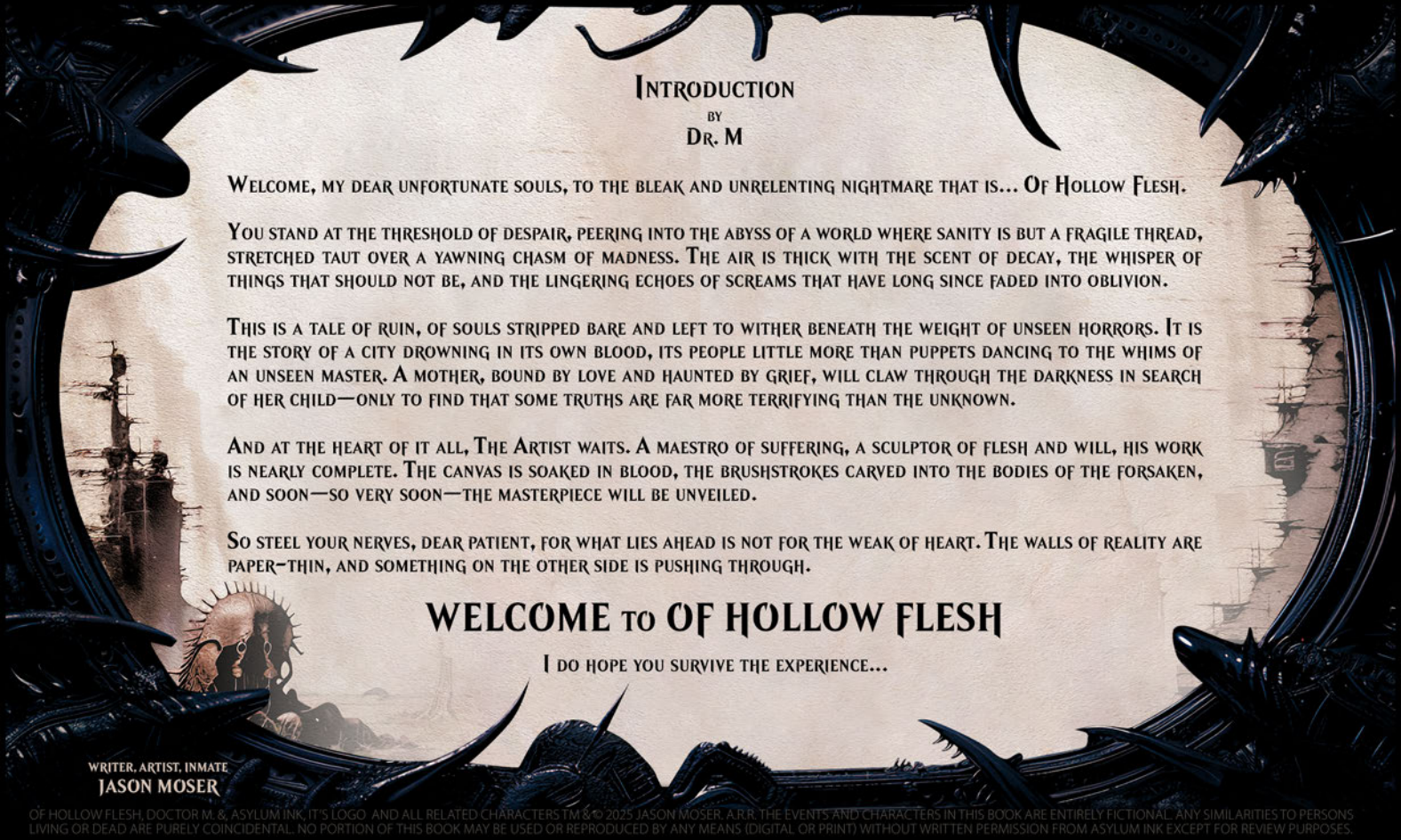


OF
HOLLOW
FLESH

OF
HOLLOW
FLESH



INTRODUCTION

BY
DR. M

WELCOME, MY DEAR UNFORTUNATE SOULS, TO THE BLEAK AND UNRELENTING NIGHTMARE THAT IS... **OF HOLLOW FLESH.**

YOU STAND AT THE THRESHOLD OF DESPAIR, PEERING INTO THE ABYSS OF A WORLD WHERE SANITY IS BUT A FRAGILE THREAD, STRETCHED TAUT OVER A YAWNING CHASM OF MADNESS. THE AIR IS THICK WITH THE SCENT OF DECAY, THE WHISPER OF THINGS THAT SHOULD NOT BE, AND THE LINGERING ECHOES OF SCREAMS THAT HAVE LONG SINCE FADED INTO OBLIVION.

THIS IS A TALE OF RUIN, OF SOULS STRIPPED BARE AND LEFT TO WITHER BENEATH THE WEIGHT OF UNSEEN HORRORS. IT IS THE STORY OF A CITY DROWNING IN ITS OWN BLOOD, ITS PEOPLE LITTLE MORE THAN PUPPETS DANCING TO THE WHIMS OF AN UNSEEN MASTER. A MOTHER, BOUND BY LOVE AND HAUNTED BY GRIEF, WILL CLAW THROUGH THE DARKNESS IN SEARCH OF HER CHILD—ONLY TO FIND THAT SOME TRUTHS ARE FAR MORE TERRIFYING THAN THE UNKNOWN.

AND AT THE HEART OF IT ALL, THE ARTIST WAITS. A MAESTRO OF SUFFERING, A SCULPTOR OF FLESH AND WILL, HIS WORK IS NEARLY COMPLETE. THE CANVAS IS SOAKED IN BLOOD, THE BRUSHSTROKES CARVED INTO THE BODIES OF THE FORSAKEN, AND SOON—SO VERY SOON—THE MASTERPIECE WILL BE UNVEILED.

SO STEEL YOUR NERVES, DEAR PATIENT, FOR WHAT LIES AHEAD IS NOT FOR THE WEAK OF HEART. THE WALLS OF REALITY ARE PAPER-THIN, AND SOMETHING ON THE OTHER SIDE IS PUSHING THROUGH.

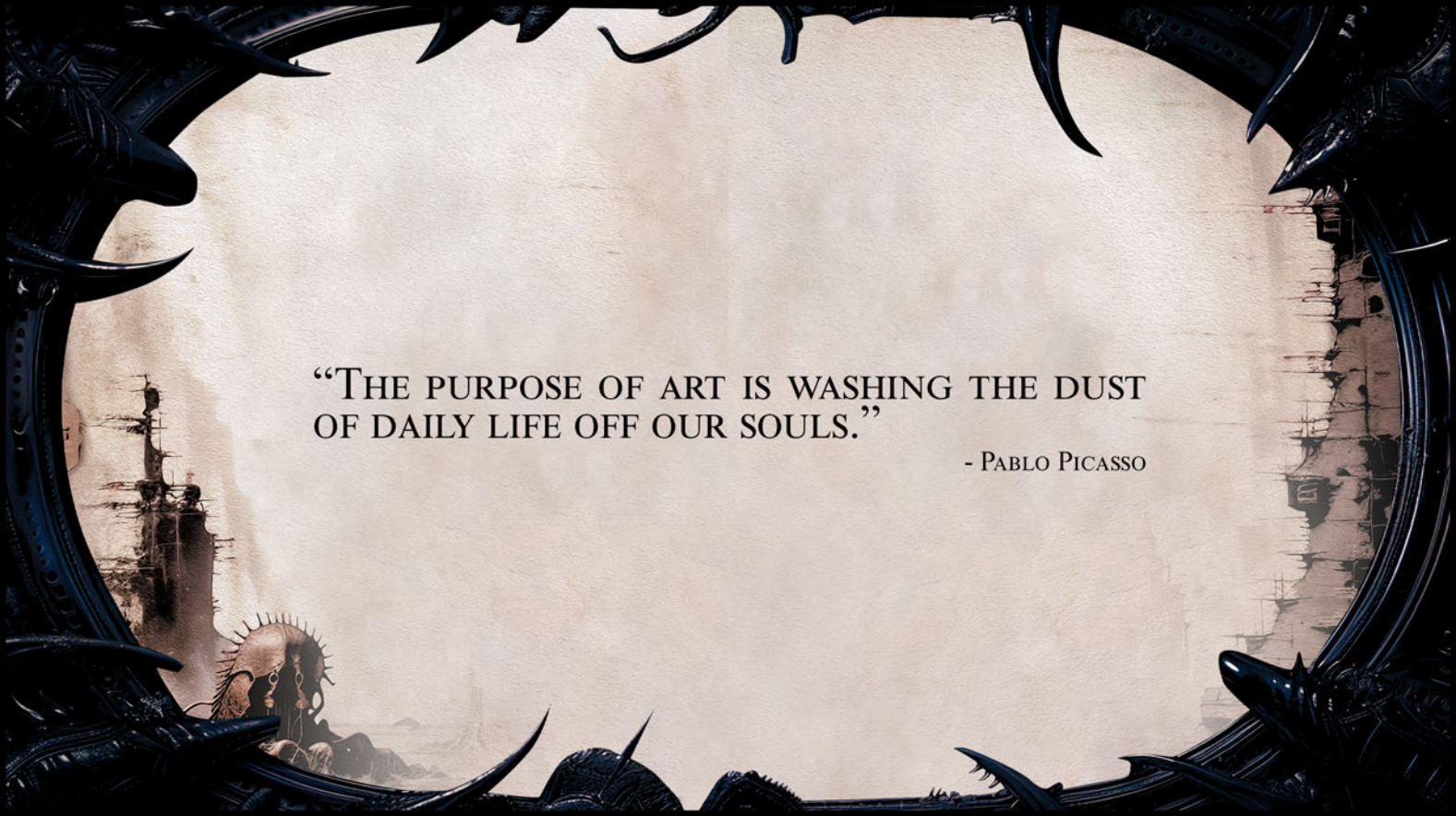
WELCOME TO **OF HOLLOW FLESH**

I DO HOPE YOU SURVIVE THE EXPERIENCE...

