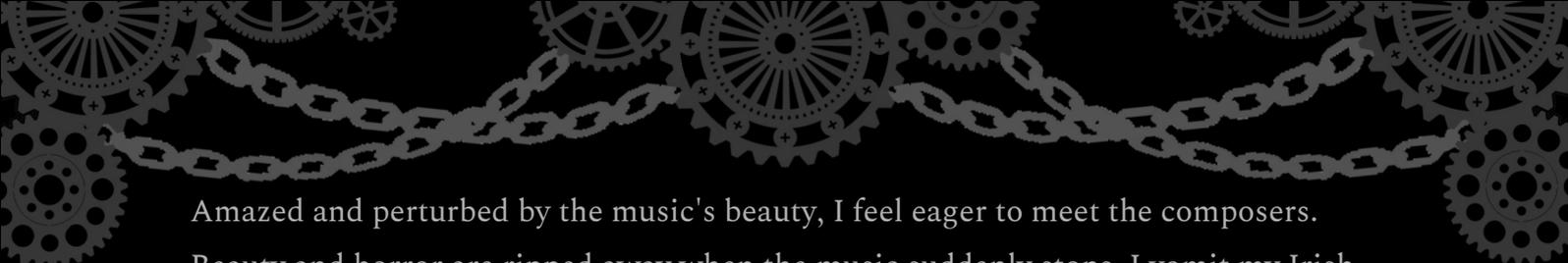
I choke a bit, nodding at Jorrit.... then take a deep breath and let the track end and the next one begin, this time putting both earbuds in.

Another image forms in my mind, this time a massive architectural undertaking. Machines spitting out machines, building an idyllic fjordic landscape, with living cancers birthing deer and wolves. A massive squid-like technorganic walker plants wooden cabins into the ground, forming a viking village. Orchestrating it all from a levitating platform, the same woman, surrounded by her peers. I feel insignificant and in the vastness of it all.

When the song ends, Jorrit watches me wearily, lighting another cigarette and trying to decide between more coffee and another whiskey.

Ricardo motions to me the universal sign of "take the earbuds out".





Amazed and perturbed by the music's beauty, I feel eager to meet the composers. Beauty and horror are ripped away when the music suddenly stops. I vomit my Irish coffee all over the table in reaction. Ricardo is holding the earbuds.

"Uh... He might be having a seizure or something like that."

Protests can be heard from the bar, with Corpsepaint slamming a palm against his forehead.

"Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me!"

"Hey, sorry", Jorrit says to Corpsepaint, "we're gonna pay for this of course. Has anyone had this sort of reaction at the time the Thirteen Moons played a live show?"

Tilting his head to one side, the bartender puts a towel on his shoulder.

"You mean vomit? Man, it's a bar, people do that all the time here. They usually make it to the toilet, though. You gonna clean that up?"

"Alright, Ricardo can you call a taxi? Parvati, can you help Anders move?"

She nods, moving around the table and slipping an arm underneath my armpit to help me move. With effort, we make it outside. I'm still dizzy and waver without support. I blink at the brightness of the new day that has begun while we were inside the bar.



Despite its high price and four star status, the Kangaroo hotel is actually small and familiar. A common living room has murals of bonsais and pheasants on one wall, with a map of the ward on the other. The rooms are narrow, but well equipped, and the entries are all sturdy steel security doors. Dropping Lucas onto his bed, the rest reunite in the common kitchen where the electric kettle is already boiling. The receptionist, an older man dressed in casual clothes and slacks, makes tea for everyone.

The detective details the Yamaken-Takumi syndicate war, all too familiar at this point.

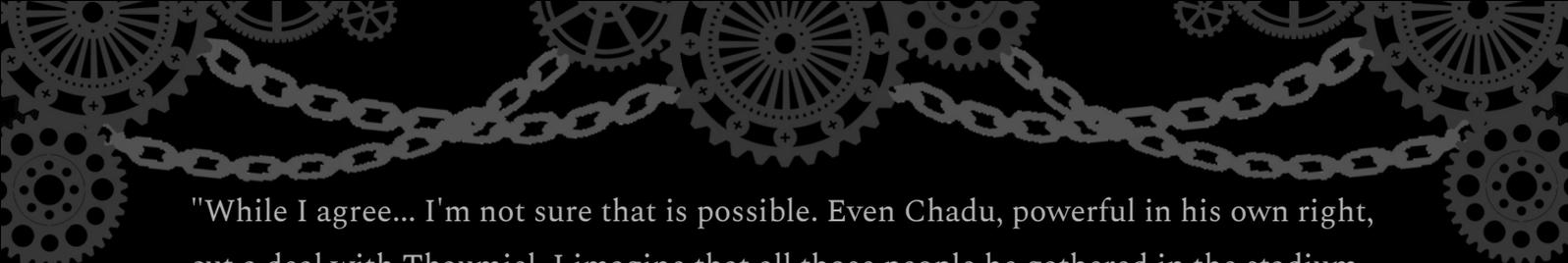
"Their boss is called Okuyama, and Aniki. They got a quarrel with someone named Takumi, who's a foreigner, but commands yakuza hitmen and kills Okuyama's own goons."

"Takumi. I haven't met boss Okuyama, but I know the Takumi boss, and the western bitch putting words in his ear. I did a job for them that went south before finding myself working for their competitors."

Parvati pulls down the scarf and shows everyone the tattoo. Jorrit compares it to the one on his hand. Sofia mentions it from her dream. Ricardo flips through his image library, looking for a match.

"The symbol is related to Tipareth, the principle of beauty, from which art stems. It is closely tied to that of Yesod's transition, and it troubles me that it might be associated with the Yakuza, and how they might pervert it. It appears that we have been branded differently. Par bears a brand different from mine and as far as I know different than the one Lucas has."

"I don't want any of us beholden to anything or anyone." Parvati protests.



"While I agree... I'm not sure that is possible. Even Chadu, powerful in his own right, cut a deal with Thaumiel. I imagine that all those people he gathered in the stadium were either a high price because of high magic involved, or just overpayment on his part to not be beholden thereafter."

I take a few minutes to describe what I experienced in those few minutes listening to that album. Jorrit raises an eyebrow.

"What... was it like?" he asks in a somewhat smaller voice.

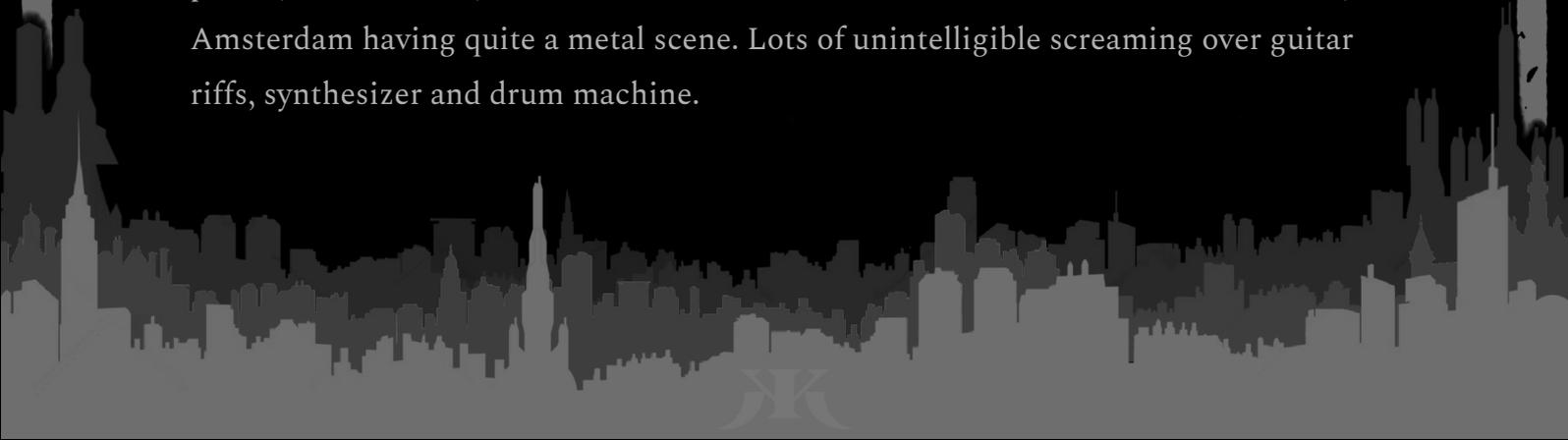
"Definitely evocative. Like a vivid dream... On the worst acid you can buy."

Staring at the word MALKUTH on the cover artwork, I really want to listen to this. I check my watch, and my fellow seekers for readiness and potential willingness to act as watchdogs if I go for it. I stare at the playlist on the website, an album called Malkuth with five songs, with three more to go:

1. Taming Gaia
2. Elysium
3. Abandonment
4. Chesed's Destruction
5. The Chosen

Lucas nods "Sounds good, I'll give you a couple of tracks and then see how you're doing?"

We head upstairs into one of the narrow bedrooms. I sit on the bed and plug in the buds, with Lucas watching him attentively. I start from the top. First one song passes, then another, without much fanfare. I've heard this sort of stuff before a lot, Amsterdam having quite a metal scene. Lots of unintelligible screaming over guitar riffs, synthesizer and drum machine.





I get lost in thought about recent events, recalling the endless city. At its center, a palace of wonders sits, a thousand architectures melded into one. Parts of it are impossible geometry of floating sandstone stairs amidst spires of glass. From a distant citadel, a woman watches it, bare chest above a chainmail sarong. A banner held by a spear is fused to her spine, a broken mirror fluttering in the wind.

I know her somehow, this tamer of the wild, builder of paradises. A trill sounds throughout the city, one of the palace's glass spires shattering. Everything shakes, buildings collapsing, as she watches the palace sink into the ground, leaving an abyss behind. I can feel her pain, unbearable sorrow of loss, as she cries blood. A most important part of her has been ripped away, her creator and lover.

Tears are running down my cheeks. I sob uncontrollably, gripped by the intense emotions in the song. Lucas watches me finishing the third song. My nose bleeds, and I slam the back of my head against the wall.

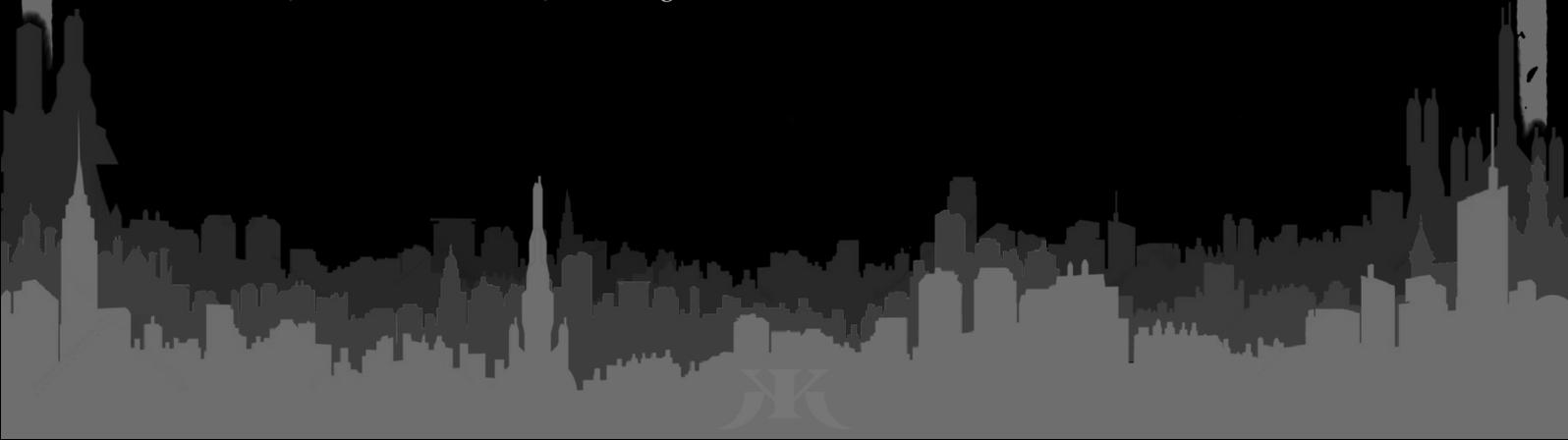
Lucas has his hand on my shoulders, waiting for the sign, as soon as the bashing starts he pulls the headphones out. I take a moment to describe what I saw.

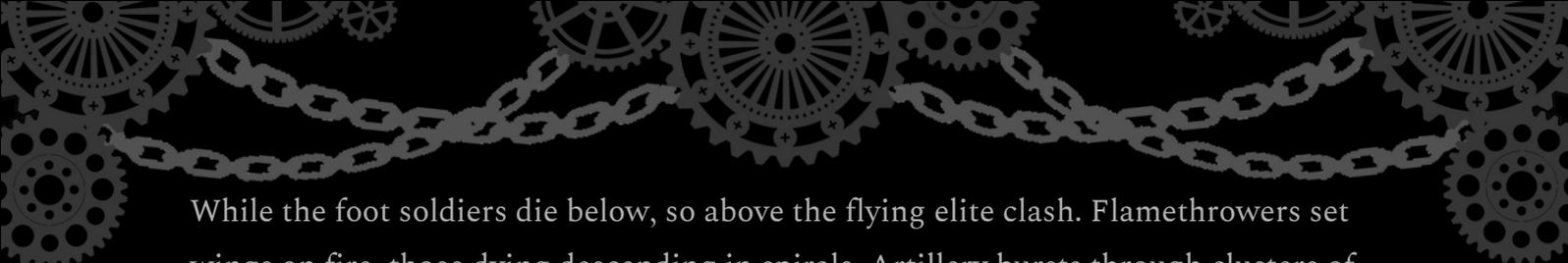
"How about I take the last one?"

"No. I need to finish this, even if it finishes me."

I put the plugs in my ears. I drift off, lost in thoughts, with the rhythmic, mechanistic metal pounding.

Even the sky bleeds, blood red, with the fires rising in the endless city. Legions rush each other in the streets, slaughtering each other mercilessly. Burning lasers scorch muscle, sword cuts sinew, and slugs shatter bone.





While the foot soldiers die below, so above the flying elite clash. Flamethrowers set wings on fire, those dying descending in spirals. Artillery bursts through clusters of cherubs, scattering them in pieces.

Every dying soldier is wondrous and unique, his death wasted in this carnage. The battlefield spreads as far as the eye can see, with one objective. A cathedral made of clay and wood, bolstered by tesla coils, a blue plasma beam shooting into the sky.

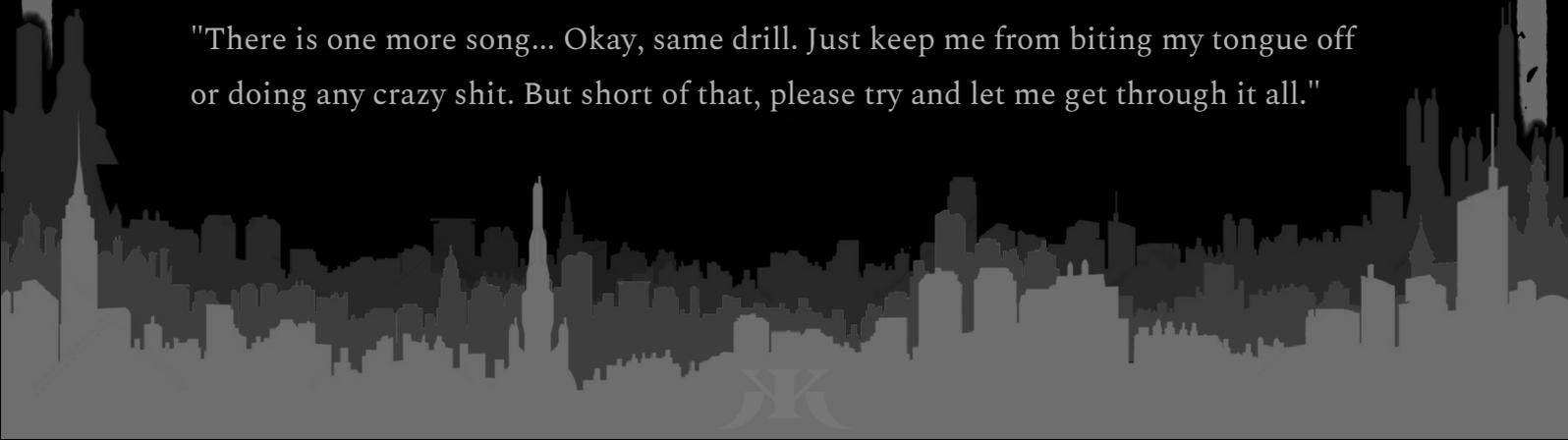
Leading a final charge from her platform, the grieving widow of the broken mirror makes the final assault. A curved strafing run sees most of the vanguard disintegrated by the beam, but she descends inside. The plasma emanates from a massive brazier, with scores of arcanists around it, casting and chanting. She spots the head sorcerer, a green-skinned priest with no lips dressed in white robes hand-painted with runes.

One hit from an arm-fused grenade launcher dismembers him, the plasma fire simmering down. A vacuum forms when the temple collapses, and the jets on her platforms barely propel her out of the ruins. Outside, hundreds of thousands are silenced at once by the shockwave.

It's all nothing more than a distant nightmare, but I pull out the headphones screaming, punching the wall, trying to forget the horrors of surreal warfare I feel a part of.

"Shit, Anders!!!", Jorrit tries to comfort me the best he can. A blanket, and a bucket for the vomiting, are quickly to hand, but from there, it's mostly holding on to me so I don't hurt himself. I finally calm after a few moments. My breathing slows and I manage to pull himself up to the bed to sit down.

"There is one more song... Okay, same drill. Just keep me from biting my tongue off or doing any crazy shit. But short of that, please try and let me get through it all."





Taking both headsets, I nod at Lucas.

"Hit me.", I indicate for Lucas to press play, and close my eyes.

Graceful and vengeful, the blood tears still on her face, she moves through the ages, watching. With the clouds above the plains rushing in fast-forward, the geography changes. Rivers grind mountains into valleys, the sun dissolves rocks into deserts. Tents become hamlets, then cities, buildings rushing upwards.

Here and there, everything slows down, and she steps into ruined lives. She touches men and women deemed worthy, changing their lives forever. The prehistoric hunter after his cannibal feast, a famished delirious atman, one artist in his clockwork workshop, a surgeon butchering prostitutes in an alley.

I recognize some of the faces, my traveling companions. One young Indian girl, stabbing a boy with a scissor in his neck. The reporter, stumbling about tentacled horrors in a jungle bunker. A detective, gunning down a witness to a drug deal. One broken soldier, looking at his comrades, dismembered by a undefused bomb. The occultist raping a young girl with raven wings.

Not many, but still hundreds of men, women and children unaware of their destiny. The last person I see is myself, merging with the memory, becoming one, and the woman approaches. I feel a metal claw caressing his forehead, until she pushes it through skull.

When she removes the finger, the wound grows and changes. A snake made of veins and muscles winds its way down. In front, a single amphibian eye stares back at me.





I wake with the end of the song. There's a dead silence in the air, and it all feels unreal. I am not myself, there is no awareness of my body when I vomit in the bucket. I sense all this from far away, deafened to the noise. The others slap me back into my senses, muffling my screaming mouth with a rag, stopping me from biting down.

Once I'm calm, there's a discussion on what to do. We decide that a few of us find the Thirteen Moons. I check for the production house is in the facepage link. Staring down at the katakana, the address format is unfamiliar, but readable. The first line is the Tokyo prefecture, then Meguro ward. It boils down to a district and city block, with a number.

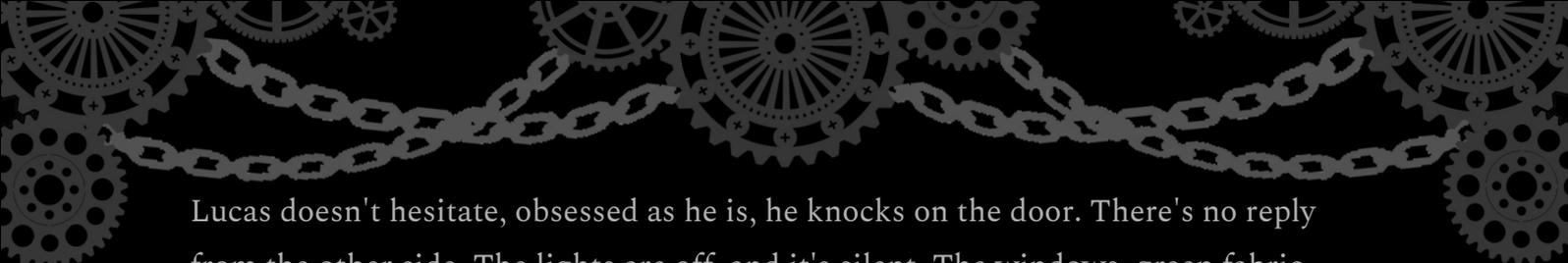
Outside in the streets, the festival is in full swing, shrines traveling through the streets. With careful planning, we head for Meguro.

White cherry blossoms hang on branches leaning over the Meguro river. The water flows silently, interrupted by the sound of ducks. Lanterns light the canal, and couples stroll the boardwalk. We walk by the shore with our briefcases and salary man suits, admiring the harmony of the water and the trees.

It's an apartment complex, coral colored, and it has an external staircase. At least 50 floors stack on top of each other, and there's no intercom to block the way. Climbing the steps, we reach door 102, looking at each other. Jorrit makes the plan.

"Alright, here's the skinny: This is supposed to be the production company that made the Malkuth album of the J-metal band Thirteen Moons. I'd say we'll try nicely at first, then gruff, then painful?"





Lucas doesn't hesitate, obsessed as he is, he knocks on the door. There's no reply from the other side. The lights are off, and it's silent. The windows, green fabric blinders rolled down, show no shadows. Just a slight unpleasant smell escapes through the thermally isolated door.

With the mercenary trying the handle, it opens, and he notices the lock is busted. A foul stench assaults me from the darkness, rilling my already weakened stomach. Lucas holds up his hand warning the others to stay back as he nudges the door open to peek inside

"ugh!", Jorrit covers his mouth and nose with his hand, while his other hand closes around the pistol underneath his jacket.

The lights are off, and I feel for a switch. I find it, but I wish I hadn't. Leaning forward on the table are a family of three, with their heads cut off and resting among the plates. They're in an advanced state of decomposition, with maggots crawling over their open throats. Everything else has been turned over, only the cartoon kitten on the fridge untouched.

The rest of the neons in the kitchen finally light up after a stutter. Black sludge is flowing from the table, the decomposing bodies dripping. It forms small rivers, spreading on the wooden floor. A tv sits in the corner displaying a blue inert channel. Four other doors lead out of the room, one of them an open bathroom.

Now that the door is open, condensation forms on the window. Jorrit thinks the place has been ransacked, and it doesn't look like the family put up much of a fight. The cereal bowls are still on the table, half eaten, and there are no signs of a struggle. Ricardo follows the sludge trails more closely, leading under the table. The bodies were eviscerated.





There's something under the table along with the intestines. A glass clink can be heard when Ricardo sticks in a wooden broom handle. Suddenly all the viscera throbs, liquid passing through it.

There's a shine forming underneath the table, something reflecting in a jar. It's faint, but getting stronger. The decomposing hands spasm faintly.

"Well, this likely isn't good." Ricardo says, backing away from the table.

Peering under the table, I see it. Connected by the guts, organs are placed in jars, tied together in chemical madness. Lucas snuggles up close, his eyes widen, and yells again.

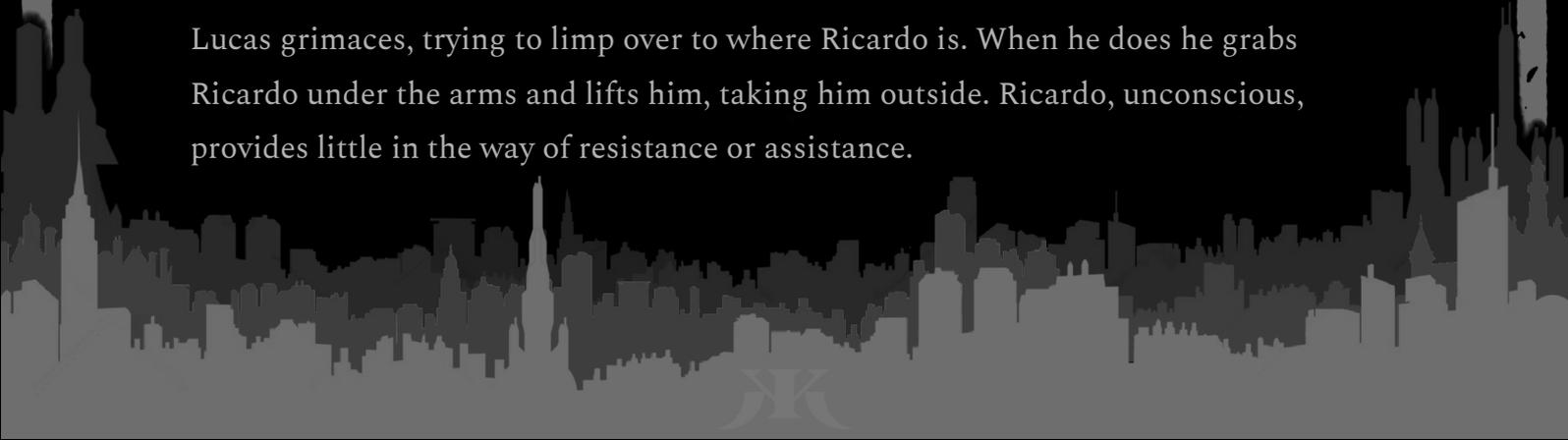
"GET THE FUCK OUT NOW! OUT, GET OUT, OUT OF THE BUILDING!"

I'm paralyzed in fear and awe, as Lucas pulls out some sort of tool and takes a few short breaths and cuts the only wire that makes sense to him.

Lucas cuts and cuts, the black sludge making his hands slippery. He loses track of what he is doing in the gore. Something big and feral pulls him aside, slamming him through a room door. The bodies spasm, and then burst, sending bone shards everywhere.

Ricardo's entity, summoned at the last minute, takes the brunt of the blast, but a piece of its shoulder blade strikes Ricardo in the head. A shard of bone hits Lucas in the knee as he lands on a bed filled with stuffed toys. All that is left are raven feathers, flying through the room, which is still standing. It could have been much worse. The mercenary did something right in there.

Lucas grimaces, trying to limp over to where Ricardo is. When he does he grabs Ricardo under the arms and lifts him, taking him outside. Ricardo, unconscious, provides little in the way of resistance or assistance.





A few slaps wake up Ricardo, but his temple is bleeding from the blunt hit. Everyone else approaches the door, wondering what happened. A few neighbors poke their heads out, most of them in bathrobes.

"Eeeuuuughhuhh..." Ricardo moans as his eyelids lazily open.

"We got to act fast and leave. Maybe... tapes in that room."

The onlookers approach, two of them from the neighboring apartments. Middle aged old ladies, they seem preoccupied by the noise and the people. Jorrit tries some crowd control, openly wielding his gun.

"Interpol Investigation! Possible Terrorist Threat! Everybody Stay Back!"

Frantic, Parvati and I search through the tossed over room. There isn't much left in the place untouched. One is an office with a bed, strewn with mechanical blueprints. The other is a little girl's bedroom, j-pop bands on every inch of wall. Parvati, used to contraband, knocks on the walls, and finds a fake panel. I help her, and soon we tear it down, smearing blood all over the place from the antiquarian's temple. An entire collection of horror movie tapes along with a laptop and some pictures sits behind it. We grab everything we can and move out, while one of the old women outside is dialing on her phone.

There's one black tape holder with no markings, and it opens to reveal a photograph. Cursing her luck, Parvati, piles me downstairs, and we board the taxi Lucas ordered. We're on our way to another hotel in Asakusa, Taito.





The hotel is a post-modern architectural miracle, both on the outside and the inside. Paintings resembling Pollock line the walls, with abstract metal sculptures in the lobby. Even my room, a spacious studio with a skylight, has an iron pitchfork sculpture made of rebar. The label underneath says "Robot Hand".

Spreading everything taken from the apartment, we make a quick inventory while Lucas and Ricardo bandage themselves. A collection of horror tapes, a laptop and some recording equipment are the electronic items. A leather journal and a picture in the unmarked holder are the analog ones.

The journal's cover is a stylized woman's face wrapped in shrouds. I open the lock and peruse through it. A typical confused teenager narrative, full of nihilism and suicidal ideation. Mood swings are apparent in his talks of love, horror movies, and music. Guitar tabs frequently appear, a fiasco of corrections and retouched notes evident.

In the last segment it all changes, turning to page after page of perfect notation, not a single correction mark on it. A single entry separates the two:

Takashi Shimizu's good, Ruggero Deodato was the top, but nothing compares. Kalma brought us the tape, he somehow got it off a dealer at his workplace. He didn't watch it, leaving it to us, but we won't let him. It's the most horrible and wondrous thing I've seen, laying out my entire future. Everything makes sense now, and I know that I'm just the water. Rain, with his vocals, swims in it, delivering her message. Everyone will know the Truth. I no longer need words. Rain speaks for us.



There's quite a number of tapes and DVDs with some obscure grindhouse exploitation movies. Some titles we recognize: Dawn of the Dead, Cannibal Holocaust, I Spit on Your Grave. Others are Japanese specific, like Jigoku, Suicide Club, or Tokyo Gore Police. One set stands apart, a series verging on pure snuff films by the director Shinichiro Fujiwara. The sleek corporate logo of the film studio is a version of the one Parvati has on her neck. A strange corruption of the Japanese flag, with Sumiyoshi-kai Pictures written underneath.

Lucas calls down to the concierge and asks for a vhs player. It takes some convincing and a great deal of money, but an hour later the concierge shows up with an old Sony TV/VCR combo. It's a small, grey box with a transparent plastic protection panel in front, accumulated dust in the bindings. Lucas plugs in the tapes one by one, watching movies created more to disgust than entertain. None of them strikes any particular notes with him, only the Fujiwara films being realistic enough to be believable. Art-house snuff films. The director likes presenting situations of people kidnapped and tortured in creative ways.

Sofia spends some time on the laptop. Finding it passworded, she tries different tricks for unlocking the thing. Turns out there's an unpassworded administrator account hidden in the profiles. Thankfully, the owner used some sort of mailing system which backed up everything on disk. There's an obvious correspondence between three monikers: Rain, Onyx, Kalma. It's mostly discussions about movies, bands, and unreachable attachments with samples of music. One email from Rain stands out:

Onyx, our message isn't reaching the right people. None of the drunks in the clubs and chat rooms are Chosen. They're not important enough, the shut-ins like us won't affect anything. I'm going to the Sea of Trees to kill myself, and I'm taking an album copy and the tape. Maybe that way the right people will notice. Tell Kalma I'm sorry.



"That's Aokigahara, the 'Suicide Forest'. About a hundred people offing themselves there every year... so many the officials have stopped reporting the exact number years ago." Lucas says loudly enough that everyone can hear. "Paid a visit my first year here."

"So that's our next location to visit." Parvati looks at Lucas.

I look at that picture in the holder. One would think these common goth kid names would result in hundreds of results. I use the tags and do a reverse image search, like so many times before. Their social media profiles pop up, and the same faces are in the picture. Dresses in full leather strap, spiky hair, chokers, and latex masks.

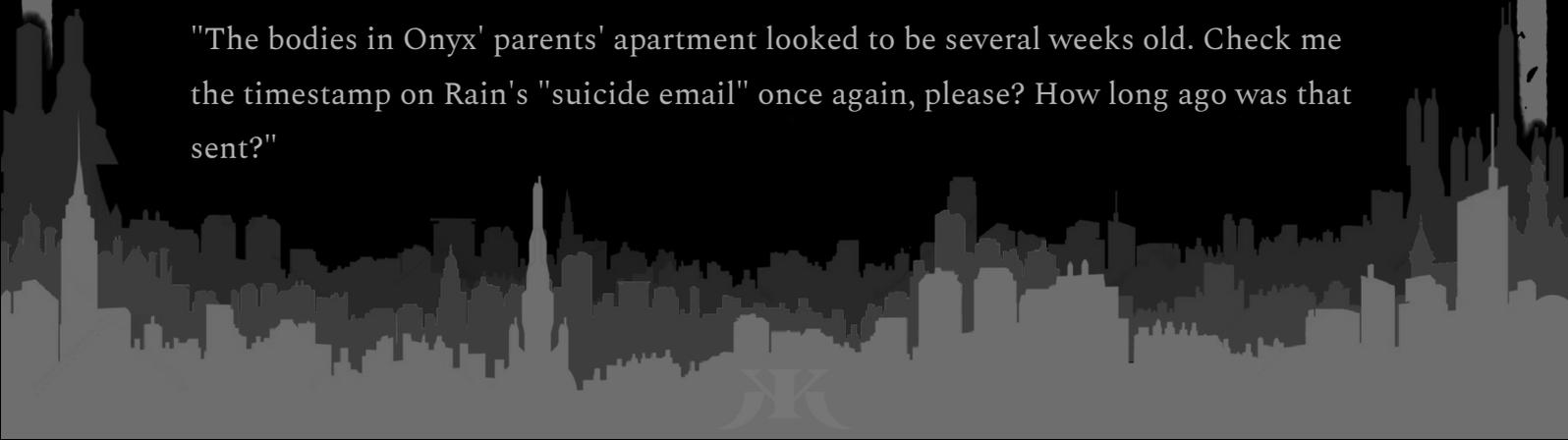
Unlike most goth kids taking pictures in an idyllic park, this one is in a fish market. Kalma, in fact, wears a fish seller's green apron, and displays his ketchup-stained cleavers. The Hiragana in the background spells Tani Market & Fish Farm. Web searches show it's in Koto.

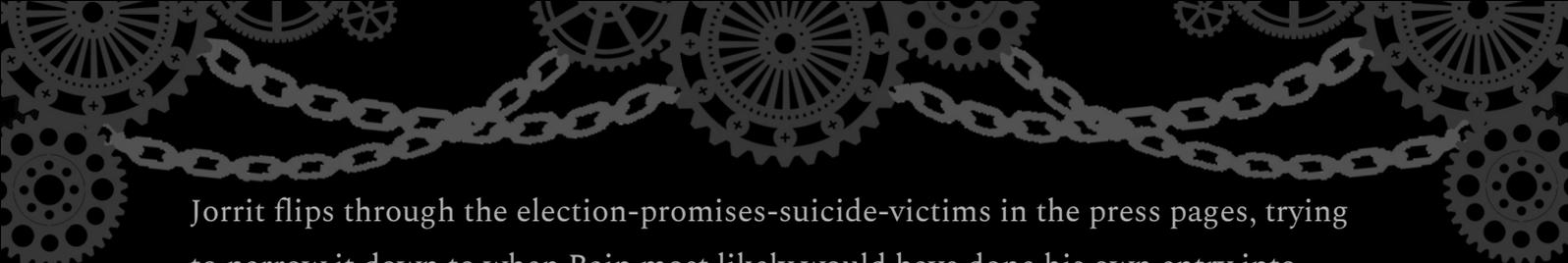
I keep googling, doing a cross-search for Aokigahara, Kalma, Rain, Onyx, Thirteen Moons, Tani Market, and Malkuth. See if there was something in the papers, on TV, or Youtube.

"Kalma" Parvati points to the kid in the picture "He's the one that didn't watch the tape."

My search doesn't result in anything more concrete than the band album. A side article attracts my attention, one that focuses on the upcoming election. Part of the incumbents' platform has promised no more suicides in the forest. To ridicule him, each new death has been a small spectacle in the press, with each victim detailed.

"The bodies in Onyx' parents' apartment looked to be several weeks old. Check me the timestamp on Rain's "suicide email" once again, please? How long ago was that sent?"





Jorrit flips through the election-promises-suicide-victims in the press pages, trying to narrow it down to when Rain most likely would have done his own entry into these...

No entries in the journal are marked by time, having more of a free flow structure. Once I check the dates on the mailbox, I realize the suicide email has been received in the last few hours. The automated emailing system just archived it directly, and chances are that Rain is still alive, heading for the forest.

"Internet says Mount Fuji is the most popular spot to do it. But there are several other frequently used places, and of course a million trees to just hang yourself from."

"Something tells me once we get somewhat close, we'll know."

"Not good enough" Lucas interrupts. "We're talking about 14 square miles of forest, without roads or access for cars... Ricardo, you wouldn't happen to be able to organize us a helicopter, would you?"

"I've got the cash. Best to find a civilian rec pilot."

"They have helicopter tours. We just have to convince them to land in a clearing or rappel down."

Ricardo is soon on the phone, charting a flight with the company Jorrit found online. Most of the night has passed already, and they get instructions to a nearby building with a helipad. A cab takes us to a tall office highrise, and an elevator does the rest. There's just enough light in the sky to see the pilot, a short woman with a ponytail and red cap. She politely shakes their hand, instructs us to fasten our seats, and takes off for the Sea of Trees.



There's a rain cloud cover rising, the sun just above it, visible only at this altitude. Mount Fuji's peak still has snow this time of year, the albedo reflecting the light. From the slopes, fog rolls downwards, drowning the forest, trees barely visible. Everyone's wearing headsets, listening to the pilot serving us the tour guide.

"Looks like we're lucky, it's one of those rare air fronts. Majestic, isn't it?"

"It is indeed! Do you often take people out by this route?" Sofia answers her through the headset.

"It depends on the time of day. I try to keep the sun to the side, if possible. If it gets in your eye, it blinds the sight. You guys are lucky for booking in the morning."

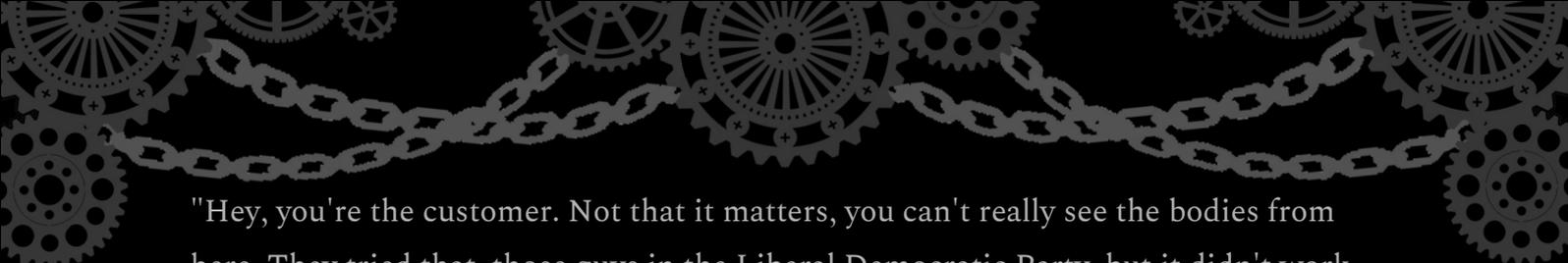
Lucas had some foresight and stopped in at one of those ubiquitous electronic shops and bought a thermal camera. He's sitting shotgun using it to scan the forest. Erena, as she introduced herself earlier, laughs at him.

"Bird watching? That's Mount Fuji right there, the highest volcano in Japan, and the reason why Tokyo has earthquake architecture. The Sea Of Trees, our famous Suicide Forest, is below us, covered by the fog."

The mercenary looks downward with a specialized binocular, and thinks her saying has some merit.

"There's nothing visible through the thermal camera. I've seen some movement with the magnifier, but it could be anything. Heard this place was haunted." I sense dread, something reminding me of that first song. Ricardo makes his move.

"Erena, if I asked nicely could you do a low hover over this area for a few minutes? To be honest, we are looking for a friend..."



"Hey, you're the customer. Not that it matters, you can't really see the bodies from here. They tried that, those guys in the Liberal Democratic Party, but it didn't work. Too much tree cover from the air. As for most haunted, who knows? Compasses supposedly go haywire. A few caves have had people go missing, but if I had to guess, more suicides."

There's a knot in my stomach when the helicopter lowers, dispelling the fog. The pilot holds the helicopter steady over the forest. True to her word, it's nothing but overgrowth. Somehow, though, through the branches, I spot a group of people in sportswear. I could swear they have swords. Pointing them out to Lucas, he talks to the pilot.

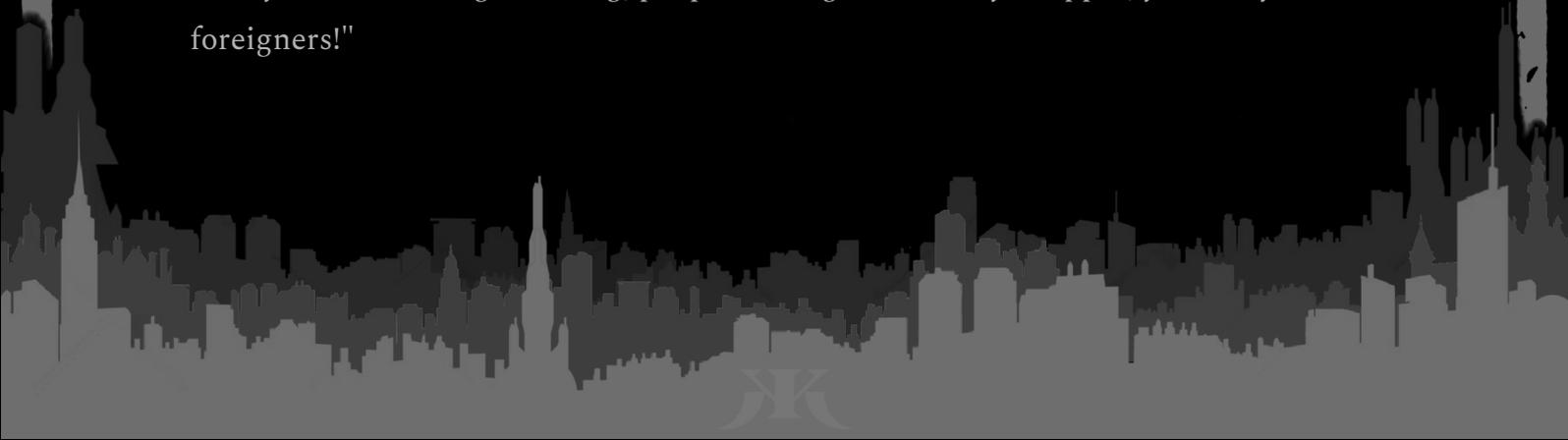
"Ma'am, a few of us would jump out here please."

"That's why you brought the rappel gear, right? Fuck it, got paid upfront anyway, and you people signed the liability forms. I'll find a clearing for the rest of you, set you down nicely."

Having done this a thousand times before, the mercenary hitches the rope to a nearby security handle. He rappels downwards, slowly and calculated, until he touches the foliage. The less experienced Jorrit is next at the rope. Picking up the rappelling carbine, he swings himself over the edge and holds on for dear life, descending.

Both of them are gone. When the others give the all clear signal, the pilot moves the vehicle. She finds a clearing after a few minutes of searching. The machine lands with a thud, knocking everyone's teeth together.

"Sorry about the rough landing, people. Now get out of my chopper, you crazy foreigners!"





It doesn't take long before she takes off, leaving us behind, the fog reclaiming the forest. No sooner does someone step from behind a tree, a blue haired man in a striped suit and fedora. He has a sword hilt on his shoulder, and chews a toothpick, staring disdainfully. Others join him, climbing over the small hill that was standing in the antiquarian's way. Among them is a woman in red leathers and combat boots, wielding an Uzi. I recognize the machine gun woman from the pastry shop in Amsterdam.

"Well, well. What do we have here?"

"We've heard you can actually see dead people out here!" Sofia tries to feign ignorance.

Sticking his tongue out, the fedora chortles mischievously, unsheathing his sword.

"I'm looking at some dead people right now!"

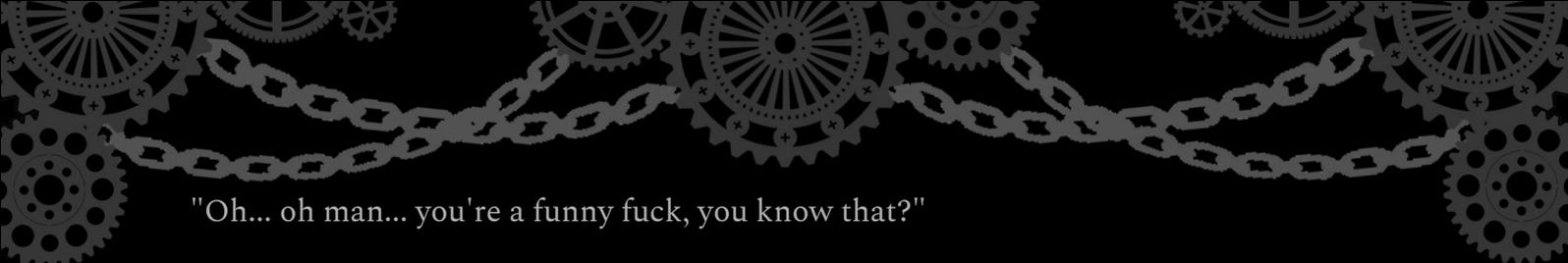
The group turns to Parvati, who has a short blade at her throat. She can't see his face, but recognizes the low snicker of One-Eye.

"I wouldn't move if I were you..."

He brings her close, feeling up her breast, licking her ear. The assassin keeps absolutely still, not even so much as shivering in response to the lick. Ricardo speaks, trying to negotiate.

"Well, uh, how about not hurting us? I'd rather not be killed."

Bursting into gut laughter, the boss is joined by his crew. Only the woman in red is silent, but smiling, waiting for them to recover. There's a tattoo of a chalice on her neck.



"Oh... oh man... you're a funny fuck, you know that?"

He points the sword at Ricardo.

"I'll kill you... last. How's that?"

"Look, we're just lost tourists, we're sorry if we offended any traditions." Sofia adds.

"We're really not worth it."

The boss looks at Sofia, then uses his other hand to take off his fedora, a mocking bow.

"I tip my hat... at a fine bullshitter. I'd almost believe you, if it wasn't for that Sumiyoshi ronin over there."

He looks at Parvati, still in the grip of a bald man in a black suit, one eye white, carved by a scar. Sofia tries to co opt Parvati in her scheme, without success.

"You know these people?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

The reporter is frustrated by the answer.

"Is this why you keep coming back with bullet holes and blood?"

"Whew. Suddenly feels very hot, is it just me?" Ricardo asks, unbuttoning the top several buttons of his shirt. "Maybe impending death feels like that. Is she the boss?" Ricardo asks, indicating the red lady.

"No. She's not." Parvat corrects him.





The woman in red stays silent at Ricardo's remark. The boss, not so much.

The fedora erupts, raising the blade and moving towards the antiquarian.

"I'll show you who's the boss, motherfucker."

Once more the claws tear out of Ricardo's chest, who falls to his knees, spent. Dark raven wings rise upwards, as something made of muscles and teeth moves forward. The fedora pisses his pants, and his underlings are equally shocked.

"What... what the fuck is that?"

Impasse, the woman in red raises an eyebrow.

"Whatever it is, shoot it, you imbeciles!"

While the entity tears into the Yakuza, one-eye shaves Parvati, causing only a trickle of blood. She's still in his clutches, holding on strong. The assassin struggles to put an elbow in her captor, but he only laughs in her ear and presses the blade into her throat.

Ricardo, on his knees, leans forward to put his hands in the dirt as well, then crawls as fast as he can behind a tree to catch his breath and shield from bullets. Sofia and me run for the tree cover at the edge of the clearing. Screams are heard as the beast rips the mobsters apart, viscera splashing the trees. It stops to chew on a leg, with the same savor as if it were lamb, and is torn to pieces in the next instant. Smoking barrel in hand, the woman in red points her uzi at Ricardo's head as he tries to get away.

"Where do you think you're going?"





The more Parvati struggles, the deeper the knife edge digs in. One-eye is staking his time. Blade digging in towards the carotid, she's slowly losing consciousness.

"Uh, I didn't want to be a part of this. Did Samael send you?" Ricardo asks, hoping to buy time. Samael's bitch tilts her head, looking at Ricardo like he's breakfast.

"Sorry, not selling any. Now tell me everything you know about the tape and I'll give you a quick death."

Parvati stops struggling, but the sadistic killer keeps the blade where it is. She spots Sofia in the tree line, unobserved and forgotten, and a dead mobster's revolver at the reporter's feet. She motions the reporter toward the dead mobster's revolver.

Sofia reaches out and picks up the gun, cocks it ready to fire, but isn't sure who to target first, the sleaze holding Parvati or the woman talking to Ricardo. The bitch leans back, resting her gun arm, supporting it with the other underneath.

"Hmm, what I know? About the tapes? Well, uh, they're the last music these guys did I think. And their shit is really mind-altering. I knew they were gonna make the tapes before they were born."

"Really? That's what this fuss is about? A simple divination? You humans really are pathetic, aren't you? Maggots on a hook."

A gunshot rings out, and I feel an anvil dropping on my chest. But it's not me. Ricardo spits out blood, having trouble breathing. There's a knife stuck in the woman's hand, the one previously cutting Parvati's throat. She looks angered at One-Eye, who pushes his hostage hard into the ground, her throat bleeding. Parvati's head smashes onto a rock, leaving her dazed, stars in her field of vision. She can't seem to find her gun, and she feels around for it, clawing at the dirt.





"We need him alive. He's bait for the Father of Carnage."

"You dare betray me, Drath'tan? After I freed you from Gebruah's citadel?"

"What can I say, Samael's not all that these days."

Ricardo, confused at the exchange, wheezes. Red warmth drips down his chin and drips off of his beard. Ricardo is at the end of his rope. The blood from Ricardo's mouth cascades, flowing towards the bony remains of the raven wings. It rises yet again, half-dead, and rushes the woman first, taking Ricardo's lust with it. Holding the massive Colt, Sofia finally snaps off a shot, but doesn't make it past the entity.

One-Eye laughs, retreating into the forest, leaving us in the company of growling sounds and machinegun fire. Two unstoppable forces tumble down a hill, out of sight, embraced in brutality.

Ricardo motions Sofia to check on Parvati. He himself is on his knees, one elbow in the dirt using his other arm to motion. He rolls onto his back for a second. His open chest shows a kevlar vest, half torn in the summoning, and a wound where the bullet grazed him. He grabs a pair of gloves from his pocket and stuffs it under his vest to try to slow the bleeding.

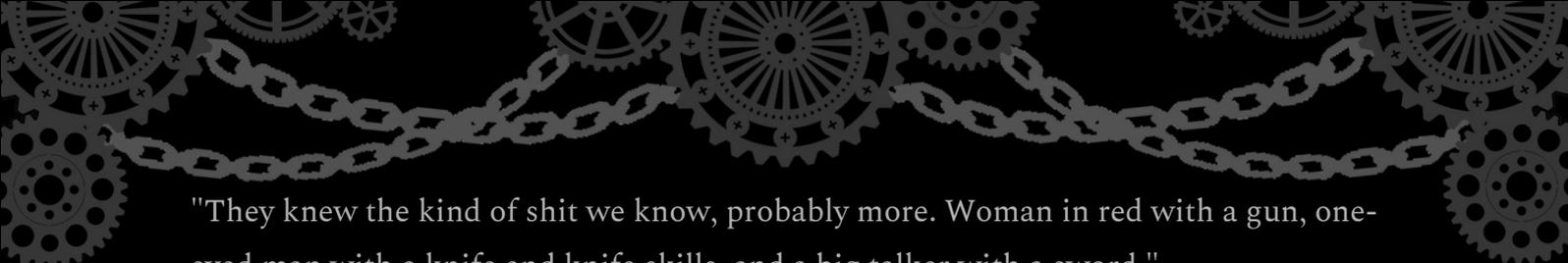
Parvati crawls around, clearly dazed, blood trickling down her face from the injury, trying to find something close enough to use as support to get on her feet.

Over the hill, the rampage has stopped, and the silence resumes. Lucas descends from that direction, hurrying down the hill, with no sign of the detective.

"Jesus Christ guys, what the fuck happened?"

"Yakuza....my previous employers...."





"They knew the kind of shit we know, probably more. Woman in red with a gun, one-eyed man with a knife and knife skills, and a big talker with a sword."

"Well the woman in red is almost a stain on the ground if that helps" he starts checking everyone over. "Didn't see anyone else."

I breathe a sigh of relief that the woman is dead, before walking over to fedora man and looking for his sword and scabbard.

The mercenary checks the wounded, finding them in pretty bad condition. He focuses on the antiquarian first, who can't seem to find his breath. Lucas does what he can, sewing, bandaging and injecting painkillers. Branches and sticks are improvised as crutches, clothes as bandages. It isn't much, but they're mobile.

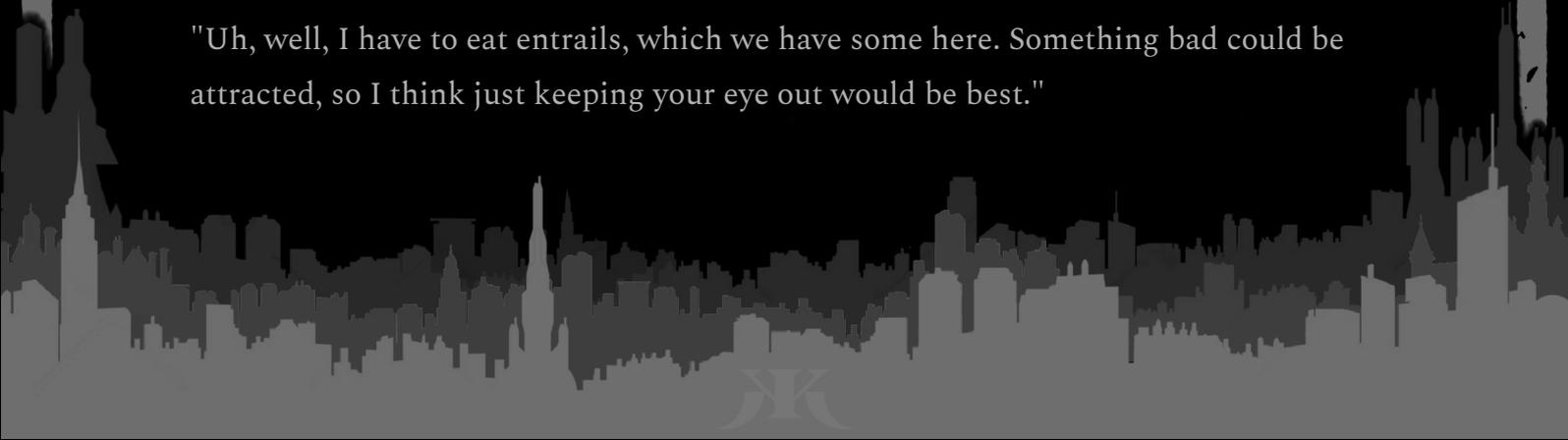
There are no lines on the mobile. I think back to what the pilot said about geomagnetic disturbances. I switch to an expensive direct satellite laser transmission we purchased for the occasion. It beeps, and confirms a location, the display generating a precise map.

"We need to get out of here. There's something seriously wrong with this forest. Whispers of the dead and shit. Lost Jorrit in the fog." Lucas says, while patching Ricardo up.

"Well, that delay likely cost us. But hopefully we can find the tape and Jorrit can find us. Hmm. Any luck with the tape? I know a ritual that might help us locate the boy, but as everything, it could go awry."

"I'd say you need to rest, but none of us have time for that. How can I help?"

"Uh, well, I have to eat entrails, which we have some here. Something bad could be attracted, so I think just keeping your eye out would be best."





"I got your back, man!"

"Well, here goes. At least this asshole deserved it." Ricardo feigns a chuckle but it turns into a rough cough.

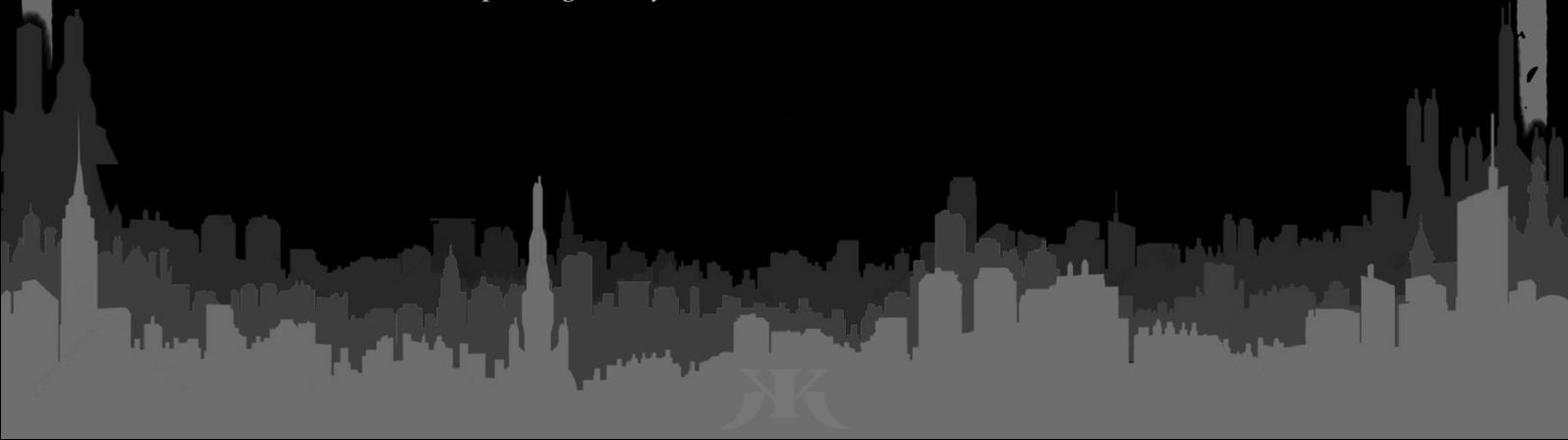
Walking over to the fedora-wearing gangster, Ricardo kneels down next to the body. The man's throat had been torn out and one of his legs ripped entirely off, the opened bodies still steaming slightly in the cold morning fog.

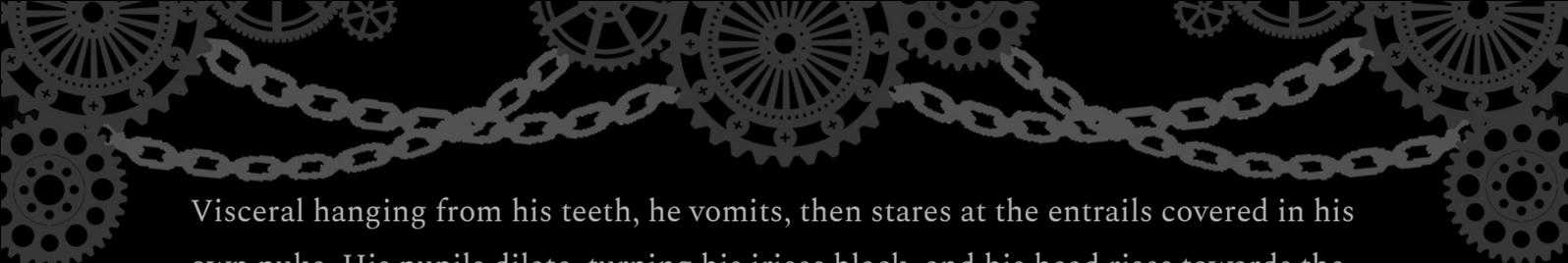
Ricardo draws out the katana next to him and carefully slices the stomach area open, laterally at the top of the pelvis and again at the bottom of the rib cage. Then he slides the blade sideways under the skin, rotating it, and pulls outward from the body to reveal the man's guts. He wipes the blade on the man's shredded suit and puts it back.

Steeling himself for the vileness to come, he separates the stomach from the corpse, giving it a squeeze to empty the contents off to the side. He eats the stomach lining, ripping the entrails into manageable lengths. At first, I can read the disgust on his face, but then a foreign hunger overtakes him. Perhaps the beast within is replenishing itself, starving from the exertion.

He eats more fervently, and might look even crazier if his eyes were open. Mouth full, he is humming a tone that alternatively trills upward several octaves and then becomes a growl much deeper than a man like Ricardo could create. He cradles the lengths of intestine in his arms, shaking them as if he were comforting a baby. He himself rocks forward and back.

Then, he flings his arms forward, sending the entrails scattering about the ground in front of him before opening his eyes.





Visceral hanging from his teeth, he vomits, then stares at the entrails covered in his own puke. His pupils dilate, turning his irises black, and his head rises towards the forest. Intestines hang from the branches, marking a path, which he follows like a madman. He rises and walks in a drunken stupor, occasionally tripping. We follow him into the fog.

It isn't long until we notice the first body sitting in the trees. It's wearing blue overalls and is in an advanced state of decomposition, a bluejay pecking at its eye. Soon, there's another, and another. Hikers, women, and children. Lucas doesn't remember seeing any corpses last time, but now they're everywhere. Whispering sounds distracting the duo, and soon they're lost in the fog.

We find the body of the boy, Rain, in a small grove. He sits in a throne of sorts, made of roots, ruling over older, less fresh cadavers. His spiked dark hair now a crown, one eye hanging out, with a bluejay inside the cavity. Jorrit is hanged among the vines, sleeping, the creeping plants coiled around his neck. Lucas runs both hands through his hair.

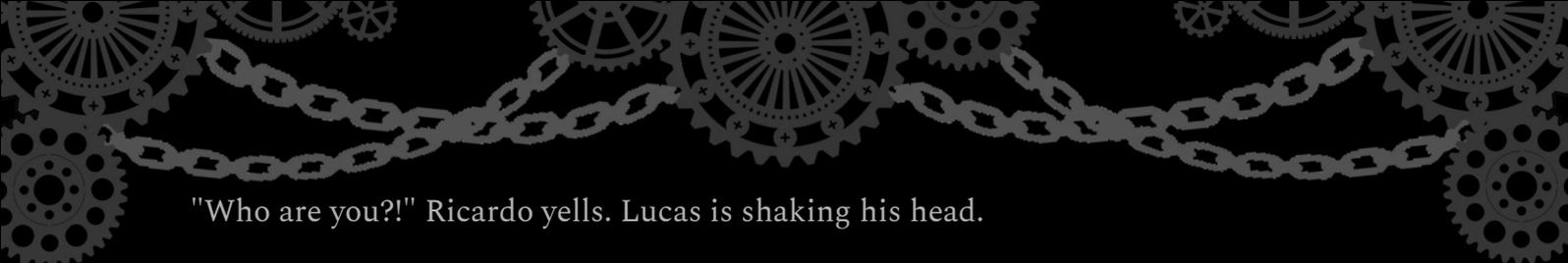
"Fuck..." he looks at the detective, sleeping peacefully, then to the boy. Saddened, he still looks around for the tapes, until the wind picks up. With a corner of his eye we spot movement, a combination of breeze and vines turning the bodies into puppets. The tape is nowhere to be seen. Whispers can be heard.

"Mine..."

Parvati takes the katana from Ricardo, and bites down on the blade before climbing the tree. After a certain height, she hacks at the branch holding Jorrit. It snaps loose under the blade's influence, and Parvati catches him as he falls. The breeze moves the bodies slightly, with no discernible source for the whispers.

"Never leave..."





"Who are you?!" Ricardo yells. Lucas is shaking his head.

Violent rustling shakes the branches, bluejays landing on the corpses. Some look like they have sharp teeth in their beaks. The whispers are louder.

"I am hungry..."

When the mercenary helps Parvati, Rain's head tilts with the bluejay escaping.

"Thieves... same as... one-eyed... took bauble..."

The birds chirp for the first time, joining in with the wind.

"Thieves... thieves..."

One by one, they begin slamming into us, dying. More and more appear, a barrage intensifying. We try to protect ourselves while dragging Jorrit and Ricardo with us through the flock.

Moving along the paths, the bluejays and the wind will not let up. The constant chirp and pestering only enhance the whispers. Secrets of sins past surface within the static noise of the cires. Lucas pulls out his yellow plastic bottle of Ronsonol and his zippo.

"Try me! I'll burn this whole forest down" he yells into the mess of birds

When Lucas lights a small bush, the birds break away. It's not long before the GPS map brings us to a road. From there, a bus station, and a return to Tokyo. Its only noon when the cultists arrive at the hotel in Taito.





A splash of acrylic on a canvas greets us after the back exit. Coffee waits in the kitchen machine, round glass tables all around. Dejected, we sit around, enjoying the hot brew. The whispers of the forest haunt us still. Ricardo sips deeply of his coffee, letting the cup warm his still-cold hands. "Any idea where to find One-Eye? Drath'tan?"

"Yakuza. I should be able to find him, but I can't say I'd get a warm welcome."

"Who the hell was that woman?" I ask.

"The servant of Samael. She mentioned having freed Drath'tan from a citadel of Geburah. Geburah is a house of law, so he is a criminal, which is not surprising. But he seems pretty able with a blade, and the fact that she would go through the trouble to free him would suggest to me that he is beyond the ken of mortal men. Are you aware of any other abilities he possesses?"

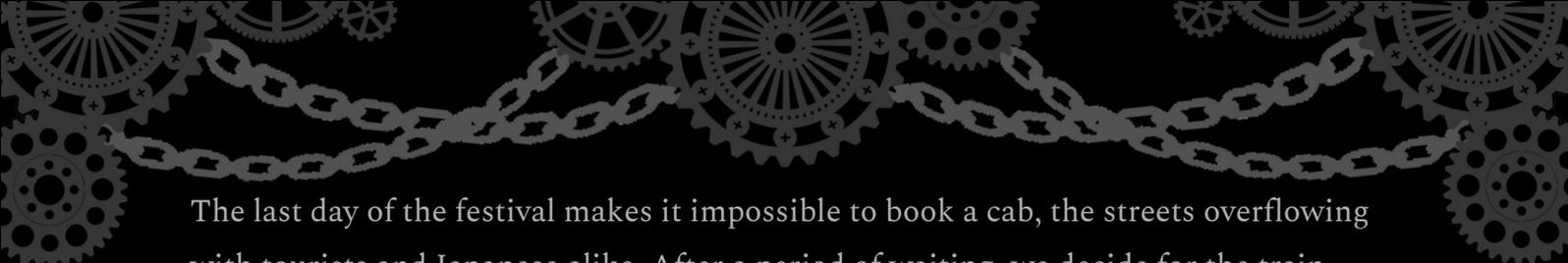
Parvati looks at Ricardo.

"Being able to freakishly contort himself into a vent and get out of a building."

"But he still double-crossed his employer. Maybe there's a more powerful one out there."

"We need to figure out where this tape came from. Maybe track down Kalma."

"You two are in no shape to look for anyone. I'll take Anders and Jorrit. Sofia has some medical training, and since we can't go to the hospital, you're staying here and she's patching you up." Lucas is still clicking his Zippo, it's become an almost nervous tick now, as he goes over his things. I check the picture again, and get the Tani Fish Market address from my phone.



The last day of the festival makes it impossible to book a cab, the streets overflowing with tourists and Japanese alike. After a period of waiting, we decide for the train, and seek the signs of the magnetic rail. The train is silent and sleek, rolling onto the platform with speed, opening its door to spill out people. Somehow the seekers fit themselves inside, crowded between the passengers, and are quickly carried away.

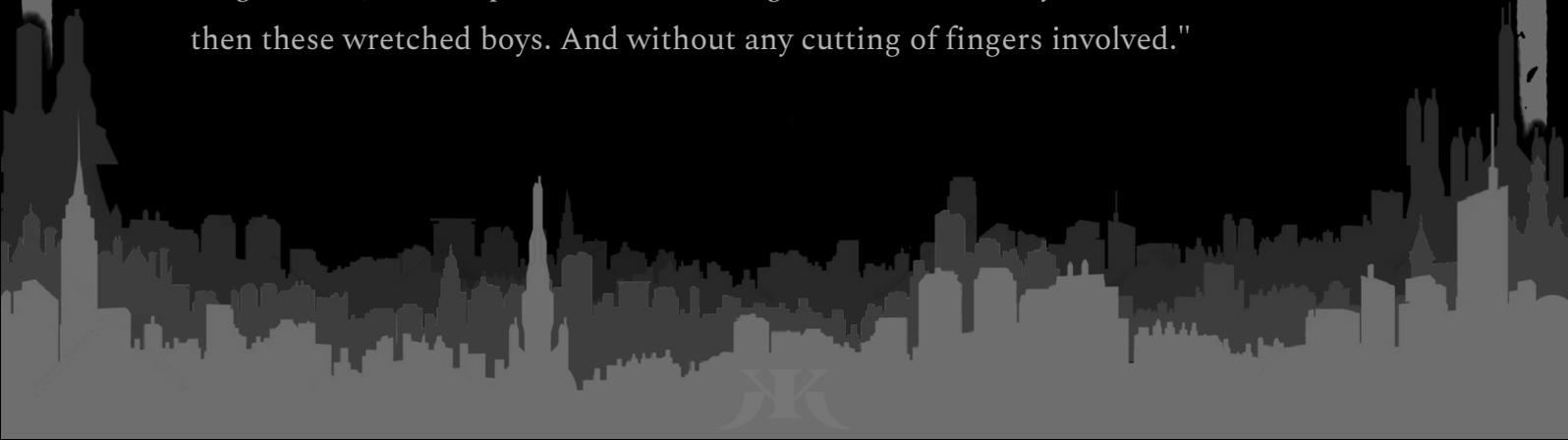
The led display throws up Koto, and we get off. It's a short walk across a bridge that leads to a pier before they reach the destination. The market is a single story building, with men unloading a truck of plastic boxes flapping with fish. A set of stands at the entrance sell deep fried fresh produce, the smells of spices mixing in the air. Inside, it's rows of fish, squids, and live crabs giving out a rough smell, all neon lit by a low hanging fake ceiling. There must be at least 40 separate stalls, with seafood in all possible colors.

We press through the crowds of buyers and sellers, visiting into each stall looking for the large sign where the photo was taken in the first place - and then for where the photographer must have stood for that particular perspective.

We find it. The back of the hall, where the fish farm is. Heading that way, we're shoved aside by two men in green aprons, passing some semi-transparent plastic frills that separate the farm. Inside there's an assembly line for fish products, but nobody to operate it. It's immediately evident why: two young men are at a table, immobilized. Around them are yakuza thugs, led by Big Tuna in his white suit.

"One last time before I start cutting fingers: where's the tape?"

"Big Tuna!" Jorrit stops him. "I would wager that we can tell you more about that than these wretched boys. And without any cutting of fingers involved."





Taken by surprise, Tuna throws the cleaver into the table. It narrowly missed one of the hands held down by his thugs. He walks towards the detective, hands wide open.

"Foreigner, I thought you had no involvement in this. What are you doing here?"

"Didn't expect to have reason to cross your path again, either. But what can I say, involvement... developed. I think I know what you're looking for, and I think I can help you find the one who has got it."

Tuna rubs his eyes and sighs. Looking back up, weariness washes over his face.

"Ok, let's get to the point. What have you got for me?"

"A deal. I tell you who has got your tape, and you help us to find and kill them. See, me and my friends have separate troubles with these guys - so I was thinking, why should we not both profit from working together on this?"

Jorrit chooses his words carefully, but speaks them with confidence. He checks closely for Big Tuna's reaction to the last bit there.

Moving around the stall, Lucas draws his pistol, keeping it low as he moves to a better vantage, using the manual rubber cylinder assembly for cover. Hands on his hips, Tuna laughs, looking away for a bit, then back at Jorrit.

"You're full of shit. Always in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now you want to lead my men into an ambush. It's not going to happen. Let's see what the boys have to say about that tape."

He nods towards one of his men, who chops the cleaver downwards. The long haired boy that isn't Kalma screams, taking away his hand, fingers on the table.





The cleaver snaps in half. Blood gushes out of the gangster's hands. Lucas steps out from cover, rushing Big Tuna, thrusting the gun in his mouth.

"Freeze! If I hear a fucking fart I'm a blow this fucks neck in half!"

The gangsters are waiting for their boss to give orders. Tuna tries to speak through the gun muzzle.

"Tell them to fuck off or I'm going to end your fucking existence" Lucas backs the barrel out just enough to let him speak. "Jorrit, Anders!! Get the kids, let's go..."

Gun still in his mouth, Tuna mumbles something while we get Kalma and his friend. One of the itchy trigger finger thugs grinds his teeth, a few of them silver. Lucas maneuvers himself behind Tuna, using him as a shield, pulling him backward, following us and the kids.

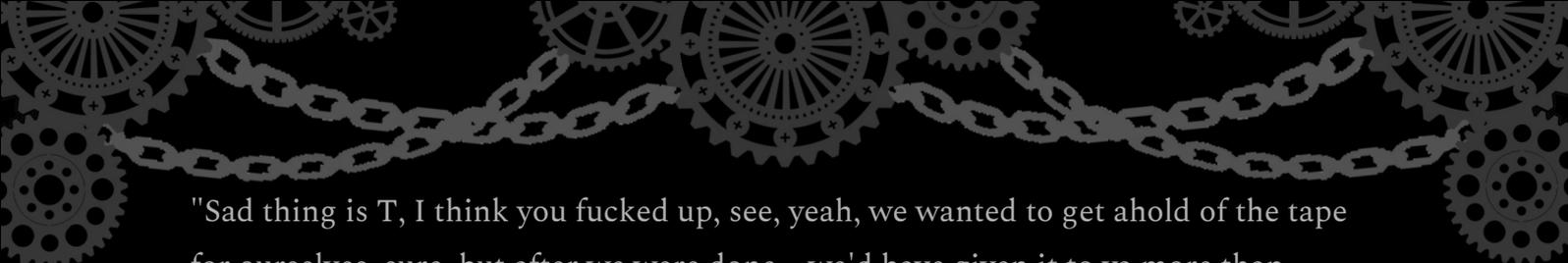
I spot a police patrol up front, at the end of the stalls, and past some wooden pallets with crates of shrimp, a side exit. I whistle to Lucas, and soon we're in the street. Somewhere behind us, he hears the cops yelling at the Yakuza to drop their guns. Lucas walks briskly with Tuna in front of him still, the handgun in his back.

"Neither of us want to get busted by the police, so let's move."

He nods in agreement and we head across the bridge towards the rail station. In front of the steps, Big Tuna stares the mercenary down with that weary look in his eyes.

"I hope you know you'll pay for this. There's no way to escape the Yamaken. We're just too large."





"Sad thing is T, I think you fucked up, see, yeah, we wanted to get ahold of the tape for ourselves, sure, but after we were done... we'd have given it to ya more than likely." Lucas frowns.

He continues to look Lucas in the eye, unflinching.

"We all have our interests and our masters to serve. Perhaps you are different, but I think not. I have no regrets, not with the lives of my men on the line. So foreigner, do what you have to do, or leave."

He shuts his eyes, and opens his arms, inviting. Big Tuna straightens his back, waiting for the blow. Instead, he is hit by a gust of wind, caused by the maglev train passing above.

Parvati and Ricardo wake up when Jorrit calls them to a corner of the living room. Meeting them there, they see two boys, one with his belt-strapped leathers and spiked hair. Kalm. The other, Giichi, wears a yellow parka, has a few fingers missing, and supplicates himself before Lucas.

"Thank you, kind sir, thank you so much."

"Jesus kid, stop bowing and get your hand on the table"

Lucas forces the kids hand onto the table and waves at Jorrit to get his bag. grabbing the soda cup of ice he stole from a passenger with the fingers inside it. He unscrews his pill keeper hanging from his neck and gives this kid a Morphine Sulfate Tablet

"This is gonna hurt man, sorry!"





Giichi nods. Lucas does his best concerning local anesthetics, but the boy still weeps. Nobody of import hears with all the guests attending the last day of the festival. The mercenary finishes. Giichi will retain the scars for the rest of his life. His fingers, however, should gain back some mobility once the cast is removed. Somehow, the youngster braves it all, remaining awake.

While the operation takes place, Rain takes advantage of the kitchen. Soon a pot of noodles steams, and a table is set with noodle bowls. Giichi awkwardly holds a spoon with his other hand, and digs in. With a sigh, Jorrit resolves that it will have to be him after all, who takes the lead on this.

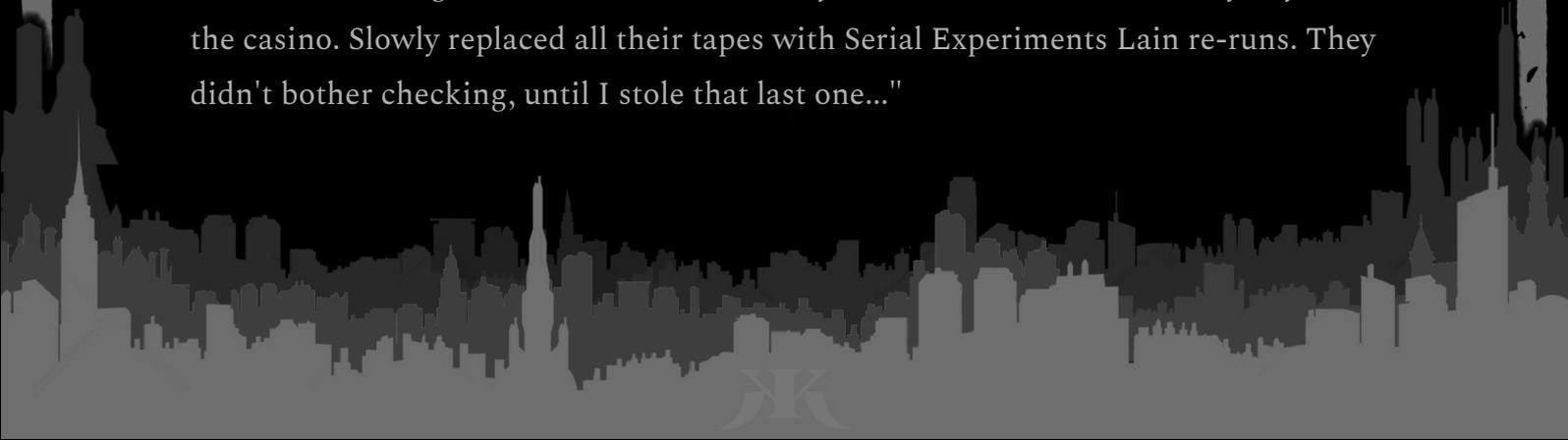
"Alright, Kalma. Rough night for everyone here, so forgive me if I go straight to the point: Let's talk about that tape, where you got it, what's on it, and what it did to your friends. And while we're at it, how did it influence your music, and do you have any idea what you're even doing, or do you happen to know where it has gotten to and why?"

A barrage of questions now, no doubt an interrogation tactic. Kalma is surprised, his eyes widening in defense as he blushes.

"I... just did the drum machine, sir. Rain and Onyx watched it, and they wouldn't let me. Said I was too young. I really bothered them about it, but they kept saying no. They changed somehow, always looking at each other like they understood. All the songs were their own code. I don't get what the big deal is. Just another horror tape, I've seen Fujiwara's other work. Got it from Giichi here..."

The yellow parka intervenes, stumbling.

"I've been stealing them from the Yamaken syndicate. Worked as a delivery boy at the casino. Slowly replaced all their tapes with Serial Experiments Lain re-runs. They didn't bother checking, until I stole that last one..."





"Where's the tape right now?"

"I don't know. I guess maybe the Inagawa gang have it. They're the ones I was stealing them for in the first place. They told me about the room, and everything. Said I'd be less suspicious. Gave them the copies, and we kept the originals. I didn't get to copy the last tape. Rain and Onyx, they wouldn't give it back. Onyx kept it somewhere at his studio, which was really his house. Last time I checked, they were all dead. That's why I think the Inagawa have it."

"No wait, I figure Rain took the original tape with him to Aokigahara, right?"

Giichi raises his shoulders as high as he can.

"I don't know exactly what Rain and Onyx did. When I found Onyx and his family dead, I didn't want to get involved. But the Yamaken found me anyway."

"Inagawa gang. Name means anything to anyone?"

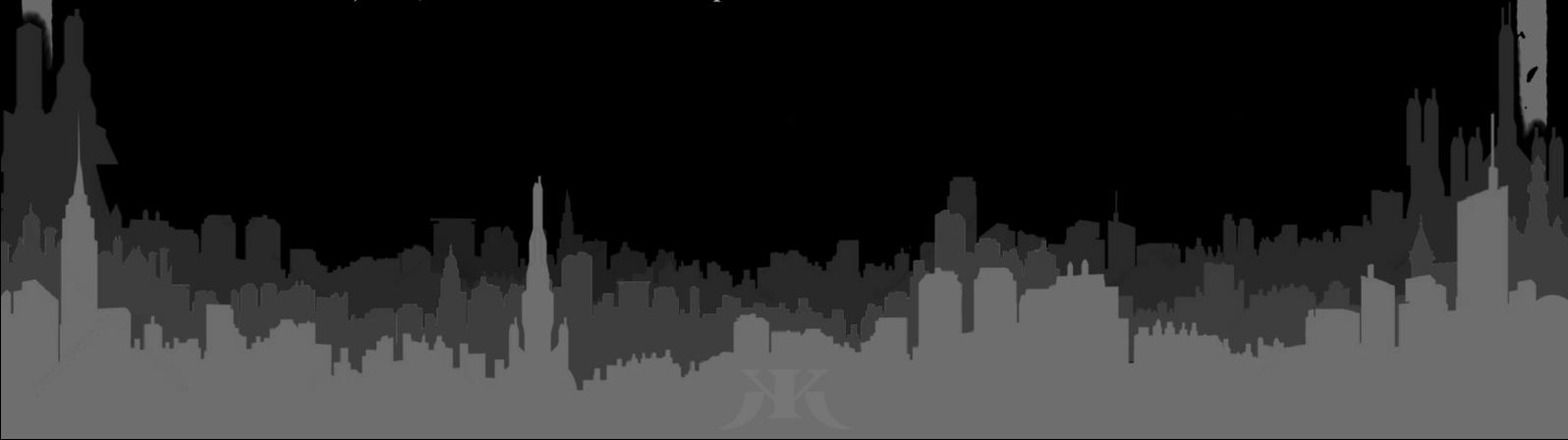
Parvati thinks about it for a moment, before speaking.

"I purchased the weapons from the Yakuza through a third party. The Inagawa gang was the original supplier, I met one of their couriers in the mall."

"Hmm, maybe that's who One-Eye switched his allegiances to...?"

"Actually, I might have met one of their associates before, in the mall. I can try and get in touch with them again."

Giichi interjects, not sure he should speak before Parvati.





"Uh... I know where they're at. The old parking lot in Edogawa. They have drift races every Sunday, and I hang out. I was hoping they'd give me a gun if I got them the tapes."

"So, that parking lot in Edogawa - are they there only on Sundays, or what? Is it like their headquarters? How many of them are there?"

"Well, with today being the last day of the festival as well as Sunday, I'm sure all the drift racers will be there. The place is chock-full of Yaks, but with enough money to bet or a car to participate you can get in. They even let people they know in. I can usually talk my way past the guys at the entrance. I don't know if it's their headquarters or whatever, but if you want business done, that's where you do it. Oh... their leader is a foreigner, like you. Maybe not quite like you, some Arab guy."

"The Arab guy, their leader. How long has he been there? Ever since you hung out there? Or did he recently take over?"

It takes a while for the boy to calculate all the things he's seen. With effort, he tries to talk more mature than he is.

"I think Narushi Tick Tock used to lead the gang, and he's still around to organize things. Rumor has it that Arab's been supplying them with guns from the states. So, he's the one holding all the money, really."

Lucas loads magazines as he listens in, the steady clicks stop when he hears about the Arab supplying guns.





The neighborhood is a rundown industrial park, abandoned with the rise of the Nippon service economy. Warehouses and factories are crumbling, their windows shattered and metals scavenged. Graffiti is omnipresent, from the boringly mundane to the drug addled insane.

We hear the races before we see them, screeching tires combined with shouts. Lit by green defective lamp posts and metal barrel bonfires, the multilevel parking lot rises in the night. A giant mural marks it, a monkey boy wrapped in cloths wielding an AK with corporate brand stickers. Below, sleek reflecting cars leave trails in the dust as they outdo each other, circuiting around the block. The salary men onlookers, bottles and Yen bills in hand, react as the autos pass them by, cheering or booing.

One man in a leather jacket, flanked by girls in mini-skirts, sells booze and other things from the trunk of his car. The prices are double of what one would find in a Tokyo shop, the merchant making the best of his little monopoly. Goods and paper exchange hands.

The detective stares around at the scene, and easily spots various bookies in the crowd handling money. Most wear fluorescent track suits of some sort, an informal uniform that makes them recognizable. The real enforcers guard the entrance to the parking building, inside which engine roars can be heard. Through the open levels we can see flashier, speedier cars racing in private circuits at different levels.

One dealer approaches, the green reflective tracksuit burning the eyes, contrasting his silver sunglasses.

"10 to 1 on the Green Toyota! Last chance to bid, gaijin!"





No sign of the Arab can be seen, no matter where we look. He must be inside. Sofia talks to the bookie in Japanese while Jorrit fakes English. He is drunk, lewd, and belligerent. Broken english assaults the detective with the bookie flashing Yen bills in his face.

"Make money, gaijin! Dollar good!"

Ricardo drinks his beer, tucking the neck of the bottle under his medical mask to reach his lips, looking like a dumb foreigner.

"He's showing off how rich he is, try not to fleece him too badly." She shares a conspiratorial smile with the bookie

The fluorescent man agitatedly nods in agreement to Sofia.

"Don't worry, but I am going to charge him more, since he's new."

"Make thousand dollar if win, gaijin. I take 10 percento."

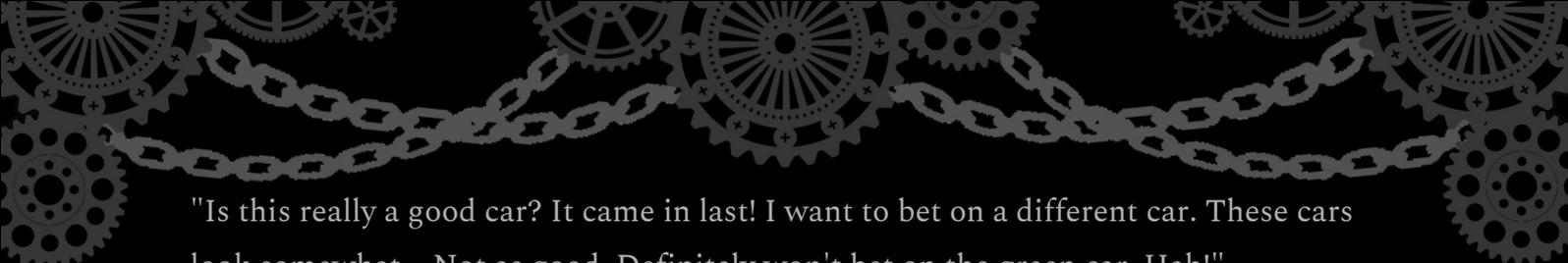
She grins and explains in English what a good deal it is.

"Yes. Yes! What's that in Yen...?", Jorrit frowns in concentration as he counts money in his hand... then looks up and cranes his neck as a car zooms by.

"I bet 30.000! On the Green Toyota! Do it now!"

Without hesitation, the bookie grabs the bills out of Jorrit's hands, and walks to other bettors. He doesn't stray too far, and occasionally looks back at his mark, smiling. The race finishes quickly, with the chosen car coming in last. Not wanting to lose a customer, the bookie returns.

"So sorry, but no worry, new race starting. Same car?"



"Is this really a good car? It came in last! I want to bet on a different car. These cars look somewhat... Not as good. Definitely won't bet on the green car. Hah!"

"Yeah I was getting the same impression. Let me try something" She turns to the tout to ask *"My clients wish for the faster cars and bigger bets, maybe for a similar amount you could introduce us to someone further inside?"*

A quick dance shakes the bookie, who spreads out his palm at the end. We ply him with Yen. In a good mood, the bookie dances his way to the entrance, and the betters follow. Passing another onlooker, Sofia can hear his slurred protest.

"I'm Tokyo Police! I could have you all arrested!"

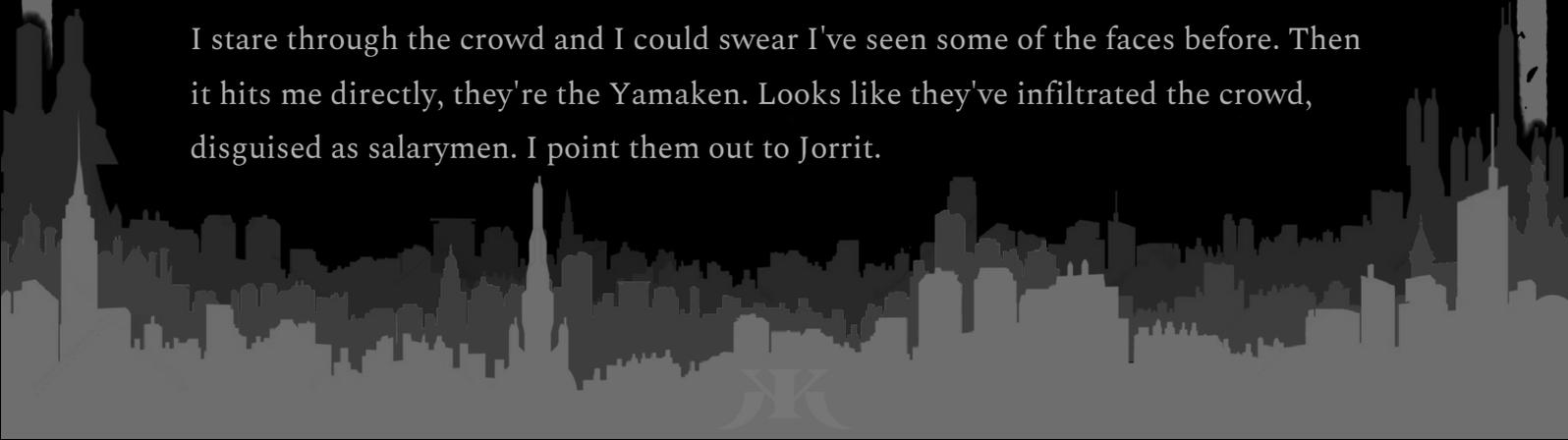
Those guarding the entrance don't seem impressed.

"Go ahead, then! Arrest us!"

Once in the building, the quality of the cars improve. Lined with neon underneath, more compact cars leave hot rubber in the asphalt. More distinguished, and generally more sober people are around tables with men in shirts. The bets are in large notes of foreign currency, or bank cards, the bookies working out of briefcases. White powder lines are freely offered at the entrance, along with pill samples.

The smaller cars are highly maneuverable, spinning around the cement pillars of the lot. From above, a techno beat combines with the cars in shaking the ceiling, loosening bits of parapet. It's all less chaotic inside, with the bookies all centralized at a single table. Parvati spots One-Eye picking up the winnings in a briefcase and heading for upstairs.

I stare through the crowd and I could swear I've seen some of the faces before. Then it hits me directly, they're the Yamaken. Looks like they've infiltrated the crowd, disguised as salarymen. I point them out to Jorrit.





"Yeah, those are they guys that worked me over. Maybe hurrying up isn't such a bad idea after all".

One-Eye goes up the stairway, disappearing behind a tattooed couple making out. The Yamaken follow suit in a speedy fashion, disrupting the lovers. In her body-tight black dress, the woman scolds them, but they don't stop to reply. Jorrit nudges us to follow as he maneuvers past the crowd toward the stairwell.

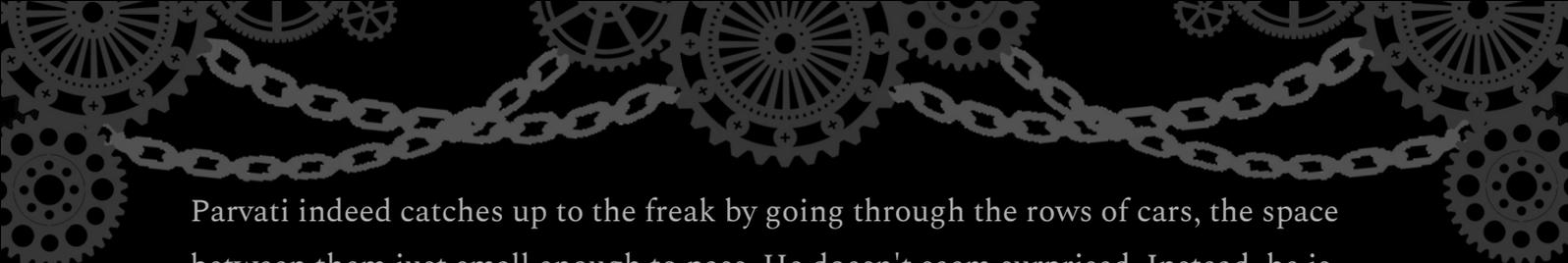
At the top an impromptu club danced on top of the cement level. Several cars have their trunks open, boomboxes linked to a DJ table. The technobeat bass vibrates the walls, synched with the neon underlights on the cars. One has an improvised smoke machine, spitting out haze onto the dancers. A set of laser lights, cutting through the smoke, have been installed and tied to a generator. Lucas can't help but think of disabling it and causing chaos.