WRITER, ARTIST, INMATE
JASON MOSER

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The image features a quote by Pablo Picasso centered on a light, textured background. The quote is enclosed within a dark, ornate, and somewhat gothic border that frames the central text. The border has intricate, spiky details. The background itself is a light, off-white or cream color with a subtle, mottled texture. In the lower-left corner, there is a small, dark, and somewhat abstract illustration that appears to be a profile of a face with a crown or a similar headpiece, rendered in a dark, possibly metallic or stone-like material. The overall aesthetic is artistic and somewhat somber, reflecting the theme of the quote.

“THE PURPOSE OF ART IS WASHING THE DUST
OF DAILY LIFE OFF OUR SOULS.”

- PABLO PICASSO



The air was thick with the smell of blood, urine, and worse.

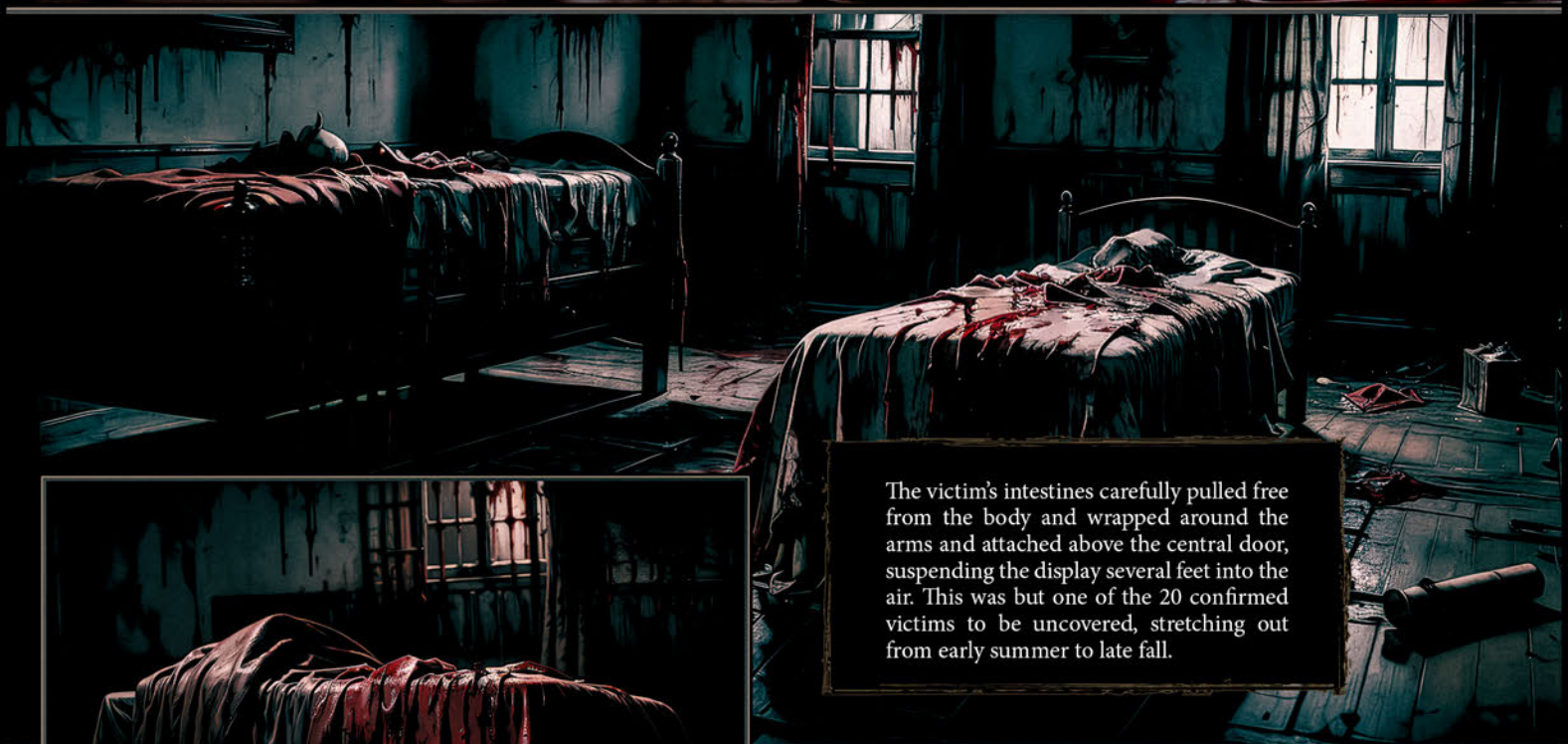


The pattern was always the same - young, alone, easy prey. For some, it was all about the hunt, but for The Artist, it was all about the materials he worked with. The canvas of flesh was meant to be desecrated and with this mission in mind. A gallery of horror was to be made, showcasing madness and sadism beyond compare. For six horrifying months, the bodies added up, always displayed in new and increasingly deranged displays.

The media dubbed the serial killer "The Artist" after the fifth body was found nailed to planks of wood in front of St. Mark's Cathedral, a perceived commentary on religious hypocrisy.



The head severed from the body and replaced with the marble head of Jesus, carefully removed from a statue within the cathedral.



The victim's intestines carefully pulled free from the body and wrapped around the arms and attached above the central door, suspending the display several feet into the air. This was but one of the 20 confirmed victims to be uncovered, stretching out from early summer to late fall.



Eventually, The Artist began writing to media, taunting the detectives on the case and proclaiming his work a "glorious masterpiece in the making."



While never obvious on what the end result would be for the ongoing atrocities, it was made clear that the media attention served to inflate his ego, inspiring his acts of murder to become even more grandiose and public.



He desperately needed his work to be viewed by all, according to the many experts interviewed during the manhunt.



A distinct need to be recognized for his "genius" seemed to permeate every correspondence the media received.

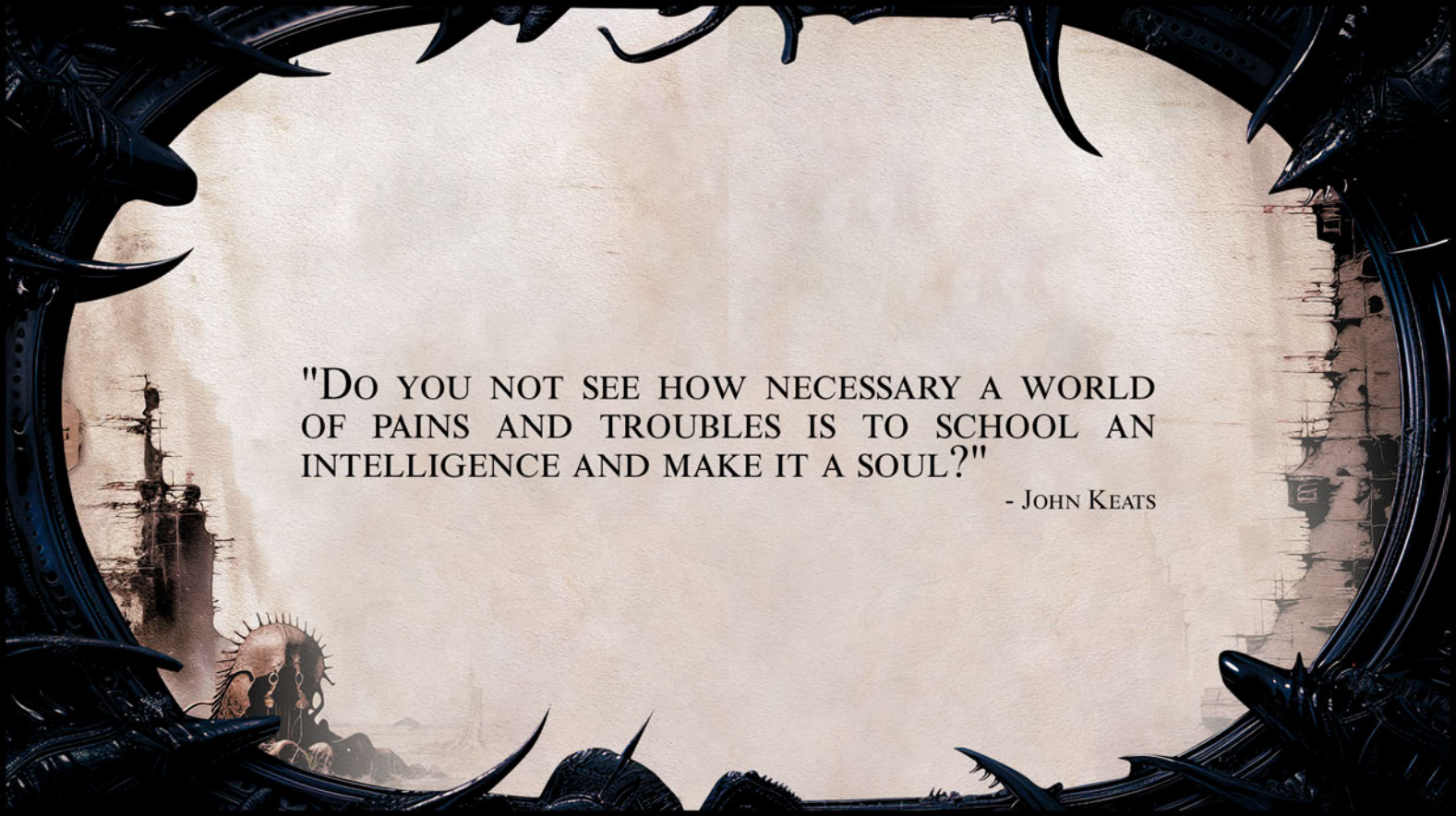
Ultimately this desire for publicity led to his downfall, but only after more lives were forever destroyed.

The Artist's work would have reached its penultimate conclusion with the murder of Detective Jennifer Kale.



What began as simple taunts of the detective and her partner as they hunted The Artist, quickly began to escalate into an obsession for The Artist. Taunts led to stalking, which eventually led to kidnapping. Narrowly escaping with her life, Detective Kale and her partner, Detective Munse, made sure that no others would ever be violated by his hand.





"DO YOU NOT SEE HOW NECESSARY A WORLD
OF PAINS AND TROUBLES IS TO SCHOOL AN
INTELLIGENCE AND MAKE IT A SOUL?"

- JOHN KEATS



Jennifer Kale was born into a world of law enforcement. The need for justice was buried deep within her soul as part of a long line of officers determined to bring order to their corner of the world.

Although she had faced the ultimate violation years earlier, Jennifer rose above the trauma she suffered at the hands of the murderer the media a lifetime ago dubbed The Artist.



It took months of therapy and rehabilitation to wear down the emotional scars her attack left behind, but the pain eventually did give way to great joy, celebrating the birth of her son, Jacob.

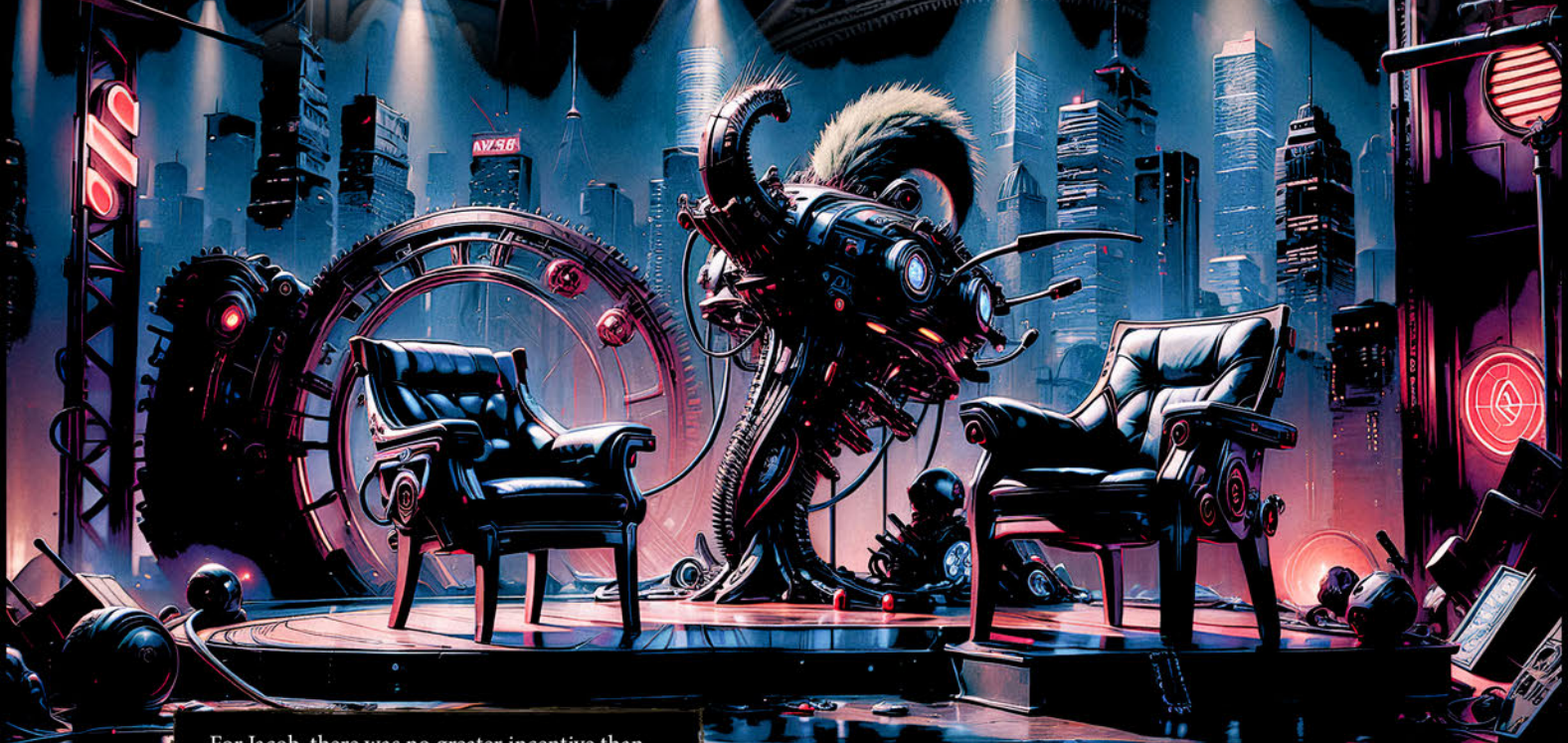
Emotionally intuitive, Jacob Kale lived a mostly eccentric 12 years of life. Celebrating the more esoteric realms, Jacob was a staunch believer in the paranormal.

Jennifer wasted many an hour trying to ground Jacob in the firm world of reality that she lived in but by now she realized it was a lost cause.



Now, on Jacobs 13th birthday, Jennifer made what she considered the biggest mistake of her life, promising to take her son to a live studio taping of a talk show, with Jacob's favorite "psychic" as the guest.

When Jacob bartered his report card for the opportunity to attend the Fallen Michaels' show, Jennifer thought straight A's would be impossible - never underestimate a 12-year-old that's motivated.



For Jacob, there was no greater incentive than the once in a lifetime chance to meet Melinda White, the most esteemed psychic personality to grace the television, offering the future and a tale of a loved one for a price.



Jacob's mother was indeed willing to suffer for her beloved son - plus you only turn 13 once. Jacob's mother was indeed willing to suffer for her beloved son - plus you only turn 13 once.



The Fallen Michaels show sat everyone with the customary greeting and pre-screening on behalf of the psychic. Jennifer stifled a snort of derision while Jacob waited ecstatically.



Meanwhile, backstage amongst the clamor of pre-show prep sat Melinda White. Melinda was both beautiful and gifted as a speaker. Sitting quietly, she steadied herself for yet another public appearance, always on guard, always hiding her great secret while profiting from it all the same.



The unbearable truth of her life - that the television psychic and accused fraud was, in fact, all that she advertised.