One-Eye is walking towards the king of it all, an orange beast of a convertible. A set of thugs surround it, keeping people away with stares and automatic rifles. On the car, flanked by women in fine clothing, is an Arab in a light blue shirt. The Yamaken are working their way through the crowd, pulling out weapons.

Lucas rushes sideways to avoid the Yakuza gangbangers toward one of the columns for cover as he pulls his gun to his shoulder, drawing a bead on Nazar.

The assassin looks at the rows of cars, the space between them just small enough to pass. They open up directly in the contortionist's path towards the Arab. If she runs for it, it might be just enough to reach One-Eye before his hunters catch up with him.





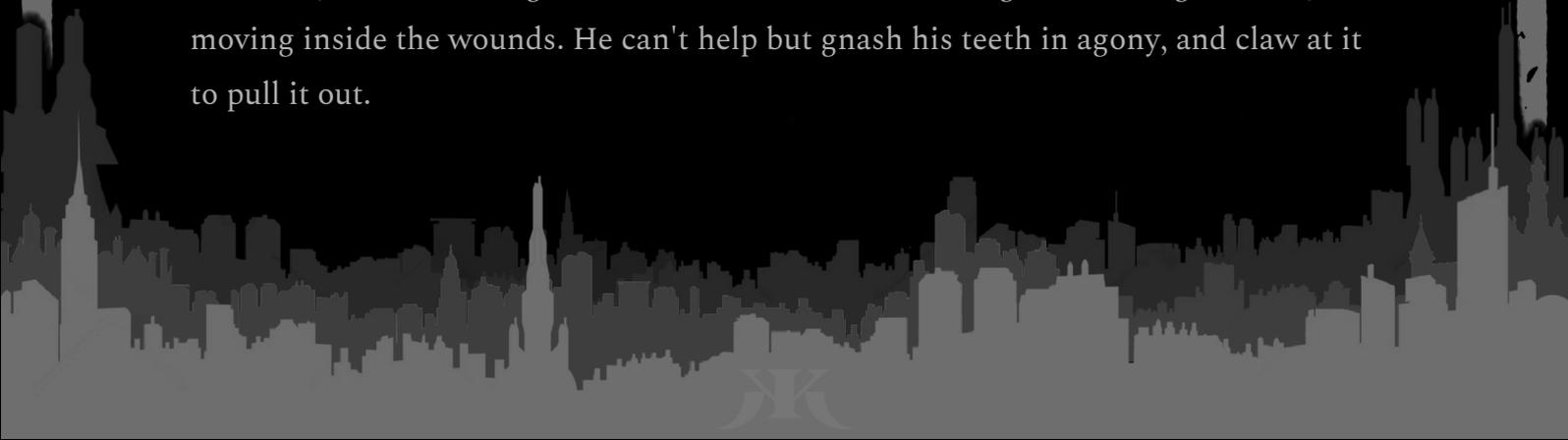
Parvati indeed catches up to the freak by going through the rows of cars, the space between them just small enough to pass. He doesn't seem surprised. Instead, he is smiling, and she has just enough time to spot her tail. A set of Inagawa gang members are unsheathing tantos as they approach. They swing her way, blades shining in the laser lights. The assassin side-steps their attack just in time, with One-Eye making a break for it. He's still within reach when a commotion starts near the orange speedster.

Lucas pulls the trigger, a full auto spread, there are loud clacks, the sound of the bolt moving forward and back again. Lucas' burst takes out some of el-Nazaar's bodyguards and hits him, knocking him down. Jorrit and Sofia seem lost somewhere in the panicking crowd behind us.

Parvati strikes One-Eye's knee, putting him down, right before a pair of wings flies before her, taking him away. Ricardo, bleeding from his chest, takes a step forward to rebalance himself while the people in front scream. A trail of broken men and women stand before him, left in the beast's wake. That's when I lose them too.

I see the briefcase One-Eye was carrying, kicked around by the panicking people. The antiquarian I grab the handle just as a foot steps down on it. A massively obese man stares down at me, a gun pointing at my face. The raven winged savage slams into the distorted Yamakun boss, an amphibious man with rings of tattooed fat. He retaliates with an SMG, to no avail. The beast drags him away, freeing the suitcase.

The crowd is dispersing somewhat, and I can see Parvati engaged in a sword fight with the Yamaken soldiers and One Eye. The Arab turns and fires a revolver in Lucas' direction, hitting him square in the chest. The mercenary stares down, feeling sharp pain, and sees a bone shard piercing through his kevlar. My eyes don't want to believe it, but it's moving. The bone shard in Lucas' chest grows flailing tendrils, moving inside the wounds. He can't help but gnash his teeth in agony, and claw at it to pull it out.





And the Lie breaks down, the scene now a visceral nightmare. What's left of the mob boss before me is a mound of melting flesh, zippers built into it.

Worst of all is el-Nazaar, now getting on top of his convertible. He has a mohawk made of bullets, with a face stapled on, one that clearly isn't his. His guts are hanging out, with spears, swords, and axes pierced in his body. Four skinless arms hold rifles and guns, all pointing at the mercenary.

His car is now a wide, low-set reptile with orange scales fluidly ending in a tail. It breathes through exhaust pipes shaped like gills, and has tusks for the front grate. A maw opens where the hood used to be, and muscled legs move where wheels once were. The headlights, yellow vertical irises, blink at him, and it roars. Lucas screams when his gun jams and refuses to fire.

Prize in hand, I make it to a car and open the briefcase. A tape is there alright, in a fold cushioned with some serious Yen. Success in hand, I search for my allies.

Parvati gets stabbed in the back by the contortionist, knife jabbed into her kidney. She returns the blow, blasting One-Eye's skull to bits with a revolver. Lucas panics, dropping his gun and dashing for the stairs. Further away the Yamaken boss is torn apart by Ricardo's inner being. The man himself is carried away by Jorrit and Sofia. A roar sounds, and I stare down the orange riding beast. Guiding its harness, the thing that was the Arab smiles at me.

I jump out of the way in time, finding myself off the ledge with a three floor drop underneath me.



Ricardo wakes up in Kopfel's kingdom, this time tied to a table. The Prince smiles at him, checking his restraints. Ricardo remembers the electrocuted frogs, and looks outside the window. He hopes there isn't a storm tonight.

"A little birdie told me you've come into the possession of something called the Tome Of Worms. I'd very much like to have that small token of appreciation in exchange for saving your life."

"I have made headway in convincing the burly pain-train. He says if you match the Sultan's offer, he will join us. The Sultan asked for alchemy specifically in the waking, oddly enough."

Kopfel places his fingers through Ricardo's hair, then reaching out above his head. The antiquarian feels his teeth crack as the voltage goes through him. When it ends, the prince grabs onto his face.

"Of course the Sultan asked for it in the Waking. He's trying to acquire what I sought for a lifetime and failed to find. Something that's now in your possession. And now you want me to share? No. Tell me where the book is, or you'll never leave my kingdom. I will visit such nightmares on you that you'll wish for torture instead."

Ricardo exhales, defeated.

"I suppose I have no option. It's in my bag."

Kopfel grabs it, smiling satisfactorily.

"Thank you. I've searched so long for the answer, I almost forgot the question."

Another electric shock throws Ricardo back into oblivion.



I come to in the train that drops us not far from the hotel, and we watch the last shrine enter it's temple. When the crowd finally disperses, we make it through to their chambers.

Ricardo, jaw set tight the whole ride back, is clearly displeased. He calls for the concierge to bring up equipment to copy the tape. Lucas is drunk out of his skull, and Parvati nurses her wounds. Jorrit and Sofia pulled me out of a garbage dump I was lucky enough to land in.

"Kopfel has the Tome of Worms. So if there is no other type of version of that lying around, we are fairly fucked. I only learned two fucking spells from that motherfucker!"

"Are you fucking with me?" Lucas looks ready to explode for a moment.

"I'll do some more searching to see if any other tomes of that nature exist. Maybe all is not yet lost. I thought our time in Amsterdam represented Malkuth's awakening. Then Sao Paulo represented transition, in ways associated with Yesod. Then again, elements of Tiphareth were present in Borges' desire for timeless beauty. Of course Thaumiel in Rwanda. Hareb-Serab perhaps, though conflict is everywhere. Most of us anyway... I think..."

"What the hell are you even talking about? I can't make sense of what you're saying half the time. What is Malkuth?" Lucas yells, half drunk.





"It's a revelation to the Chosen. It's always the same, average people struck by angelic or demonic influence gain some sort of Enlightenment. A long line of prophets for the Abrahamic faiths witness an androgenic angel giving them wisdom. Siddhartha Gautama talks to a female manifestation of time in some Upanishads. Leonardo da Vinci's apocryphal journals suggest an unearthly model for his perfect Mona Lisa. Many mathematicians and scientists speak in vague terms of muses, most of them too afraid to be tied to the occult."

"What about all the other stuff? The nightmares and horrors?" Sofia seems tired.

"There is also a darker side to all this. Among the thousands of letters of Jack the Ripper are a few with reference to a woman crying blood. Jeffrey Dahmer interviews and evidence suggests he was building an altar of skulls to meditate and worship something. With memories from the Tome Of Worms still fresh, the Zodiac Killer's murders speak of a pattern I can't quite grasp. Many serial killer obsessions with women begin to make sense when put in the context of recapturing an experience of a perfect muse."

"And the magic?" I ask.

"In between are the occultists: Hermes Trismegistus, Johann Weyer, Aleister Crowley, Anton LaVey. None of them have any qualms in writing about encounters with a woman in a chainmail dress."

"Is there any end to these prophecies?" Parvati gets to the point.

"No happy ones. Those speaking of Enlightenment and peace are quickly killed, like Gandhi or Christ. Mathematicians dissecting infinity like Cantor go mad, scientists like Tesla die in poverty. The serial killers don't fare better, either captured by the forces of law, or suddenly stopping, disappearing off the map."



"All of it points to the influence of the Malkuth principle in history. None of it suggests the experience is something pleasant, or something that can be defended against. It is simply there to be experienced, lives unfolding almost according to a plan, building on top of each other. Tragic destinies are reserved for the Chosen, wherever they are, whether one believes in fate or luck."

"Hopefully this tape has answers. Or just kills us. What's the big deal, right?"

The mercenary pushes the play button on the ancient remote, a mechanical screech spinning the tape at first. When the sound settles, a grainy film interrupted by occasional vertical lines lights up the screen. It's some sort of cement basement, walls green with mold so thick it's greasy, a single carton piece on the floor. People walk on screen, a set of naked men in Japanese demon masks with snaking knives in their hands. Last enters the stage a woman in a black fishnet shirt and a string thong, wearing thick dark red eyeshadow. A Nippon snake dragon coils down from her shoulder to her breast, its scales green. She kneels on the carton and begins pleasing the men, who take advantage and force their tumescences down her throat.

When they finally give her pause forcing her to work with her hands, she speaks with an unearthly voice.

An Angel was guarding the gates of the Garden of Eden. After the Fall of Man, Adam approached him, seeking entrance back in the Garden. The Angel answered thusly:

"I know seven keys," the Angel said. "They are the keys to the heart of my Lord."

"Tell me which they are," Adam asked. "And I shall find them and return to reopen the gates to Paradise."





The first knife strikes the woman's back, the blade removed with blood.

We shift uncomfortably in our seats when the tape goes from something erotic to something vile.

More knife stabs follow, leaving gashes in her body, cutting up the fishnet. Behind her, the room enlarges, shifting and changing into a grated tall metal fence. A winged faceless creature, with sets of eyes blinking between feathers, guards a portcullis. Beyond is a Garden Of Sorrows, fountains of mutated beast vomiting blood, trees with rotten fruit. A man before him pleads, while the woman continues speaking.

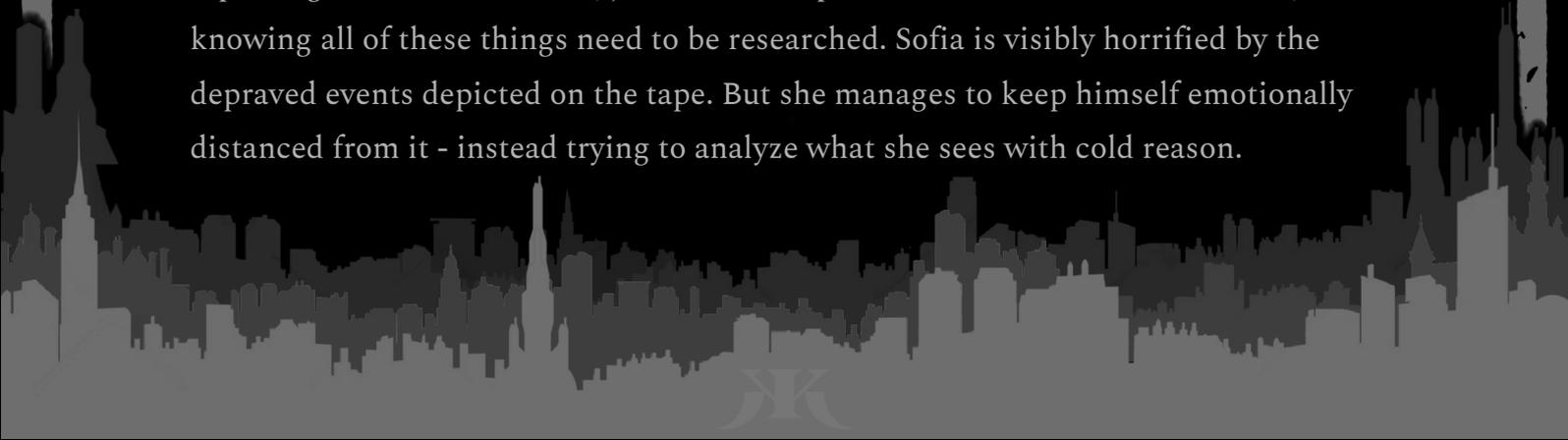
"The first is named Kabbalah. It is the key of Israel, which opens the gate to my master's servants."

"The second is named Al Khemi. It is the key to Aegyptus, and it leads to the gates of the elements."

"The third key you will find in the stars. It is the key of Babylonia, where you may read the soul and the future of the world."

The background morphs to show vistas of ancient times of dust and slaves, building monuments, reading stars. A knife falls downwards and severs the woman's breast, but she continues speaking.

I can't believe how much suffering was caused for this atrocity. For the first time since we have known her, Parvati's face reads unsettling emotion. Jorrit keeps repeating that this is not real, just some cheap horror flick. Ricardo takes notes, knowing all of these things need to be researched. Sofia is visibly horrified by the depraved events depicted on the tape. But she manages to keep himself emotionally distanced from it - instead trying to analyze what she sees with cold reason.





The masked men continue to get satisfaction from the woman while they mutilate her, taking turns. Scenery changes to fit the narrative of the woman, showing migratory populations moving between ancient cities.

"The fourth is the key to Hellas, the numbers opening all gates of understanding."

"The fifth is the key of symbols, to be found in the hidden teachings, the one opening the hearts of man."

"The sixth is named Tarot, the key of Romani, opening the doors to your own heart."

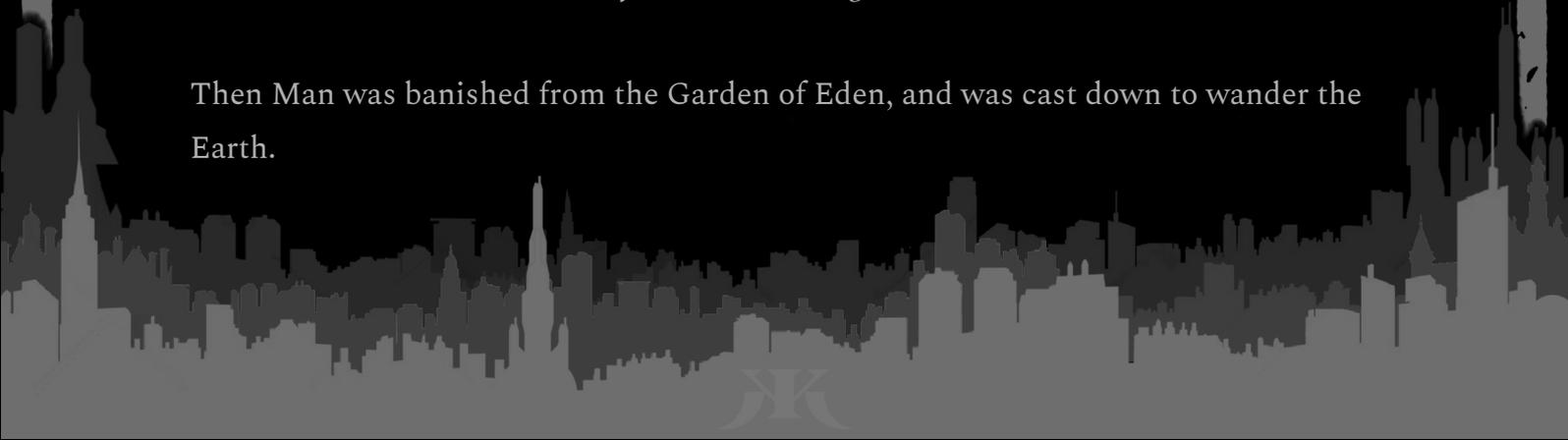
"The one who finds the keys will be purged from sin. The fruit of knowledge will be a blessing, and the gates of Paradise will no longer be locked."

I spot a symbol on one of the striking hands., and think back to what Kalma said, about Fujiwara's other work. I remember the collection of confiscated tapes from Onyx's apartment. Each marked with a strange corruption of the Japanese flag. Underneath some of them in katakana was Sumiyoshi-kai Pictures. One of the blades lands on the woman's elbow, severing the hand. A participant climaxes after this, spraying the woman with his seed. In a chain reaction, the others do the same, the semen mixing with the blood. The background returns to the winged creation guarding the gate.

Adam memorized the six names. "But the seventh key, what does it do?" Adam asked.

"It is without name. This key you must create on your own, the key of the exiles and the downtrodden. It will make you free" the Angel said.

Then Man was banished from the Garden of Eden, and was cast down to wander the Earth.





Guilt crosses my features at the fact that I'd been watching the video for this long, and I tear my gaze away, getting up to get something to drink. Noticing the others around me getting more and more upset, I focus all the more on staying calm and rational - and manage to compartmentalize my revulsion and confusion. I keep on just taking in the information. Lucas throws his empty beer can at the TV.

"Fuck! all this for some kind of pervo art fag bullshit?"

A chainsaw sounds in the background, and one larger man arrives, cutting her legs off. The mutilation continues while the detective stoically watches, now convinced it's not fake. With Ricardo transfixed, Lucas and Parvati stand up, the former angry and wanting to do something. Those sudden movements tear the walls down, leaving us in the same room as the woman.

Reduced to a bleeding mass of moving stumps, only her face remains intact, liquids dripping from it. The eyeshadow intermingles with blood, the crimson tears flowing down her face. She looks us, the chosen, directly in the eye.

"The third eyed child shall be lost at midnight, in the city of the nailed god's mother, after her son has had two thousand footsteps. Born of bedlam to a witch with many flat faces, those who find him shall open the door to themselves, unlocking it with the seven keys."

The cement walls turn to static and white noise, and it all ends in a flash. At and end, the tape screeches to a halt, leaving the screen to close by itself. Only the attic room they were originally in remains.

I shudder but hold still, for a moment wondering if we are still in japan or some other fucked up place "did... what..."



Lucas looks at the others questioningly.

"Mother of the nailed god. Nazareth? Bethlem?" he says out loud.

Parvati thinks for a moment.

"Portuguese. Madre de Dios. Shortened to Madras over the ages, they finally changed the name as Indian symbol of nationalism. Now they call it Chennai. That's where we have to go next. Provided we actually end up there."

"How do you know this?"

"I used to live."

Lucas scratches his head, it takes him a few moments looking through google before he gets it.

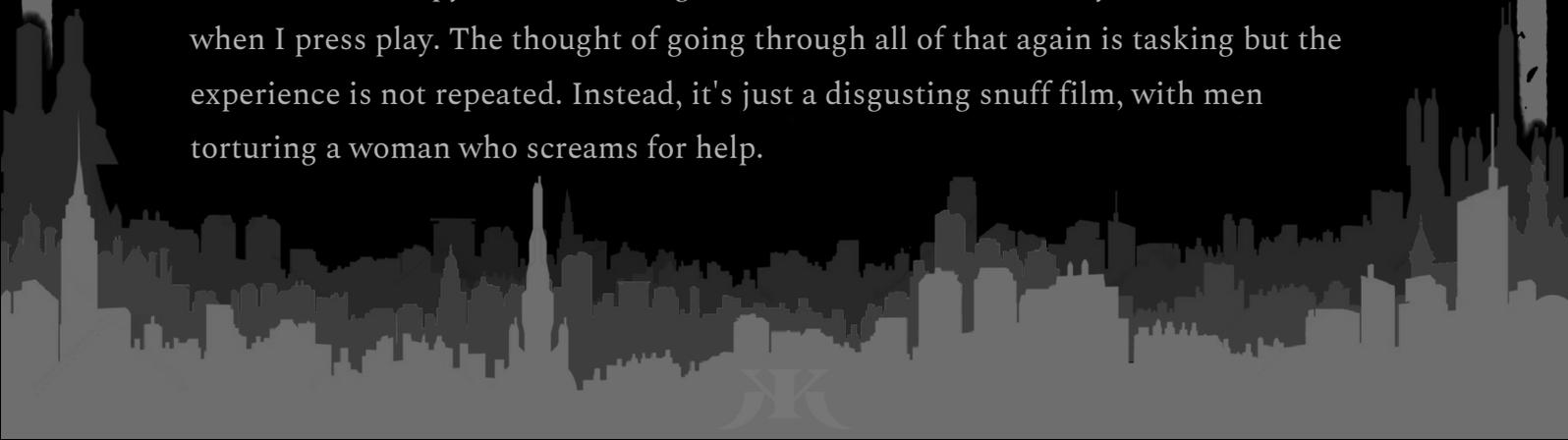
"Fuck, that's 4000 miles away"

"Let's handle one thing at a time. We finish up our business here, then book a flight to Chennai."

"I have definitely seen some crazy shit during my time in Vice, but this without a doubt takes the cake", Jorrit says after a long silence. His voice sounds sober, stoic, almost serene.

"Let's first see if copying the thing even worked. I somehow doubt that it did."

I switch to the copy we had running in the VCR and rewind it. My hand trembles when I press play. The thought of going through all of that again is taxing but the experience is not repeated. Instead, it's just a disgusting snuff film, with men torturing a woman who screams for help.





I turn the copied tape off in disgust once I'm reasonably sure the experience is not repeatable by simply copying the tape. Rain and Onyx would have done that dozens of times already, if it worked. They wanted to spread its message, after all.

"I have half a mind to destroy the whole mess" Lucas threatens, and Jorrit agrees.

"We will have to deal with everyone else who wants it - Nazaar, the Yamaken, the Sumiyoshi..." Sofia ponders, and Parvati answers.

"And I'm afraid we can let none of them have that tape."

"If people want it it might be our only leverage. If it doesn't get us killed."

"You think we can keep it somewhere that they won't be able to reach? Carry it makes one of us a target."

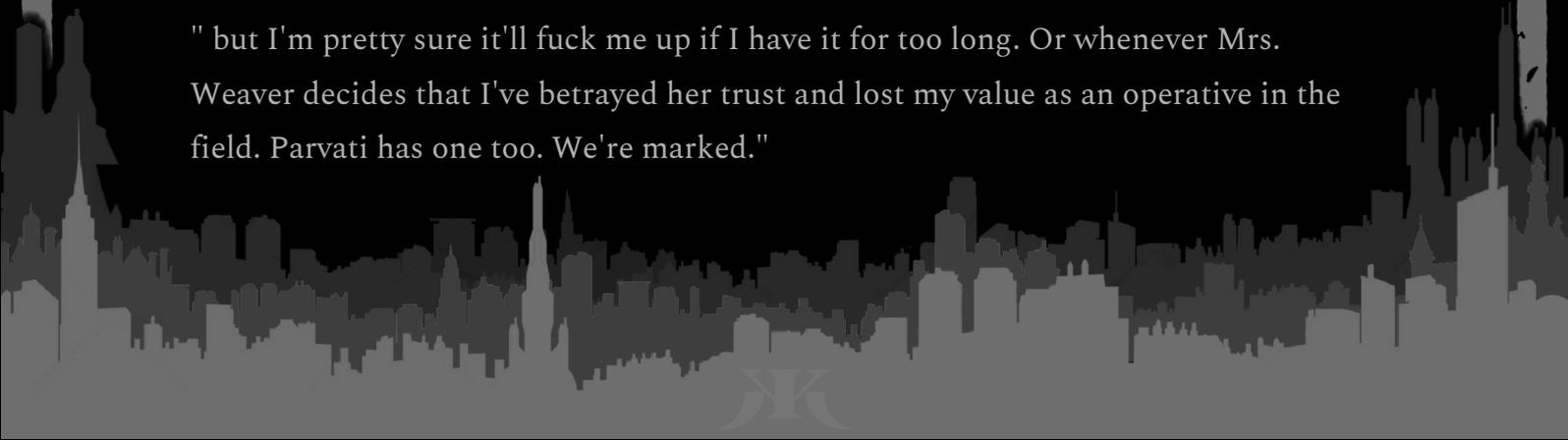
"But there is one enemy that this will not take us out of the reach of: Mrs. Weaver. Who may or may not be the leader of the Sumiyoshi as well. She messes with time, herself. No guarantee we'll be safe from her, whenever we go..."

"Another Lictor then?"

"Not sure. But I don't really have a choice."

He pushes up his left sleeve and reveals a disturbing sight. On the inside of his forearm, the blackened burn mark in the shape of an occult-looking symbol has spread into a spiderweb network of dark veins in all directions, necrotizing the flesh.

" but I'm pretty sure it'll fuck me up if I have it for too long. Or whenever Mrs. Weaver decides that I've betrayed her trust and lost my value as an operative in the field. Parvati has one too. We're marked."





Sofia whistles.

"Fuck!"

"But if my assumption is correct, then Parvati might know how to contact her, I presume. "

"Fuck that bitch, we owe her nothing."

I sigh, looking at Lucas. "You've seen the name of the production company in the tape, right? Symbol on the tape is hers anyway."

"They also promised to get rid of some issues I've been having in exchange for the tape." Parvati says from the back of the room, trying to drink a glass of water.

"Will she help us then? Or is this just another job and that is it?"

"We can try and bargain with her using the tape, and see what she says or does."

"That is not comforting."

"What is?"



Sleek and corporate, the tower shines of neon against the backdrop of the night. Glass and steel rise upwards as far as the eye can see, its peak blending into the darkness.

The reception's backdrop is a cascade trapped in a crystal panel with the etched logo. One young woman in a shirt and tie stands flanked by two seated security guards in uniforms. She looks up to the newcomers in the red lighting. The clock above her reads 03:13.

"Hello. We've been expecting you. Please take the main elevator to the top floor."

The transparent plastic embedded in iron offers a vista of the city. Flowing along the accelerating machine are exposed fiber optic lines. The lightshow travels along with the cultists, who reach the top. Following it is an escalator passing through paintings hanging on wire.

Most of the exhibits are from famous authors, works that one would expect in a museum. The Garden of Earthly Delights by Bosch comes face to face with DaVinci's Vitruvian Man. Goya's Sleep Of Reason reflects on Van Gogh's Starry Night.

Once on solid ground again, the seekers traverse a long, empty hallway. Huge LCD screens line the walls, behind Greek style columns displaying lava. Chambers open to the left and right, studios for films and painting. Most of the people in these are creating disturbing, surreal works of art.



The last room in the hallway is where all the fiber optics lead. A massive desk with a latest-generation computer absorbs all the information. The walls are lined with massive book shelves, and the room is adorned by sculptures. A Japanese woman in a business suit, tall for her kind, has her back turned. She's admiring an ancient column behind a protective case. The cultist can all read the cuneiform: Assyria shall reign forever.

Parvati sets the bag on the table.

"Good evening. I've brought you the tapes as you requested."

Turning around, her shade plays in the lava displays, growing out of proportion. There's something sinister in her smile, and the shadows from her eyebrows darken her eyes. She wears no shirt, only a bra, visible through the half opened jacked. Reaching out for the bag, the couriers feel a menace, and an instinct to step back. Mrs. Weaver opens the bag, and picks up the tape with two fingers

"At long last. Good work. You'll be happy to know Interpol no longer knows who you are. Neither does any other enforcement establishment in the world, for that matter. Let no one say I don't reward my agents."

The symbol on Parvati's neck disappears, and Jorrit feels the veins fade away.

"Thank you."

Something ferocious is in her face, and her words are sweet as poison.

"Tell me, what did you see when you watched it?"



I can't help it.

"She didn't watch it Ma'am"

Mrs. Weaver keeps a few fingers on the desk while she sensually walks around it. She's soon past Parvati, and her face comes too close to mine for comfort. I can feel her body heat, something both attracting and frightening in it.

"You're lying. You've watched it, I can see it in your eye. Did you like it?"

"I loved it," Lucas leans in. Sofia scolds him with a stare.

"Does it change anything Ms?"

Still staring me in the eye, her cherry perfume intoxicating, she answers Sofia.

"I need to know if this piece of art I commissioned works..."

My eyes are rolling in my sockets. I want her so bad I can't stand it. I nod, powerlessly.

"It works, but only once"

Mrs. Weaver licks her lips in satisfaction, slowly returns besides the Assyrian column fragment. Placing her hands on the desk, she looks at us for a minute in silence. With the answers, she pushes off the desk.

"Good! Then it's time for mass distribution! Any unexpected side effects? Or side products?"





Sofia looks into her eyes.

"Just the revulsion"

"Can you explain this Malkuth?" I ask, intoxicated.

She leans back, taking out a small metal case from her jacket.

"What's to explain? You already know you're part of the cult. You're chosen, just like the rest of them. Who knows, maybe you'll actually make it. If not, one of the others will."

Popping it open, she takes out a cigarette, and lights it.

"The only question is... "

Leaning to one side she takes a drag, and blows out the smoke on Parvati.

"...where to next?"

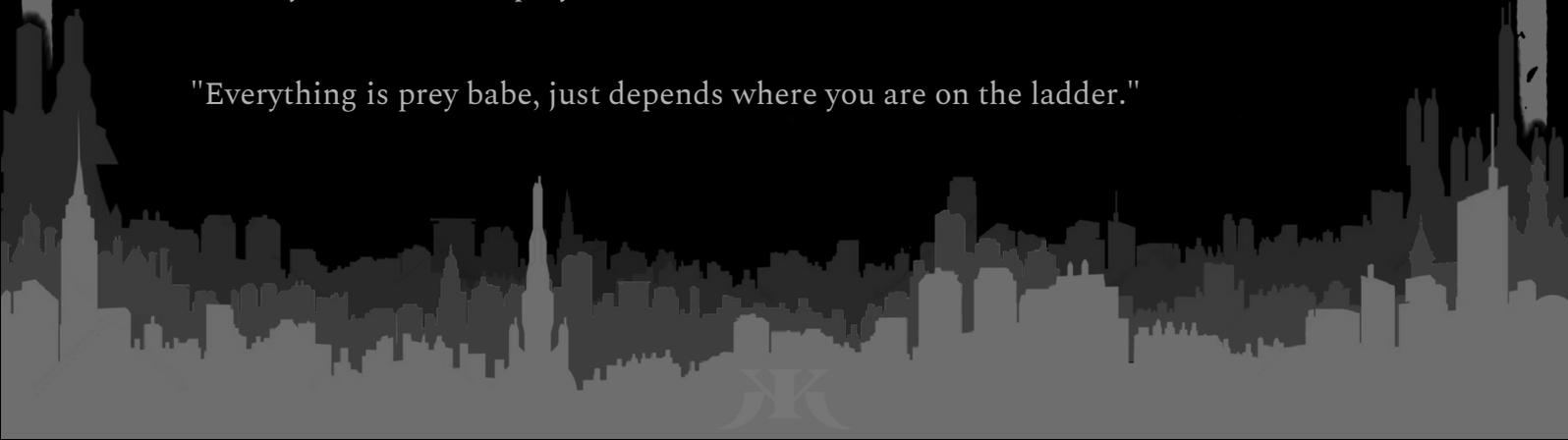
"What is the point, for you, if we make it? I thought everyone was against us."
Ricardo is less impressed.

Smiling, her head tilts to the side, looking at him curiously.

"After all that, still trapped in the illusion of good and evil, are we? A piece of advice: it's more helpful to think in terms of predator and prey."

"So do you consider us prey then?" Sofia scoffs.

"Everything is prey babe, just depends where you are on the ladder."





She puts out the cigarette on the desk after a few more drags, burning the exquisite marble.

"The Lie is getting boring. Everyone wants to keep going. Only Malkuth wants to do something different. Have you figured out the Prophecy yet?"

"Malkuth wants us to awaken, the prophecy is that we will."

She is dismissive at Lucas' last affirmation.

"We'll see. I think I can help you get where you're going a little easier."

Mrs. Weaver closes her eyes, and lifts her face in the light, enraptured.

"You're nothing more than flies on a web. If you're lucky, you'll fly free. If not..."

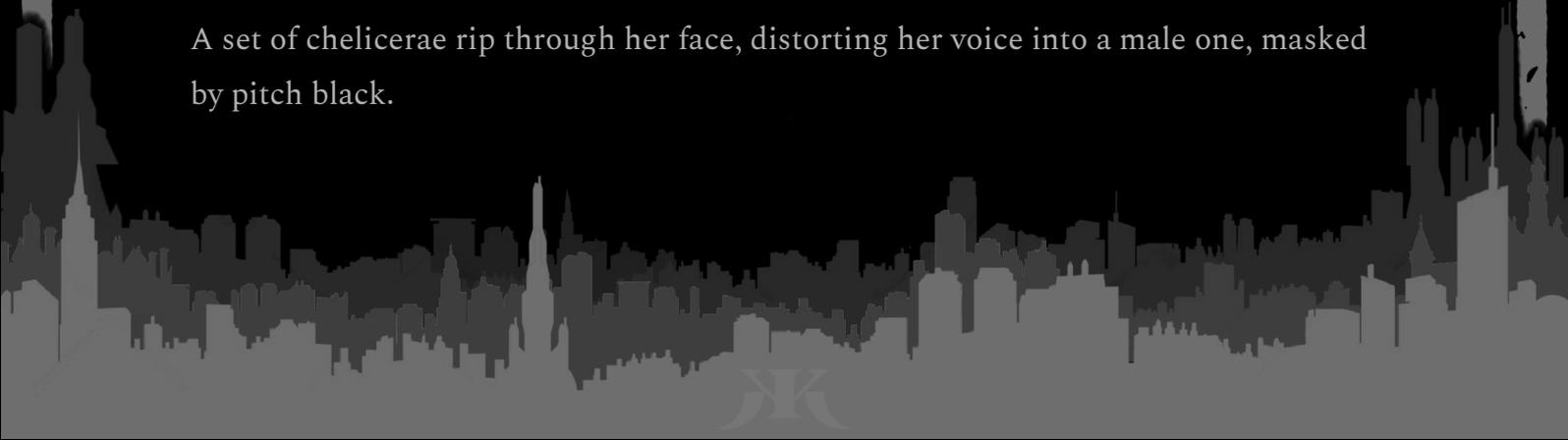
The lava displays dim, as on command. In the fading glow, she grows. Brick-colored metal spikes rip the back of her jacket, implanting themselves in the ground. She rises in the air, her legs parting and genitalia swelling into a bulbous sack, covered in rust. The corrupted sun shivers on it, but disappears with the light. Grunting in pain, she speaks again.

"There's... one thing to be said... about being prey... I've... always found... fear... to be a great motivator..."

Multiple obsidian eyes open on her forehead.

"when traveling through time..."

A set of chelicerae rip through her face, distorting her voice into a male one, masked by pitch black.





"I would be running if I were you..."

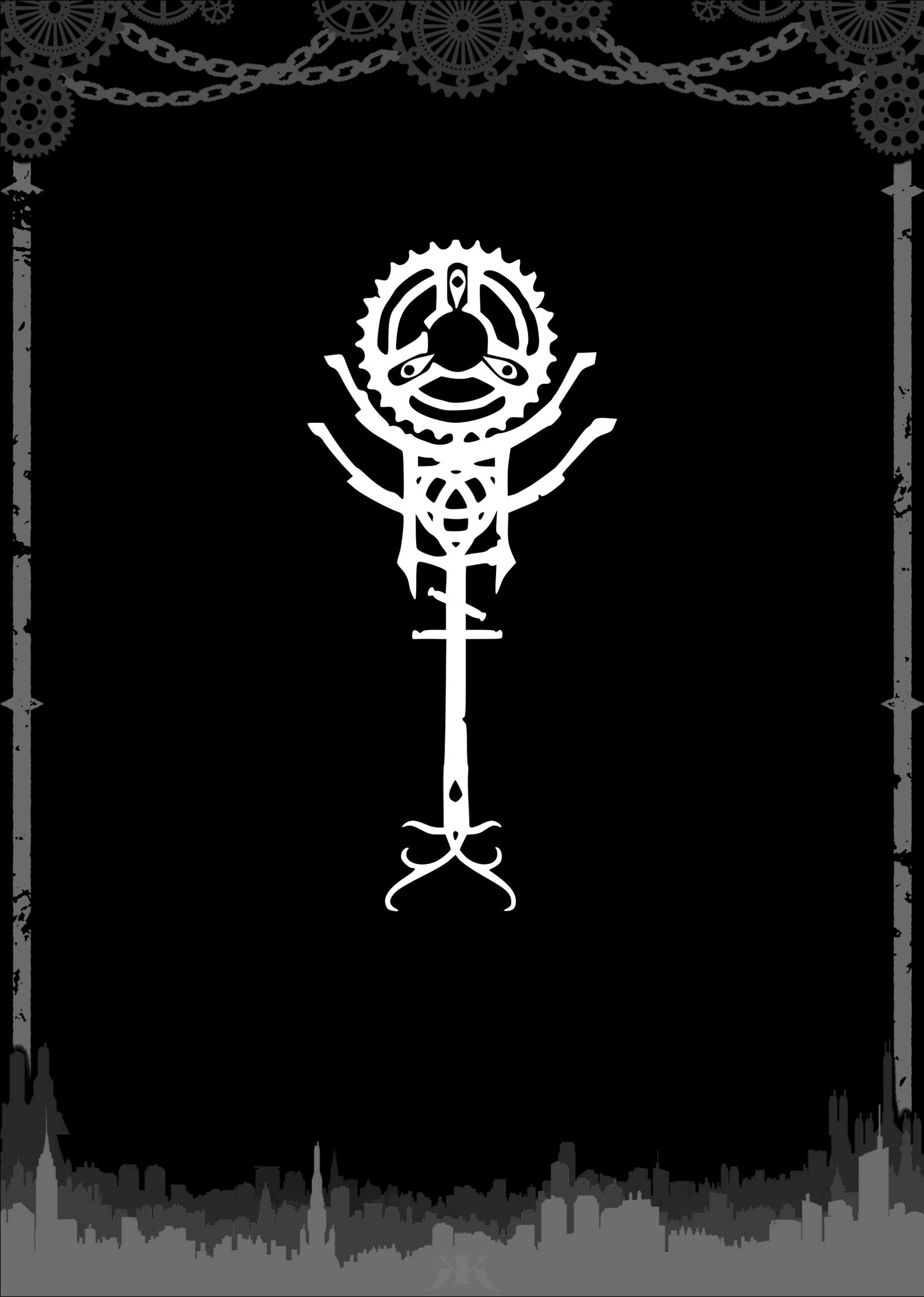
I stare at the transformed woman for a moment, before shaking my head and looking to the others, taking a step or two backwards in the direction of the door.

She is right. The fear is a good motivator, moving us when we hear the snarls. Lucas and Parvati are the first to fall, braving her head on, getting impaled on her body. We run towards the escalator, with the lights failing around us. Looking behind, we can see the metallic segmented legs pierce the fiber optic tubes. What was once Mrs. Weaver is pulling the cables to her.

To our credit, we almost make it. Ricardo sets the first step on the stairs. But he can't pass, the optics wrapping themselves around him.

We fall in her net, and she throws the two in her grasp into it as well. It closes up on our bodies, cutting into our flesh, slicing up organs. The pain is so powerful it turns into orgasmic pleasure, and we fade into time...







Tarot





The hunt.

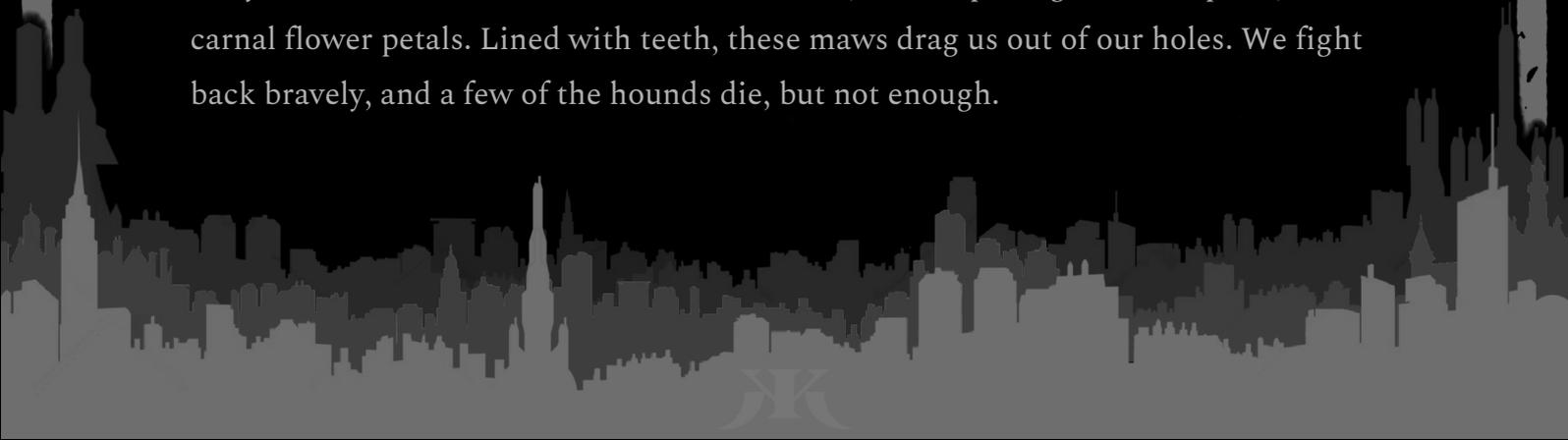
Everything changes all the time. The terrain shifts from a desert to a taiga. Waterfalls turn to lava flows. The trees become crystals resonating in the wind. Even the tactics change while we run, our skin torn by thorny vineyards. Metallic traps, deadfalls, covered pits, bows, bullets, or explosives. Everything rends us apart, and every time we rise anew as prey.

One single constant remains. Even now, we can hear the hounds barking. The howls echo through the crevasses of this ice valley in which we try to hide. Desperation increases when the voices of their masters can be heard, ever closer. Memories of being torn rise up in us, hiding in our holes. Perhaps this time, at least this time, we'll be overlooked.

I cower down in the narrow gap between hard-pressed snow and jagged ice that I found, trying to suppress a whimper from the burning cold touching my already raw skin. Trying to slow my ragged breathing, afraid that even my heartbeat thundering in my ears might give me away to the relentless pursuers.

Parvati burrows into her hiding spot as much as she can before going completely still and keeping an ear out for any howls that the hunters and their beasts make. Sofia bites her tongue hard to keep her teeth from chattering. She buries herself under a thick, ice-covered bush. Her feet are blackened, nails peeled back. Her bony fingers come around her mouth to keep the steam from her breath in check. She trembles, both from cold and fear. Lucas hackles are up. He knows it'll do him little good but he's found a weapon, a sharpened stick. He's going to jam it into the first eye he sees.

Sniffing can be heard when the hounds root us out, pawing at our snowy hideouts. They're white beasts with tendrils of their back, maws openings in three parts, like carnal flower petals. Lined with teeth, these maws drag us out of our holes. We fight back bravely, and a few of the hounds die, but not enough.





Peering from above, looking down into the crevasse, combat knives pierced hunters' faces. A few detach the chained bear traps snapped onto their bodies, and throw them down. Ensnared, we are dragged upwards, torn between the metal jaws and the bone ones.

Once dragged to the surface, the hunters begin to field dress us while still alive. A new leader walks among them, flayed skin and black horns contrasting the white hunting jodhpurs and coat. She takes the gloves off as she crouches, taking a closer look at the quarry.

"Looks like they tried to hide this time around. We almost passed them. Luck of the draw, eh? So, tell me, do you feel your luck improving, prey?"

Parvati looks down at the demon-creature from my new position.

"I can't say for sure. Who are you, really"

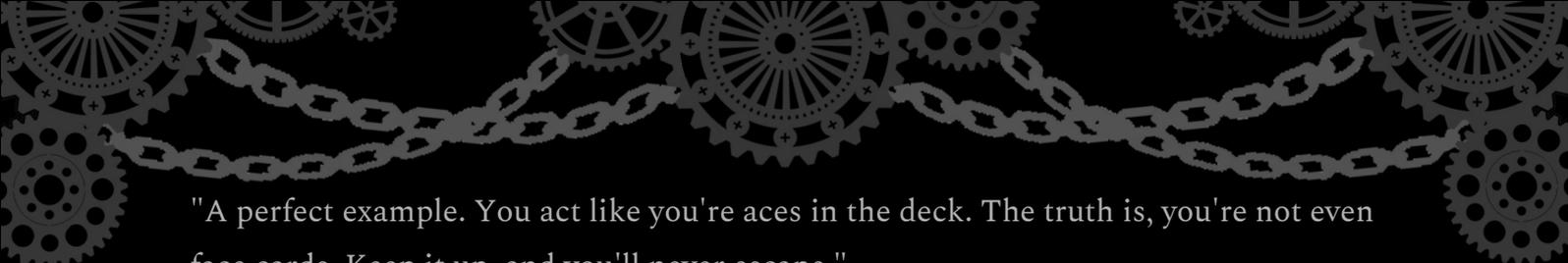
One of the hunters, his guts hanging out, opens Ricardo's torso and starts pulling out organs. The viscera of prey and predator mixes, with the Flayed leader standing up.

"Me? I'm just a facilitator really. An organizer. I win if you stay. The hunters win if you escape. That's how badly you're doing. You can't even win when the game is rigged in your favor. Want to know why?"

"You're going to babble on about it any so just get the fuck on with it." Sofia shrieks while the dogs tear open her leg.

One of the hunters turns his attention to Sofia. He pulls the chain to the bear trap, dragging her closer. Her body too heavy, the trap snaps her knee away. He attaches a hook to the stump, and brings her closer to Flayed. A dull carving knife barely does the job of opening Sofia.





"A perfect example. You act like you're aces in the deck. The truth is, you're not even face cards. Keep it up, and you'll never escape."

"Escape? escape what?" Lucas is resigned, tired of these games and the endless, pointless torture.

Using what little wood they find, the hunters start a fire. First they throw in the bits they don't need, intestines and such. Then they feast on the organs, non-essential at first. We look at it all, jaded, now used to staying alive while eviscerated. Flayed continues one of her little speeches, but this one seems different.

"There's an end to all the charades and games. The hunt doesn't have to last forever. Submit, accept your role as maggots, bow me as ruler, and I will set you free."

"Fuck no." Sofia won't have it. Lucas is more composed.

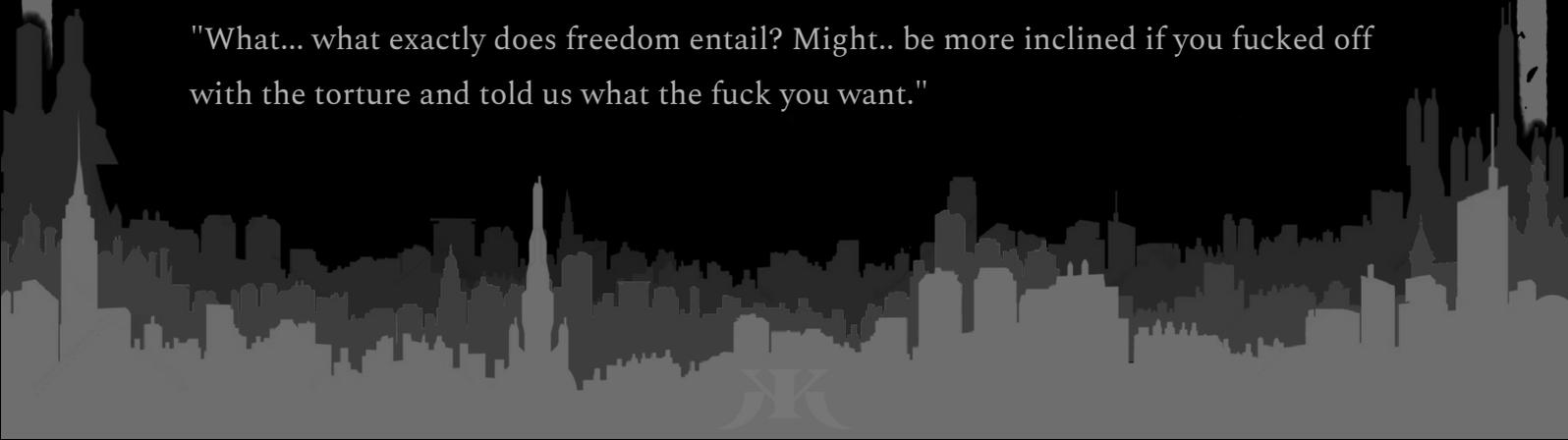
"So this is just a power trip for you?"

With the meal finished, the hunters return for the rest of the meat. They move slowly, already lazy from digesting their meals. But not slow enough, and those carving knives hurt.

"Power? Oh, if only there was power. But it's only responsibility. Do you think I like taking care of everything? It isn't easy keeping it all together. That's why I need faithful subjects. Meaning you. I trust these two don't speak for everyone?"

Sofia groans from the pain dealt by the hunters, each cut hurting as much as the last, the pain the same every time their evisceration comes.

"What... what exactly does freedom entail? Might.. be more inclined if you fucked off with the torture and told us what the fuck you want."





Flayed nods her head in disagreement. She makes no moves to stop the hunters when they drag the bodies to the fire pit. Impaling us on spears, they rise us above the flames, our bodies burning.

"This is what I mean. You still think you're important. You're still setting terms, still negotiating, still making pacts. That time has passed. You're no longer Faces in the Tarot Deck."

The hunters rip out my roasting heart, offering it to Flayed, who bites into it with hunger. Awareness fading, only the smell of charred flesh remains, reminding me of Sholanganallur.

The End Is Nigh reads the sign in Tamil. Rain pours onto the man holding it. Middle aged with a moustache and oxidized hair, brutally turned blond. Wearing slacks, shorts, and an undershirt, he holds an umbrella to protect him from the weather. The wind picks it up. In the gust the smell of burning flesh becomes obvious.

On the banks of a river, in the shadow of a crumbling temple, pyres burn bodies. The men can be seen working, stoking the flames, removing the ashes. Looking around, we find ourselves in a neighborhood so poor, it isn't paved. Only blankets cover the entrances to the adobe houses. Parvati recognizes the place, and the polluted river. She takes a breath, looking around the familiar scenery, and the possibly familiar people, the rain pressing her hair against her scalp before we find cover, musing to herself.

"Adyar. I never thought I'd see this place again...."





Pulling my coat tighter around myself against the onslaught of the elements, I look at her.

"You been here before, then?"

Sofia is pissed.

"Could we have this conversation somewhere dryer? Possibly with alcohol involved."

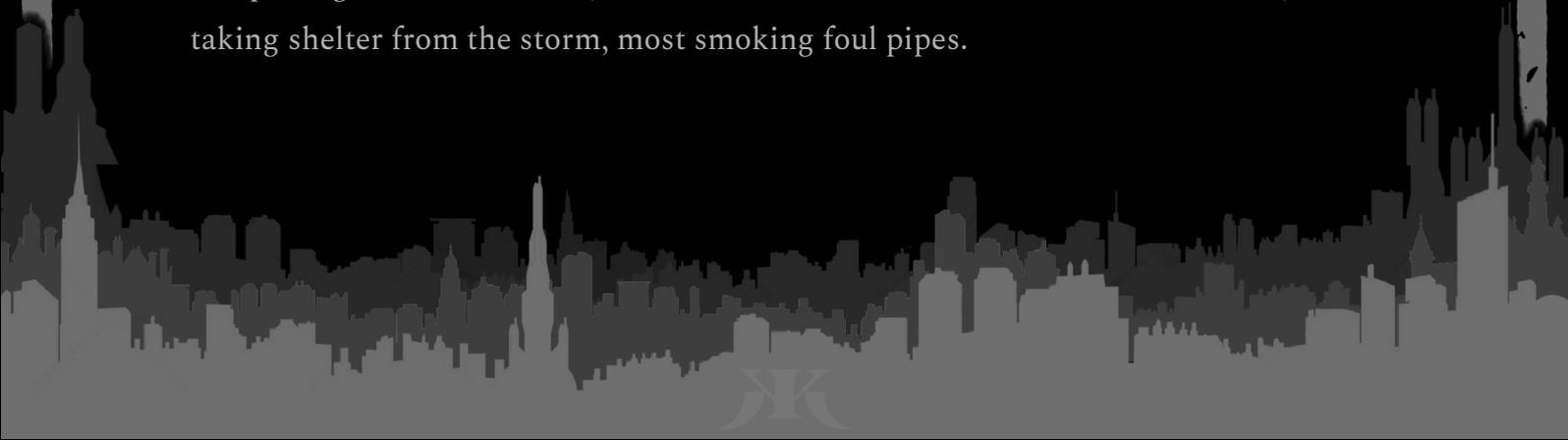
Thunder rolls through the sky, clouds eclipsing the sun. Another body, adorned in yellow garlands, is brought down to the pyre. At the mouth of the temple, a few men are trying to keep a fire alive. One of them takes a torch, and sets aflame the body wrapped in cloths and flowers.

I look at the others, then head in the direction of the man with the umbrella, asking him where the nearest bar is. There's something vacant in the sign man's eyes, and he only points to a building. Just a white painted writing above, 'The Ashes' with a multicolored cloth at the entrance. Undeterred by the rain, a few street children latch on to us, begging for money.

Ricardo checks his pockets to find Japanese and American currency. While looking through the folds of his jacket, he touches his chest, and removes his shirt.

Checking, he sees the bullet wounds are gone. Only his older scars remain. None of the children have anything for sale. They don't even have shoes. All of them look severely malnourished, tracking after us through the mud.

I check my phone, with no wifi or signal on the display. Taking some chocolate from Lucas, the children get distracted, fighting amongst themselves. Reaching the bar and pulling the curtain aside, we enter a smoke filled room. Men line the walls, taking shelter from the storm, most smoking foul pipes.





A single lightbulb shines up the place, fritzing occasionally. The pipe smokers all have cracked eyes, including the bartender. Behind him are a set of cheap bottles with barely dressed women on the cover.

Sofia shivers from the rain, welcoming even the stench. She goes up to the bar and points to a relatively expensive bottle, for this place, and holds enough fingers for the group.

"Do you happen to have a recent paper we could look at as well?" she asked the person behind the bar as she counted out a few dollars.

Lucas is uncharacteristically quiet and calm as he sits with the group

"So this is the city of the Nailed Gods Mother?"

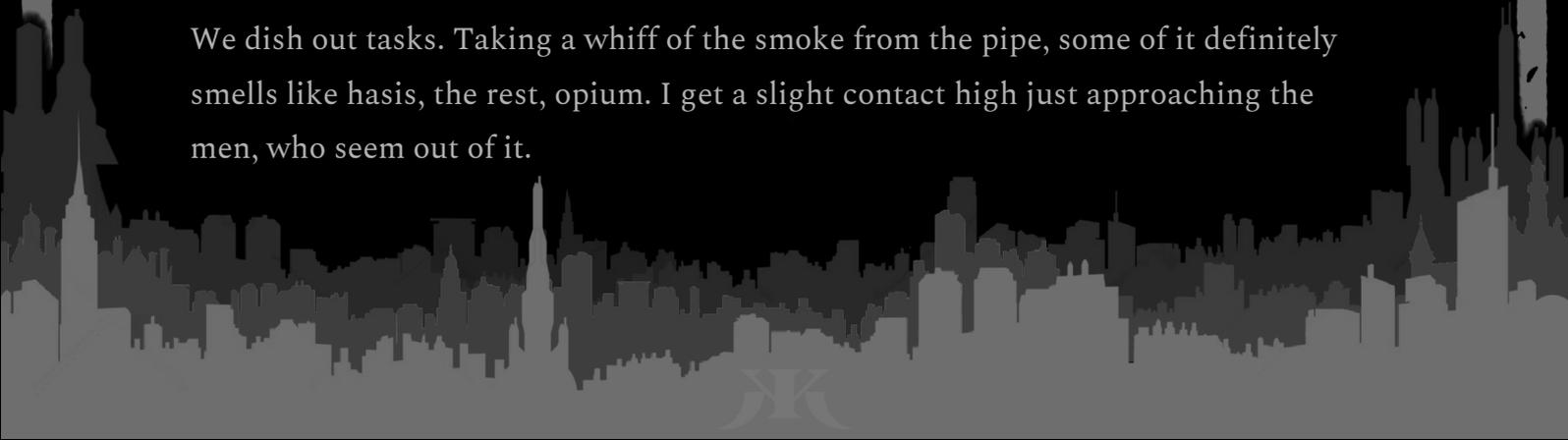
Parvati looks around the dingy bar, taking a seat with the others before turning my gaze to Lucas at his question.

"Yes."

The bartender's young and wears a yellow, striped shirt. There's wear on his face, and he keeps his hair in a ponytail. Taking the dollars, he brings down a bottle of something called Magic Moments. Turns out it's a cheap vodka. He hands Sofia a paper. The headline reads BJP promises to rebuild Ayodhya Temple. It is dated 20 December, 1999.

"We need to start asking around for that prophecy stuff. We might try these guys..." she holds up the paper.

We dish out tasks. Taking a whiff of the smoke from the pipe, some of it definitely smells like hasis, the rest, opium. I get a slight contact high just approaching the men, who seem out of it.





Outside, Parvati gives out the last of her dollars and yen to the children. They tell her a story about a boy named Srijan, who could calculate big numbers in his head. Apparently, his father went mad, killed his mother, and now he's in an orphanage. They don't know which one. The rain pours on.

Ricardo scans the paper, and finds an article about child murders. It mentions someone killing the orphaned children filling the streets. An interviewed Chennai official mentions orphanages already host 50000 children.

Lucas joins the smoking men, he offers them US dollars for passes of their pipes.

"Any of you gents know of a child with.. the sight?"

Most of the smokers are stoned out of their mind. Only an old, grey bearded man with white dreads talks to Lucas. He's the one passing the pipe and taking the money, talking with a weary voice.

"Yes. A smart local boy, outwitted his teachers at every step. Some say he had a correspondence with some English professors for a while. His father worked in an auto factory. Went insane, cut down his woman. Why, only Shakti knows." Lucas returns to us, and talks to Ricardo

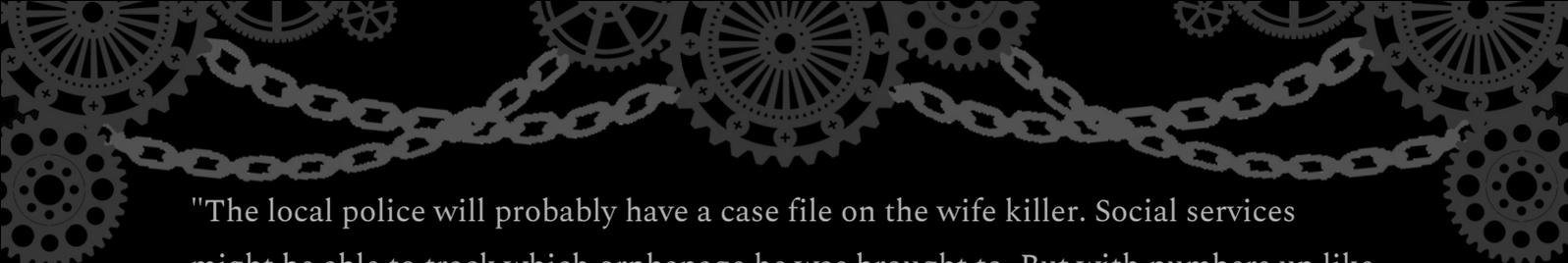
"We got any tricks for tracking the kid, or are we going to have to do this the hard way?"

"My only trick is rather unsavory. Conventional means are probably our best bet unless we are hopeless."

Sofia enters the bar again after a short break from the smoke.

"We can talk to the neighbors, see if that helps. It's a start, paper might have records as well."





"The local police will probably have a case file on the wife killer. Social services might be able to track which orphanage he was brought to. But with numbers up like that, it may be a hassle to track down."

"You're thinking too First World here. Cops won't care and doubt they did much but dump him at the first home."

"You may well be right on that. I agree that asking around the neighbourhood might get us somewhere faster..."

I drop the pipe after the old man passes it to me. My face goes numb. I see a single boy, his face painted blue, with a red dot on his forehead. He embraces a black goat, her fur patched in different colors, with many yellow eyes. Black demons with horned helmets, carrying children around in chains, take the boy away from the goat. It is fed a bowl of blood, while the boy is thrown in the arms of a couple with gouged eyes in their palms. They offer them to the boy, who consumes them without a second thought.

When I snap out of it, Sofia rises from her seat.

"I'll try a ritual. That pile of the dead Lucas mentioned will be... adequate."

Only Lucas is left behind when we step outside, where the urchins take refuge underneath a ledge. The wind from the storm nearly wipes the anthropologist off her feet. We make our way to the pyres where men and women wail. Some men are covering the fire we saw earlier at the mouth of the temple. The water is interfering with the burnings, but the fires haven't died out. Most of the dead are covered in cloth. Only one man is naked, half his face charred over.





Sofia grabs on tightly to Jorrit, closing her eyes from the buffeting wind.

"Distasteful business. I need your help with the Pujari." Sofia carefully approaches the bodies by the pyre, gently lifting the cloth to take a look at them. "A shame this all is. Normally I would feel a sting of guilt at defiling a corpse, but it is necessary."

"I got you."

A man in red and golden garbs approaches us through the rain, waving his hands. He carries a golden bell and a cup, grasping them close. The first word out of his mouth is Hindu, the rest in English.

"I bow to the divine in you! Please, do not touch the bodies! It is forbidden!"

Sofia smiles as sweetly as she can in the rainstorm. She squints hard at the man.

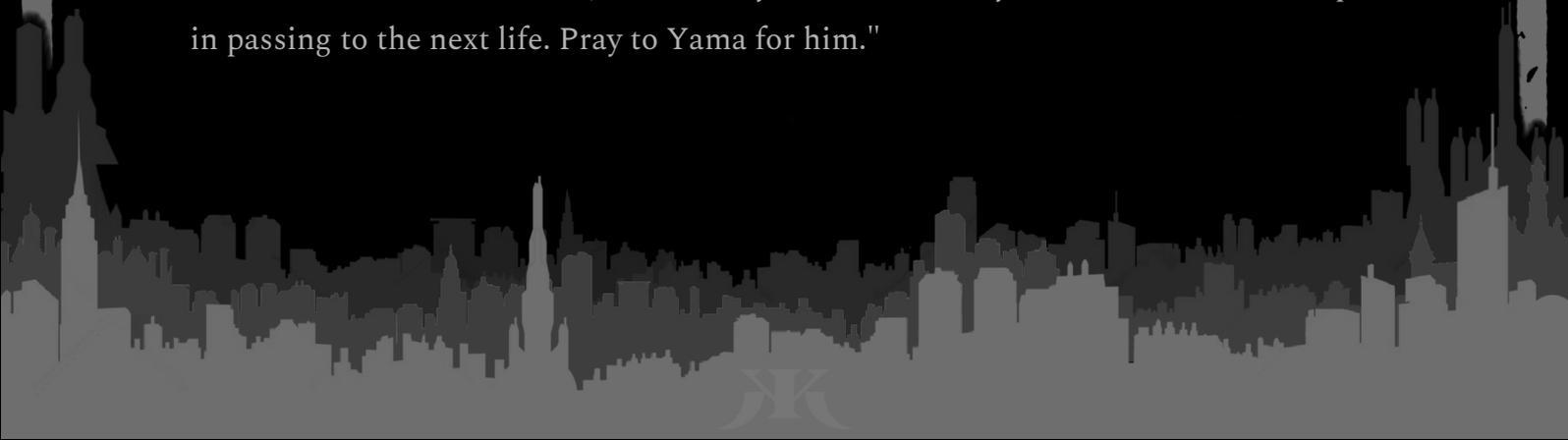
"I bow to the divine in you! My apologies, but I am only paying respects for their passing. I must connect with these people to help ease their passage to the afterlife. Please give me a few moments, will you?"

Hearing her talk, the Pujari is as relaxed as he can be in the weather.

"I did not realize you are wise in the Vedas! Amazing, I thought nobody spoke Sanskrit outside the rituals! But I beg you, do not disturb the families, they have enough suffering!"

He points to the half-charred corpse.

"This one. He died homeless, without any friends or family. He needs the most help in passing to the next life. Pray to Yama for him."





"Of course, I will help guide his way to the next life." Sofia bows her head before making her way over to the half charred corpse. Sofia nods and waits until the Pujari has walked a distance away. She obscures what she is doing as much as she can from anyone else.

Sofia takes a knife out of her coat and brings it to the deceased vagrant's hand. She leans over him as if to pray, saying a few words to guide his soul, and slices through the bone and flesh of his fingers.

Intense heat hits us, directed by a gust of wind, but the anthropologist is careful. Three fingers easily come off, already cooked. Sofia quickly pockets them. The rest are largely bone and ash, and the other arm is buried under burning logs. A sizzle occurs on the man's face, and the charring line climbs to his eyebrows. They catch alight, making the face unrecognizable.

We return to the bar where we negotiate a place to stay. Our table has another cheap vodka bottle on it, and an opium pipe, wasting away. Lucas is half-asleep on the table. We wake him, and depart

The skyline of the city is clear of buildings, with the only tenements far in the distance. A collection of cartons, metal sheets, bricks, and plastic sheets amalgamate to houses. The wind picks up the abundant trash from the ground, spinning it in whirls.

It takes a half an hour of passing from cover to cover, but we still end up soaking wet. The pension is a complete dump, a refurbished house with cracked walls and floor tiles. It's gates are red, but the paint inside is a faded amber. Small patterned decorations abound, mandala rugs and curtains. A plump woman with a Bindi checks us in, taking the rest of our money.





I cannot find sleep. The others must rest, I see that, but I'm too agitated for that. In my mind, images from the Malkuth album are racing, and the words of the Prophecy are repeated over and over again.

Grabbing as many newspapers as we can, Jorrit and I dive into lecture. Many issues are concerns regarding the Pakistani border aggressions and Islamic extremists. There's a child serial killer in the town, bodies frequently found. One picture shows police around a body with a blanket over it, a graffiti in the background. It reads something too familiar.

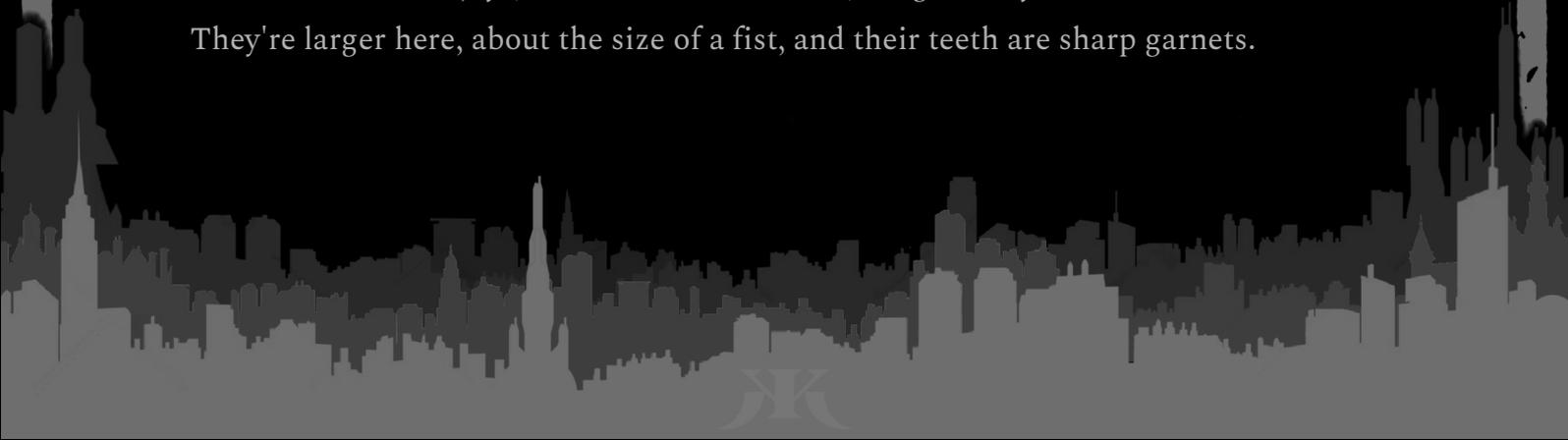
The Truth cannot be Revealed. Our Reality will be destroyed.

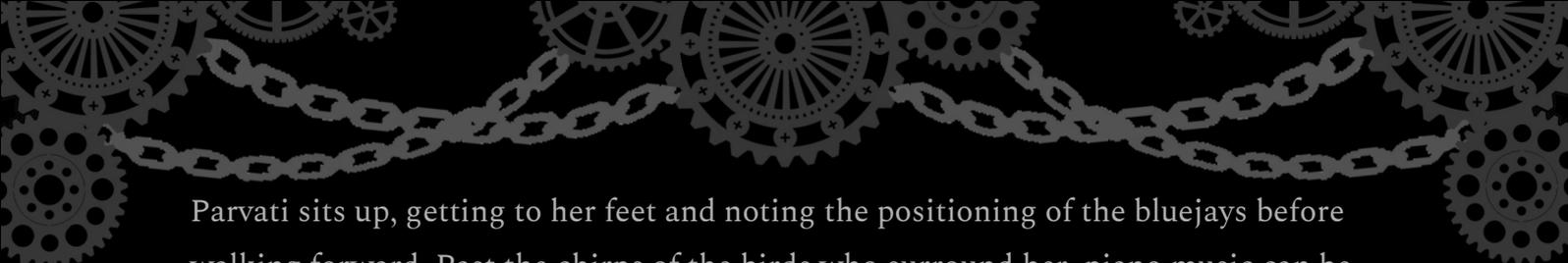
I focus on the Chosen, trying to find something, somehow in the paper. The conservative rags complain about the teenagers attending drug fueled parties in Alandur. It shows pictures of young people completely out of it, parting in a train depot between wagons. One of them looks directly at the cameraman, a shirtless man with long hair and a bandana with a golden eagle.

Liberal rags concern themselves with religious extremism, one article talking about the frightening Aghori. There's a colony of them in Velachery, in an old abandoned resort by the mouth of the Cooum River. A picture shows a man covered in ash, long hair tangling with his beard, red paint over his eyes. He holds a skull, it's dome smashed.

After a while, the words blur, and I fall asleep on the table with a plastic cover, between newspapers, the hallway bulb above me still burning.

The yellow fog lifts, with a scorching heat from a black sun pulling smoke out of the leafless forest. Bluejays, rows and rows of them, weigh heavy on the white branches. They're larger here, about the size of a fist, and their teeth are sharp garnets.





Parvati sits up, getting to her feet and noting the positioning of the bluejays before walking forward. Past the chirps of the birds who surround her, piano music can be heard. It's a sad, melodious tune, coming from a metal fortress nestled in the distant mountains. A few of the birds dive towards the sleeper, one of them leaving a scratch on her face.

Parvati runs through the flock of birds eclipsing the forest, runs until her feet feel wet. The birds are gone, and she's in the middle of a river near her home village. A pair of scissors are in her hands, covered in blood. At her feet a dying boy raises his hand for help, drowning because of his punctured neck and the water.

She remembers the face of her first victim, even after all these years. But Parvati can see more than that in the eyes staring from beneath the waves. Every innocent she's killed is there, all the hits she shouldn't have taken. Little boys and girls who would grow up to topple regimes. Protesters and freedom fighters, the poor who stepped on the wrong foot. The bluejays fly above her head, and the forest behind whispers silently.

"Thief. Killer. Monster."

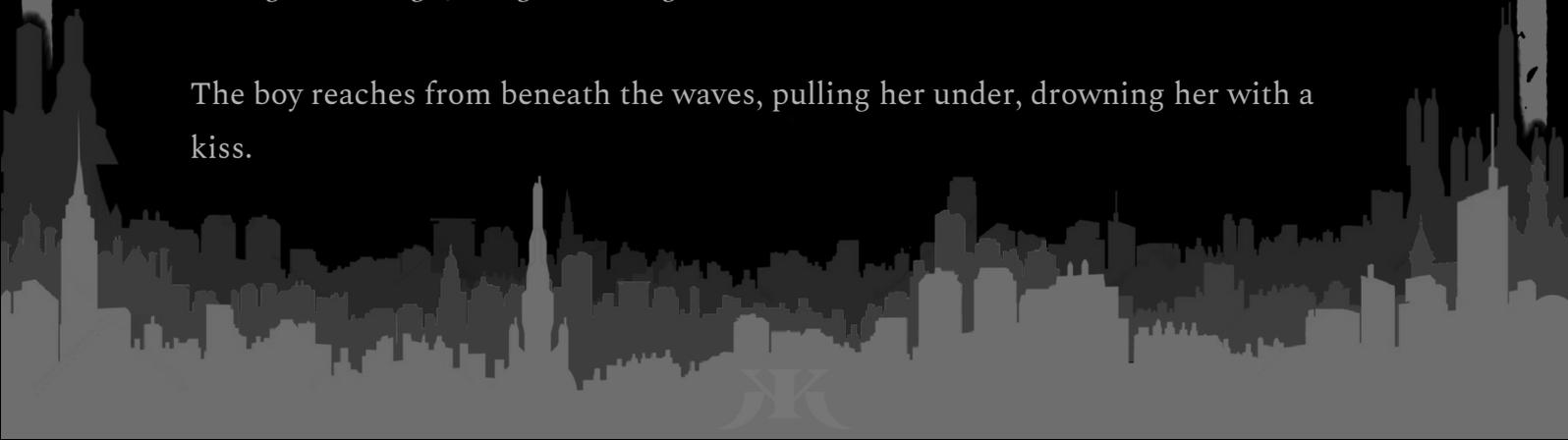
She steps back a pace or two from all the accusing eyes looking up at her from beneath the surface of the river. When she hears the whispers coming from the forest, she turns her head that way for a moment, before responding.

"I'm aware...."

The chirping chorus drills into her head upon Parvati's apologies.

"Not good enough, not good enough."

The boy reaches from beneath the waves, pulling her under, drowning her with a kiss.





She crawls out of a river within the fogs of the leafless forest. Parvati moves, leaving a trail of scissors behind. There are scores of men in this part of the woods, all in aluminum suits, tools in hand. These have gauges and spit out white static noise randomly, although the men treat them meaningfully.

She follows the parade of men, talking to the person closest to her.

"Are you all looking for something?" A hand gestures in the direction of the other men.

Behind a gasmask, he answers in whispers, his voice course. The piano sounds in the distance, melodic, though the fortress can't be seen through the fog.

"We're seeking the redeemer, the one to bring the world back. Someone to remove us from this wasteland. They say N'Gembo knows the way, but no one is admitted to his fortress."

"Is there a way someone can be admitted to his fortress?"

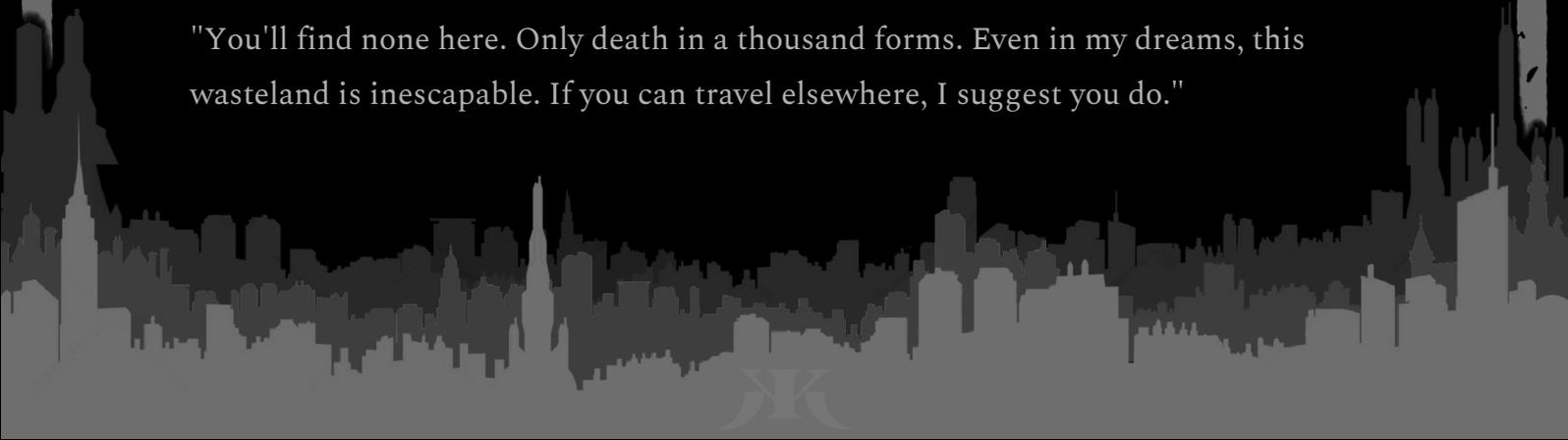
She can't see the face of the man scanning her, but once the static dies down, she can hear the disappointment in his voice.

"I've heard an amputee say he is looking for doctors. But none have helped so far. What about you, wanderer? What are you seeking?"

"Enlightenment. Peace."

A hiss echoes through the gas mask, a sign of exhaustion.

"You'll find none here. Only death in a thousand forms. Even in my dreams, this wasteland is inescapable. If you can travel elsewhere, I suggest you do."





A roar calls out through the mist, coming closer. The men scatter for cover, a few brandishing rifles and revolvers. Parvati follows their example.

Silence settles over the desolate forest, with the whole group listening. Heavy footsteps crack the dried mud and sharp jabs can be heard bursting roots. Parvati looks at her feet, the trail of scissors growing like mushrooms behind her.

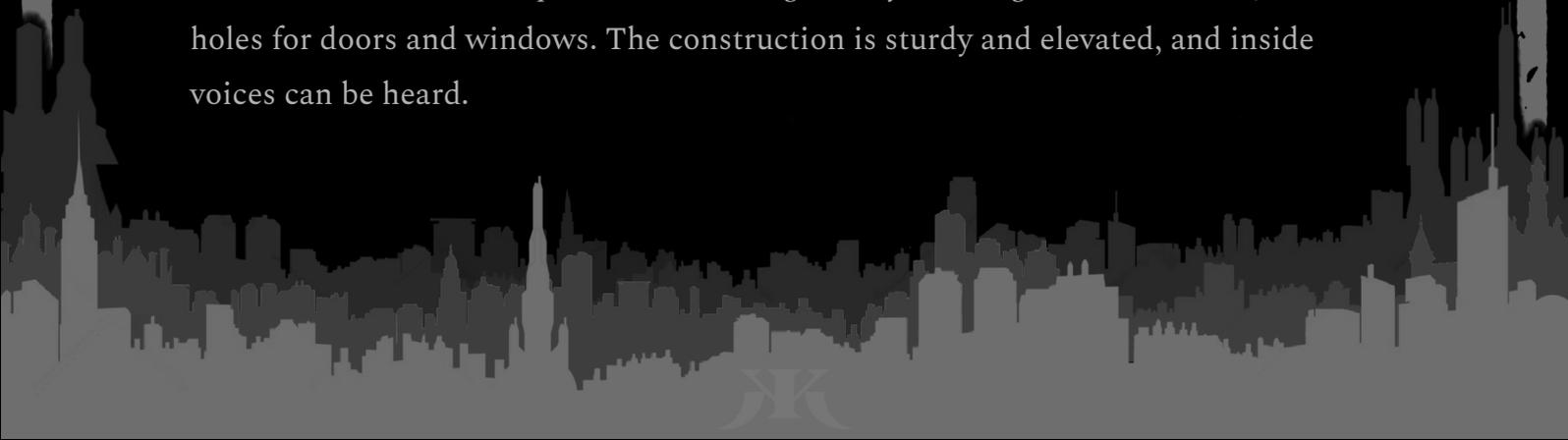
A hand bends down to pick one, skin marked by tumors. Another one grabs her throat, picking her up. The assassin stares at her own face, the same monster in the asylum. An unavoidable future version of her.

The creature bites into her shoulder, ripping the meat off. Suffocating, and strangled, she goes unconscious.

In the morning, the street has turned into a small river, fueled by the pouring water from above. Both the investigators shiver from the cold, sneezing and coughing, soaked to a sorry state. Even the beggars leave them alone as they walk through the ankle high waters.

"This is... horrible", Jorrit squeezes out between chattering teeth as he takes in the surroundings, while being constantly assaulted by the weather. "This is worse than Rwanda, man... I mean, the thousands of bodies there notwithstanding."

Jorrit keeps taking directions, asking the bystanders sheltering themselves from the rain for the house where the mother was killed by her mad husband. When in doubt, he mentions the miracle child, too. Most of the locals know the story, and they get directed to the house in question. It's a single story building with solid walls, with holes for doors and windows. The construction is sturdy and elevated, and inside voices can be heard.





Inside is a small family trying to keep the fireplace lit. Most of the place is primitive, without electricity or plumbing. A stove is built into the chimney hosting the fireplace, and some chamber pots sit in a corner, uncleaned. Breaking the pattern of poverty is a book shelf, well maintained, stacked with papers, books, and letters. Nobody pays any attention to it. The children are engaged in some sort of card game, while the father sits up in the small, crowded room, cataract in one eye. He's holding the stick he was using on the fireplace. Jorrit holds up his hands to signal harmlessness.

"I bow to the divine in you! May we take shelter from the rain here for a bit?"

After measuring the intruders, he puts down the stick, then clasps his hands together.

"I bow to the divine in you. Please, come by the fire. We don't have much, but my wife is making naan bread."

"Thank you, thank you, far too kind."

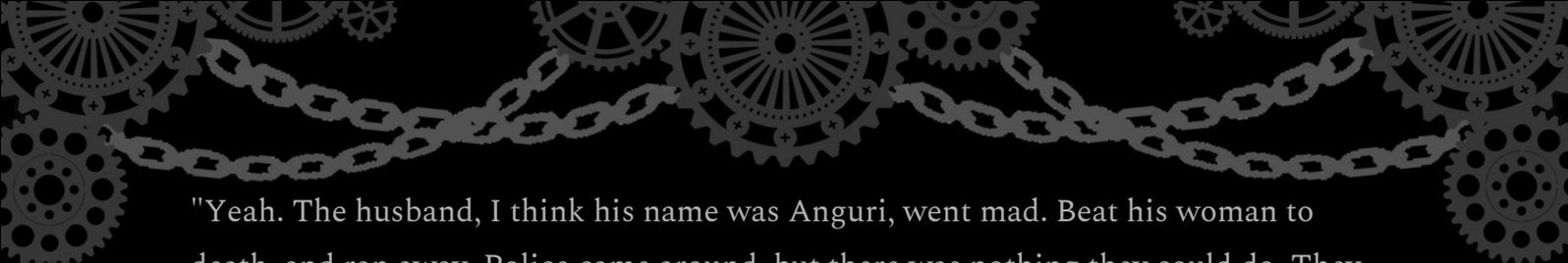
Sofia takes a few moments to warm herself at the fire, getting a feel for the people in the room, before asking questions.

"You are not the first family to live here, yes? We've heard stories."

He speaks honestly, with his wife giving him an ugly look.

"The previous family here had some trouble. We knew it was empty, so we took it."

"Any idea what trouble that was?"



"Yeah. The husband, I think his name was Anguri, went mad. Beat his woman to death, and ran away. Police came around, but there was nothing they could do. They took his boy away."

While Sofia makes small talk, the detective leans down and combs through the shelf. Most of the books are educational, ranging from physics to biology. The letters are to and from a professor at the local university called Scott Nicholson. Most interesting are the notes. They're equations, but explained step by step. They're almost intuitive, and Jorrit follows along, with the complexity increasing.

"Poor child, does anyone know what happened to him?"

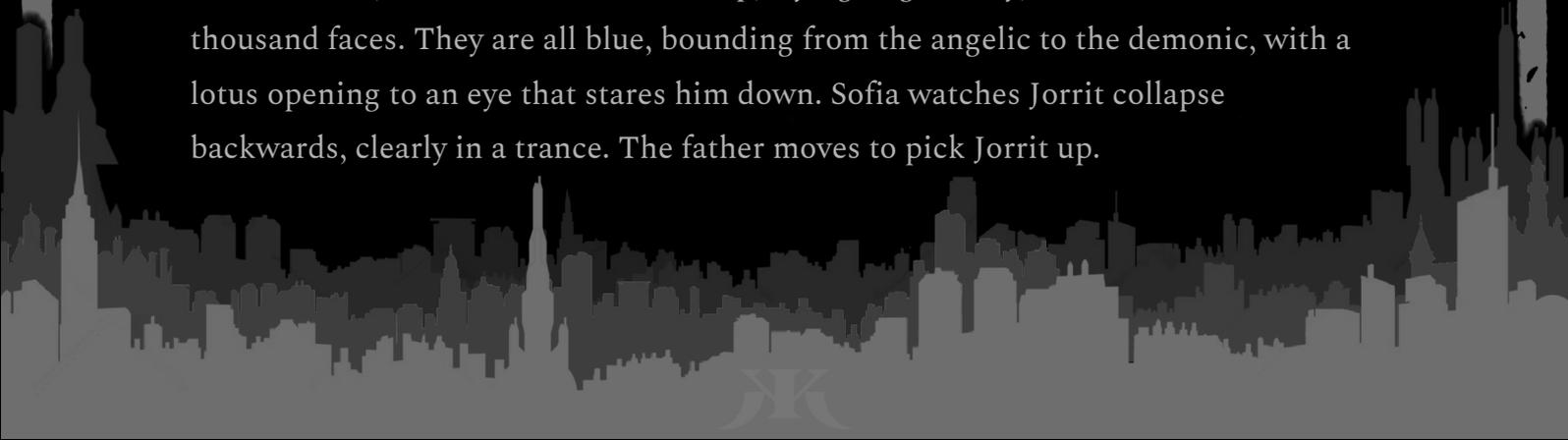
Distorted, the detective hears the man answer.

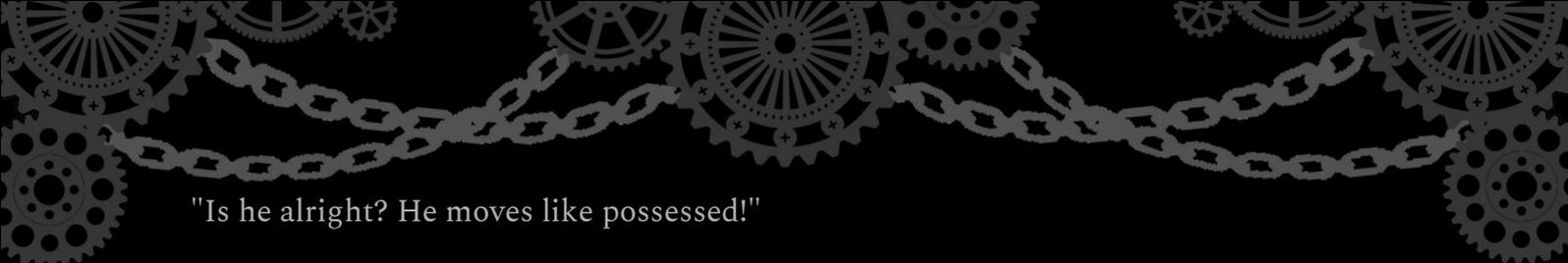
"I think the police took him to that Catholic mission on Fort St. George. A lot of people were interested in him, you see. Perhaps they placed him with his original mother, though I think she might still be in the hospital."

Jorrit can't pry away his eyes from the notebook, the writings taking on a life of their own, growing, multiplying. Generations and generations consuming each other, it's too much to bear, and Jorrit drops the notebook.

But it's inescapable now, and it's everywhere he looks, from the rain outside to the walls. The children's cards stand out, no longer poker, but a macabre parade show of mutilation and torture. Two lovers with their torsos open and viscera entangled. A man hanged upside down by his own intestines. A king and a queen, on separate cards, having intercourse with dead rats.

It's too much, all too much. He stares up, trying to get away, but instead sees a thousand faces. They are all blue, bounding from the angelic to the demonic, with a lotus opening to an eye that stares him down. Sofia watches Jorrit collapse backwards, clearly in a trance. The father moves to pick Jorrit up.





"Is he alright? He moves like possessed!"

The one thing that seems to focus the detective's twisting worldview are the cards. They're being passed around in a go fish type of game the girls are playing. He grabs the sense of another woman using them, her nose pierced with a golden chain tied to it. She does a card reading for a boy with a pair of blue eyes and a third golden one on his forehead.

Four cards come up: one is a wheel, crushing a tortured man's ankles beneath. The second is a mage with an altar behind him, an amputated leg between the tools. A third shows an angel, his chest exposed and heart beating, sounding a trumpet. The last is an image of a man, carrying a scythe, on a horse that's more bones than meat.

Jorrit finally snaps out of the trance, grabbing hold of the documents, to the protest of the mother.

"No, please, those are for the children."

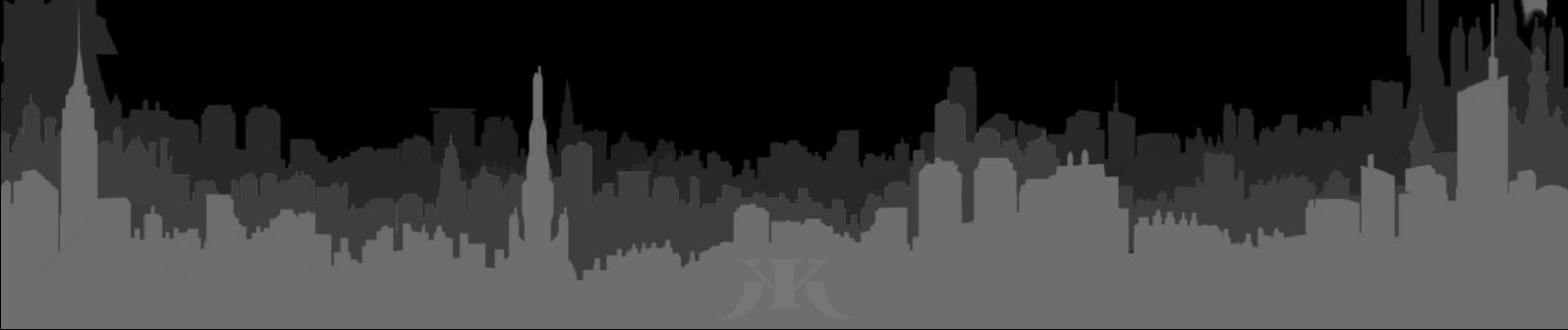
He holds up the letters of correspondence with professor Nicholson, and - especially - the notes with these mind-altering equations and formulas.