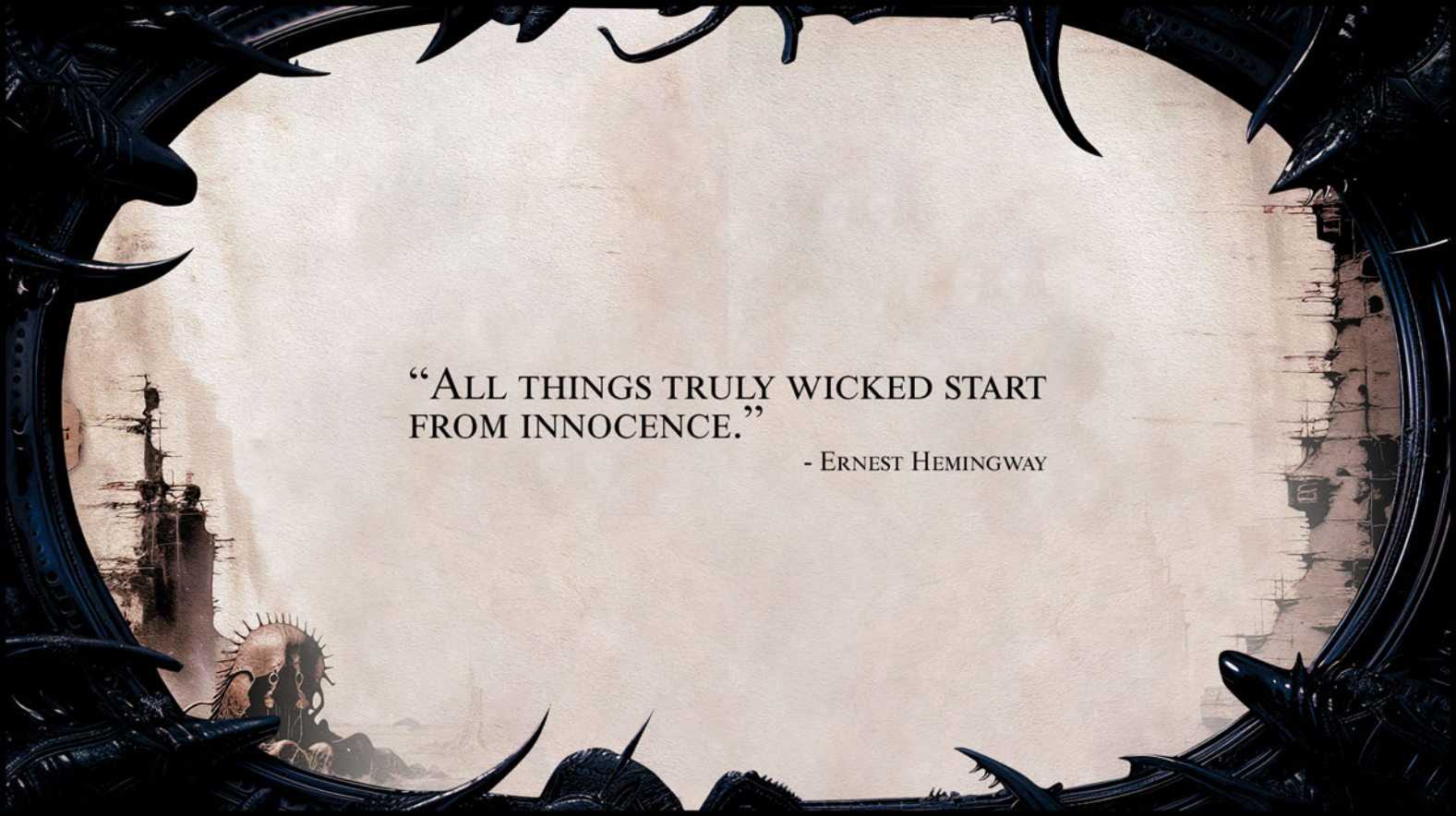


The overt use of her abilities caused severe pain and nausea including weakness that lasted for weeks at a time, but the gentle "skimming" of an audience was more passive, softer. Bearable.



The readings, however, always had a hidden cost. Still, fame and money bought a lot of morphine for the pain.

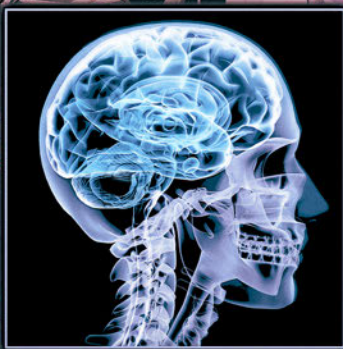




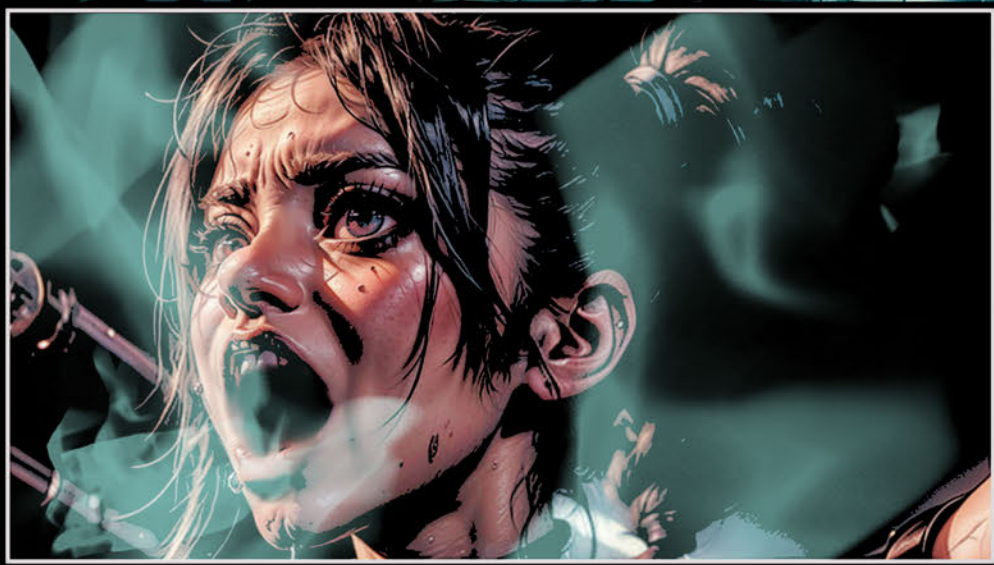
“ALL THINGS TRULY WICKED START
FROM INNOCENCE.”

- ERNEST HEMINGWAY

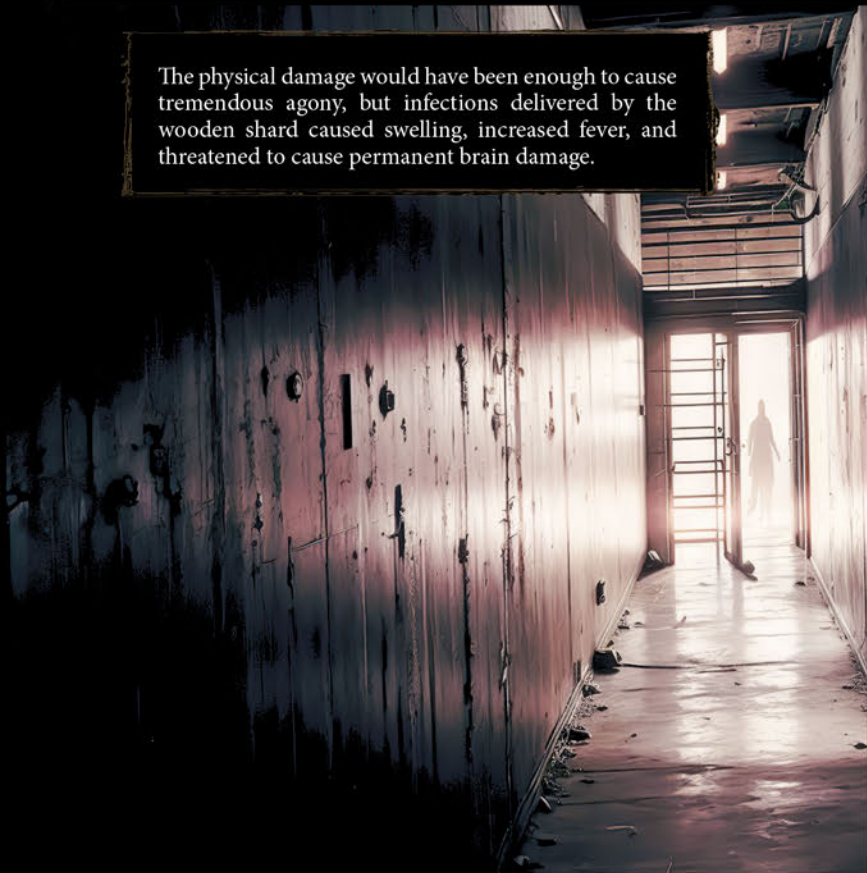
Long ago as a small child, Melinda was oblivious to the hidden realm of the spirits.



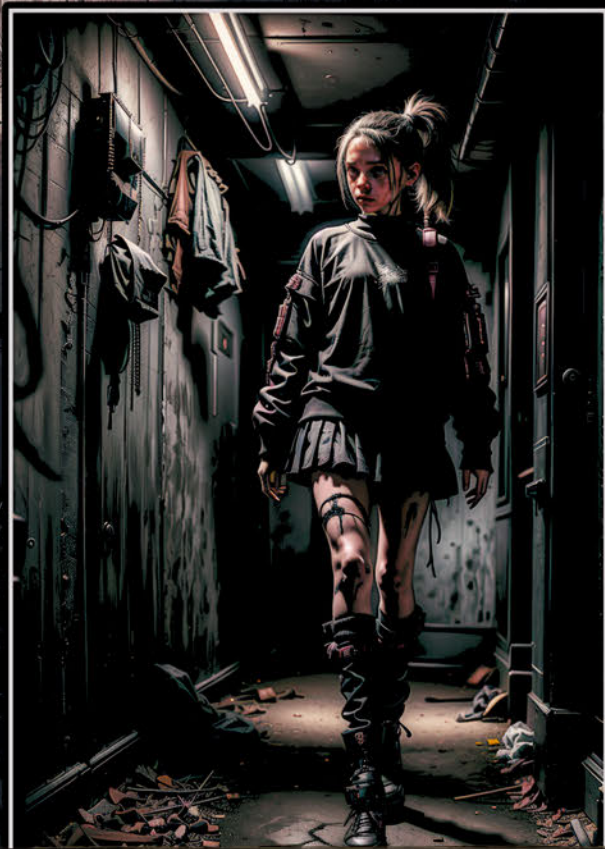
Blissfully, her days were filled with the typical joys of youth until a rather mundane accident nearly cost the child her life. A fall from a rather unremarkable tree left the child unconscious, a pool of blood slowly pooling from the base of her skull on the ground beneath her. Her sister, Sonya, stayed with Melinda as another friend ran to get their mother. As her mother neared, her hand involuntarily moved to cover her own mouth, silencing the panic within. Melinda had fallen upon an uprooted branch standing nearly vertical from the ground. The wooden stake penetrated the base of her skull, nearly severing her spine and causing immense damage. Paramedics rushed to the scene and with great care took the injured child to the hospital where weeks of surgeries awaited Melinda.