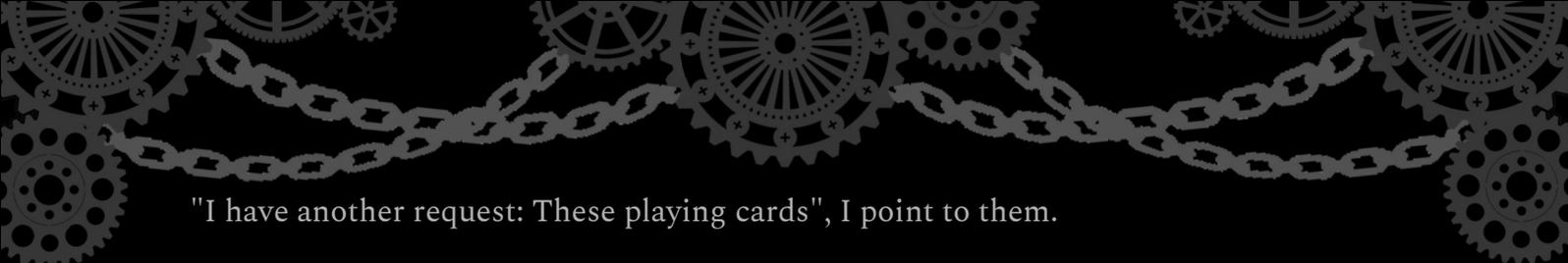
"These are not for the children."

The woman relents when her husband nods in agreement.

"You are right, sir. I could not make heads or tails of them myself."

Jorrit's sight lingers on to the cards the girls are playing with. They look like normal playing cards now, and their game has stopped in all the commotion. The father sits down again, keeping an eye on Jorrit. The mother brings the girls closer, feeding them a bit of the fresh naan bread.





"I have another request: These playing cards", I point to them.

"I need to take them as well. I will trade you something for them. What are they worth to you?"

The wife, exasperated, just takes them from the girls, one of which starts crying. She shoves them into Jorrit's chest, a few falling on the floor before he can catch them.

"Here, just take them and go. We don't like people nosing around."

"Surya, they're our guests."

"I do not care. They've brought evil spirits into this house."

"I'm sorry about all this, it's not much but I hope it's some compensation." She offered a few bills of her emergency funds. Grabbing the money, the father keeps his angry wife away.

"I'm sorry, we've searched for a home for a long time, and my wife is tired. May Vishnu preserve you for this gift... but please, we are tired. I can guide you to where you need, but you must leave."

Jorrit picks up the fallen cards, making sure he's got as many as he can gather. Sofia places a hand on his back.

"Let's get going. Thank you for the food and warmth. Gods bless you."

Absolutely broke and with their clothes not fully dried, the investigators are herded into the streets. The father offers some directions based on Sofia's questions, but the merciless rain doesn't make it easier.





"What happened in there?"

"I just had... a vision, you could say..."

"Anything useful?"

He relates his perceptions surrounding the bookshelf, notes, and playing cards to her.

"Well the last one is Death, so maybe the Four Horsemen? Knowing our fucking luck they're looking for us right now!"

"Well, the angel sounding a trumpet seems to fit the Christian apocalyptic theme of that, yes... but the first two... apart from showing torture and cannibalism, both of which, well, uhm, yeah... you know, you've been there for it, just like the rest of us..."

"What next?"

"That church in Velachery where we might find the boy?"

The sky darkens with a new layer of storm clouds, the rain reinforced. Walking through the river that used to be a street, Sofia nearly trips on something.

"Fuck it, lets get dry first, see if Ricardo has scared up some more money."

The detective relents, dejected and too tired from the downpour, and the two head for the pension.





Ricardo has already procured some resources, including burner phones. He turns to Jorrit.

"Did you check out the slums?"

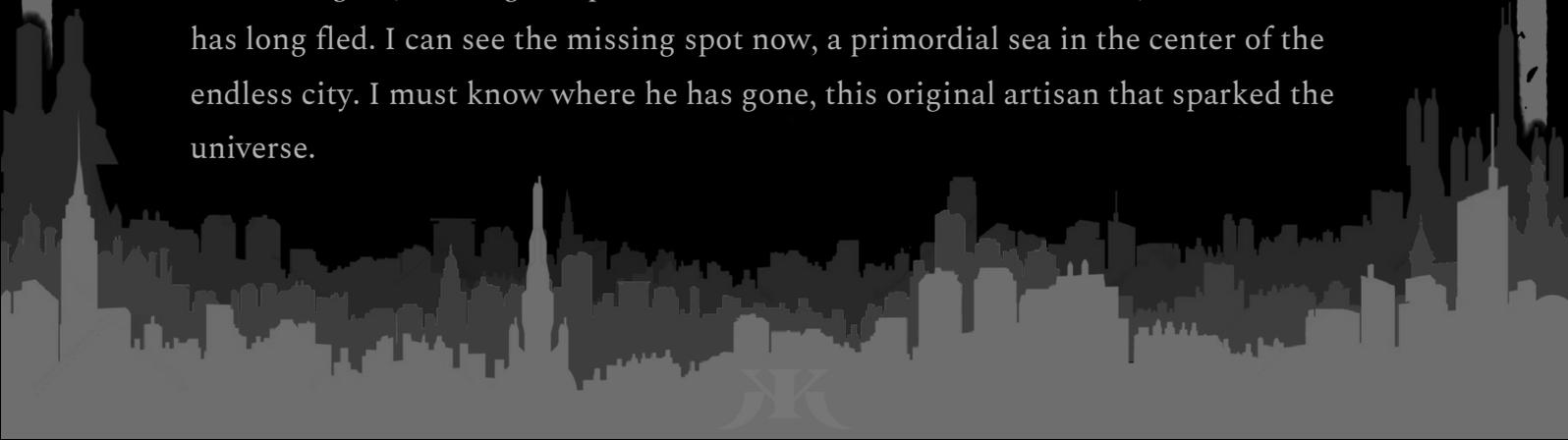
"Yeah. Didn't find him, but found a few leads and his notes, full of formulas and equations. Talking math prodigy here, it seems. Genius at explaining and demonstrating complex numerical concepts, like. Even I could follow them along somehow... for a while, at least... and then the crazy visions started. Real unpleasant shit, too."

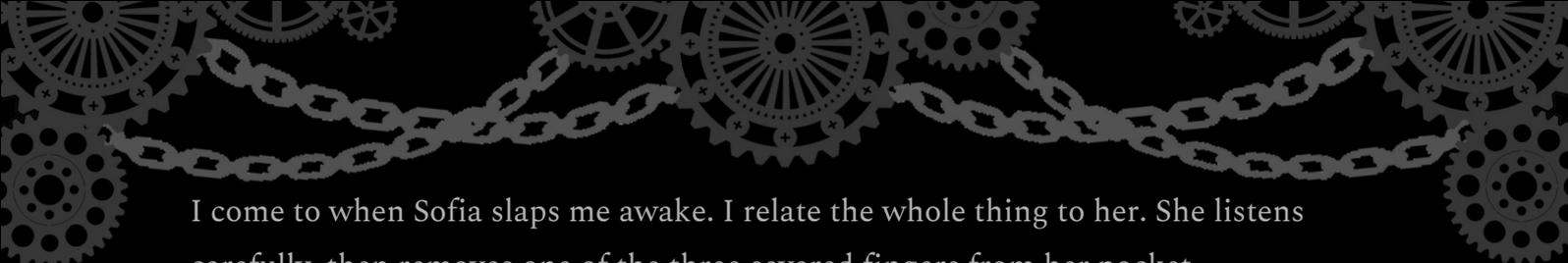
He takes out the notebook again and shows it to us. He is in awe and afraid of it at the same time. And something else... protective of it, perhaps?

I give it a look, studying the equations, seeing if I can make sense of them. It makes sense. They're equations, but explained step by step. They're almost intuitive, with the complexity increasing as they go along. Soon I slip, but the symbols keep moving, and I can't look away.

The ink spills over to the floor, and the symbols multiply, taking over the world. There's a repeating pattern, from the embroidered blankets to the raindrops outside. The others in the room grow like snaking flowers, continuously through time. And there's something missing, something essential.

All the notebook does is reveal the world for what it is, a Lie. It's all breaking apart and reforming itself perpetually, perfect in form. So perfect it's vile, nothing should be this elegant, nothing comprehensible. This is someone's creation, but the author has long fled. I can see the missing spot now, a primordial sea in the center of the endless city. I must know where he has gone, this original artisan that sparked the universe.





I come to when Sofia slaps me awake. I relate the whole thing to her. She listens carefully, then removes one of the three severed fingers from her pocket.

"He must know something."

She takes a deep breath, then bites into the decaying flesh. Chewing through the finger, something in the sink mirror catches her eye, something other than the tangle of veins on her tired face. Sofia smashes her fist into it, but only cracks the study mirror, deforming it.

The shards move, taking a life of their own, multiplying like the equations. A mirror crystal grows. One wing of reflecting glass cuts into the shower curtain. The other tears the bathroom door in half. More shards cut into Sofia's face.

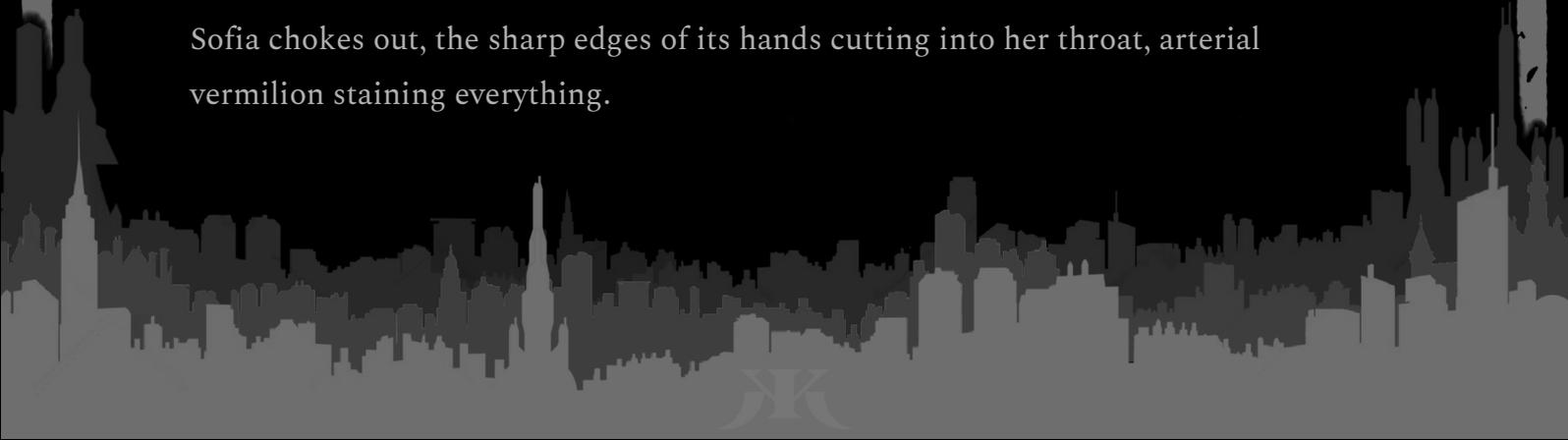
We watch in horror while she's lifted off the ground by her throat. A hand of constantly breaking mirrors extends from a vague humanoid shape with wings. Gnashing glass speaks, and I can understand the voice causing our eardrums to bleed.

"You have called upon me once more, my child. Shall I transport you to Chesed's Citadel? But I sense you've already traversed the gulfs of time. Is there something else you need?"

Sofia's arms sway freely. She does not fight, nor does she react to her fist and face bleeding. Her eyes are wide and crazed, seeing the shattered glass reflecting the space around her.

"We are indeed back in time."

Sofia chokes out, the sharp edges of its hands cutting into her throat, arterial vermilion staining everything.





"I have to know... who is the architect who fled? Who constructed this horrid fantasy around us? How does it still play without the conductor?"

Every answer Enkisun gives hurts like sand grit in our ear. A beam of light catches the mirrors, blinding everyone looking at it.

"You've learned a secret, I see. Good, I'm in need knowledgeable servants. Be careful not to learn too much, for it may harm you. The creator's name would melt your tongue, but call him Demiurge. He and his Archons set up this Elysium for you poor creatures to inhabit. Be glad, for elsewhere is much worse than this Paradise."

"What happened to him? He is gone! I can see he has left!"

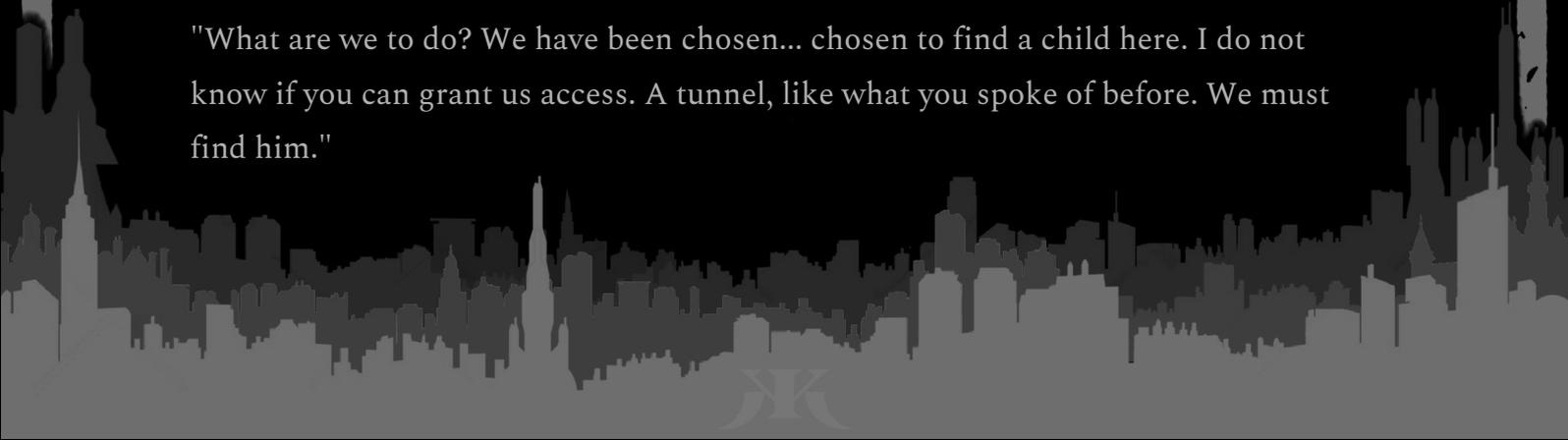
Sofia grabs onto the glass-covered arm, her hands bleeding as they press in. She chokes out her questions as blood slowly runs down her neck, soaking into her blouse. The blood trickles down on the mirror surfaces, interrupting the radiance.

When it turns, the wings smash into the walls, bits falling along with the tiles. There's not enough room for it, and it maneuvers to the room.

"All who've heard of him have asked that question. Countless have lost their lives in mournful sorrow. No one knows, but the answer would be worth more than gold. Everything has gone wrong with his absence."

Sofia moans in pain, but her hands grip tighter onto the mirror shards. She starts to pale as blood drips onto the ground from her wounds.

"What are we to do? We have been chosen... chosen to find a child here. I do not know if you can grant us access. A tunnel, like what you spoke of before. We must find him."





"I can feel the faint traces of the one you speak of in your eyes. He is here, but not here. Strange. I can lead you to his last footprint. But other creatures mask his presence, greedy for his company. Beware, they are worshipers of Chagidiel, playthings of pleasure and pain."

It steps into the living room, and part of the cracked glass unfolds, leaving behind a reflecting window. A different image appears in the resulting mirror, clear as day. Behind it is a dirty toilet, a small boy with blueish skin flat on the ground. He's got his whole arm in a hole in the wall, trying to dig something out. His back, turned to the cultists, displays a small tail made of skin. Gnashing glass speaks with surprise, letting Sofia go.

"What is this?"

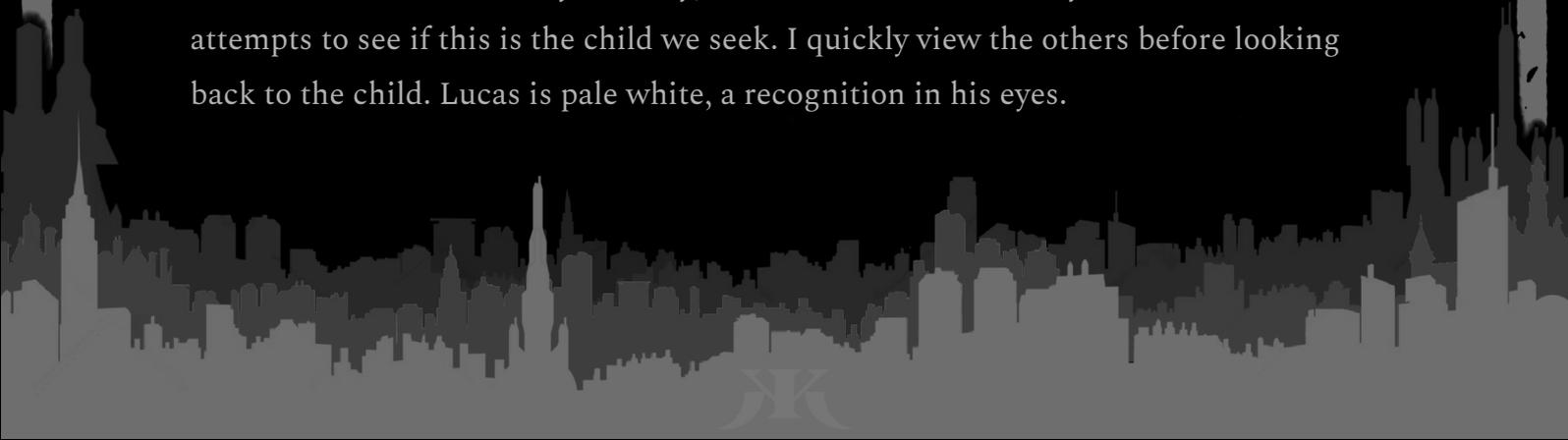
Sofia falls to the ground, clutching her throat as it bleeds. Remaining glass shards have embedded themselves into her fist, her hands, her neck. She sits up slowly and touches the image of the child with her free hand.

"There... we can seek him."

She takes a strained breath in. Her voice is weak and trembling. Her hand passes through the mirror, and the child turns with a lizard's speed. His reflective eyes stare back from the dark, a moth in one hand a rusty knife in the other. The Enkisun mirror construct takes a step back.

"Who are you? What... what is that?"

"I understand that this may be scary, child. I am Sofia. What is your name?" Sofia attempts to see if this is the child we seek. I quickly view the others before looking back to the child. Lucas is pale white, a recognition in his eyes.





His reddish eyes don't fit the description of blue irises. It isn't Srijan, there's something threatening about this kid, something feral. Now the boy extends his hand through the mirror, as if he were in the same room. Its edges start to crack, closing in on the center, Enkisun's influence. The summoning is accusative towards us, and fearful of the child.

"No, stay back! What is this deception?"

An iron candlestick serves as a blunt instrument for Jorrit who snaps out of the stunned inactivity he had fallen into at the sight of the thing. He swings it through the mirror before the menacing feral boy can cross, but catches empty air instead. It stops at the edge, swimming through the mirror shards.

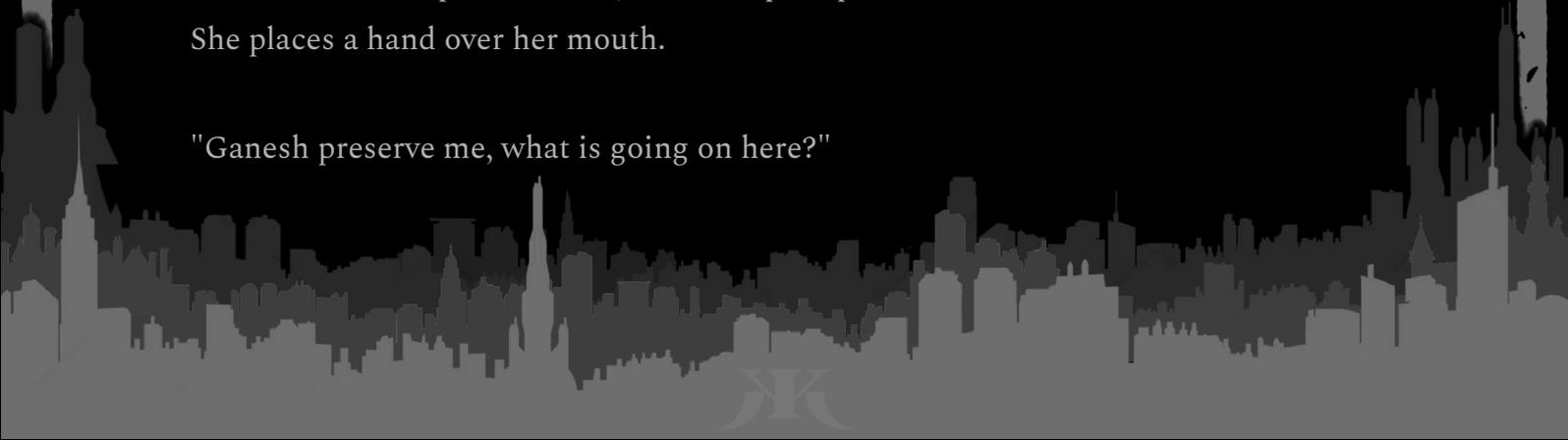
The detective struggles to remove it, but he can't. Once the shards have fully grown around it, it drops to the floor. Jorrit feels the weight, his arm pulled downwards. Through the portal, the child jumps Enkisun with the rusty knife. A few blows and the summoned construct shatters to fragments, cursing us.

"You will pay for this, seekers!"

The feral child is not an adept fighter, the blade swinging wildly in the air. Jorrit moves away, candlestick still in his hand, now coated in sharp glass. More mirror shards fall to the floor, the reflective window closing slowly with the death of its master.

Jorrit drops the candlestick and moves towards the kid with open hands - ready to grapple and immobilize the boy. Taking the blade away, the detective tosses him in the bathtub, then shoves a drawer in front of the door, for lack of a key. Jorrit turns around to see the pension host, the same plump woman that checked us in earlier. She places a hand over her mouth.

"Ganesh preserve me, what is going on here?"





"There's a... a burglar in there!", he points to the blocked door. "Just some kid, but I think high on some drug - and armed with a real big knife!"

The door budes while we rush to help the detective keep it closed, while we watch the mirror-window vanish. Our host hasn't seen it, thankfully. The violent jerking of the door dies down. Steadying ourselves, we turn back to the door, and Parvati counts to three before opening it. The beathroom is empty.

"He's gone."

"I'll call the local patrol, they should pick him up quickly." The pension owner steps out into the hallway, heading for that old rotary phone, before Ricardo stops her.

"No need madam, he hasn't stolen anything important, and I'll pay for the damages."

He signs a check, and hands it to her. Her eyes widen when she sees it.

"Are you sure?"

"Very. Let's not make a big deal out of this. Just point us to different rooms."

The host appeased, we decide to split up, following the different threads: Jorrit and Sofia after the catholic church, and the rest of us looking into the professor.

By the time Sofia returns with patched wounds, some dry clothes, and an old mobile phone in her pocket, we find the detective is gone. A note remains behind.

I'll meet you at the church later then. Anders told me about something he read in the newspaper about an Aghori community nearby. I think they might be some of the Chosen. Going to check it out.





"So much for the buddy system" Sofia says with a smirk.

Packing her things into a water resistant bag, Sofia catches a tuk tuk to Fort St. George, haggling with the driver. We head out to lunch first.

Jorrit arrives by tuk tuk taxi after a permanent struggle with the driver about going elsewhere. The houses part way for a broken down temple, ruined walls blocking the way to its stairs. Despite the storm, the vultures sit on the walls, waiting, occasionally descending. There's a man decomposing by one of the walls, and one of the birds burrows into his neck, tearing flesh. The detective has no doubts: these are charnel grounds mentioned in the news article.

There's a winding path through the collapsed walls, Jorrit thinks back on the news articles he's read. The liberal newspaper calling for their banishment called their practices primitive, unsavory, and uncultured. It soon becomes apparent why: in a roofless enclosure, fornicating in the mud among the corpses are a man and woman. They both have tangled, dreadlocked hair, now filled with mud, and their foreheads are painted with red acrylic and ash.

Sticking close to what's left of one of the walls, to avoid at least some of the torrential rain and chilling gusts of wind, Jorrit stays quiet and waits for a while. He looks on as they fornicate, however - part of him intrigued by what may be some sort of ritual.

She's on top, clearly enjoying herself, grimacing with her orgasms. The detective is sure they both see him, but neither stop. They continue their frolic until the man finishes, at which point they separate. With no sign of attachment, they continue what Jorrit assumes were their previous activities. She decapitates one of the corpses, then proceeds to skin the head with a blade. The man grabs a bowl of a foul smelling gruel, eating it with his bare hands.





The detective continues on his journey and finds the steps to the temple. It looks like an old swimming pool, with spotted dark blue tiles. Where the water should be are pyres, the dead are burning.

There are a number of ascetics about, all naked, some smoking pipes and rambling visions. A few slaughter a goat into one of the smaller pools, the blood clogging the drain. Between the spires, covered in ash, a single woman meditates, unperturbed by the vicious rank. She seems well kept, the only one clothed and with her hair neat. The detective can see why, a man returning with a smashed skull. Drinking from it, he picks up a comb and tends to her.

To Jorrit's surprise, the goat isn't part of a ritual. It's just food, but no consideration is given to hygiene. Half eaten is raw, the other half placed on a fire near the burning bodies, with a few of the men rubbing themselves in ash. It's almost if the old woman senses the detective's presence, opening her eyes, and whispering something to her caretaker. He brings her a ceramic bowl of paint, and she smears some tears on her face, waiting.

It all makes sense for the detective, as he recognizes the woman among the chosen. She was touched by the goddess when her father set himself on fire in protest over a matter of family honor. Unlike most ascetics, these men and women try to reach the truth by shedding themselves of morals and fears. Jorrit approaches her.

"I bow to the divine in you, chosen of Malkuth"

Accompanying this with a perhaps clumsy, but respectfully intended, imitation of the appropriate gestures and bow, Jorrit walks before her.

"I bow to the divine in you, mindful one. Indians use this greeting everyday but few ponder on its meaning."





"Fellow Chosen One, I am brought to your temple by a prophecy that I and a few of mine are following. It has been... a wild ride so far. Can you, perchance, tell me what the fuck is going on in this city?"

The aghori bows her head, ash scattering from her face.

"Kala, in her aspect of chaos, floods the city with both water and her worshippers. More than this, I cannot say, for I know not your Path."

"I seek the three-eyed child of a witch with many faces, before he becomes lost. I believe that I need to find him in order to open the door to myself, which takes seven keys to unlock. Is this my path?"

Closing her eyes, she lets her caretaker strip her, and clean her. He does so in a ritualic manner, using a boiled cloth and a single soap. She speaks without opening her eyes, shaken by the cleaner.

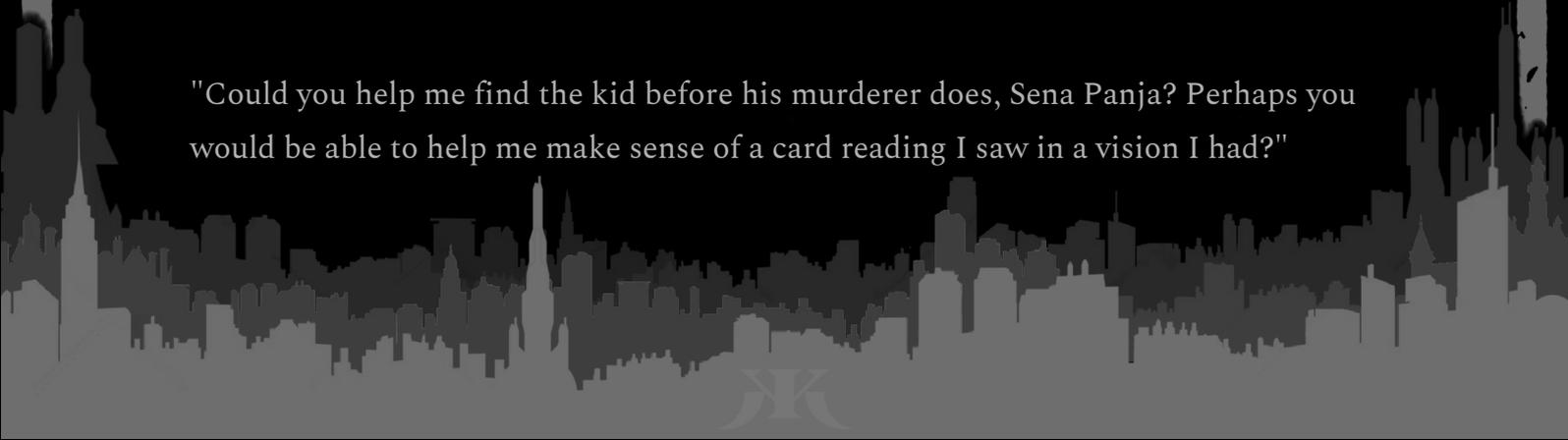
"Call me Sena Panja. I do not know your path. I can only be a guide for a while. Before this, however, tell me, are you the one who has been killing the children?"

"I am not. But I suspect he might also be looking for the same child as I am. But why he is killing all these others, I don't know."

A period of silence follows while her caretaker finishes her bath. She then responds.

"Time has no meaning for the Enlightened, and one of them is responsible for these murders. He's a strange one, afraid of the Truth spreading to others. But I sense truth in your words. You are not this stranger. What can Sena Panja do for you, chosen of Mahakali?"

"Could you help me find the kid before his murderer does, Sena Panja? Perhaps you would be able to help me make sense of a card reading I saw in a vision I had?"





Jorrit recounts what he saw in the cards.

"Four cards come up: one is a wheel, crushing a tortured man's ankles beneath. The second is a mage with an altar behind him, an amputated leg between the tools. A third shows an angel, his chest exposed and heart beating, sounding a trumpet. The last is an image of a man, carrying a scythe, on a horse that's more bones than meat."

Sena Panja raises a finger, and the caretakers scramble to bring her offerings. A flute made from a gourd is placed in her hand, and a basket with a top in front. She tries a few notes, then continues the conversation.

"The cards reflect what you've come to know. But you need to hear the words, so I will say them for you."

"First, the wheel of karma, fate, crushing those underneath. We are all prisoners to it, even you and I, even the Enlightened."

"The second is the price one has to pay for knowledge. You must know the flesh before surpassing your condition."

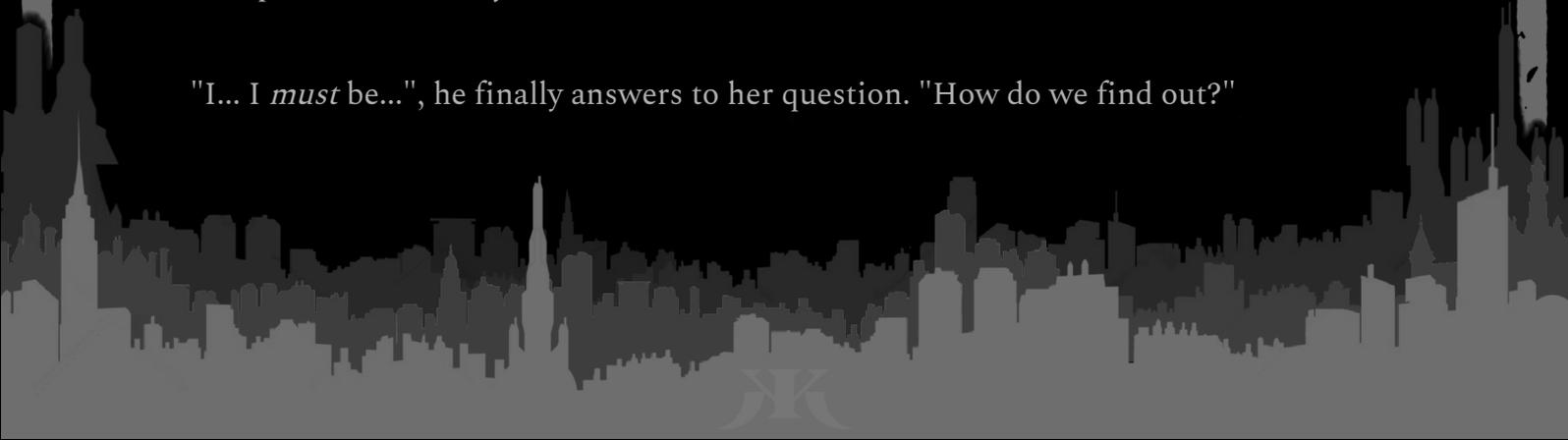
"Next is the joy of Enlightenment, the announcing of Awakening. A decision you will have to make here."

"Your journey will end with death. For only so can you be truly liberated."

"This is your path, but are you strong enough to follow it?"

Jorrit's eyes alternately widen with understanding and narrow in confusion, as she interprets the cards' symbolism for him.

"I... I *must* be...", he finally answers to her question. "How do we find out?"





"To become Enlightened one must shed mortal concerns. The body is only a weak vessel for the soul, and often the flesh worries. It has desires, but it also has fears and pains. I can test you with a lesson in the latter two. Then, perhaps, the awakened child can guide you through the rest. Are you ready?"

"I was ready to die for my vengeance when this whole thing started out. Now I may die for this prophecy. It's... a bigger cause at least... When can we start?"

Sena Panja takes the top off the basket, then plays the flute. It's a loud, high pitched, continuous melody. Jorrit half expects a cobra to come out of the basket, dancing. Instead, chains ending in hooks rise from it, winding through the air. Before he can react, the chains, moving by themselves, latch onto his skin. A short scream of shock escapes him as they strike. But he grits his teeth and endures the pain.

The hooks tear through his skin, the pain sharp, but the detective thinks past it. Dancing to the music, the chains retreat back into the basket. Sena Panja stops playing, and puts the gourd flute down, with the caretakers taking both away. Her head nods behind Jorrit, where he sees the pyres moving, embers flying through the air, forming a pathway before him. It leads to a decomposing corpse at the other end of the room.

"You're no stranger to pain. But you must conquer your fears as well. Go to the body, and eat the eyes."

Fearfully and hesitantly, he crosses the distance and stops before the corpse, looking at its face and eyes. The body is in an advanced state of decomposition, and is crawling with maggots and fleas. He looks down at his feet, realizing he just walked over the pathway of embers without feeling a thing.

"Pain is just an illusion", he repeats to himself over and over again, having crossed the scorching path.





Jorrit comes closer to the body, its pungency permeating the air. Looks like he'll have to dig out the eyes somehow. He reaches for his knife. As he gouges the first eye, he resolves to collect them both from the rotten skull first, then eat them both in quick succession.

The taste is absolutely atrocious, with something of an ammoniac aftertaste that he can't shake. Jorrit feels something moving on his tongue, and can't force himself to swallow or bite down. He pukes out the eyes, and wonders what insanity brought him to this.

"A pity. You've mastered pain, but not your fears. Remember well that your fear of consuming the dead kept you from your pain. I doubt you have what it takes to face one of the Enlightened. If you still wish to confront the murderer, he's killed again. This time in Guindy National Park, near the children's play area."

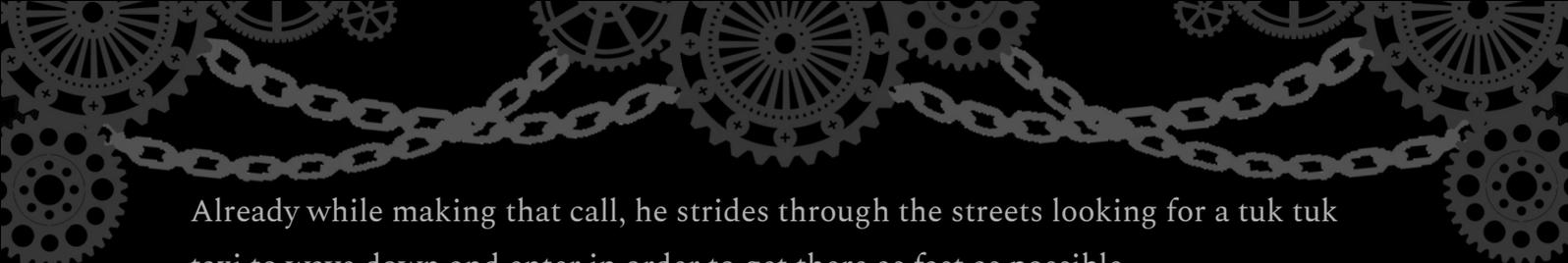
Wild-eyed, and wiping his mouth repeatedly in sheer disgust, Jorrit flees. He makes his way past the onlooking crowd of cultists, and through the rubble on the stairs, back to the street.

No one follows Jorrit out, although he hears a mirth sounding through the empty pools. With the rain washing him, he continues puking, then stands, leaning against a wall. He stares up at the rain clouds, where a bit of morning light shines through. The night has passed with him

The detective must have spent a good part of the night in the charnel grounds. He's wandered through the streets long enough, but now has collected his thoughts. He calls the others using a burner phone.

"Hey, I got a hot lead on that killer. I'm going to Guindy National Park right now, to the children's playground there."





Already while making that call, he strides through the streets looking for a tuk tuk taxi to wave down and enter in order to get there as fast as possible.

The second Jorrit hangs up the phone, a tuk tuk, slowly moving, it's driver wielding an umbrella against the wind. At least the passenger compartment is isolated, and he falls asleep on his way.

Roaches crawl up the wall of the dirty, cramped dinner, while Lucas compiles a list of asylums from several phone books. An overly greasy chicken curry arrives at the tables, served by the chef himself. He clearly overcharges, but the warm food does some good against the cold. Parvati steps in through the door, folding an umbrella.

"Did you find anything?"

"Seems these shelters are all privately run, by the same NGO..."

"Do you know the name?"

"Cows Milk" Lucas says in between shoveling food into his mouth.

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"There's one in this district, a women's shelter for the homeless. We could go there today."

Despite the unclean surroundings, the curry turns out to be edible, and we keep it down. We pile into a few green and yellow tuk tuk taxis, and head out.



Stand alone columns mark the front garden of the brick institute with its onion dome towers. The entrance has a red horseshoe arch, with white mosaics of simple geometrical patterns. The window grates are intricately designed hexagons with fingers grasping them, eyes staring from the dark. Orderlies carry people in wheelchairs to a group session, mostly catatonics. There's a circular, closed off desk with a few people sitting around. The one addressing us is a well manicured man with semi-rimless frames, speaking English.

"Welcome to the Cow's Milk House Of Mind. My name is Gharapure, how can I help you?"

I look at Lucas, then at Gharapure, giving him a smile and a greeting.

"I bow to the divine in you, Gharapure-ji. We're here to find information about one of your former residents. The mother of a boy named Srijan Devadhikar?"

"Ah. Well, we largely deal with homeless women here, but naturally there are many children involved. Let's see if I can find anyone by that name."

Gharapure scans through some documentation, then looks back at us.

"We've had several children by that name. We have over a thousand patients. Could you recognize the mother if you saw her? Or the child, if he's still here?"

"The boy was very smart, apparently his father went mad and killed his mother."
Lucas says to the attendant.

Gharapure nods in understanding, a serene look on his face that tells he's seen it all.



"Yes, I've heard of that. It was his step mother that the father killed. His birth mother was interned here, but I'm not sure if she's still with us. I'm sure doctor Patel knows more. But before we go forward, I have to ask, who are you? What relation do you have to all this?"

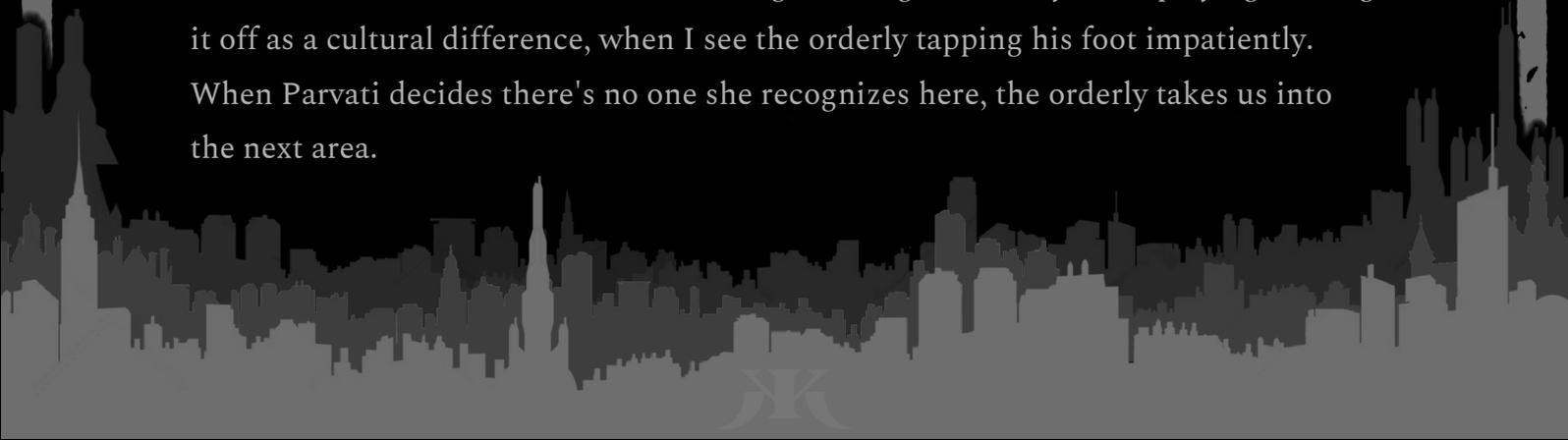
"I'm his aunt, on his mother's side of the family." Parvati steps forward. Lucas interjects with a long and sordid family history. The orderly in his white coat shakes his head in pained agreement.

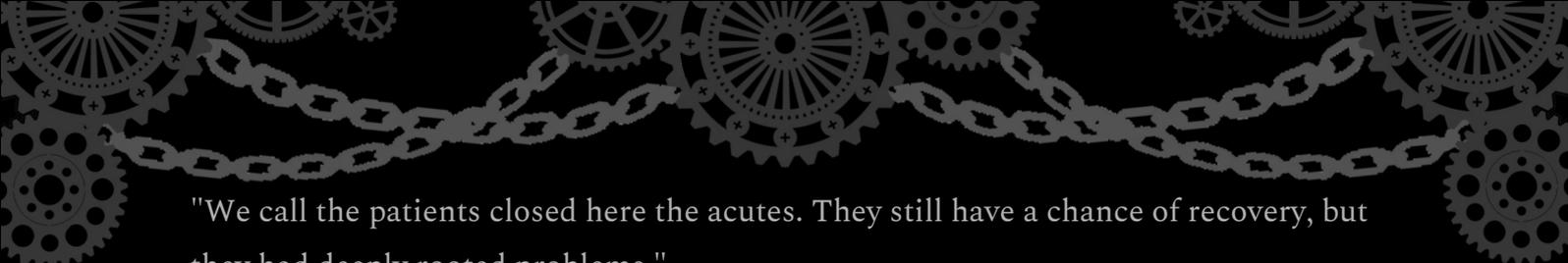
"Ok, since we don't have any ID on anybody, I'll take you to have a look around. I can only take three people, for security reasons. Leave your things here. Don't worry, they'll be safe. Maybe we'll get lucky, and find who you're looking for. I'll leave word for doctor Patel. Please don't bother the patients."

Unlocking the ornate grates, the orderly moves through the institution with a careful, calm step. The plaster on the wall is cracking due to humidity, and the white paint on the beds is peeling to reveal rust underneath. All in all, it's not that bad, since the patients themselves seem looked after. Many women are engaged in old board games or faded card games of some sort, keeping them busy. A sit in lotus position in a group circle, singing songs.

"This is our first level of isolation, the neurotics. They're the less severe cases, mostly due to malnourishment and substance abuse. Feel free to look around, but I think you won't find whom you're looking for here. "

He unlocks a second grate and waits for us to inspect the place and ultimately go through. There are a few women and children, playing with joy. None fit the blue eyed boy we've heard descriptions of, and we have no idea what the mother looks like. What strikes as odd are the non-recognizable games everyone is playing. I shrug it off as a cultural difference, when I see the orderly tapping his foot impatiently. When Parvati decides there's no one she recognizes here, the orderly takes us into the next area.





"We call the patients closed here the acutes. They still have a chance of recovery, but they had deeply rooted problems."

Here, things are a bit less clean, with the common bedding areas a bit larger, each separated by locked grates. The few patients roaming the corridors have strange behaviors, catatonically rubbing against walls, looking away. Only two of the games are used for therapy, though they're less social in nature. Solitary women built things out of wooden blocks, or roll dice and move a single pawn on a board. Only one group breaks the pattern, playing poker according to some obscure rules. One woman cheats by blatantly looking at another's card, who tries to hide them. The cheater explodes into violence and hits her repeatedly, her victim relenting the cards.

While staring at the card game, I feel the hairs on my back rise, a chill climbing on my spine. Most of the participants in the game distance themselves from the table. Some nurses head to split the two women clawing at each other's eyes. Unhindered, one woman continues the game by herself, lost in thought.

"Ah, doctor Patel."

Gharapure greets a gaunt woman that looks like she hasn't slept in ages, craters under her eyes.

"Are these the family in question?"

"Yes, doctor, an aunt and some teachers."

"I bow to the divine in you, doctor Patel. I'm Lucas Reynolds, this is Anders Jornsens." he bows slightly and offers a standard handshake. "We're with the Naval prep academy, this is our friend Parvati. Sorry it took so long to get here, red tape and all that."





I give the doctor a polite smile and a greeting when Lucas introduces me. An exhausted gasp escapes and he shakes my hand. There's a smell of formaldehyde surrounding the middle-aged doctor.

"I bow to the divine in you. A pleasure, Professor Reynolds. I didn't know the Naval academy had taken an interest. We're glad someone finally takes an interest in young Srijan. We've kept him with his mother, but she's largely unresponsive to medication. Now, while she's sedated, we're about to go into an area for the chronics. Please, prepare yourselves."

The doctor motions them towards another gate, this one separated with hexagonal steel. The lone woman left from the card game is still there, a light complexion in her skin, a teardrop Bindi between her eyebrows. She's taken control of the deck, and reveals cards in front of her, slowly inspecting them one by one.

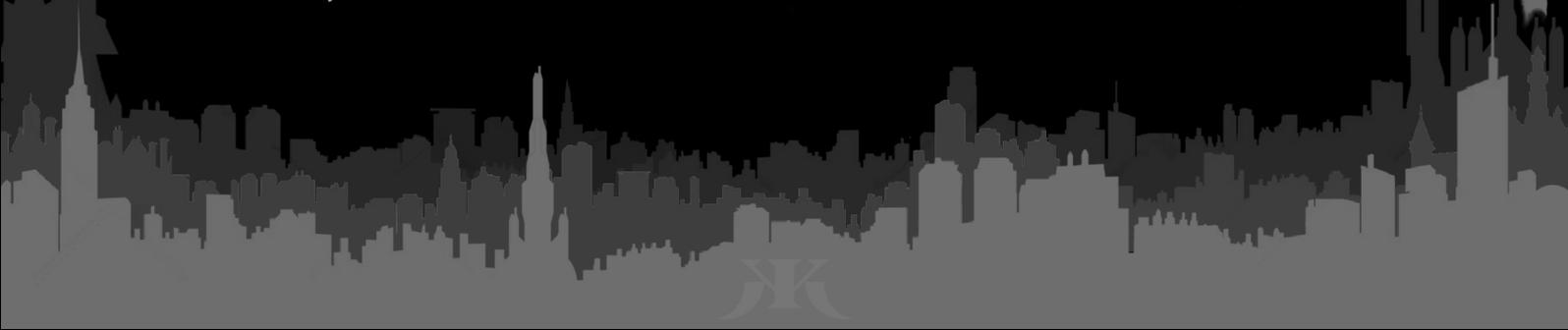
"Shame about the boy's history, but based on the interviews, he seems unaffected. Right this way, if you will."

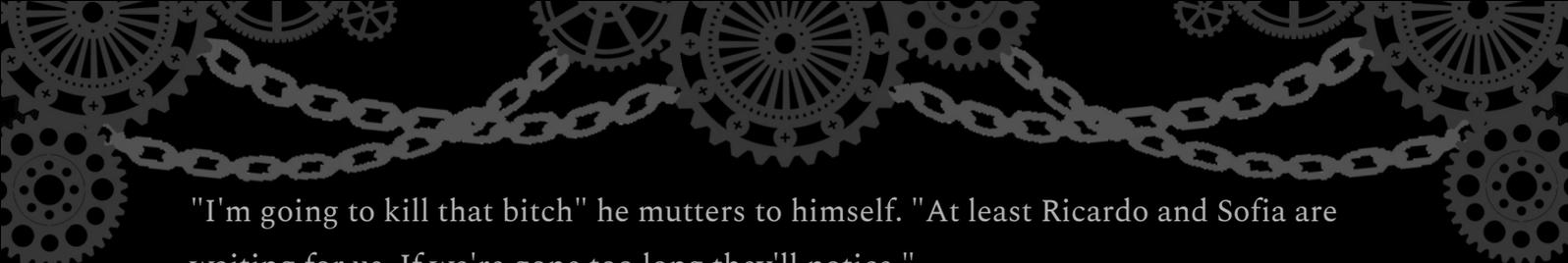
One past the gate, we see a large room with a few blankets on the floor. Grates let in light from the gardens outside, with the rain splashing in at the edges. A few clothes lines are somewhere in the back, waving in the wind. There's no one in the room, and the grate behind us slams shut. We hear a gaunt woman's voice sound behind us.

"Chronics indeed, these cultists of Malkuth. Let's see if they're responsive to a few hours of isolation."

Trapped, with all our things in bags at the front desk, we see the doctor and orderly departing.

I turn and try to open it, hoping it might work despite having a niggling doubt in the back of my mind that it won't. Lucas curses.





"I'm going to kill that bitch" he mutters to himself. "At least Ricardo and Sofia are waiting for us. If we're gone too long they'll notice."

I give up tugging on the door and look to Lucas with a light frown on my features as I realize something.

"Unless they get them too. How did she know about Malkuth?"

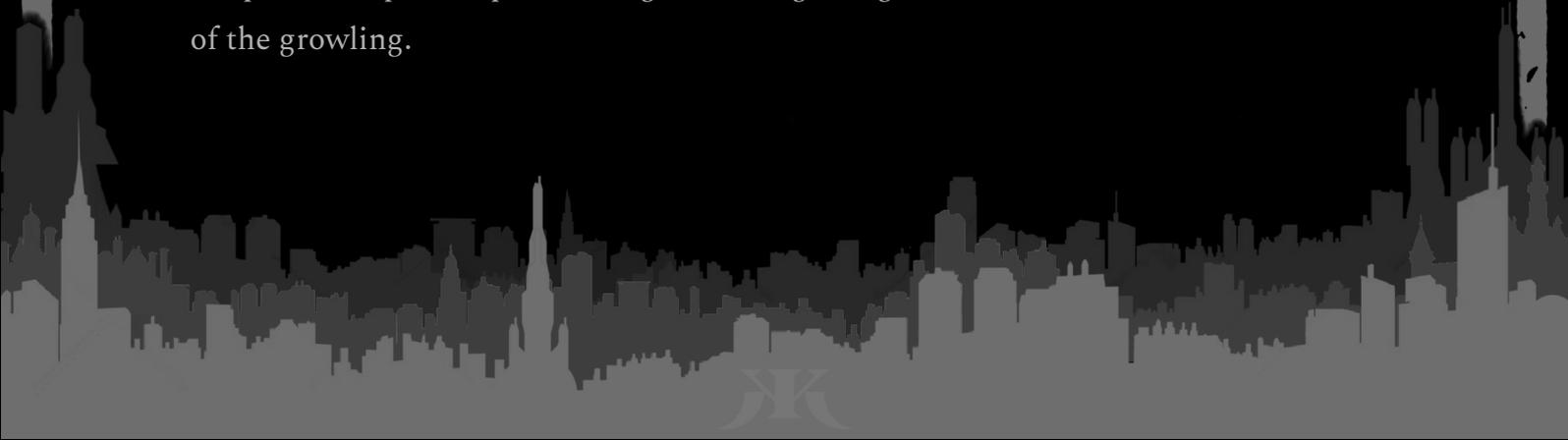
"No idea, probably aligned with the Lictors or something"

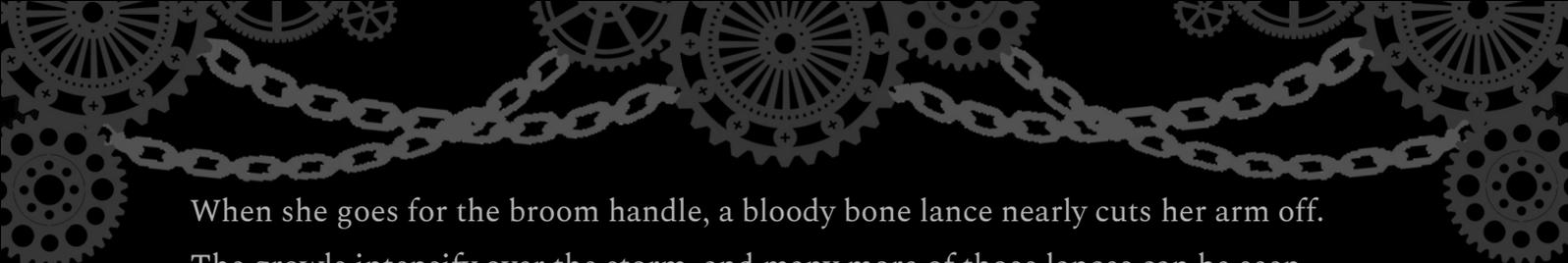
Lucas is looking for any means of escape, the grates, or anything that can be broken to get out. I frown some more before looking around the room myself, checking for any ways out of the room.

Parvati notices an old chimney. She gives Lucas a hand up, and he ascends using what little handholds he can find. The chimney is covered in moss, and the rain hydrates it, making it loose. Inevitably, a foothold slips, and Lucas loses his grip, falling for a few meters. Landing on his leg, the mercenary hears a crack follow, an open fracture wetting the pant leg.

Something else sounds through the curses of the mercenary, a growl from the direction of the clothes lines. The storm clouds hover overhead, a dark spot dimming the available light. The growls mirror Lucas's screams, something brushing through the clothes, something large.

Parvati sees what she's looking for, an old broom, underneath the clothes lines. Whatever is moving through there isn't far from it, but it's the only substitute for a weapon she can see. Lucas, still cursing, tries to remain upright, teeth grind under the pain. I help him up. Hopping on one leg along the wall we watch for the source of the growling.





When she goes for the broom handle, a bloody bone lance nearly cuts her arm off. The growls intensify over the storm, and many more of those lances can be seen underneath the clothes. One flies at the assassin's head.

Whatever it is, Parvati dodges, with the bone lance cutting the air. The thing gets tangled up in a bed sheet, and a wide torso with multiple arms swings wildly. Two heads try to breathe through the rain-soaked rag, while its four sharp bloody stumps tap onto the floor.

"STOP!" Lucas yells

It stops advancing when Lucas yells, but its feet keep moving, tapping into the floor. I can't help but notice it has a rhythm.

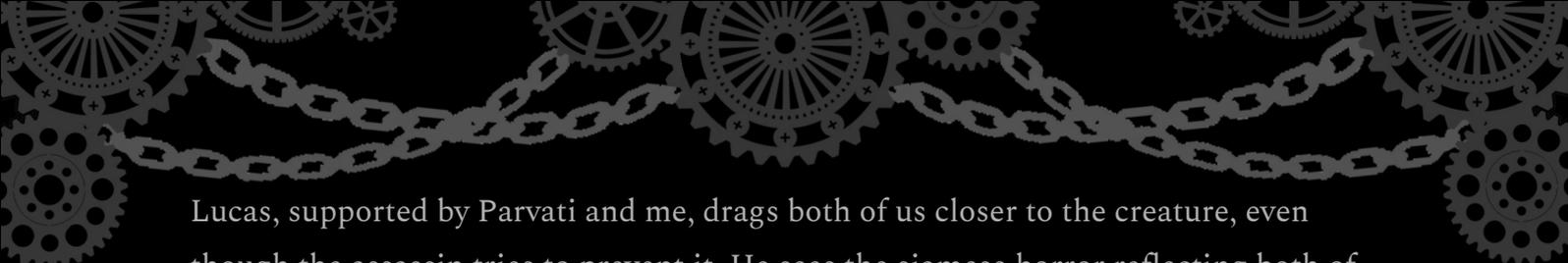
The mercenary feels something inside him, something reminding him of the visions brought by music.

Using the broom handle, Parvati takes off the bedsheet, and finds herself staring into a mirror. No, not a mirror, Lucas's head and mine are there as well, and they're fused at the neck, like siamese triples. Their bodies are melted together, six arms flogging the clothes lines, while the legs keep on tapping in rhythm. The siamese thing, too familiar for comfort, makes me want to heave.

Parvati somehow manages to keep it down, returning to Lucas with the broom, improvising a splint. Lucas is there, listening to a tap that sounds too familiar, almost military.

"That's a marching song I know."





Lucas, supported by Parvati and me, drags both of us closer to the creature, even though the assassin tries to prevent it. He sees the siamese horror reflecting both of them, the tapping a perversion of the marching songs drilled into him. It's too much to take, with the grotesque faces mouthing in silent agony, recognition in their eyes. Lucas leans on Parvati as he approaches the monster.

"You're trapped here as much as we are, help us escape!"

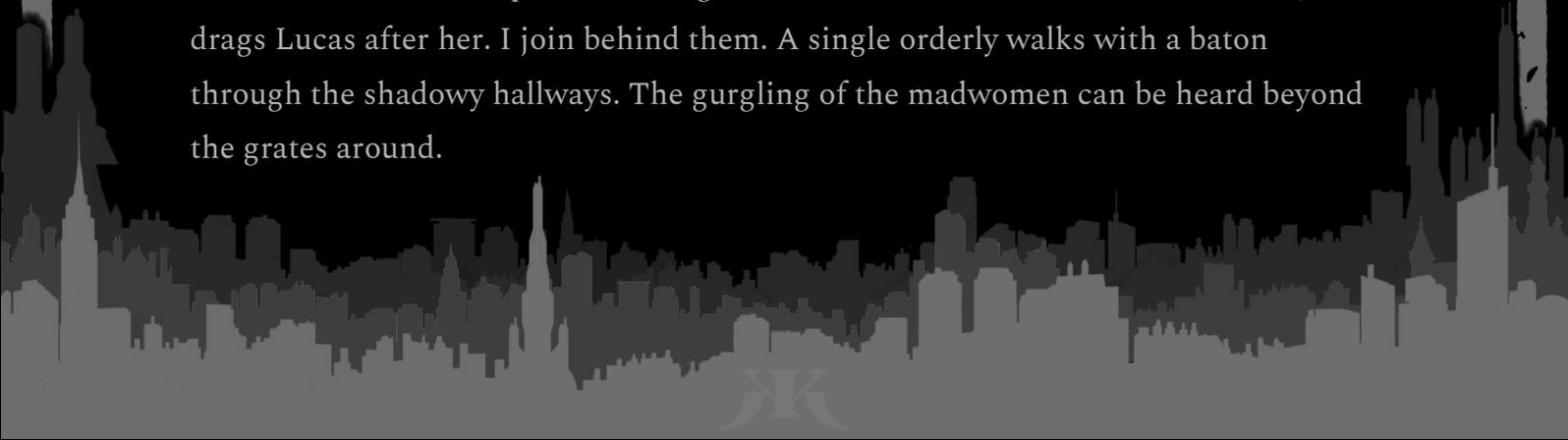
I think the siamese mirror nods before it moves to the edge of the room. Its many hands grab onto the grates and pull with force, trying several times. One of the arms rips at the elbow, leaving a stretching cartilage behind. Its eyes roll in pain, but it continues its strained effort. The bars break loose, leaving us a small slit to crawl through. With the water crashing onto our heads from the clouds above, we roll into the interior courtyard. Lucas, laying on the ground, reaches his hand through the space.

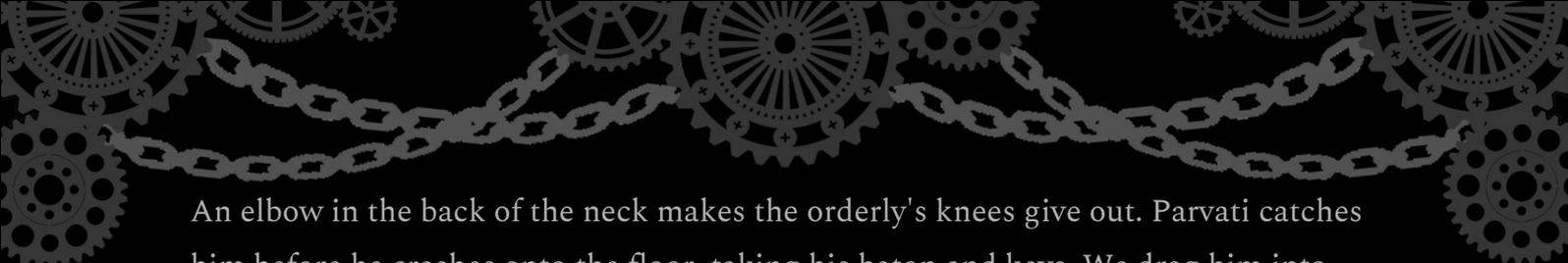
"Come with us!"

The beast rages against its cage, ripping off its other arms, too wide to fit through. It departs for the other side of the room, disappearing in the clothes lines. Only the clacking of its feet can be heard, distant, marching. A lightning bolt lights up the falling night sky for a moment.

Nobody seems to have bothered to reinforce the interior courtyard. One loon walks the garden paths, oblivious to the downpour. I spot several well lit windows, but also some orderlies patrolling the halls inside. Lucas attempts to stabilize his leg, cursing the whole mess.

Parvati hoists herself upwards through the windows back into the acute section, then drags Lucas after her. I join behind them. A single orderly walks with a baton through the shadowy hallways. The gurgling of the madwomen can be heard beyond the grates around.





An elbow in the back of the neck makes the orderly's knees give out. Parvati catches him before he crashes onto the floor, taking his baton and keys. We drag him into the broom closet and lock the door, looking up and down the hall to see if any more orderlies are coming this way.

The corridor is clear, and we see the route we took inwards. Not far behind us is the locked clothes drying room we escaped from. Up ahead there are sudden bursts of light, electrical crackles shining from a half-open door. I move up a little closer, glimpsing into the room.

Ricardo is strapped to a table, his shirt ripped opened, revealing his chest. Electrodes are glued to various points of his body, from head to soles. Along with them are several IV lines with yellow liquids. Sofia is unconscious on another table. Working some dials, the gaunt doctor Patel makes verbal observations. Gharapure makes notes on a pad, nodding with every remark, occasionally throwing one back.

"It's clear the body is inhabited by something, but what?"

"Well doctor, we've put it through every stimulant, and still nothing beyond the initial reaction."

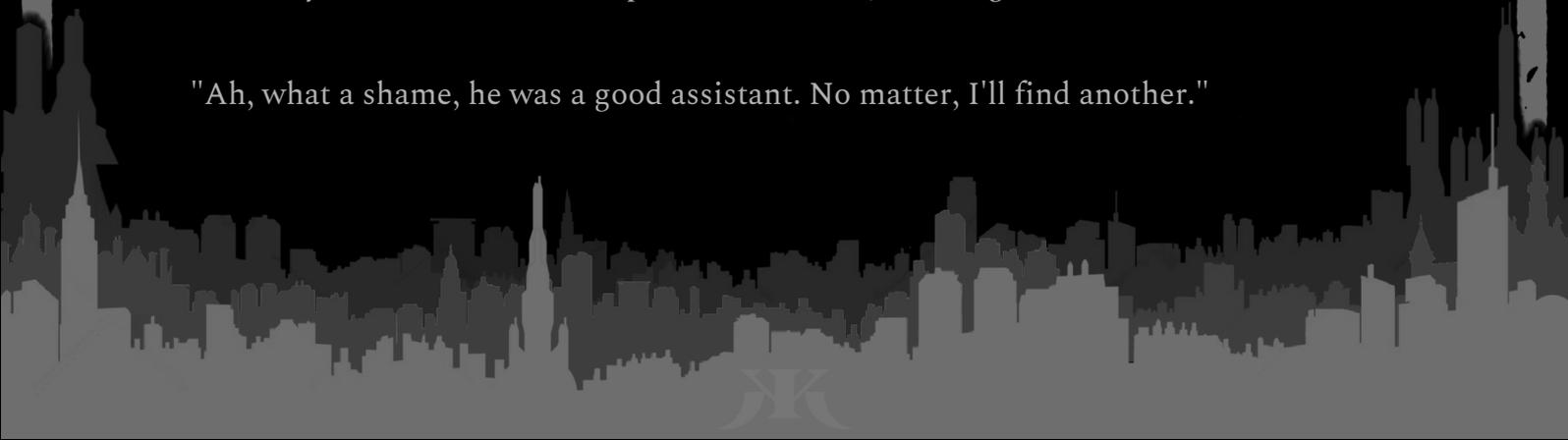
"That thing took out five orderlies before I put it down. If we could just harness it..."

Parvati puts a hand on the orderly's mouth and a blade in his neck.

"Perhaps if we increase the epinephrine, that special batch we extracted from the schizophrenic... Gharapure?"

The body of her assistant is limp at Parvati's feet, bleeding out.

"Ah, what a shame, he was a good assistant. No matter, I'll find another."





The gaunt woman stares at Parvati, with the IVs removing themselves from Ricardo, coiling like tentacles around her. Lucas spots an exposed electric panel nearby and knows his throwing knife. It hits the panel, which shorts and sends out tension to the electrodes. Sparks can be seen around Patel, stunning her into a convulsive state.

The assassin moves into her opponent, swinging her blade, cutting the IV lines as they approach. Parvati's arm makes contact with one of the trodes, and drops the knife before she can remove it. The assassin looks down at her arm, a burn cutting deep to the bone, rendering unusable. What must be intense pain shocks her entire body. The smell of fried meat rises from the doctor, her skin sizzling.

I reach out to her, feeling the pain as well, remembering the fall of the citadel. An intense migraine overcomes Lucas, and his nose and eyes bleed, while he vomits blood. The entire corridor fills with the screams of madwomen, with the doctor frying away, the fried stench filling the room.

Patils' lab coat burns away, revealing half burned skin underneath leather belts. The creature's nose and ears have been severed, it's eyes gouged out. Only its lips remain, sewn shut, but loose enough to let it speak.

"You ruined... my experiment... you'll pay..."

Lucas, despite his pains, drags the antiquarian off the table, who's starting to come to. I do the same for Sofia. Along with a few of the lunatics, now loose due to the power failure, we head for the exit. Wet splats can be heard, something coming out of the laboratory and ripping through the madwomen. Parvati sifts through the keychain she got from the orderly, trying to open it before the doctor arrives.





It finally swings open, and the assassin slams it shut behind us, locking it. Ripping through the patients, the thing that was doctor Patel rages when the door stops her. She returns to the common rooms, encountering the woman playing solitaire, unperturbed. A crunch is heard, and the creature leaves the lifeless, headless corpse behind.

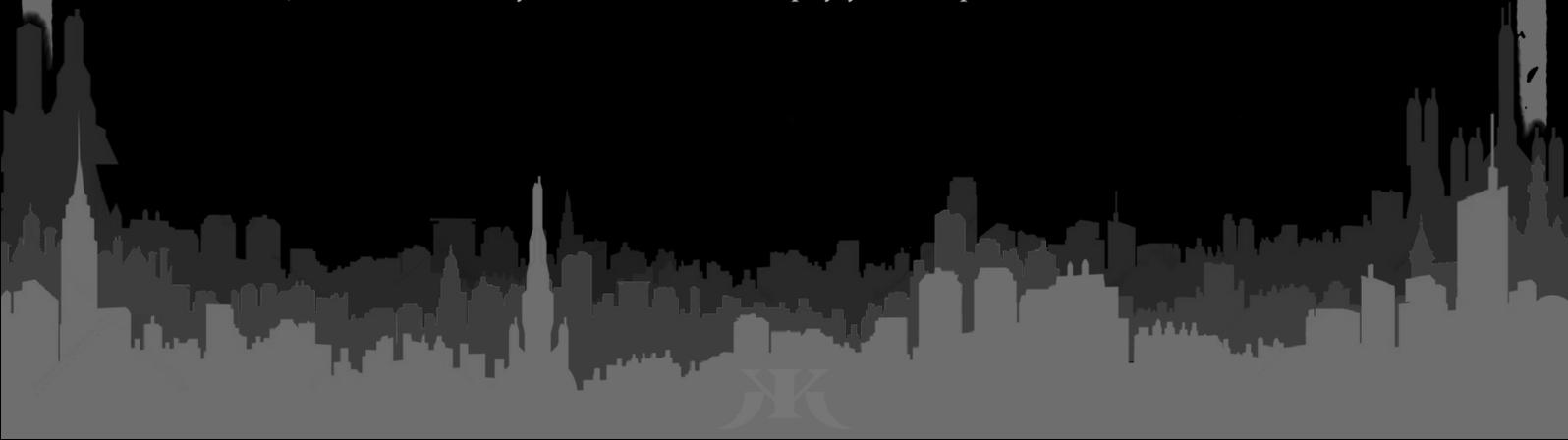
Outside, the storm is in full swing, the gutters flooded. A taxi mini-van nearby is flagged down in desperation.

The hour striking midnight, a minivan dropping us at the cheap pension. Everyone else is missing, with Sofia leaving behind a note, mentioning a church in Fort St George. Lucas, exhausted, lands in his bed, and soon snores.

On Jorrit's bed there are some letters and a deck of face cards with grotesque imagery. I sift through the letters first, a correspondence between a boy named Srijan and university professor named Scott Nicholson. Then I turn my attention to the deck of cards, picking one at random from the scattered deck, most of which is face down. To my shock, it a picture of Nazaar and the orange reptile he rode into battle, with the Tokyo parking lot in the background.

I drop the card on the bed. It catches on fire, spreading to the decaying wallpaper. Before I can react, the whole room is in flames, the walls devoured. I find myself in a Kabul house, with the after effects of a bomb still visible. My comrades dying around me, Nazaar sits upon his reptile throne. The stapled on face grims at him, and one of the arms removes shells from the mohawk. Another two load an automatic shotgun.

"Lucas, dearest of all my soldiers. Come to pay your respects?"





Though in awe of this monster, I speak with Lucas' voice, in pure defiance.

"I am a soldier no more Nazar, or Herab Serap, whatever the fuck you call yourself."

Nazaar stops for a moment, inspecting a shell, while his other hands cleans an Uzi.

"Do you think that just because you've taken up a holy quest you're no less a soldier? Remember, I'm the one who set you on the road in the first place. You're just a bullet on a trajectory, moving from that initial gunpowder. Following an order to the end."

I am Lucas, and he stops shaking suddenly, the dawning realization hitting him. He shakes his head, trying to clear the voices of his teammates telling him to attack.

"Why? Why me? Why them? Any of them could have been counted as better fighters"

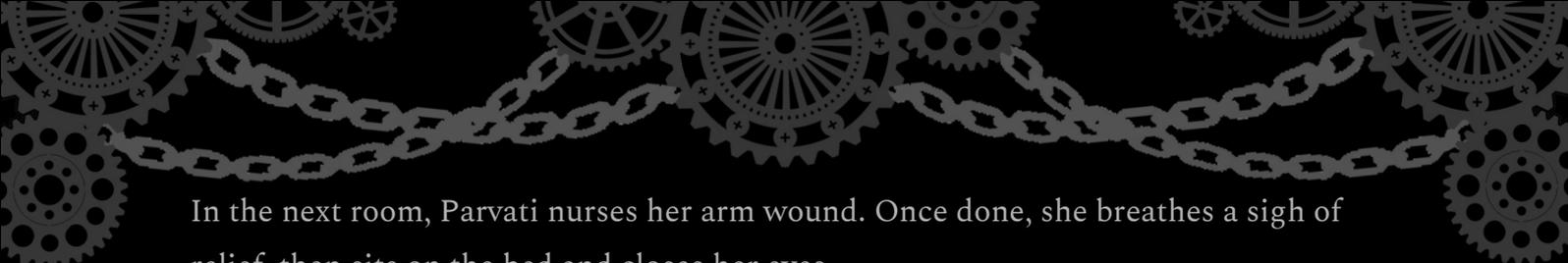
Nazaar finishes loading the shotgun, then takes off the safety.

"None of them could strike true. My trajectory is long, longer than you can imagine. I needed something that can pass through the walls in its way. Your blind devotion to your ideals, that fanatic code of conduct. It all made you a perfect bullet, unwavering, unstoppable. If you think I'm lying, leave the service of Malkuth, and go back to your beloved."

He aims the shotgun at Lucas's head, at my head knocking us back through the flames. When Lucas lands, he's on his back, in front of the bed.

When I wake, I feel strange. Stronger. There's less hair on my head. I stumble to the bathroom and check the mirror next to the cracked ceramic tiles. I have the mercenary's face.





In the next room, Parvati nurses her arm wound. Once done, she breathes a sigh of relief, then sits on the bed and closes her eyes.

I pick up another card, almost unconsciously. There's a man in it, with hollow eyes, a fanged mouth and batlike wings. He's pouring gore from one bowl in his hand to another on the floor.

A river of blood flows from the card, extending into a puddle, and I can't lift it off the bed. On the card, by a shore, is the woman we saw in the asylum, emptying two vases of water into the flow.

I am on the shore and can see the springs of the river. Parvati's victims, dead from expert shots, are contributing to the flow. The woman is trying to correct the river, but her vases run out. She looks up at me.

"At least save my boy. While there's still time."

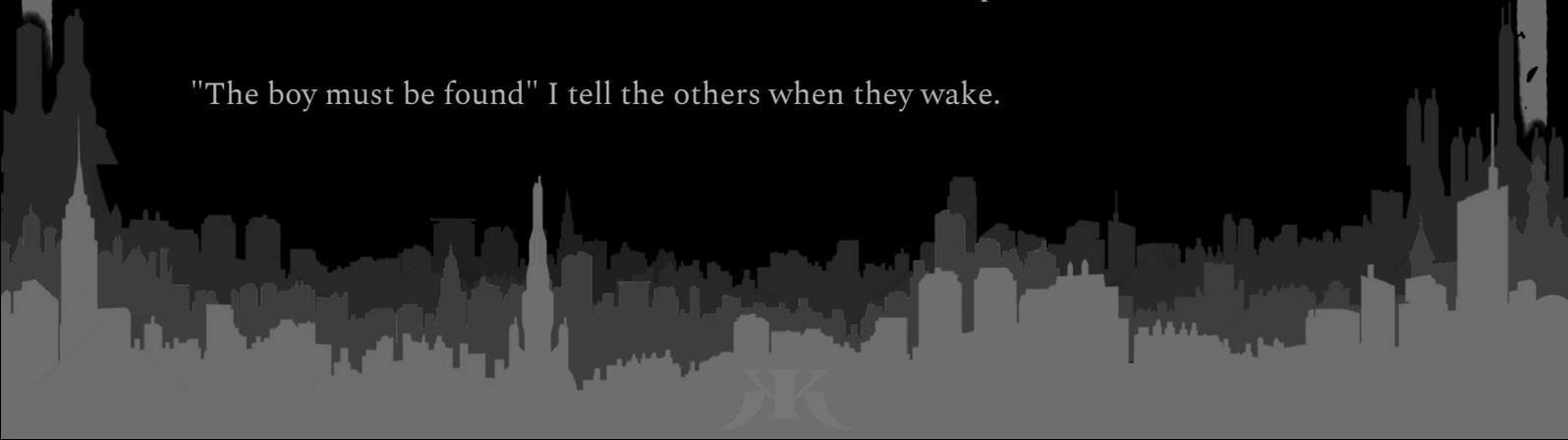
I speak in Parvati's voice.

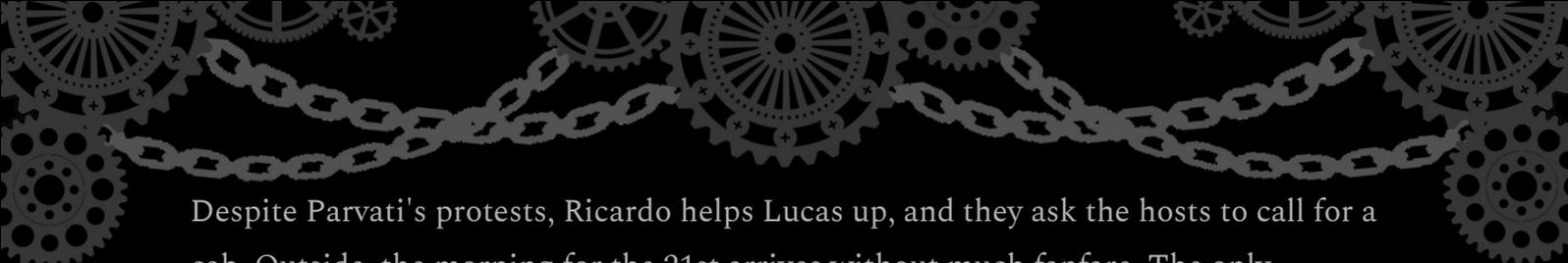
"I'll do my best to save him."

The woman falls, torn open, blending into the river, and I snap out of the vision. Parvati's face glares at me from the mirror. Worried, I put the cards back in the deck, and check the mirror again. My old ugly bearded face.

I sigh in relief and comb the correspondence between the kid and the professor. It's a simple chain of letters which exchange mathematical ideas. I'm too distraught to understand everything, but the professor is amazed. An office address for the Chennai Mathematical Institute marks one of the envelopes.

"The boy must be found" I tell the others when they wake.





Despite Parvati's protests, Ricardo helps Lucas up, and they ask the hosts to call for a cab. Outside, the morning for the 21st arrives without much fanfare. The only difference in the ever more wild storm is more light.

The old institute is housed in an office complex, a set of international flags marking the parking spaces in front. We blend among the cosmopolitan crowds of students and professors, nobody paying any attention to us. An elevator ride and a knock on the door later, they're greeted by a morose professor in tweed. He stares contemptibly from behind a pair of green-shaded eyeglasses.

"I'm sorry, but these aren't my consultation hours."

Lucas pushes the door open, taking the professor along with it. The mercenary stays silent, but remains intimidating as he pushes his way in. Standing up in protest, the professor barely fits in his cramped office. It's filled to the brim with disorganized books and papers. The desk is occupied by a massive cathode monitor.

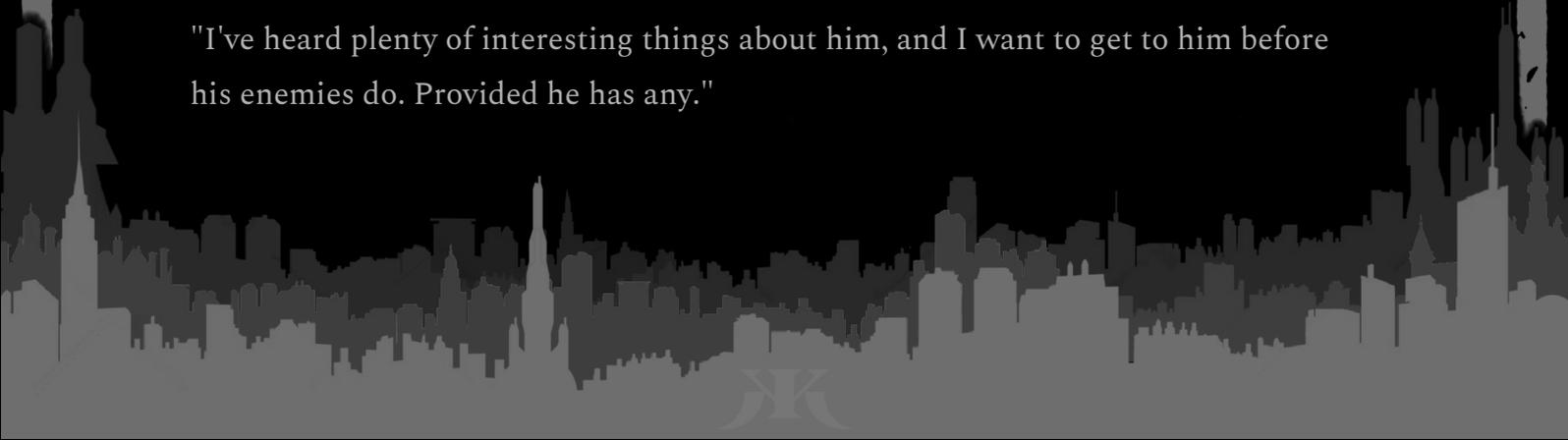
"Wait a bloody minute, you can't just barge in like this! It's my office! I'll have you expelled! What is the meaning of this?"

"Apologies for the intrusion, professor," Parvati calms him down, "but we just need any information you have on Srijan."

His eyes go wide at the mention of the name.

"Srijan? You know Srijan?"

"I've heard plenty of interesting things about him, and I want to get to him before his enemies do. Provided he has any."





"Enemies? What in the blazes? I'm calling security!"

He picks up a phone, and dials a quick number, but Lucas pushes him back into his chair. Ricardo moves to lock the door behind us. The mathematician raises his hands, a panicked look on his face.

"Please don't hurt me. I have money."

"Money? I don't give a fuck, I want the truth, if I can't get that I will kill you"

"We're not going to hurt you, professor." Parvati gives Lucas a look, motioning for him to go stand with Ricardo. "We just want to protect Srijan."

He arranges his glasses back on his nose, more out of instinct.

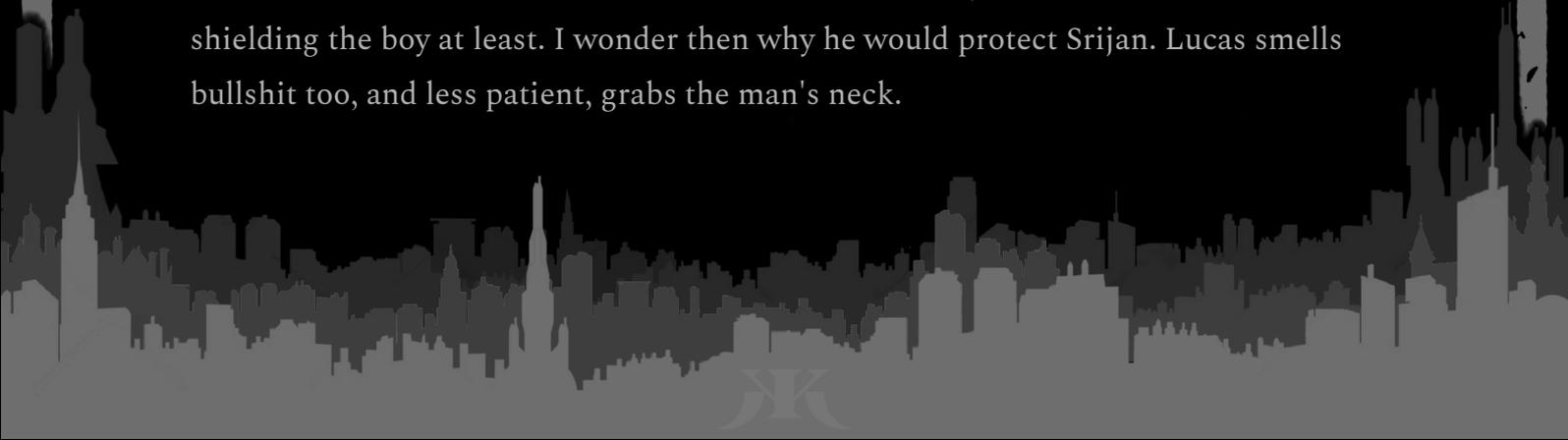
"Yes, of course. Glad to be of help to the old boy. We all want what's in his best interest, after all."

"Do you know where he currently is? And is there a medical facility on campus? My friend has a fractured or broken leg."

He settles into his chair, and puts his hands together on the table.

"Well, nurse Thatcher's office should be at the end of the corridor. As for the boy, I hear he's with his aunt in Delhi now."

There isn't a single picture on the man's desk, not even a cat, nothing that would betray unselfishness. The professor is a natural born bullshitter, well trained in academic circles. Violence doesn't seem to work on him, but he does seem intent on shielding the boy at least. I wonder then why he would protect Srijan. Lucas smells bullshit too, and less patient, grabs the man's neck.





"I am going to give you three seconds to talk, motherfucker!"

A serene calm washes over the professor's face.

"Do it then. I don't know who you people are, but the boy is too important. I refuse to hand him over to brutes such as you."

Parvati keeps her gaze on the professor, motioning for Lucas to back off.

"We don't mean to harm you, but we're on a tight schedule here. The sooner you tell us what you really know, the sooner we'll be out of your hair. And it's better if he's with us, than with others."

Lucas grunts, letting go, but in a way suggesting that he's still willing to hurt him.

"So you do know where he is..."

"Oh bloody hell, not again..."

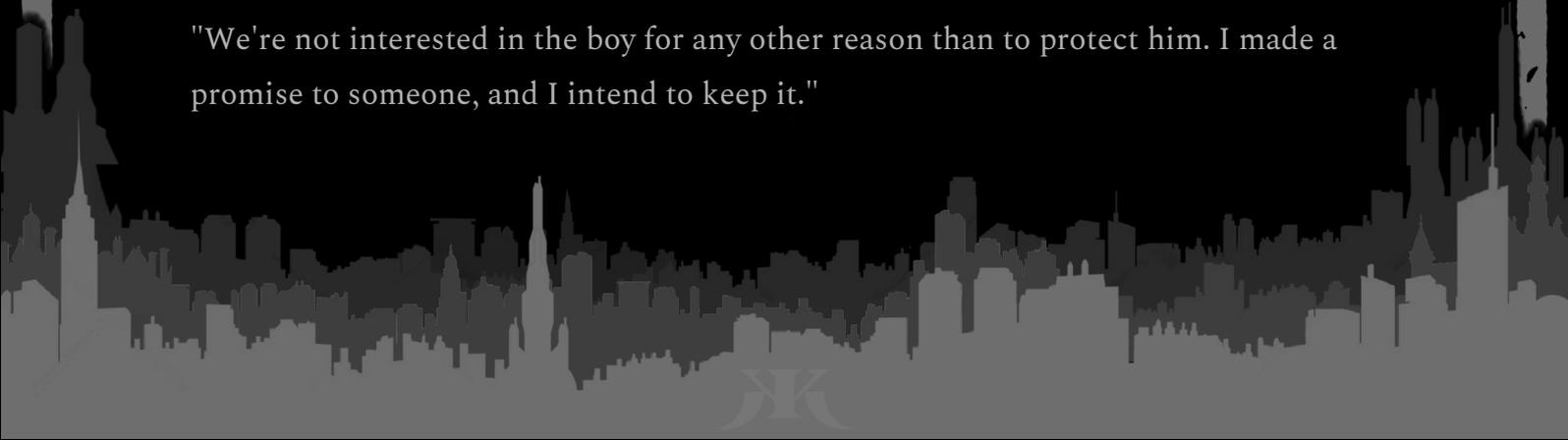
"Again?" A brow goes up at this particular statement.

"Bloody Paki terrorists, asking me to build bombs for them... I'll tell you twats again, I'm not a physicist..."

"We're not Pakis. Or interested in building a bomb."

"I guess you want the boy for something much worse than. Biological weapons, if I had to take a stab. Some sort of eco-terrorist group, am I right?"

"We're not interested in the boy for any other reason than to protect him. I made a promise to someone, and I intend to keep it."





"You've got a horrid way of showing your good intentions then. Go on, who did you make a promise to?"

"The boy's mother."

"You mean his step mother, who kept him in the house to rake in the scholarships, while his father got drunk and beat him to death? Or his actual mother, who filled his head with witchcraft non-sense, before she got carted away to the asylum?"

"The mother who died asking us to save her child, that one you cunt!" The guy's attitude makes Lucas want to punch him in the sternum, and it shows.

"Save him from what, you git? A few nuns? A better life somewhere else? A promising career? Whose interests are you really looking after? It's clearly not the boys. I doubt you've even met him."

Lucas has had enough, he starts breaking fingers. The bones in his hand snaps, and he yells. Panting, he finally gives Lucas what he wants.

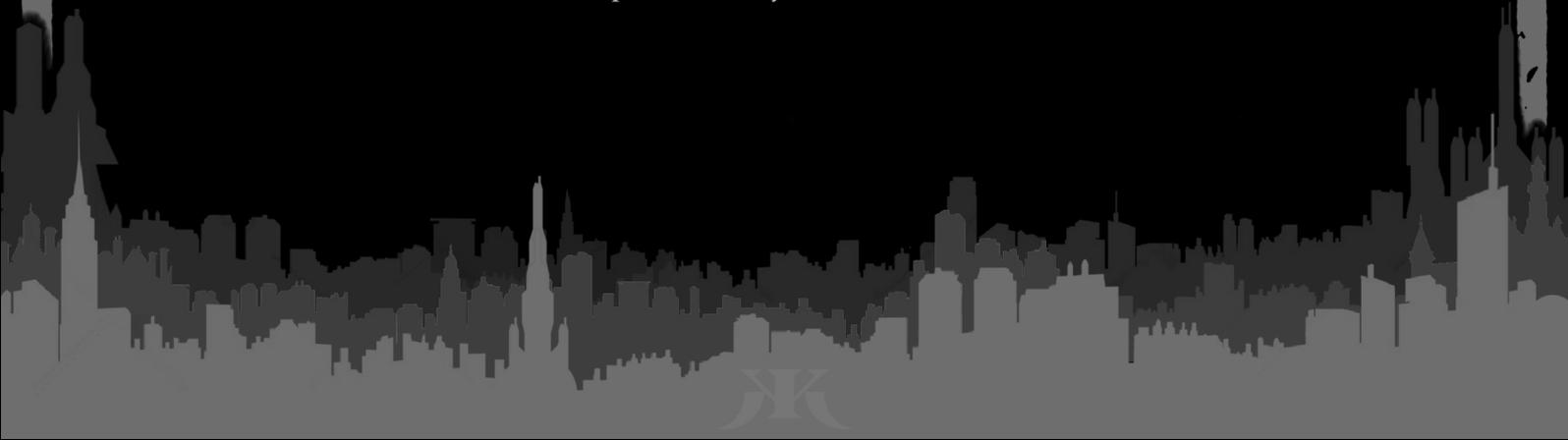
"Ah... you fucking... monkey! He's at the.. Bethania Foundation... I tried... to obtain custody... it's an ongoing process..."

"Thank you, professor."

"Bloody go fuck yourself."

Parvati tuts in disapproval.

"We don't have time for red tape. I'm sorry it had to come to this."





"You're a maniac."

"A maniac would enjoy this. I don't." The mathematician, already under extreme duress, goes out with one punch from Lucas.

"He gave us the name of the place where the boy is at. The Bethania Foundation."

A call from Jorrit arrives at one of our new burner phones. It sounds like he is outside in the rain, traversing the streets. Something about a lead in Guindy National Park.

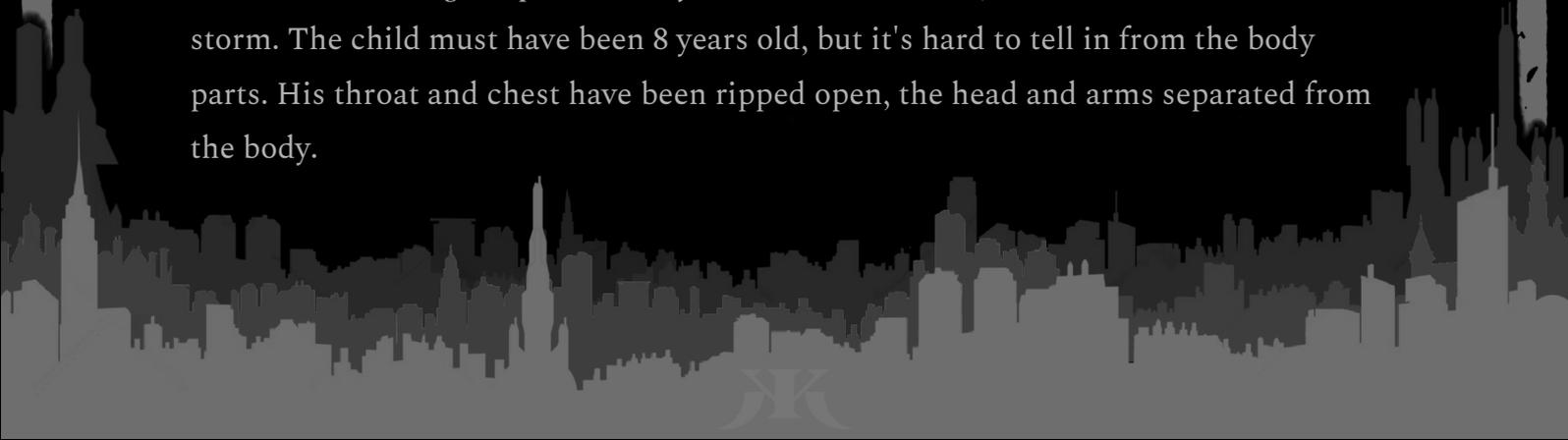
A swingset creaks in the wind, with the detective taking cover under the slides. With some umbrellas over our heads, the rest of us join him under the rain cover. The children's park is completely deserted, with the roundabout rotating in the gust. Parvati approaches Jorrit, inviting him to dry off under her umbrella.