The physical damage would have been enough to cause tremendous agony, but infections delivered by the wooden shard caused swelling, increased fever, and threatened to cause permanent brain damage.



Experts were brought in to consult on the case, seemingly to no avail. It wasn't until all hope looked to be expunged that something miraculous occurred. Steeped in sweat and with a fever threatening to reach above 108 degrees, Melinda would spend years trying to recall exactly what happened on that desperate night, but to no avail.



Clouded in a haze, Melinda's recollections were limited to those of ghostly apparitions. Some terrifying beyond words as they tried to coax her down darkened hallways.

Others greeted her warmly, comforting her with their aura's. Her fever broke later that night, bringing relief to everyone in the room. Her recovery was as swift as could be expected, considering the trauma. It wasn't until 6 months later that the Others made themselves known to Melinda.





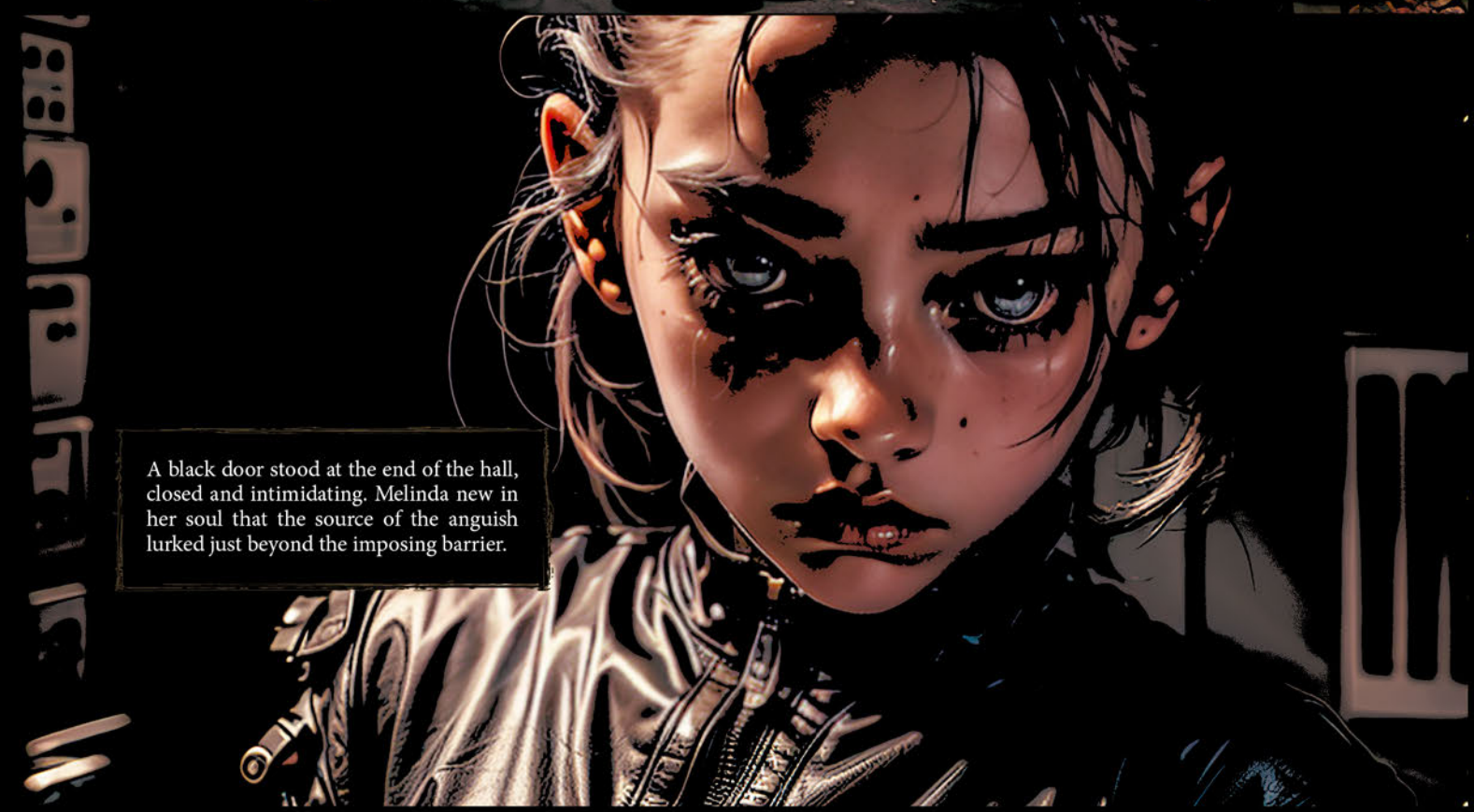
At first they came to her only as bodiless voices. Sometimes just sounds, other times even complete sentences. Some curious, others outright helpful, the young child grew to love her disembodied friends.



It wasn't until one unremarkable evening in September that the Others began to manifest visually. At age 11, Melinda woke in the middle of the night to a blood curdling scream. Her sister and the rest of her family remained asleep, oblivious to the anguish she could so clearly hear.

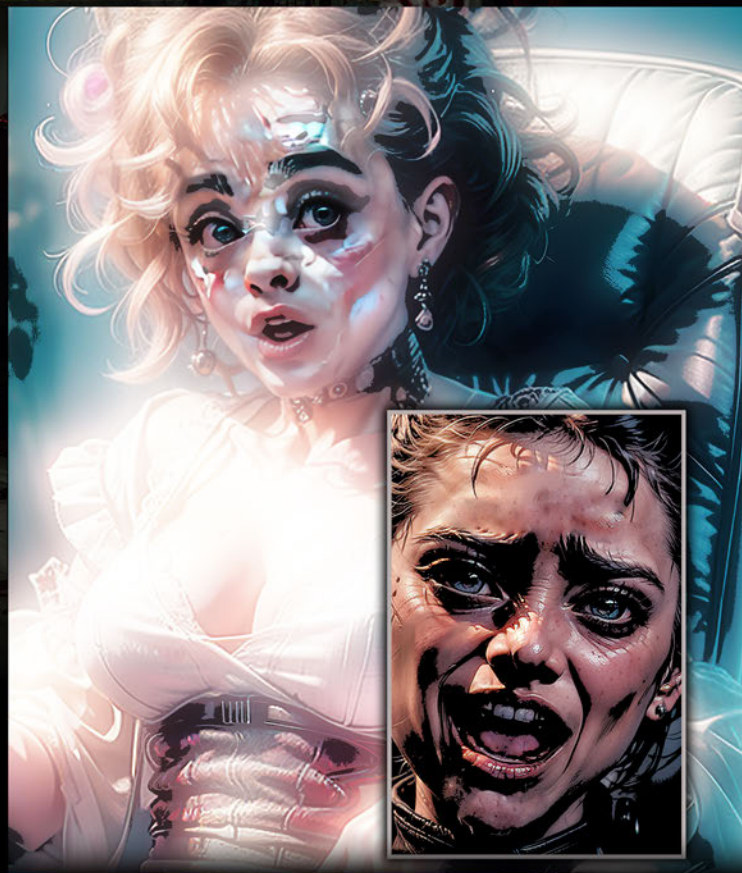


Melinda began to wander the halls of her home, noticing as the walls became increasingly more alien. Textured with rough, dangerous edges, the walls seeped a black goo, coating everything and slowly consuming the very floor she walked upon.