"What are we trying to find here?"

"I heard from a... source... that the newest victim was very recently killed somewhere near this children's park. And that no one has found it yet."

The park itself is a sprawling verdant garden, with trees growing in no particular arrangement. There are benches here and there, and a main cement road, but otherwise it's unorganized. Right at its edge is a train station with a clock on top, though it's far from where the investigators are.

It doesn't take long to spot the body at the roots of a tree, unnoticed due to the storm. The child must have been 8 years old, but it's hard to tell in from the body parts. His throat and chest have been ripped open, the head and arms separated from the body.





"Oh dear god..." Jorrit mumbles and averts his gaze for a moment. He's seen too many dead kids, more than his share for a lifetime, in Rwanda. But this one is clearly amongst the worst ones.

After a moment, he starts to look for traces in the immediate surroundings. I can see only one thing carved into the tree.

The Lie is all we have.

The corpse, bloated by the water, squirms in the mud when we approach, each part independent. Jorrit points his gun at the moving body parts, hesitant to shoot lest we draw attention, but too horrified by what he sees to not keep it in aim.

Parvati and I keep our composure, having seen too many horrible things. Ricardo, on the other hand, is fascinated by the mystery of what creature could have done this. The body is still fresh by all accounts, perhaps a day or two old, it's movements random and aimless. Jorrit is the first to ask the obvious.

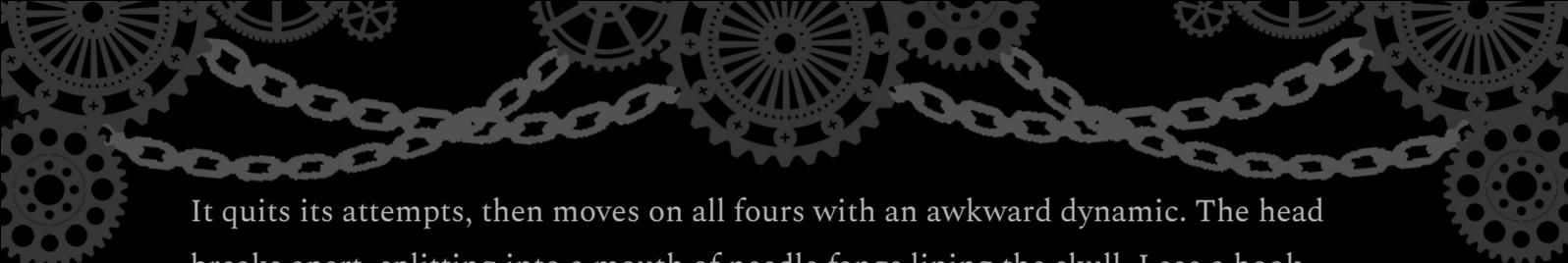
"Can... can we kill it...? I mean, should we... or can we just leave it here?"

"Maybe she can tell us something. There was a ritual in the Tome of Worms." Ricardo puts his umbrella under arm and zeros in on a squirming arm, walking over to it quickly and picking it up. One by one, he moves the body parts in their original position. He then cuts his wrist with a knife, and draws a symbol on top of the body.

Sinew and veins knit themselves back together, but it's imperfect. A smile widens on Ricardo's face as it recomposes itself. We take a step back while the child-thing tries to stand up.

"Fascinating... absolutely fascinating..."





It quits its attempts, then moves on all fours with an awkward dynamic. The head breaks apart, splitting into a mouth of needle fangs lining the skull. I see a book under the rising body, though the teeth are not enticing. I signal it to the others.

Parvati throws a boulder at the thing, unbalancing it long enough for Jorrit to snatch the book, but not before the child-thin scratches him with a bite. I notice the scratch on his arm inflamate. He passes out, while the amalgam moves towards Parvati and me.

The amalgam crawls away with incredible speed towards the train depot. Ricardo tucks the book under his arm while I help Parvati with Jorrit.

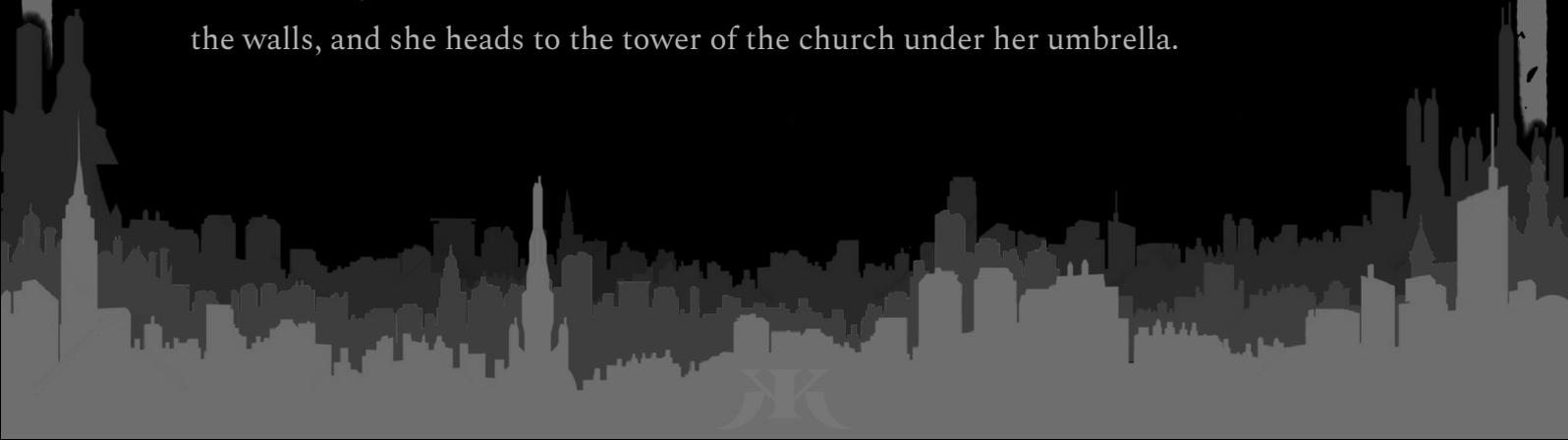
"I am so sorry... I did not think it would do this."

"Well, now you do know." She grunts as she picks up the detective.

We follow the amalgam. There are footsteps leading away from the crime scene, heading to a train depot. It's closer to the park than the station itself, and some rusted box cars are visible through the tree line. Lucas joins us, late after a failed phone call to his husband.

I take a look at the book. A stylized thornbush blankets the cover, with "The Name of the Rose" emblazoned in red. It's the same one Chadu was reading in the stadium.

When the red and white tuk tuk drops Sofia off inside the fort, she can see why they called it white town. The old English fortress-island, with its western Greek inspired architecture, is made of white marble. Even the storm clouds can't seem to darken the walls, and she heads to the tower of the church under her umbrella.





A set of nuns can be found inside, all praying along the pews. An Anglican Church, the ceremony is led by one Mother Superior, who is at the end of her sermon. Sofia slips into one of the pews near the back of the church and waits for the service to end.

The whole building is a lot less pompous than one would expect from a church. A set of round arches and the ceiling are only decorated by brief geometries. It's not long before the nuns rise up from their seats and go about their daily routines. The Mother Superior is packing up her bible from the altar at the front.

"Mother Superior, could I have a few moments please?"

Beneath her blue habit, the nun is an old lady with a sweet grandmother face.

"Well, you're not from around here, are you dearie? Come to join the convent?"

"Not quite yet, but it's starting to look like a solid option with the men out there," he smiles and winks before she continues. A giggle showcases the nun's cheery disposition.

"That bad, eh? Well, remember, there's always plenty of love in the arms of the Lord."

"I'm looking for a little boy that's been taken into your care."

"I think the Chennai branch handles at least several hundred. You're going to have to be a bit more specific. Most of god's children, young and old, have been struck by tragedy. But I think you'll find..."



Her view stares off behind Sofia, the comforting smile on her face gone. A well dressed man in a turban leads a few beggars into the church. He draws a curved knife, grabs the nearest nun, stabs her in the belly. Dragging the blade, he soon exposes the liver and stomach.

"The outlanders have outstayed their welcome in Tamil."

"Awww fuck! Best get your sisters out of here Mother Superior!"

She strolls forwards confidently, putting a hand in her purse.

"How about we talk about this before things get messy?"

The beggars, most of them with crazed looks, turn their attention to the reporter. Stepping forward with his knife, now dripping with viscera, the turban preaches.

"Watch, brothers, the arrogance of the outlander! Even when faced with the fury of the Kala, she attempts to talk her way out of things! Like those fools in parliament, still discussing Tamil independence! Speak your last words, foreign bitch, before you die!"

"If you have a story you wish to tell maybe I can help. I'm a journalist, it's what I do!"

Sofia can see the beggars have stopped killing, taking hostages. The turbaned man takes a moment to mock her in front of his followers.

"See? Even now she tells stories! More lies from the mouth of the westerners! These stories won't save you from reality... Neither will your petty gods! There is only one, the chaos, Kala!"





Most of the nuns have evacuated, leaving only the few taken hostage by the beggars. Sofia recognizes the anger of young men in their eyes, willing to grab onto anything for vengeance. As for the turban, his patience looks like it's coming to an end.

"It's been a while since I've checked the god index, I must have missed the word of Kala. Why don't you explain to me what I'm missing?"

Lifting his head to the ceiling, the turban recites from memory a list of titles.

"Kala, the Great Death! Mother Of Chaos! The Abyss! Ender of Time! Worshiped by those above and those below! We have reclaimed her temple in the jungle, and now, now the whole world shall tremble!"

The beggars still haven't released their hostages, but everyone else has left.

"Huh. I've been to the temple and seen the armless woman dancing. Did she tell you to come to this place? What does she want exactly?"

Something snaps inside the leader when he hears Sofia mention the dancing.

"You! You dare insult us by claiming to know the Black Dancer?"

He rushes the reporter, and the bottom of her purse explodes. The preacher drops dead, a smoking revolver having finished him off. A blade deepens in Sofia's thigh, a surprise from one of the other fanatics. Bleeding out, Sofia slips into unconsciousness.



Night falls but the storm offers no relief at the abandoned train depot. Faded yellow letters spell CMRL, and the tracks are still visible above the water. A crescendo techno beat can be heard from inside the large warehouse building. When we walk inside to take shelter from the rain, they find a party of youngsters.

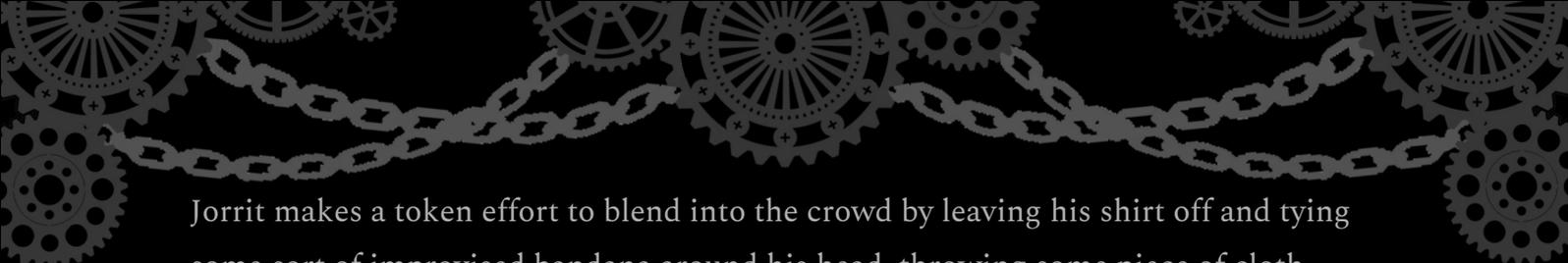
The dance ring is a wooden platform suspended between connected open cargo box wagons. Elevated from the water, the dj booth is on the cement platform, stealing electricity from a fuse box. A white tarp is spread above the boxcars with ropes, painted with lotuses and mandalas. Everyone here is dressed in bright colored hand crafted clothing and is half naked in some way. The wind doesn't reach here, where it's warm amid the dancing bodies, many eyes staring with dilated pupils.

"Not gonna prevent any prophecies or unlock any secrets of paradise if we catch a deadly cold first."

There's plenty of boxcars to go around, and we find one that's empty. The rest are occupied with squatters and partygoers, having their own little fun. It even comes equipped with a couch, either old cargo or newly brought in. Lucas' attention turns to the revelers, watching as he removes his soaked shirt and body armor, hanging them to dry out of the rain.

It's impossible to tell anyone apart, all of them locals. They all share that anarcho-primitivist fashion and a spaced out look. I catch something, some of them are sharing pills. Not that unusual at a rave, but something about it catches my attention. I nudge Lucas to indicate the pill-sharing group. Lucas nods an affirmative.

"Gotta start somewhere"



Jorrit makes a token effort to blend into the crowd by leaving his shirt off and tying some sort of improvised bandana around his head, throwing some piece of cloth around his shoulders in order to mimic the anarcho-primitivist style of the partygoers at least to some small degree. Some streaks of wet dirt are quickly applied to his face and chest, emulating a rough approximation of warpaint or tribal adornment.

"In case someone is looking for us, can't hurt to look a bit different from normal, eh?"

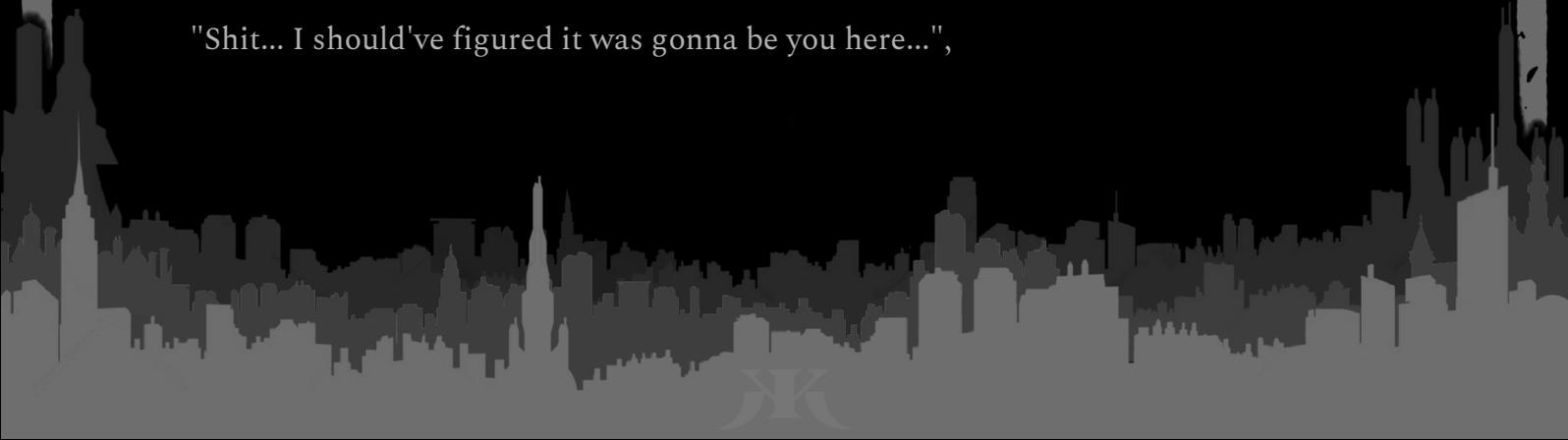
Jorrit blends in the party, his camouflage making him invisible. Despite our best efforts, we can't make him out in the rambunctiousness. I search through my pockets. The tarot deck is dry in my hand, and I pick up the first card. The title say Prince of Disks, but there's an image there of a monstrous abomination with cancerous skin, wrapped in an overcoat with a hood. The card swallows me, and I become the detective.

Working his way through the revelers, it becomes apparent they aren't sharing pills. Instead, they take out bits of their tongues and pass them to one another. Many are kissing with a passion, mouths bleeding and melting together.

Embracing lovers' skins dissolve together, stretching into canvases, walling him in. He becomes more encircled the deeper he goes, but it feels... like home. The detective has a sense of belonging, closer than that of his brother. At the center of the crowd, he finds the one he'd been looking for. Chadu, his face affected by this living leprosy the revelers have, smiles with needle teeth.

"It's been a while... or have we met yet? I can't remember... "

"Shit... I should've figured it was gonna be you here...",





He coughs, a continuous hack that produces a spray of pus.

"I needed...*cough* the camouflage...*cough* It's easy once a few are infected... I need to get to the... *cough* child... Where is he....?"

Those watching from the outside see the crowd stripping their clothes. A wave of passion reverbs through the revelers, who fornicate together. A couple in front liquefy into one another, and more follow.

Lucas can see the workings of magic here, even if he doesn't really understand the systems, he begins to worry for his friend and enters the party

"I think I understand. Most of it anyways. I've come a long way since Rwanda, you see..."

"There's only one thing ... all of these other children... why? What did killing them do for you?"

Chadu takes a few steps back, placing his hand on the face of a young girl. It sinks in, thawing like an ice cube into water, the bone losing its structure.

"I had to *cough* make sure I'd find him...*cough* I've been to the beginning *cough cough* of it all... It's worse than you can imagine... *cough* tried to change it.. We can't escape it *cough* unless we kill the boy..."

The mercenary walks through the revelers, but the bodies are dense and close together. Worse, they are melting, and he finds himself pushing against stretching skin. Lucas can't make any more progress the way he's going. Pushing against the wall of flesh, Lucas yells out to the detective.

"Tell me of that beginning", Jorrit asks with a feverish glint in his eyes. "Convince me why I should help you."





Rolling onto each other, the revelers blend together, losing definition. Chadu stays on top, the lower part of his body liquefied into the mass.

"You're lying *cough* I saw you there, *cough cough* supporting the boy... His servant... but I sense the Cairath plague in your *cough* veins... So not all is lost this time... perhaps I can control it..."

Warm bodies slam into both Lucas and Jorrit, trapping them, crushing them. Onlookers see the wooden platforms snap underneath the rolling mass. Water splashes when it lands, a towering mound of bodies ripping the canvas above. The two remain trapped inside this aberration, voices throbbing with pleasure.

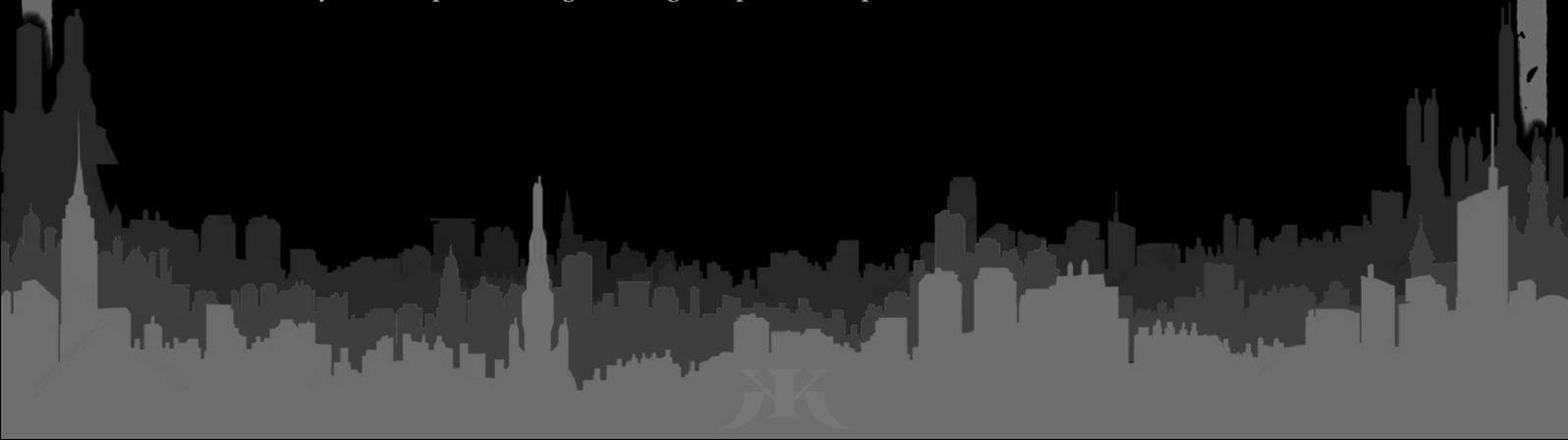
Lucas muscles his arms free enough to find his knife and starts cutting at the wall of skin and flesh trying to crush him. The detective turns to Chadu, now focused on controlling the mass. Somewhere behind him he hears Lucas screaming.

"You're full of shit, only talking in riddles! Did you really think we're gonna let you have him?! You must be even crazier than I thought!"

Jorrit tries to get to Chadu, wanting to choke him with his bare hands. Cutting through the mass, the mercenary sets himself free. His blade has snapped somewhere in a bone, and now he's unarmed. Jorrit, his legs still trapped between two fusing revelers, reaches for Chadu's neck.

His hands compress the throat, but the neck only moulds itself into the body. Jorrit's strangulation attempt has failed, while the men's heads collide together.

Lucas, covered in gore and blood, lands on the ground in a wet splash. Though winded by the impact he fights to get up and leaps at the mass of flesh.





For his part, Jorrit strikes at the mind behind the monstrosity with kicks and punches. The mass, however, takes him away from his goal, while growing another limb. It moves closer through the water to the other seekers, the extremity ready to slam.

Chadu's head is sinking into the mass, arms moving to cover it. A nearby tanker car has a flammable warning on it. Lucas attempts to climb the writhing flesh ahead of him, moving towards Joritt in an attempt to pull him free. The mercenary feels something jagged pushing through his kevlar, a bone poking out of the mass.

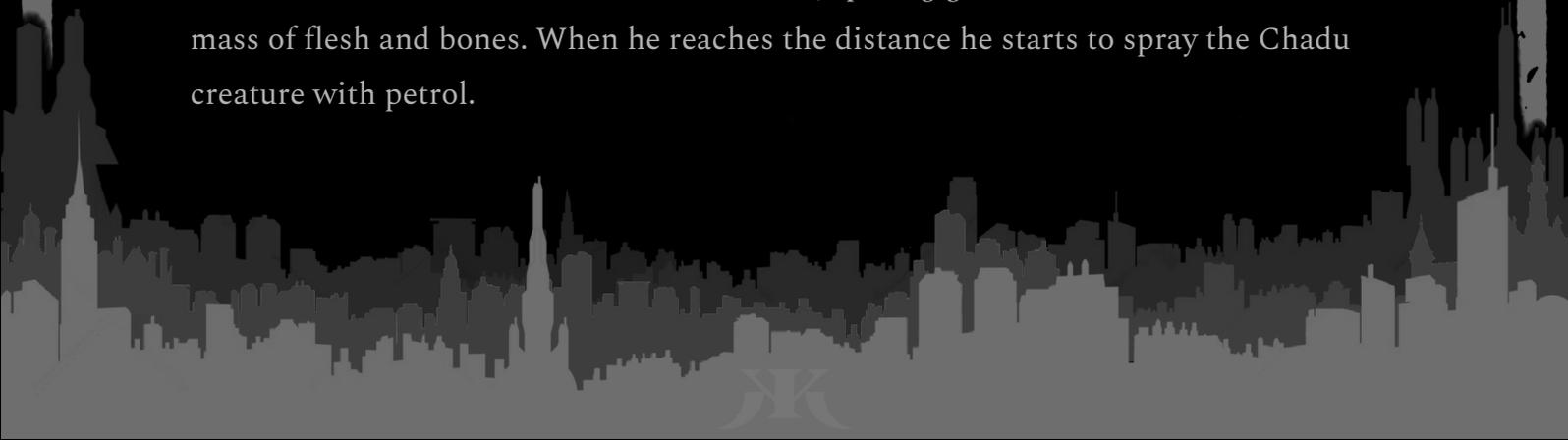
Parvati takes a few shots, but all she hits are the protective hands of the mass, fingers exploding. Jorrit frees himself, but lands on the limb, grabbing hold while it slams down on. The assassin lands to the side, but the limb corners the me in the box car.

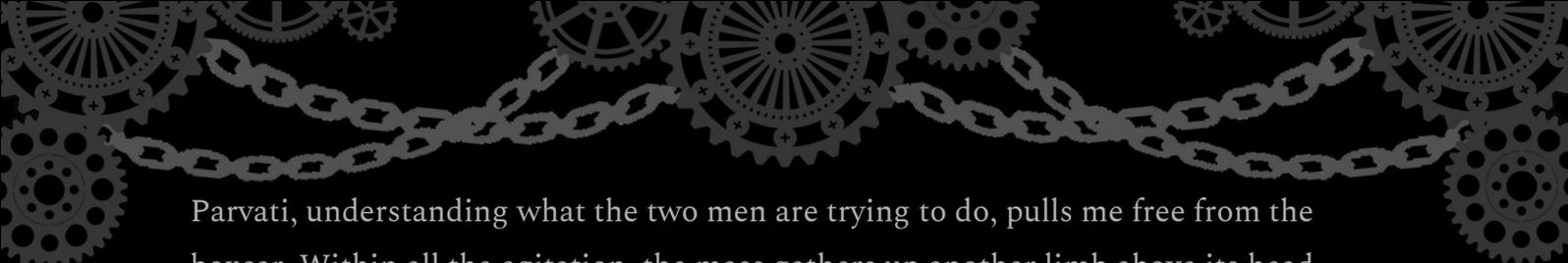
Jorrit pulls away one of the sharp bones protruding from it, and stabs the abomination with it as hard and as often as he can. Stabbing the connections between the bodies, he hits something. The limb snaps under its own weight, voices wailing when it crashes.

I finally come to, the card letting me go, a pallid face haunting me from the image. The same face Jorrit yells at me with.

"Run! Get away from it! And stay out of the water!!!"

I get up, blinking a few times before attempting to escape. Lucas leaps over the stumbling blocks in his path as he heads for the fuel tanker. A few more rounds leave Parvati's gun, but Chadu's face only ends up submerged, untouchable. Lucas unravels the hose that connects to the tanker, spilling gasoline as he runs back to the mass of flesh and bones. When he reaches the distance he starts to spray the Chadu creature with petrol.





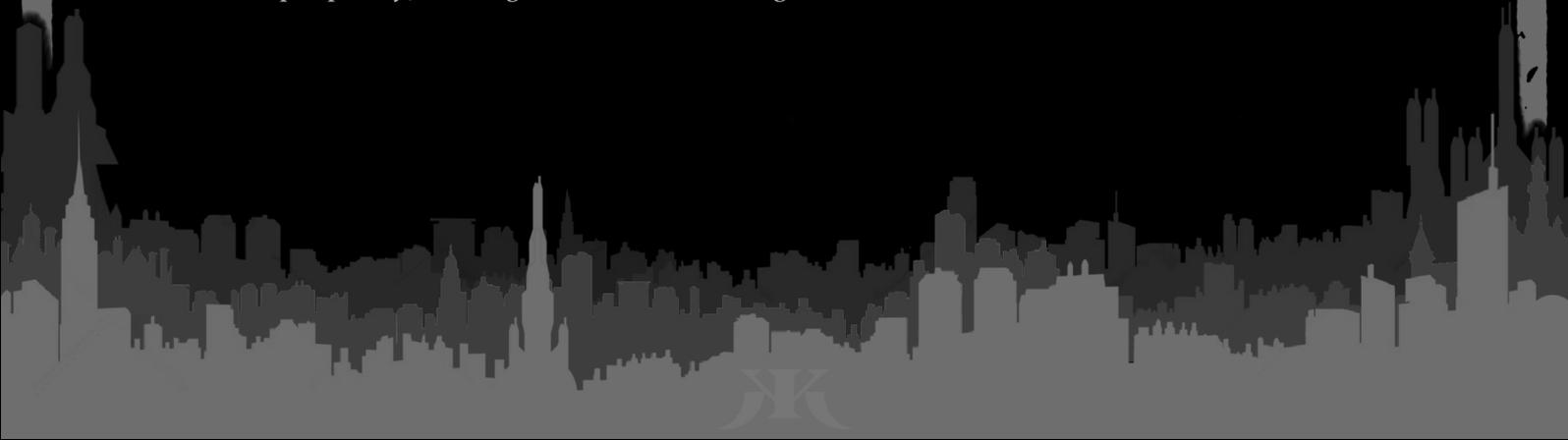
Parvati, understanding what the two men are trying to do, pulls me free from the boxcar. Within all the agitation, the mass gathers up another limb above its head, ready to strike.

Jorrit drapes the cables over a railing, ready to push down into the water, then plugs them into the fuse box, and pushes them off. They land on the petrol floating on the water and the fire quickly spreads, the mass screeching. Rolling in an attempt to escape the flames, it makes it worse. Soon, the weeping voices are silent, the smell of singed flesh filling the air.

We depart with flames licking the sky and something exploding, bringing the depot down. Someone notes the fire must have spread to the oil car, all those gases inside alight. It attracts the attention of a silver bus, which we promptly rent to take us somewhere nearby and dry.

After negotiating the fare, the bus driver recommends a place to stay, the owner a good friend of his. Hotel Mastya is a cheap kind of thrown together student dorm, with a neon lit commercial that also has pictures of chicken curry. At least doesn't look like someone rented out their private home like the last one did. Standing behind a metal gate and fence, it looks like it used to be some sort of institution.

Rooms are lined up one after another in a corridor and the kitchen is at the end of the hall, opposite the bathrooms. There's even a small internet cafe, though the equipment and cathode monitors are old yellow from the cigarette smoke. One of the rain-soaked mattresses from an open window needs to be changed before the seekers check in. The hurricane howls getting worse outside in the night only reminds them of the prophecy, it's vague deadline ticking down.





Sitting on a bed, Ricardo talks to us.

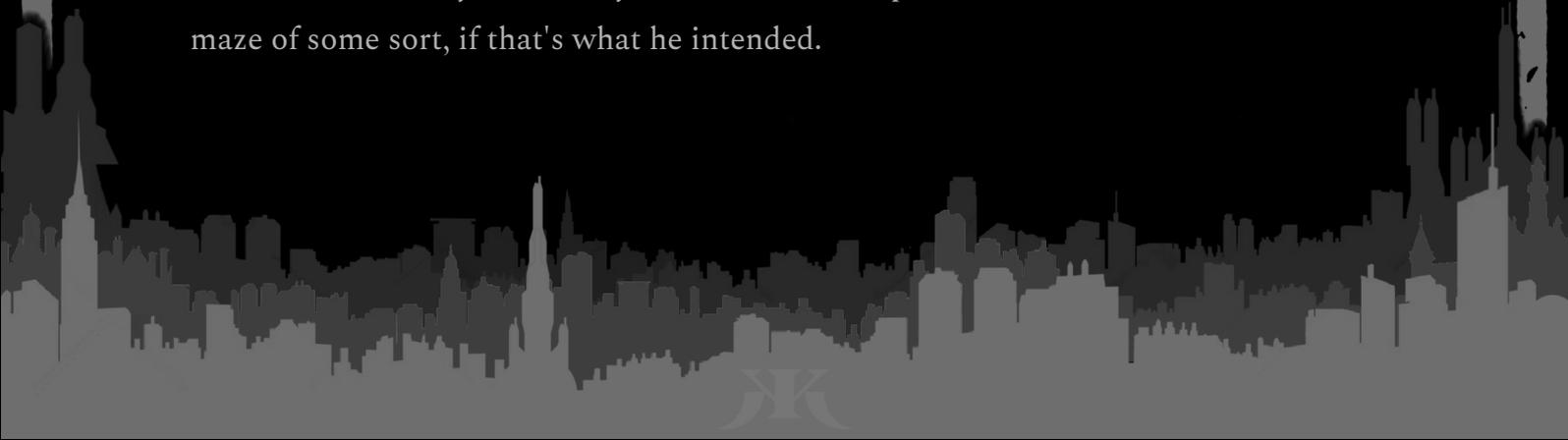
"The journal must be related to the fifth key," he says, "It's full of mathematical symbols and the fifth key was noted as the key of symbols. The tarot cards must be related to the sixth key, the key of Romani."

He tells us that his books are full with reference to occult symbols, magic circles, and alchemical signs. But after his direct experience with things piercing through the Lie, Ricardo seeks something else. He notes them everywhere: corporate logos, propaganda posters, mathematical notations. Even the tattoos he's seen on his enemies and binding brands on himself and his allies.

The antiquarian brings up that old Pythagorean question: do symbols exist in a space somewhere? If they do, everything derives from them, Reality being based on, and vulnerable to, particular signs. Whatever Demiurge built this Prison knew all of these, and everyone else they've met is taking advantage. Now it's only a matter of time before he learns them himself and their associations, a road to power. He knows a few already, and has learned that magic is malleable. Experimentation will be dangerous.

And at the center of it all, the Labyrinth. A set of roads opening to innermost knowledge. Accessible to all, but selective enough for only a few to make it past the traps and tricks. There's also the minotaur, a final, deadly threat, incestuous in nature, to face before the center.

The Labyrinth is the ultimate symbol of both entrapment and liberation, punishment and reward. It connects all paths with each other, the nexus of everything, building block of all illusions. And if it really exists as a concrete Platonic model somewhere, it is accessible everywhere. Anyone could walk its perilous roads whenever lost in a maze of some sort, if that's what he intended.





The journal, however, contains something more than symbols. Something Ricardo can't put his finger on just yet.

The night and discussions deepen while outside the gutters swell, making the streets swim. Cockroaches skitter up a wall while the chosen speculate in their stale, damp little room. Above, water collects in the plastic box housing the lightbulbs, dripping into a bucket by the side. A lightning flash sends the corridor into darkness and the room strobing, thunder shaking the windows. It only takes a minute to return, a minute the hypnotized customers in the net cafe don't notice. Instead of letting up, the monsoon is getting worse by the minute.

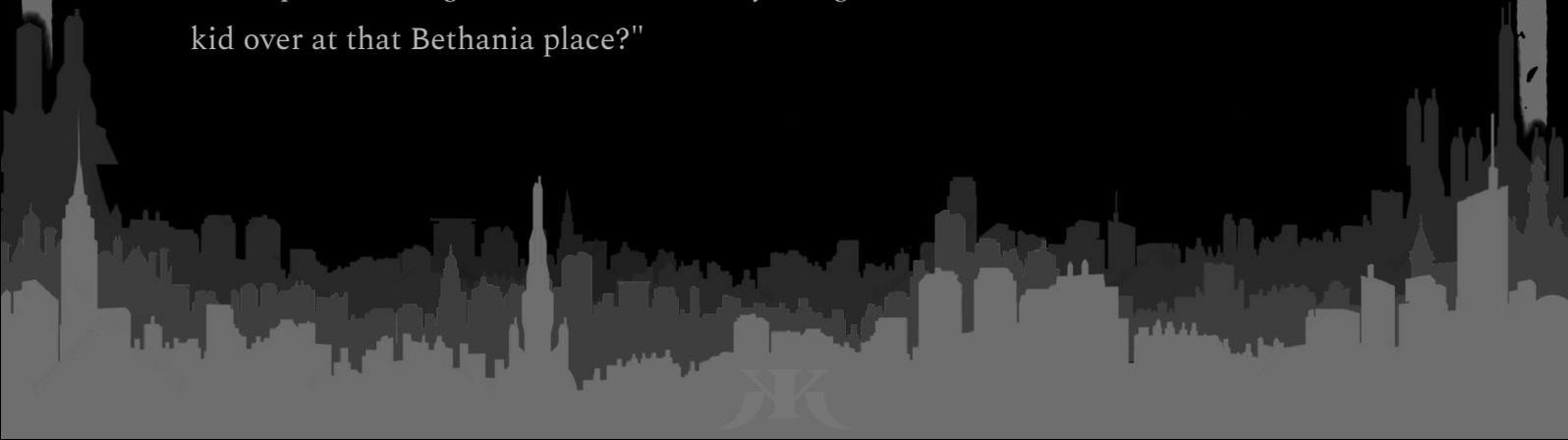
"...because if the Malkuth album was the Symbology - and dammit if those visions weren't quite the heavy hitters that way - then it could make sense with the stops on our journey so far. In Amsterdam, you guys got involved with the Kabbalah in the first place..."

"Then in Sao Paulo we learned about the Alchemy of the Flesh, right, and discovered Chadu's astrological diagrams in his planetarium in Kigali..."

"Tokyo, let's presume, gave us Symbolism and now here in Chennai we have a notebook full of numbers and a deck of cards that you're telling me is Tarot..."

Jorrit orders all the clues, visions, depravities, and prophecies we have gone through out loud, all the while flicking back and forth through his own notebook, full of scribbled notes, pictures torn out of newspapers, and others scraps and pieces collected here and there. His 'case file' as they have heard him refer to it.

"We may have six of them already. Now there could be only two questions left: How do we put them together? And is the only thing we still need in addition to this... the kid over at that Bethania place?"





Sofia lies down on one of the beds, exhausted from the day of running around, bleeding out, and almost burning in a fire. She looks to the others from her position.

"We need to get to the child as soon as possible."

Dawn sneaks in unexpectedly. Hours have added up with the conversations, operation, and a storm too loud to allow sleep. The morning brings a new violence to the monsoon, the electricity in the pension giving out. A nearby roof is ripped off a house, shingles crashing into each other.

We nervously drink some vending machine booze. Meanwhile, Ricardo uses the only working electrical device: a rotary phone. A few calls later and he obtains an appointment at the Bethania Foundation. The pretense is simple: a set of foreign philanthropists are looking for a tour. Whoever is at the other end of the phone agrees to see them later in the day.

Nobody's quite sure how Parvati pulls it off, but half an hour later she's back. Arrayed on the bed are weapons, kevlar vests, and other pieces of equipment, such as flashlights.

"Some advantage to this being your old home turf, eh", Jorrit smirks at Par while we sort through the generous supply she procured.





It isn't long before we set our eyes on the Foundation Building lingering silently in the storm. A central rotunda ends in a Mughal styled dome standing between spires poking into the storm clouds. From the rotunda, the rest of the honeycomb windowed wings spiral out in the green grassed garden. A minivan drops us in a grove of beech trees swaying in the wind, a dash for the entrance.

The insides are decayed, with the mosaic murals of the past now scrawled and painted over by young hands. Only a rotting oak desk stacked with yellow paper serves as a reception, with a nun in blue garments behind it. Sofia saunters up to the desk with as much confidence she could manage.

"Hi there I was wondering if you could help us?"

The nun at the front desk pulls down her reading glasses to see Sofia better. She sets her book down near a stack of registration forms.

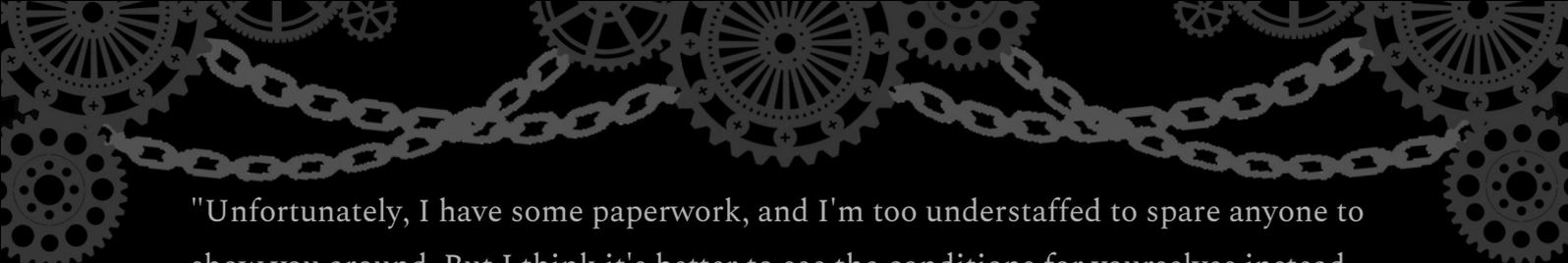
"Ah, didn't see you there. Helping's what we're here for."

"We're from the charity organization. We were wondering if we could have a look around."

"Of course. We've been expecting you. We've just some forms for you to fill."

"How long would that take? We're kind of on the clock right now"

Setting her glasses straight, she hands Sofia a pen and some sheets. Checking her hand watch, the nun then stares back at the arrivals. Ricardo fills them out. Grabbing the forms, the nun hides them between the folds of her robes. She points to her right, down a corridor with a check patterned floor. Music can be faintly heard throughout the hallway in that direction.



"Unfortunately, I have some paperwork, and I'm too understaffed to spare anyone to show you around. But I think it's better to see the conditions for yourselves instead of me putting on a dog and pony show. That way you'll understand how desperately we need funds. You'll find the boys' wing in the west. We've found that it's best to separate them from the girls. Please try not to disturb the children or the staff."

The building was beautiful once, but the conditions are filth, a rotten egg smell in the air. Immature scrawls and drawings of obscenities cover the uncollapsed parts of the wall. Walking through the overcrowded hall, we see the authors: apathetic boys, half dressed in old clothes.

They push around and fight over the few broken toys available, the larger overpowering the smaller. There's little furniture available in the rooms, most of it decaying in the dampness. Chairs are almost unheard of. We pass a set of boys eating from metal bowls set on the floor. They're using their hands, as do the toddlers in the next room, finger painting shared paper.

The few teachers giving lessons before chalkboards are usually standing or sitting on the floors themselves. They look as weary as the children, unless correcting a child directly through the application of a rod. While walking, we discover the source of the music in a lightbulb lit room half sunk in darkness. A nun directs a choir of boys, who mouth a cantata in Italian, their young voices still feminine.

I examine the etching on the walls. It is a little more than the usual vulgarities and juvenile obsessions with genitalia. The crude paintings depict stick monsters with massive reproductive organs and mammary glands. Smaller, more numerous stickmen surround the monsters, engaged in bizarre rituals. A few, clearly colored differently, are transported to the monsters, then torn limb from limb.





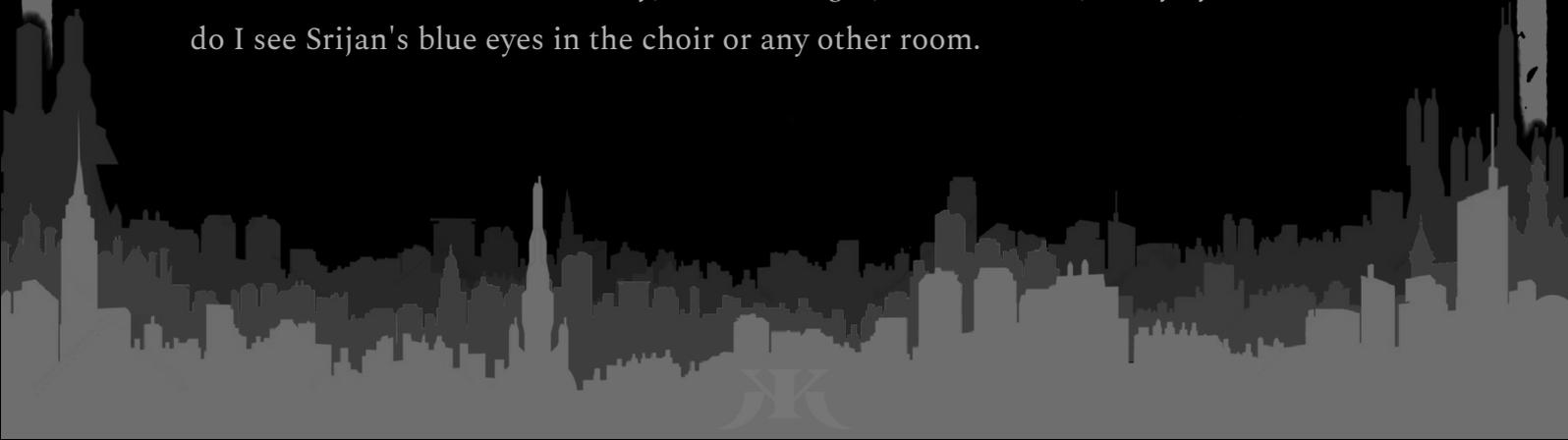
I rub my eyes, trying to fight away the stories the children tell. But now it's all I can see when I inspect the rooms, these supplication rituals. Those children more distinctive are the center of the abuse, both from pupils and teachers. Some of the younger oppressors play with sharp handmade shivs, their eyes feral and hungry. The lessons on the boards are arcane symbols and the grammatical syntaxes are chants and mantras.

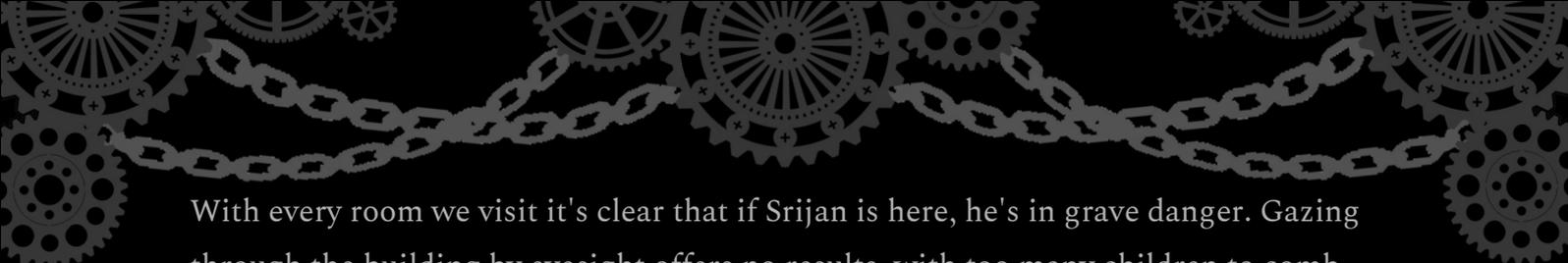
I notice something else, something in the courtyard, a rusty awning covering a playground. I'm sure the roundabout is there, the central sacrificial pit the pictograms speak of. And there's someone out there, even now, in the fullness of the raging storm. I can't help but think on what the Enkisu mirror-thing said: worshippers of Chagidiel. The blue eyed boy can't be seen standing out anywhere, and I don't know if that bodes well or not.

"This place is, once again, bad news...", Jorrit mumbles to Lucas and Parvati, indicating the children with the shivs and the abuse happening against those who stand out a little bit more from the others. At least I'm not the only one to recognize it this time.

"I think they are doing sacrificial rituals down there in the yard", I whisper in a conveniently unobserved moment, pointing out the playground outside. It isn't all that clear who's outside in the downpour, but there's more than one. All of them are under the shadow of the awning creaking in the wind. One set of stairs leads downwards to the yard, the railing covered in rubber.

I take a closer look at the kids singing in the music room. Their voices are clear, trained, even if they don't understand the words to the cantata. I'm not sure if it's my lack of familiarity with Indian complexions or something else. But they all look alike, and each of them has a deformity, an extra finger, crooked teeth, a lazy eye. Nowhere do I see Srijan's blue eyes in the choir or any other room.





With every room we visit it's clear that if Srijan is here, he's in grave danger. Gazing through the building by eyesight offers no results, with too many children to comb through. I dread looking at the courtyard, too many drawings emulating wheel quartering. A pair of milky irises draw upon me, a feral child with a tail looking me in the eye. He's talking to the other orphans, who lick their lips and whisper to each other.

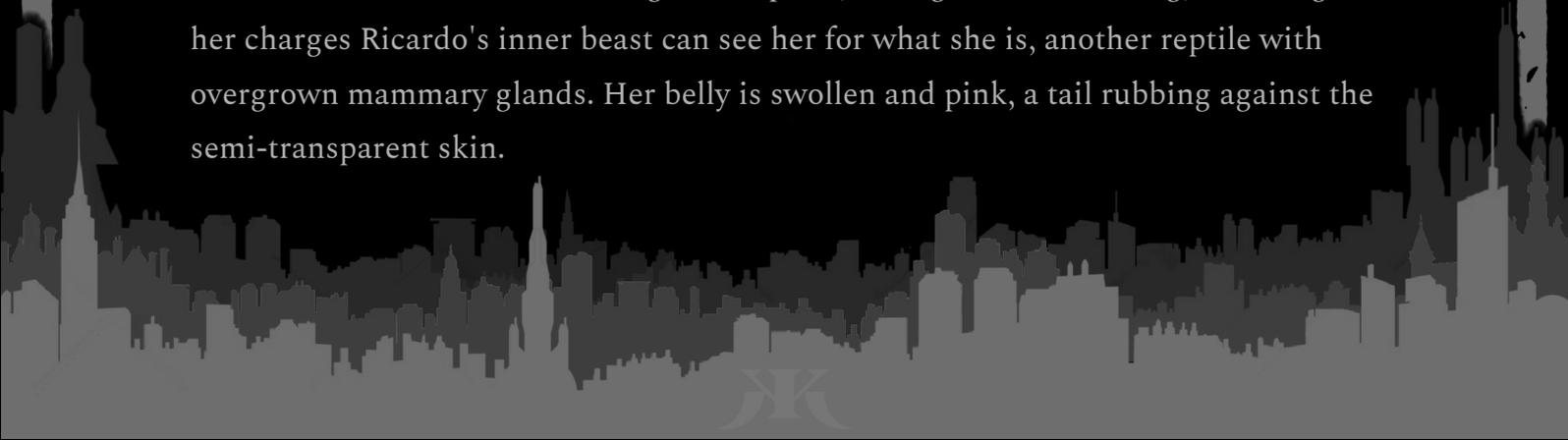
The facade drops when Ricardo's eyes turn black, a wild stir inside him, the beast rising to his beck and call. The children in turn mutate to reptiles, gray scaled with patches of skin. Jagged teeth whisper incantations to a blood-stained absent Father, empty words praising the corruptor. The teachers and nuns are taller reptiles grotesque sexual organs, busy encoding the prayers on chalkboards.

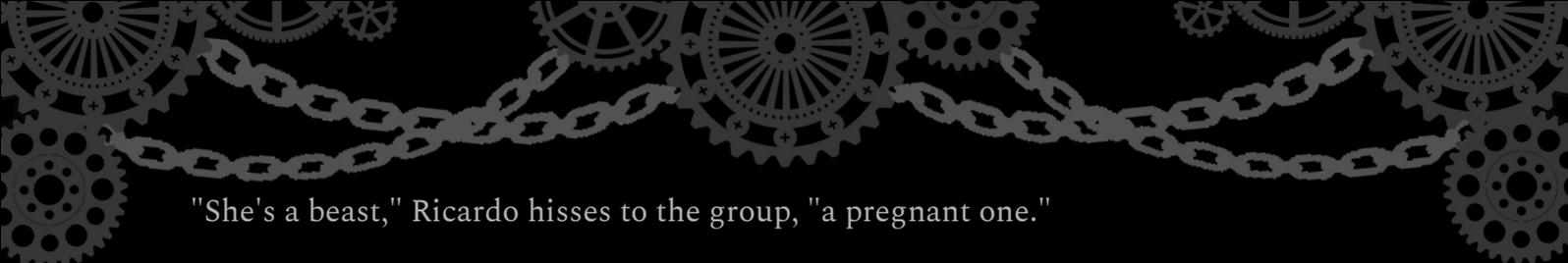
Above it all is a smell of purity, something innocent I have felt before in a deep memory. But it's coming from outside, along with the rain fragrance slipping through the cracked windows. The beast inside goes wild with lust, and wants to tear through the walls in search of it.

Lucas keeps focused, looking for a way out from the second floor we're on. He sees a set of stairs, but the flocks of children and teachers are crowding us slowly. The mercenary pushes us to run down the stairs. Last to leave, he slams shut a gate and blocks it with an iron bar from an exposed wall. Mud fills the courtyard, mud mixing with blood flowing from the covered playground.

Underneath the awning, a few of the feral children have a boy hung up above the roundabout. They take their turns ripping off bits of his skin and adding it over their own. A few rods occasionally slap the victim, a teacher looking on.

She's a slim woman covered in a green dupatta, sitting on an idle swing, watching her charges Ricardo's inner beast can see her for what she is, another reptile with overgrown mammary glands. Her belly is swollen and pink, a tail rubbing against the semi-transparent skin.





"She's a beast," Ricardo hisses to the group, "a pregnant one."

"Step away from the boy and drop the rods, NOW!" Jorrit calls out in the well-practiced authoritative voice of a police detective conducting a raid against armed opposition.

With both pistols out, he tries to keep the children and the teacher in his aim, while at the same time closing in on roundabout, exuding determined menace.

Parvati produces the submachine gun, aiming it at the ground, not really looking forward to killing women and children. Even if they are really beasts.

Jorrit's intimidating voice scatters the feral children, but the teacher doesn't budge. Instead, she grabs on to the swing chains, and slowly lifts herself up, still holding on. Even in her disguised form her pregnancy is obvious under her yellow dress.

"Threaten my children again and you won't leave here alive."

Lucas glides into the line but does stop, continuing to move toward the victim.

"I won't leave alive?! Excuse me lady, but you gotta be crazy...", he gestures to the roundabout with an unbelieving expression on his face, "... I mean, whatever you were thinking you were doing here... you should better get your pregnant ass out of here and to safety. This shit fucking show is over."

He watches her with narrowed eyes, ready for any move she might attempt.

"Get the boy", he quickly tells us, while keeping one pistol trained on the pregnant woman.





Inhuman howls can be heard from the old Mughal palace behind us. Rapid glances over the shoulder catch windows breaking above the beech trees. Hundreds of hungry eyes peer through slowly bending grates, shivs in hand. The gate Lucas left behind can be heard teetering, begging to be loosened. Even the feral children in the courtyard regain their courage.

I move towards the victim and unchain them. The only other way out of the yard is a chain link fence standing between us and a landfill. There are no people in that direction, only mountains of garbage swimming in water. Any adult could certainly move faster than a child through the muck.

I untie the crying blue eyed boy, who drops to the floor. Pain shoots through my wrist, the teacher crushing it with a steel grip.

"Wouldn't you rather stay a while? We can offer you so much pleasure..."

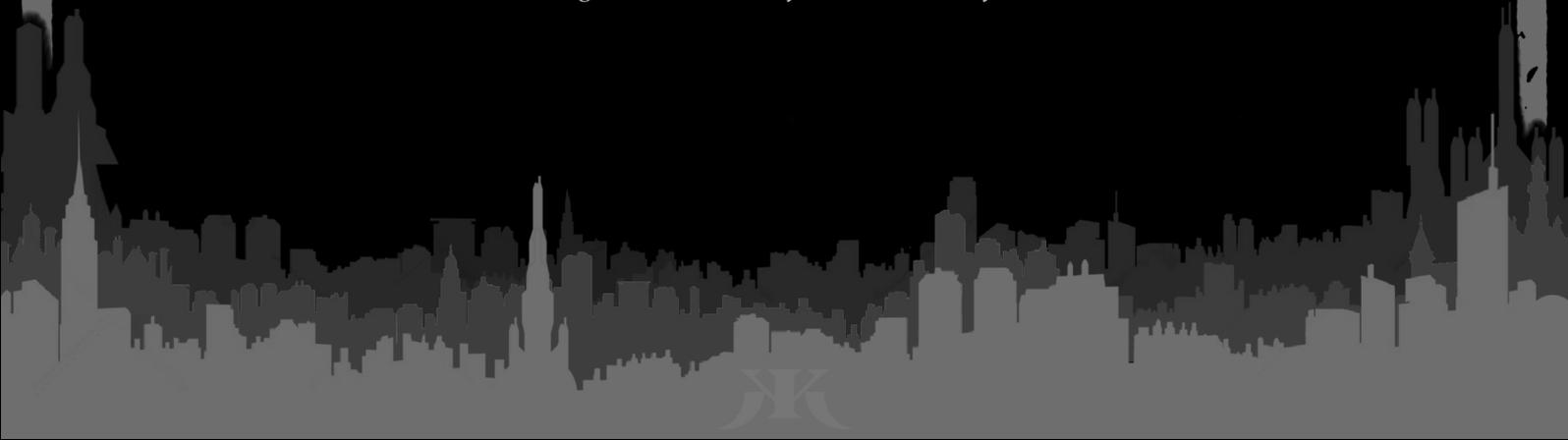
Her lips burn mine upon touch, and a slimy tongue makes his way down my throat.

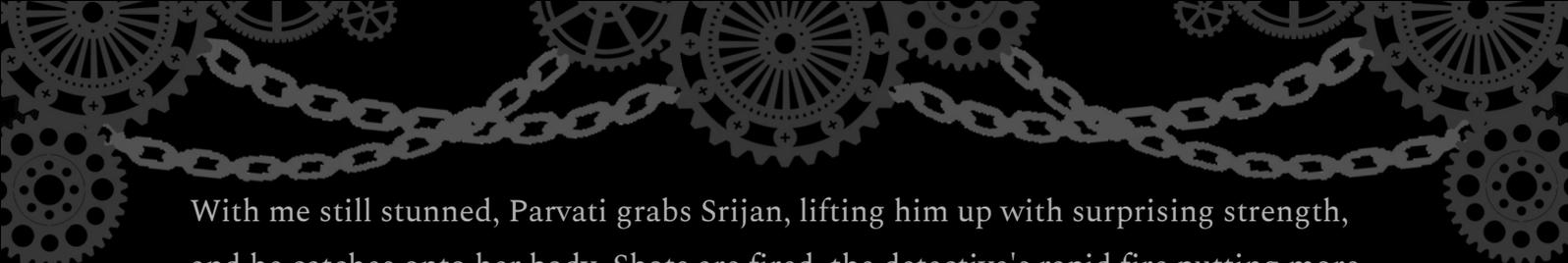
I turn, breaking free of the suffocating kiss, but the reptile mother won't let go. She puts her other arm around me, limiting my movements. A whisper in his ear is accompanied by a lick to make the skin crawl, while above more windows break.

"I'll give you the boy, willingly. Just let me impregnate one of your bitches. I promise no harm will come to her, as long as she delivers the offspring to term."

I'm splattered in black sludge looking at a crater in a skull, torn to pieces by Jorrit's bullet.

"That fence over there - we get out that way! Grab the boy and let's run!"





With me still stunned, Parvati grabs Srijan, lifting him up with surprising strength, and he catches onto her body. Shots are fired, the detective's rapid fire putting more holes in the reptile mother's skull. A trail of watery pus chases the head as it struggles to regain balance. Lucas is free, but his captor is still standing, the snarls from the orphanage getting louder.

While widening the distance, I hear the reptile mother grunting. She's pleasing herself, finding great satisfaction in her head wound.

"What a sweet kiss! My master, I'd forgotten the pleasures you bring. I wish you'd stay with me, but you may go, if my children will allow it. They are hungry, after all."

Parvati moves through the mud, but so do the ferals, trying to cut her path. The fence itself isn't sturdy or dangerous, just an impediment to surpass.

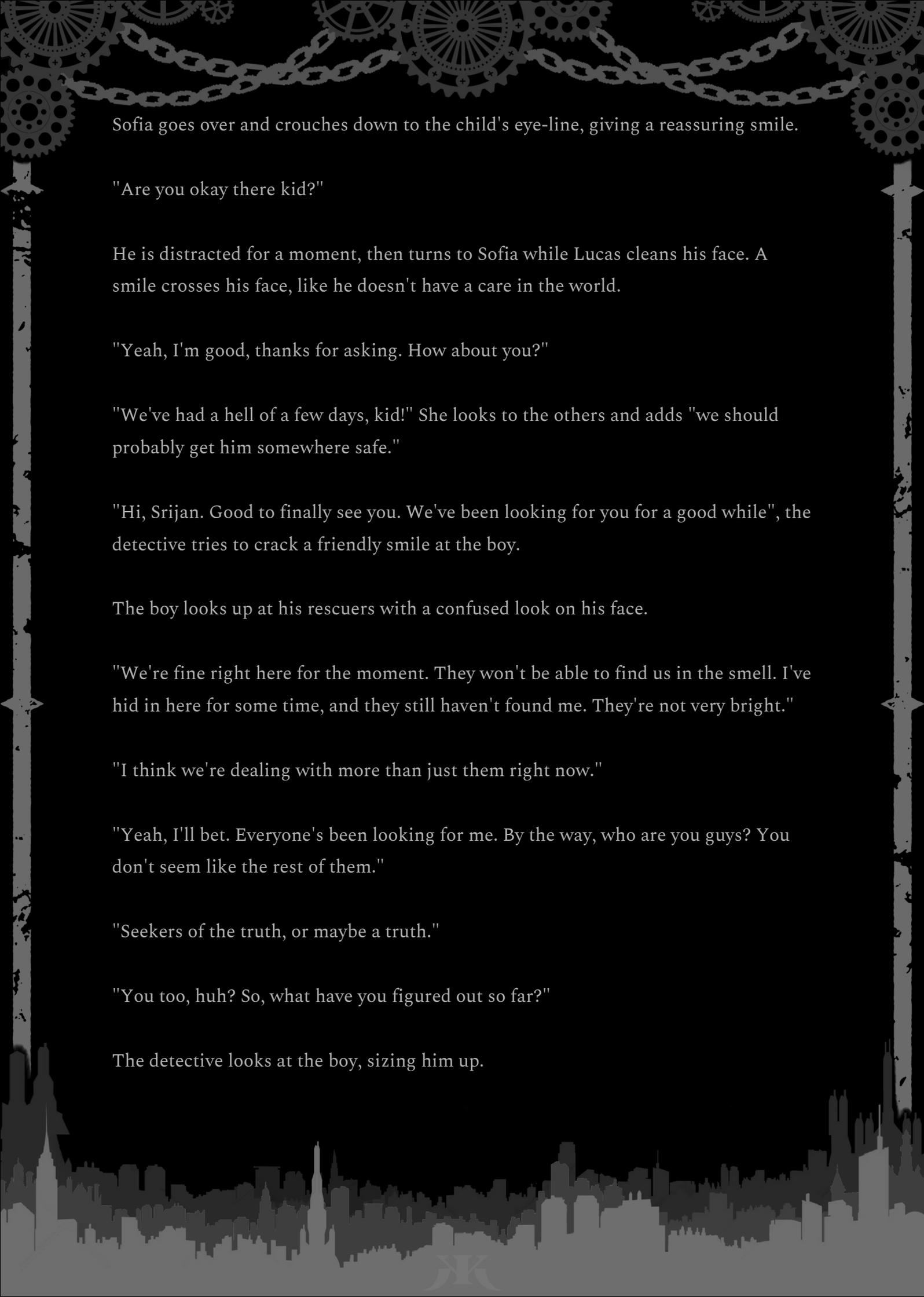
"Maybe next time!" Lucas remarks, on the fence.

The assassin's weapon fire keeps the flock of children away from us. Machete hacks work to break through the rusty metal links promptly. One by one, we pass through, stepping out of the mud and into the garbage fields. We keep ahead of the ferals, who fall behind and disappear beyond the hills of trash.

There's a lull in the storm for the first time in days. Srijan stumbles through the garbage, looking up at the sky. Large parts of his skin have been shredded, but he's largely intact. Jorrit is trying to patch him up and calm him down. The mercenary takes out his kit and applies bandages and disinfectant.

"I'm alright, I'm alright! Really!"





Sofia goes over and crouches down to the child's eye-line, giving a reassuring smile.

"Are you okay there kid?"

He is distracted for a moment, then turns to Sofia while Lucas cleans his face. A smile crosses his face, like he doesn't have a care in the world.

"Yeah, I'm good, thanks for asking. How about you?"

"We've had a hell of a few days, kid!" She looks to the others and adds "we should probably get him somewhere safe."

"Hi, Srijan. Good to finally see you. We've been looking for you for a good while", the detective tries to crack a friendly smile at the boy.

The boy looks up at his rescuers with a confused look on his face.

"We're fine right here for the moment. They won't be able to find us in the smell. I've hid in here for some time, and they still haven't found me. They're not very bright."

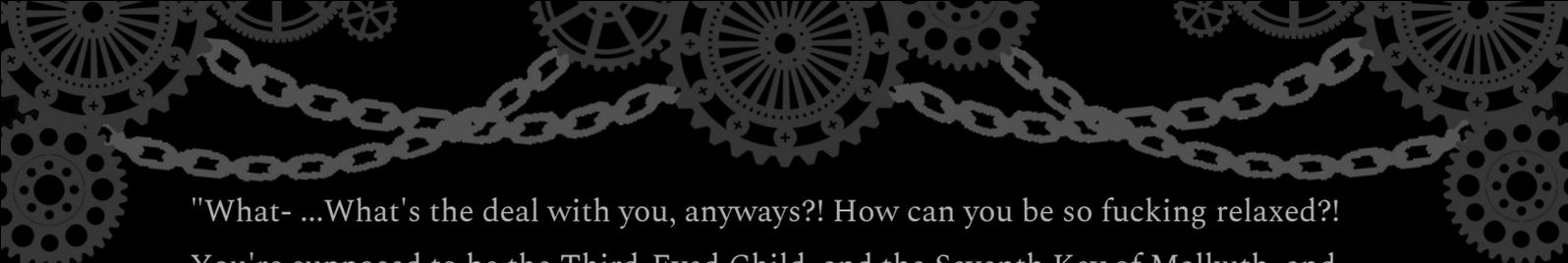
"I think we're dealing with more than just them right now."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Everyone's been looking for me. By the way, who are you guys? You don't seem like the rest of them."

"Seekers of the truth, or maybe a truth."

"You too, huh? So, what have you figured out so far?"

The detective looks at the boy, sizing him up.



"What- ...What's the deal with you, anyways?! How can you be so fucking relaxed?! You're supposed to be the Third-Eyed Child, and the Seventh Key of Malkuth, and everybody and their favorite demons are looking to kill you, goddammit! We are probably the only people in the world who at least think we mean you no harm, and... and... and you... are hiding in the smell of these trash heaps and acting like its all a walk in the park?!"

"Well, what else am I going to do? Ever since I've figured it out people won't leave me alone. At least here nobody bothers me, and I can find whatever I'm looking for."

He squirms out of Lucas's arms, then rummages through the trash. Srijan picks up a bag, and wipes it off with a nearby cloth. It's a sealed bag of sugar coated peanuts, which he promptly opens. Tossing a few in his mouth, he talks while he chews.

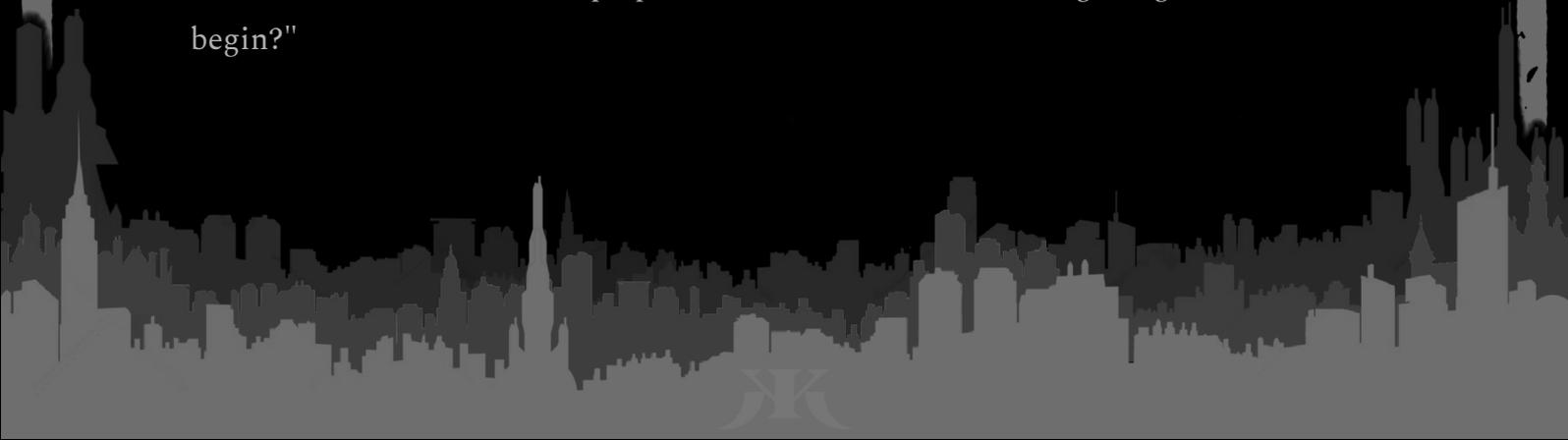
"I lofe theshe! -gulp- I'm no key mister, I've been trying to find it myself. Somehow, though, I can see the lock. How about you?"

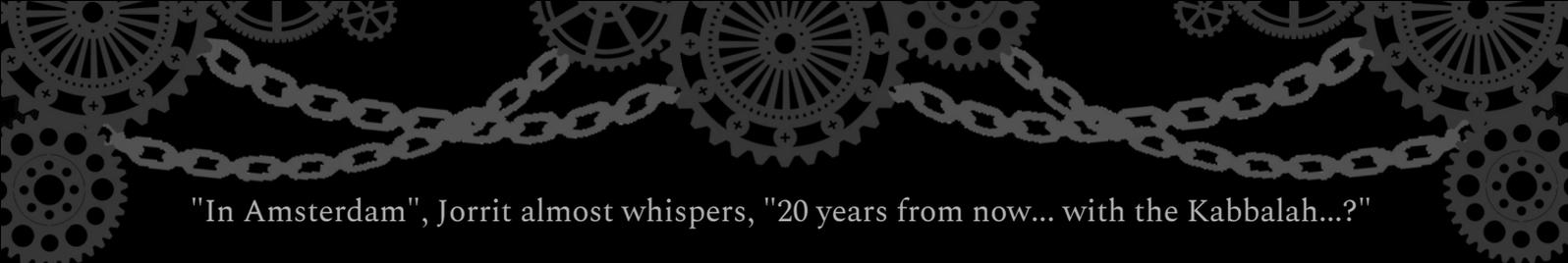
Lucas lets out a solid laugh.

"I knew we missed something, and it's probably the last key, whatever... or we're are the last key, fuck man. I'm just a soldier, I'm still not sure about any of this" he opens a ration from his pack and slits it in half, casually handing one part to the kid. Srijan laughs, taking half the ration.

"At least you guys are offering me something. A lot of the others only want answers and give nothing in return. But I can see how we could work together to get out of this prison. Tell me about these keys, and I'll tell you about the lock."

Lucas finds an old chair and plops it down in the wet earth and garbage "Where to begin?"





"In Amsterdam", Jorrit almost whispers, "20 years from now... with the Kabbalah...?"

Lucas nods at Joritt. Taking a deep breath he relays the team's story, trying not to leave anything out. The Dreams, Chadu, Borges, the Tokyo Prophecy. Where he fails he invites the others to fill in with their own recollections. He finishes dramatically.

"...and right smack dab in the middle of all that disjointed chaos, is you my young friend."

The boy finds himself a beach chair and sits, enjoying the sun now piercing the clouds. He nods on the occasion, occasionally scratching his chin in thought. When tw finish our story, he's silent for a moment.

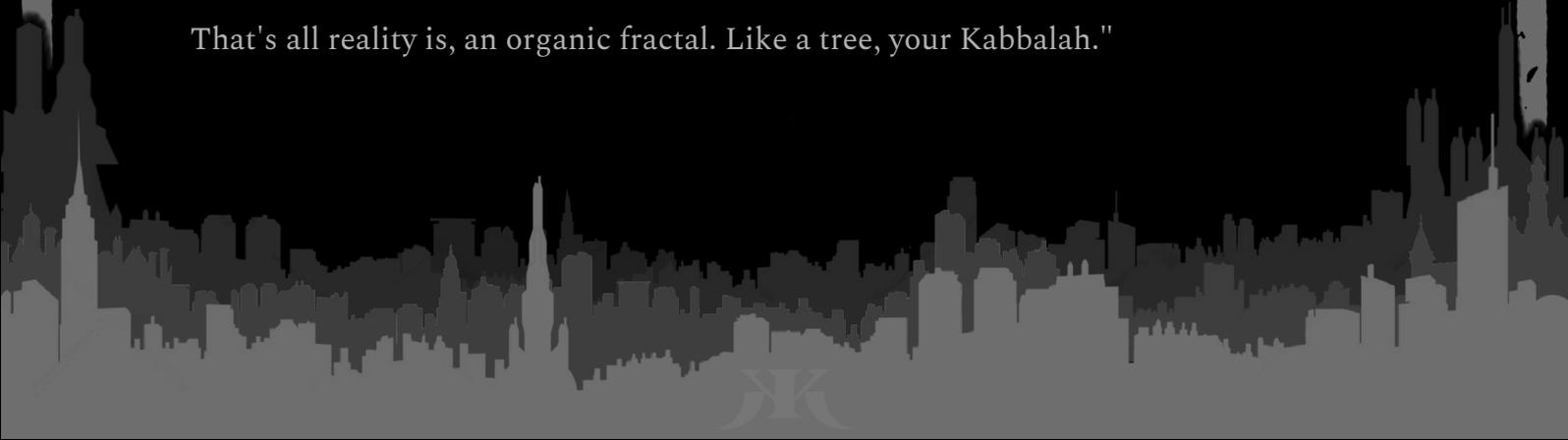
"Well, that makes sense. I'm sure that whoever made this prison had ten fingers. In our image and all that... that's why we have ten... what did you call them, Archons? And all those Keys, well, they're really methods, aren't they? Used to build the prison, this prison which we carry with us, they can also set us free.

But they're all faces of one single big trick, can't you see it? Just get something random, like the Tarot, to multiply, and combine to form new patterns. Some ten basic principles, interacting with each other, giving way to space, time, particles.

Particles then create more particles, stranger, bigger. They fuse together in stars, which give birth by exploding, creating other stars. Those stars have more complex elements, which combine to give out chemical elements like iron.

Those heavy elements create life, which multiplies and creates ideas and thoughts. Symbols and numbers multiplying within ourselves to reinforce it all.

That's all reality is, an organic fractal. Like a tree, your Kabbalah."





From somewhere he fishes a toothpick, and clears his teeth.

"Now it's all about reaching the center of it all, and using the keys."

Lucas is getting frustrated with this whole thing.

"At this point, I just want my family to be safe. I swear to god if the 7th key is love I'm going to throw up"

Ricardo rolls his eyes while we laugh. He's more interested in the answers.

"How do we reach the center of it all then, do you know? Is it that lock you said you can see? How do we go there? How do we use the keys?"

"Sounds to me like you're already using these things. You're controlling dreams, creatures, traveling through time and space, finding things. It just takes a bit of practice. It did for me.

I don't think your family was ever safe, mister. But you're just now finding out and it scares you. I can understand that, it scared me too. Just remember it's all an illusion. It scares you because that's how you're kept under control.

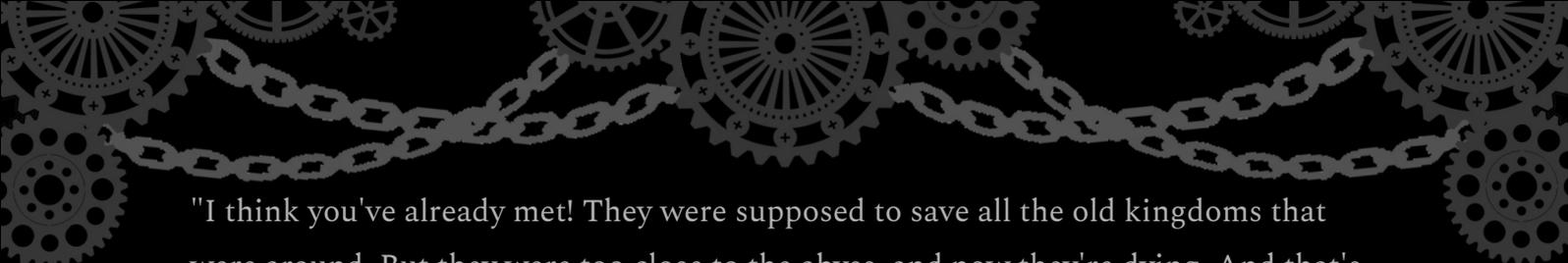
That last key though, that's another bit of tricky business. I have a hunch, and I'm already on it. The Keepers are taking me to the center, or partway, at least."

"The keepers?"

"Yep. Keepers. Gray, crystal, gas masks, 'bout yay high..."

He rises on his toes and stretches his arm, trying to show how much taller they are.





"I think you've already met! They were supposed to save all the old kingdoms that were around. But they were too close to the abyss, and now they're dying. And that's the key, I guess."

"The labyrinth?" So the hollow men are allies? They could have maybe mentioned it before."

"Well, they're taking me through the labyrinth, but that's just part of it. I'm sure they want something in exchange, everyone does. It's like all men and women have a hole in their heart. And they try to fill it with something: Power, Truth, Duty, Knowledge, Justice, Peace.

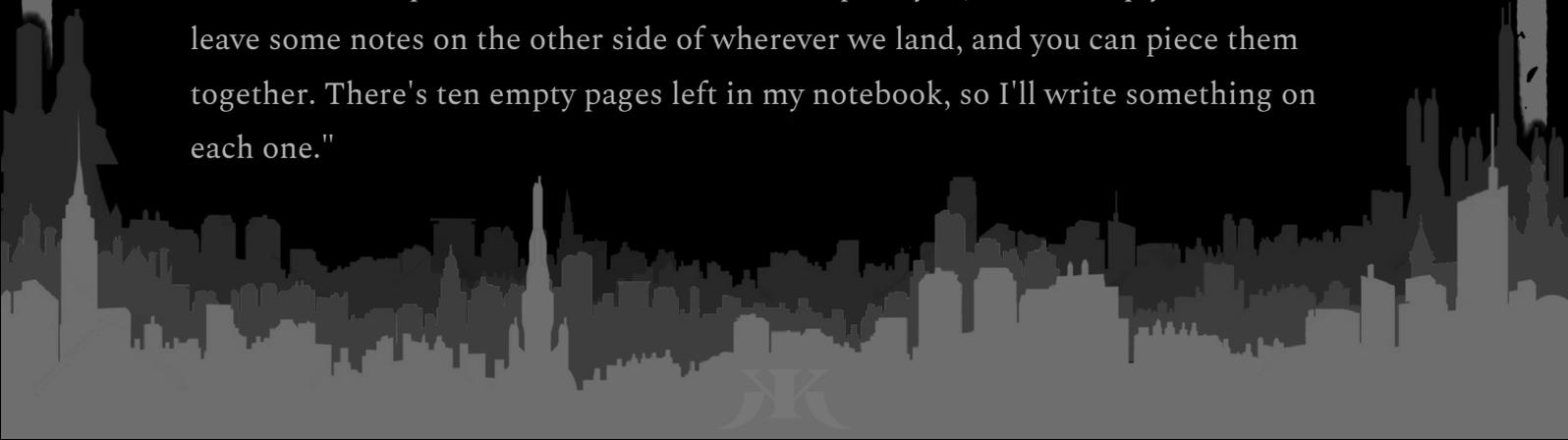
But that hole remains empty, because only one thing can feel it: death. Because death is the void, the same void that is in the hearts of men. When we die, we go back home, and only after that are we free.

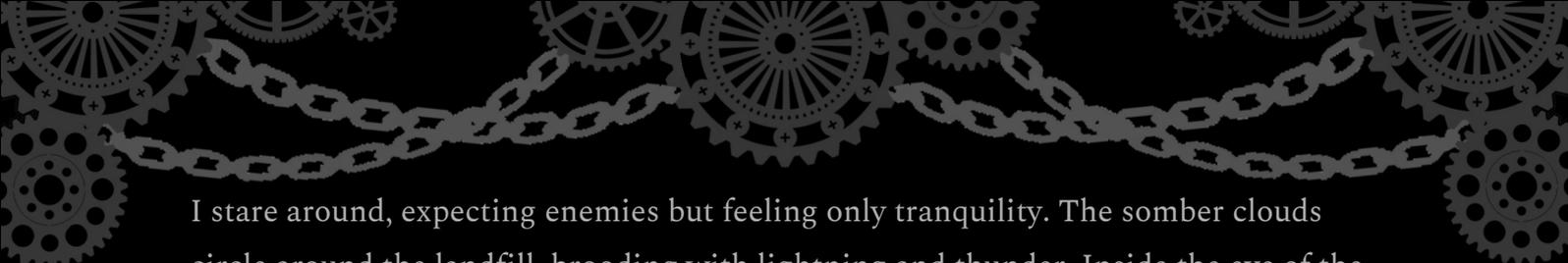
These keeper guys, they have embraced this abyss, because they live in its shadow. Where all the others underground are fading away like bitter old hags, they embrace the void. Because of that, they can use the labyrinth, go to other times and places. I can see it now, we're nearly there. There's a path beyond it."

"The last key is death?"

"Yes, mastering it, whatever that means. People die everyday and you don't see them escaping. But I think if you have all the other Keys, it just might work. You're missing one, that Numerology thing. Really, numbers are just the flip side of symbols, but unlike symbols, they do add up.

Me and the Keepers are too far ahead to wait up for you, but I'll help you out. I'll leave some notes on the other side of wherever we land, and you can piece them together. There's ten empty pages left in my notebook, so I'll write something on each one."





I stare around, expecting enemies but feeling only tranquility. The somber clouds circle around the landfill, brooding with lightning and thunder. Inside the eye of the storm, we listen to Srijan finish his plan.

"That's about it I guess. You follow me past the underground city of Ktonor, into the abyss. I'll leave notebook pages when I can on the other side. And hopefully the Keepers will take me to the center, and we'll meet there. Any questions?"

"What is Ktonor? The city we fell to after Amsterdam? "

With sun rays beaming through the cloud cover, Srijan turns phantasmal. He's more translucent with every word and breath he takes.

"Oh, no, I think that's the city the Demiurge and the Archons built, where mankind lived once... Ktonor is underground, where everyone else lived, trying to get away from them... I need to go now, I can hear the calling of the void..."

The last word steams away with the rest of the boy's projection. Left all alone, we savor a moment of serenity, with the wind slowly picking up again.

On a hunch, Jorrit opens Srijan's notebook. A rain drop stains the white blank page. True to the boy's words, the last ten pages are blank, waiting to be filled. The pages turn in the breeze, the sunlight fading before an advancing front.

Ricardo wonders where Sofia is, and Parvati gives her a call. No reply, she is out of network range. I take the Tarot deck out, shuffle it, and try the first card. It's the Princess of Wands, a picture of her in garb that's Inca tribal royalty wrapped in copper chains and black leather, holding a crystal scepter.





She wakes strapped to a metal table. Sofia tries to move, but straps hold her down, and she's unable to rise. Her leg has been patched, and there's a spotlight shining down on her. By the side are some surgical instruments, and blood stained cotton.

There are a few mobile sheet walls separating the surgery room from the darkness. The reported can hear voices, two of them, getting closer. The voices are murmurs, talking with effort.

"She's healthy. Her kidney should fetch a good price."

"It doesn't matter, Amar said she shouldn't be touched."

"Amar Naidu isn't the king of this place. Dasra has ruled that healthy above grounders be harvested for organs."

"Amar says this one knows about the goddess."

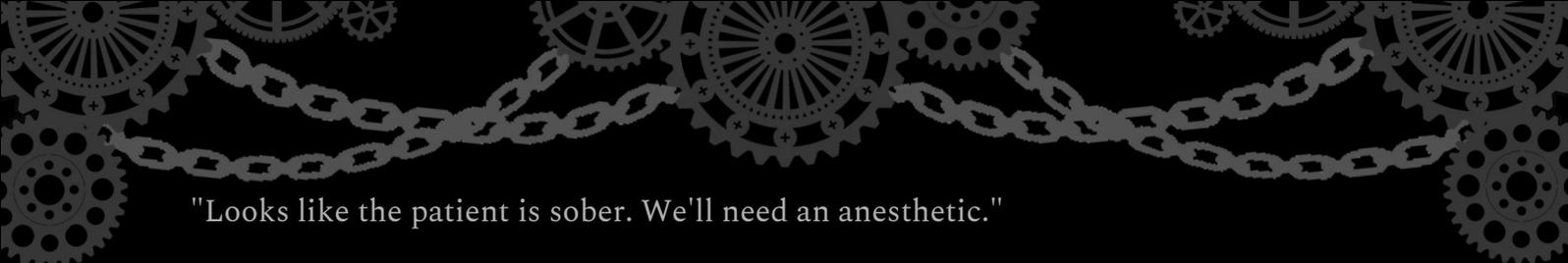
"So? We'll say she's just another sacrifice. They all knew about the goddess too."

"You make a point there."

The voices are getting closer, one convincing the other. Testing the limits of the bounds, she looks around in desperation to see if she can reach something to help free herself.

Despite her best efforts the table barely moves forward. Past the fake walls, the surgeons enter, dresses in unclean gowns. There's two of them, with their necks scarred by slashes. They are stitched up here and there, and one is missing an eye.





"Looks like the patient is sober. We'll need an anesthetic."

One of them moves to a nearby table, and picks up a syringe.

"I'd like to skip all this if you don't mind."

One of the surgeons smiles beneath his mask.

"No anesthetic? I'm so glad! It's much more fun operating on a living patient!"

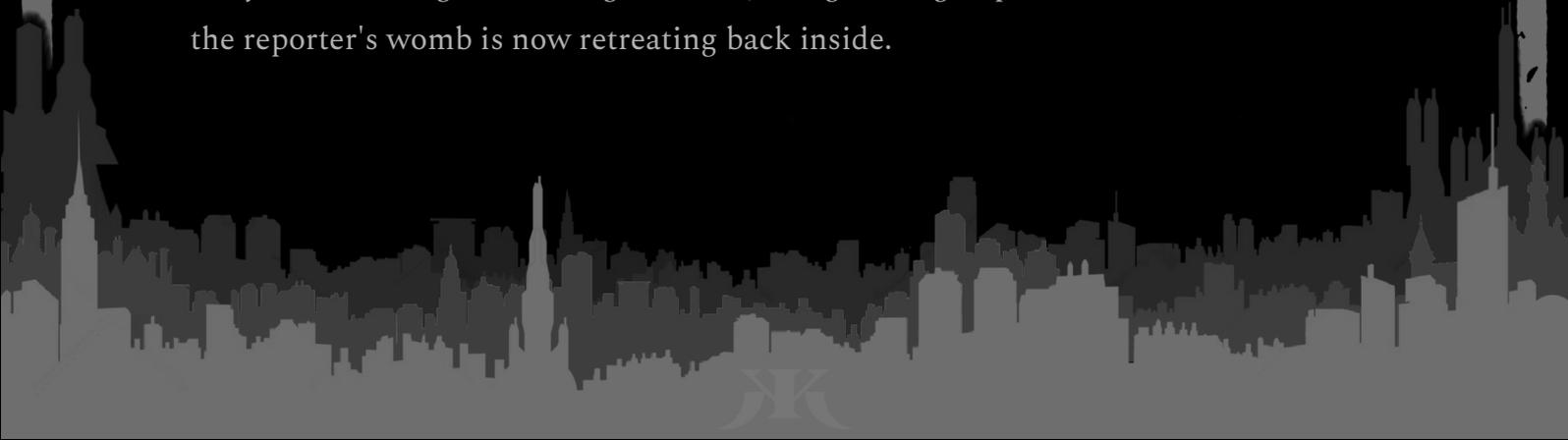
He picks up a scalpel instead, its edge sharp and shining under the spotlight. She screams when one of the doctors tears her pants off, cutting them with a knife. Sofia nearly bites through her lip when the other starts cutting her abdomen.

Then it's the surgeon's turn to scream.

Staring downwards, the nightmare incident is repeated. Spreading from her vulva, a gelatinous semi-transparent feeler stings one of the surgeons. It pumps, and toothed suckers try to bury themselves into his flesh. His skin torn, the surgeon screams. Another feeler grabs his face, crushing his surgeon's head, and a third grasps a hand on the one trying to get away.

The table crashes to the side, its edge cutting through one of the straps in the process. Sofia feels an ungodly pain shooting through her pelvis when the feeler severs the runner's arm. The other surgeon's skull cracks, the pressure shoving his one eye out of its socket.

The pain is intense, but at least she has a free hand. There's a trail of blood leading away with the surgeon holding his hand, still groaning in pain. Whatever came out of the reporter's womb is now retreating back inside.





As quickly as she can, she undoes the other strap, keeping an eye out for anyone else. The straps come loose easy enough, and Sofia is free, crawling on the floor. Although her pelvis hurts with a loose kind of pain, she stands on her own two feet. She can't see the surgeon, but there's a bit of light shining from the direction they came in.

"Fuck it!" Sofia spends a moment catching her breath, recovering as much strength as she can. Grabbing a scalpel for defence and a medical gown to cover herself, she spots her bag a bit further away, on a chair in the fading darkness.

When the reporter reaches out for her bag, a blade shines in the dark. The one armed surgeon is using his left hand to swing the knife he used to cut her clothes off earlier. His left isn't as good, and Sofia evades his wild swings, but he does step between her and the bag.

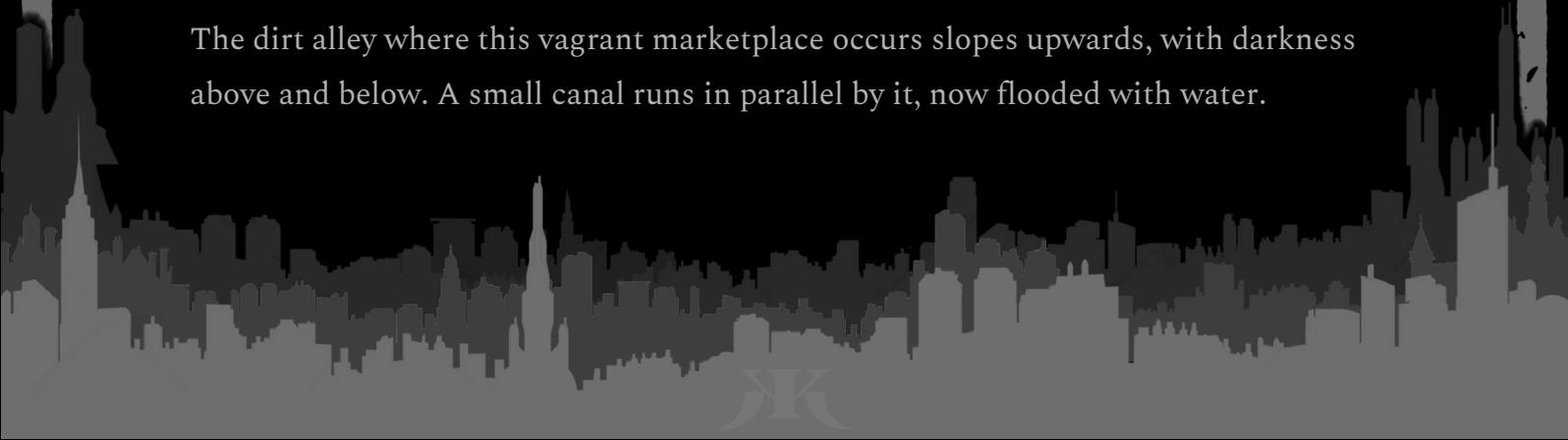
"Look, I've had a really bad fuckin' day, just let me take my bag and go! Because I really don't want whatever is going on downstairs to take your other arm!"

Sofia can see him trembling, his hand still leaking while he holds it under his shoulder. Tears streak his eyes as he steps aside, leaving the reporter to her bag.

Sofia, keeping an eye on the surgeon, takes her bag and passes through the exit. The light is coming from several fires in braziers spread about the place. Its an old temple, underground, the crumbling columns blending with pipeworks.

There are packs of beggars here, a lot of them wearing rags or hospital gowns. Amputees are among them, along with vendors with merchandise on blankets. A few performers juggle knives, entertaining the men, women and children watching from alcoves.

The dirt alley where this vagrant marketplace occurs slopes upwards, with darkness above and below. A small canal runs in parallel by it, now flooded with water.





Taking a deep breath, she strolls through the alley as if she was naturally meant to be here. Moving through the vagrants, Sofia feels a tug on the bag's strap. She looks down to see an amputee pulling at its bottom, asking for the bag.

Struggling for a moment, the reporter relents and salvages what she can from the bag, leaving it to the amputee, avoiding attention. She resumes head upwards through the human wrecks that surround her. There's an ill kept storm drain where all the water and some people are coming from. Sofia makes it in record time, but there are some men guarding a ladder.

It looks like those guards by the stairs are there to stay. Their pastime is sniffing glue from plastic bags, but they have knives.

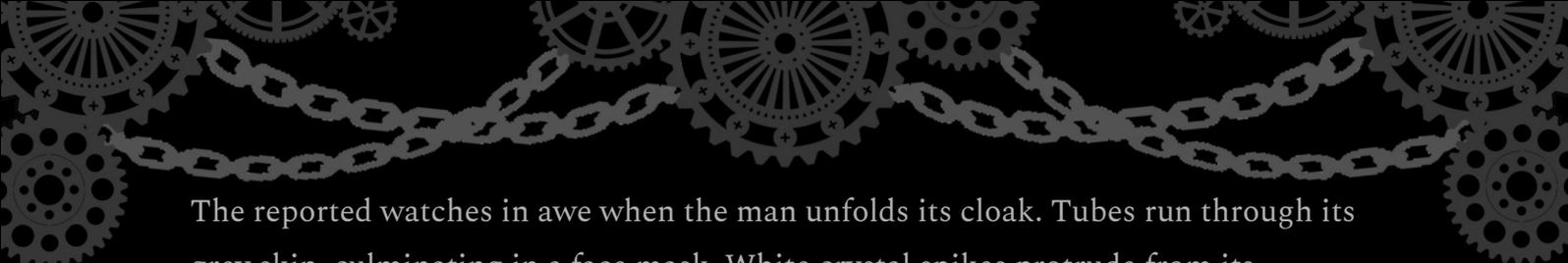
Something moves in the corner of her eye, a figure approaching from the storm drain. The cloak disguises it, but there's no doubt: the gas mask and white crystals signal one of her nightmares. It holds a glass shard that shines white the closer it gets.

The hollow man moves in closer, silent in his pace, guided by the luminescent shard. It hasn't spotted Sofia yet, but has her trapped, blocking the way back in the temple. The two glue sniffing guards seem oblivious to its presence.

She takes the risk, and runs for the ladder, climbing a few rungs before the guards pull her down by her ankles. Her leg breaks when she lands, an open fracture, protruding bone. The two guards react by pulling curved knives, while the hollow man takes a few steps back.

The two guards, noticing the hollow man, fearfully make room. The shard brightens upon approach, but it seems more interested in Sofia. Floating in the knee-deep murky rainwater, she puts out an arm in defense.





The reported watches in awe when the man unfolds its cloak. Tubes run through its grey skin, culminating in a face mask. White crystal spikes protrude from its shoulders and head. Other smaller such gems beautifully adorn its body.

It is taller than she dreamed, much taller than she expected. Strong as well, picking her up with one hand ending in white fingernails. The luminescent crystal in its hand grows bright, shining over the wound. Her fracture closes, just as it produces a syringe.

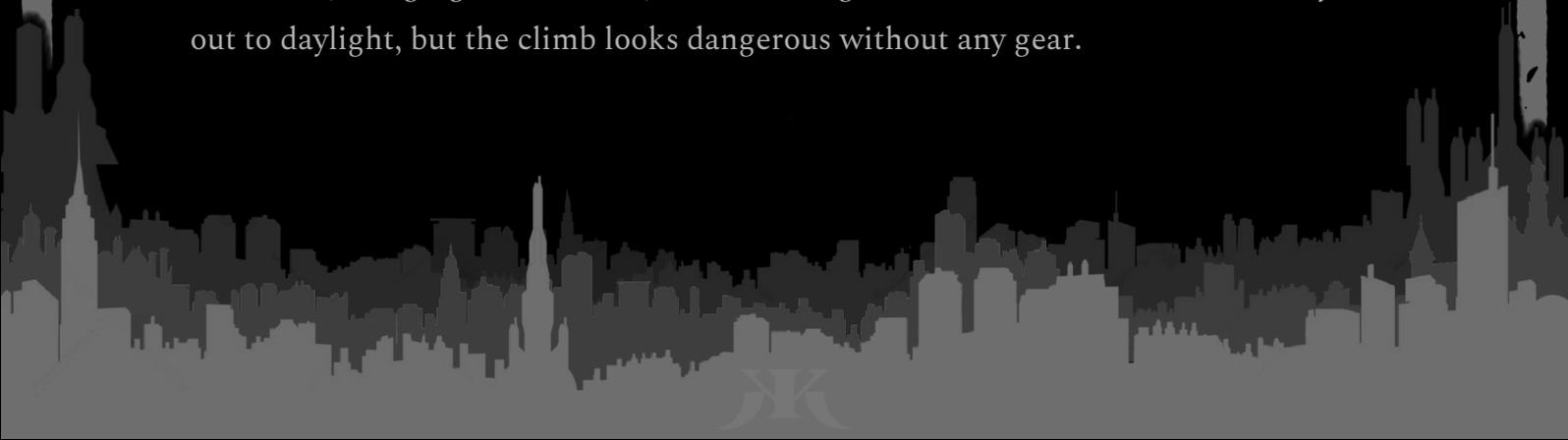
"What... the fuck?"

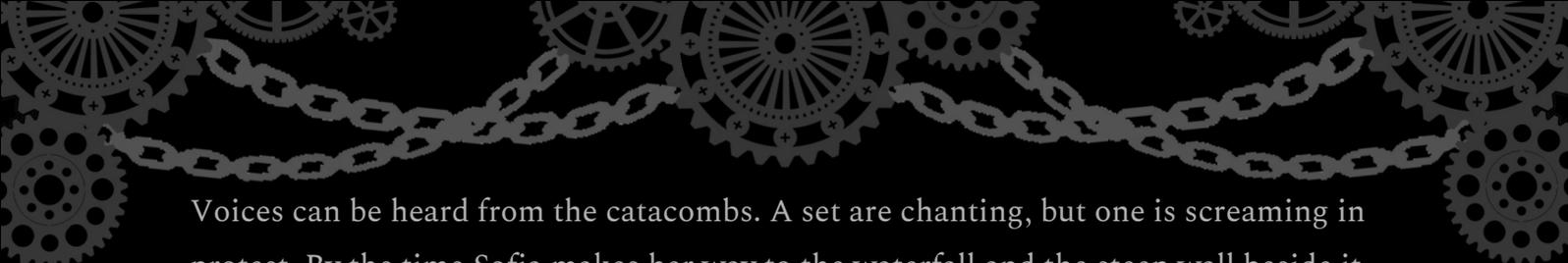
Only a low growl comes in response, echoing through the sewer. The guards are kneeling in the water in supplication before it. Sofia feels a stab, the syringe digging with precision into her liver. The hollow man extracts fluid while Sofia looks on.

The way it moves is animalic, sudden, jerking, tilting its head on approach. It raises a hand, and the fingernails glow in sequence when it passes her abdomen. Sofia feels cramps again, and dark blood spills in the water. When she falls in the water, it leaves, an inhuman cackle sounding through the drain. Both of the guards are dead in its wake.

She ascends through the storm drain. The quiet and darkness have their advantages, helping her focus on other senses and the reporter hears a trickle of water. A draft also accompanies it, stench blowing from a direction through the tunnels. Keeping at it, soon her eyes need to accustom to a shine.

It's a cavern, the stalactites reflecting the turbulent garbage-filled lake below. Many colored patterns dance on the ceiling, light reflecting in petrolic waves. A waterfall is at the end, bringing in rainwater, but not enough to alleviate the stench. It's a way out to daylight, but the climb looks dangerous without any gear.





Voices can be heard from the catacombs. A set are chanting, but one is screaming in protest. By the time Sofia makes her way to the waterfall and the steep wall beside it, a set of red robed men and women enter, carrying a live and bound victim. Their prayers can't be heard from the distance, but something perturbs the water. The red hooded worshippers throw their victim in the murk.

Something moves from underneath and snatches the sacrifice in an instant. A hungry leviathan of metal, garbage, and flesh, rapidly retreating.

A few fissures serve as handholds helping her climb, making the ascent quickly. She surfaces at a waste drain leading to a landfill. landfill covered in birds, swept away by the wind. The garbage slides down with the water, causing avalanches. Seagulls move in through the storm, picking at the trash.

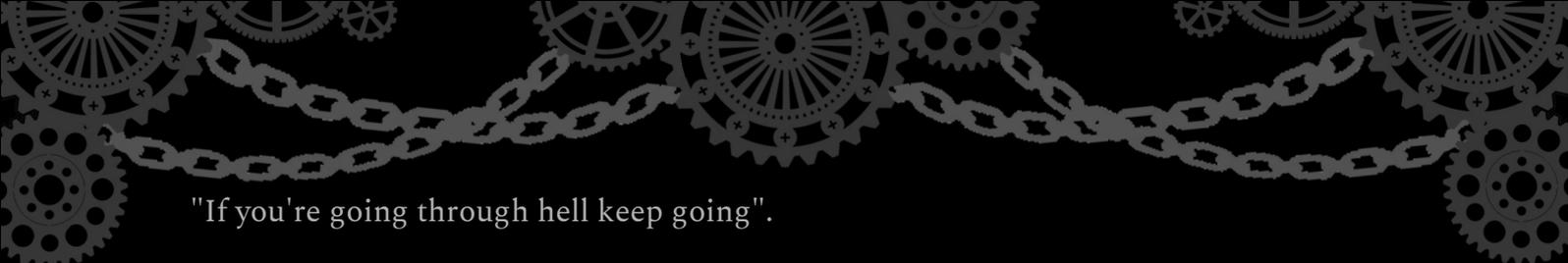
I open my eyes, put the card away, and lead the others in her direction. We greet her when she exits, and turn her around.

We see the beggar parade for the first time, chaotic in nature. Amputees mingle with jugglers and snake charmers, red robed priests giving sermons. A canal has been dug to divert the water, and the floor is mostly dry. The alleyways leads downwards, into dark tunnels, pipeworks augmenting the old columns.

It's a small marvel of engineering that a few well dug canals are all that stop the temple from flooding. The minor rivers drain into the darkness past the parade of amputated beggars and street performers. For their part, they shamble in an aimless fashion, but their interactions do have a point.

Lucas is befuddled for a moment at the spectacle before him, he turns with a slight smile.





"If you're going through hell keep going".

Passing the crowd, we get assaulted by the beggars, amputees asking for alms with open palms. A few vendors try to sell them trinkets, practically pushing cheap bracelets in their laps.

With all of us present, more faces are recognizable throughout the mad crowd. Sofia sees surgeons like those that previously held her captive, operating on themselves. Lucas recognizes the red robed cultists from the lake, a crude yellow spiraling symbol on their chest. Jorrit spots some of the Aghori, their eyes made glass by pipes filled with opiates. Parvati has been here before, or rather will be, one day, perhaps ten years from now. She points out the gold adorned King of Beggars guarded by the Euthantos in their black wraps and knives.

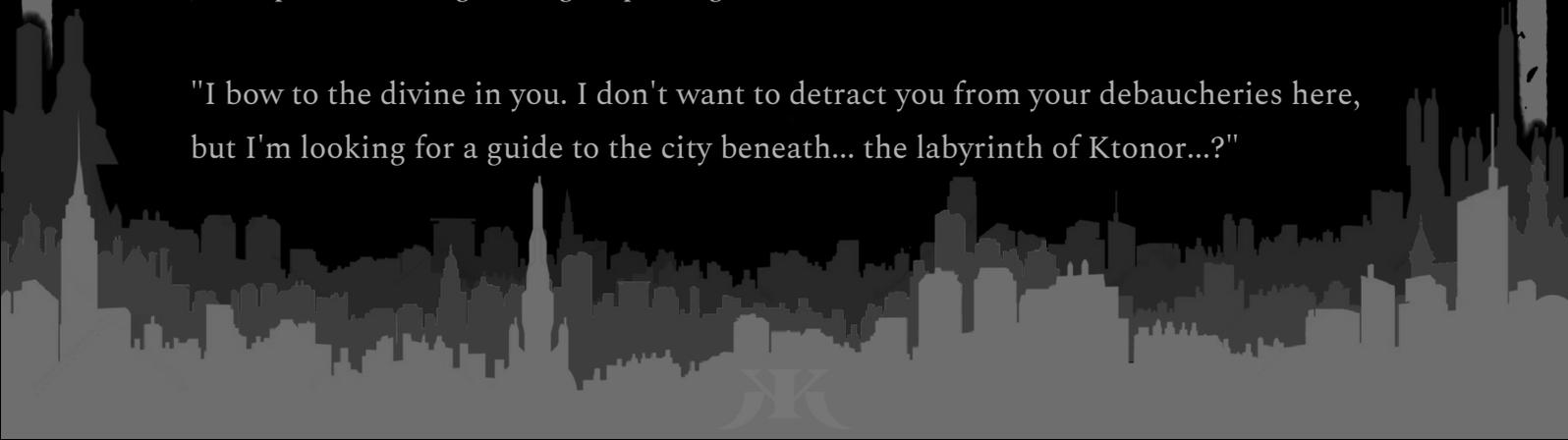
Lucas moves, and keeps moving past the motley crew of beggars and truth seekers. following in his own footsteps to where he found Sofia and was healed. He pauses only for a moment spotting the cultists but is assured that his family here has the upper hand, though still worries that this has become a contest, or perhaps a battle to the death.

Lucas takes the lead, and not timidly. Pushing past anyone that steps into his path. Still keeping in mind that they might need a guide, he keeps moving, but still looking for the right person.

The deeper they dig into the mob, the more obvious it is they don't belong. Beggars are asking them for money, crowding them into each other. It's harder and harder to distinguish recognizable faces beyond the human misery.

Jorrit pushes through to a group of Aghori.

"I bow to the divine in you. I don't want to detract you from your debaucheries here, but I'm looking for a guide to the city beneath... the labyrinth of Ktonor...?"





One of the most sober Aghori blows smoke into Jorrit's face.

"The taking white man still doesn't understand why we Aghori do what we do. Sena Panja has warned you that you're not ready for the path. Now you've been touched by impurity, and are a dead man walking."

He points to Jorrit's hand, where a strange skin has grown over the bite wound. It's sickly yellow, stretched over, like the melted mass in the train depot.

"The sign of the Cairath, infecting, consuming, inescapable. You might as well offer yourself as a sacrifice for the Red Brotherhood. Be gone, trouble us no more."

"Story of our fucking life!" Sofia had been keeping back a little but she figured the cat was most probably out of the bag anyway, so what the fuck

The Aghori seem unconcerned by the troubles of the chosen and retreat into their chemical bliss. Feeling their clothes grabbed by the beggars, we try to reach one of the other familiar faces.

The red robed cultists are closer, a braided black-haired woman leading them. Sofia recognizes the turban preachers of Kala, now speaking to the surgeons nearby.

Lucas is getting angry with each person that steps in his path. He shoves, kicks, and pushes his way through until he cannot anymore.

"I'm not sure any of these people will help us. These fucks are useless, I doubt we'll find anything like a guide here."

"We should at least try asking once more. We can always go without a guide if that doesn't amount to anything..."





With the warning of sacrifice from the Aghori, Jorrit is wary of asking help from the red robes. Our choices are swiftly dwindling down, it's either up to the turbaned man or the king himself. That is, until weapons fire draws his attention away and he starts to argue with his allies.

The beggars make more noise wherever we pass, more with Lucas' violence. This doesn't go unnoticed. Those black-wrapped men near the King Of Beggars take whispered orders and approach. I observe someone studying the sanskrit on a far away column, dressed like a backpacker.

She's a white woman that doesn't belong, but is left alone by the others. The backpacker steps away from the column, heading downwards. With an entire quagmire of poverty in front of us, she'll be difficult to catch up to.

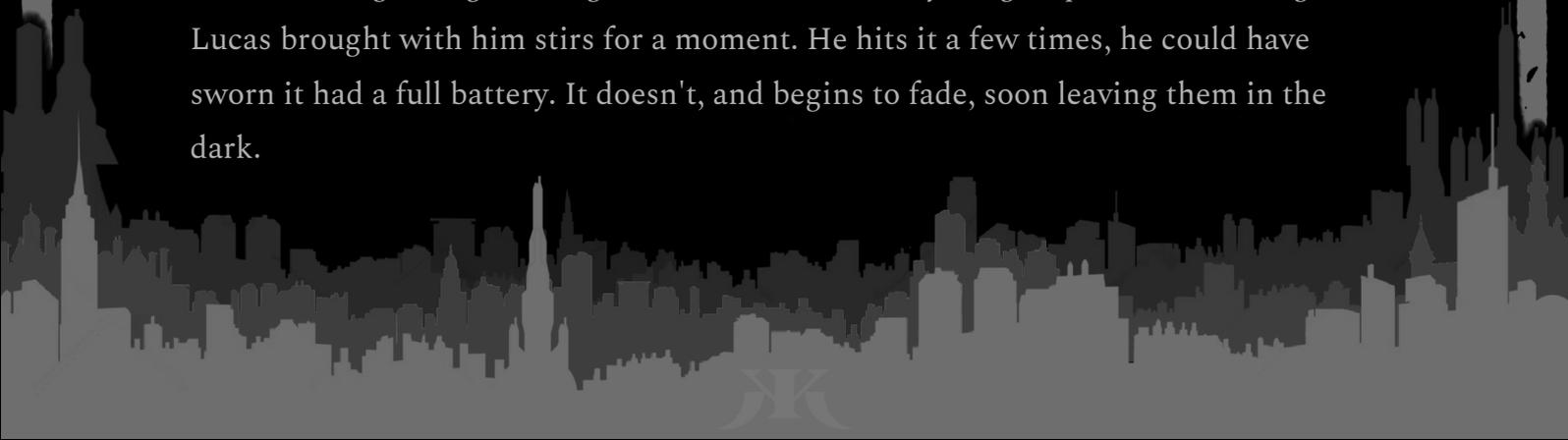
Wrapped in black, the guards of the underworld descend upon us with knives drawn. I tell the others about what I see, and we shove our way to the temple entrance.

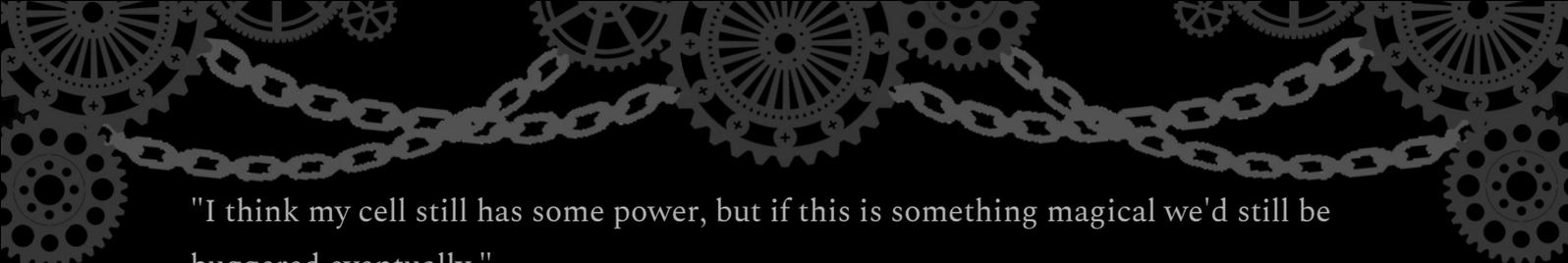
It's dark in these tunnels, sustained by metal girders, the only light emanating from the temple. Soon, even that is gone, and all that is left is a pitch black, with the roaring crowd fading behind.

Parvati busts out a flashlight from her pocket in an attempt to illuminate the area in front of us.

A mummified corpse stares back at her, then another, then more. Alcoves filled with the dead line the walls, adorned with nothing. The flashlight reveals a catacomb of winding tunnels without indications.

We move long enough through the tunnels until everything is quiet. The flashlight Lucas brought with him stirs for a moment. He hits it a few times, he could have sworn it had a full battery. It doesn't, and begins to fade, soon leaving them in the dark.





"I think my cell still has some power, but if this is something magical we'd still be bugged eventually."

A poor substitute but one nonetheless, we continue by the reporter's phone. The convoluted tunnels offer no relief or indication of direction. Only the mummies we pass seem older and older, with advancing decay.

They spend what must be days traversing the catacombs, ever downwards, directionless. What little supplies we have slowly drain. Without a guide, we are lost.

Jorrit has become quiet, disgruntled and ill at ease. He has stopped eating, and hasn't talked to any of the group in a good long while. Occasionally he flips through his notebook during their rests, but more often he sits in darkness, to conserve batteries.

The mercenary sets down for a restless sleep. While he's resting a chemical lamp burns bright green, lighting the nearby tunnels.

Ricardo, after a bit of time, will also settle down next to a pillar and inspect the back of his eyelids. It has been so long.

The group falls asleep, each with his own brand of personal nightmare.

I stay awake as long as I can, keeping an eye out for any trouble coming our way, but eventually my eyes begin to droop and I move to find a comfortable spot to sit down, resting my head against the stone and closing my eyes.



Parvati feared being chased by the Euthanatos, and every night she is. They hound her on smoke spitting motorcycles through the yellow fogs. The rocky desert hill is a steep climb, but at least it slows them down. Past its peak, Parvati can see the wreck of a cargo plane, torn open in the wasteland.

The assassin takes cover from her hunters in the wreckage, hiding under a cargo net. Motors roar, the Euthanatos circling the wreck, waiting for her to appear. She's not alone inside: spread between the pallets and boxes are face-down corpses.

One of them raises its head, staring at Parvati with charcoal eyes. It's her father, reaching out for his belt, coming closer while cursing. The other corpses are her victims, attempting to get up, shouting accusations.

She reels back, terror and panic written on her features as she crawls on all fours and reaches the cockpit, but her past follows her. Under their weight, the plane wreck quakes, each drop more violent than the last. Two more corpses await her at the top, one of them Nicholson, dressed as a pilot.

Parvati abruptly freezes when she sees him regret flashing across her face. Removing a scissor from his neck, her first victim joins the last while the cockpit drops another half a meter. The next quake will surely bring the wreck open and exposed to her hunters. She backs into the wall of the plane, reaching out for something to steady herself, shouting.

"Do you want me to apologize? Visit a priest?"

Gurgling, Parvati's first victim spits out venom through his lips.

"There's nothing... you can do. A killer's a... killer. No peace... for you, you'll never... change. Only blood will pay... for blood. When you die... your torment will begin!"



The plane crashes, landing her within a set of jagged rocks. Her guilt catches up with her at the same time as the hunters. An unveiled helmet reveals a face of cancerous growths with falling skin.

"Time for a meal, boys!"

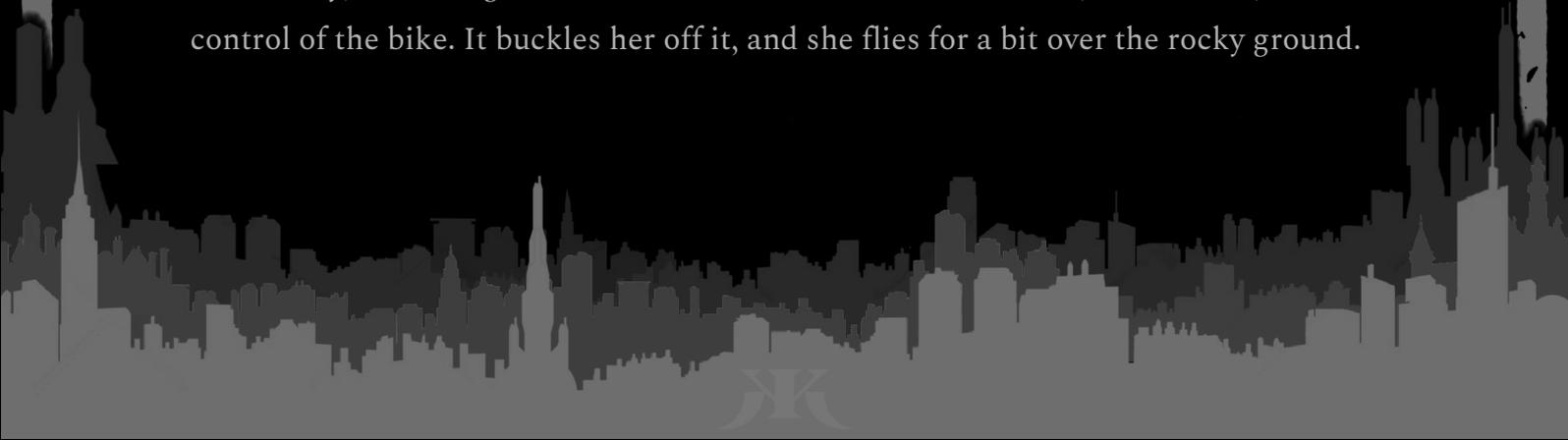
An axe-kick to the cancer-head throws him off his bike while crushing the stones holding her. One of his fellows raises his arm in aim at her head, a steel crossbolt with two bolts attached. The assassin weaves her head, and the bolts strike rocks. Agitated, the riders pull firearms.

The assassin grabs the bolts and throws them at the nearest rider. Dying, he drops a strange organic gun at her feet. It writhes in pain, and she can see it uses small, sharpened bones for bullets. The head killer is recuperating, crawling to his fallen motorcycle, the motor still running.

She picks up the weapon, firing two rounds. His head splatters when the gun screams its shots at him. Parvati picks up the bike and presses the acceleration handle. The wheels spits rocks, attempting friction, and it departs.

With the cancer riders in pursuit, the assassin sees yellow lighting. It parts the fog, showing her the metal fortress she's seen before. Increasing the pace of her bike, the assassin sees the source of the yellow lightning, an array of electric towers. They stand halfway from her to the fortress, the riders catching up to her.

She checks the gristle gun, now out of bullets. Looking into the mirrors on either side, she turns her head and flings the gristle gun at a biker. She tags him square in the face, the weapon latching, shredding him to the bone. It then jumps to another one nearby, devouring his face as well. Parvati turns around and, in the twist, loses control of the bike. It buckles her off it, and she flies for a bit over the rocky ground.





She rolls with the landings, eventually stopping with only a few scratches, but no broken bones. The assassin is short of her objective, the fortress beyond reach of the electric towers near her. Parvati makes a run for it, but she isn't fast enough. A flash occurs when the riders catch up with her. The yellow bolts fry everyone, the assassin included.

The current traverses Parvati's body, settling in her shoulder, lighting up the bronze mesh. It hurts like a long corrosive acid, but she knows she's lucky when the raiders all die. She walks the rest of the way, metal gates parting for her when watchers above shout.

It isn't what she expected: before her stand medical tents and many wounded and deformed. Doctors and nurses travel between them, doing what they can and it's all coordinated by one man. He's a bald Nigerian in a white gown, staring down at a paperclip, taking notes while he gives directions.

Parvati looks for someone available, settling on a curly haired scarlet afro. The doctor inspects her without any prompts.

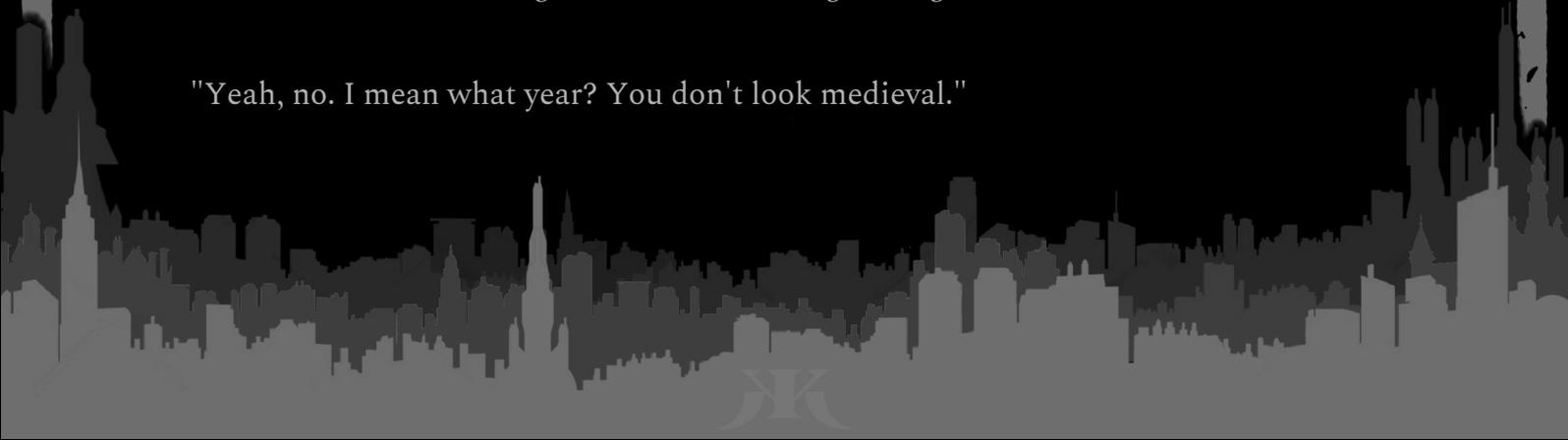
"You don't look affected by the radiation or the plague. We really don't have time to replace broken implants here."

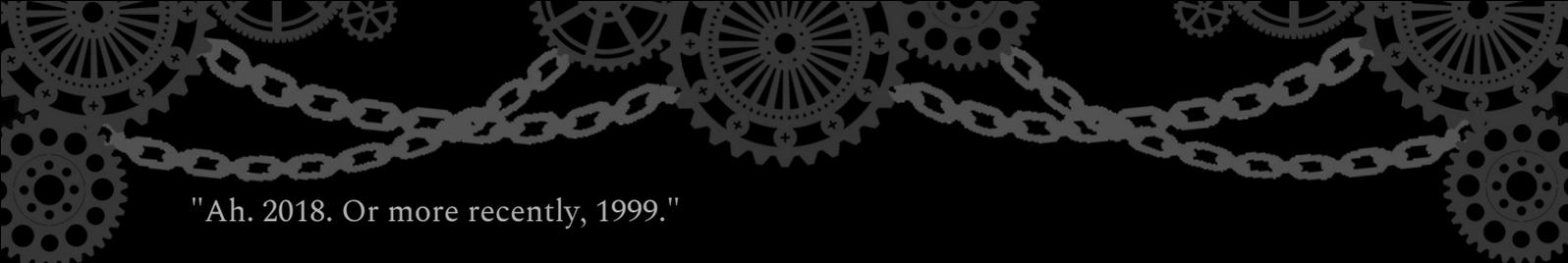
"Implants? Plague?" Confusion bleeds into my voice and appears on my features, my brow knitting slightly.

"Ah, you're new here. Good, maybe you can help. Where do you come from?"

Parvati points out the gates and down the valley to where I appeared in this dream. The doctor takes off her glasses while bursting in laughter.

"Yeah, no. I mean what year? You don't look medieval."





"Ah. 2018. Or more recently, 1999."

"Oh. Well that changes things. Come with me."

The scarlet afro takes Parvati straight to the Nigerian. She whispers in his ear, then goes to check on other patients. A hand is extended, the black man expecting Parvati to grab his.

"Jolainne N'Gembo-Mouanda, pleased to meet you. Natasha tells me you're a traveler. I don't know how you got here, but we could use your help."

"Parvati Shankar. And help with what?"

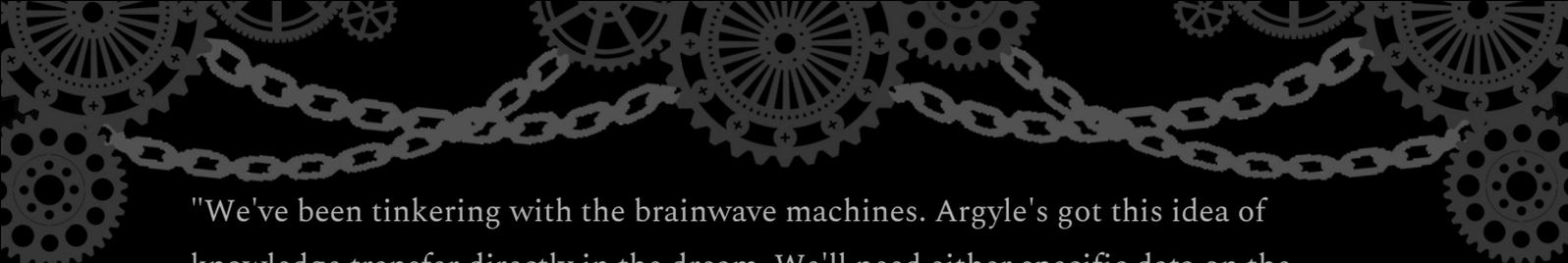
"The future, Mrs. Shankar. We've got our hands full. I suppose someone will call it World War III if humanity survives. But it's child's play compared to the Cairath Plague. We've figured out that dreams are transchronal. Got some brain wave machines hooked up every night in the lab, hoping for someone like you. We need your help finding a cure."

"I...can try, but my skills run toward other fields."

"Don't worry, we've got the knowledge, we just can't travel there physically. I'm not going to ask for tech, those in the future never hand it out. Fear of paradoxes and what not. But you're our first traveler, and we need pure samples of the plague. The main pathogen originates from somewhere around the turn of the millennium. So, we'll instruct you into analyzing samples, and go from there."

"Do you have a location for me to do this at?"





"We've been tinkering with the brainwave machines. Argyle's got this idea of knowledge transfer directly in the dream. We'll need either specific data on the samples or the samples themselves. If you can't or don't want to deliver them in person, we'll set up a drop spot. So Mrs Shankar, want to help save the species?"

"Fine. I'm in. Maybe this way I can atone."

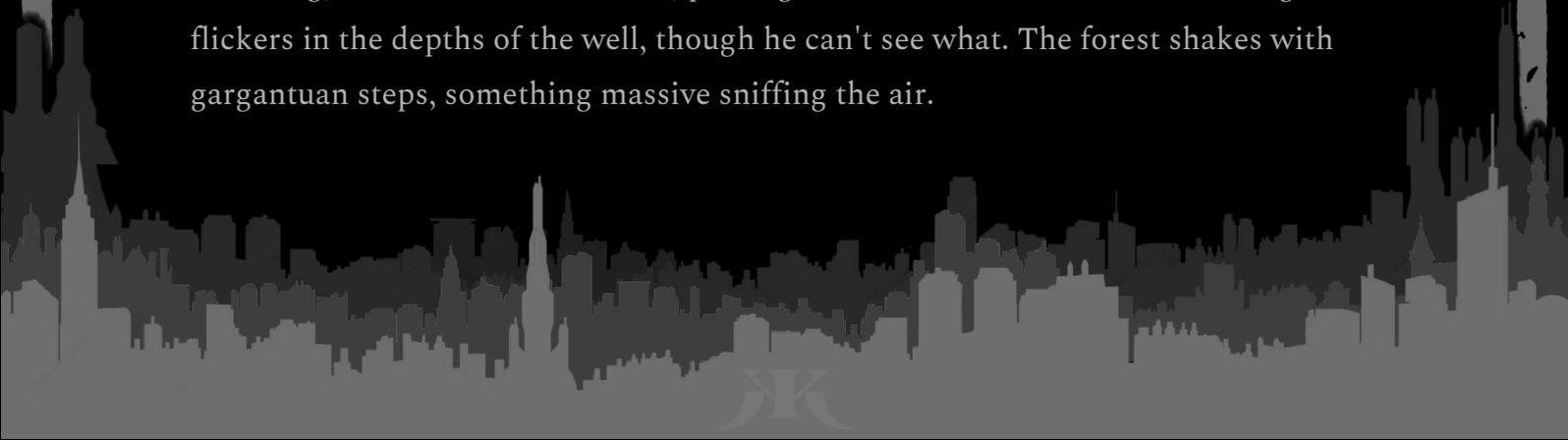
"With my military record, I'm the last one to judge. If there's anything we can ever do for you, let us know. Now let's see what we can do about waking you up from my personal nightmare."

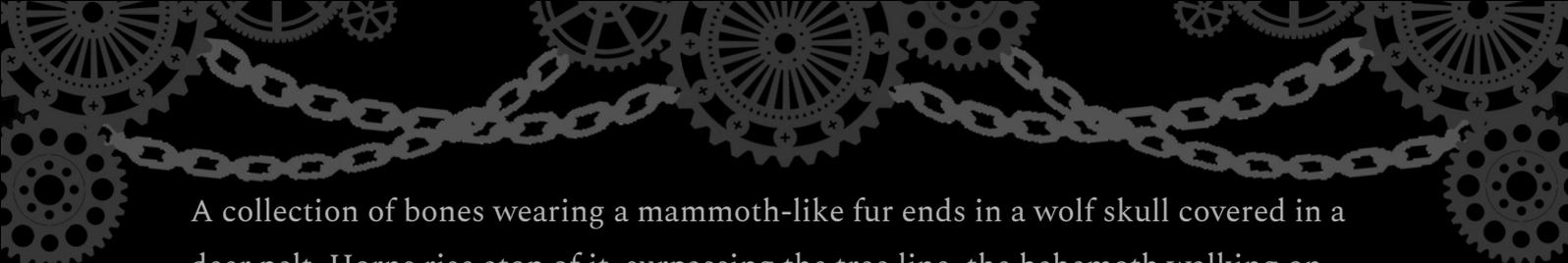
Before she can react, he jabs the pen in her shoulder, a syringe filled with radioactive fluid. Her mouth froths and she enters a seizure.

In front of him, the forest dark, and echoes of Gregorian chants. Something huge, hungry, and moaning is shuffling through the pines, stirring the snow off them. Further away, smoke rises in the light of the full moon, escaping the chimneys of wooden houses. The source of the choir is a distant grey cathedral, suspended on a plateau, ripe with gothic spires and gargoyles.

The clear night sky is full of stars, freezing like the snow-covered forest floor. Giant horned shadows move behind the trees, shaking the needles of the pine foliage. A single stone well with a wooden roof lies nearby, no bucket attached to the broken chain. Lucas' teeth chatter together, with no equipment or enough clothes to warm him.

Shivering, Lucas moves to the well, peering down into the darkness. Something flickers in the depths of the well, though he can't see what. The forest shakes with gargantuan steps, something massive sniffing the air.





A collection of bones wearing a mammoth-like fur ends in a wolf skull covered in a deer pelt. Horns rise atop of it, surpassing the tree line, the behemoth walking on four legs. Dragging the knuckles of its clawed hands, it strides through the pines towards Lucas. Rotten meat and dried fur gets tangled in the branches while it advances.

The mercenary hears rocks shuffling behind him, turning instinctively. Gonzales, towing Hicks, climbs out of the fountain, the rest of the platoon following. Lucas gathers himself and stands, the afterimages of his squad giving him some bravado. He steps toward the beast. He signals to his men to hold.

"We are not enemies," he says in a low tone.

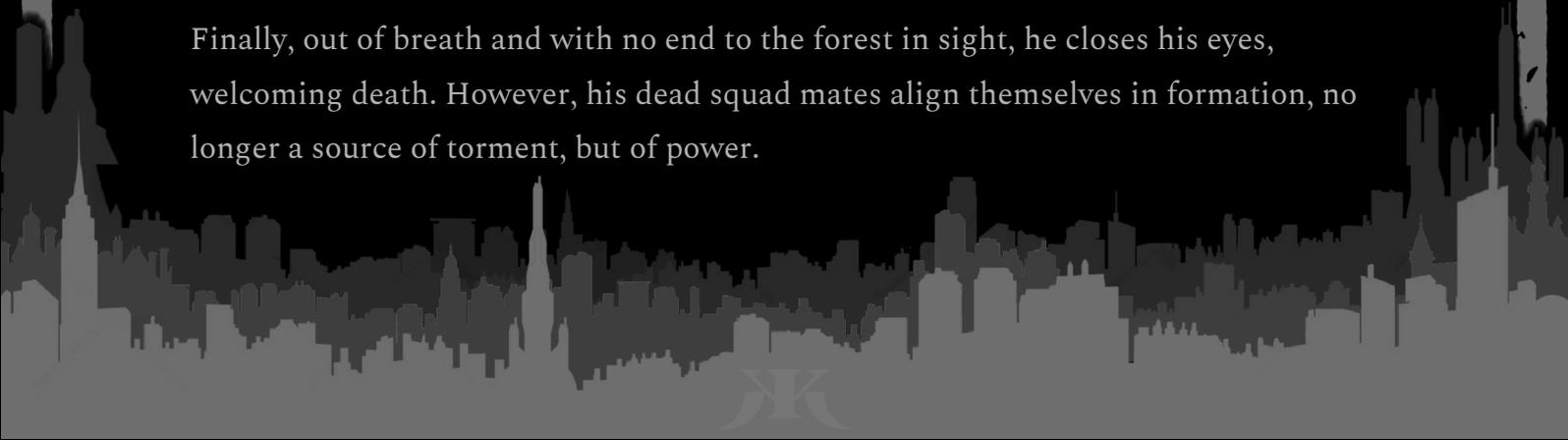
Launching one of its limbs forward, the horned beast smashes the fountain. This stops the flow of dead soldiers, with ice shooting up instead. The geyser spills slush onto the forest floor, creating a small river. Rebounding for another strike, the beast smashes a few trees. Splinters fly, dancing with snowflakes.

Lucas, startled for a moment, shrinks for a second but regains his composure. The beast merely took out what it considered the bigger threat first. Its claw swings downwards onto the mercenary, looking to tear him in two.

Lucas dives out of the way, just in time, looking back toward the well. It has been completely wrecked, but the river of ice carves a path through the forest. Snow falls from the trees as the giant's horns collide with the top branches.

The mercenary breaks for the treeline following the river of ice. Its easy for the horned beast with its great stride to keep up with Lucas and his platoon.

Finally, out of breath and with no end to the forest in sight, he closes his eyes, welcoming death. However, his dead squad mates align themselves in formation, no longer a source of torment, but of power.





Tears form as Lucas desperately fashions an improvised spear from one of the nearby ripped trees. Joining in with soldiers who grab stones and branches for weapons, they assault the beast. The platoon clambers on the many bones sticking out of its body, battering everything.

A few of the dead troopers die, but so does the horned nightmare, howling. Everyone falls silent, listening to the murmur of the ice river. Its path has settled, leading to the spires of a grey gothic cathedral on a plateau.

Lucas takes a few moments to comfort the dying ghosts. Retrieving his makeshift weapon he heads for the cathedral. The ice river dries up during the journey, the forest regrowing over its bed. Lucas, feeling himself freezing, looks back. The path to its corpse is lost and the road to the cathedral is still long. The fingers on his hand turn purple.

Grabbing some kindling from the forest droppings and rocks from the cliff, he sets to work. It's a small fire at first, only a slightly smoking thing, but he keeps adding branches and twigs to it. The kindle burns and Lucas warms his hands and his body while piling more wood. His comrades approach the fire out of instinct, their dead hearts cold long ago. It takes some time, but his soul is again warm and feels good enough to continue. Each soldier picks up a fired branch.

Even with the fire the platoon carries, Lucas is still cold and shivering. One by one, the soldiers freeze in place, their torches diminishing. Only the mercenary reaches the gates of the cathedral, with gargoyle statues staring down at him. Inside he can hear choral music, Gregorian chants of mature men.

Opening the wooden gates, he finds himself in an empty church. The altar is a monumental piped organ emitting the chants. Playing the keys is a man dressed in gold embroideries and purple vestments. A black papal hat stands on his head, his back turned.





"I know you see me!" Lucas says as he approaches. He's still carrying a branch on fire. The Gregorian chants stop when the player lifts his hand off the keyboard. He doesn't turn when speaking, but straightens his back.

"Well, what would you do if you had an intruder in your house? Such a nice little infestation of plague bearing rats."

"I'd at least ask why they are here." he studies the church for a moment. "I didn't ask to come here"

"Are you sure you didn't? A dreamer powerful enough to take down my horned god usually doesn't make mistakes. I also smell that foul Arab on you, but I'll ask your question. Why are you here?"

"I have had enough of you and your power plays... the sultan, the prince, and now the priest?" he scowls. "All I want it a way to the city below"

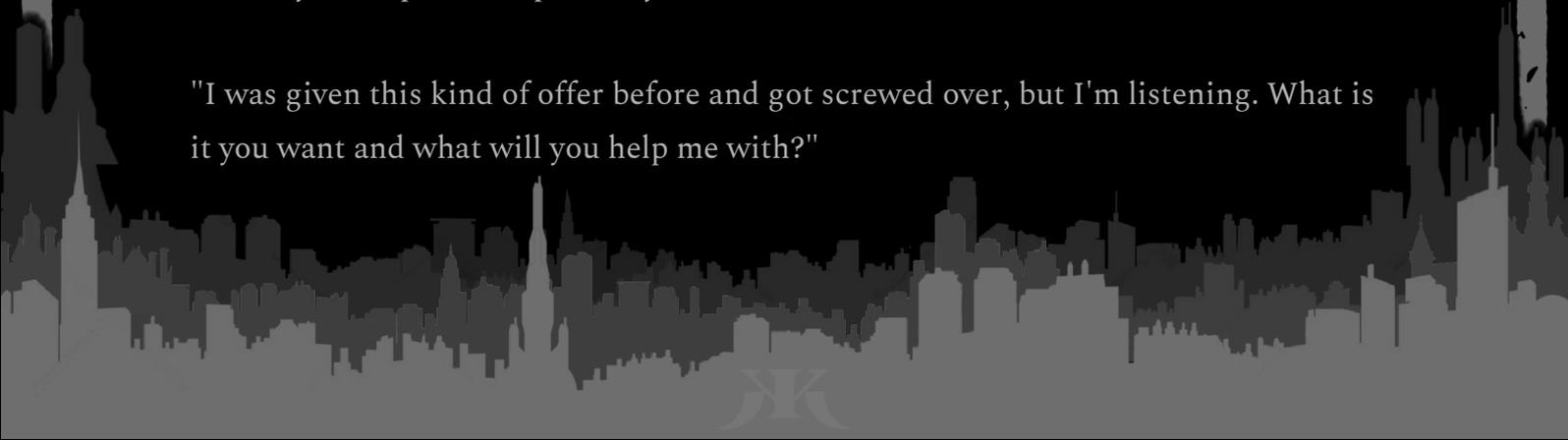
"You're in the wrong place then, I know nothing of any such city in the Waking. They must not pray there, or at least not to any god I know. The power plays you speak of, however, I can tell you this.

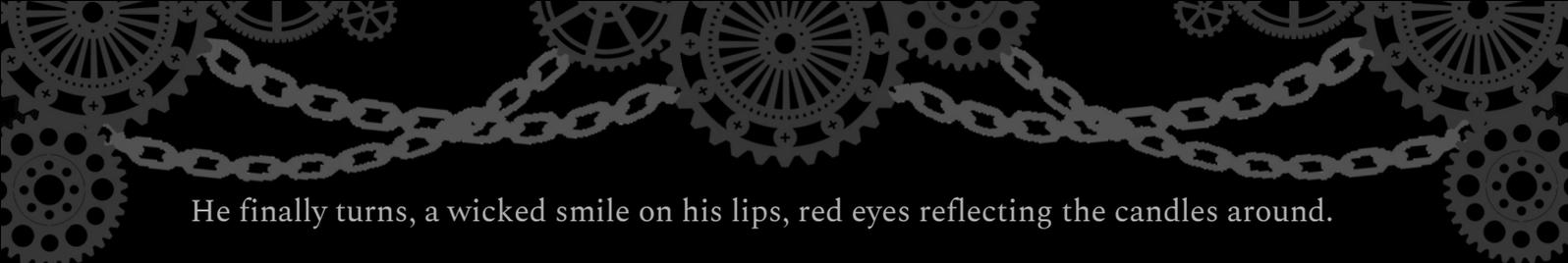
You'll never stop dreaming. Even the dead dream in my experience, especially if they've learned to control it like you have. But why would you ever want to? I remember the Waking life, that boring monastery.

Of course, the trick is to build your own dream world, or conquer one. I'll make you a deal. If you retrieve something for me, I'll offer aid."

Lucas eyes the priest suspiciously.

"I was given this kind of offer before and got screwed over, but I'm listening. What is it you want and what will you help me with?"





He finally turns, a wicked smile on his lips, red eyes reflecting the candles around.

"I'm glad you can see reason. They say a shaman died in the Amazon. He was the last of the Karamakate, an ancient tribe inhabiting the forest. This shaman wrote of the spirits they worshiped on the canoe that took his dead body downriver. A rich white man named Grunberg got his hands on it, but can't read it and isn't a praying man. Bring me these tales, and I'll help you further your dreaming in whichever way you desire."

The smell of myrrh seduces Lucas, putting him to sleep.

Falling fast asleep, Ricardo tries to keep in mind the image of the backpacker. The antiquarian surfaces in an infinite ocean with a scent of her soul. He builds a raft out of lost memories and heads for a crystal island.

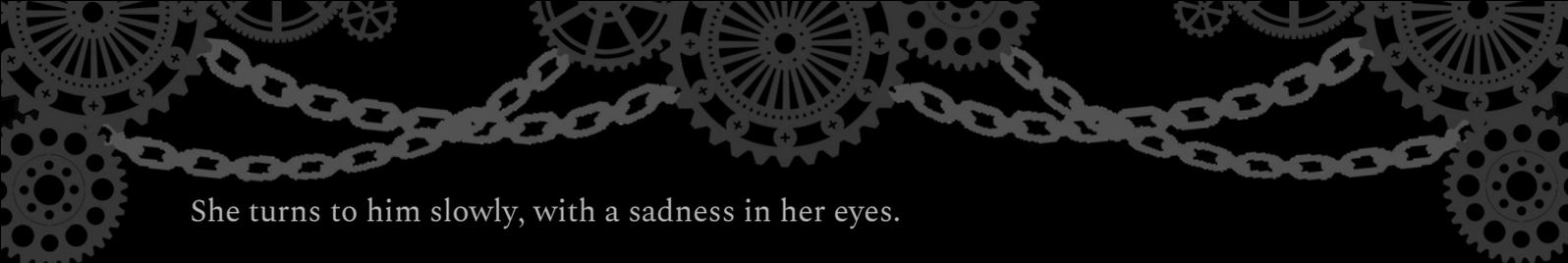
His makeshift raft hits a beach of smoothed over glass shard beads. When he steps off the raft, it breaks apart, dissolving back into the ocean. Upwards from the beach rises a city of blue silicate vibrating in the breeze.

Edo styled buildings nearby are an amalgam of glass and paper. They house surreal prostitutes with added genitals and limbs, their clients insecure pale naked boys with boils on their skin.

Watching the waves, the backpacker stands on a pier made of snowflake crystals. She's flabby, her shirt one size too small and green shorts too large. Her hair reaches her hip, ending in a bang in front. A rucksack is by her side. Ricardo carefully moves up in a non-threatening way.

"We missed you in the tunnels."





She turns to him slowly, with a sadness in her eyes.

"It's beautiful... who are you?"

"I'm Ricardo. A collector, and fellow seeker, perhaps. I saw you reading the sanskrit. Are you a scholar?"

The backpacker laughs at Ricardo's question.

"Hah. Far from it. They keep calling me a quack. I've been looking for all the hidden places. I didn't think I'd find Atlantis in a dream."

"Is this what you were after in the tunnels? Or just a stop on a farther destination?"

"I think I've just begun to explore this place, it might take me a lifetime. I know it's all a dream and I'll wake up back sometime soon... but I don't think I should be sharing my most intimate secrets with just anyone. You say you're in the tunnels as well? What are you looking for?"

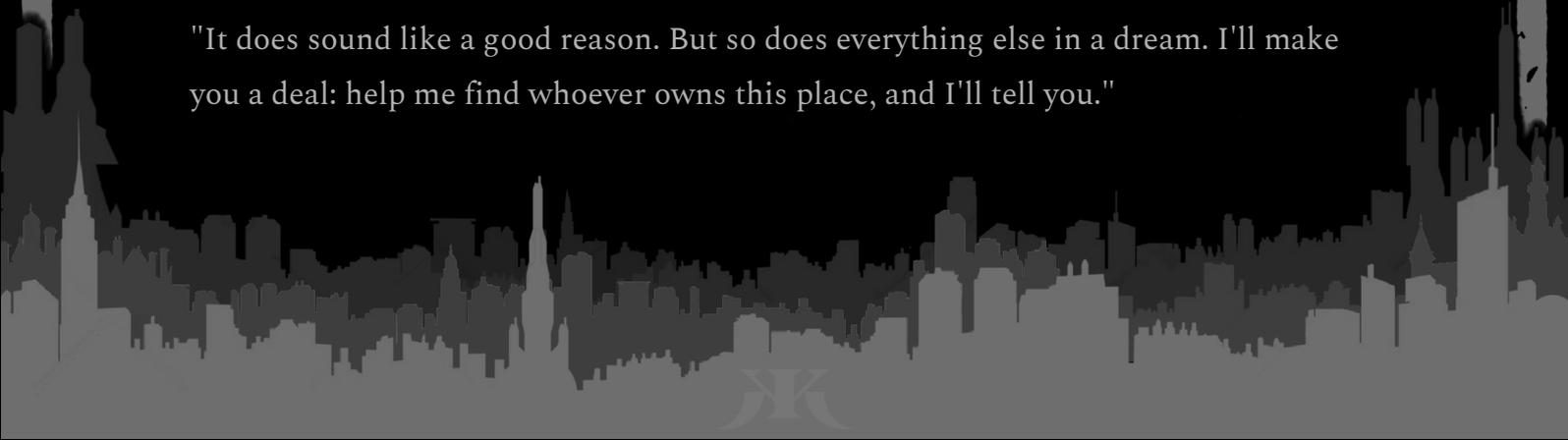
"A city deep below. Fear not, my interest does not lie with this island."

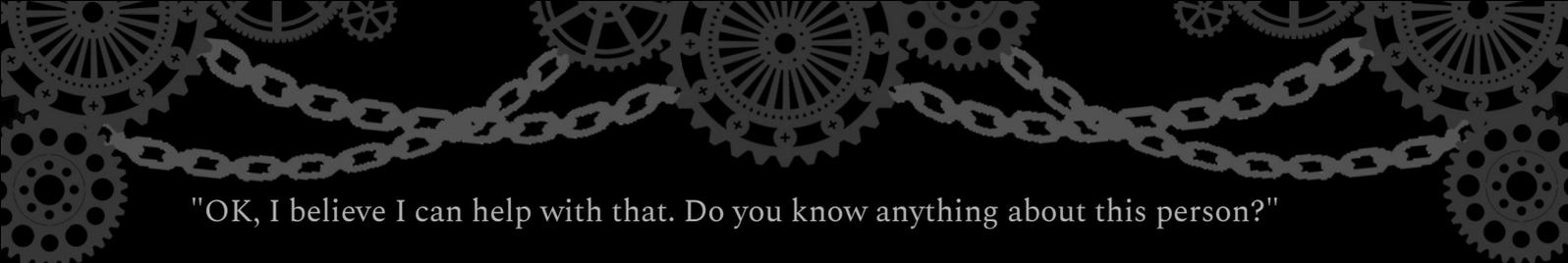
"I think I know what you're talking about, I almost remember it. Why are you looking for it?"

"A young boy implored us to go that way and seek him there. I believe he was a being of great knowledge and power."

The backpacker nods in understanding, lifting hair out of her eyes.

"It does sound like a good reason. But so does everything else in a dream. I'll make you a deal: help me find whoever owns this place, and I'll tell you."





"OK, I believe I can help with that. Do you know anything about this person?"

"Nothing at all, I've just arrived here, I'm not even sure how. I don't usually dream... like this. Walking through the tunnels has that sort of effect, I guess. But someone must organize this place, and I'd like to know more."

"Hmm, alright. I'm something of an experienced traveler of lucid dreams. I will attempt to locate this person in that manner, but failing that, we will have to explore conventionally."

Ricardo feels the soul of the place, a blue palace of paper-rice and silicate at the heart of the island. A dirty street leads directly to it, a red light district with creatures of ambivalent sexes. The display windows show perversions spanning leather constrictions to eating feces. Painted mermaids in rainbow fishnets call out to the antiquarian from the pavement.

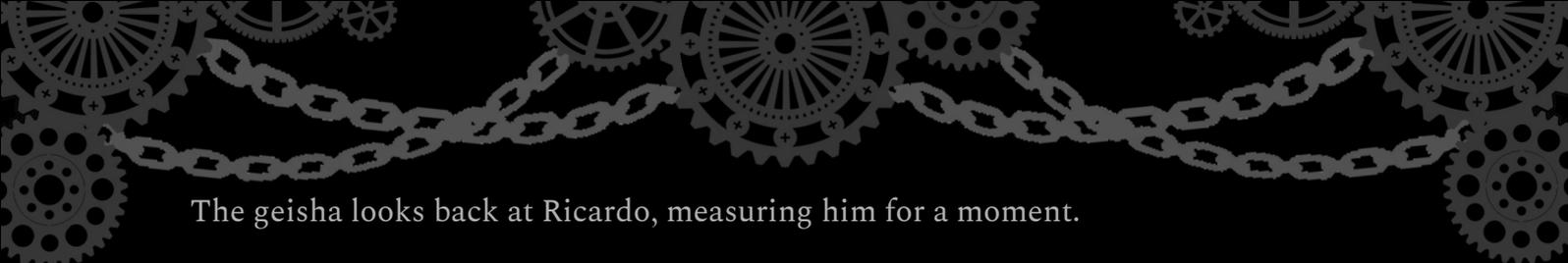
But his sin is something else: a single girl sits on a park bench, clean like a pastor's daughter. She doesn't even pay attention to him. Ricardo, perspiring slightly as his body warms, struggles with what he wants. He continues along the path to the organizer of this place, but gives the girl a wide berth, daring not to look her way.

Moving past his desires, Ricardo and his charge move over a bridge leading to the palace. Paper lanterns flow in the deep blue water, and arches ending in spherical lamps light the bridge. A set of geishas with bat-like wings bleed from the misshapen horns growing on their temples. They bar the entrance to the palace with crystal swords.

"The palace is not for the Johns. Head back to the strip."

"We are no Johns, we are seekers on a quest for enlightenment. We seek an audience."





The geisha looks back at Ricardo, measuring him for a moment.

"Anyone can claim that. Many have. What do you have to show for it?"

Ricardo holds up his arm, with the otherworldly chain wrapped around it.

A scornful snort escapes her lips.

"Hah. I have one just like it at home. Let's see you swing it, maybe then I'll believe you."

"The chain is merely decoration, true power lies within. I'd rather not fight with you, as once I get started, things don't stop so easily. If that is your wish, however..."

Ricardo trails off, waiting for the guards to explode in violence. Once again the geisha snorts.

"Big talk, no walk. Tell you what, give me the chain, and you can see the matron."

"You may have it, lest it fetter me any further."

She takes the chain and pulls on the glass door.

"Insult the matron at your own risk."

It's a garden of strange, meaty, sweet smelling orchids. They grow on a bed of glass, wrapping themselves around crystal trees. The center is a bathing pool, where a set of gorgeous women pleasure each other. Injecting a syringe into her tear duct is a nude Japanese woman, perfect in form. Once done, she looks on, then gives an order. The women lift glass knives from the bottom of the pool, and stab each other.

A smile crosses the matron's face.





Ricardo looks to his charge, allowing her the pleasure to engage first. The backpacker speaks to the geisha, expectantly.

"Is this Atlantis?"

Standing up from the bloodbath, the matron rolls her eyes.

"Not another one. I knew those Renaissance writers would be trouble."

A few geishas dress her in a white kimono embroidered with flowers.

"What about you, kid? At least you look like you've got some sense of style. What are you here for?"

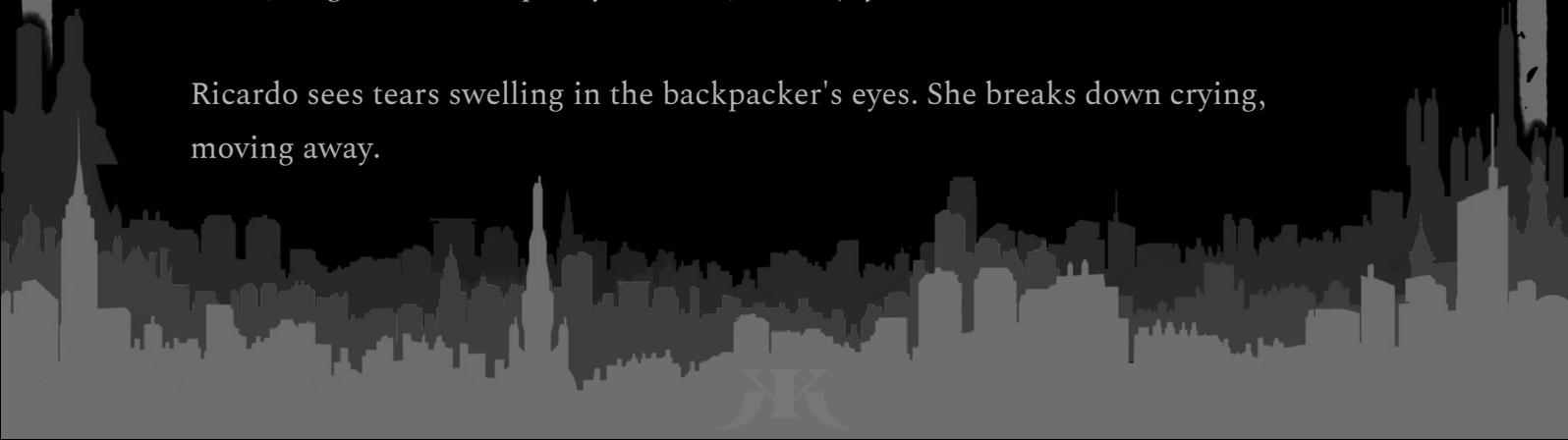
"I thank you, you are clearly a woman of immense taste. I am a traveler of dreams. I was looking for this woman and she asked my assistance to meet you in exchange for assisting me in finding Ktonor."

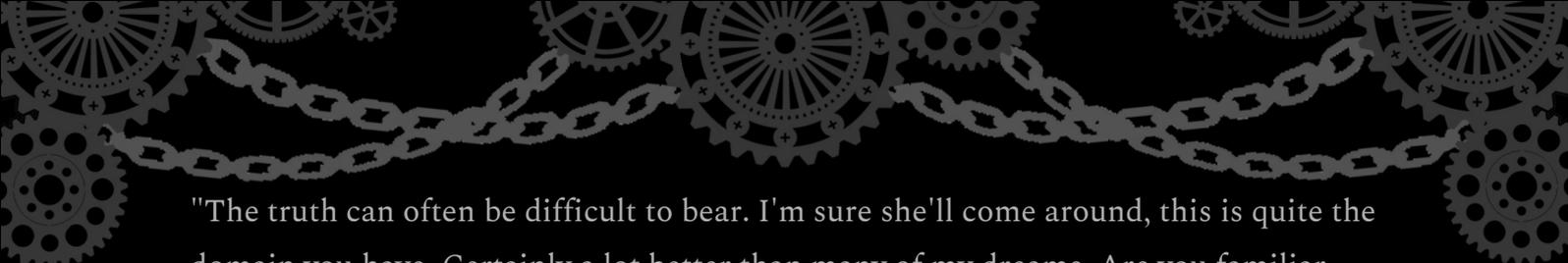
"At least you've got some sense, and aren't one of these amateurs stumbling around. Look honey, I'm a bit tired of this Atlantis shtick, so I'll spell it out for you. A while back one perverted little freak dreamed his way into my kingdom. He talked about an utopia he was writing, something based on some Greek guy. Anyway..."

Her servants bring her a tray of golden goo. She chops up a rail and snorts it through a banknote.

"Kept him around, and it brought more dreamers in. But I don't think this Atlantis ever existed. Now, you can hang around, but you need to get rid of that attitude. Relax, let go of the conspiracy theories, and enjoy the wet dreams."

Ricardo sees tears swelling in the backpacker's eyes. She breaks down crying, moving away.





"The truth can often be difficult to bear. I'm sure she'll come around, this is quite the domain you have. Certainly a lot better than many of my dreams. Are you familiar with Ktonor, your eminence?"

The matron sucks air when she finishes another rail.

"Oh no. I'm not getting roped into that one again. Keep your mystic fairytale lands away from me. Got my own utopia, thank you very much. Since this is your first visit, enjoy the crystal island. But don't show your face around here again without a present, understand? Now, go get your reward from the loon back there."

"Understood, I will get out of your hair." Ricardo bows politely and promptly leaves, eventually catching up with the Atlantis scholar back on the glass bead beach. He's a bit uncomfortable when she embraces him, crying in his arms. The antiquarian reassures her for a bit before she speaks.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to turn back. I've had enough of the ridicule. If you still want to find the city, just listen for the sound of the waves. There's a gate there, and the price is blood. That's all I know. Now hold me until I wake up."

Turning, Ricardo can feel her hair on his lips before he moves them out of the way. They watch a sunrise dissolve the dream around them.





Ricardo awakens well-rested, looking around at the others.

"I've got a lead on the backpacker. Well, her destination anyway. She has given up after reaching her goal and finding it not to her liking."

"Huh?", Sofia rubs her eyes wearily. "What's the clue?"

"We must listen for the sound of the waves. There's a gate, and the price to pass it is blood."

"Huh, waves yeah? Stands to reason that all this water up there has to go somewhere, and usually it would go down, yeah? Maybe there are more of these lakes around somewhere..."

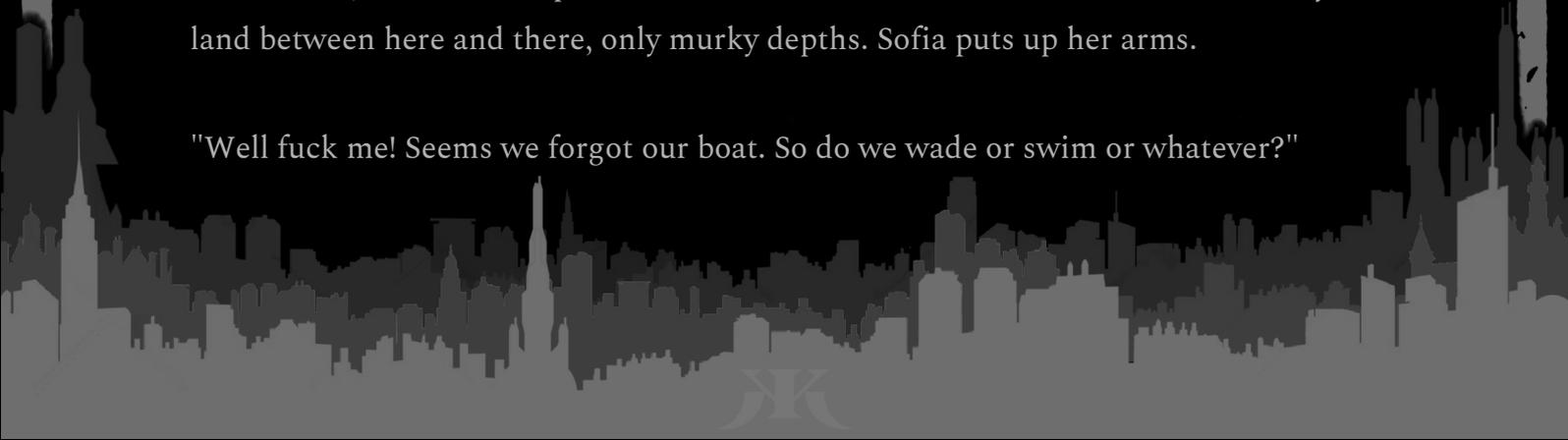
"You may be right," Jorrit thinks out loud "but we don't know where. Either way, any sound we come across would be a welcome change, and tempting to check out..."

Everybody wakes from their sleep, some still groggy. The road downwards is accompanied by the ever decreasing light. But we hear it, the murmur of water, the crashing of waves. The cultists double the pace in anticipation.

It is a cavern lake, not unlike the one above, but cleaner. There's no trash in the petroleum stained water. Only blind bioluminescent amphibian snakes, feeding on one another.

The lake, stretching through the cavern, has a tide bouncing of the walls. Gaining momentum, the waves stop at a reddish coral formation at the end. There's no dry land between here and there, only murky depths. Sofia puts up her arms.

"Well fuck me! Seems we forgot our boat. So do we wade or swim or whatever?"





The detective reminds us of the plenty coffins in the catacombs. Most of them have rotting wood, but tied together they might do the job.

"We'd have to somehow mark the path we take, so we can make sure we'll find our way back here - but I reckon we could make some sort of raft from those coffins we came across some way back..."

Most of the tombs we've passed are dug directly in a drag sandstone or standing cairns in larger chambers. Faded names and stories long forgotten are carved into the rocks with ease.

"Alright, between the wave sounds and the footprints, we should probably be fine if we use a mixture of the rope where tunnels are short and corners frequent, and stone markers where tunnels are long and we take turns more rarely... and if we run out of all of those, we can still always scratch the walls deeper than those who came before?"

Supremely organized, we spread out through the caves and return with gathered materials, but also with reports of chanting. A few have seen far away torch lights and the red robes from further up. Ricardo produces some supplies left behind by the dream guide in a hidden cairn, including sources of light. Emboldened by the danger, we put together the coffin rafts. These tangles of old boards and ropes don't look sturdy, but they float.

The lake isn't that big, perhaps a kilometer at most. It could be traversed by swimming, but the water is ice cold. Hypothermia is more of a risk for anyone falling in than the snakes. The dark waters and memories of the lake above hint at something more sinister below the surface. The chants and torches get closer.





The rafts are large enough to sustain two people each. We pair us and push the coffin rafts into the water. Lucas, with his navy experience, takes a coffin himself. I join Parvati. It's slow going, but at least we don't sink under the stalactites. Several boards serve as paddles but they don't reach the bottom, and we use them to push against the walls when we get too close.

With Parvati's and Lucas's training, the canoeing goes quickly and two of the boats reach the coral. Jorrit and Sofia discover a leak mid transit, which they can't plug. Eventually they are forced to swim in the freezing water a quarter of the way.

The coral is a small island surfacing from the bioluminescent snakes who inhabit the lake. All the colors of the prism are mixed in uneven shapes, but there's a scarlet sludge coating it all. The formation looks soft from the distance, but upon closer inspection it's hardened, with sharp edges.

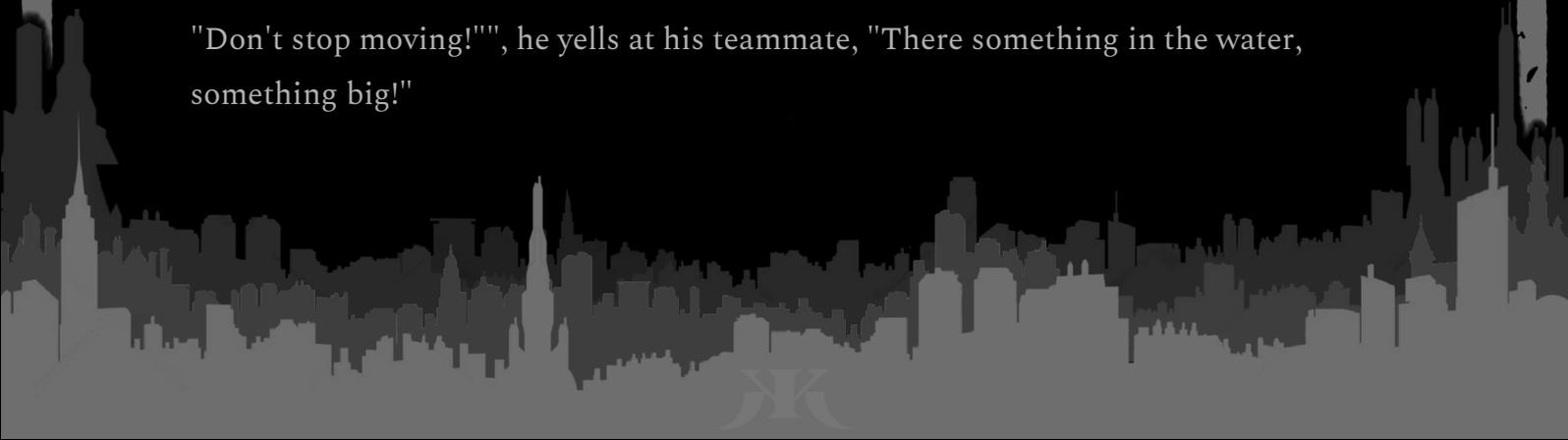
Lighting increases, with the chanting louder at the beach on the other end. The red robed worshipers bring with them a victim, another beggar. He's thrown in the water, where a creature of melted flesh and metal snatches it through the snakes.

One of the cultists points to us, screaming over the desecration of their shrine. Whatever swims in the lake accelerates towards the coral, displacing water.

Ricardo steps on the island, the coral beneath the sludge slightly crunching under the weight of his boots. He pulls a knife and makes a cut on the outside of his arm, letting the blood drip from it on to the coral. The Blood Price.

Crawling onto dry land as fast as he can while also supporting Sofia in doing the same, Jorrit shivers and shakes from the icy cold water.

"Don't stop moving!""", he yells at his teammate, "There something in the water, something big!"





When the blood pours onto the coral the sludge absorbs it, making it its own. The calcium cracks, splitting the island in half, causing us to lose our footing. When they've regained their feet, a set of hard polyp stairs beckons us downward.

We rush below, but the thing in the water catches up and follows into the tunnel. Misshapen liquid metal spurts out flesh on the occasion, with a humanoid frame trying to escape, an indistinguishable, wailing face in the mess.

Bullets from Parvati's gun ricochet off the coral, which cracks. Everything trembles in the tunnel, bits of barbed calcium falling from the ceiling.

It blocks the way of the advancing creature, but a piece lands on Parvati's leg. We drag her away.

The tunnel opens in a cavern with a ceiling so far it can't be seen. Below them is a pit, descending in layers, with noises coming from the closest. Descending, we reach a marketplace with stalls of fetored spices and meats. Very few torches light this grotesque circus, but we regard sufficient horrors.

A tall creature with a cluster of eyeballs on a stalk sells rotting grains. Nearby, a monstrous fly births and offers her own larvae as edible goods, sampled by a toothed raptor of azure plumage and severed wings. Shambling aimlessly through the place is a hominid covered in algae. He moves to the beat of the dream smiths, interacting with materializing shades. Limbless goblinoids and spiders crawl quickly out of their way into hiding holes.

We are not welcome here.





"I've seen this in my dreams," there is a recognition in Ricardo's eyes, "It's all changed here." Something shrieks in the market, making us alert. The antiquarian orients himself based on the memories of his dream. Gone is the underground sea. Gone is the clockwork tower. It has all been replaced by the pit, with tendril fliers circling it.

"We must go down, past this city and into the abyss. Let's move."

Parvati looks skeptical.

"Move....? With those things around.....?"

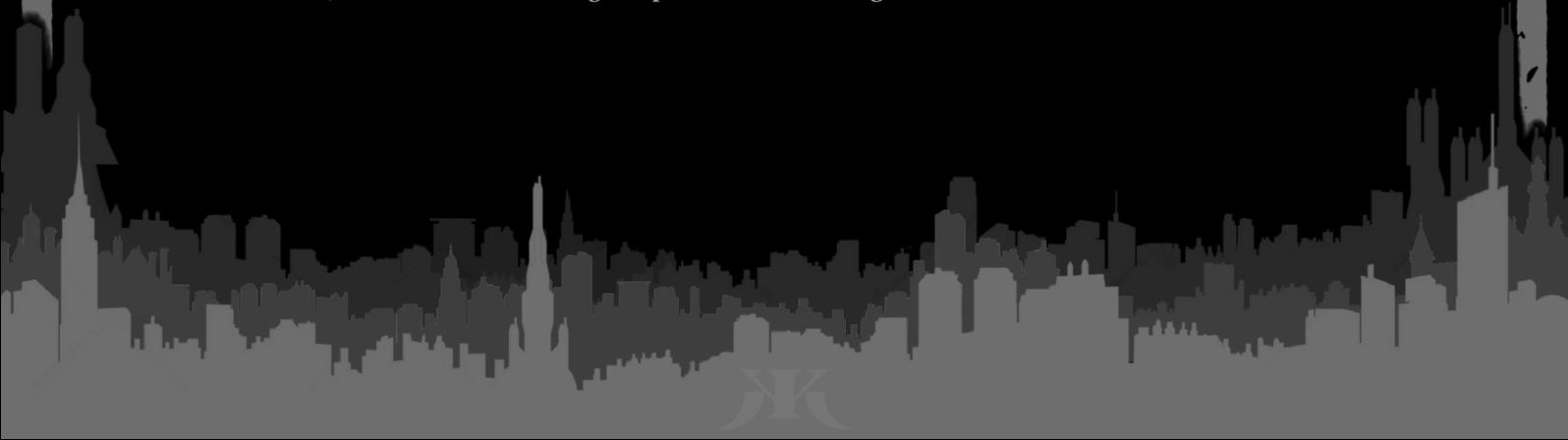
"If we stand still something is going to catch us, so damned if we do..."

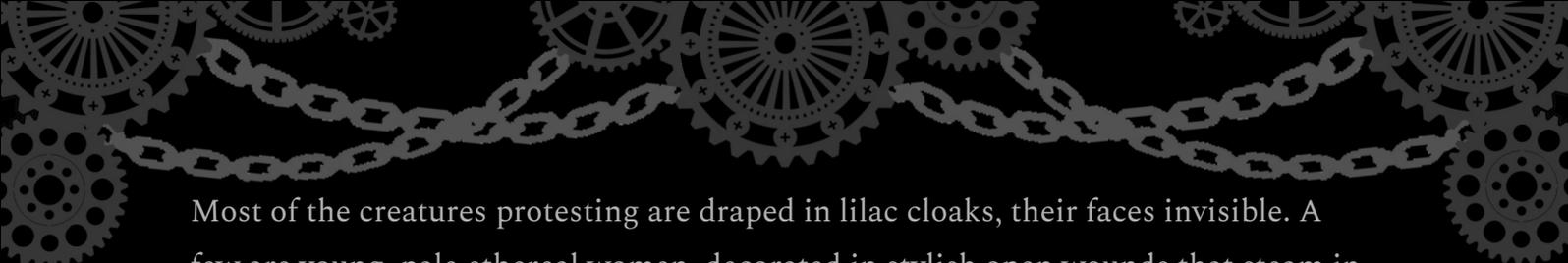
"Sofia is right. If we stay, they will find us anyway. We could maybe search for hidden passages, covered stairs, tunnels. But in doing so, we could risk being lost."

Pacing on stone steps, we head downwards, leaving the market behind. The dimness of light increases descent, often our only light sources being our own. The ground eventually becomes level, feet dragging through dirt.

Under the flashlights we see a soot-covered jungle of putrid vines and orchids. Bloated insects oozing grease are snatched up by hungry toothed leaves in a silent ballet. Above are spider webs with cocoons the size of men, but their owners are not present.

We head for a source of light, hoping for salvation. It is not. A crowd stands before an industrial factory with turbines pumping smog. Diverse creatures are in this collection, but at least a few groups can be distinguished.





Most of the creatures protesting are draped in lilac cloaks, their faces invisible. A few are young, pale ethereal women, decorated in stylish open wounds that steam in the cold air. A group of men with eyes sewn shut stand to the side, cutting off and stitching each other's extremities, lining up to enter the factory.

On the steps, with the algae shamblers at their right, the hollow men guard the entrance to the factory. One of the protesters, a needled crustacean, acts as a mouthpiece for the lilac cloaks, and a shambler as a voice for the silent hollow men.

"Keepers, you keep us out of the Birthing Chambers, yet you allow these men passage?"

"You know full well... they are pilgrims of Achlys... They are the only ones to appease... She Who Waits Below..."

"Grant us passage, and we shall slit her throat and feed her to Achlys ourselves. That will satisfy him and stop the decay of our races."

"No... the Abyss... can never be fully fed, only... tempered..."

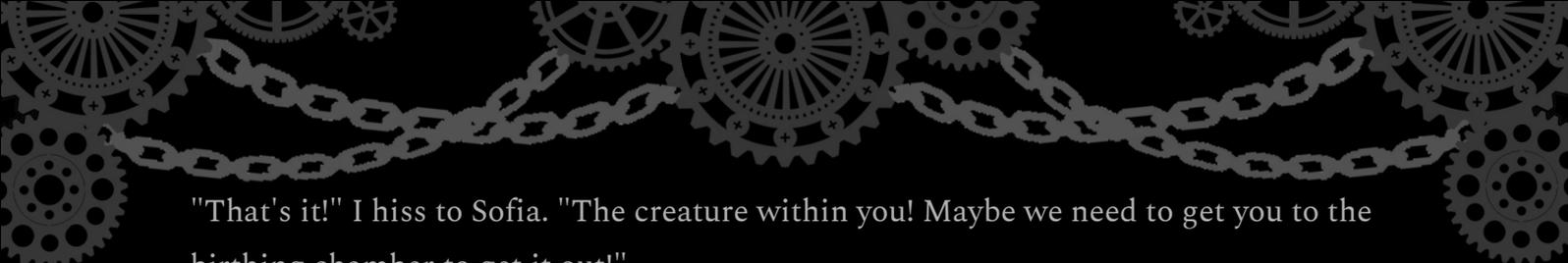
"Then give us access to the birthing chambers, and we'll breed more offerings!"

Ricardo seems worried.

"Which angle do we want to take in this conflict?" "The Keepers are the rulers here, but they're outnumbered by the Decayed."

"What desolate and miserable creatures these are... decimated and dying, but still squabbling amongst each other..." A deep sadness has gripped Jorrit's voice. My face washes with a look of epiphany.





"That's it!" I hiss to Sofia. "The creature within you! Maybe we need to get you to the birthing chamber to get it out!"

"How do you know about that?"

I'm not sure how to answer. I smell myrrh, the wound adorned women working with some sort of censers. These pale nymphs remind me of the herdsmen in the endless city. I fear the censers, with their blue embers, are weapons of some sort. The conversation continues, this time the shambler stepping forth. Gurgling sounds surface behind the veil of algae, but the chosen understand it.

"You know too well... the birthing chambers produce errors... Even with stable manmeat... breedings... have failed... "

His answer only agitates the crowd, the crustacean protesting.

"It's clear the Keepers can no longer perform their duty. The Famaria should be placed in charge, their attempts are more successful."

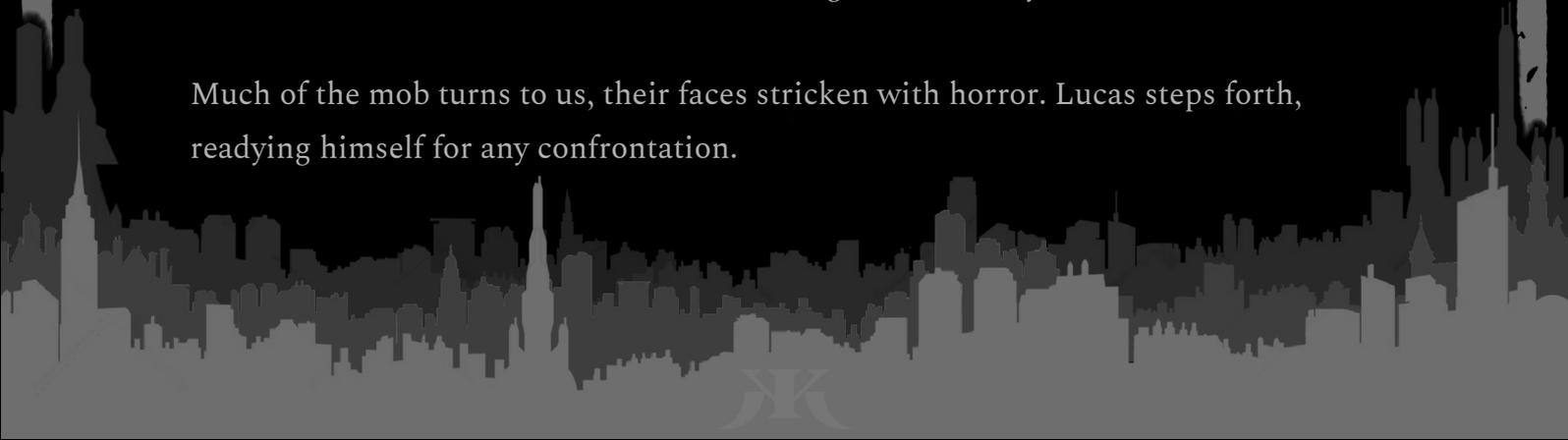
Hissing approvals snap out of the lilac cloaks. Another Keeper moves to intervene, as it dawns on me they are controlling the mind of the shambler, using it as a voice.

"The Famaria... have cut a deal with... the Gransangthir... Their offspring are no longer... Children of the Underworld... mere aberrations of... metal and flesh..."

"Again, lies, lies about the Famaria and Gransangthir. Their servants guard the Coral Gate, keeping us safe. With words like this is how the Keepers repay them?"

"Safe...? Then what are... fresh humans... doing here behind you?"

Much of the mob turns to us, their faces stricken with horror. Lucas steps forth, readying himself for any confrontation.





"Don't do anything rash, brother", Jorrit whispers to Lucas, "Violence won't get us anywhere here. There's just too many of them, and we don't know what monstrous powers any of them may have."

Taking a deep breath, Sofia steps forwards trying to look confident, standing in front of the keepers.

"We come to seek access to the birthing pods. It is time for us to enter and bring new things into this world."

His eight legs moving in unison to create stable motion, the anthropoidic centaur approaches. It studies Sofia from a distance, snapping his claws covered in allergenic needles.

"What can the slayers of civilizations bring except death? Speak before we slay you, human slaver. Be quick about it."

"I bear the gift of the hollow men, dwelling inside me ready to be bought into the world."

The tallest of the Keepers, the same who haunted her in dreams hears Sofia's words. Silently, he breaks off a crystal spike off his shoulder and points it at her. It glows white in his hand, a beam radiating on her forehead through the gloom. The reporter gnashes her teeth when the feelers tear through her privates. They lift her high above the ground, the Children of the Underground bowing down. Another gargle from the shambler speaks in her favor.

"A Mother! Disperse... and let her through!"





Lilac cloaks hiss with disapprovals while making space. A path is made to the steps of the turbine factory. The Keepers advance in a languid but firm manner to secure Sofia. Holding her arms, they let the feelers coil around their bodies. The factory gates open with us following the procession. Many of the sewn blind men follow as well.

Inside, tanks filled with brine contain people with flaked skins. Others are on operating tables, their livers and lungs exposed. All have genitals and intestines hooked to machines. Central reservoirs pump nutrition paste and collect waste. The Keepers set Sofia gently on a table. She's completely out of it, catatonic and unresponsive. They're hooking her up to machines while the feelers writhe.

The Keepers leave us alone while they process the reporter. There's a small ceremony of bows and selecting tools, but they haven't attached anything yet. One Keeper ushers the blind pilgrims through the vast hall to an exit in the back.

There's too much going on in the Birthing Chambers for me to process. But I hear those outside arguing and yelling, the lilacs hissing at the crustacean. I watch the censers of the wound women light up with blue flames behind the closing gates. It won't be long before they change their minds and storm the place. Lucas slowly backs away from the table and moves closer to the exit, looking at the gates.

"We don't have time for this," he points at the gathering outside and unslings his rifle. Ricardo takes stock of the situation.

"Hmm, we have a back exit. It's the way the eyeless went, and they go to the void. We could weather a siege from without if you can get to good firing positions and we can barricade the front door." Ricardo turns to one of the Keepers, who responds through a nearby shambler.

"Did the third-eyed boy of two thousand steps come through here?"





"Yes... Into the Void... The escorts returned.... The boy did not.... Leave the Mother with us... she belongs here..."

The strife outside is getting louder and the gates buck under a ram on the other side.

"Will she be safe?" Ricardo says. "What is to be done about the front gate?"

"Only the child... is of concern to us... we do not care... for the host. When the rabble breaks through... we will fight... its victory is ours... if Achlys wills... else, the Children of the Underworld... have doomed themselves."

Iron turns red under heat, the gates melting slowly. Another buck bends the metal, the hinges coming loose. One more ram, and the mob will be inside.

"Fuck... fuck fuck." Lucas knows the chances of these few fighters against this crowd are slim to none, but he can't just leave Sofia to these creatures. "Well, she means something to us. Get the baby out, and we want the host in safe condition. We can repel the invaders. What weapons have you got? Anything with range? Any way to fortify the door? We can't move slabs this heavy ourselves."

The Keepers are unimpressed by his agitation.

"Only when... it is time."

We take positions, mine near Sofia, holding her hand.

Iron wails, the gates are torn to pieces, setting aflame nearby tables. Victims die ignored and screaming in the fire, reaching out to the Keepers. A massive slimy pachyderm slug salivates sludge over the fire when it enters. It chills a path for the mob, azure raptor birds rushing in from behind. In their rage they've forgotten this is where their future and children lie. With the crowd pouring in, so does the crustacean mouth piece. The lilacs whisper to him, and he makes pronouncements.





"Give us the child! Then we are satisfied with the Keeper's tasks!"

A shambler intervenes, gurgling in Sofia's favor.

"The birth... is not ready! It would kill... the mother! Have... mercy!"

Finally, unclocking itself, one of the lilacs speaks. Its face is only a yellow circular maw with fangs.

"No, eternitiessss have already passed. The child, now!"

Lucas takes a deep breath, his patience with this thing growing thin.

"The child will be given to you after it is born, not before!"

"Lying humans! Kill the trespassers!"

The raptors charge while the wound women launch blue flames in the hall. Those Keepers not engaged in surgical rituals break away from their tasks. They rip off crystal spikes and cut their enemies with beams. It's pure carnage in the Birthing Chambers, with unthinkable weapons firing.

Parvati takes cover behind a nearby stone slab, avoiding injury. Lucas isn't as lucky, a tank nearby exploding, spraying him with toxins. Ricardo calls upon his other half, the entity bound within.

"Slay any who approach Sofia, except for my allies and the Keepers."

Ricardo's summoning throws him backwards over a metal table, which collapses. He loses sight of it in the fray, but hears crunching sounds where the entity is. The Keepers have attached machines to Sofia, but they're still in no hurry. Those who have finished their task move away to help their brethren.





Parvati starts with suppressive fire from her cover while Ricardo's entity tears the pachyderm to shreds. Sofia returns to consciousness, but the feelers are retreating slowly and she's connected to tubing.

Lucas gags on the cloud of toxic gas that has engulfed him, choking on the fumes as he stands back up, moving back to meet the leader.

"You insolent pest, you've defied me for the last time... LEAVE THIS PLACE, AND NEVER RETURN, YOUR TIME HERE IS DONE"

Very few of the mob leave under Lucas's orders, and the rest continue the fight. The lilac Famaria with an uncovered maw answers the mercenary, who struggles with acid burns.

"We are no longer your slaves, manmeat! We are free, and have been for eons! You'll find your end here, we'll make sure of that!"

"You will make sure of nothing!"

Lucas lunges at the thing, stabbing wildly at it. His eyes light up as the bloodlust takes over. The mercenary tears through his enemy with ease, finding a frail constitution under his knife. Organs covered by giant black leeches are all that is under the lilac cloaks. He moves on to the next one, and continues tearing through the Famaria kin fleeing the hall.

The raven winged savage cleaves the azure raptors spreading their reflecting feathers in the air. Parvati's gunfire touches one of the censers which explodes in blue light, devouring the women. On the table behind them, the Keepers induce birth, Sofia roaring at the atrocious pain in her bones.





Ricardo takes on slight changes in appearance, looking temporarily more like the gargoyle he calls upon. Eyes blacken, fingers end in claws, and a flurry of black feathers coalesce around his form in a cloud of razors that lash out at his foes in a painful wind.

Lucas is covered in gore, some of it recognizable as blood, some of it alien and oddly colored. He is shaking with anticipation for the next would be attacker. He spits out some piece of flesh like substance and retreats back into the hall, towards the keepers.

Fire burns through the Birthing Chambers, left behind by the retreating mob. Few Keepers or their surrogates are left, and the flood is covered in motley gore. A grey humanoid infant with pale eyes slimes its way out of the reporter, feelers attached. The pain is so intense that Sofia goes blind while the Keepers patch her up. I look up at the Keepers.

"What is that?"

"A Child... of the Underworld," the shambler responds. The Keeper looks around at the devastation, regulating his implants.