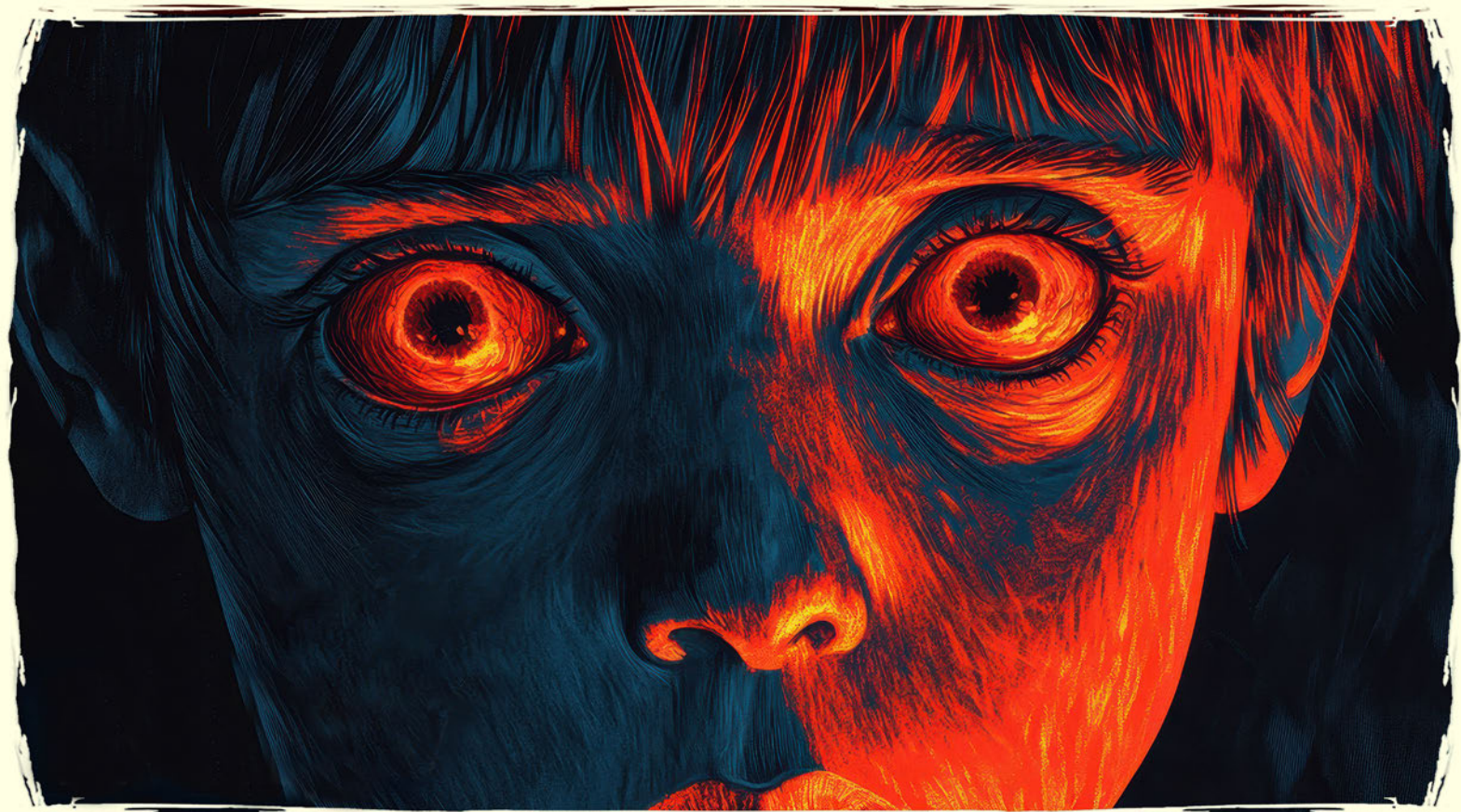


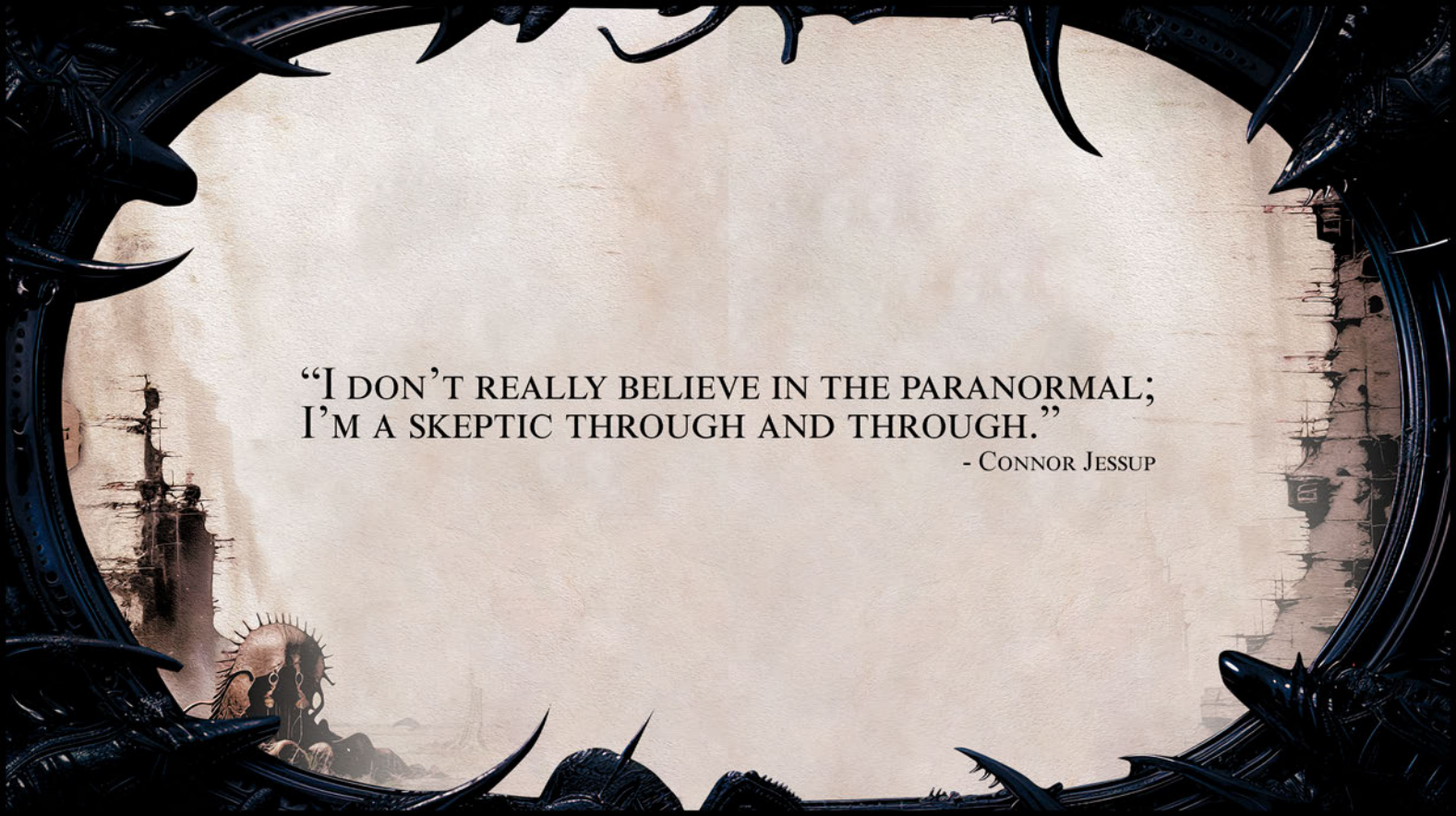
A black door stood at the end of the hall, closed and intimidating. Melinda new in her soul that the source of the anguish lurked just beyond the imposing barrier.

As she neared ever closer, Melinda heard whimpers of sorrow and pain grow once more into the cascading shrieks of terror and agony, burning deep within her psyche with an untraceable sense of familiarity.



A truth was hidden behind this door and should she choose to open it, would she find relief? Would she free this unknown suffering? Or would she damn herself, taking within herself a great and unknowable darkness? Melinda could not refuse the lure of the secret door. Reaching out slowly, she grasped the knob, turning it ever so gently. As the door opened, realization and knowledge began crashing in, blending with her very soul, mutating and changing her very being.



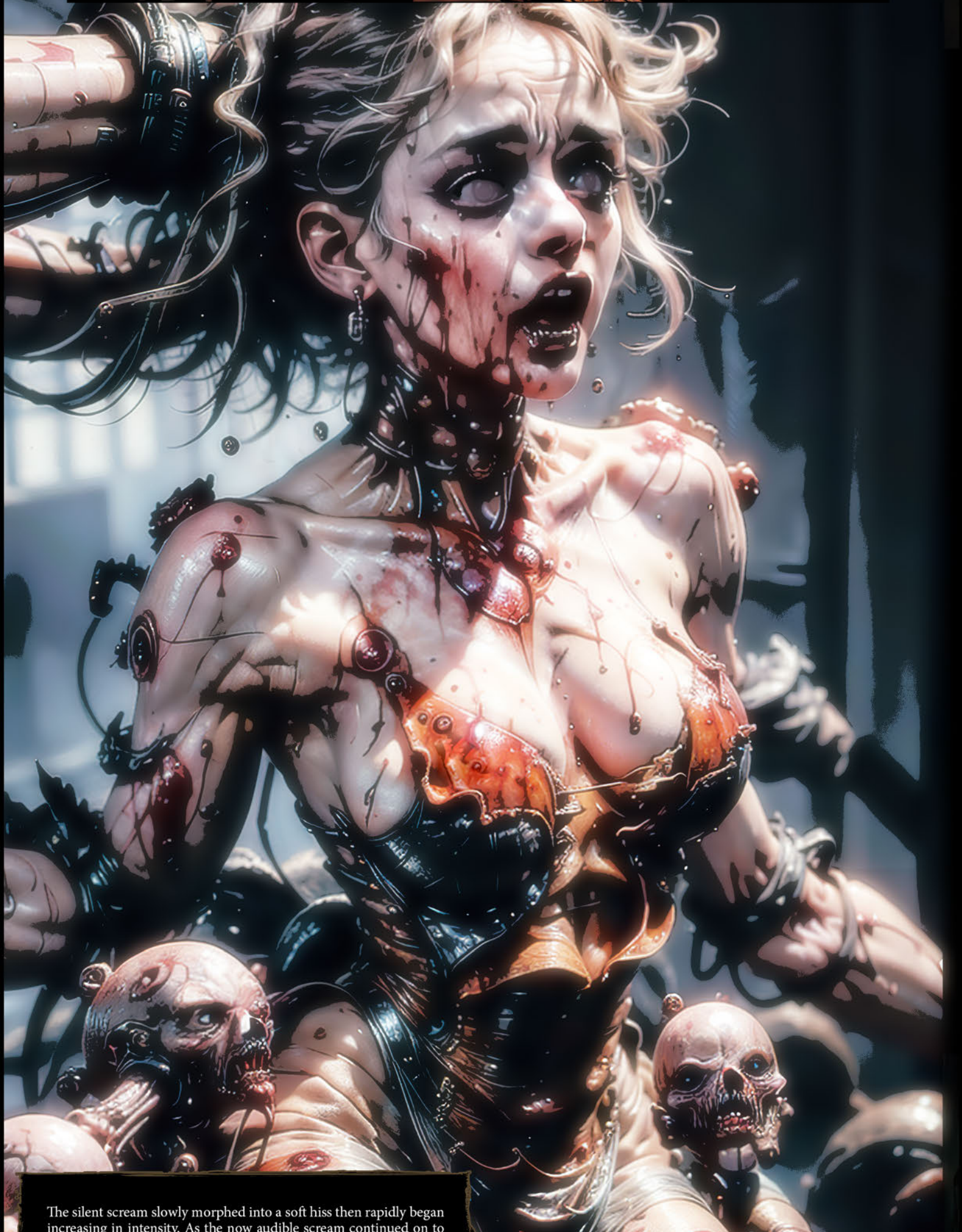
The image features a quote centered on a light, textured background. The quote is enclosed within a dark, ornate, and somewhat gothic-style border that frames the entire scene. The border has intricate, spiky details. The background itself is a pale, off-white color with some faint, darker textures and a small, dark, spiky object visible in the lower-left corner.

“I DON’T REALLY BELIEVE IN THE PARANORMAL;
I’M A SKEPTIC THROUGH AND THROUGH.”

- CONNOR JESSUP



Upon a chair in the center of a white room, and older woman sat prone, eyes unnaturally wide with mouth agape in a silent scream. Her pupils slowly turned to observe Melinda as the rest of the woman's body remained perfectly still.



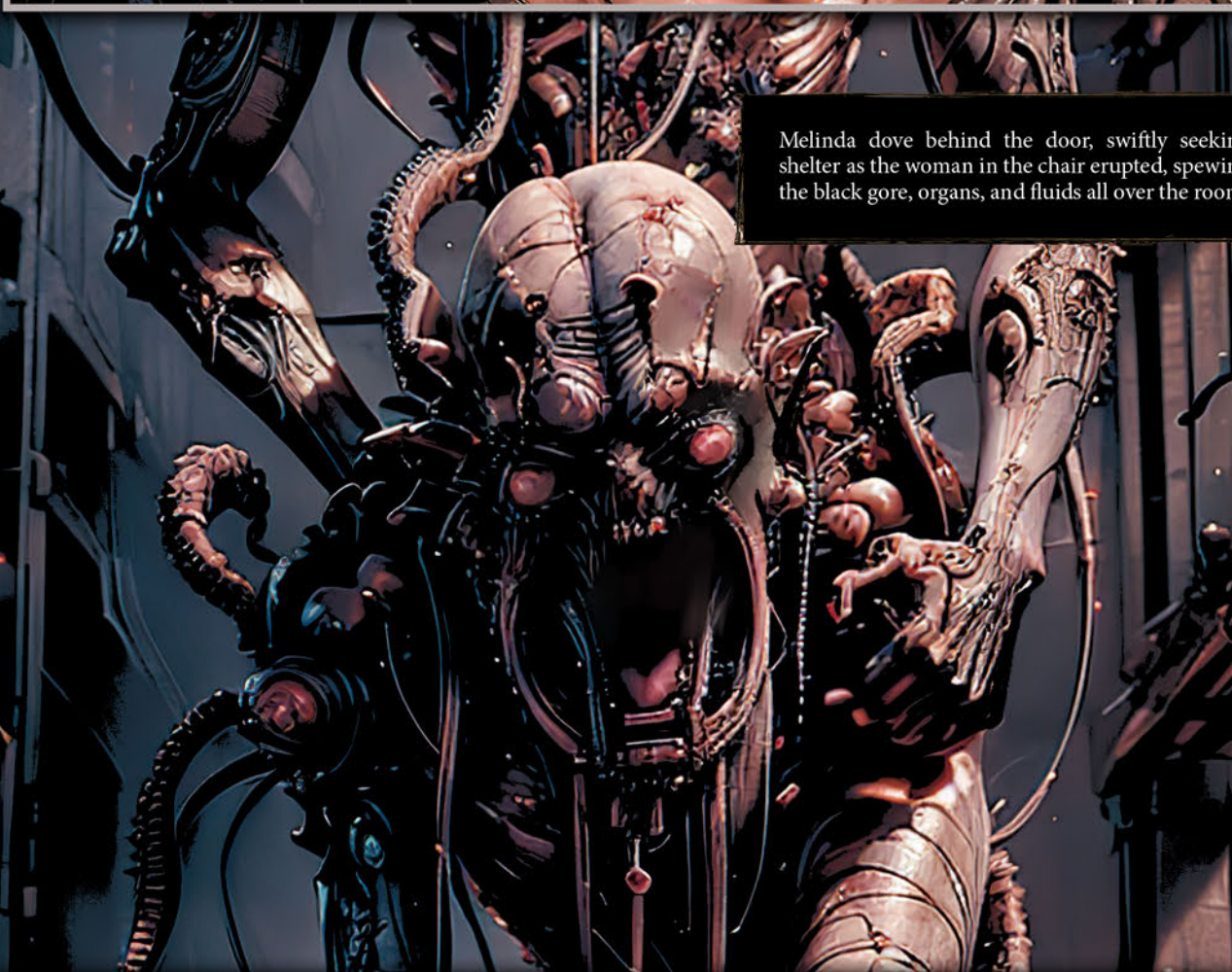
The silent scream slowly morphed into a soft hiss then rapidly began increasing in intensity. As the now audible scream continued on to its crescendo, Melinda began to recognize the moment and even the woman for what it was and joined in the ever deafening scream.



The woman's skin began to crack as a viscous, black and crimson fluid began to seep from the wounds. Cracks appeared all over her body, along her arms, her face, her jaw line, everywhere! And where ever the cracks appeared, so too did the sickly liquid.



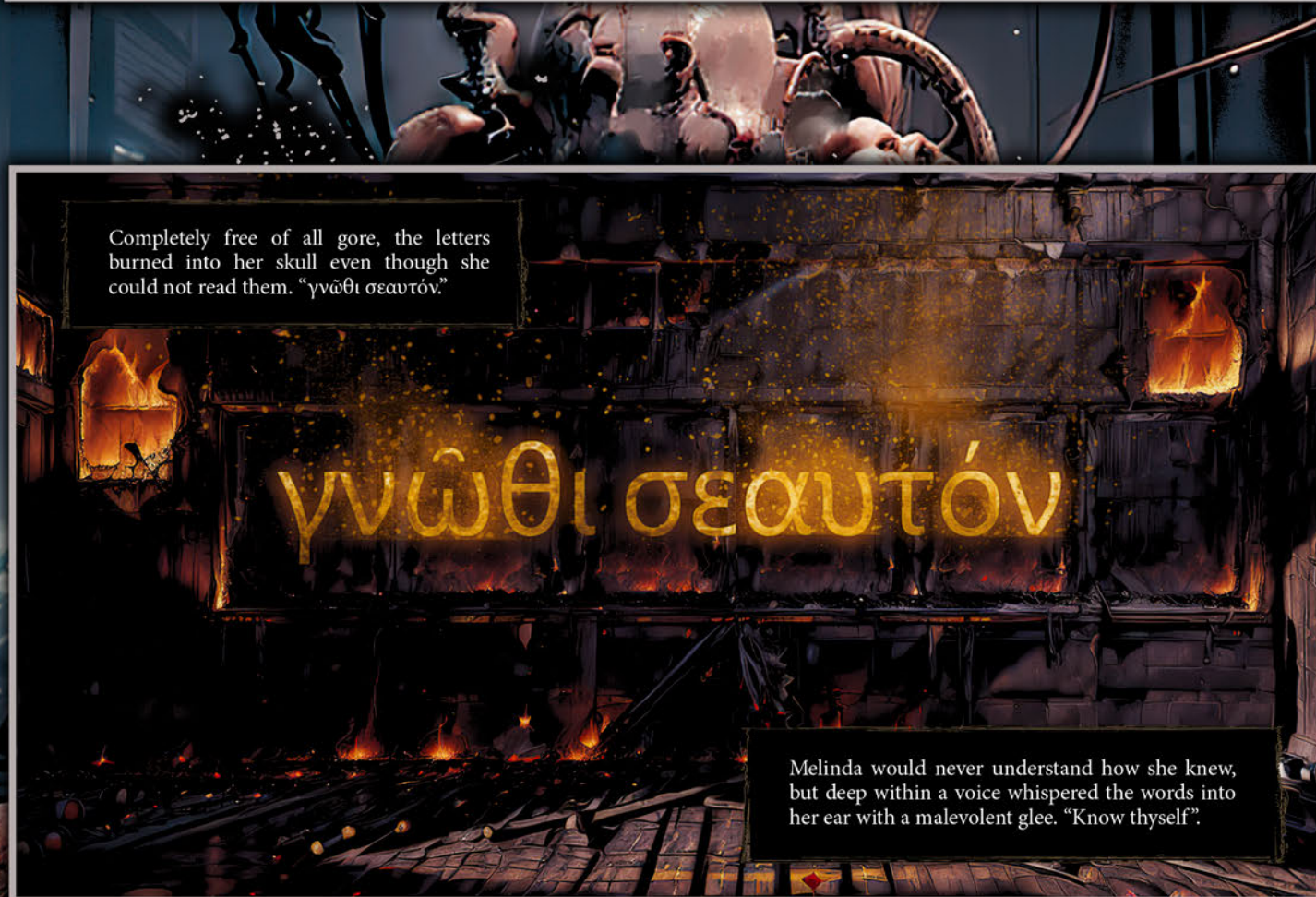
The woman's scream abruptly changed to a gurgle as the black liquid bubbled up from deep within her lungs, now gushing out of every orifice in greater and greater amounts.