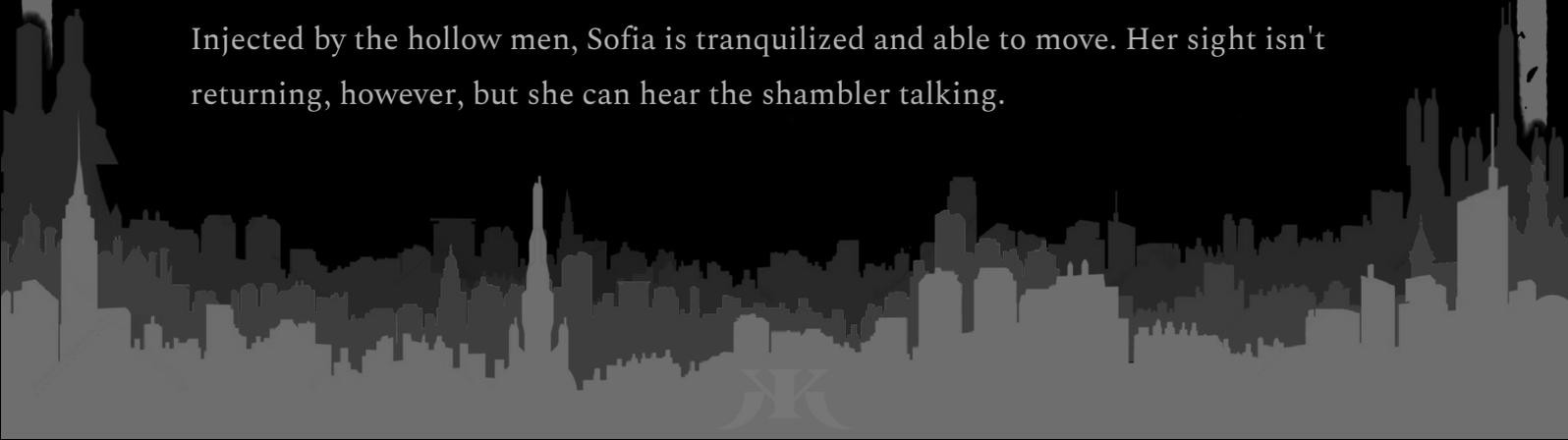
"Perhaps... the last.... If no one claims him... he will be adjusted... and become ours..."

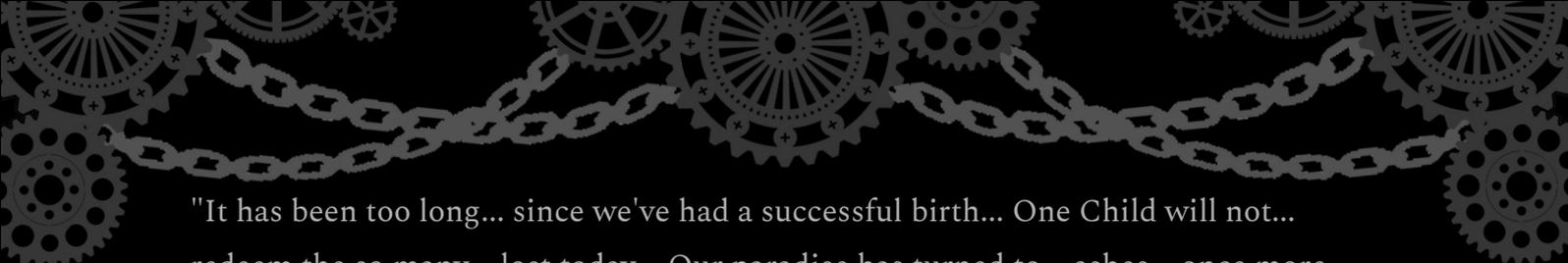
I stand up when the mob flees out the ruined gates, and feel Sofia's grip.

"What the fuck just happened?"

"You made it. So did we."

Injected by the hollow men, Sofia is tranquilized and able to move. Her sight isn't returning, however, but she can hear the shambler talking.





"It has been too long... since we've had a successful birth... One Child will not... redeem the so many... lost today... Our paradise has turned to... ashes... once more after the intervention of... man..."

"Ungrateful bastards... you'd have all died if we hadn't shown up."

"Perhaps it is time we head out the back door."

"Not yet Ricardo." Lucas is looking at the speaker of the hollow men.

"You are the cause of all of this misery! You impregnated her, you failed to deliver properly, this is all on you!"

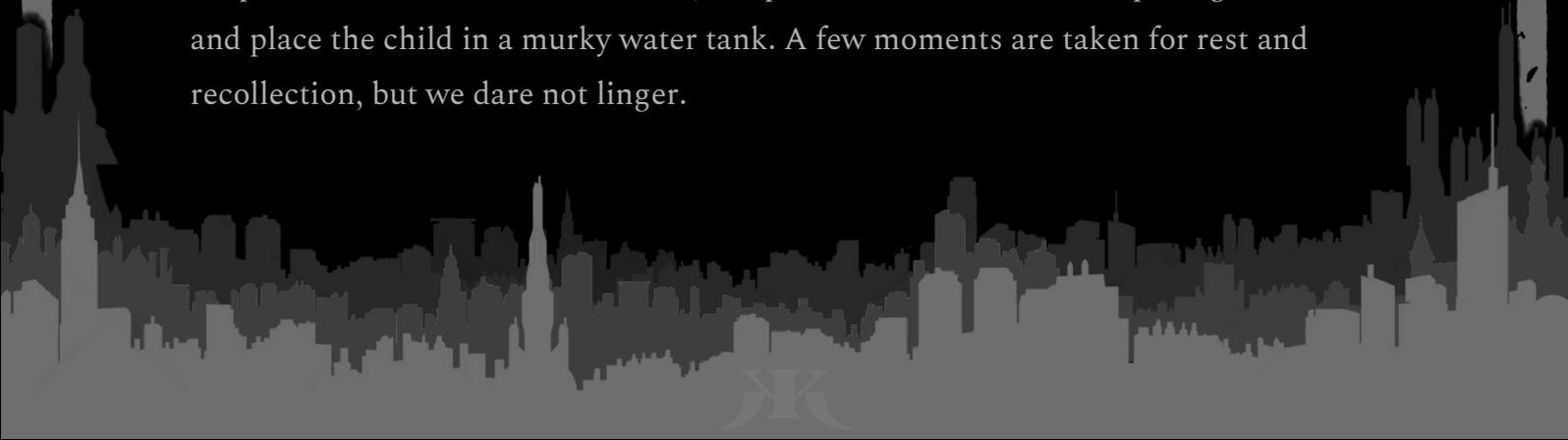
Lucas puts his hand on Sofia's eyes, covering them. I don't know where he learned the rite, perhaps another dream. But I think he transferred her blindness to the leader of the Keepers.

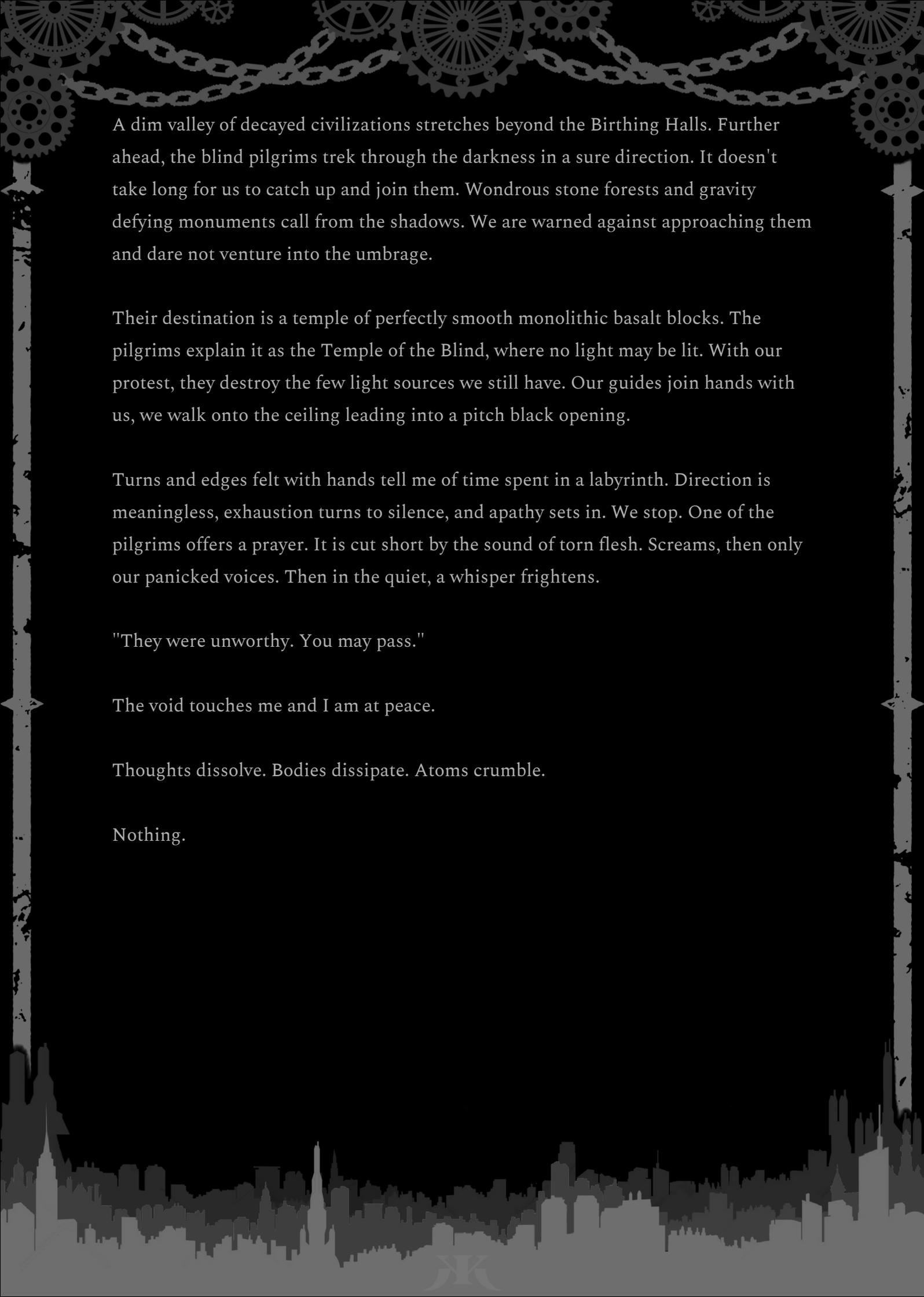
"You are cursed!"

The Keeper does not react, and it hits me that they were always blind.

"We always were.... Our failures are... not our own... We sought shelter here, away from the sun... Too late did we realize... the void corrupted us... Our promised land turned into our doom... While mankind built their paradise... above, ours crumbled below... and we took the blame... Now, the same monsters who... drove us here... come to judge us..."

Enraged, the mercenary launches a litany of profanity and justifications, demanding to keep the child. We talk him out of it, our path too difficult. The Keepers ignore him and place the child in a murky water tank. A few moments are taken for rest and recollection, but we dare not linger.





A dim valley of decayed civilizations stretches beyond the Birthing Halls. Further ahead, the blind pilgrims trek through the darkness in a sure direction. It doesn't take long for us to catch up and join them. Wondrous stone forests and gravity defying monuments call from the shadows. We are warned against approaching them and dare not venture into the umbrage.

Their destination is a temple of perfectly smooth monolithic basalt blocks. The pilgrims explain it as the Temple of the Blind, where no light may be lit. With our protest, they destroy the few light sources we still have. Our guides join hands with us, we walk onto the ceiling leading into a pitch black opening.

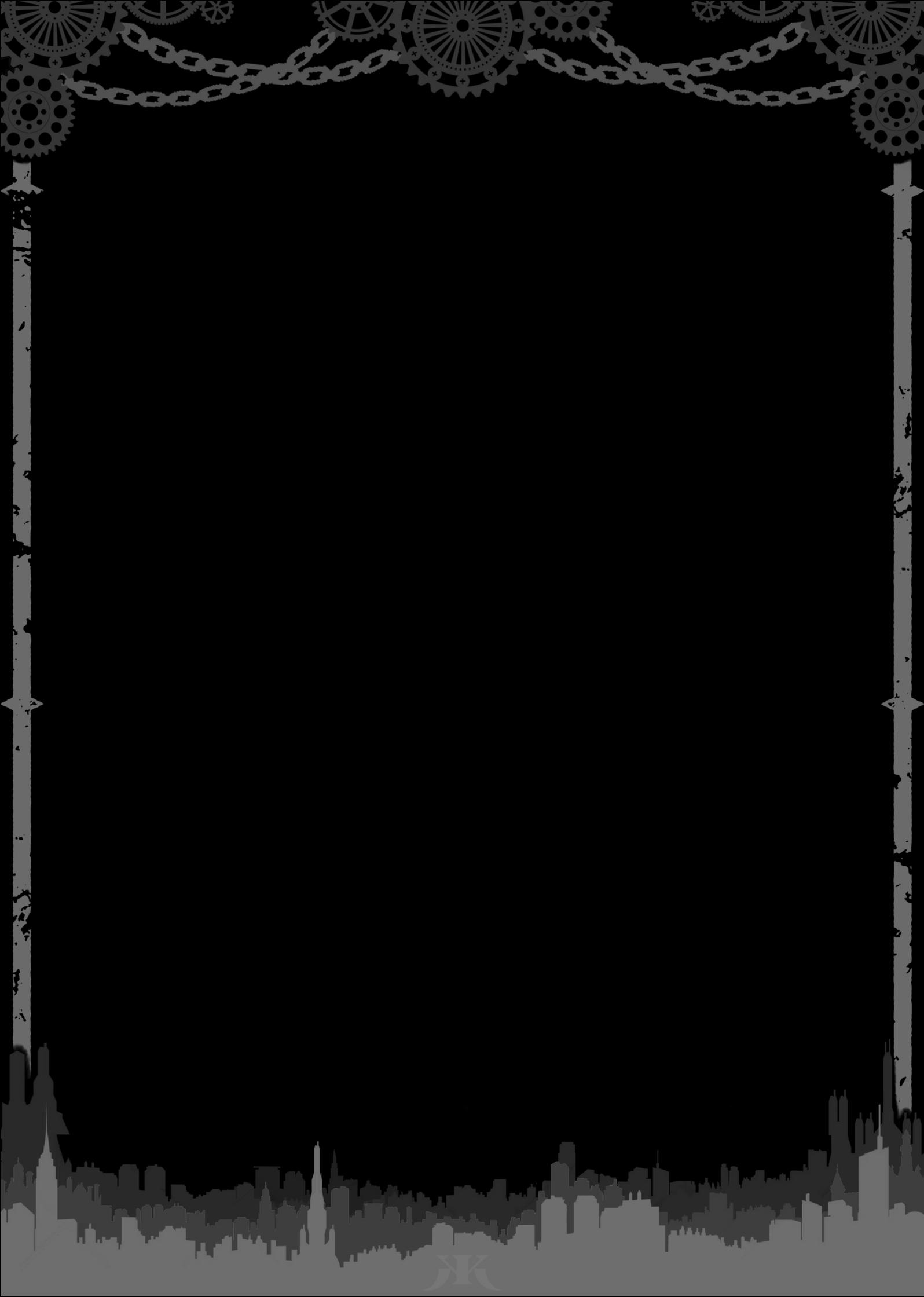
Turns and edges felt with hands tell me of time spent in a labyrinth. Direction is meaningless, exhaustion turns to silence, and apathy sets in. We stop. One of the pilgrims offers a prayer. It is cut short by the sound of torn flesh. Screams, then only our panicked voices. Then in the quiet, a whisper frightens.

"They were unworthy. You may pass."

The void touches me and I am at peace.

Thoughts dissolve. Bodies dissipate. Atoms crumble.

Nothing.

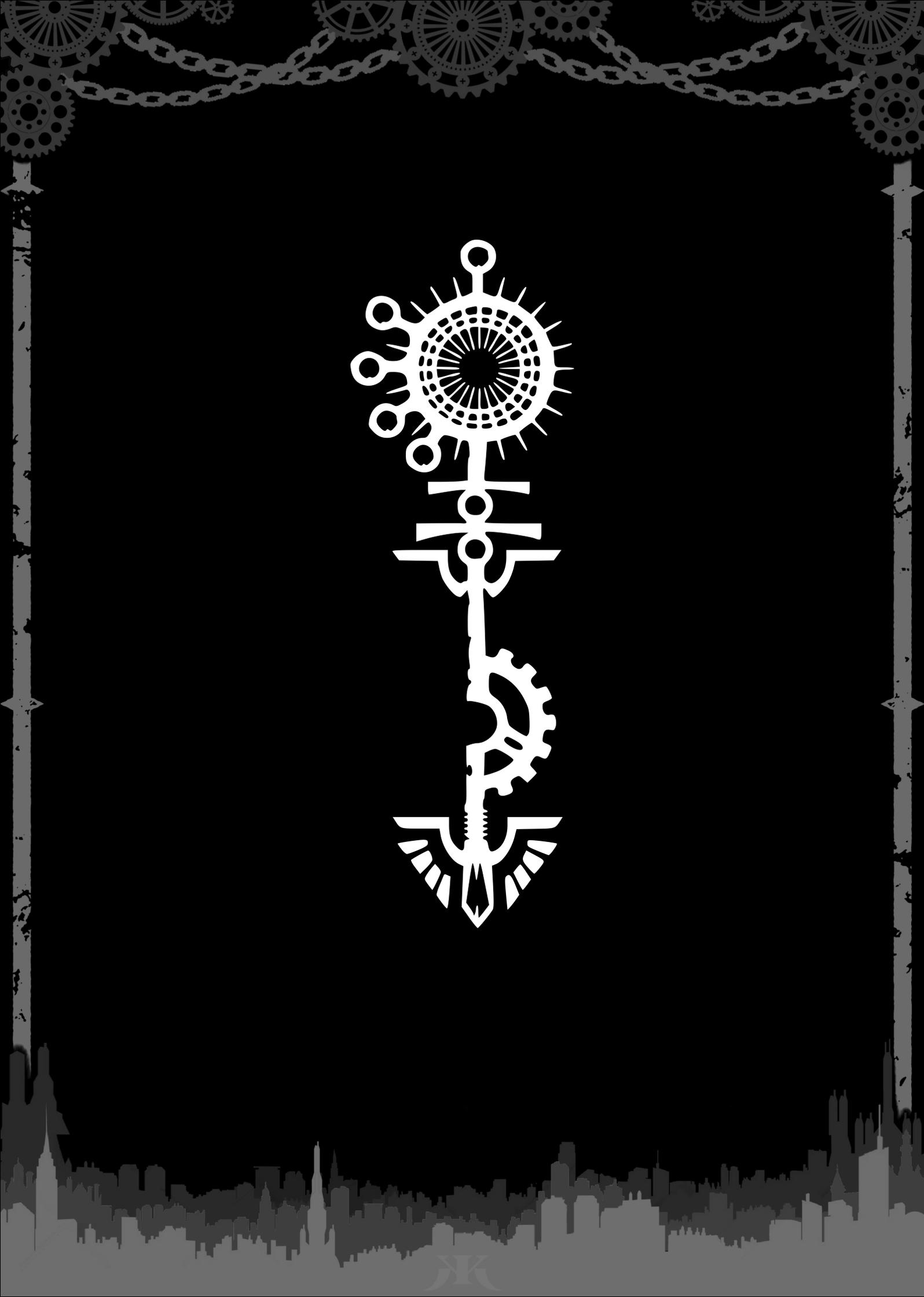




Nothing is Everything.

Forgetfulness turns to memories. Blindness turns to light. Peace turns to pain.

Overwhelming.





Voodoo



"It's all about stretching the tendons just right."

The voluptuous Gamaliel bat matron rips into her victim with her hand claws. She ties the chords of his hands onto the nearby rusted prison bars. In the opposite cell, an eviscerated guard in a hockey mask uses rib cages as xylophone. His apprentices follow suit, opening the chests of the prisoners and "tuning" them with hammers. Elsewhere, bronze bullmen pour hot gold down the throats of women, creating horns under minotaur tutelage. Expectantly, the matron looks at us and our unopened victims.

I look at my hands to see them free of bindings or any other restraints. Instead, one hand holds a hooked knife, and the other is on a woman in unclean rags. All of us have one of each, the matron looking on while she does her work. Her own victim's hand is torn with the hooked knife, and another tendon is tied to the bars.

"Well? Those victims aren't going to prepare themselves!"

Jorrit opens his eyes again, blinking in surprise.

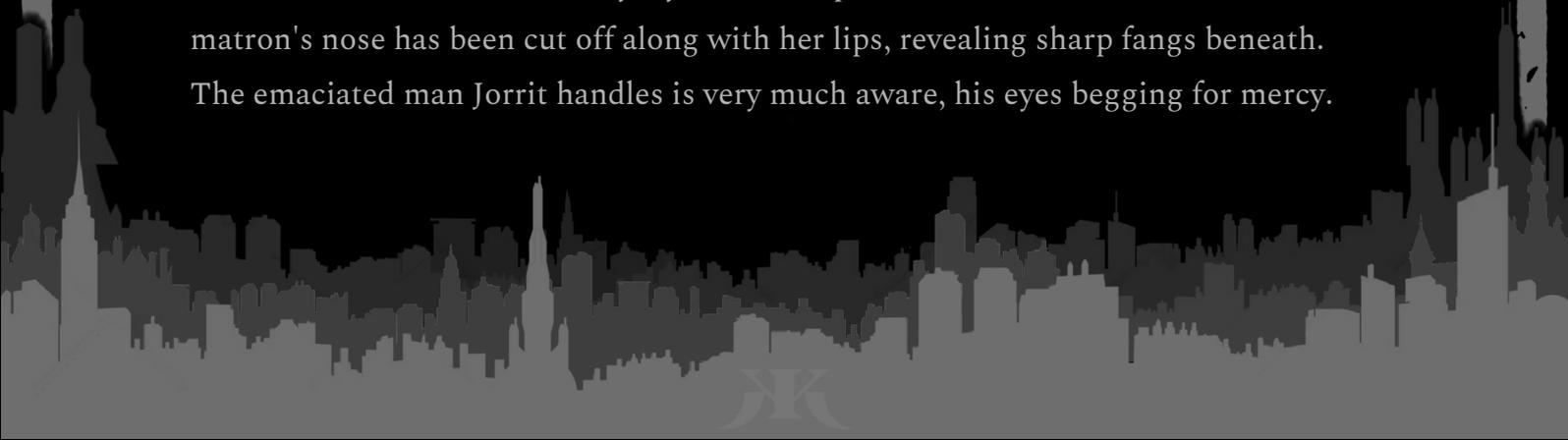
"This is new..."

He weighs the knife in his hand, testing its balance. He looks at the victim he has been given. Parvati looks at the others, then at the matron, not lifting the blade yet.

"Prepare them for what?"

"For the choir director. We've got a concert in a bit."

Underneath her arms a leathery layer of skin spreads from her bloated breasts. The matron's nose has been cut off along with her lips, revealing sharp fangs beneath. The emaciated man Jorrit handles is very much aware, his eyes begging for mercy.





I have a vague sense of familiarity and comfort. Even motherhood. Recollections of the matron teaching us pain and suffering, molding flesh through torture. Her victim cries out when she stretches the tendons with her fingers, testing their elasticity.

I hesitate, looking down into the woman's eyes and giving her a regretful look before raising the knife and bringing it down toward her slowly, slicing into her once the knife's edge touches flesh.

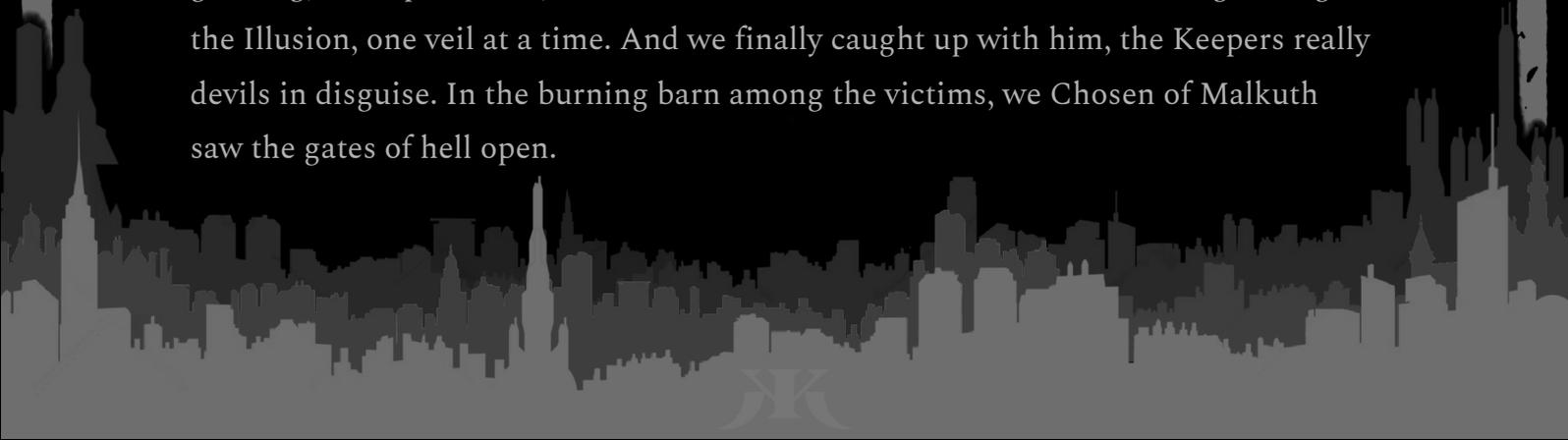
"I'd like to tell you that I'm sorry, sweetheart", Jorrit grunts at his victim between gritted teeth, "but I'm not sure I am. I reckon whatever we've all done to be here, you probably deserve it as much as I do."

He starts cutting. The Matron squeaks with pleasure when she sees the students work.

"Good, good, Jorrit. Hit them if they scream and cry when they shouldn't. Everyone else, start cutting, we don't have a lot of time. You are the best Inferno has to offer, and must set the example. Your work must be perfect. At most, these wicked souls will become razides, your servants. You're nepharites, true demons, rulers of Inferno."

But we're not. Not demons, but human gods instead. We remember being reformed from the void, separated, lost in time and space. Each with his own path, slowly growing more twisted, like trees in permanent dusk. More memories slip through, memories of sorrow and joy when reunited. Remembrance of desperation over the fate of the Awakened child, whose journal stood silent.

Years followed, years of visited atrocities and genocides to track him down. Talents growing, skills put to use, victims felled in the name of the Truth. Piercing through the Illusion, one veil at a time. And we finally caught up with him, the Keepers really devils in disguise. In the burning barn among the victims, we Chosen of Malkuth saw the gates of hell open.





We weren't ready.

More time passed, gathering power, knowledge, taking down the demon lords one at a time. Fiendish citadels falling one by one before our might and our allies. Inch by inch achieving the impossible, a siege on hell itself. But somewhere in the war we lost ourselves and were captured. Tortured and forced to switch to the other side, but now, to the wails of the damned, it all clicks in place.

We remember.

I pause just as I begin to cut, looking at the matron before my features take on a wistful cast as I start to remember things. As this continues, my features darken little by little, until when it finally clicks, I step back, lowering the knife, shaking my head.

"No. I'm not....a nepharite. Or a demon."

Ricardo looks around groggily, and Sofia seems resolute.

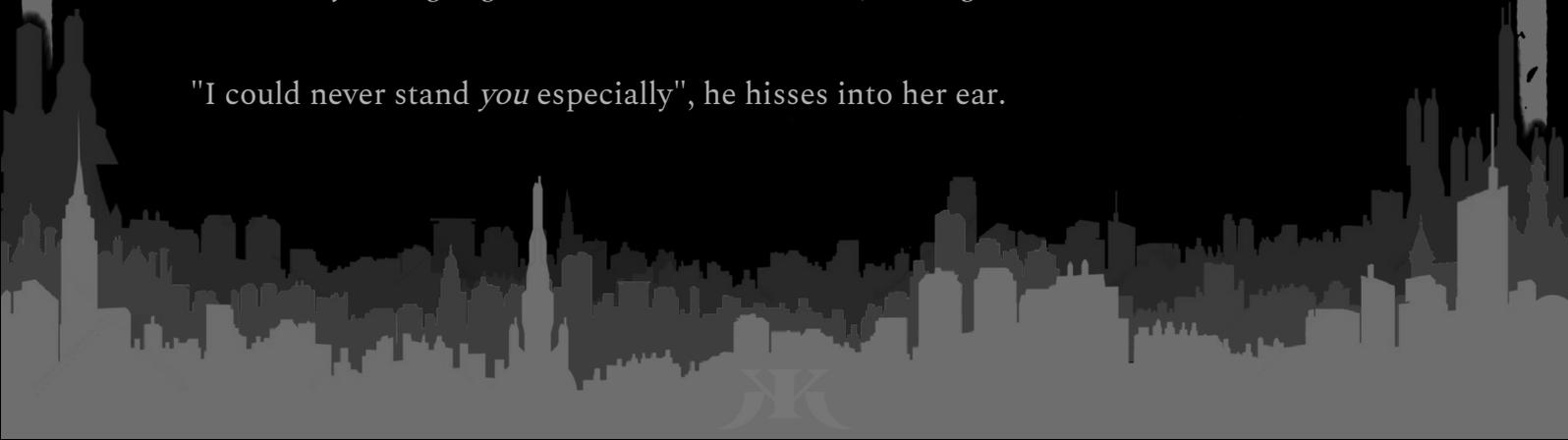
"You know what? Yeah, I don't think I belong here."

"No, we're don't, Sofia", Jorrit says quietly, even as he cuts along the length of his victim's forearm and pulls out a long, gory bundle of sinews.

"I just needed this", and he cuts off the length of elastic, yet sturdy sinews near the elbow.

Ricardo walks in that direction, slowly. Close enough to brush her mind with his, the roiling subconscious storm of nightmares made flesh that it was. We blink and Jorrit is suddenly strangling the matron with a tendon, cutting into her throat.

"I could never stand *you* especially", he hisses into her ear.





She does struggle, but isn't dying, while Ricardo peers into her nightmares, leaking away from her mind. He sees her deathly afraid of a certain song, a child's rhyme that was prophesied to be her end. Crooning, he comes closer, and she struggles, deepening the stranglehold.

Parvati blinks, suddenly noting the fact that Jorrit's behind the woman now, and steps forward, knife lowered.

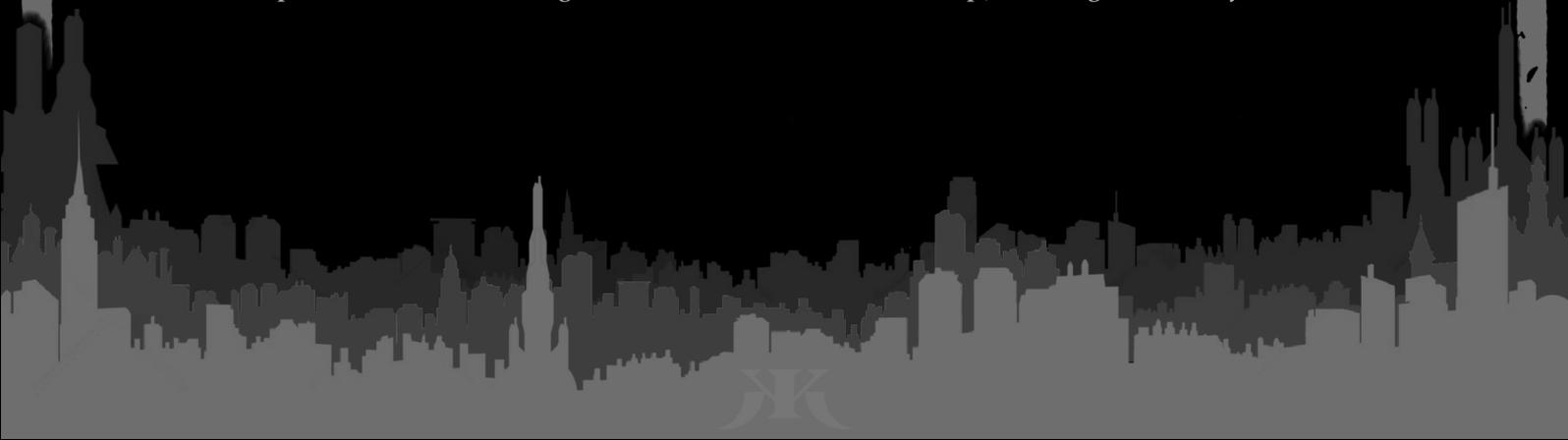
"Planning on killing her?"

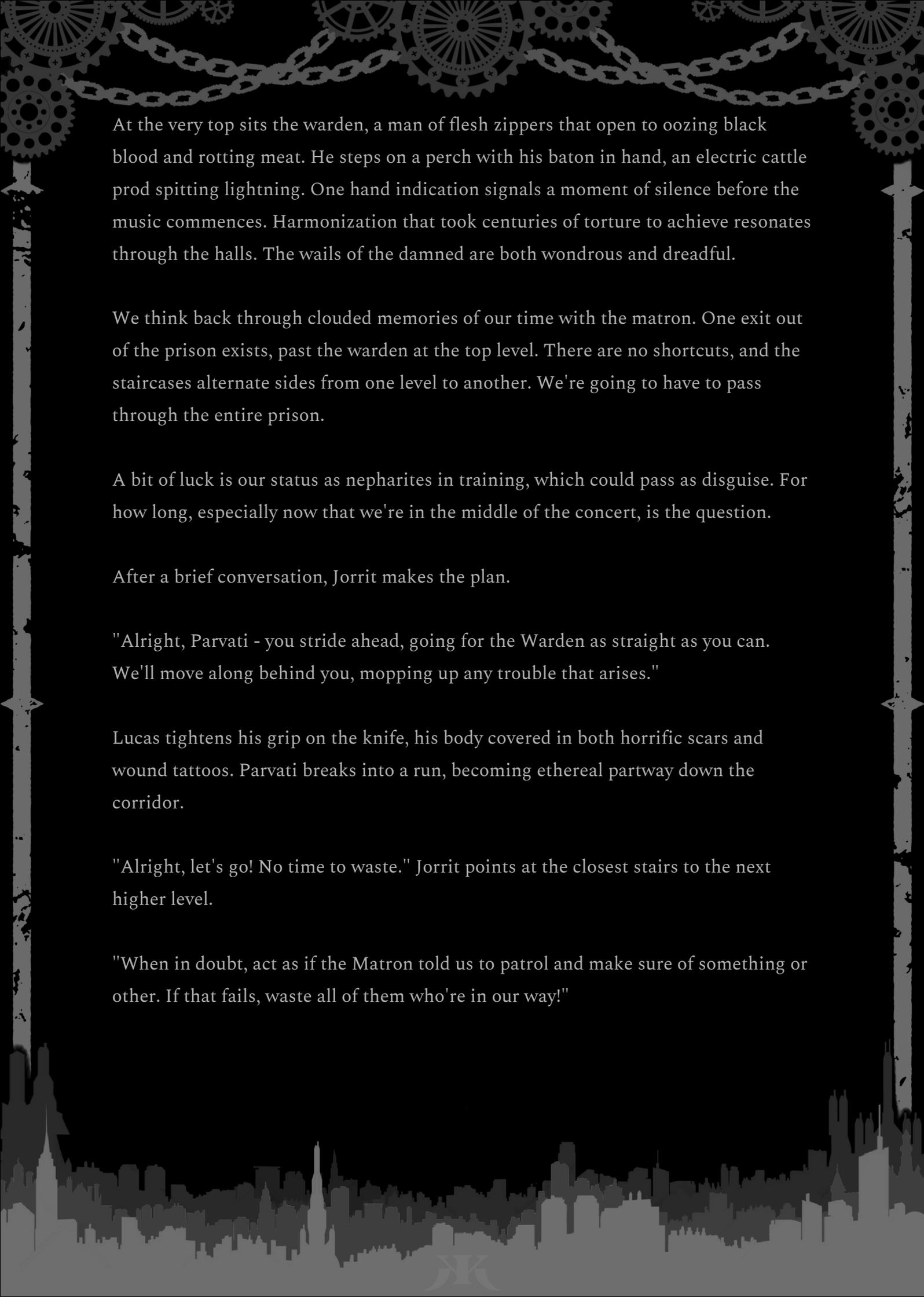
"Tell me a reason not to, if you got one? Certainly wanna hurt her a bit first though, I'd say"

"Not really. I was just asking." She continues forward, raising the knife on approach before sinking it into the matron's shoulder and slicing across to where it meets her neck.

Cleaved, the matron's bestial head splatters to pieces, spraying blood. Her lifeless body drops to the floor when Jorrit lets go. Ricardo feels the ache of the sleeping cocktail that's ever harder to fabricate. The cell door is opened, grating us passage into the half broken building beyond.

Balconies rise up around a central corridor. I've been here a long time, and know how the prison works. Illuminated by bonfires made with bones, none of the cells are locked. There's no need to, the prisoners having no better place to escape to. Better the devil you know. The various levels hold different sections of the orchestra. All the nepharites are warming their instruments-victims up, wailings out of sync.





At the very top sits the warden, a man of flesh zippers that open to oozing black blood and rotting meat. He steps on a perch with his baton in hand, an electric cattle prod spitting lightning. One hand indication signals a moment of silence before the music commences. Harmonization that took centuries of torture to achieve resonates through the halls. The wails of the damned are both wondrous and dreadful.

We think back through clouded memories of our time with the matron. One exit out of the prison exists, past the warden at the top level. There are no shortcuts, and the staircases alternate sides from one level to another. We're going to have to pass through the entire prison.

A bit of luck is our status as nepharites in training, which could pass as disguise. For how long, especially now that we're in the middle of the concert, is the question.

After a brief conversation, Jorrit makes the plan.

"Alright, Parvati - you stride ahead, going for the Warden as straight as you can. We'll move along behind you, mopping up any trouble that arises."

Lucas tightens his grip on the knife, his body covered in both horrific scars and wound tattoos. Parvati breaks into a run, becoming ethereal partway down the corridor.

"Alright, let's go! No time to waste." Jorrit points at the closest stairs to the next higher level.

"When in doubt, act as if the Matron told us to patrol and make sure of something or other. If that fails, waste all of them who're in our way!"



Lucas is certainly fast enough to match Parvati, but stops when she raises through the ceiling. We go up one level to face the eviscerated hockey mask killers drumming on the taut skins of their victims. While the rest steel themselves mentally, with one eye I divine her movements.

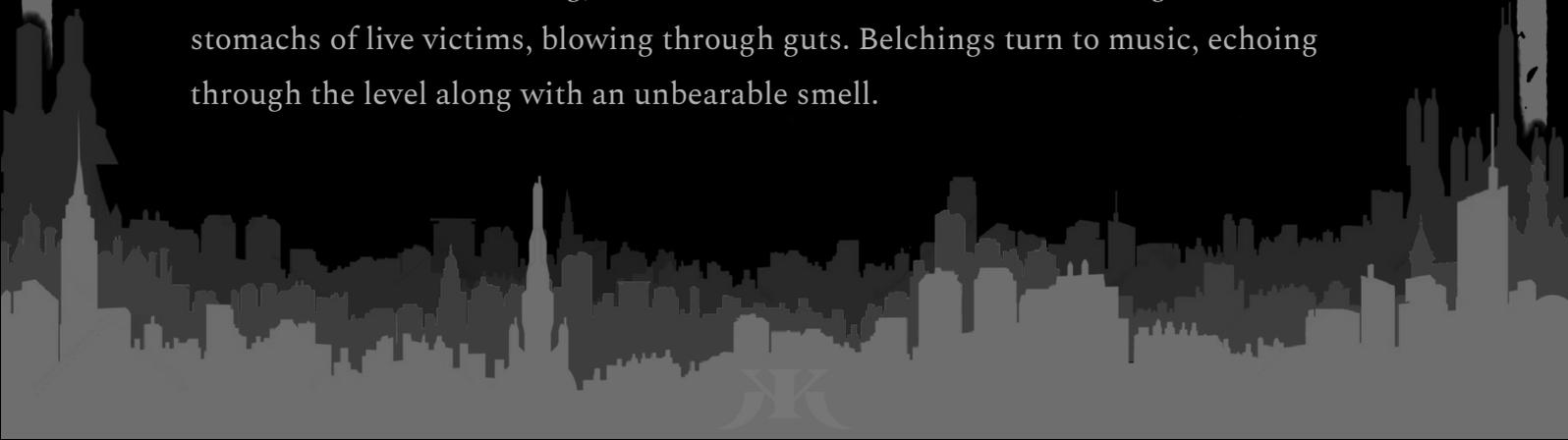
The assassin goes upwards, alone in the symphony of torture, watching the hellish musicians. She makes it to the perch, where the director zaps a lightning bolt at a gaunt bat-matron in the strings section. He doesn't pay attention, focused on his music, his eyes in a seizure as he opens up another zipper.

Jorrit, unlike most of the time before this place, between now and the Void, is not in his usual full-body disguise - long sleeves, hooded sweater, bandana over the lower half of his face...

Instead his new, horrid physical appearance is plainly on display. Knotted disfigurements of his flesh are covered by ragged skin that looks like it has melted and coalesced back into solidity in ugly patches stretching across large areas of his body.

His mouth distorted into a permanent grin-sneer reveals sharpened yellowish teeth, and his eyes glitter with an unwholesome obsession ever since he has just a couple minutes ago remembered his True purpose in life.

We walk proudly and unimpressed past the hockey-masked drum conductors. We have business elsewhere, after all. But Sofia does spare them an assessing glance, as if to appraise their work on the wretches they draw their discordant music from. The creature formerly known as Jorrit becomes a thing of shadows. All the others take his lead and pass the percussion session without attacks. Another set of stairs leads them to the screaming, bloat woodwinds. Obese siamese twins grab the stomachs of live victims, blowing through guts. Belchings turn to music, echoing through the level along with an unbearable smell.





Up top, Parvati studies the choir director's chamber. A true cornucopia power tools covered in gore sit next to a live victim. The sufferer's back skin has been stretched, musical notes etched within. It's the symphony score, each note burning up as the orchestra plays it. Behind the director is a round, locked titanium door with a center keyhole. The perch has no railings, and all it would take is a little push over the edge. He gives her the finger as he descends, and the musicians scream blasphemies.

She telekinetically picks up one of the power tools, a drill, and jams the sharp end into the director's chest. The drill passes through, but it isn't enough to buck or kill him. In fact, he has an orgasmic smile on his lips as he turns partly to the revenant.

She grabs hold of him by the shoulders, becoming physical to do so, and in a trained and perfected move, marches him over to the edge to throw him over. I divine the key to the exit in his chest, visible now through an open zipper. Parvati's quick hand, now materialized, snatches it out of the warden's heart.

A few levels below, the siamese twins are starting to notice we don't have instruments. Jorrit just keeps up his arrogantly self-confident demeanor, putting a little more swing in his step though. Not hurried or stressed, but with an air of focusedly needing to get somewhere. Maybe it will just keep working...

It's getting harder and harder to pass unnoticed as we go up. We feel the heat from the melting gold of the brass section. A few of the bull men are still pouring hot metal into the mouths of their victims. Others are blowing into the newly shaped cones, gold-filled lungs vibrating.

The pretense that we belong goes even thinner when the orchestra conductor falls. At the same time, the orchestra throws things at Parvati's head. Jorrit leads us safely, and only two more levels remain before we reach her. We have to go through the brass section minotaurs and the string quartets of bat matrons. Around us, the infernal musicians scream murder, looking for someone to blame.





In the rain of torture tools, it's inevitable that something hits Parvati. A baseball bat with nails in it knocks the key out of her hand, sending it flying. Climbing another level to the string section, we see its shine reflecting the bonfires. A few of the siamese have followed us, curious where we are going.

Parvati moves the key with her mind, and it returns to her hand. As we move upwards and more memories return, Lucas spots a familiar laser rifle. A little something he picked up in a future war in service for his masters, an oath we saw him take to higher beings, who now call their dues of violence.

Without the music, the demons lash out in frustration, turning to their victims for pleasure. For her part, Sofia can instinctively sense the spontaneous daemonic arousals and the resulting violation of their victims. She feels her body absorbing the orgone energies around, her cursed womb attempting conception. She spreads this knowledge to us and, through her passions, we know where the enemies are.

The Jorrit abomination sees the final set of stairs to the top at the end of the row of cells. He drops the pretense of calmly walking around, now useless in the erupting chaos. Even when trying to slow down, the abomination moves faster than us. He reaches the stairs first, while Ricardo herds a few victims, using them for cover. Sofia, overcome by the orgone, falls behind, a few hacksaws from the string quartets flying to her neck. The saw blades narrowly miss the passion magician and she reaches the stairs.

While we retreat, Lucas, his eyes turned to black glass, fires cauterizing beams at the rioting music demons. With Parvati unlocking the circular door, the beams cut into the walls, collapsing them. A narrow corridor leads out of the caving prison into the heart of hell.





Now we look upon the black sky with new eyes. Powers returning, our memories leak into the malleable inferno, merging with the background. War torn streets and buildings stretch on to infinity, sufferers hiding in the ruins. Air raid alarms sound, and a modern passenger plane above is shot down by WWI biplanes. Parks are humid jungles where cannibals perform magic, trying to appease their demon masters. On the horizon, the skyscrapers of the future are partly covered in the melted victims of the Cairath plague.

I expected hell to be a pit the first time I saw it, eons ago. Instead, it is a climbing mountain. We reached the top once and had fallen from there, our minds fragmented. With each torture we suffered, we went lower and lower, further from our goal. The paths of the mountain are littered with what is left of Inferno's armies, protecting one individual. Because at the top is Flayed herself, occasionally coming down to check on her captives.

In this night of hell, we undertake our campaign once more.

Ricardo closes his eyes, feeling the hot air stirred into a hot wind. Lucas looks back at him, not with sadness or doubt, but with madness in his eyes. Parvati looks around, before her gaze lands on Lucas and I. Sofia keeps staring at the sky, but speaks first.

"We're going for a frontal assault, then?" There is a look in Lucas' eye that betrays the need for violence.

"Not sure there is another way, they know we are here and that we are coming."

"A moment," Ricardo says. "While we are indeed beings far advanced from those people that met in Amsterdam, more reinforcements never hurts. I will summon, or at least attempt to summon, aid from the realms I have traversed."



"Make it quick, magician!"

He lays his hands on the heads of the victims which he herded out, immediately placing them in a slumber from which they would not awaken. Removing a pen from his pocket, he punctures the wrist vein to remove writing materials, ink in the form of the blood of a dreamer. He uses this to inscribe sigils on his forehead, hands, and to draw a circle in the sands before him.

Perhaps what the sinners feared most was salvation or maybe it was divine judgement levied upon them. Whatever the case, their nightmares take the form of eviscerated archangels, wings set ablaze with blue flame. Their gouged out eyes bleed onto the hands carrying spears and scrolls of liturgical magic. A small cohort lines up before the dream magician rising their weapons in unison.

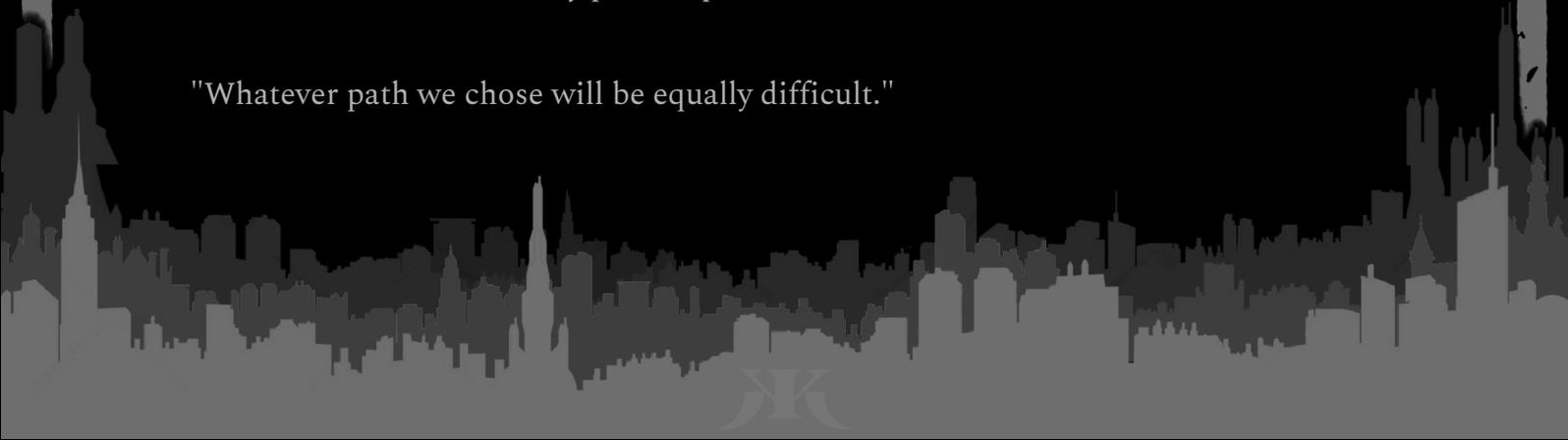
Checking Srijan's journal, we notice one of the pages has been filled with equations. The Key of Numerology is coming together, and soon so will the rest. Perhaps only the Alchemical book lost in dreams truly needs recovering.

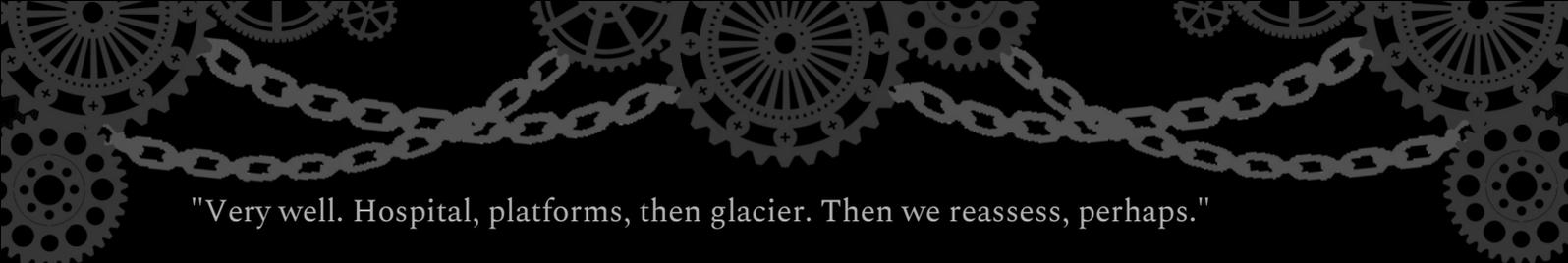
A ruined urban landscape wraps itself around the mountain, but with travel we recognize things. The icy glaciers of the hunters, the chitinous hospital, the execution platforms, the railroad track, the abattoir. In hell, distance is merely perception, with each obstacle more difficult than the last. Ricardo turns to Lucas in particular.

"The book that I lost those ages ago, in the tower of my would-be patron, Kopfel. That is a loose end. While the iron is hot, I suggest we strike. Do you see the clockwork tower in this hellscape?"

Parvati is more immediately preoccupied.

"Whatever path we chose will be equally difficult."





"Very well. Hospital, platforms, then glacier. Then we reassess, perhaps."

After some time Lucas stops his climb and waits for the others to make it to the ledge he has found. A small fire has been lit here and he is warming himself by it, his arms covered in tattoos. An anchor, a cartoonish bomb, a row of numbers, starting at 100 and ending at 600. A Raven with its wings spread like the eagle of Rome... the list goes on. Memories of previous lives.

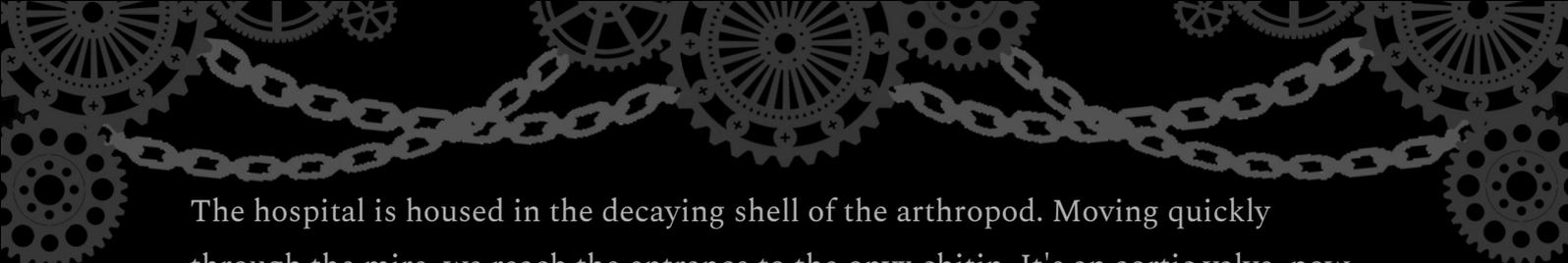
"I agree, we need to recover that tome, we are all dreamers, but I think it will take more than that to get it. The Priest has promised me that ability, the Sultan has promised us his aid. The important part, of course, is getting what we need before the others try to screw us over."

Listening to their planned intrusions into the Dreaming, we walk up the mountain paths. Bomb shelled ruins part before tangles of mangroves, and the cement turns to humid dirt. Judging by the smell alone, they are approaching the Nahemothian hospital.

A massive shape stands out in the vapors evaporating off the accursed swamp. Insects buzz around the exoskeleton of an ancient chthonic beast. The roots of the mangrove trees sprout from living sinners, seeded long ago. Vermin eat at their faces while the plants draw sustenance and grow. It's getting harder and harder to breathe the toxic atmosphere. Lucas's bag opens up to reveal a set of gas masks, passing them around.

"We should keep moving. Air too fetid out here to stay for long", Jorrit growls. Lucas unveils his Nata, cutting a path through the acidic jungle.





The hospital is housed in the decaying shell of the arthropod. Moving quickly through the mire, we reach the entrance to the onyx chitin. It's an aortic valve, now clamped shut, with a protuberance by its side. Above the protuberance is a shut eyelid, sweating in the heat of the swamp.

"If this thing wakes up and sees us, they'll be warned inside", Ricardo guesses, and lifts his hooked flesh-carving knife, the one he brought from the Symphony Pit. He makes motions to indicate we should cut it off at the stem, and then immediately unclamp the valve so we can get inside...

Jorrit seems unsure.

"Huh, Sofia, you think you can deceive it with those smooth words of yours? Or do we take the risk and cut it, hope we're quick enough and do it just right?"

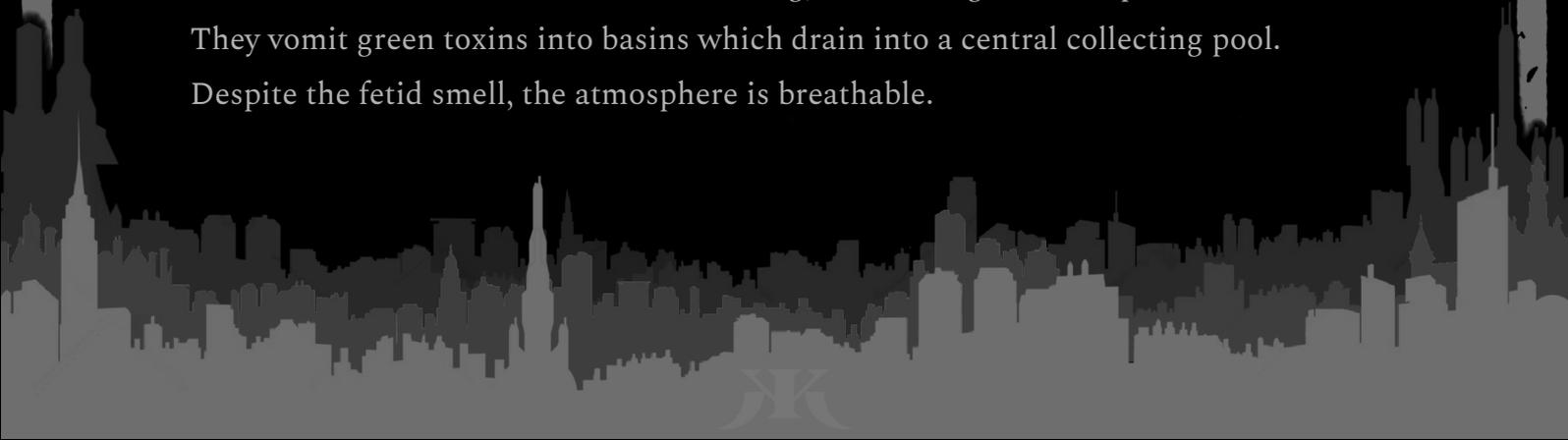
"Normally I do people, so to speak, but I might be able." She relaxed and mumbled some words. It was flesh and blood after all, or something close.

Hearing Sofia's strange word, the eye opens and the protuberance moves. It then stares expectantly at Sofia, while the grasper grows agitated, grasping. With as much authority as she can manage Sofia gives a simple command.

"OPEN!"

An arcane symbol forms from Sofia's breath, a key with a weaved handle. Fixating on it, the eye blinks a few times and falls asleep, grasper inactive. The valve opens and everyone steps onto the low lying fog covering the floor.

Inwards are sufferers attached to the ceiling, with tubing in their open intestines. They vomit green toxins into basins which drain into a central collecting pool. Despite the fetid smell, the atmosphere is breathable.





One of them sees beyond his pain, sees us moving past him. He can't speak, but moans, attracting the attention of others. It isn't long before the entire lot are moaning or asking for help. They're making a lot of noise.

"I know what you're thinking," Jorrit rallies us, "but even mercy-killing them would hold us up for too long. Better get used to it. There's going to be many, many more of these before we get where we're going..."

Focusing my memories, I remember the hospital is a futile attempt to revive the arthropod. All the essentials are there, feeding, byproduct processing, heart, nervous system. The head nurse is in the brain and the end, along with a set exits carved through the eye sockets. There are many pathways between here and there. I let the others know.

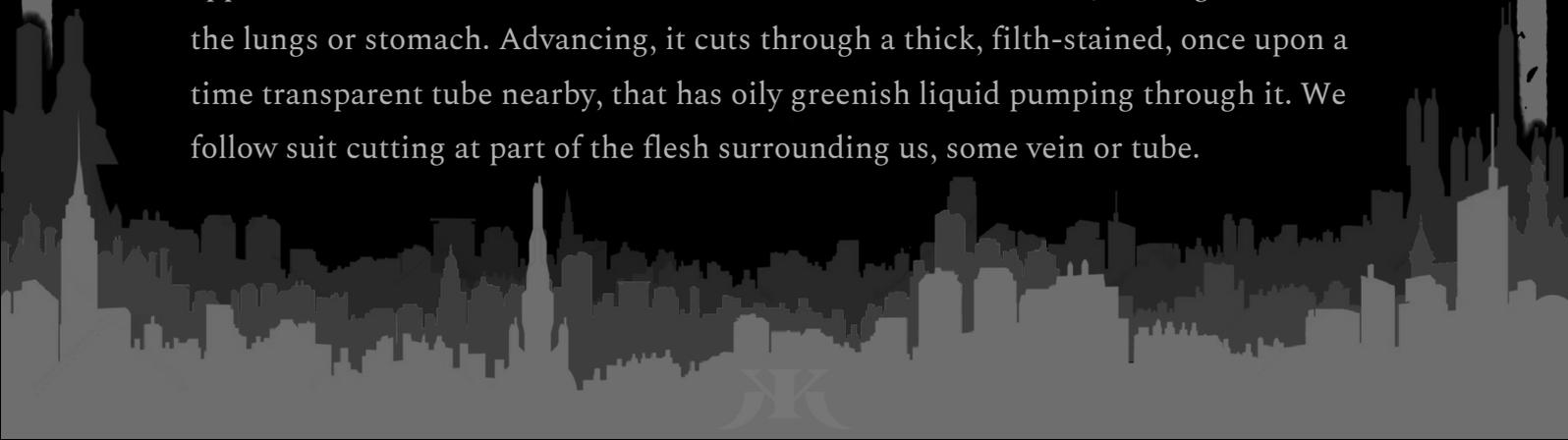
All those moans and cries for help attracted something. Chittering sounds echo through the corridor ahead. We pick up the pace. It sounds like something is following us from the folds of the black mucilage. A silent head with an agonizing look peers past a segment of chitin. The hands follow, but after them the torso is cleaved of meat. This human scorpion crawls on rib legs, its spine curved into a stinger.

"Yeah, I was afraid so", Jorrit replies.

"Netzach be with us!" Lucas offers a prayer.

It isn't shy or alone.

More of the fleshgrown scorpions appear behind, ribs tapping on the chitin on approach. The abomination looks ahead and sees an intersection, leading to either the lungs or stomach. Advancing, it cuts through a thick, filth-stained, once upon a time transparent tube nearby, that has oily greenish liquid pumping through it. We follow suit cutting at part of the flesh surrounding us, some vein or tube.





Due to our sabotage, the light in the corridor dims briefly, leaving only the tapping sounds, nearly upon us. We move in the left corridor, reaching a valve that opens. More sufferers in the next room, only torsos and heads left, fused to the floor. They breathe in the fog on the floor, exhaling breathable air with great misery. When they notice us, they scream in a non-organized cacophony. Another door opens, and in steps a nurse in shiny onyx leathers, maggots writhing in her flesh.

Jorrit rushes the nurse, immediately and viciously. Parvati has our backs, fending off these scorpion creatures as best she can, along with Ricardo's dream seraph allies. Lucas points at the nurse's throat, the most vulnerable part. She gets hit like a sledgehammer by the abomination, keeping her silent. But her appearance did slow us down, fleshgrown scorpions catching up. The disciple of Netzach slashes into meat, but there's more and more, the numbers on his arm jumping with every kill, 601.. 602... They don't seem to be stopping, pouring out of hidden channels.

Circular saw blades used for amputations stand in the fog. Many of the remaining bone limbs from the fog processors have turned to fossils. I spot a few of the holes that might be collapsed to stop the flow. Parvati telekinetically closes the closest one.

A few saw blades cut through the chitin, collapsing vents. The disciple's job gets considerably easier with the flow stemmed. While he thins out the scorpions, Jorrit eats part of the nurse. Her venomous meat leaves him a drooling, semi-conscious mess.

He pukes it all out again, but it is not enough to wash the toxins suffusing her inhuman flesh out of his system. Too far gone to stand up right away, or think clearly for the moment, Jorrit crawls away from the mangled corpse on all fours, to lean against a nearby chitin wall.





Without their reinforcements, we finish off the remnants easily. It's silent for now, the tapping muffled by the chitin. They're probably looking for another way in, but it will take time. Jorrit collapses on the floor, but we remember the paths now. One leads to the throat.

Two vocal cords stretch like an archway above the chamber with round walls. It's been converted into a storage, with an insectile arm impaling human boxes. Within its reach are four glass cylinders serving as columns for the ceiling. Inside them are Cairath plague victims, their faces repeatedly separating and merging together. I wonder if this is where the plague began, and so, if these are pure samples.

I share this with Parvati, who pauses, moving toward the closest cylinder, intent on getting one of the samples before we move on. Confusing Parvati for one of the human boxes, the segmented limb strikes. The revenant side steps, and the limb impales the floor for a moment. We all hear the tappings of the scorpion fleshgrowns coming closer.

She looks for a weak spot in the segments, and stabs it. The cut is successful but a chemical spray follows the open wound. It's acidic in nature, spraying one of the cylinders. Melting the glass, it sets loose the aberration within. Many gnashing teeth out roll with the mass, looking to infect.

She picks up one of the syringes implanted at the bottom of the cylinder. Drawing, the container fills with dissolving plague meat. The Cairath mass wraps around her unexpectedly fast, teeth biting.





Her bronze mesh armor, a retroactively birth-implanted gift from N'Gembo, does what it's designed for. It protects her from the ravages of the plague, preventing penetration and infection of the heart. Parvati struggles herself free of the Cairath victims, throwing it in the path of the spraying acid. Up ahead, Ricardo can see the closed aortic valve leading to a hollowed out brain chamber. He periodically rewrites the sigils on his hands in order to keep his summoned gang intact and present.

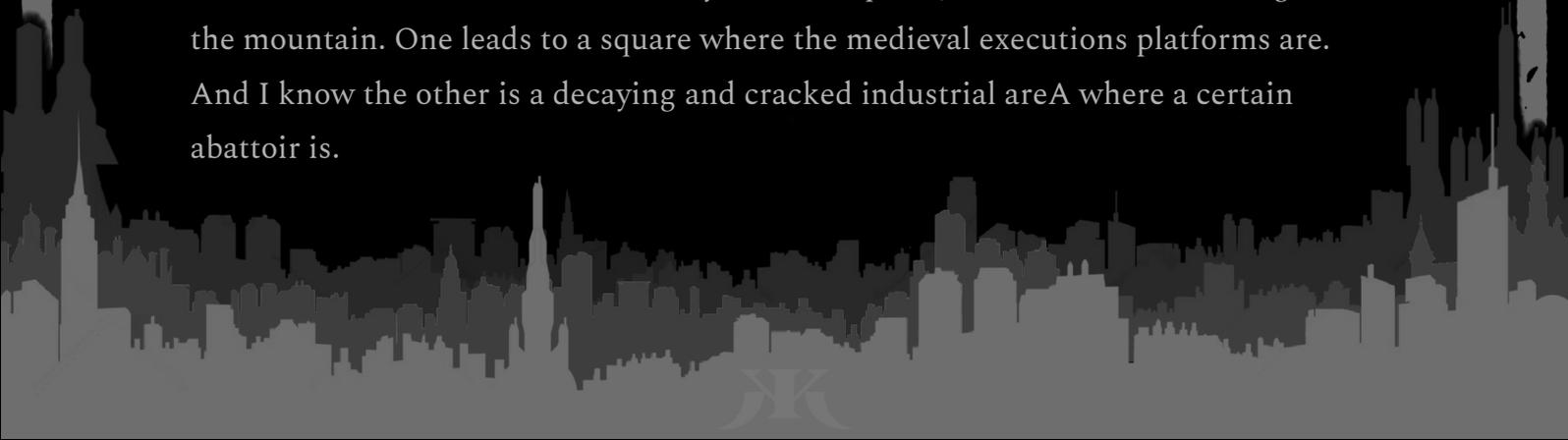
Stepping inside the chamber, we recognize our old torture slabs. They circle the fort where the head nurse is fused with insect-like appendages. Around her, interrupted by the seekers, are the nurses with their gristle gun injectors. Just out of reach, semi-transparent crystalline windows show the hellscape beyond, the path up the mountain.

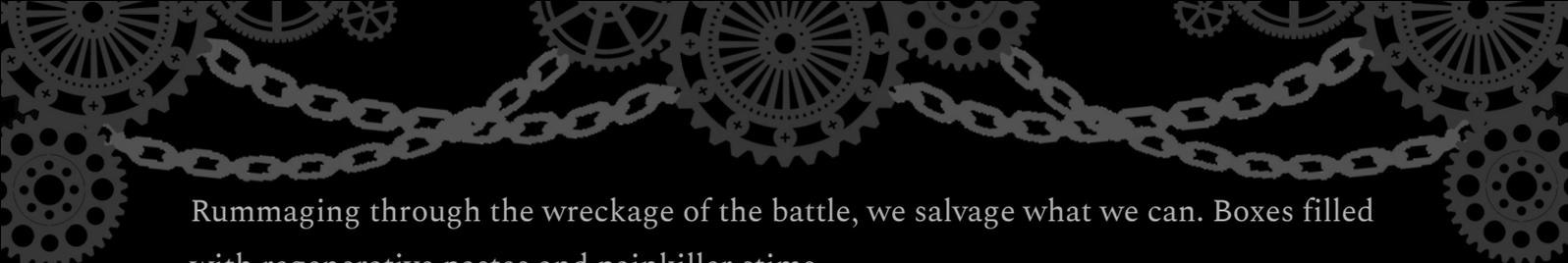
Ricardo looks towards his summoned guards. "Slay the nurses, head nurse too."

Emboldened by Ricardo's words, the blazewings commence their slaughter, putting the nurses to spear. The only one they can't touch is the head nurse, keeping them at bay with her appendages. About a third of them die in the assault, the Nahemothians worthy adversaries. Parvati snatches one of the injector from one of the dying assistants, and it squirms in her hand.

The revenant's old instincts are dead on point, even after all this time out of practice. A dart injects a potent biological weapon into the head nurse's neck, and she bloats. For a moment, her immune system tries to contain it, but eventually she bursts. The nightmare dream seraphs slaughter the rest, ruining the gristle guns in the process.

Smashing the crystal windows and peering downwards, the paths of the mountain reveal themselves to us. As laid out by Ricardo's plans, there are streets leading to the mountain. One leads to a square where the medieval executions platforms are. And I know the other is a decaying and cracked industrial area where a certain abattoir is.





Rummaging through the wreckage of the battle, we salvage what we can. Boxes filled with regenerative pastes and painkiller stims.

Jorrit is starting to come back out of his toxic shock state, still violently shaking and sweating as his hyperactive metabolism finally makes some progress in expunging the nurse's venoms from his system...

I check the Awakened one's journal to see another page filling up with equations. Srijan must have gotten ahold of a pen and is sending the key, with another eight pages to go.

"Ah, that's the good stuff." Ricardo says with an involuntary shudder after dropping a bit of painkiller liquid on his tear duct. "Sorry, professional medication. Executioners next. They ought to have good weapons and hopefully some clothing. We need clothing for the glacier."

"Right, and I also got a feeling we might perhaps manage to recruit some help there."

Jorrit looks around for any last things to scavenge here. A few scalpel and assorted medical saws are spread on operating tables. They're sharp, sharp as hell after all, but don't have any special properties. Only the viral injector gristle guns with their limited ammo stand out.

Lucas uses the stock of his laser rifle to smash in the crystal windows. Exiting the arthropod's eyes, we crawl down on its mandibles into Torture Town. Unnoticed by the others, I take a detour.





Ancient layers of soot cover broken down cement factories with shattered windows, rats feeding on the damned limbless enough to prevent their escape. Everyone else is gone, and I only encounter the occasional soot whirlwind that has gained malevolent sentience. They avoid me.

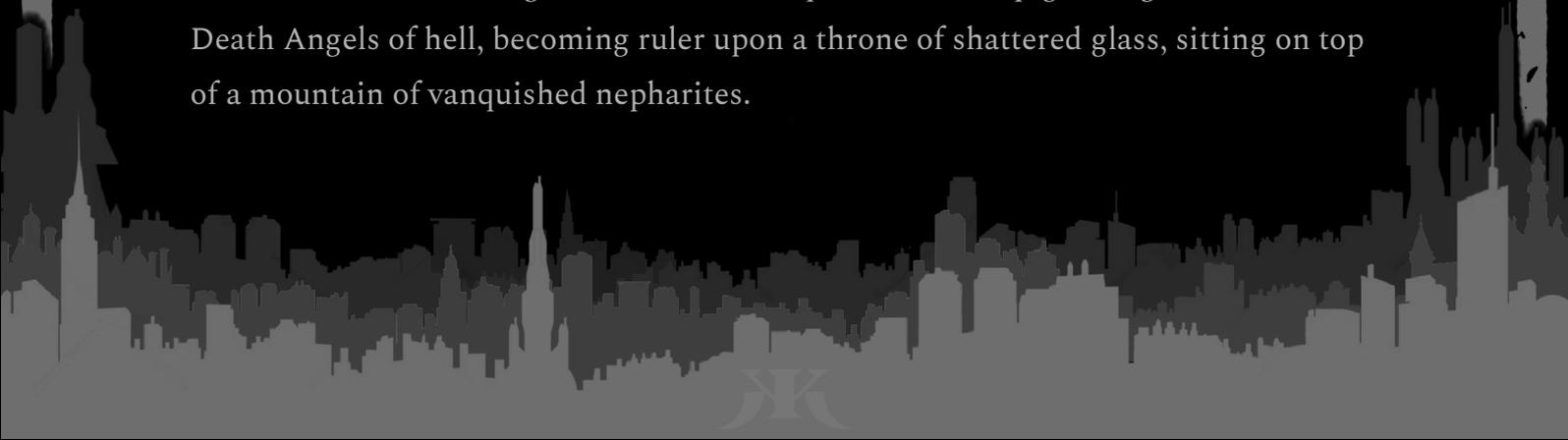
I'm not surprised this part of Torture Town is abandoned, but I welcome the silence. It is interrupted by the song of crow murders nesting in the industrial chimneys, the birds praising the only nepharite to police the place. Even they don't know his name.

I find his temple at the center of the district, ground red meat and blood spreading from it like a cancer. The abattoir walls pulsate with the wailing of its victims, their cries for mercy and release unheard by anyone.

For a moment, I consider shattering the chain on the rusted gates, but I decide against it. I take a card from the tarot deck envisioned in my mind. A four of wands. Just as many membrane wings stem from my back, and I take flight, landing on the roof, near a broken skylight.

Dropping down, I am among the sleeping and dazed victims, upside down, hooked to the ceiling on chains. The closest agitate, but it's a slow build, and I spend a moment taking in the familiar surroundings.

Some time has been spent covering the walls and ceiling into a continuous mural. The detail is astounding, reminding me of the work of Renaissance painters. It speaks of the delusions of a single creature, a bipedal pig worshiped by an entire society of its kind. Voluptuous sows pleasure him sexually while piglet servants offer him the finest feed. Imagined stories of conquest show the pig taking down the Death Angels of hell, becoming ruler upon a throne of shattered glass, sitting on top of a mountain of vanquished nepharites.





Now the chained victims are pulling onto one another, creating a tide of bodies, trying to grab onto me. A prolonged and disturbed squeal sounds from deeper in the hall, where the swine in stops carving into his latest victim, his work still unfinished. He's wrapped himself in a cloak and hood made of human skin, but the glass shards piercing his body are still there.

"For all your talent, you have no imagination, pig!"

His furious grunt echoes in the hall, followed by flying glass, navigating around the victims like a school of fish. They pelt me, ripping off my wings. I pull another card, the ten of disks. My skin turns segmented shells, and the glass shatters against it.

In a rage, he charges against me, but I knock him back into the wall, the victims grabbing onto him slowing the impact, but his bones still shatter. The swine never was one for actual physical conflict, just show, so he falls back on what he knows.

The meat.

The victims are ripped open with his hand gestures, ruptured ribs looking uselessly to impale me through my shell. Another card appears before me, the Two of Cups, and the meat, mural included, liquefies. The swine amplifies the effect, and piles everything onto me, hoping I'll drown.

But I see one final card. One of Swords. My segmented body sprouts a tail, and I swim through the gore, surfacing close enough to hook a pincer through his eyes.

I divine on my friends while my body takes time to recover from the transformation.



They remember their time here, in what's left of Golab's territory. A smashed citadel still burns in the background of the streets they walk. Few actual nepharites remain, but their zealous victims make up for it. Those tortured until turned name themselves razides and continue the work.

The seekers peek through holes in the dilapidated buildings they pass by. Here, a set of eye-gouged soldiers waterboard fanatic islamists. There, a strangled medieval turnkey rips the fingernails off a naked woman.

The exit to this stretch of hell isn't far away, but the path from here to there looks dangerous. Above ground are POW camps from newer ages, while below are ancient and medieval dungeons.

"I liked the place better before gentrification. So where next?" Sofia smiles weakly at her own joke.

"Yeah, it's seen better days", Jorrit smirks at Sofia. It makes his face look distorted. Ricardo answers, impassibly.

"Down below, I reckon, would be safer."

Hewn walls of masoned granite accompany the seekers in the depths. Torches light the labyrinthine corridor reflecting howls of torment. Wooden doors reinforced with iron fittings mark every cell. Nobody bothers closing them, the victims manacled on floors sparsed with straw.



Like the doors themselves, the razides are fitted with iron frames, nailed into the flesh. They are as diverse as the tortures they inflict on their victims. A creature with a face stretched in a metal frame slams a black man in an iron maiden. One with a rail spike piercing his lower lip flogs a man trapped in a chest. There's but one motif to it all. When the victims see the seekers, they cry for help. There's pity in Jorrits eyes.

"There's many more of these victims here than there are of the guards... we could make really short work of this place... Every prison ever in human history... all it takes is the keys and a couple of the inmates freed up to use 'em on more of their peers..."

"Where should we search for the keys, then?" A more pragmatic Parvati asks.

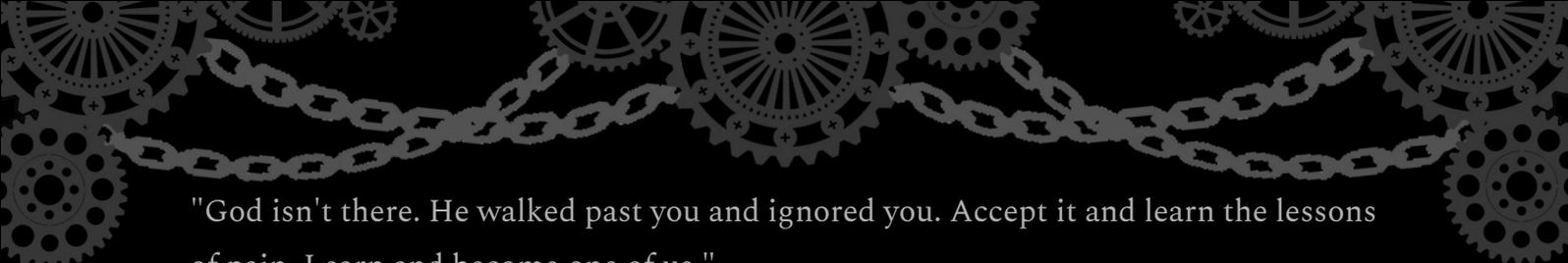
"The head turnkey, Jem Clink. He holds all the keys in a ring on his person. His room is easy to find: it's the one leaking the most blood."

The revenant takes this information and passes from cell to cell looking for a way to unlock the manacles. She goes unnoticed by the razides, but not by the victims who continue to ask for help.

Parvati finally finds the head turnkey, who enjoys a victim all by himself. Tears flow out of cataract affected eyes when a rat is placed on the stomach. Then comes a metal bucket, and a torch upon it, heating the metal. Scurrying at the walls is heard before the mammal starts digging.

"Oh god, help me."

The razide, his chest sewn back together with chainmail. The keyset is at his belt, near a small spiked cudgel.



"God isn't there. He walked past you and ignored you. Accept it and learn the lessons of pain. Learn and become one of us."

Parvati lifts her hand, the keychain from the busy razide along with it. She flings it in the direction of the rest. The keys slam onto the floor, sliding through the dust, stopping at their feet. The revenant, still unnoticed by Clink, returns to her allies.

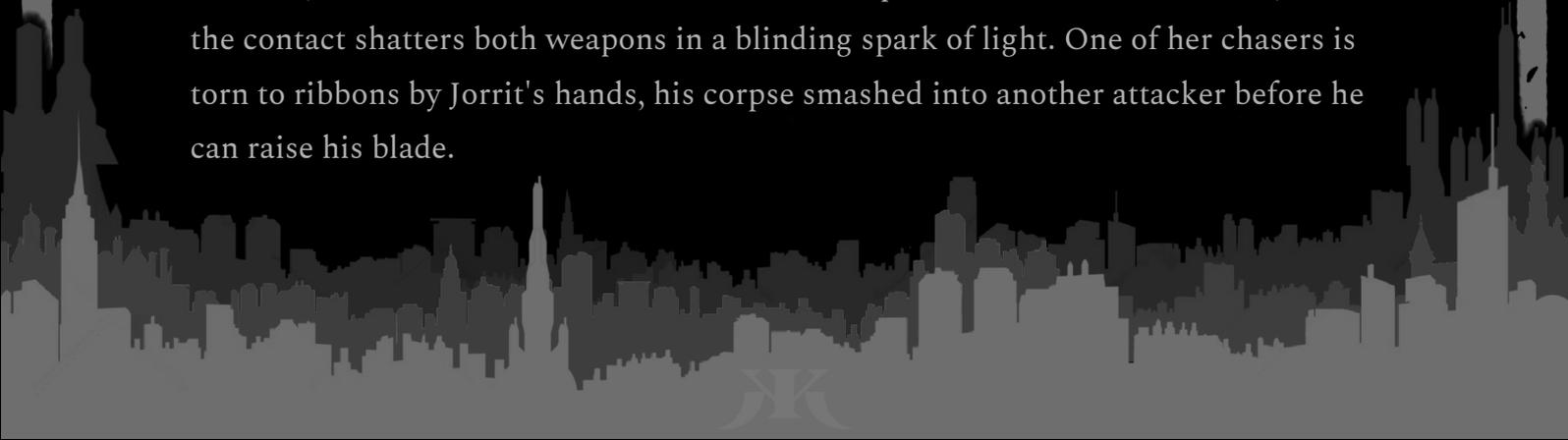
But her path is cut by a cascade of shadows, coalescing into material substance. A man wrapped in charcoal wraps lifts a bi-forked blade, crackling with electricity. The Euthanatoi have tracked her down. Jorrit picks up the keys and hands part of them to Sofia.

"Take either Ricardo and Lucas with you and start freeing the prisoners! The rest of us will help sort out these guys."

More arc blades light up the shadows, obscuring the revenant as she grasps for one of them. Parvati snatches the blade away from the Euthanatos, but she's clearly suffering until she grabs the hilt. The revenant inspects it for a moment. It's a shortsword with a channel in the middle where electric arcs climb. Her assailants are spaced close together and are ignoring everyone else but her, one of them striking.

Sofia moves through the cells unlocking the manacles while the dream seraphs step in to protect her. Another third of Ricardo's troops are cut down by the protesting razides, but the damned are going free. Grabbing keys from the passion magician, they help others in a chain reaction of hope.

The damned are disorganized and screaming, many of them aimlessly running through the halls. Some are frozen in place, not taking advantage of newfound freedom, fearful it's another hellish trick. Parvati parries with the short sword, but the contact shatters both weapons in a blinding spark of light. One of her chasers is torn to ribbons by Jorrit's hands, his corpse smashed into another attacker before he can raise his blade.





Sofia raises her voice to reach as many of the damned as she could.

"We have the power to overthrow all of them!"

The gory dance of the meat cleaver continues, Jorrit tearing into the next shadow chaser. He looks like a ravenous, mindless beast just slashing and killing them.

The dream magician is more preoccupied with the damned than his own troops. Whatever was left of the dream seraph cohort dies at the hands of the razides. Swinging wildly with a new blade taken from her enemies, Parvati works in tandem with Jorrit. Torch flickers and electric crackles show glimpses of a graceful ballet of death in the shadows. It's soon over.

The sufferers strike back at the razides using whatever weapons they can improvise. Fresh blood washes over the old one on the grimy granite floor. A few of the damned run up stairs leading into the night above.

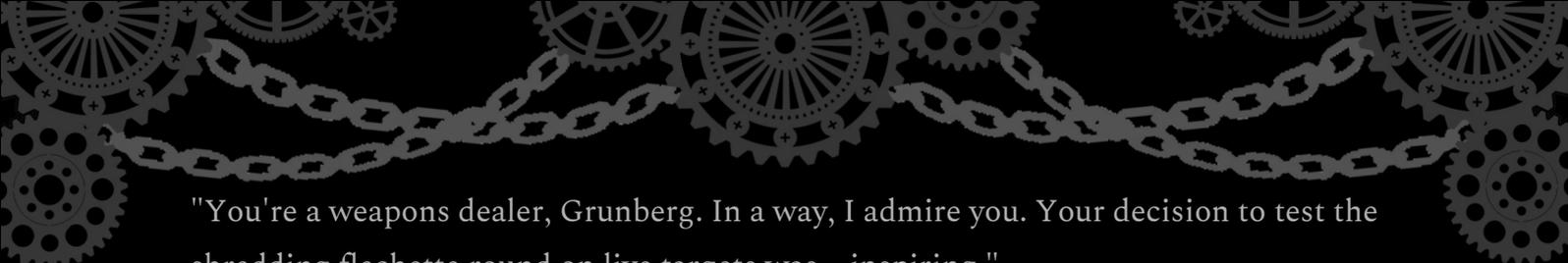
"Yeah! That's right! We gonna roll up this entire false fucking hell until nothing's left!", Jorrit roars in enthusiasm over their victory. "This Is NOT Our Destiny!"

A great fire burns down witches along with their heretical writings. It's intense enough to brighten the entire execution square. The seekers recognize Kurgath, Goleb's bishop, licking the centipede replacing his front teeth. He adjusts the barbed wire covering his flesh while his razide followers cheer. There are a few sinners of the platform, but the bishop is judging one in particular. He's a blonde middle aged man with a moustache, drawn and quartered by nepharite nuns.

"Grunberg, you sorry bastard. Admit your sins."

"No, puh-please! I'm inn-n-n-n-ocent!"





"You're a weapons dealer, Grunberg. In a way, I admire you. Your decision to test the shredding flechette round on live targets was... inspiring."

"Th-th-they were sub-sub-humans!"

"Yes, the crutch of your right wing morality. But even there you were no saint, not even to your own ideals. Look, that canoe in the fire, the one from the Karamakate. You prayed to their gods, didn't you? And used their rituals!"

"Th-th-they were aryan! B-b-b-before, when..."

"Spare me! You did it all in the name of torture! You should be proud, Grunberg! They are!"

The bishop points to the crowd of razides who cheer and morph into his relatives and friends.

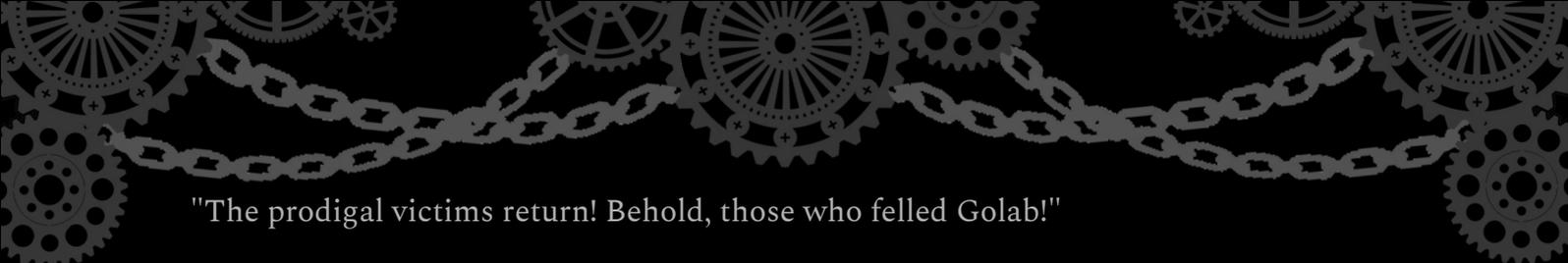
The abomination's cat-like eyes reflect the bonfire, adjusting to the light. There are vendors in the crowd, selling handmade toys depicting hangings. Bakers offer marzipan guillotines to potters painting scenes of flogging.

A carved canoe indeed stands near the bonfire, like a totem pole grounded in a pile of books. No flames have reached it yet, but it's only a matter of time. Kurgath continues his diatribe, pointing at a showcase of weapons on a table.

"Look at these wonderful contraptions you've made! We've used so many of your little toys here! Now we just want you to enjoy them too!"

The nepharite bites into his lower lip, the centipede drawing blood. He spreads the crimson liquid on his face, cooling off from the fire. His gaze traverses the mob, stopping on the seekers. Kurgath explodes with enthusiasm when he spots them.





"The prodigal victims return! Behold, those who felled Golab!"

A horde of razides turn to look at the seekers and the throng of damned. Glasglow smiles accompany deadpan glares standing out of the mock torture carnivals.

"I'll take care of the fire. Think I got this", Jorrit says when all of the seekers hesitate for a couple moments. "You others wanna keep the nepharite out of my hair in the meantime?"

Ricardo, his eyes calculating in their darkened orbital sockets, looks at the nepharite.

"Sure. A ritual is too risky, not my forte. But I can send a demon at him."

Kurgath's centipede mouth squirms while speaking.

"See them conspire once more against us. Seekers, you've seen this paradise of pain for what it is. Will you not join us?"

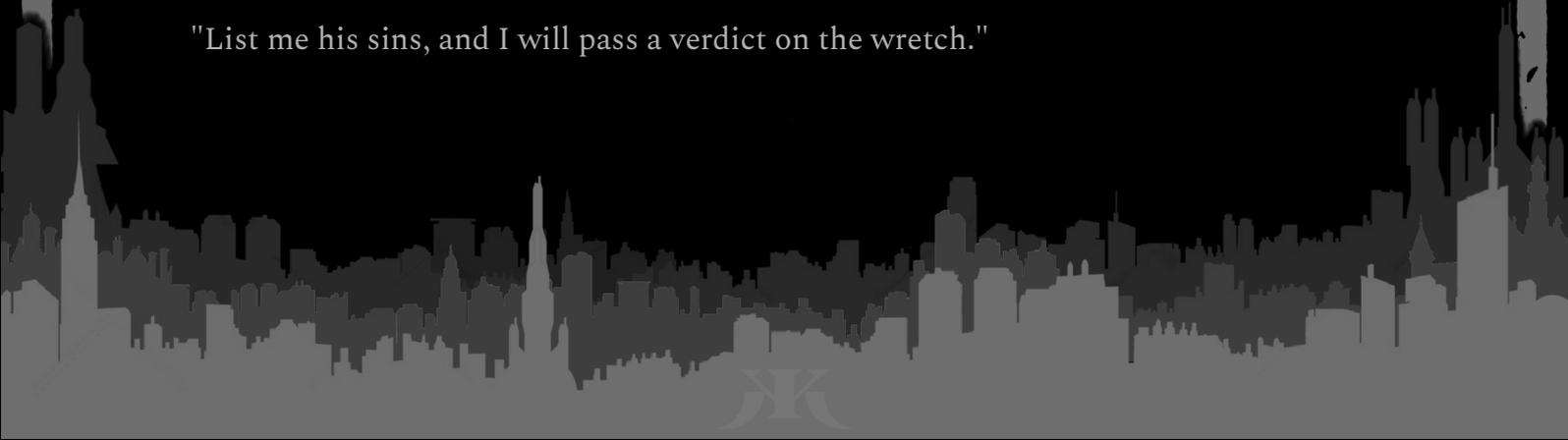
"You would do well to join *us*", Jorrit walks a few steps towards the nepharite.

"We might just let you live if you don't give us any trouble now."

Kurghat shows no fear, but he can smell a change.

"Spoken like a true master, Jorrit van Geesbaeck! How many have you tortured in your life during your interrogations? And the lost souls here, I'm sure you've practiced on thousands. Perhaps a change of leadership is needed, and you the one to take hold. Judge Grunberg rightly for us, and we'll adhere to your cause."

"List me his sins, and I will pass a verdict on the wretch."





"A weapons manufacturer in life, but just another soul here. He made thousands of implements of death an torture. Had them tested on living subjects. Claims innocence, having never used them himself. It was ideological, he says, or all for the money. He refuses to acknowledge his own sadism. Help him see the light, and serve appropriate punishment."

"I know this one." Lucas whispers to Jorrit, recognizing his long lost disciple. "A WWII german industrialist. I tutored him in the ways of war and philosophy of Netzach. He died in an Amazonian expedition, retrieving that canoe for me."

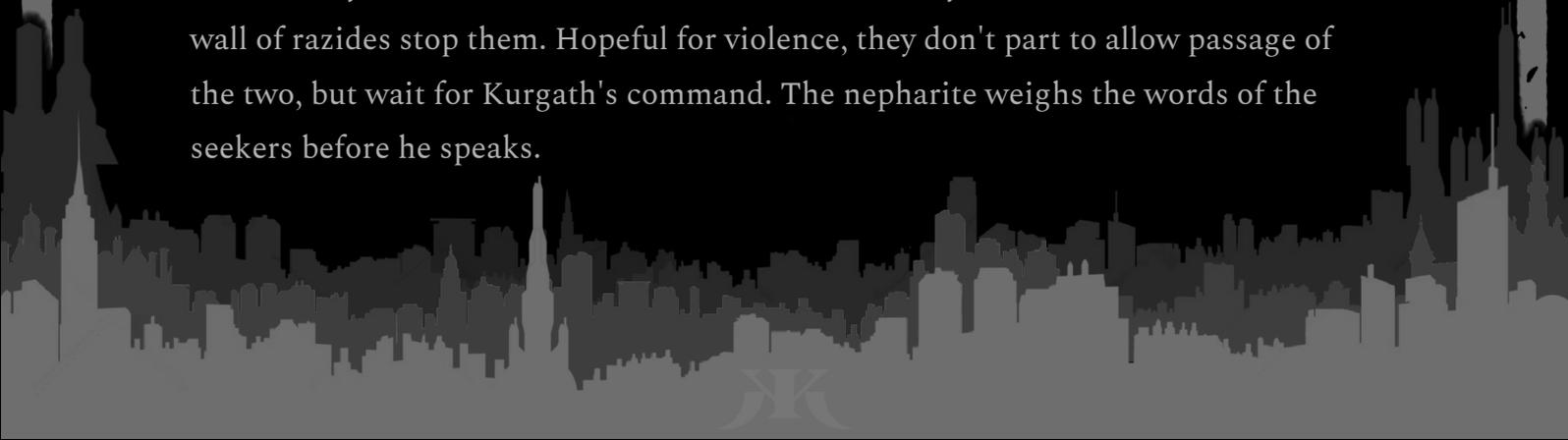
"This one infuriates me with his pettiness." The seeker steps forth, fighting the impulse to cast sideways glances towards his companions. No weakness can be shown right now. "His crimes are well depraved, but his excuses are idiotically confused."

I want the skin of his hands flayed off - since he never touched his instruments of pain with them, there should be pain inflicted on them with these instruments of yours. I also want his eyelids cut off - or better yet, pulled open and affixed with screws into his skull and cheekbones.

That way he will be forced to look at his deeds, until he can decide on what his reasons for them are - idealism, money, or sadistic pleasure.

But his final verdict can only come after that. Before that, I need to take a closer look into his past blasphemies. Kindly have your servants fetch me that canoe", Jorrit points at where the flames have almost reached it. "It contains the key to his deepest guilt and self-loathing."

There's only so much the seekers and the sufferers they freed can advance before the wall of razides stop them. Hopeful for violence, they don't part to allow passage of the two, but wait for Kurgath's command. The nepharite weighs the words of the seekers before he speaks.





Kurgath snaps his fingers and a few of his loyalists grab the canoe. They set it down horizontally, a few books sliding inside its carved interior. Another finger snap in Grunberg's direction signals the onset of his torture. First, they pull his eyelids and nail them to his face. Then they burn his skin with a crowd control plasma thrower. Once he's done screaming in pain, he looks at Lucas.

"It w-w-w-was him! He t-t-t-told me about a-a-a-all of it! I s-s-s-served him and his m-m-master! I wanted power!"

Kurgath, pleased with the answer, licks the centipede again.

"Is this true, seekers?"

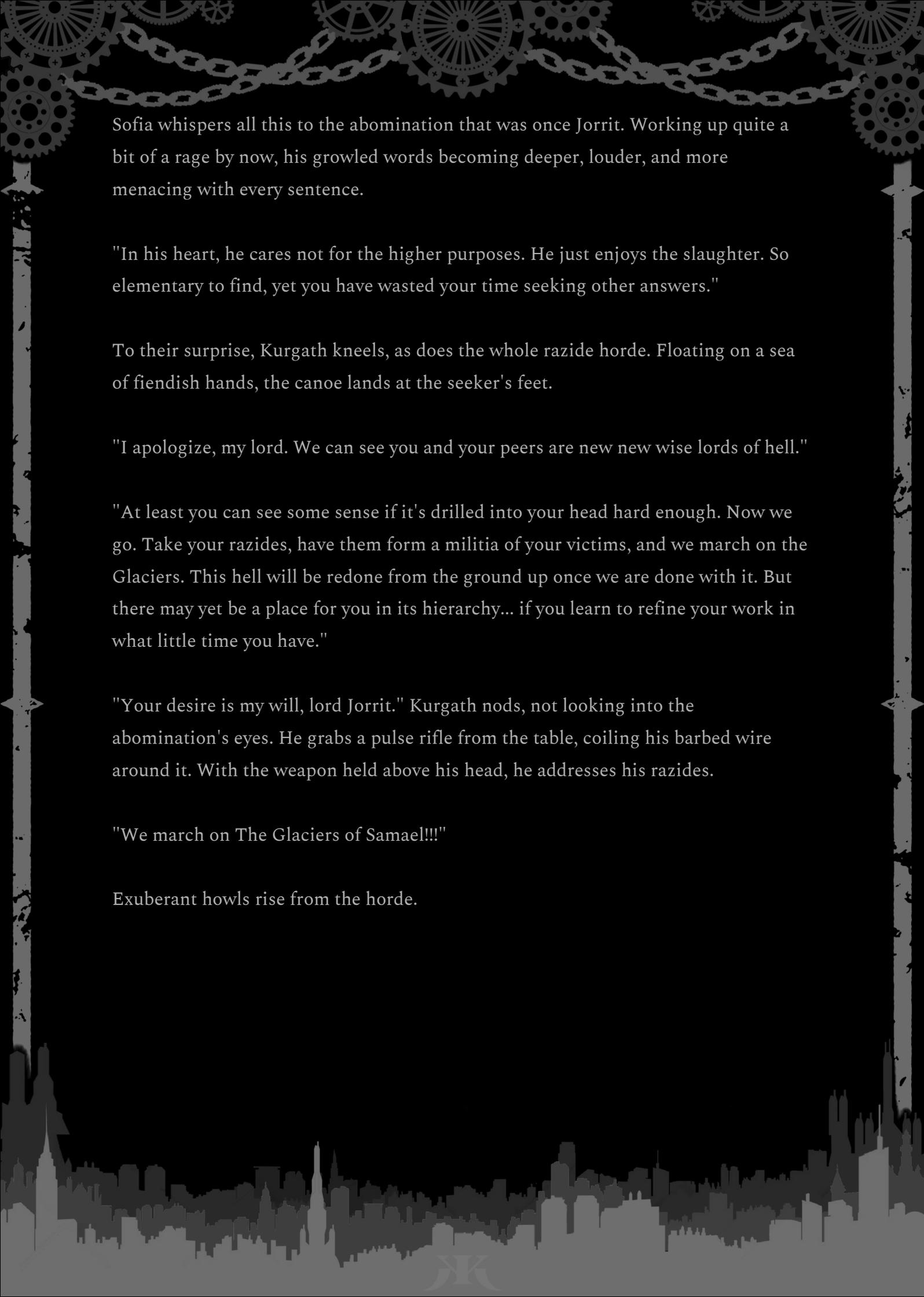
"Power. It's still only an excuse he uses, one he used before. You are getting closer, seeker, but are still not there. How can we follow one if he cannot find the heart of a sinner? What lord of hell would you be?"

Sofia turns her gaze to Grunburg, looking into his subconscious mind, closing her eyes. Childhood memories see Lucas placing a knife in his hand. It's an old WWII knife with Blood And Honor written on the hilt. But the child does not care for the concepts, instead using it to kill his dog.

As he grows older, he has fantasies galore. Weapons that leave opponents alive but suffering. Guilt over the live test subjects implanted with nanobombs. All in the name of a lord of war called Netzach.

Among these fantasies, fear only occurs once. Just one imperfection in a paradise of carnage. A thought while Grunberg prays to his small shrine. A fear that the war god will find out the truth.

He didn't do it for a higher purpose, he enjoyed it.



Sofia whispers all this to the abomination that was once Jorrit. Working up quite a bit of a rage by now, his growled words becoming deeper, louder, and more menacing with every sentence.

"In his heart, he cares not for the higher purposes. He just enjoys the slaughter. So elementary to find, yet you have wasted your time seeking other answers."

To their surprise, Kurgath kneels, as does the whole razide horde. Floating on a sea of fiendish hands, the canoe lands at the seeker's feet.

"I apologize, my lord. We can see you and your peers are new new wise lords of hell."

"At least you can see some sense if it's drilled into your head hard enough. Now we go. Take your razides, have them form a militia of your victims, and we march on the Glaciers. This hell will be redone from the ground up once we are done with it. But there may yet be a place for you in its hierarchy... if you learn to refine your work in what little time you have."

"Your desire is my will, lord Jorrit." Kurgath nods, not looking into the abomination's eyes. He grabs a pulse rifle from the table, coiling his barbed wire around it. With the weapon held above his head, he addresses his razides.

"We march on The Glaciers of Samael!!!"

Exuberant howls rise from the horde.

Golab's followers create a trail to the plateau of ice that lays before the spire. Halfway, a broken ice palace belonging to the avenging angel Samael lies empty. Tempests howl over the ice crags housing what's left of the hunters. Ahead, the razide army splits into the crevasses, sending scouts ahead.

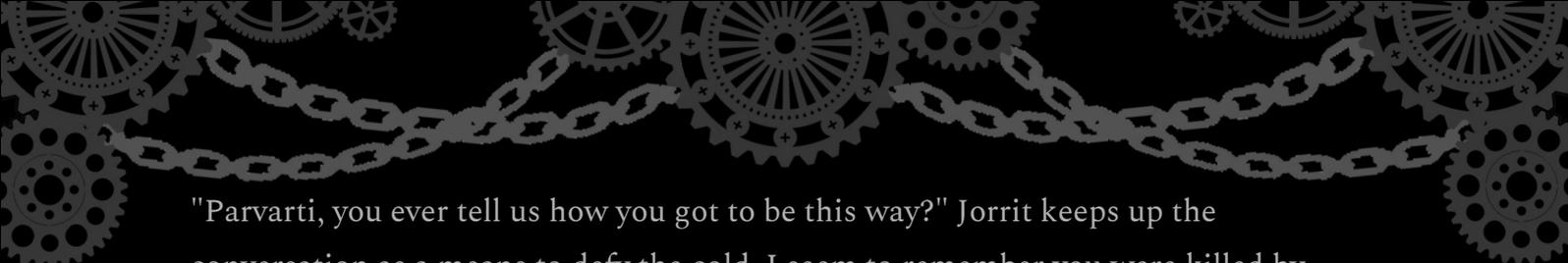
I join the others. Checking the Awakened journal, I see a third page scorched into being. More symbols interchange with numbers, but there are seven pages to go before clarity.

"So you really thought you could achieve some sort of peace between Netzach and Hareb-Serap?" Jorrit asks Lucas. "You really never were one to go for the low-hanging fruit"

"In the end, we all want the same thing, I just don't think El Nazar understands it yet. My only regret is wrapping all of you into my games"

"If there's a trace of Malkuth's insights, or a clue towards enlightenment to be found, I'll come along looking for it. We've been through some... interesting times that way, didn't we?" Jorrit smiles at some of the memories, even in spite of them containing many terrors as well. It's not a pretty sight when he smiles. One wishes he wouldn't do it often.

Lucas takes off his jacket, and offers it to Sofia. It's a useless gesture, not enough to protect the passion magician against the cold. We feel it now, ice gales cutting through our skin to the bone. The crevasses are small comfort, bringing a horror of their own. Hanging on spears are eviscerated leftovers of the hunts, their organs and skins taken. Somewhere on the ice, the frozen hunters are stalking with inhuman patience.



"Parvarti, you ever tell us how you got to be this way?" Jorrit keeps up the conversation as a means to defy the cold. I seem to remember you were killed by cops, right? But then what happened...?"

"I spent a few years....or maybe less....wherever the dead end up, gaining enough willpower to claw myself back to the land of the living. I think I made a bargain somewhere along the way, though."

"Didn't come here, though, did you? Some better place for the dead then?"

"I don't think so. The Euthanatoi have other paths."

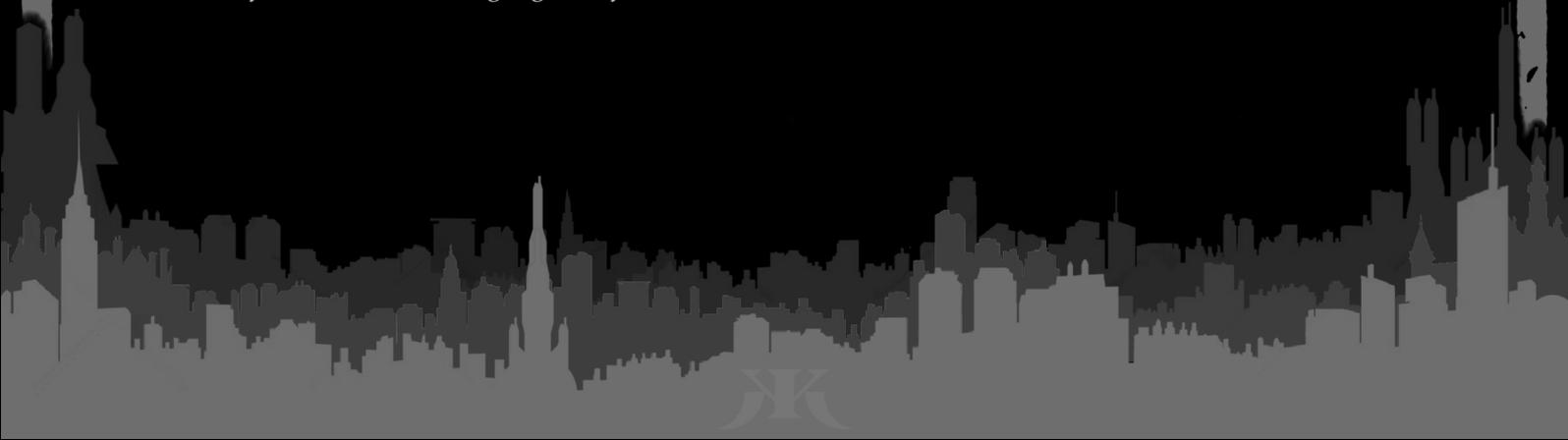
"And I used to think forbidden tomes were bad."

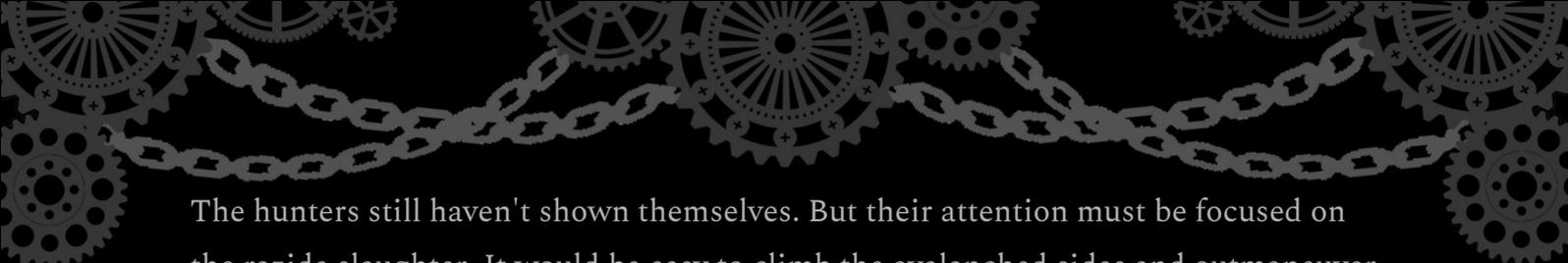
"That what you did, Sofia?" Jorrit asks. "Tryin' to get rid of that c-curse of yours?"

"Tried being the optimum word."

A fist raised from Jorrit and we go quiet. The abomination's instincts are spot on. He points out the traps in the ice, with the razide column heading right into them. Above, ice boulders have been fixated into ready-to-collapse positions. Jorrit can't see the enemy, but it can smell them.

Unwarned, the razides fall directly into the ambush. The ice breaks, bear traps snap off legs, pulling their victims under. Those who aren't killed from below are set upon from high. Boulders and snow avalanches crush the column, blood spreading on the ice. The petal mouthed hounds descend. Maws lined with teeth, they latch on to the survivors, finishing the job. Screams from the other crevasses mean it's the same everywhere for the ragtag army.





The hunters still haven't shown themselves. But their attention must be focused on the razide slaughter. It would be easy to climb the avalanched sides and outmaneuver them. Only the prey hounds, white fur stained red, stand in the way. We set out on a plan.

Lucas climbs around the hounds. His training sneaks him past them, but they pick up the scent of the rest of us. The prey hounds, tendrils snaking out of their backs, dive towards the us.

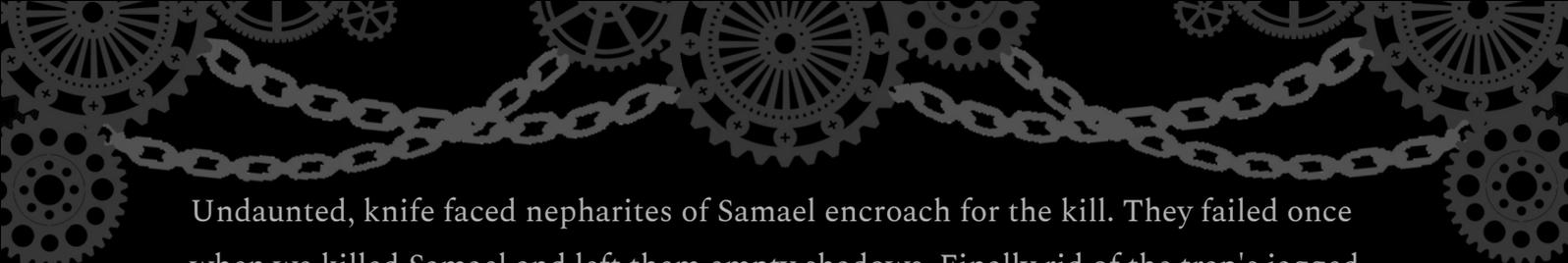
Plasma fire serves to attract their attention. One of them snaps its long tongue at the shooter, coiling around Jorrit's arm. The prey hound drags him in the path of a boulder. Teeth line the tongue, now working their way into the abominations' thick skin. Ricardo broadcasts the creatures' fears, nightmares of the master's whip.

Jorrit's efforts tear the hound to bits, but the poison in the hound's tongue takes him out. Lucas rips what's left of the hound off him, pushing it into the chasm. Picking up the abomination, the disciple drags it to safety. The rest of the pack grows agitated, among the tendrils in their back, barbed whips grow. Ricardo's influence. These new appendages torment the hounds, trapping them in place for a moment.

A crunch can be heard when the boulder rolls over the hounds on its way down, let loose by Parvati. Nothing but leathery imprints remain in the snow when the seekers climb. Everyone makes it to the top of the glaciers, watching rows of ice spread to the horizon. We stare out in the blizzard, the frozen fortress not far from their location.

The sleet under our feet gives way, bear traps jumping in the air, snapping. The traps clamp largely on frozen air, missing their targets. Only Jorrit, slowed by the poison, is snared.





Undaunted, knife faced nepharites of Samael encroach for the kill. They failed once when we killed Samael and left them empty shadows. Finally rid of the trap's jagged metal jaws, Jorrit addresses them.

"So what do you want?"

The nepharites are fast, almost as fast as the abomination, but they stop. They still carry their hooked carving knives, sharp but rusty with old prey. One of them whispers hoarsely though a blade pierced throat.

"To serve the last lady of vengeance. Come with us to your judgement. Come with honor, or we will drag you in chains. "

I know who they fear and obey. Sarnilluth, the Mitrailleuse. I remember her from the cafe and the Japanese forest, wrapped in red leathers, the melted metal frame and machine gun fused to her arm.

"We've killed her once, we can do it again," Sofia turns to us. "Even know, she is an up-jumped underling looking to fill a power vacuum. It is she who should be serving us, and these nepharites would be wise to do the same."

"We'll pay this Lady of yours a visit, alright. No need for the chains just yet. Say, I've been wondering...", he says with a look towards their sparse clothes. "How come you assholes never seem to be freezing in this godforsaken cold out here?"

"Vengeance keeps us warm."

Despite more questions, that is the only one the hunters answer. The trek up the mountain to the citadel is short with them leading the way. Climbing the slopes, Ricardo spots frozen fronds and picks their opium fruits. More clans join in from the other crevasses.





The citadel of Samael is decorated with instruments of vengeance. Anything from katanas to railgun sniper rifles adorn the walls, evidence from sins past. The icy halls are carved with images of a four-armed angel with mechanical wings. A crown of horns covers his eyes while he metes out punishment. Many of the rooms are busy courthouses judging sinners whose crime has been revenge. We find ourselves in our own frozen pulpits in front of a hailstone desk.

She's there, the machine gun woman, cutting into the true form of One-Eye. Drath'tan's chest is a massive maw, his bipedal insectile body sprouting pipes. Sarnilluth peels off his transparent fly wings one by one as torture.

"Now you pay for your betrayal, traitor! Now you'll see the vengeance of Samael"

"AAARGH!!! Stupid cunt, your master is dead! Mine is alive, the only Death Angel left! He'll come for you, come for you all, and become the new lord of inferno!"

While she is busy with him, we talk to Ricardo. The dream magician sees through Sarnilluth's cold exterior to someone he encountered in dreams. They lived a romance in a long forgotten fairytale night kingdom, living as harpies and mermaids. He knows her weakness: She can't be the embodiment of vengeance, she has a heart. In it, the Sarnilluth keeps a piece of Ricardo.

"Worry about One-Eye first, he's the more slippery of the two."

Ricardo moves around the room, further from the others.

"Sarnilluth. I've returned, ascended to take all that belongs to me. Won't you join me, as we had in the past? We will slay the one at the top of this mountain and reign eternal."

"I...I... know that voice..."





She turns and a tear freezes on her face. His dream persona creates an aura of feathers Sarnilluth recognizes. A vortex of the dark raven wings he used as a harpy swirls around him. She runs and snags him in her cold embrace, pressing her lips against his. Still tied to his mind, we feel it. It's like kissing a corpse, her cold metal rubbing against him. Vapors rise out of the pair into the ceiling.

"What about vengeance?" one of the hunters interrupts.

Sarnilluth tears herself away from her lover.

"Now I know. Drath'tan's betrayal was the one who made Samael's downfall possible. These were mere tools of the Flayed one. She is the one that needs killing."

Once more her crystalized eyes turn to Ricardo.

"We will join you for the mountain. And after she dies we will be happy forever."

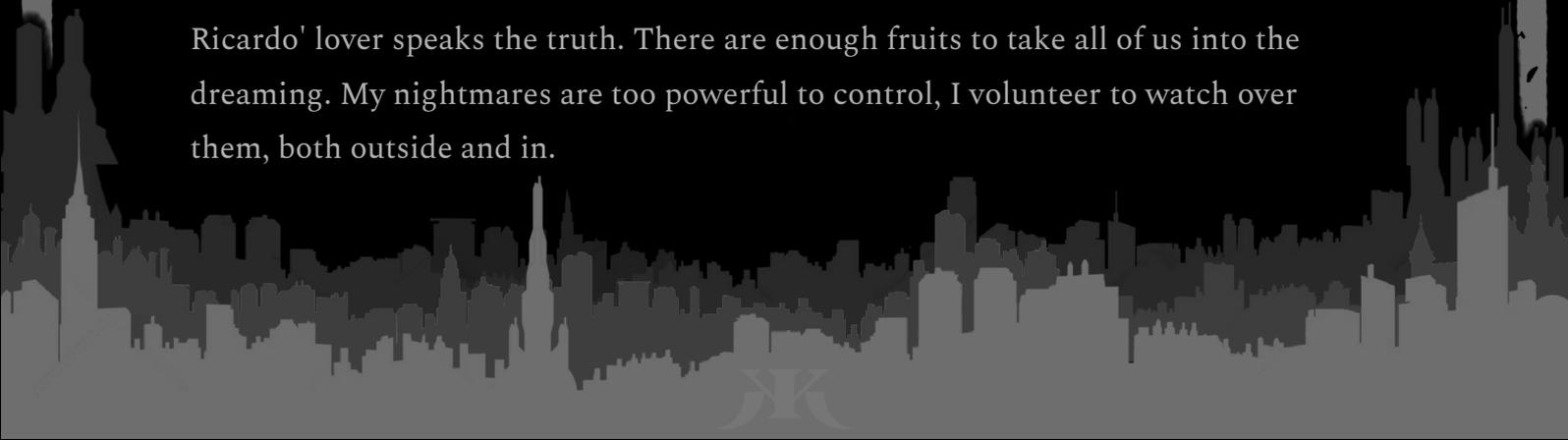
The hunters tear into Drath'tan, commencing their endless torture for the traitor. Ripped to shreds, old One-Eye shouts out in agony.

"Hareb-Serap will consume you all and free me! He's the one who will rule inferno! You'll see! You'll suffer for eternity!"

One more page gets scorched while Drath'tan's torn body parts reassemble. Soon the torture will begin anew, forever.

"Rest for a moment before the departing. This is the only place in hell where you can find dream flowers..."

Ricardo' lover speaks the truth. There are enough fruits to take all of us into the dreaming. My nightmares are too powerful to control, I volunteer to watch over them, both outside and in.





With that, Ricardo sits down, leaned against a pulpit with Sarilluth under an arm. Biting into the fruit, he feels the rush of his brain's longing for the narcotics within. The rest follow his example.

For the first time in eras they rest their heads on cold ice slabs. Through the Tarot I feel them, the opiodic fruit bitter tasting, the aftertaste crawling in their mouths. Sleep comes with difficulty, but the dreams are welcome.

An arched sail on a dhow catches the wind of an eternal ocean bathed in dusk. In their tortures, they'd almost forgotten about the vastness of dreaming. They can feel Kopfel's power growing with his possession of the Tome Of Worms. His kingdom is massive, attracting more and more occultists to his side. If he isn't stopped soon, he'll conquer the entire dreaming.

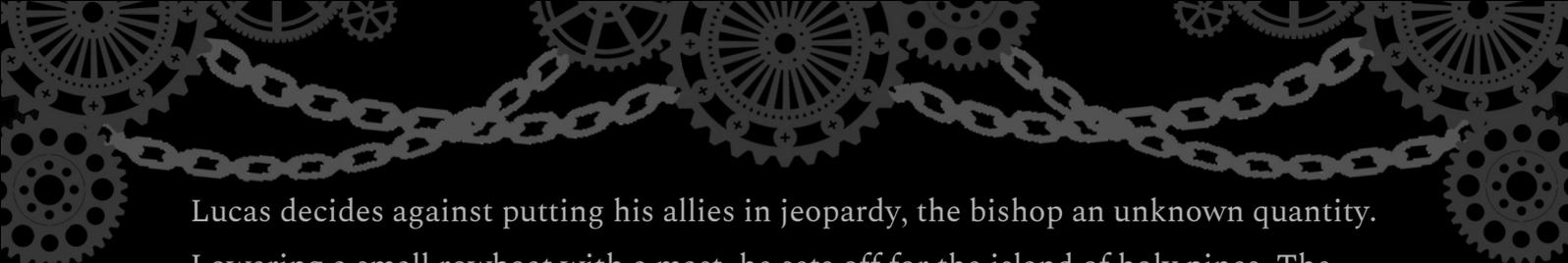
"My failures have come back to haunt us, it seems." Ricardo says solemnly.

"We'll see what the priest has to say," Lucas tries to comfort him, "hopefully he'll be of some help."

"Yes, the plan hasn't changed. We follow your course, hopefully get some aid, then reassess. I'm sure I know others in power, but am loath to become more closely involved with them. Since losing the Tome, I have kept my distance from most in here."

The disciple looks to the horizon and spots what he's looking for. An island lifts out of the mists of sleep, snowfall and icebergs around it. He ponders whether he should take a boat and go alone, or steer the whole dhow there.





Lucas decides against putting his allies in jeopardy, the bishop an unknown quantity. Lowering a small rowboat with a mast, he sets off for the island of holy pines. The remaining seekers watch him disappear into the mists.

Dusk dies, ushering in a night sky filled with stars. Lucas can't seem to shake the cold even in his dreams. The hull hits gravel and sand, waves crashing near him. Trees part, offering a path through the pines.

Lucas pulls the canoe further into shore, gooseflesh creeping up and down his arms, he wonders if it's this place, or the other. His boot crunching through the snow, he drags the canoe after him through the dirt and gravel underfoot.

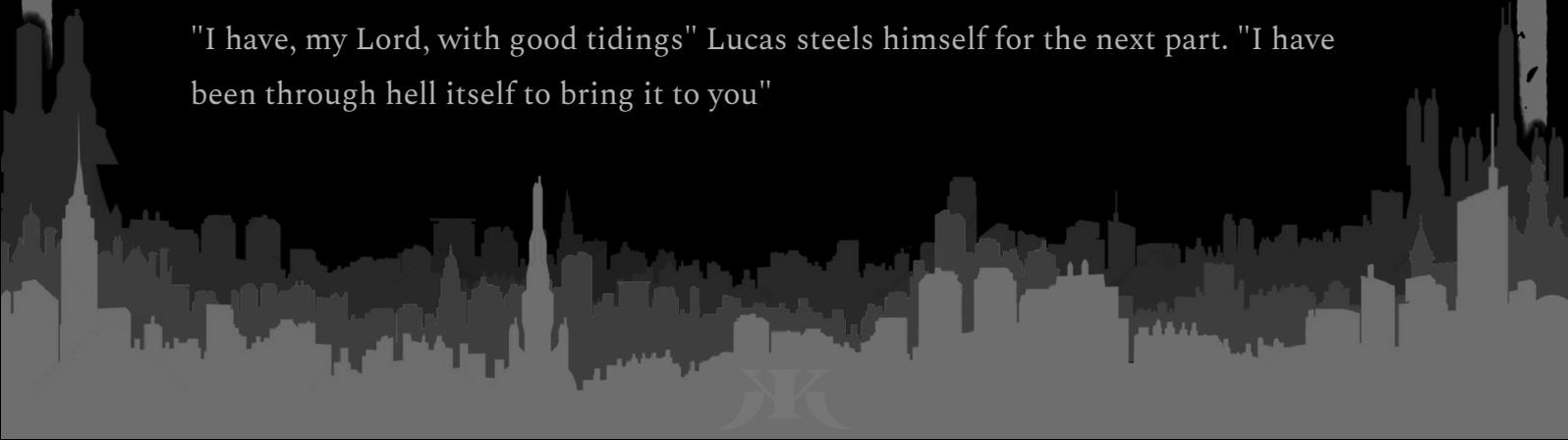
Snowfall isn't as relentless as it was the last time. Someone is obviously looking out for the disciple walking the path. Giant shadows move in the corner of his eye. Finally, the cathedral's gothic spires tower above.

Music floods through the reinforced wooden gates Lucas is pushing through, a chorus of fanatics from all religions. It's music of spiritual reverence, a tone universally touching the soul. Accompanying the voices is the mauve bishop playing his grand golden organ.

One by one, the singers fade, leaving the dreaming, flickering candles extinguishing with them. When the last one departs, pitch blackness sets in together with silence. A pair of glowing eyes ignite like cinders, blinding Lucas.

"You have returned."

"I have, my Lord, with good tidings" Lucas steels himself for the next part. "I have been through hell itself to bring it to you"





"Hell is just another dream, devout one. Now, show me the prize in your mind..."

Suddenly, clawed hands grab onto Lucas' face. He tries to pull back, but the grip is stronger. A seed drops through the darkness above. It blossoms into a flower, then a vast garden. A primordial jungle, with men escaping the foliage. They carry more seeds with them to the outside. More jungles appear, and so the church fills with leaves.

Its a memory of what Lucas read on the canoe, in detail, he bishop expertly retrieving it from his mind. He stands naked in the underbrush, his skin darkened. A shaman covered with bark paint and a skull on his head.

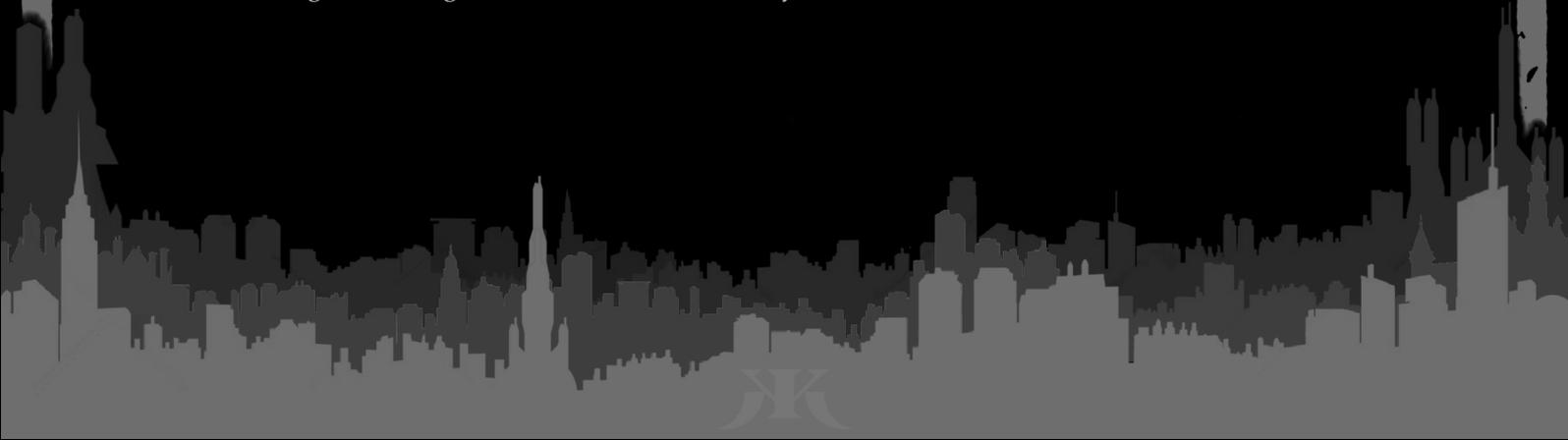
"Good, good, I can feel more dreamers approaching like moths. Now, what did you want in return?"

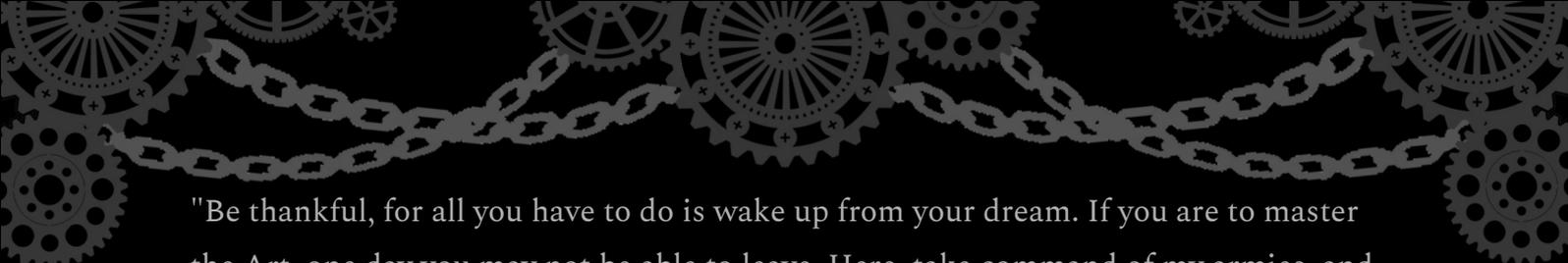
Lucas stands in awe of the scene for a few moments before replying.

"My lord, I am sure you have noticed the incursions here, from the Prince. I'd like to stop him and retrieve what he stole from us. I'll need allies for that. I have heard of this Art Of Dreaming. Can you teach me?"

"The Art Of Dreaming takes many years and is difficult to master. In time, I'll teach it to you, fully, assuming you play the role of the apprentice. For now, I'll lend you my might when confronting the alchemist, on one condition. I want those dreamers who worship magic to fall under my domain when it is over. Agreed?"

"You are an honorable man, moreso than I have met here in the dream... I agree to your terms my Lord. I do have one last question, is there an easier way to enter the dreaming? Coming here took extraordinary effort."





"Be thankful, for all you have to do is wake up from your dream. If you are to master the Art, one day you may not be able to leave. Here, take command of my armies, and go with the gods."

He rips a piece of bark from a nearby tree, the tear dripping with transparent sap. Its insides are covered in liturgical texts from Sanskrit to Hebrew. The bishop extends the bark piece to the disciple while picking a berry from a branch. Lucas bows and takes the gift.

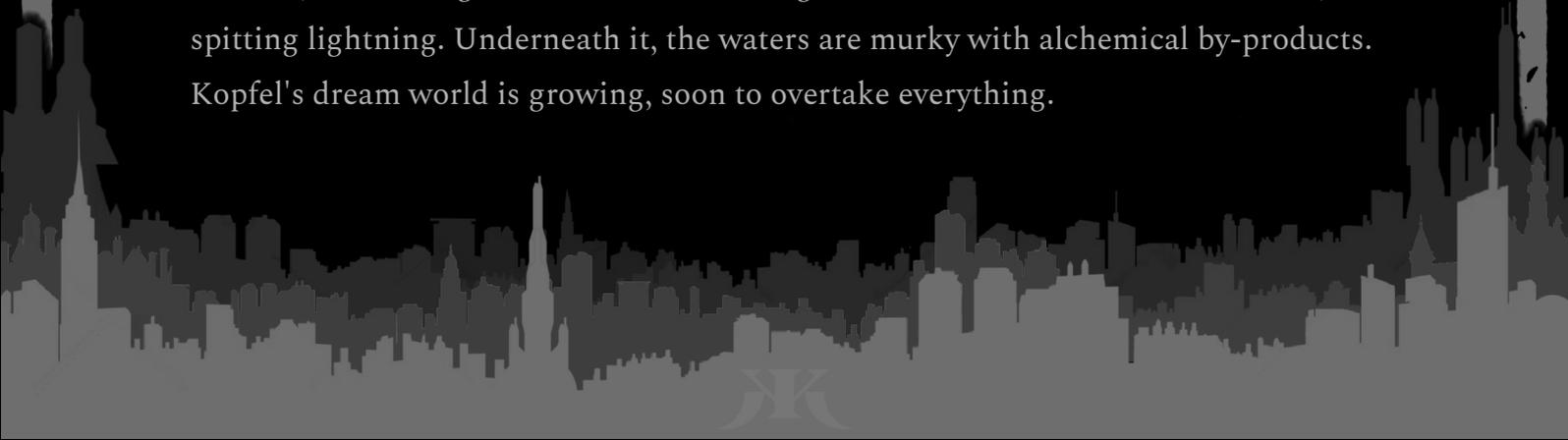
"I hope this will at least help you hold off the Prince. Thank you Lord" He turns back to the path and the boat.

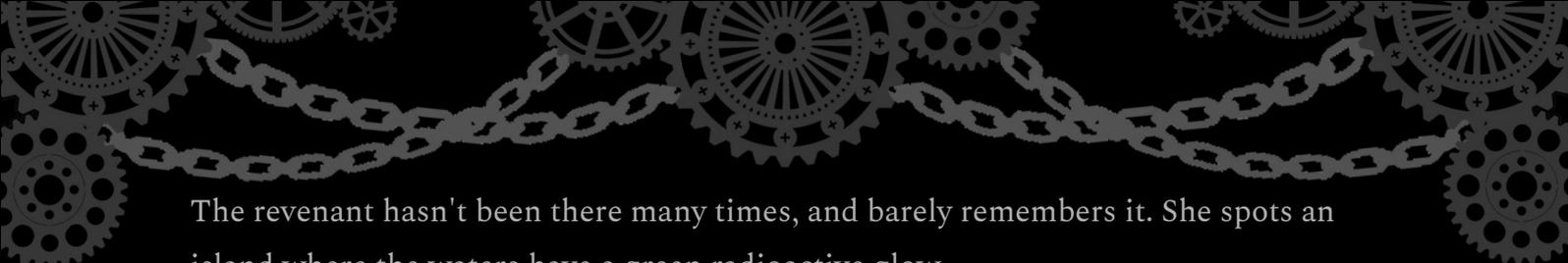
Lucas, bark in hand, can now hear the choir again. A few gargoyles rip themselves off the spires when he exits the church. The voices get louder when they circle above as he walks through the forest. He sees more cinders in the dark, on top of gargantuan shadows.

Horned giants join his trip back to the gravel and sand beach. There, more of them are building rafts out of the pines. Here, the rowboat is gone. Instead, he sees the carved canoe with one oar. The disciple departs the holy pines for the dream dhow.

Dreaming is bewildering, and the sea calls to them. For a time, the seekers stare into the horizon. The dusk light shifts, and a fleet of horned giant gods appears. At its front is Lucas, rowing in a canoe.

Tranquil waves lull in the dusk of the ocean of dreams. At the edge of the horizon is a vortex, swallowing crushed islands. Goring towards it is a cloud of black smoke, spitting lightning. Underneath it, the waters are murky with alchemical by-products. Kopfel's dream world is growing, soon to overtake everything.





The revenant hasn't been there many times, and barely remembers it. She spots an island where the waters have a green radioactive glow.

"We need to talk to a doctor to see if he can help us with Kopfel."

The others nod. A flock of seagulls coalesce out of thin air accompanying a gust setting the sail in motion. The dhow navigates into a bay where barrels with biohard symbols float. Landing on the island, its hull scrapes against the jagged shores of the blacksun wasteland.

The dreamers step from the weathered deck onto the burnt orange rocks. Like monuments of forgotten deities, Parvati's old victims wait for her. Giants made of granite, they block her passage to the inland.

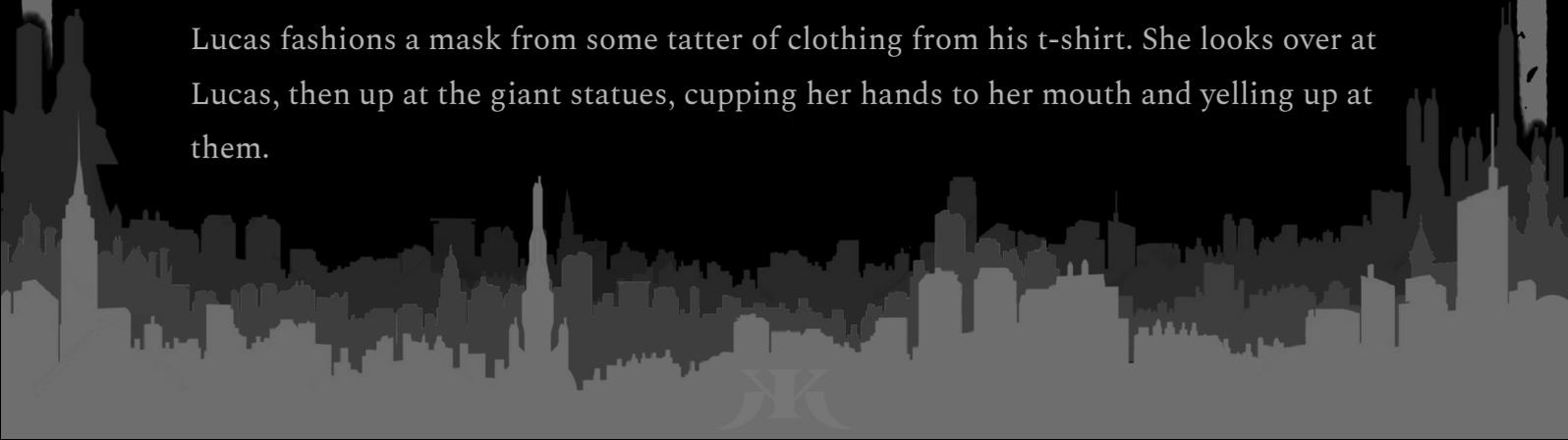
An Israelian mother she silenced once to avoid witnesses steps forward. Rocking her newborn to sleep, the monolithic statue stomps in Parvati's direction. The revenant narrowly avoids the crashing foot, but it crushes a small crag into dust and sand. A remnant cloud spreads across the shore, veiling all the other giants striding in.

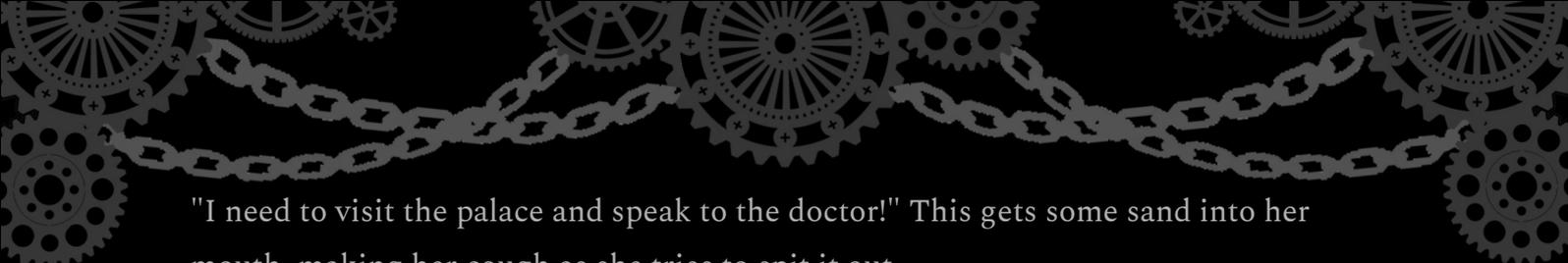
The dust cloud makes orientation in the rocky crags impossible. Only the violent, wild swings of the stone giants pierce through. Their saddened faces stand above the cover of sand itching Parvati's eyes.

The sound of falling sand muffles every sound, like a heavy rainstorm, so Lucas speaks up.

"Tell them you need to speak to the Dreamer!" He doesn't exactly sound sure that will work or not.

Lucas fashions a mask from some tatter of clothing from his t-shirt. She looks over at Lucas, then up at the giant statues, cupping her hands to her mouth and yelling up at them.





"I need to visit the palace and speak to the doctor!" This gets some sand into her mouth, making her cough as she tries to spit it out.

Their voices pierce the sky like thunder while the dust settles.

"We shall accompany and protect you on the path to your salvation. If you fail to redeem yourself, we will be there to end you."

The mother points to a shining bit of metal inland. Parvati and her companions follow the giants who part the stones. A valley is created to the compound of the future scientists.

Crossbow bolts and rifle fire pester the stone statues on approach. The volleys stop when a spotter sees the revenant, the gates clanking open. Jolainne N'Gembo-Mouanda waits in the middle of the compound with a medical team.

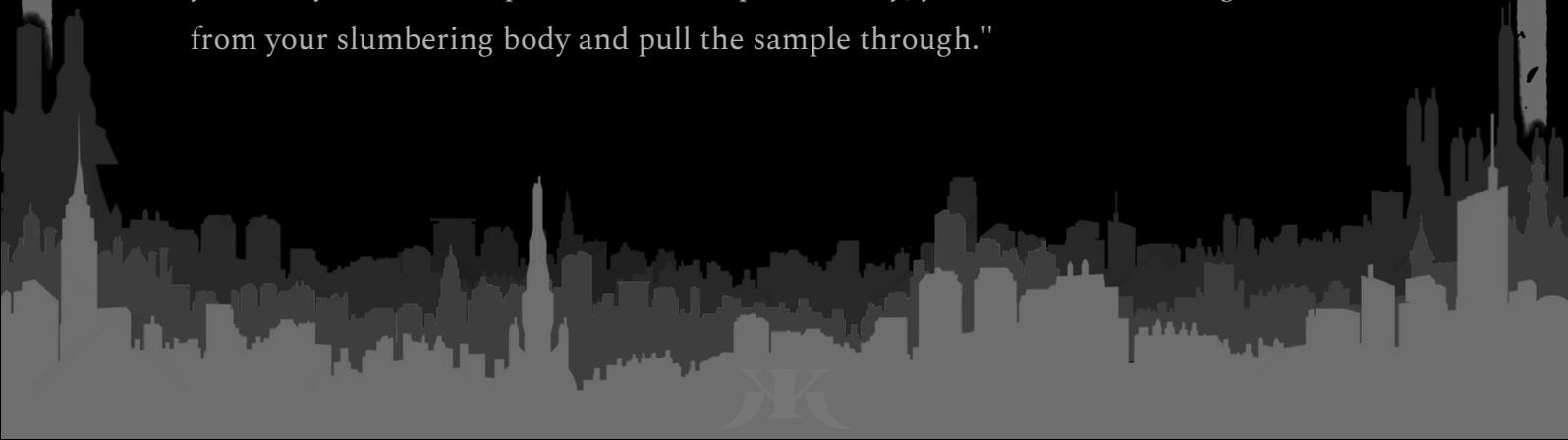
"You're back. It took longer than expected. What do you have for us this time?"

"The sample."

As soon as she hands the sample to the doctor, it turns to colored powder, whisked away by the wind. The one she was carrying here was a memory of the real thing still with her body in inferno.

"Ah, I see. Common mistake, you didn't memorize the sequence. Well, we'll set up a drop box, we've got one in the NY Public Library."

"Perhaps I can get it now. Dangerous, but doable." Ricardo says. "Parvati, visualize your body and the sample itself. I will open the way, you will reach in and grab it from your slumbering body and pull the sample through."





Ricardo draws an elaborate circle around the three of them, amazing in its complexity. It takes quite a bit of time, and after a while he intones words in a language that sounds like the mumbling of a sleepwalker. The circle completed after nearly two hours, he stands in the middle of the three of them and draws out a pen from his pocket, stabbing his thumb and scribing a symbol in his own blood on each of their foreheads. The air inside the circle grows hazy and their breaths show with the growing colder.

A silver thread appears in thin air above the circle. It's an enlarging tear through which cold air blows. The soot in the camp gets pushed away from it, those present covering their eyes with their sleeves.

Parvati reaches into the glacial portal, her fingers freezing. She grabs the sample from her blue, livid, sleeping self. Alongside hers, Jorrit's body also falls into slumber. His ghost stands upright, separating itself from the meat. It follows through the portal, reuniting with the dreamers. The gate sews itself up with a deafening hollow sound. Parvati still has the sample in her hand.

Disoriented for a few moments, Jorrit looks around this new environment. At least it's warmer here. Looking at the circle at their feet, then at Ricardo, he frowns in confusion.

"This... this is the Dream, right? Did... you just _summon_ me?"

"Uh, well, not that I am aware of. But 'magic', if you want to call it that, has all sorts of unintended side effects. We had to get a sample from Par's body from inferno to here, so I opened a way. It seems you also slipped through."

"Was feeling like I was gonna fall asleep any moment back there. Those fruits are damn powerful, even if you just sniff at them... So what are we up to?"



"A being with whom I hastily made a pact a great time ago is endangering all within this realm. We are marshalling forces against him. He also has a tome we need."

N'Gembo grabs the flask from Parvati's hand, inspects it, then passes it to the scarlet Russian. She runs it through a machine after fitting herself with some goggles, reading data printed on paper.

"I think that's it, Jolainne! It's the original strain! We can reverse engineer something!"

A white ivory smile shines on the doctor's face.

"Thank you. We're forever in your debt. How in the hell did you find it?"

"Magic" Parvati answers.

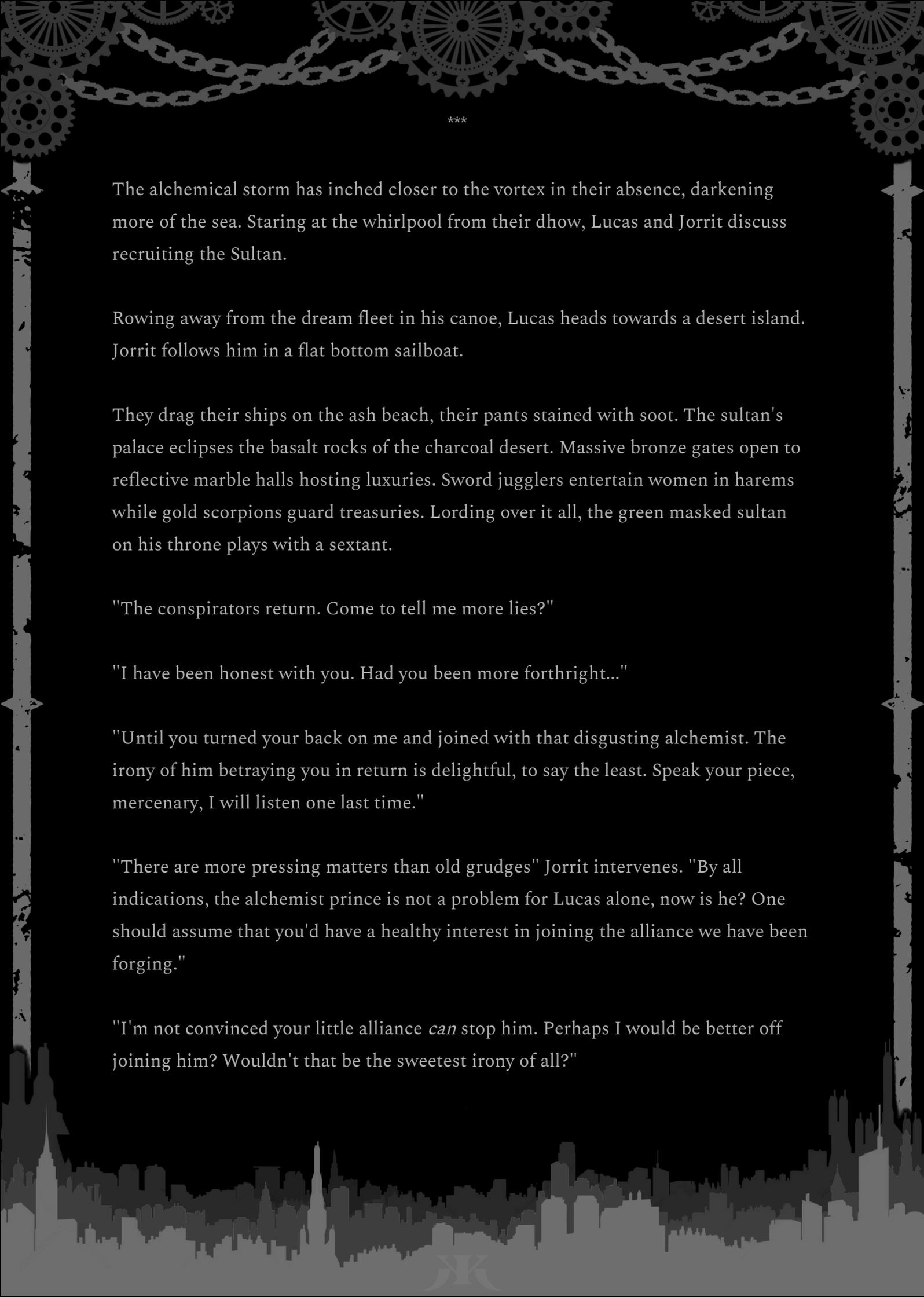
"I'm a man of science, but I'll take what I can get. What do you need from us?"

"Allies against the dream Prince Koepfel", Jorrit confirms.

"You'll have them. I'll advise our hypnonauts to lend you aid."

He hands Parvati a medical pad. On it, numbers related to logistics appear. The dreamers say their farewells and travel back to the sea via a truck. Mutant road warriors on motorcycles join them, yelling battle cries. The rocky shore is littered with mad scientist archetypes armed with tesla ray guns. Man made lighting sutures together rusted wrecks of oil tankers which the armies board. Even the stone giants of regret join the fleet, walking directly in the sea. The wastelanders join the rest of the fleet in the dreaming.





The alchemical storm has inched closer to the vortex in their absence, darkening more of the sea. Staring at the whirlpool from their dhow, Lucas and Jorrit discuss recruiting the Sultan.

Rowing away from the dream fleet in his canoe, Lucas heads towards a desert island. Jorrit follows him in a flat bottom sailboat.

They drag their ships on the ash beach, their pants stained with soot. The sultan's palace eclipses the basalt rocks of the charcoal desert. Massive bronze gates open to reflective marble halls hosting luxuries. Sword jugglers entertain women in harems while gold scorpions guard treasuries. Lording over it all, the green masked sultan on his throne plays with a sextant.

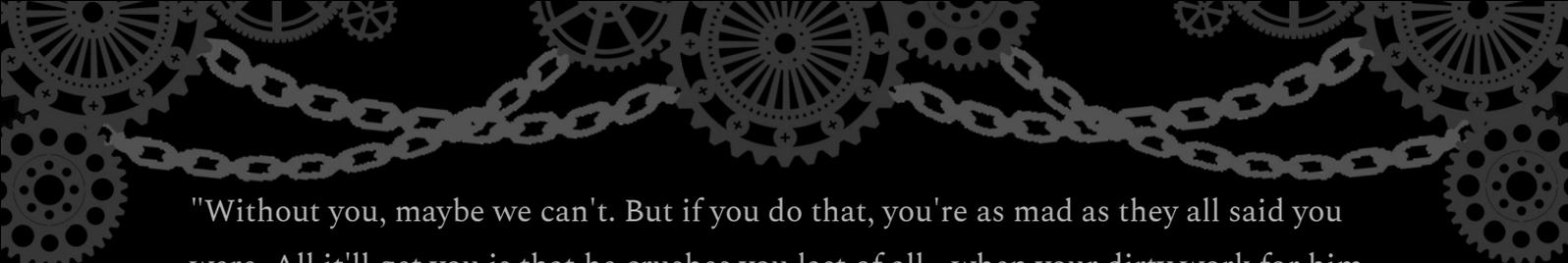
"The conspirators return. Come to tell me more lies?"

"I have been honest with you. Had you been more forthright..."

"Until you turned your back on me and joined with that disgusting alchemist. The irony of him betraying you in return is delightful, to say the least. Speak your piece, mercenary, I will listen one last time."

"There are more pressing matters than old grudges" Jorrit intervenes. "By all indications, the alchemist prince is not a problem for Lucas alone, now is he? One should assume that you'd have a healthy interest in joining the alliance we have been forging."

"I'm not convinced your little alliance *can* stop him. Perhaps I would be better off joining him? Wouldn't that be the sweetest irony of all?"



"Without you, maybe we can't. But if you do that, you're as mad as they all said you were. All it'll get you is that he crushes you last of all - when your dirty work for him is done"

"And we would both gain the knowledge of the tome." Adds Lucas.

"Words! Words of liars and betrayers! Promising me what the alchemist already offers! I will allow you to depart, for such are the ways of honor! But I will seek you on the battlefield, curs!"

Lucas continues with the insults, but eventually the dreamers depart the Sultan's palace, bronze gates ringing as they close behind them. A somber descent sees them at the beach and their boat takes them to the dreaming fleet.

The remaining dreamers watch an island crushed by the alchemical waters. Ricardo stares at the unstoppable storm, and then their small fleet.

"Any other known allies? Sofia?"

"Guess we could try the hollow men or the limbless one. I do have a member of my family in their ranks."

"OK, well that sounds promising. My contact would likely attempt to bind us in sexual prisons or somesuch, her tastes run lascivious. That, and I have remained cordial yet not close with her. Let's try your dreamscape."

The bubbling of the sea births mermaids, dancing in pairs under the waves. They bring a seaweed carpeted yacht from the depths. Sofia and Ricardo board it, the mermaids dragging them to an island under the light of a blood moon.





The crimson shade of the leaves is nuanced by the rainwater. Pulling their ship ashore, they walk through the foliage immediately. Singing of sirens carries through the vines of the undergrowth. Contractions hit Sofia before they reach the music's origin.

The Keepers have solidified their industry in the valley, overtaking even the pyramid. Factories on each level churn smoke, creating clouds in the sky, hiding the moons. Ascending its massive steps, the dreamers find the Keepers worshipping a dancing figure. What deceptively looked like a woman from the distance is Sofia's squid-like offspring. The passion magician sidles up to one of the Keepers, waiting for the best opportunity to interrupt.

"We wish to discuss an alliance."

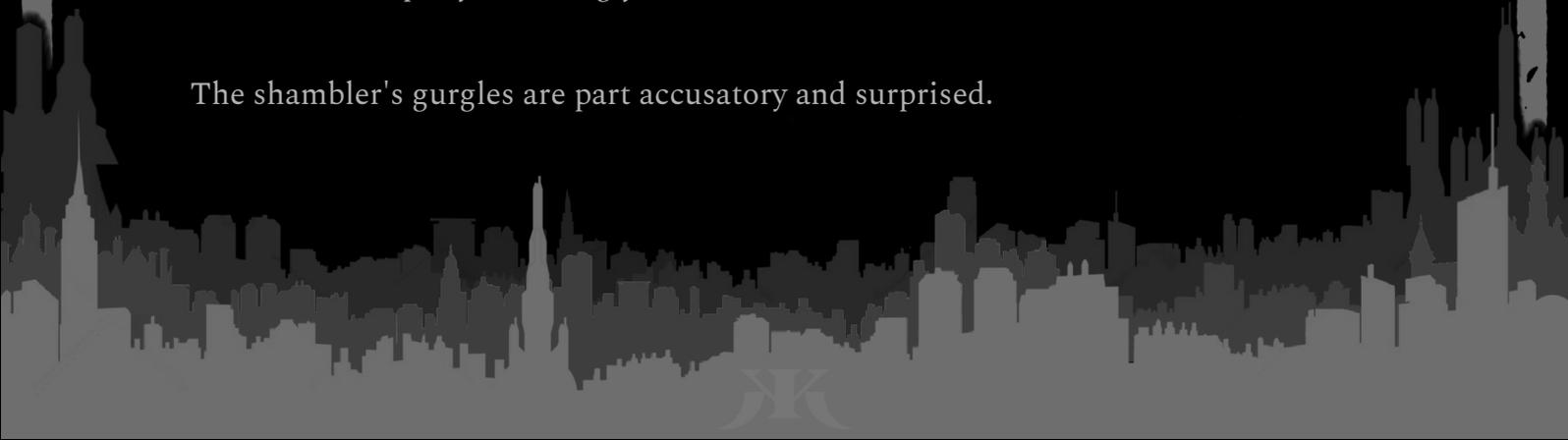
Before the Keeper can reply, the contractions hit Sofia even harder. She wonders what shades her womb has attracted this time when her water breaks. A tangle of organs covered in leeches lands on the floor and struggles for a moment. Somehow it finds its ground and lifts a knife made out of resin. A Famaría assassin crawls towards the dancing dream god.

An expert at its function, the organ assassin cuts through the Keepers. It knows their weak spots, striking at the bindings of meat and metal. There would be nothing to stop it from reaching its target. But Ricardo feels the tides, and brings a crimson moonshine from the sky. It petrifies the crawling death, making it part of the pyramid. An algae shambler speaks, the mouthpiece for the Keepers.

"Our Mother, a deceiver for the Famaría? Is our fate this dire?"

"I would never put you willingly at risk."

The shambler's gurgles are part accusatory and surprised.





"Then why did you bring one of the Famaría here?"

"I didn't know. Why would I lie to you?"

"Then what is it the mother wants from us?"

"We have a problem with Prince Kopfel and we need you to assist us in beating them." She takes a longing look at her offspring. "It's nice to see her again..."

"Behold, you have bore us one child with success, and we are no longer dying! Agree to forever be mother of the Underworld and we shall join you against the prince!"

"I will agree to your terms, but when this is over we will discuss what will be my duties."

Ricardo's expression turns to one of relief, unsure as to what her choice would be.

"As you aid the dream, so too shall I endeavor to assist in the underworld, when and if I can, anyway."

"I appreciate it."

The Keepers seem pleased with the response. Sofia and Ricardo are escorted back through the jungle. On the scarlet beach, the Children of the Underworld cut down trees. A collection of gondolas soon join the dreaming fleet.





Some with reinforcements, some without, the dreamers all return to the dusk ocean. Kopfel's alchemical storm is almost at the center of the Dreaming.

"How did it go?" Ricardo asks of Lucas. The mercenary is somber.

"The sultan will be against us."

"I see." Ricardo says, disappointed but not surprised. "He didn't seem the helpful sort at all. I thought he was at odds with Kopfel. Or perhaps that was a ruse, or a more friendly competition than we had guessed."

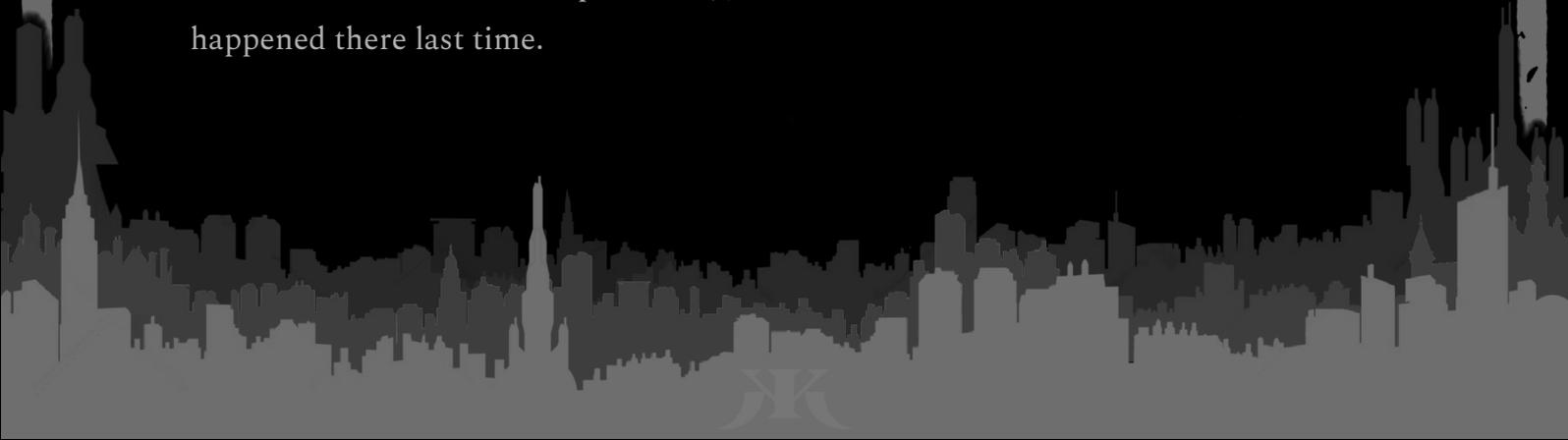
"If that was the case, then fuck him. He will kneel in submission."

"There used to be other realms that we can visit out here." He scans the horizon for a moment before he grimaces at Joritts observation.

It's evident and frightening what Kopfel has managed to achieve with the help of only one Key. Where the ocean of dreams was full of islands, it now stands almost barren, victim to the vortex storm. A reactive cleansing to a corrupting agent spreading through mankind's dreams. Soon Kopfel will have too much in his grasp, unstoppable by whatever is left.

"There is only one more I can think of. The matron of the islands of perversion. She is a stately sort, and very dangerous."

"So we're off to the crystal island then? Is that where the princess of pleasures said not to come back without a present?", Jorrit remembers Ricardo's tales of what happened there last time.





Ricardo concentrates a moment, eyes closed and hands clasped, then starts thumbing his nose and sniffing. In his hands appears an ornate chest, the size of a bread box.

"This should at least favorably dispose her to our request," he says, opening it, "as I recall she is a fan of drugs." Inside it is filled with an assortment of narcotics in baggies and an ornate pipe. He samples a bit of the coke. Having spent so much time navigating this ocean, the dream magician can already see her island.

The dhow changes direction before Ricardo consciously thinks about it. Night falls while they travel to the crystal island.

Their sailship crushes multicolored glass beads when it lands. The night sky's stars are hidden by the blue silicate obelisk castles. Jaunting the streets, their shoes crack syringes and vials.

Half-naked jaguar women, their stripes whip scars, walk their beats. Here, the visiting dreaming men are catcalled for their cowardice. Their egos fall easy prey to she-mantises devouring them in dark alleys.

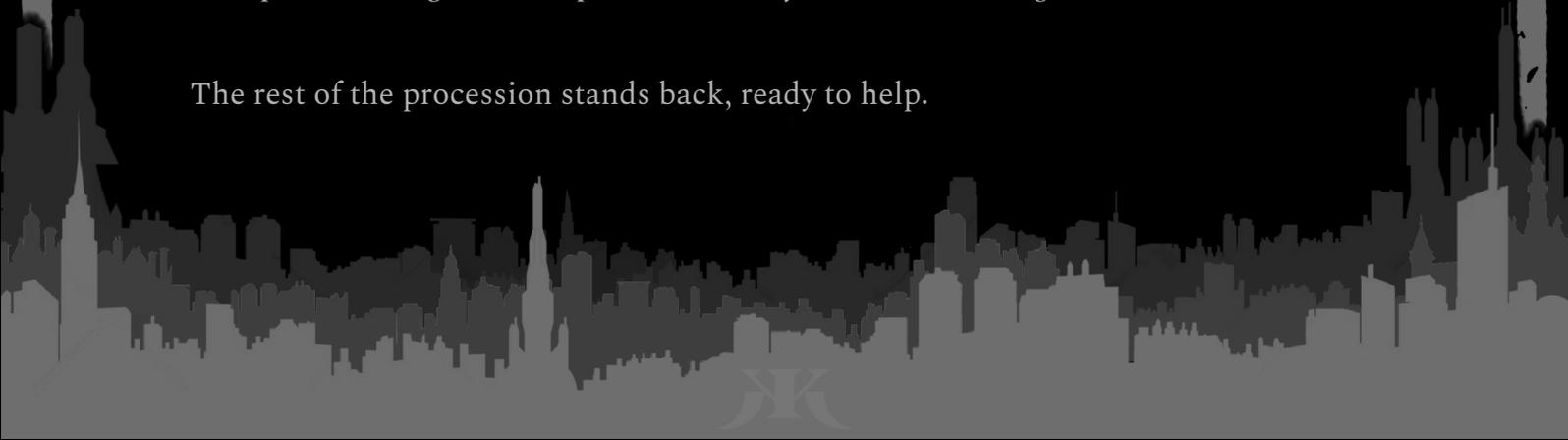
The matron's diamond guards wave the dreamers through without complaint. An orchid garden grows in the interior of the paper and glass palace. A small japanese businessman is taken apart by the geisha with her knife. She samples his liver with a glass of white wine before speaking.

"Mr. Sensible returns. Got something for me, honey?"

Ricardo walks forward, presenting her with the ornate chest.

"I hope that this gift is acceptable. I know you like to have a good time."

The rest of the procession stands back, ready to help.





"So as not to waste your time, I'll lay out all the cards. Kopfel is expanding his territory, seeking to take over the entire dream space it seems. We are seeking the aid of beings of great power, and now we have come to your doorstep in search of aid to stop him before he takes it all over."

The dreamers watch Ricardo make his offering to the geisha.

"We have already gathered a great force, ships of warriors ready to storm his realm. I have come to see if I could secure your aid in preventing his machinations from despoising your realm, and the realms of others."

"Tsk, tsk. I was hoping you're a little more creative than that. It's always the material things with you men: jewelry, flowers, or chocolate. As if I don't have enough of that here, in my realm."

She points the blood stained knife all around the small garden. A collection of orchids donated by admirers and coffee tables with cocaine rails. Ricardo's gift pales in comparison.

"And you always want something, something for your little war games."

The geisha wipes an eyelash off her face, leaving a trail of blood on her white painted face.

"I've been trapped here long enough tending to men's fantasies. I'm tired. Perhaps it's time someone ends it. Maybe it's the alchemist. So, I don't really see a reason to help you. If that's all you've come to say..."

"What about the memories of our terrors? Would that be more acceptable?"





"More trinkets, more toys, more parties, it never changes. I've held the tears pouring from the nightmares of countless women sold as meat. Your measly terrors don't mean much in comparison."

"Why not then join us in the fight? Perhaps that will invigorate you."

"Just another party. I'll give you a piece of advice, young mage. Leave the dreaming behind, before it's too late. Before you're trapped here, like the rest of us. Now, if you don't mind, I've got the rest of a pimp to savor."

"I find the dreaming far too interesting to let it just be taken by Kopfel. Is there no way I can secure your aid?"

"I offer myself." Jorrit steps to the front.

His shirtless skin is disfigured here, as in the waking, by swirls and wrinkles as if from burn wounds or as if melted and settled into solidity again by unholy forces beyond ordinary medical ken. Here in the dreams though, the wrinkles and swirls seem to form a hypnotic pattern, almost spelling out equations or hinting at sacred geometries...

"If you join us in our fight against Kopfel, I will serve you. I like this place you have here, and if I return here every night for the rest of my life to do your bidding, I could fare much worse in what I've seen from the world, both waking and dreaming.

Also, I think I could be of value to you, as well. I have survived and beaten the Cairath plague. I have delved into and come back from the Void itself. My flesh bears witness to all of that. I am a seeker, and a fighter, fast as lightning and harder to kill than any you have ever met... and I will offer you my services, in whatever function you deem desirable or useful."





"Don't be ridiculous, honey, you'd be just another freak in the circus. And I'm looking to pull up the tent for good. Besides, your market value just plummeted. My spies have told me of that cure you gave the young doctor. Soon there will be millions like you arriving in my realm. As for you, young mage..."

The matron rips a kidney out of the pimp, and throws it to some nearby hounds.

"You think you're the first to say that? That's how it starts. Some empty headed romantic falls in love with the dream. Then he builds his own little world, and seeks power. Before he knows it, he can't leave, and is trapped here forever. With nothing but his petty insignificant schemes. Let Kopfel conquer or destroy it all. It isn't all that valuable anyway. It's just a dream..."

Ricardo moves to the back of the group, lost in thought, the words ringing true.

Sofia had been watching and trying to figure out what passions move the Princess.

"We might be able to help you gain power here. Instead of passions of the flesh you can gain real power to do what you wish. Ally with us and we and our allies will help you gain control of your destiny."

"You still don't get it do you, darling? Probably why you're engaged in this little squabble. I already have power, ultimate power even. And it means nothing, because there's nothing more to wish for. Only the void calls, and perhaps I'll visit. Time for you to go."

She snaps her fingers and the dreamers find themselves floating in the dreaming fleet.





Massive waves crash into the boats, dwarfing them with raging foams and cruel winds. Kopfel's alchemical storm has drawn near the boats of the Horned Giants. Despite their desperate attempts, many of them drown in the foam. Gems sparkle in the storm clouds, ready to swallow an island of ashen desert.

"Someone has to take care of the sultan before he reinforces Kopfel."

"I reckon you're right, Lucas." Sofia yells the last bit, for the surrounding boats to hear.

"I'll do it! If I don't see you again, it's been a pleasure!" He yells, slipping deeper into the dream. His canoe drifting out, its swallowed by storm waves along with his giants.

When he wakes, the charcoal beach of the ash maze greets him. Waves crash into Lucas's face when he rolls on his back. Gonzales picks him up. He sees the horned dream gods and dead soldiers marching on the Sultan's palace.

"Fuck is..." He pats Gonzalez on the shoulder to indicate that he is okay. He is disoriented for a few moments, wondering how he got split from the others. No time to think though. He joins the March ahead.

His troops make quick work of the myriapods guarding the ziggurat palace. One of the giants rams the double gate, stepping on the djinn guards. With courtiers concubines running out of the way, the disciple enters the throne room. The giants make short work of the Sultan's guards, but he stands up from his throne and walks to the banquet table.

"Easily dealt with!"





Lucas draws his rifle as his army turns to autumn leaves, blown away by a breeze. His own hands and weapon crumble into ash, with the sultan smiling.

A sudden wash of power flows through the disciple, a vision of conflicts, surging upon him in the dreamworld. Courtroom battles between billionaires and the government. Civil actions from the people. Media blitzkriegs. Riots in the streets. Gang conflicts. Social media revolutions.

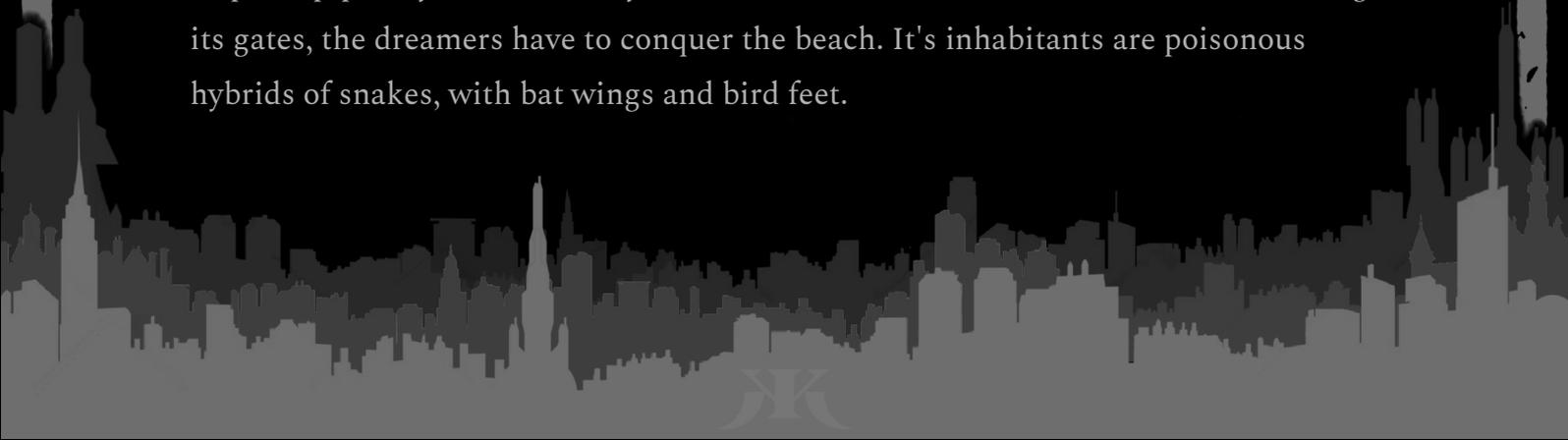
With a final effort, Lucas materializes and launches a scimitar at Al Sufi, cutting him in half. Inside he is nothing but sand and ash, blending into the crumbling palace made of the same. A breeze picks up the dust cloud that is a disintegrating Lucas, who spouts a final remark before fading away into nothingness.

"Pleasant dreams, asshole!"

I open my eyes for a moment, and see the dreamers sleeping on ice slabs. The Awakened's journal has a few more pages burned in it. Only five pages are left. I close my eyes. I see a wave pushing the fleet into the clockwork cavern.

Stalactites shining with precious gems are traversed by lightning bolts. Among them, gearwork chiropterans hang, encircled by smoke djinns. Below, waiting on the beach are black myriapods and chimeric hybrids. A gated wall is held by recombined, sewn together dock men. Factories in the pipe-town are attended by brainjar golems with multiple limbs. Ruling over it all, the clockwork tower strikes midnight, host to sorcerers on balconies.

Kopfel's pipe city is defended by stone walls carved from the cavern. Before reaching its gates, the dreamers have to conquer the beach. It's inhabitants are poisonous hybrids of snakes, with bat wings and bird feet.





For their part, the dreamers have amassed a gargantuan force. Keepers and Children of the Underworld advance in gondolas. The motorcycle riding hypnonaut warriors and mad scientists operate on rusty oil tankers. Parvati's stone men of regret walk upon the shores. Above it all, a cloud of gargoyles screech, circling the fleet.

"We must defeat the myriad forces out here, army versus army." Ricardo points out. "Kopfel is powerful in the ways of dream so I can't just get us inside. Then we take down the gate. Ascend the tower, and take him on. Sometime along the way take out the sorcerers, with rifles perhaps or melee when we get there."

"We should kill these chimeric hybrid wretches first! And watch out for those Djinns, too. And not get bogged down on the beach, we must advance on the gate as fast as possible..." Jorrit suggests to Ricardo, the stratagems continuing for a while before the moment arrives.

A pair of raven wings uncoil themselves off Ricardo's back, ripping the skin as it takes off. The feral entity he hosts flies for the tower, but the chiropterans and djinns drop, giving chase. Ricardo remembers the nightmares of the sinners, and a cohort of dream seraphs steam the murky water as they rise.

"Follow the creature with the black wings, kill the chiropterans and djinns!" Ricardo orders of the dream seraph contingent. He also turns to the mad scientists.

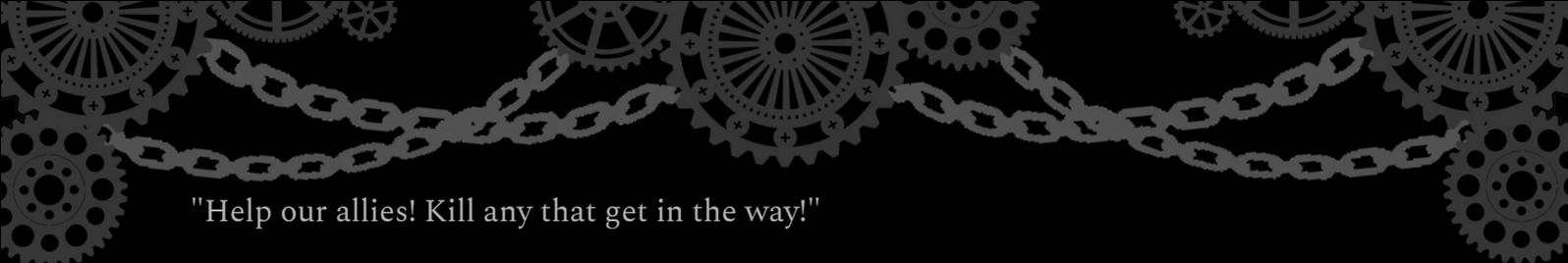
"Take out enemies at range, clear the path for the aerial troops and distract or injure the sorcerers to prepare them for the dream seraph landing."

Parvati roars up at the stone giants.

"You'll be the vanguard! Focus on the gate to bring it down!"

Sofia leads the hollow men.





"Help our allies! Kill any that get in the way!"

Jorrit now shouts out the orders to the other ships and their various crews.

"Those who can, provide air support, attack the gate and the sorcerers on that tower. Everyone else: Start killing them!"

He then leads his troops in.

"GARGOYLES - with me! We're the first to make landfall and smash into the chimeric hybrids! Their poison will be meaningless to us, and we'll make a dent for the others to follow up through!"

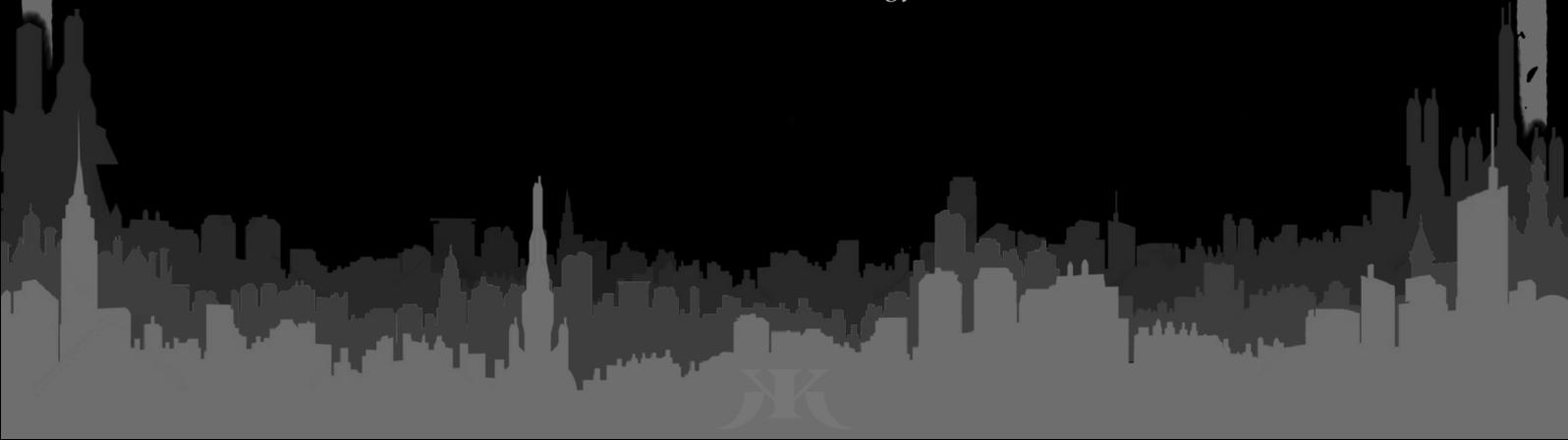
The dream seraphs prove no match for Kopfel's combined aerial forces. They fall from the sky, setting fire to the beach. Only the ravenwing has made it through to the tower. It smashes into a balcony and commences tearing sorcerers.

Parvati's stone giants step through the chimeras. A few are taken down, but the gargoyles reinforce them. One steps on the city gates, crumbling it open. Behind the catapults of the recombined men stand.

Ricardo's forces either decimated or currently acting under orders, he sets his sights on the catapults, looking to test his control of the dream.

"Call the giants back," Ricardo says, straining, "there will be an explosion."

The recombined men around the catapults mesh with the catapults themselves. From within a red glow pulses with the rhythm of a heartbeat as their veins are connected to one another in a molten core of energy.





Slaughtering abominations that make himself seem almost normal in comparison, Jorrit keeps up with the Gargoyles as they support the Giant Stone Men in crashing through the gate.

"Hypnonaut Warriors! Into the Breach!" Jorrit yells at the ragged bikers!

Parvati cups her hands to her mouth and yells, hoping the stone giants would be able to hear me.

"Fall back! The catapult's going to explode!"

The stone giants retreat to the beach while the motorcycle warriors replace them. A blast resulting from the catapults torches their bikes as well. In a flash, the walls are gone, as are the mutants and a few giants. Heating up their tesla coils, the mad scientists shoot electricity at the flyers. It's not much help against the djinn, who dive onto them.

Ricardo, standing near the scientists, throws up his hands in a defensive posture and releases his inner power in an attempt to damage or give pause to the djinn.

Flinching about the sudden and near-total loss of the mutant bikers, and the sheer and massive brutality of the carnage that ensues around him, Jorrit grits his teeth and goes back to commanding the Gargoyles instead.

"With me, into the breach!!"

And over the still red-hot ground where the catapults and walls used to be just a few moments ago, they advance into the city. Sofia, frenzied, urges the Keepers on.

"Storm the breach and fuck them up!"





Abandoning the balconies, the feral ravenwing turns around. It zips between stalactites, tearing the bandages wrapping up the smoke. A good set of the djinn die, and the rest retreat to the tower.

The Keepers hold back, using the more disposable Children of the Underworld as a vanguard. A ragtag band of raptors and dream smiths are shredded by gearwork chiropterans diving from above. In turn, the gargoyles clash into them, stopping short of the tower.

Jorrit finds himself faced with brainjar golems on stilted bronze legs. The spit bile and acids flow onto the streets, wiping away whatever recombined men are left.

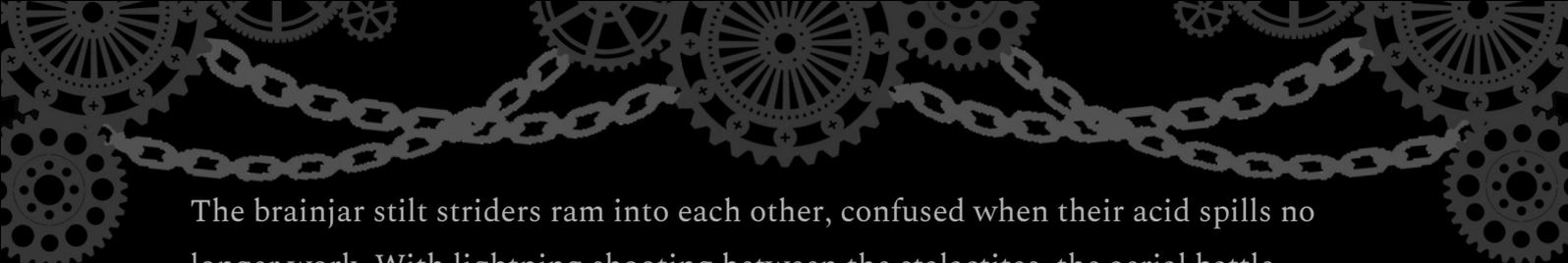
The abomination and the Gargoyles are trying to clear a path to the tower, for Keepers, Children, Giants, and whoever else may be left to advance behind them. Too fast for the clumsy golems by far, Jorrit is unimpressed by their uncoordinated vomiting attacks, and proceeds to tear into them, the Gargoyles at his side.

Ricardo moves forward, slowly, leaving the scientists to perform their ranged support where they are. Still staying very much out of the main skirmish, he stands ready to get to the tower a few minutes after Jorrit.

The dream mage makes it past the walls only to hear the clanking of the mechanical stilt striders. They're recharging their acid tanks from massive containers where recombined men work.

Ricardo looks at them, startled. He hadn't noticed them on his approach, thinking them abandoned constructs with no pilots. He makes a chopping motion with his hand and over in their vicinity some hoses and pipes transferring the acid sprout holes and disconnect, hindering or making it impossible to fill them and squirting acid over the recombined men.





The brainjar stilt striders ram into each other, confused when their acid spills no longer work. With lightning shooting between the stalactites, the aerial battle continues, neither side gaining. Much of the city is in smoking ruins with the remaining forces rushing the streets.

The abomination jumps from rooftop to rooftop, reaching the tower. He can see a balcony slightly out of his range where a sorcerer is charging an ice spike. Looking behind, the gargoyles are still tangled with the chiropterans above it all.

Feeling the unnatural swiftness already leaving his distorted limbs, Jorrit darts across the rooftop as far as he can, and then makes a jump for the sorcerer.

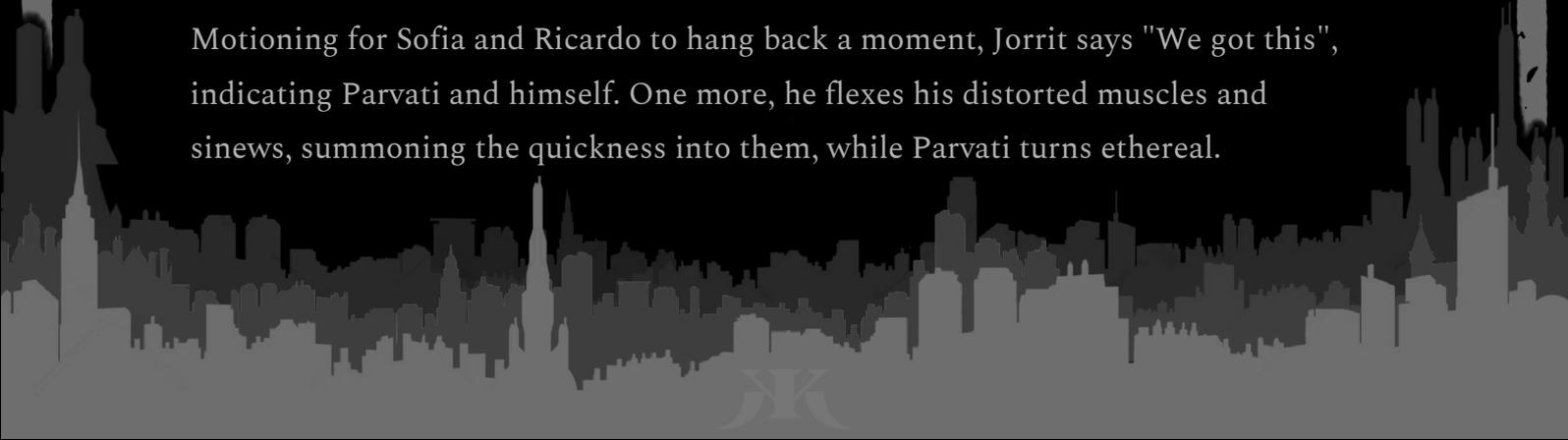
Jorrit rips the sorcerer's heart out, splattering his white robe with gore. Inside, the maze of pipeworks and stairs leads upwards, the elevator shaft inaccessible. Loath to enter the maze-like insides of the tower all on his own, Jorrit looks around from his elevated position on the balcony.

Ricardo, at the base of the tower, cautiously moves inside, the battle outside no longer of consequence. Sofia and Parvati are leading what remains of the troops, wiping out the remnants in the city. The clocktower's ring is deafening to all who approach it.

"We have to go in now!" Jorrit yells to the rest. "There's no time to lose!"

Ricardo collapses to the stonework in agony, the noise no mere byproduct, but aimed at him. Parvati picks him up and, along with Sofia, rush up the stairs, meeting Jorrit. They all stare down more sorcerers descending by staircases from upper levels, hands trembling in spell conjurations against the intruders.

Motioning for Sofia and Ricardo to hang back a moment, Jorrit says "We got this", indicating Parvati and himself. One more, he flexes his distorted muscles and sinews, summoning the quickness into them, while Parvati turns ethereal.





Cleaving, clawing, and viciously biting, Jorrit and Parvati fall upon the hapless sorcerers in a blur of deadly motion. The abomination then snarls and growls at the remaining ones, mouth blood-smeared, and an insane obsession as well as the promise of death clear to read in his black eyes. Starting at them, he roars in the most menacing way, to see if he can drive them off without further slaughtering needed. Parvati makes use of the rusted refuse gear mechanisms laying around, telekinetically flinging everything she can into the mass of sorcerers.

"STOP THIS GODDAMN RINGING!" Ricardo shouts, hands on his ears as he lays in the corner. The creature within him similarly antagonized by this horrid cacophony, it leaps out of him and seeks to end the sound by destroying the mechanical workings of the bell or simply dispersing the magical notes.

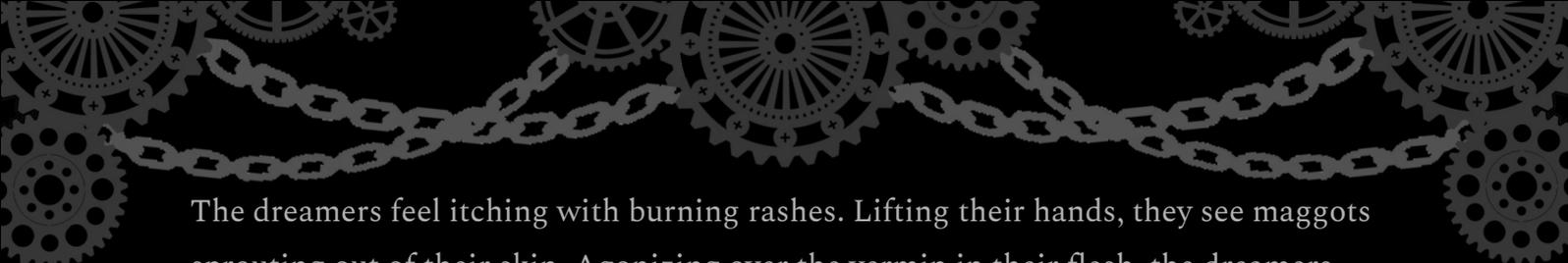
Somehow, out of sight, the ravenwing manages, a crashing bell is heard, and the ringing stops. The abomination and revenant keep the sorcerers busy long enough for Sofia and Ricardo to climb. Guided by the dream magician through the pipework maze, they arrive in the throne chamber. Half assembled chimeras litter the tables with glasswork carrying bubbling alchemical substances. The black worm gambeson prince watches the battlefield through a shattered painted window, his back turned.

"Back again I see, no doubt for your little pamphlet."

Kopfel turns, his face half eaten by necrotic tissue, foul veins pulsating.

"Too late!"

"What has become of you, Kopfel? You are being eaten alive. And for what?" Ricardo asks of the man, while deliberately reaching out with his aura to answer that question for himself.



The dreamers feel itching with burning rashes. Lifting their hands, they see maggots sprouting out of their skin. Agonizing over the vermin in their flesh, the dreamers hear a distorted voice.

"It doesn't matter if the Tome is too taxing! Once I rule the dreaming, I'll escape into reality! I'll bring my armies through and conquer new flesh! You fool, you let ultimate power slip through your fingers!"

"If you conquer the Dreaming, you'll be stuck here, rooted as the worms are in your flesh. The more of the Dream you let inside yourself, the more you become attached to the very fabric, as those worms are in you!"

Ricardo focuses on the vermin. Under his influence, the necrosis spreads across Kopfel's face, making it unrecognizable. At the same time, the ailments of his allies tone down in scale. Kopfel stops, but only for a second.

"Dream shaping, *cough* huh? Fool, I invented it!"

His body elongates, cracking bones completing the stretching skin. The eyes burst, two more grayish tongues sticking out of the sockets. His head splits in three parts, each with its own leading section of neck. Rips continue to grow above and below, morphing into an osseous plate.

When his transformation is complete, Kopfel looms from above. A three headed worm covered in bonemold armor ululates in the tower. One of his proboscis lashes at the abomination.

Tired from the fighting below, Jorrit isn't fast enough to dodge. The worm's stinger perforates through his chest, lifting him off the floor. It's skin radiates with hypnotic colors, making it nauseating to look at.





Smashing through the window behind it, the dream mage's ravenwing latches on to the worm. Its catlike eyes are barely visible before its sharp teeth bite into the bone. A thick fluid paints the ceiling white when Parvati rips off one of the heads with her bare hands.

Invigorated by this fresh jab of pain through his chest, Jorrit's turns his exhaustion and tiredness into anger, searing hot anger that spills forth like a flash of lightning. Inescapable, the abomination descends upon the blasphemous horror the Prince has turned into, shredding and tearing at the bony armor plates to get at the pallid, squishy flesh beneath. Ricardo's entity helps, ripping a protective rib off the worm's body, the gash showing vulnerable white meat, throbbing and bleeding. Jorrit takes full advantage, digging into the warm flesh.

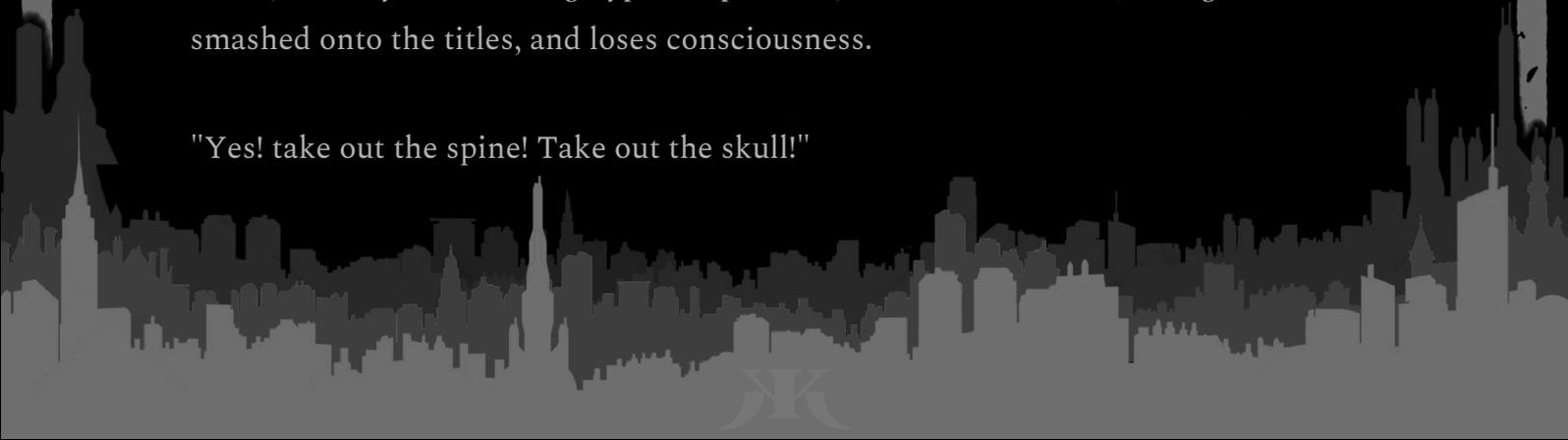
Gripping her hands around the next head's tongue, Parvati tears it off, but it's no use. Pulsating it's body, the worm drinks from the abomination still impaled in its proboscis. One of it's heads regenerates, but not the gash on its body.

Raising his meat cleaver once more, Jorrit launches another flurry of attacks, entangled in a deadly contest with the horror siphoning his life essence. More of the creature's bony armor comes undone by the claws of Ricardo's feral. The worm is losing ability to stay upright, its body twisting to maintain balance. Jorrit puts several powerful slices in the newly grown head, cutting off its tongue. It's not enough to decapitate it.

Ricardo, blood pumping with fervor at the sight of Kopfel so grievously injured, continues lashing out with the beast. He can almost taste the flesh himself.

His ravenwing digs into the spine, launching a vertebrae into the wall. The Kopfel worm, its body still flushing hypnotic patterns, slides on the floor. Jorrit gets smashed onto the tiles, and loses consciousness.

"Yes! take out the spine! Take out the skull!"





Parvati rips another head while the feral entity obeys and takes flight. Spine in hand, it rips the worm in half, covering everyone in its white blood. The remnants of white flesh reveal the prize, a human skin covered book. An earthquake occurs, gears and pipes breaking through the walls. Ricardo moves to take the book.

"We must leave here, and soon."

The dream magician keeps the tower from collapsing just long enough to grab the Tome Of Worms. Through the window, a whirlpool breaches the cavern, destroying everything in its path. It rams into the tower, the vortex at its base dissolving the dream. The dreamers awaken in the citadel hosted in the glaciers of samael.

"The fuck!" Lucas jumps awake, body half frozen from the cold. Sofia is still disoriented.

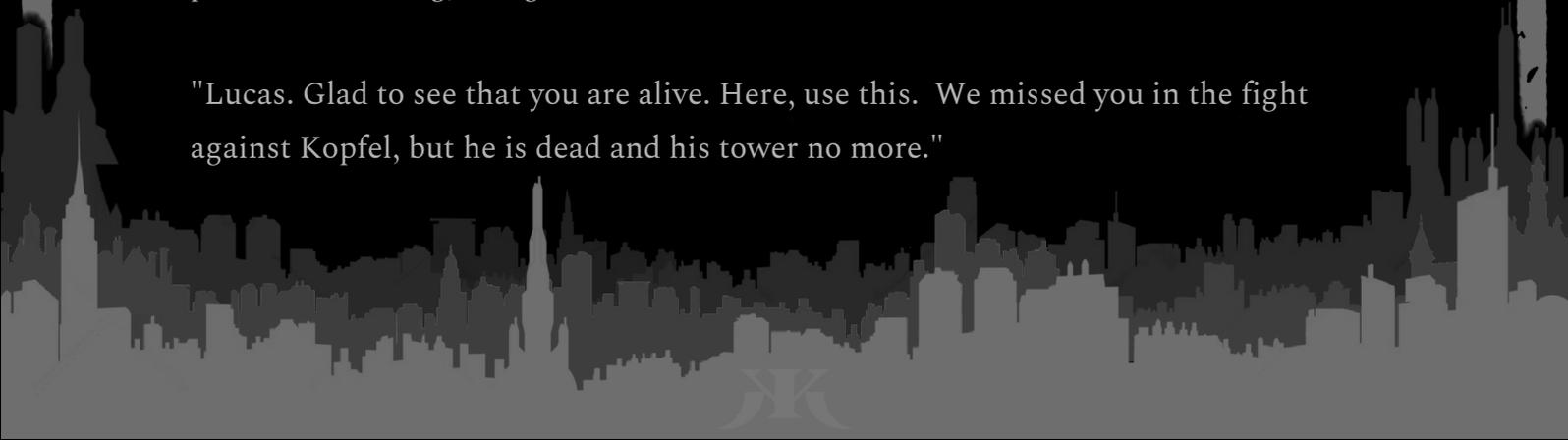
"Can anyone tell me what the fuck happened?"

I check the Awakened Child's journal to see another page inscribing itself. The heat leaves when the scribings end. Only four blank pages are left.

Checking their bodies, they see the wounds inflicted in the dreaming are still there. Through a pane of transparent ice, we can just about make out an arid waste after the glaciers.

Ricardo, accustomed to waking up in all manner of ways, pulls a vial of regenerative paste from his bag, along with the Tome Of Worms.

"Lucas. Glad to see that you are alive. Here, use this. We missed you in the fight against Kopfel, but he is dead and his tower no more."





"What's next?" The disciple of Netzach asks, applying the green paste. It knits together sinew, regrows bone, closes skin, all fresh and newborn. Jorrit answers him.

"Gamichicoth. The Lord of False Hopes and Broken Promises. We toppled him from his Throne of Lies, but his followers remain. It won't be easy."

"Sarnilluth, you must have the souls of all those slain purgatides and razides here somewhere." Ricardo asks of his lover.

Waking from her sleep on the ice slab she shared with her beloved, Sarnilluth rubs her eyes. Her steel spiked frame and muzzle arm scrape against the floe when she supports herself up.

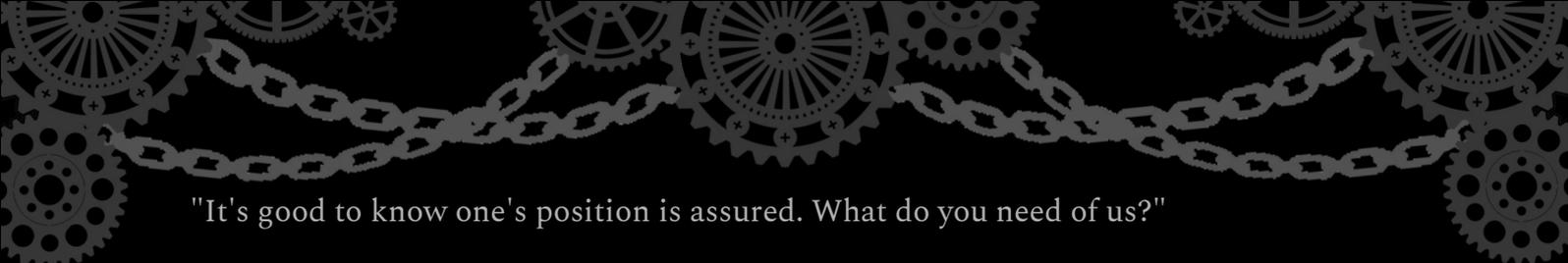
"It's not entirely up to me, beloved. It would mean depriving the hunters of their spoils. Tir'nan the guile is the one who leads them, and with him you'll have to barter. We'll have to go below. He's the sort that keeps his hands busy."

Sarnilluth leads us through narrow staircases of sleet. Cerulean torches emit a chill shine reflected on the glinting walls. The prisoners are half encased in ice, still alive with chattering teeth. Tir'nan is a pygmy with knives through his face wielding a chainsaw three times his size. He sculpts upon flesh and floe alike, his machine spitting red flakes off a victim.

"What do the Daughter Of Rifles and her New Lords want with me?"

"We seek an alliance with yourself in the upcoming struggles. In return we offer you a place in our new order." Sofia negotiates, manipulating his hunger for power.





"It's good to know one's position is assured. What do you need of us?"

"Bring all of the souls. We need to bolster our army."

"Then we march as soon as they're thawed."

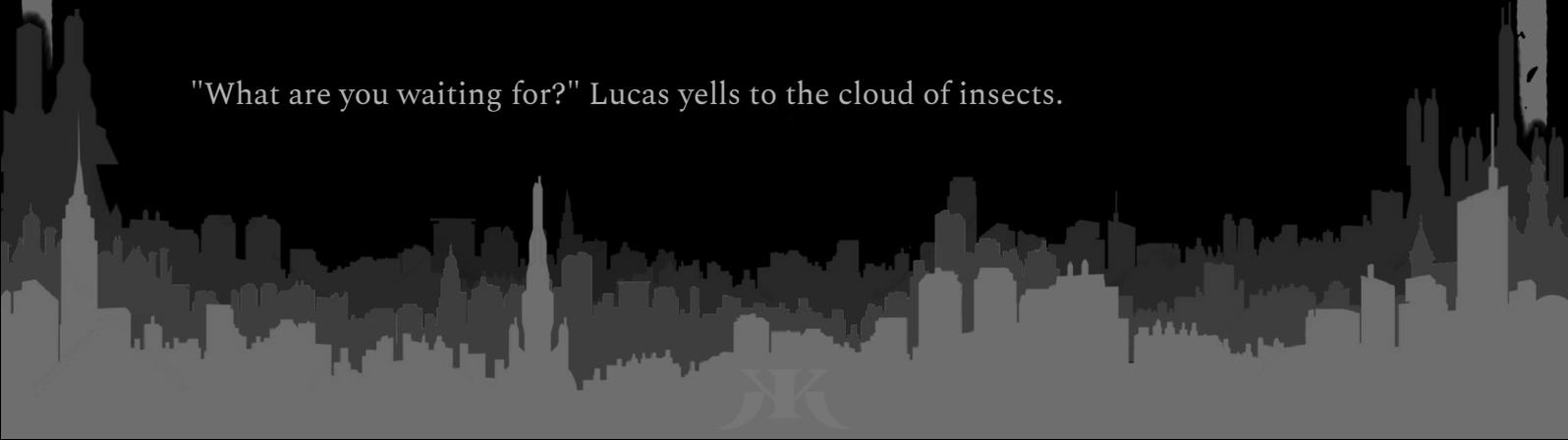
True to his word, in a few hours a combined army assembles. Most of it is composed by the damned, still thawing or dragging their shackles. Next come the better equipped razides with Grunberg's weapons. Commanding them all are Golab's nepharites and Samael's hunters. We ride on pale skeletal horses along Kurgath, Sarnilluth and Tir'nan. Millions of souls march for the Desert Of False Hopes.

There isn't so much as a draft in the night air of the desert. The blistering heat escorts the army advancing across a railway of bones. Many Gamichicoth boys leave their slaves and flee before the troops. They are all retreating to the empty citadel hewn into an elevated siltstone mesa. Suddenly, the convoy halts, an indiscernible commotion at the front.

Circling on higher hills on top of his skeletal mount, we see what halted the army. A colossal mass grave serves as a moat, with a bridge of bones over it. It's a perfect choke point, but there's no one to launch an ambush.

It's a sturdy construction for the building materials at hand. I have hazy memories of constructing it strong enough to sustain the train. The corpses underneath are boneless, decomposing husks, crawling with flies. From the grave, a cloud of vermin takes to the air, engulfing the osseous arches. They coalesce into something vaguely humanoid and familiar.

"What are you waiting for?" Lucas yells to the cloud of insects.





"I BRiNg a MeSSage fROm tHe ONES aBOvE to The Ones BeLOW. STOP YOuR MaRcH, fOr it hAS uNfoRSeEn COntSeqUences. ReAlITy Is CRUMBlIng BECaUSE OF yoUr aCtiONS."

"You're talking shit." Sofia adds.

"wE HAve NO REASON to liE, AnD nOtHIInG To gAiN. yOU hAVE BEcOME toO POWErFul TO oppOsE. i canNOt aCt to StOP You, NoT HEre, not nOW. but My WoRdS ArE tRUE, YOu ArE UpSEtTING ThE bALANcE. wItHOUT THE lOrDS of INFERNO, HUMANITy HaS lOST ALL ShAME. IT BlUDGeONs ItSElf paST iTS OWn lImits, PResSiNG thE iLLuSiON."

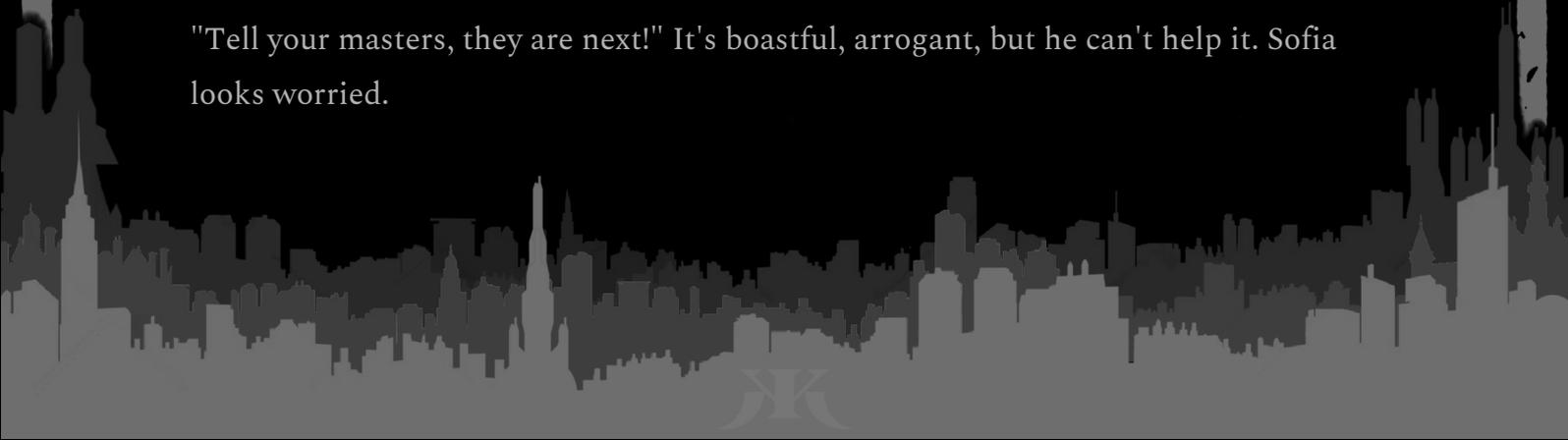
Lucas, instantly, turns a sour face towards the swarm.

"This fucking illusion, so much pain to hold on to. For what? You all know it's weakening anyway, let it go and be kings among gods!"

"THE ArCHonS UrGe yoU To THiNK baCk On yOUR TiME aS moRTAIS. TO ReMeMBER ThE fEar aNd unCErTAiNty thE mASses FACe. the lIE Is CoMFOrtinG, aNd TRUTH NeVER BRinGs HaPPyneSS. AlL youR ACTIoNs Will rESuLT In iS ConfuSiON aNd ChAOS. fOr ALL The LOvED Ones YOu leFt behiND, and COUNtlESs otheRS. You CAN StIlL TUrN BaCk. AccEpT youR sins aNd pUNiShments, ANd ReiNcarnATE. SpaRe HumanITy thE SUFFeRIng IT SOUGHT REFuge FROM in EIYsIuM. SELah..."

Its message delivered, the will of the archons dissipates into the night sky, all those wings creating the force to kick up. Sand whipping into his face, Lucas draws a mask from his neck, covering his mouth and nose.

"Tell your masters, they are next!" It's boastful, arrogant, but he can't help it. Sofia looks worried.





"So next we storm heaven?"

He lets out a mighty laugh, it goes on for more than a few moments before he calms himself. Lucas is clearly letting his ego take over.

"Of course we do! We steal hell and take over heaven!" He's nodding at his own words, so full of his ideology. "We shatter the whole system, the dream, the illusion, all of it, we are kings now!"

"I like the sound of that."

"Ricardo! Let's do this then!"

Sofia brings them down to earth. So to speak.

"One step at a time."

Continuing its march, the army crosses the bridge and arrives at the citadel. A gargantuan grotto entrance accommodates all of those following the rail. The interior butte is a circle of alcoves, lit by a mirror lake for a ceiling. Perched caves host the Gamichicoth boys with their gouged eyes, leather straps and whips.

Higher still on the stratified streaked shales are emaciated abbots intoning their prayers of hate. Xarth the Elder leads the recitations from a chiseled lectern of maroon slate. Underneath his white hood his fangs drip venom, uncaught by his missing lower jaw. Xarth preaches a sermon we've heard too often from the lectern. His attention focuses on the pale riders, his topic changing.

"Behold brothers, fetid half-gods, the usurpers of inferno! Those who would soil the purity of our infernal race. Speak your dirty words, slave meats!"



Sofia goes as far as she feels is safe before calling out.

"We have an army at our back and will wipe you all out if need be, but if you join us all will be stronger."

"It's not your claw we fear, sinners! Our demise will be at the hand of the train! Once it carried envoys and reinforcements to the belfry! Now, with inferno empty, it is hungry, craving meat! It will smash through soon enough, devouring us all! Our only solace is your perdition as well! Until our turn comes, we are content to watch!"

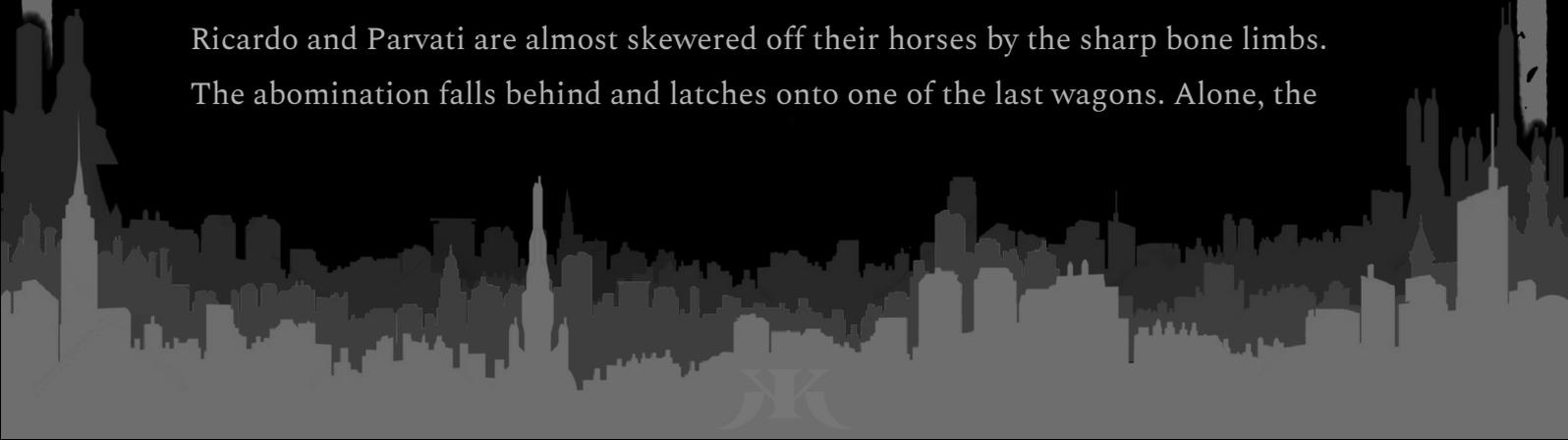
"You can join or die, I don't care anymore! Just get out of the way!" There are poisons inside Lucas, old ones that tell him to kill.

"Of course the usurpers threaten us, my brothers! Like many before them, they do not listen! It is no coincidence we infernals have risen to the top! You cannot scare us, for you have no real power here! And we know you will not reach us in time! Once again, the superior race has the upper terrain by virtue! Indeed, you are mere sinners, and here comes your judgement!"

True to his words, the seekers hear the macabre chime. A human whistle, blown through thousand esophagi of the locomotive. The train churns behind the column, trapping the army in the alcove. It's a thing of muscle and fat, its plow a set of sharp teeth. Elongated spikes propulse the empty wagons, implanting themselves in the sand.

Kicking their spurs, we ride their pale horses to meet the infernal express. It hurls past us, more preoccupied with the multitude of souls in the citadel. We catch up and attempt to board the wagons and locomotive.

Ricardo and Parvati are almost skewered off their horses by the sharp bone limbs. The abomination falls behind and latches onto one of the last wagons. Alone, the





passion magician grabs hold of the locomotive, where raw muscles churn, turning the tibia-spoked wheels.

The revenant dodges the sharp scythe-like bone arm sideways. She almost falls off the saddle, but holds on to the bridle. Her heels are dragged through the dirt before she rebalances.

The rest of us, now on the train, run towards the screaming locomotive. All the wagons are true rib cages, now empty of their cargo. Sofia looks on to the citadel growing larger by the second. It won't be long before the impact, our army of the damned bracing itself.

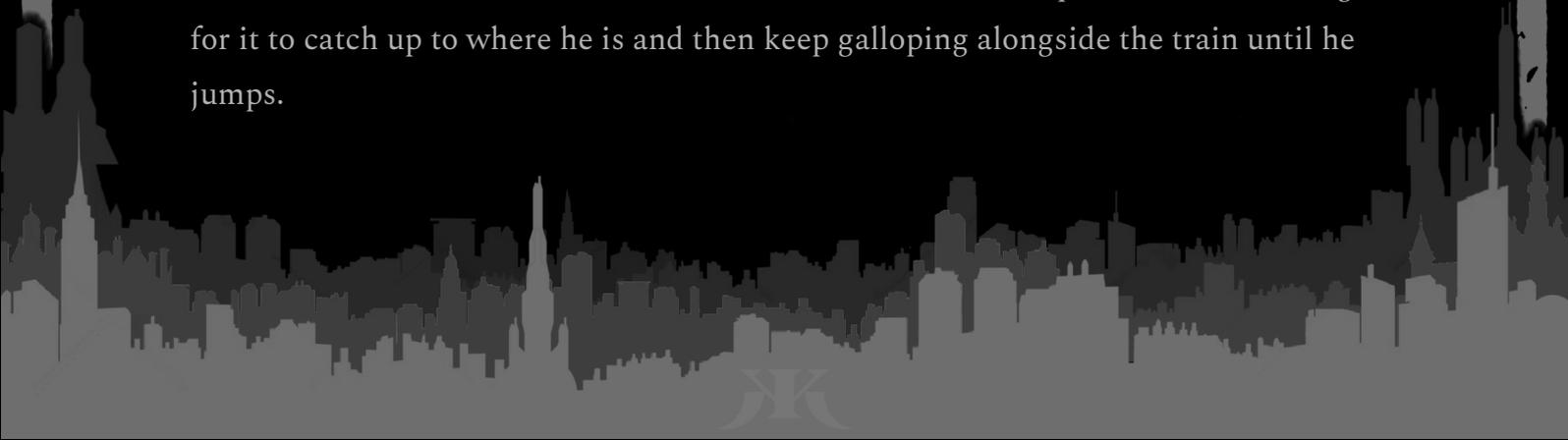
It took a second to realize this isn't a mechanical train, but a beast, a thing of emotions and passions. And passions is something that Sofia can work with. She presses her hand against the "body" of the train and closes her eye concentrating on drawing her power. We feel her every thought and emotion.

"Whoa there boy."

The passion magician bonds with the living engine powering the train. It must have been human, long ago in a methuselaic age. Now it's just crude desire and hunger, its suffering overwhelming.

Sofia focuses its urges to the wreck of a humongous excavator machine. She hopes the resulting collision will be enough to destroy it. The bone rail track reconfigures itself in that direction while the magician screams. We feel the brunt acceleration of the direction change in our guts.

He sends a mental command to his skeletal horse that is the equivalent of whistling for it to catch up to where he is and then keep galloping alongside the train until he jumps.





I'm not keen on the idea of leaping off of this thing at high speed. I take a broken bone from within the construct itself and use it to knock loose the hinge attaching the caboose, hoping that detaching it from the engine's force will slow it down sufficiently to save us from the worst of it.

The last wagon isn't slowing down as fast as I'd hoped. Moving swiftly through the empty wagons, Jorrit advances on where Sofia is at the front of the train, grabs her, and jumps off the train together at just the right moment. We follow suit and roll through lithic terrain, gathering scratches and bruises.

A howl erupts out of the cartilaged throat exhaust when the train crashes. A fire appears in the pileup. A fetor of cooked flesh fills the desert while the excavator fire consumes the train.

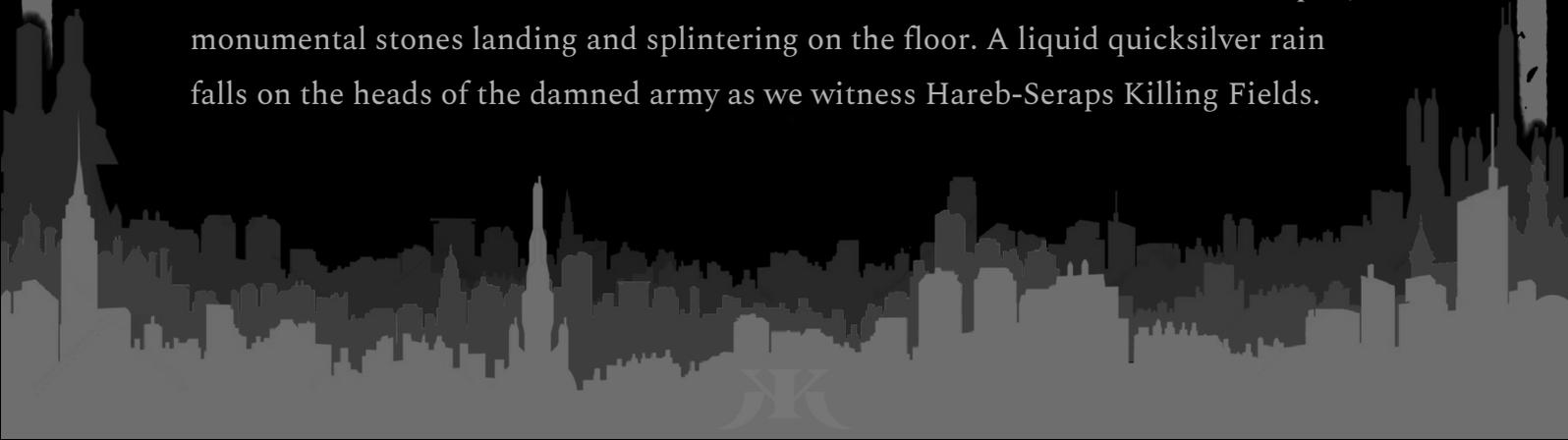
Covered dust, we lift ourselves off the bouldered landscape and regroup. Without horses the journey to the citadel turns into a period of silence. We find the army of the damned in a stalemate with Xarth and his ilk. Neither side has attacked, waiting instead for a verdict on the train.

"The usurpers return! What catastrophe have you blessed us with this time?"

"We've rescued you from the train! Now join us!"

"The followers of Gamichicoth don't engage in miscegenation with humans. You've robbed us of decent death. We'd rather fade away into nothingness since. To those nepharites who follow you, I leave a message. If you obey these interlopers, Inferno will fall, and you along with it."

Xarth and his abbots retreat into the shadows of their caves. An alcove cracks open, monumental stones landing and splintering on the floor. A liquid quicksilver rain falls on the heads of the damned army as we witness Hareb-Seraps Killing Fields.



Through the open hole in Gamichicoth's ruined citadel is a boundless battlefield. Combatants are everything from Roman legionnaires to battle cloaked mech-suits while B2 bombers fly overhead. Chemical clouds fill the air and nuclear blasts flash in the background.

Memories from our past lives seeps in, transforming everything. Constructions rise up, the ruins of a Berlin ravaged by war in the spring of 1945. The desperate attempts of Kether's Nazi Germany to fend off Thaumiel's Red Army.

At the center of it all, pouring out more soldiers, is a colossal war machine. It's gargantuan tread tracks crush entire trenches underneath. The cannons wipe out whole districts while its machine guns mow down legions.

I take in the carnage before me, trying to find a pattern, but there isn't one. It's an ever shifting battle, where all the small armies are fighting each other. The only advantage being that they're too distracted for us to become a common front.

I know what awaits us in the war machine, and I know there's no avoiding it. Hareb-Serap rules the battlefield here, picking out the victors to join his fodder. We won't get to the crown of the mountain and the belfry without taking out the Death Angel.

It's the final obstacle before the crown of the mountain. There, a belfry waits, covered in the aftereffects of the Cairath plague. The Awakened journal's cover turns to iron while its pages drip sparks. Opening it, I see only three pages left empty.

"First things first," Ricardo grabs the reins "we need to disable, or ideally take control of, that tank. Otherwise we are covered in tooth-filled goop again. Jorrit, perhaps you and Anders provide a distraction while Lucas gets in and does a bit of the ol' ultraviolence?"



"I'll lead the bulk of the army into the fray to provide distraction for you guys. See what you can do about that huge-ass tank, maybe with your ravenwing savage and perhaps a small contingent of ice hunters...?"

Lucas cracks his knuckles.

"Let's rock!"

Jorrit nods grimly, bends down to pry a submachine gun from the deathgrip of some casualty nearby, and readies his meat cleaver in his other hand.

"Loyal Samaelites! With me! We have hunting and killing to do!!!"

Lucas mutters a quick prayer to Netzach to guide him through this, then takes for the trenches, running at full speed between dying soldiers and the living. Him and Parvati grab any discarded weapons that seem of use.

They can see the flow of violence in the trenches, finding the weak spots, the lulls, the deaths. But it's getting harder as they approach the tank.

A group of Mongols with rail guns notice them and start shooting. The duo takes cover in a foxhole, but they're pinned.

Firing at random into the mayhem with the futuristic large caliber SMG he picked up, and hacking his cleaver at anything that stumbles closer than arm's length, Jorrit leads the demonic army into carving a path into the carpet of carnage that already rages everywhere.

"If we hope to distract anyone here with anything we do, let alone the big guy in that wartower over there - we need to go big!" Jorrit yells to a random gaggle of nepharites near him.





The ice hunters led by the abomination carve up the Mongols and their suppressive fire ends. Lucas and Parvati have traversed about a third of the way to the mobile citadel.

I spot a cache of out of the way nuclear warheads guarded by bipedal mechs, and let Jorrit know, just Sofia and Ricardo are beset by a vanguard of Aztecs with stolen conquistador armors. Their filed obsidian teeth flicker under the fires of their flamethrowers. One of the Aztecs springs a lasso of barbed wire around Ricardo's neck. He gets dragged behind the cavalry who circles around Sofia. Concentrating, she calls on her magicks to weave loyalty upon them.

"You don't want to hurt me now do you? In fact you'd rather protect us all from everyone else."

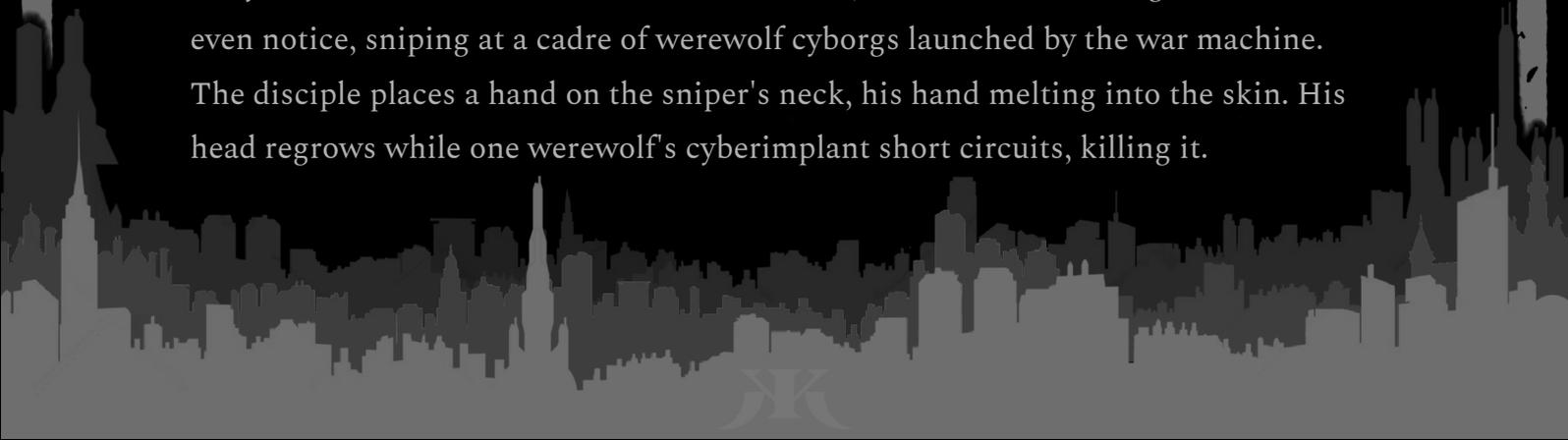
They declare their undying love for the passion magician, and ask for orders.

Having liberated his friends from the mongols' suppressing fire, Jorrit steers his troops away from them again - towards the nuclear warhead storage facility with the mechs.

"Petal Hounds forward! Run around them and between their legs to distract them - then all of us fall upon them in massed assault! See if we can set this warehouse on fire!"

The petal hounds are stomped on by the mechs who fire their rockets at the ice hunters. Jorrit, along with Tir'nán and his kin, are cut down by the weapon fire.

Lucas and Parvati sprint to another trench, somehow avoiding all the mortar fire. They dive inside and land near a Russian soldier, half his skull missing. He doesn't even notice, sniping at a cadre of werewolf cyborgs launched by the war machine. The disciple places a hand on the sniper's neck, his hand melting into the skin. His head regrows while one werewolf's cyberimplant short circuits, killing it.





"Spasibo, tovarishch!"

It doesn't stop the rest of the raging cadre heading their way. At the other end of the killing fields, Jorrit and the ice hunters are still pinned. Sofia can see the mechs firing, her Aztec cavalry releasing Ricardo at her command. She directs them to the abomination's help.

Charging recklessly, the Aztecs are mowed down by laser beams. Their conquistador armors melt in the heat, and even the horses fall. Sofia and Ricardo can barely use the carcasses for cover, and a blue laser slices through it the next instant.

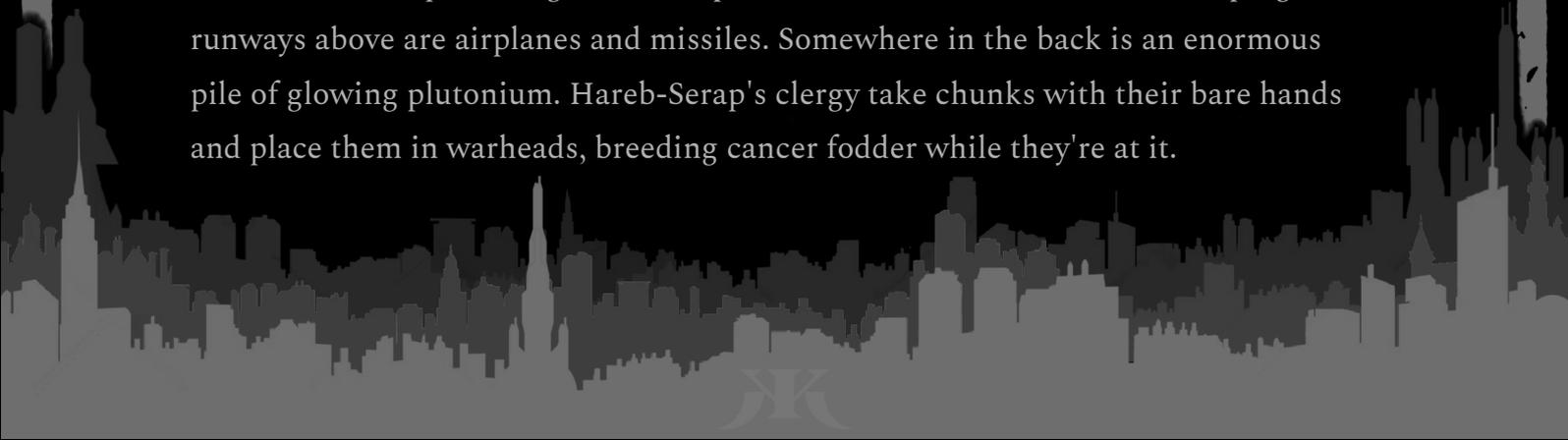
The dream mage grabs a dead Aztec, using his armor as protection. A weakened ray deflects off it, scorching Sofia's shoulder. Grabbing a piece of the armor, Ricardo moves forward using it as a shield. Sofia holds her shoulder, running behind him. Soon they find themselves near Jorrit, the ice hunters, and me, divining the movements of those ahead.

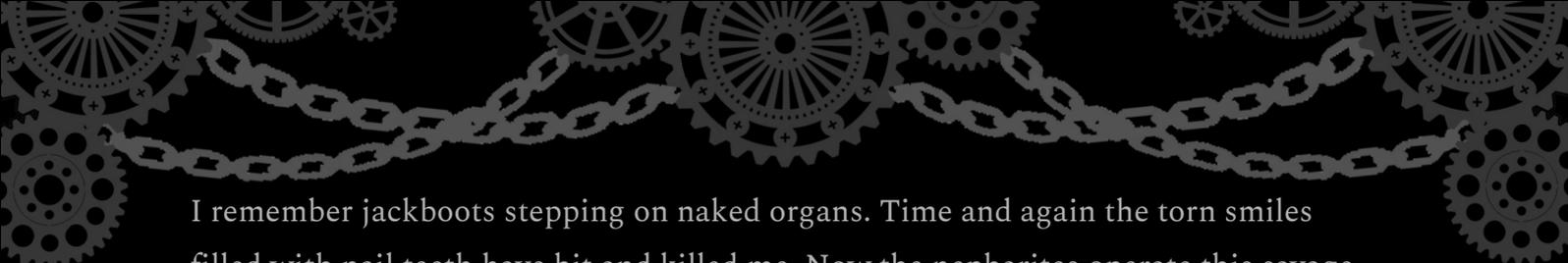
"Join us!" says Lucas to the Russian sniper.

"Why the hell not?" he replies, smiling, while Parvati shoots. The gatling gun Parvati picked up wipes out the werewolf cadre. It also runs out of ammo, leaving her with only a couple of pistols. At least the path to the war machine is clear. They rush it.

Its bowels contain a veritable army factory. On assembly lines are soldiers of all ages in various stages of undress. Some are repuzzled corpses, others are freshly dropped in by portals. Robotic arms weld uniforms and exoskeletons on them, then serve them weapons.

The lower levels produce ground troops as well as tanks and chariots. Escaping from runways above are airplanes and missiles. Somewhere in the back is an enormous pile of glowing plutonium. Hareb-Serap's clergy take chunks with their bare hands and place them in warheads, breeding cancer fodder while they're at it.





I remember jackboots stepping on naked organs. Time and again the torn smiles filled with nail teeth have bit and killed me. Now the nepharites operate this savage factory serving the master above.

On his lizard throne, Hareb-Serab waits, a freshly stapled face masking his own. His many hands are charging two different types of rifles with ammo from his mohawk, the bullets regrowing. When satisfied, he sets them aside, grabs some blades piercing his body, and starts sharpening them. Inspecting their cut, he barely takes notice of the new arrivals.

"The prodigal son returns."

"You knew I'd be back here, it's not so much a surprise. You fired me out of your firearm, you shaped me, taught me... but why? Because I would strike true? Against your might?"

Lucas paces slightly at first, back and forth across the throne rooms floor, then stops.

"You wanted all this, didn't you? Conflict without reason or rhyme, of course."

Outside, a throng of visigoths with rocket launchers finish off a WWII platoon. They're recharging their weapons and welding their chainmail. Sofia is not far from them, feeling their anxieties, but the spell fails. The visigoths launch two things at Sofia: boisterous chortles and missiles. She barely has time to dodge back in the trench for cover.

Jorrit resists the urge to dart to her side and help her out. Instead, he goes right for the nearest mech while the killing machines are distracted. He darts over and moves between the legs of the mechanical walker. It settles underneath, where oil leaks paint the abomination. Exposed circuitry and a hatch is visible.





The abomination rips open the hatch, and the pilot points a flechette gun at his face. She's a green haired woman with a suture scar and a black patch over her left eye. Without even blinking, it hand shoots out too fast to see, snatches the gun from her, and points it right back at her face.

At gunpoint, the mech pilot ceases her chair to Jorrit who takes the intuitive command. A wounded Sofia sees one bipedal tank liquefying the others along with the visigoths. One missile rips the warhead storage, a flash destroying whole battalions, clearing the way to the war machine.

Mech led, we enter the army-fabricating citadel just in time to hear Hareb-Serap talking to Lucas.

"All things are guided by two motivations: survival and reproduction. I have survived long, but have no offspring, no heir. He must be born of conflict, I reasoned.

So, I looked at the wars, and followed the soldiers. A triage of hundreds of millions, under the pressures of natural selection. The longer the war, the fewer survive, the stronger they are, seeking more conflicts, inducing more refinement.

You're just the latest in a line meant to replace me. If you defeat me, there is nothing more conflict can teach you. If you don't... it means you were not worthy, and there is another out there. So let's see if you have what it takes to become conflict itself."

Lucas, not being able to help himself laughs hard for a moment.

"As if I expect fair fight from you."

"Conflict has no terms, no quarters given. It only cares if you survive."



We turn just in time to see his four arms firing belt-fed machine guns. The hail of bullets ruptures everyone, leaving each of us to deal with the pain in our own way. Hareb-Seraph unfolds his jet fighter alloy wings, looping in flight between the assembly belts.

Lucas musters his will, and acts. He jumps from the floor of the mobile citadel and lands in front of Herab Serap. No guns, no blades. The disciple's jump places him in front of his nemesis. His thumbs drive into his skull, crushing the eyeballs. Hareb-Serap laughs and pulls swords out his body. Blades move quicker than bullets, lacerating Lucas, who continues to hammer away with his fists, raw knuckles against metal and dead flesh.

Extreme heat forms from the blades cutting the air, and the pair ignites. The savage raven entity leaves the dream magician bleeding on an ammo box. It takes flight and dashes into one of the Death Angel's wings, leaving him flightless. Together with Lucas he crashes into an assembly line, leaving the former trapped in a tank. Hareb-Serap is blind, but he smells the rest of us, and approaches hurried and hungrily.

Jorrit zips over to where the Father of Carnage faces off against the Prophet of Victory and the Ravenwing Savage. In a blur of motion, he rips out the blades that are stuck in Hareb-Serap's own body, slicing up the last remaining King of Hell while disarming him, blade for blade, at the same time.

The Master of Conflict bursts with laughter at his disarmament. His four arms turn to the heavens, and the factory responds. Machine arms bring down their saws into the abomination's face. His jackbooted nepharites throw him SMGs and chainsaws.





The Death Angel looks horrendously wounded, but fights unhindered. A powerful turbulence disturbs the operation of the war machine. Raven feathers clog the gears and the nepharites fall from heights. Ricardo, keeping away from the vicinity of the Death Angel for the moment, attacks the supporting nepharites with the powers of his dark bloodline. It's just enough of a distraction for Jorrit to retreat from the saws. Lucas struggles to free himself from the molten tank.

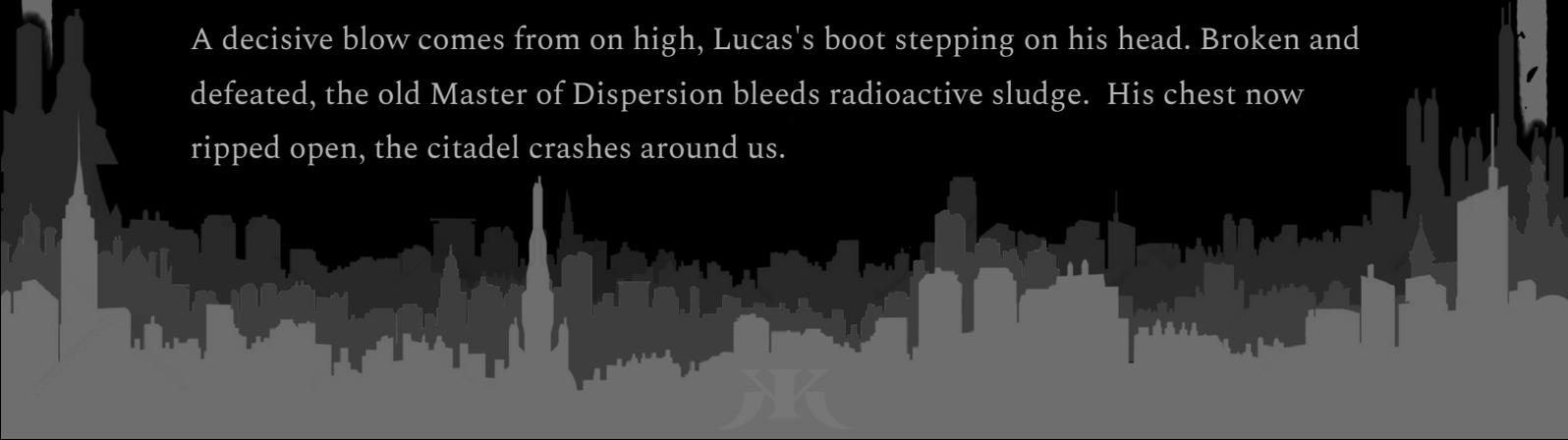
"You got it all wrong, you realize that?", Jorrit calls out to the terrifying foe, from behind defensively raised blades stolen from that very foe's body. "We're not here to succeed you, you know. There's not going to be a new King of Hell when we're done. There's not going to be a Hell anymore. We're doing away with it, this whole charade, the entire prison. This is the end, Hareb-Serap! Just let go of the carnage, pack it up and go back to wherever the Lost Creator called you from when He made all this. Or die here!"

"She was right, you are foolish enough to think you can change things. The insanity is to think you can create order without struggle. I've seen your journey, it began in violence and will end in the same. Hareb-Serap will have an heir, but will it be any of you?"

He brings down the chainsaws in an intersection on Jorrit's head. Their noise is deafened by shrieks of crumbling machinery. The abomination narrowly flinches away from the chainsaws, but in a sweeping motion is right back at his opponent, hacking and slashing at him with his own serrated blades.

More join the bloodshed. The disciple, the revenant and myself pester Hareb-Serap with our attacks. He parries most blows, but enough get through to break his weapons. Without the war machine to replace them, soon we hack off his arms.

A decisive blow comes from on high, Lucas's boot stepping on his head. Broken and defeated, the old Master of Dispersion bleeds radioactive sludge. His chest now ripped open, the citadel crashes around us.





His organs are a tangle of wires connecting organs protected in glass globules. His heart lights up, and the glow spreads to the other organs. Lucas must have seen this a thousand times in his nightmares.

The heart climbs out of the Death Angel's chest under Parvati's guidance. She feels a surge of energy, but turns ethereal, absorbing it all. Everyone else evacuates just in time, dragging Lucas, heading for a trench. The revenant is the last one out of the exploding citadel. Its detonation sends a shockwave to the killing fields, wiping everything. Nothing remains after the blast, nothing but us. The crown of the mountain is closer than previously, the belfry waiting.

All is quiet on the infernal front.

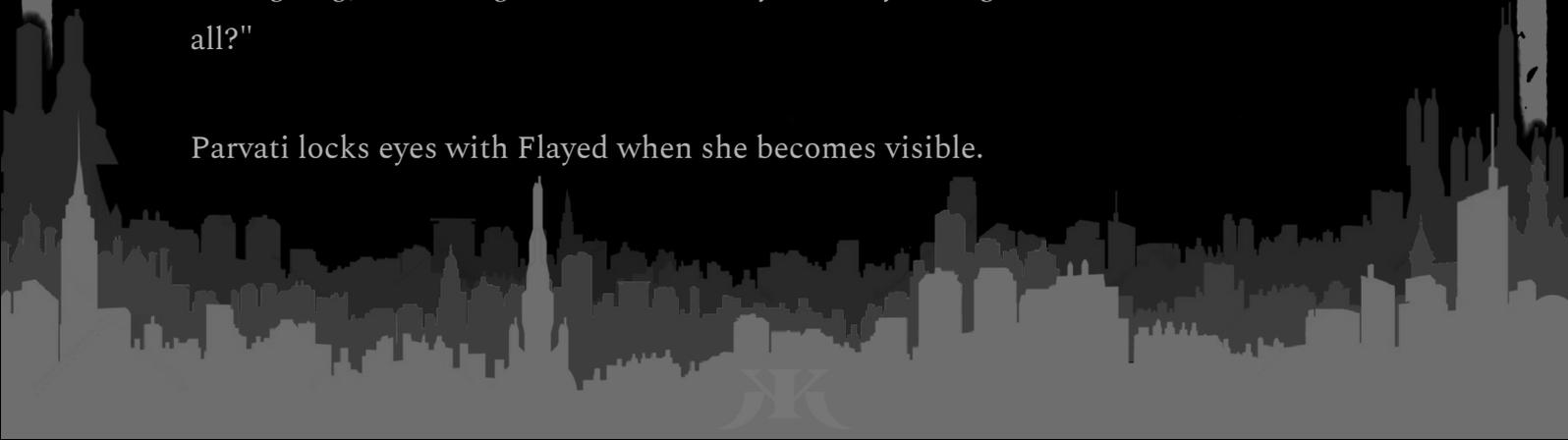
Gone is the Cairath infestation, scorched by atomic fire. Now there is only the hewn fieldstone and a reinforced wooden gate of the belfry. It unlocks without protest, uncovering a spiral staircase.

We take to the steps with unflinching determination. But there are no torches here, no markings, just a journey heavy on the knees. Still, we continue, turning into old creatures, then shades, before fading to black.

A match brightens the darkness, lighting a cigarillo, showing Flayed's face. Her rows of horns are larger, and the carmine silk suit and tie she wears are ripped by spikes. She puffs a few times, her chest pumping behind the black shirt, looking at the shades.

"Still going, huh? Kings of shit hill? Are you sure you've got what it takes to rule it all?"

Parvati locks eyes with Flayed when she becomes visible.





"Yes."

"At this point, I really got to ask why. Ever think the Demiurge quit his job in disgust? Why would you bunch do any better?"

"Can't do any worse." Sofia justifies. Ricardo takes more time to consider.

"Perhaps he knew it all. I have so much more to learn before the end."

I check the notebook. The floating journal has one added page in radioactive graphite, with two more empty. He can almost make sense of the symbols flipping into numbers, adding up to something. Lucas throws in his bravado, but it's Jorrit who drives the conversation.

"Why not? The last guy quit because he was weak, without purpose"

"So it's you? You are who they call the Lost Creator?"

"Lost Creator? Oh no, I'm just the Caretaker who inherited this mess. That shithead left it all to me, just fucked off without a word. Did well, all things considering. And au contraire, mon cheri. You and this bunch of clowns can do a lot worse."

"At least we have purpose. If you don't want the job why not find someone else? Why are you lot so damn fixated on ruling this shit show of a fake world? And where is Srijan?"

"Oh, I'm not fixated on ruling anything, I'd love to have someone take it off my hands. But I can't just let this place in the hands of a bunch of monkeys climbing up a tree. As for the kid? He's a catastrophe waiting to happen. Not on my watch! So, you've got purpose. What purpose is that, jackass? Do you even remember anymore?"





Sofia offers an answer.

"Fix a system that put some fucks at the tops. Equality for all."

"Equality for all? Sure, sounds like a great idea! Let's test it out before we put it in practice!"

With a snap of her fingers, we feel connected to one another. Thoughts, feelings, and memories flow together. I know this feeling, I've lived with it. It hasn't helped make anything better. Instead, it has only passed the suffering around. Flayed knows this, and now, so do the others.

"Any other bright ideas?"

It's Ricardo's turn, we think.

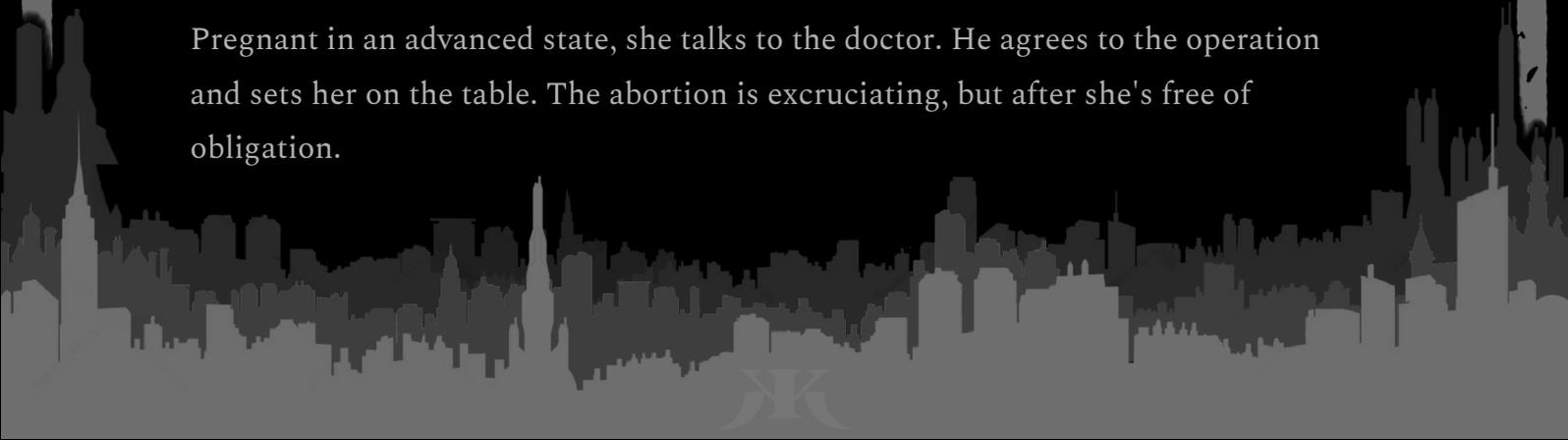
"No more lies, no more illusion. No more pointless little lives. Truth for Everyone."

"We demand our divinity back," Jorrit adds, " For all of humankind. Not all at once, that'd never work - but we'll take off the blinders, tear down the fences. Let the herd wander out and explore the wider lands."

"No more lies, well that's just fantastic! How come no one's ever thought of that one before? Oh shit, let's see how it pans out, since we're all equal. Let's see if you avoided cruelty even in your pointless little lives."

Lush jungle vegetation sprouts in the dark. They see a younger Sofia walking with a guide. Arriving at a small medical encampment, she drops her poncho.

Pregnant in an advanced state, she talks to the doctor. He agrees to the operation and sets her on the table. The abortion is excruciating, but after she's free of obligation.





"Sounds good until you actually try it, doesn't it?"

"Why you motherfucker, think you're being so goddamn clever don't you? This whole fucked up system is why shit like that happens, which we're going to tear right down. Whatever meager sins we've done, can't compare those of hell itself."

Sofia's rage filters to all of us, revolting but satisfying.

"Hey, they were your ideas, right? Also, fun fact: nobody ends up in hell if they don't choose it. I'm literally not judging her, she was judging and torturing herself. That's what people do, that's why they end up in this place. Neeeeext."

A hot evening in Kabul, Lucas is fed up with his squad mates. He's had enough of the machismo and homophobic jabs, against the bomb technician, no less.

So, he places a bomb and an anonymous tip. There's a certain guilty pleasure to see those assholes blown to bits. Now he can even claim a purple heart as the sole survivor.

Lucas's sickening self-hate contaminates everyone. Flayed nods disapprovingly.

"Ready to call it quits?"

"Oh fuck you!" The anger still resonates strongly in Jorrit, giving him determination.

"You put us in frail, helpless bodies, blind us, feed us lies about being weak and meaningless, and set us upon each other in our cages - and _then have the audacity to blame US for the things we felt we needed to do just in order to get by?! That's... that's..."

"Mitigating circumstances," adds Ricardo.





Jorrit's eyes have begun to glow black with anger and outrage. He is barely keeping his temper together by putting a humorous overtone on things. At the same time, he is gnashing his teeth so hard they almost crack.

"Mitigating circumstances, sure. Elysium was supposed to be a paradise. People learning to rediscover, explore, and cherish each other. Instead, we got this shit. By the by, I'm so glad you're the one who said that, Ricardo m'boy! You're the most fun, so let's do you next."

A light drizzle hits the antiquarian's face. He draws in his fedora, looking on at the carnival. Leaving the big wheel are a few girls, handling cotton candy.

Ricardo feels his tumescence, then checks his gear. Rubber tubes, chloroform, rags. This will be a good night.

"Wasn't that just... lovely? Role model, that one."

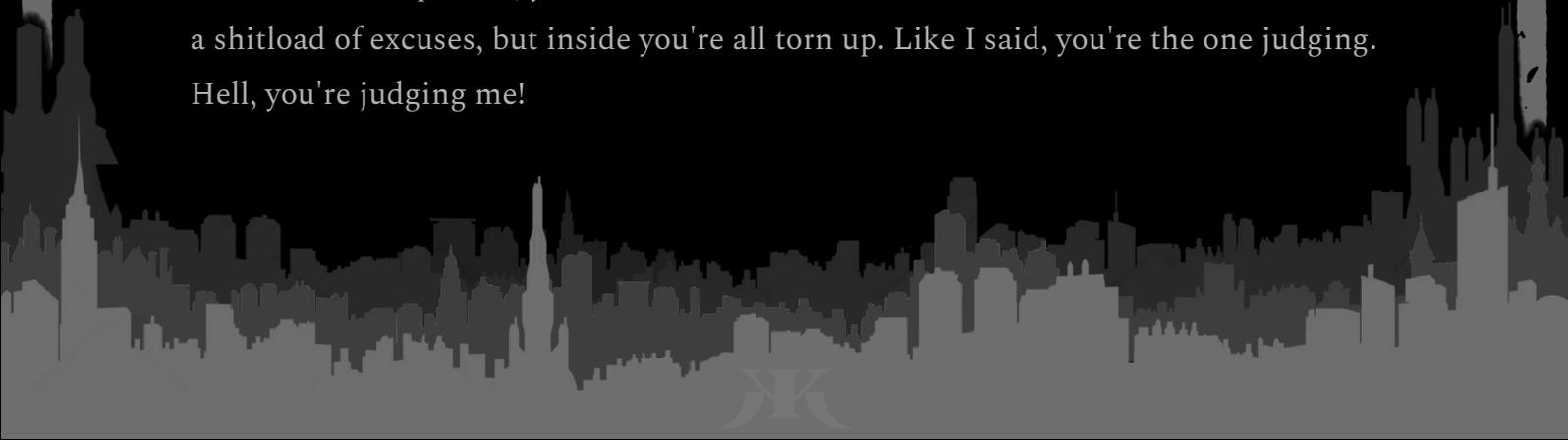
"Even if that were true... father of lies"

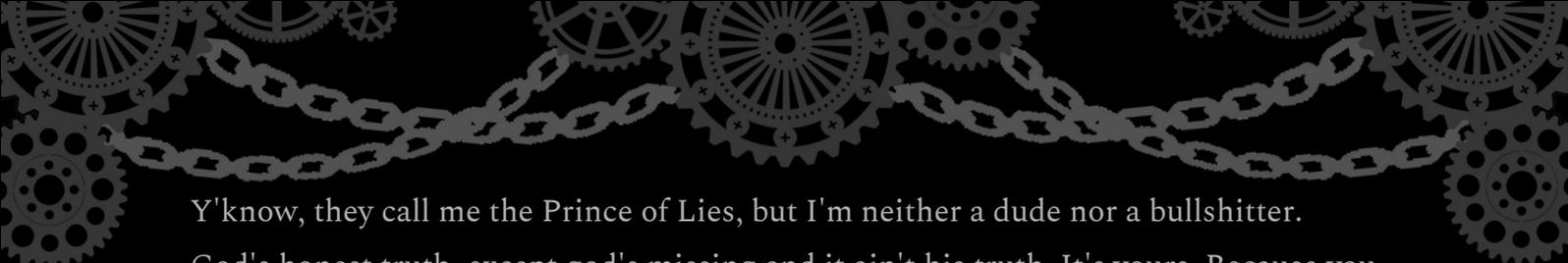
Parvati gives Ricardo a somewhat sickened look at what she sees in his mind.

"I've done even worse since. I'm a vile creature and have been since before I knew it. That is why we were chosen."

"Yes, broken lives, lost souls. But broken and lost by no fault of our own." Jorrit talks down the guilt, but feels it wash through him all the same. "Lives are broken because the world is broken, which is all on you fuckers."

"The world was perfect, you're the ones who chose to break it. And of course there's a shitload of excuses, but inside you're all torn up. Like I said, you're the one judging. Hell, you're judging me!"





Y'know, they call me the Prince of Lies, but I'm neither a dude nor a bullshitter. God's honest truth, except god's missing and it ain't his truth. It's yours. Because you chose yourselves, honey. Especially you, Jorrit."

The room behind the neon lit bar is swarming with rats. Cold beer barrels shine in the spotlight when Jorrit enters. There's a man on a chair, beaten by baseball bats.

The detective lifts his head, and looks his brother in the eye. That cold look tells him all he needs to know about his own blood. His brother will snitch, and he can't have that.

A bullet between the eyes takes care of the rest.

For a moment, Jorrit's eyes widen in shock, in disbelief. Self-loathing and remorse play over his mutilated features.

"That's not what happened! You... you're twisting our minds! He died in prison! He died because Aalberts arranged it and I swore him revenge for that and that's where I started to get into all this!"

"I chose a lot of things in my fucked up life. And look where it got me", he gets close to her, up in her face as it were, staring down the devil himself.

"BUT I DID NOT CHOOSE THIS"

We feel our fists clench and our teeth grind together in sync with Jorrit's anger and denial, washing in on top of everyone's emotions, weakening us further. Flayed takes the advantage.

"That's how it works with gods. They have ultimate power, and inevitably do some stupid shit. And then you predictably lie to yourself about it





Then you torture yourselves in hell trying to forget about it. Somehow find Enlightenment and get reincarnated peacefully. Ain't that right, Parvati? Or have you forgotten already?

It's all a game to her, playing hard to get. She likes twisting the boys, rubbing against them. Getting them to fight between themselves, or in trouble with their parents.

Parvati bruises herself, because she's thought up a new game to play. It's called the victim. Played right, she's forever blameless. Gouging out their eyes with scissors is going to be so much fun!"

The revenant's face darkens and flushes with anger after this, her gaze locked on Flayed, voice tight with suppressed fury. Her fists tighten even further, cutting off the blood momentarily and whitening her skin.

"I'm not that sadistic, and if you think you can twist my memories to try and make me fail, you're an idiot."

"What was that cheap psychological mumbo jumbo? Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance? You shitheads can't even make it past anger. If you can't face yourselves, how can you make the world a better place?"

"What about me?" I ask. "I haven't done anything."

"Exactly. You abandoned yourself to sloth, hedonism and misanthropy disguised as art instead of reaching out and helping others. You even failed at that, in the end producing nothing. And when it got boring, you sold your soul, not to the devil, but to a drug dealer."

A lifetime spent in bars and art studios doing things that lead nowhere and having conversations about nothing flashes before my eyes. Running drugs just to get more money, to spend on frivolous things I don't need.





"Your admonishments are false, your argument is false, what can you really bring to the table here liar. I cannot imagine how sad it would be to this evil and your only ploy is lies." Lucas tries to wound the beast.

"I really wish all this weren't true. You brought yourself to the table, like you always do. You could have stopped anywhere along the way. In the end your greed and selfishness consumed the world, like it always does. Congratulations."

Another finger snaps, and the light comes on. It's the same room we began in. A hole in the floor emitting strange noises. Police knocking at the door.

We are dressed in catholic priest robes. Malkuth's guts are spread out on a table. We're eating her, gaining power and corporeality. Soon there's nothing left of the banquet.

In the corner is a cage where Srijan is writing in his journal. He fills in the penultimate page.

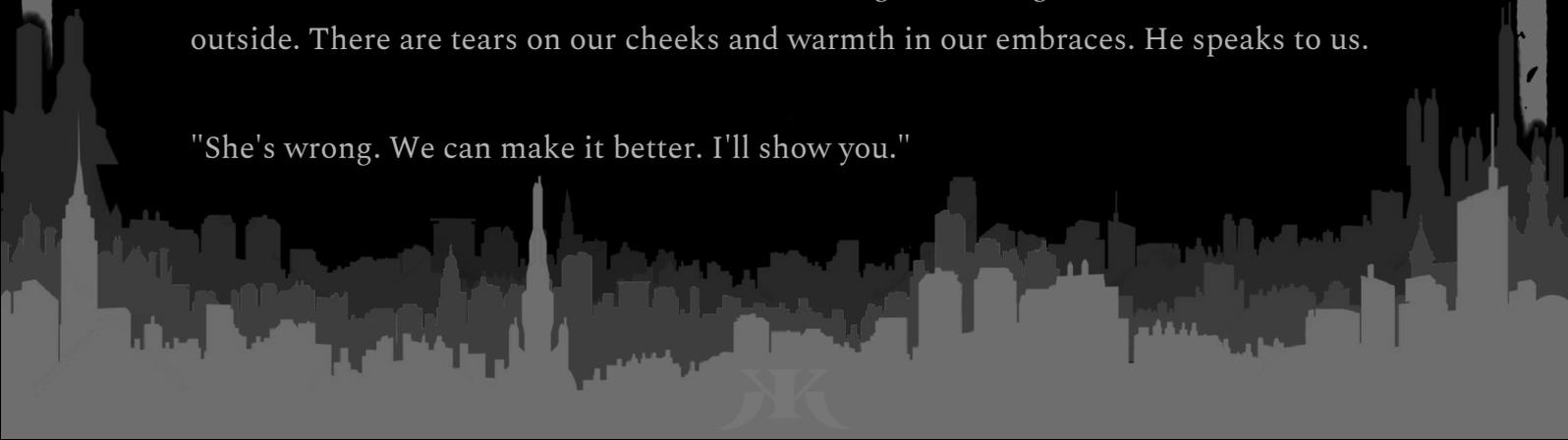
"What the every loving fuck?" exclaims Sofia.

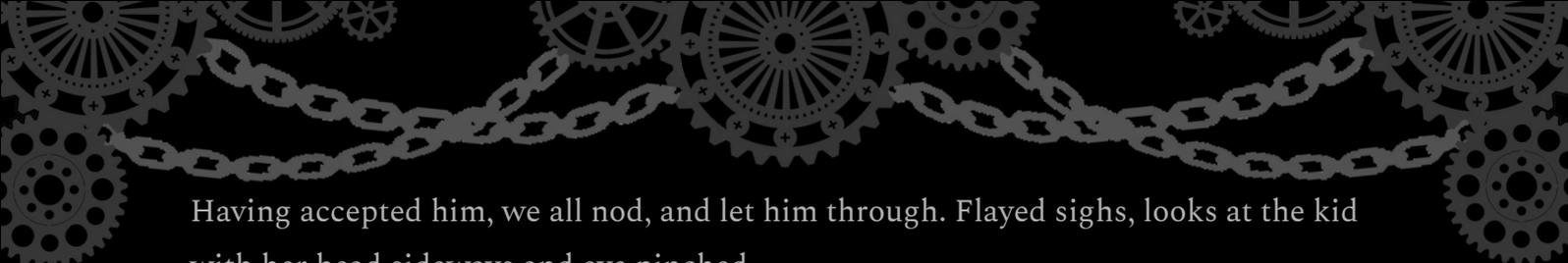
I look around at my new surroundings before turning my gaze on Srijan, mouth slathered in blood. I wipe at my chin with the back of one hand, moving over to see if I can free him.

The cage opens easily, and Srijan reaches out with his small arms. There's no judgment in him, only a need for love and unconditional acceptance. I grab him in my arms, and the rest embrace him. I take a look at the hole in the floor.

The fracture is filled with all our horrors and regrets. There's nothing in the hole that I haven't seen before. We all surround the cage and bring the Awakened child outside. There are tears on our cheeks and warmth in our embraces. He speaks to us.

"She's wrong. We can make it better. I'll show you."





Having accepted him, we all nod, and let him through. Flayed sighs, looks at the kid with her head sideways and eye pinched.

"I knew it wouldn't work. I don't know how many times I've tried. Fuck it, I'm done anyway. You can have it."

She drops her cigarillo, and stomps on it. Srijan reaches out to her.

"Let's get this over with."

They touch palms and she dissolves into a swarm of bats, combining with the shadows.

I feel a burn on my side, Srijan's journal burning a hole in my bag. I drop the iron book, and it opens to show fiery runes inscribing the penultimate page. We can make sense of the words, reading our own story until now reflected back at us.

The child, now free from his cage, interlocks fingers with Parvati. Hewn stone flies from the wall, forming a set of steps upwards. Srijan climbs them, gently dragging her by the hand.

His breath is vapor, spreading through the belfry during the ascent. Shades appear within, materializing into familiar faces. The enlightened lost in the conflict gain form once more.

One oxidized green bell looms above our heads, hanging from a column supported roof. An eagle eye's view shows the vast smoldering wastes of inferno in their entirety. All the screams of tortured sinners can still be heard piercing the night's shroud.





The Awakened one pulls on the bell's rope, commencing its toll. Shaking for a moment, the entire belfry thrusts upwards into the sky. For a moment, we struggle to find our feet.

Brickwork travels through the dense layers of smoke lining the empty firmament. Dim sunlight fills the sky, turning the smog into steam, then clouds. We traverse the layers with longer pauses between each one.

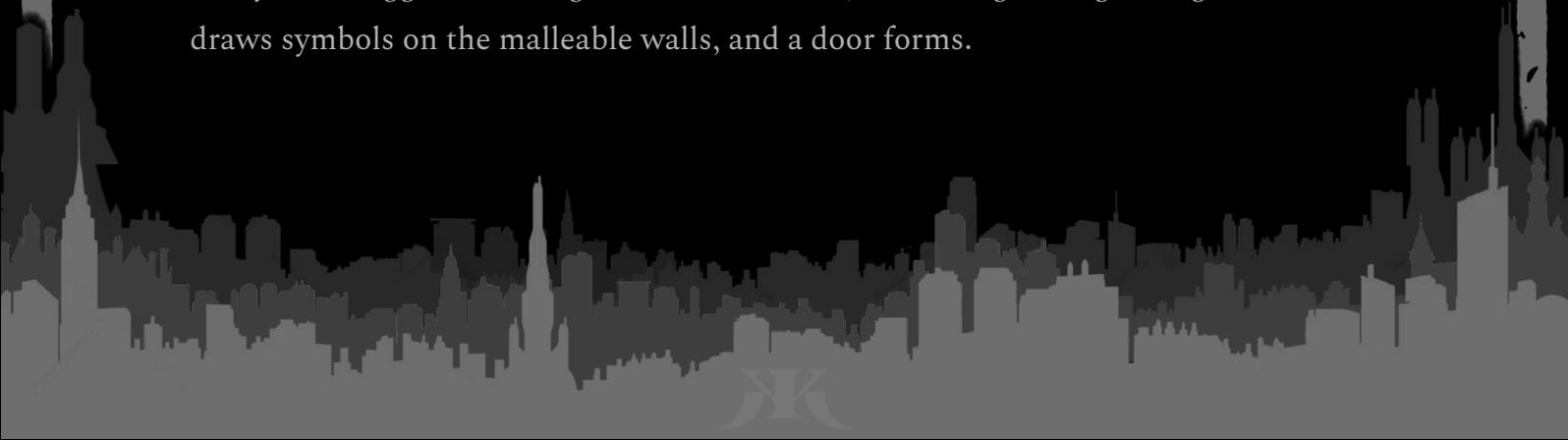
A final push pierces through a rain cloud cover, condensation grabbing onto the stone. The belfry sprouts from the eternal sea of dreams, now seated in the middle of the endless city. Along with it, a self-constructing palace of titanium spires, paper minarets, and plastic domes.

Stopping its ascent, the belfry now stands in front of a grill fence overgrown with thorns. A portcullis marks the entrance to a Garden Of Sorrows where rotting trees grow. Srijan shows the eye-winged faceless guardian a drawing of the Sefirot, grating us passage.

Inside the garden a squared stone gate is flanked by two white statues vomiting blood. Its white frame contrasts the granite inside, with a cracked, empty fountain in front. Ricardo mixes an alchemical brew and pours it inside, creating a door in the granite.

Next is a plaza of white marble and many windows where our old fears stand. We dismiss these shades which no longer hold any sway. Lucas points to the star filled sky, and marks a constellation that opens the way.

Past the window shown by the comet is a hall of quicksand, the walls wet shale. Everyone struggles reaching the end of the hall, swimming through the gravel. Sofia draws symbols on the malleable walls, and a door forms.





It leads to a room shaped like a chessboard, all the pieces life-sized statues. Unmoving, we are engaged in a check move in the middle of the board. I place the tarot cards in the hand of the queen, the peons forming a path outside.

The path ends in a greenhouse where the trees and tombstones grow together. A graveyard silence and low mist placate the seekers on their journey. Parvati casts a spell, and the dead rise out of their graves, leaving a tunnel behind.

The last stop is a hall of glass sculptures and stained windows showing humanity's conquests. Two rows of archangels are lined up, on either side of a crimson carpet, waiting, crying blood. In chains, a gagged Chadu cries before he is struck silent by an archangel's fiery sword.

The child travels to the living quicksilver lectern of the Iron Book. He takes his journal from me and places it on top, a perfect, merging match. Taking a quill from an archangels' wing, he finishes the last page, then reads it.

"I don't like this story. It's too ugly, with too much suffering. We might as well start anew, and we can take some new roles. Sofia can be the Great Mother Binah. The ever warring Lucas is Netzach. The sorcerer Chomak can only be played by Ricardo. Jorrit is a paragon of justice, so it's only fair that he is Geburah. There isn't someone more honorable than Parvati, therefore Hod. And Anders will be Tipareth. I'll be the Demiurge, Creator of All."

And with that, the writing seeps from the book onto the kaleidoscopic glass floor. New scarlet ink covers the pages, marking the end of the Last Cycle...

...and the start of the First.







Numerology





An old enameled rotary telephone rings a few times. A cybernetic hand presses the rotary, placing it on speaker. The voice at the other end of the line sounds filial.

"The codename's Ghost Rat, I'm an independent agent. Somebody fingered you with intel on Abdul Haadi el-Nazar. I'll pull whatever stunt you want to get it."

A pause follows before a response.

"Head to Amsterdam. We'll be in touch. Call us Ops."

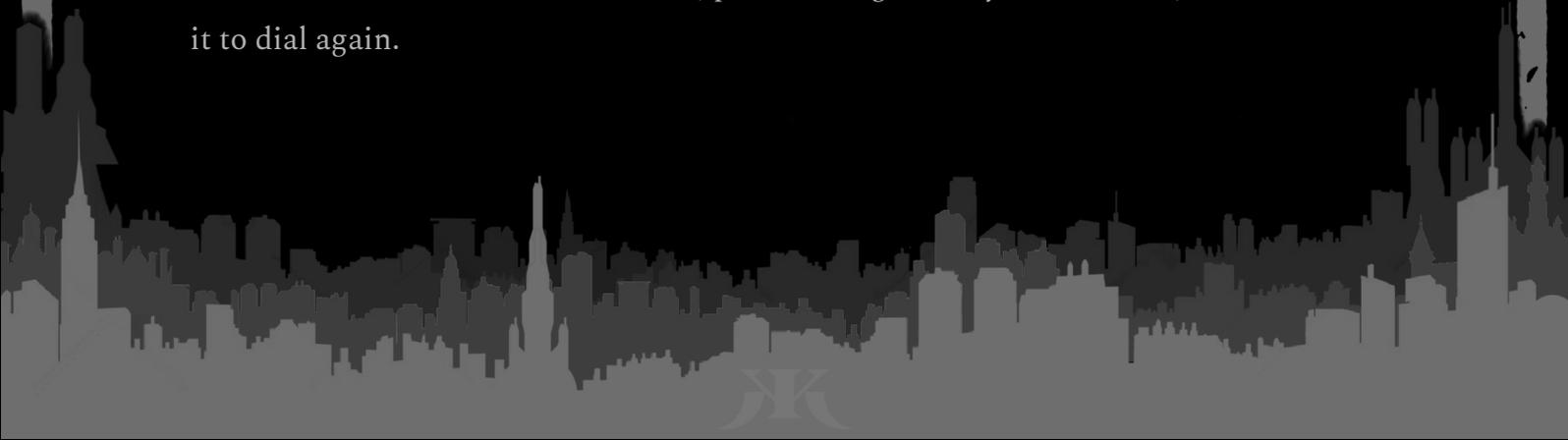
The cybernetic hand pushes away the phone. Lifting from his seat, its owner scrutinizes the aperture's vista. The highest chamber in the Palace provides a view of Metropolis. Yet it stretches even further, to countless unconquered worlds. Weaved between them are the untamed wilds of Gaia.

Netzach turns a look around at the chamber he's in. All his companions are there, answering phones and discussing. Archons, Knights of the Sefirot Table, planning their Crusade.

Chokmah, for his part, sits in his cruelly winged chair, eyes half-closed. One foot in this world, one in the sea of dreams outside. Like a somnambulist, he quietly speaks in many voices. His head lists to the side, cradling a phone receiver, such that his voice is heard in three worlds.

"No, no, this is the new dogma. Bring them closer. Remove the chains and fetters one by one. Slowly. Yes. Yes... No. Generations at a time. We will bring them closer to their former selves."

One of his several arms reaches over, places a finger softly on the hook, then releases it to dial again.





Netzach has spent some effort and time honoring his promises of advancing those warriors and survivors that joined us into positions where they will do the most. Concentrating some of his will to the task of absorbing some of Herab Seraphs armies.

He wonders for a moment, then speaks.

"what do we do about the other Archons?"

"What do we do about the other Archons?"

"Do we really need them?" Chokmah scoffs.

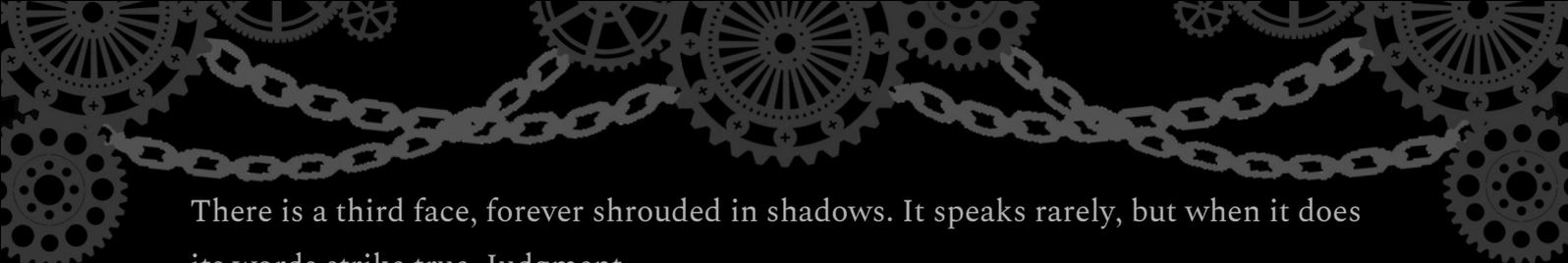
"Aren't there supposed to be Ten?"

"We moved against the Lie. We moved against a system keeping us in place. We are shepherding them to a new place, so they don't have to do what we did."

Geburah has multiple faces now. The first one is the Paragon, the face of a young, idealistic cop he once upon a time was, when he was learning all the rules and aspiring to make the world a better, more orderly place. The second one is the Abomination, for the other side of Law is of course Crime: all the infractions and transgressions, the rebellion and the discontent. They are a necessary part of the whole as well. This face now turns to Chokmah.

"We are letting them free, but ever so slowly. Like children finally allowed to grow up, they are bound to give us some trouble, some time."

"Some will want their freedom too fast, straining at their bonds once they recognize them as such. Others may balk at the Truth, and crave to crawl back into their blissful ignorance. But we must neither punish them, nor force it. We will teach."



There is a third face, forever shrouded in shadows. It speaks rarely, but when it does its words strike true. Judgment.

Hod remains silent, listening to the others talk before opening my mouth to speak, expression neutral.

"For those who strain at their bonds too quickly, we must temper their urges, since too little control or patience can only end in disaster."

Blood drips on the table from her flayed body, the other side of her role. Though the plan is to demolish Inferno, until we do so someone has to take the office, with all the ceremony that entails. She offered, taking the double role of Samael.

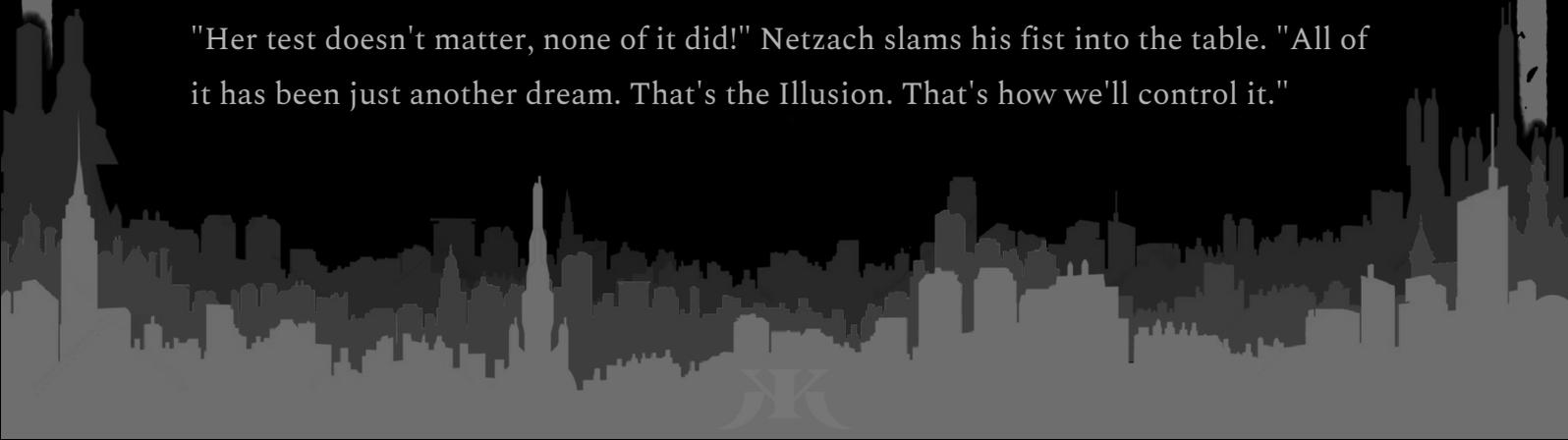
"My question stands, what of Kether? Of our brother Chesed? Yesod? And most importantly the rebel that started all of this? Malkuth..." he says it aloud, almost as if expecting her to answer.

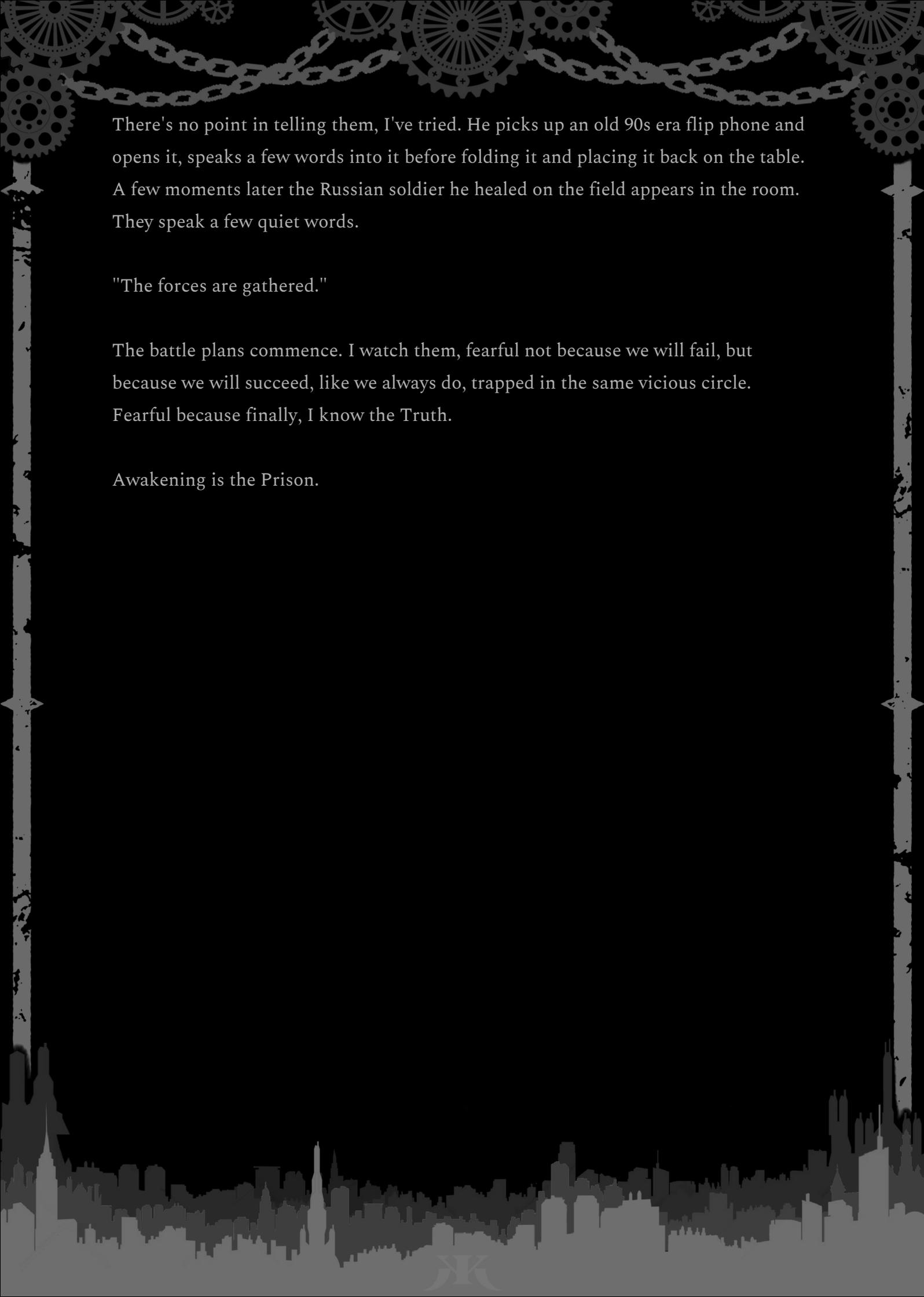
"I control the Labyrinth now," Binah speaks from her crystal throne, the dark veins of her pregnant body growing into the crystal itself. "It's only a matter of time before we find them"

I take a look at my new form. Self portraits where I was a dark haired Japanese woman have always been present. There was a consistent thought in my head that my art would improve if only I could bring out more of my feminine side. Although I must admit the arachnid traits that came with the transformation surprised even me.

"What of the vanquished Flayed? I think we failed her test."

"Her test doesn't matter, none of it did!" Netzach slams his fist into the table. "All of it has been just another dream. That's the Illusion. That's how we'll control it."





There's no point in telling them, I've tried. He picks up an old 90s era flip phone and opens it, speaks a few words into it before folding it and placing it back on the table. A few moments later the Russian soldier he healed on the field appears in the room. They speak a few quiet words.

"The forces are gathered."

The battle plans commence. I watch them, fearful not because we will fail, but because we will succeed, like we always do, trapped in the same vicious circle. Fearful because finally, I know the Truth.

Awakening is the Prison.