Melinda dove behind the door, swiftly seeking shelter as the woman in the chair erupted, spewing the black gore, organs, and fluids all over the room.

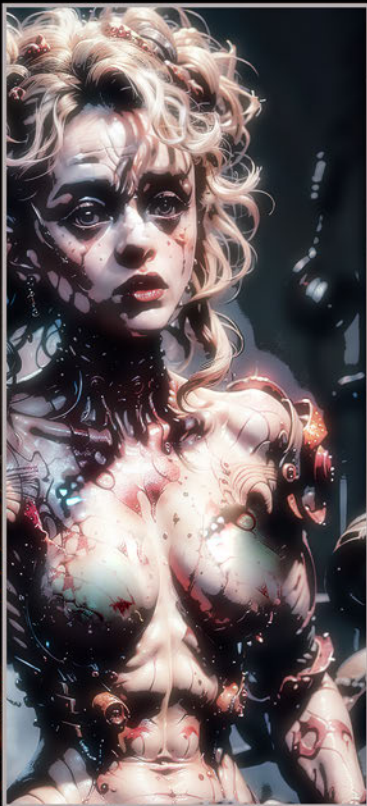


Melinda peered back in, cautiously and with great fear. The entirety of the room was stained black except for an inscription on the far wall.

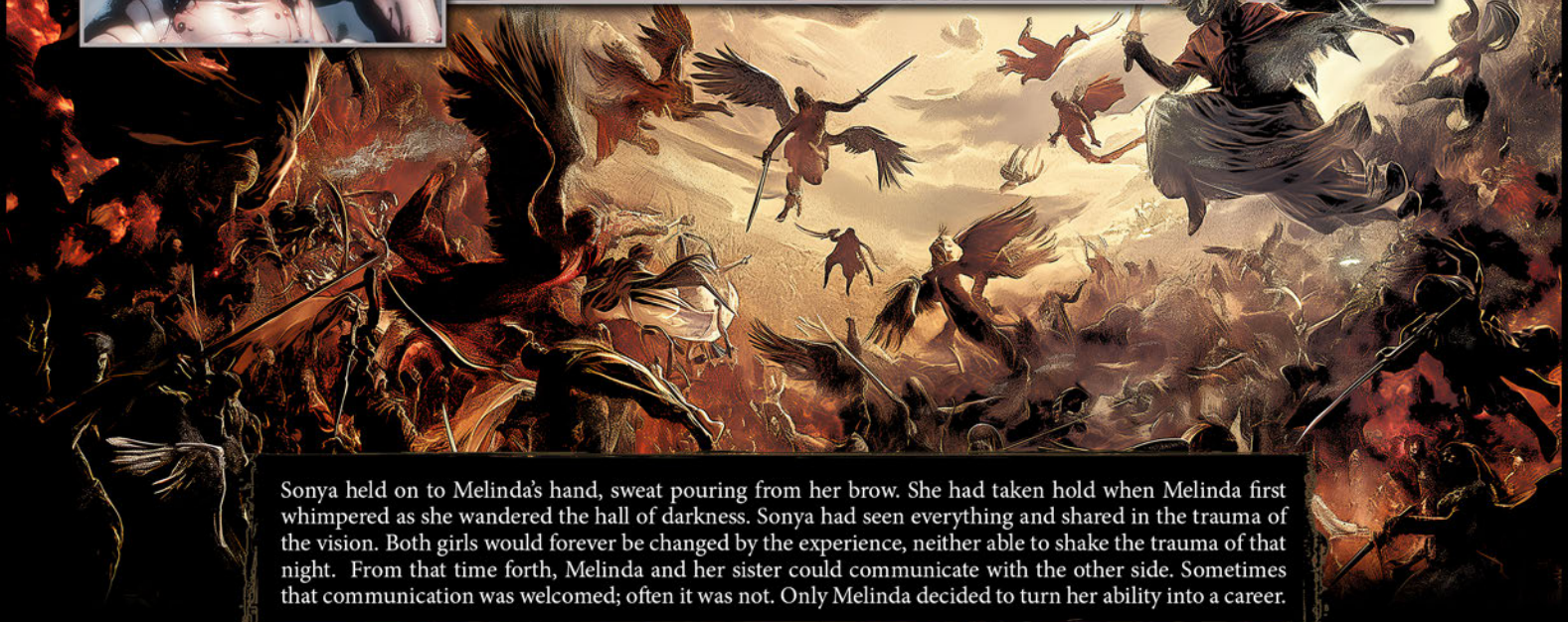


Completely free of all gore, the letters burned into her skull even though she could not read them. "γνώθι σεαυτόν."

Melinda would never understand how she knew, but deep within a voice whispered the words into her ear with a malevolent glee. "Know thyself".

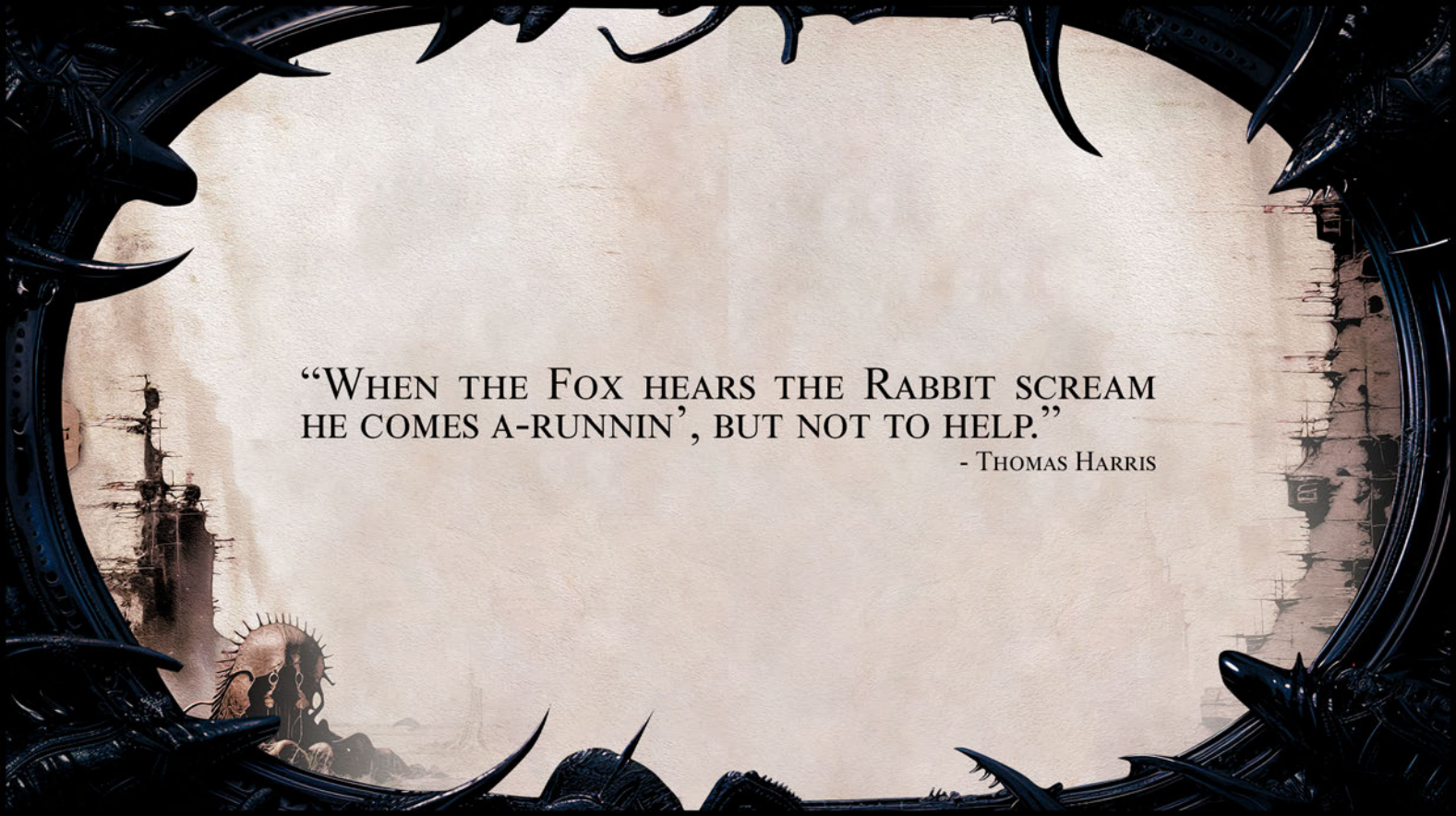


Melinda woke screaming, her future foretold within a prophetic dream.



Sonya held on to Melinda's hand, sweat pouring from her brow. She had taken hold when Melinda first whimpered as she wandered the hall of darkness. Sonya had seen everything and shared in the trauma of the vision. Both girls would forever be changed by the experience, neither able to shake the trauma of that night. From that time forth, Melinda and her sister could communicate with the other side. Sometimes that communication was welcomed; often it was not. Only Melinda decided to turn her ability into a career.





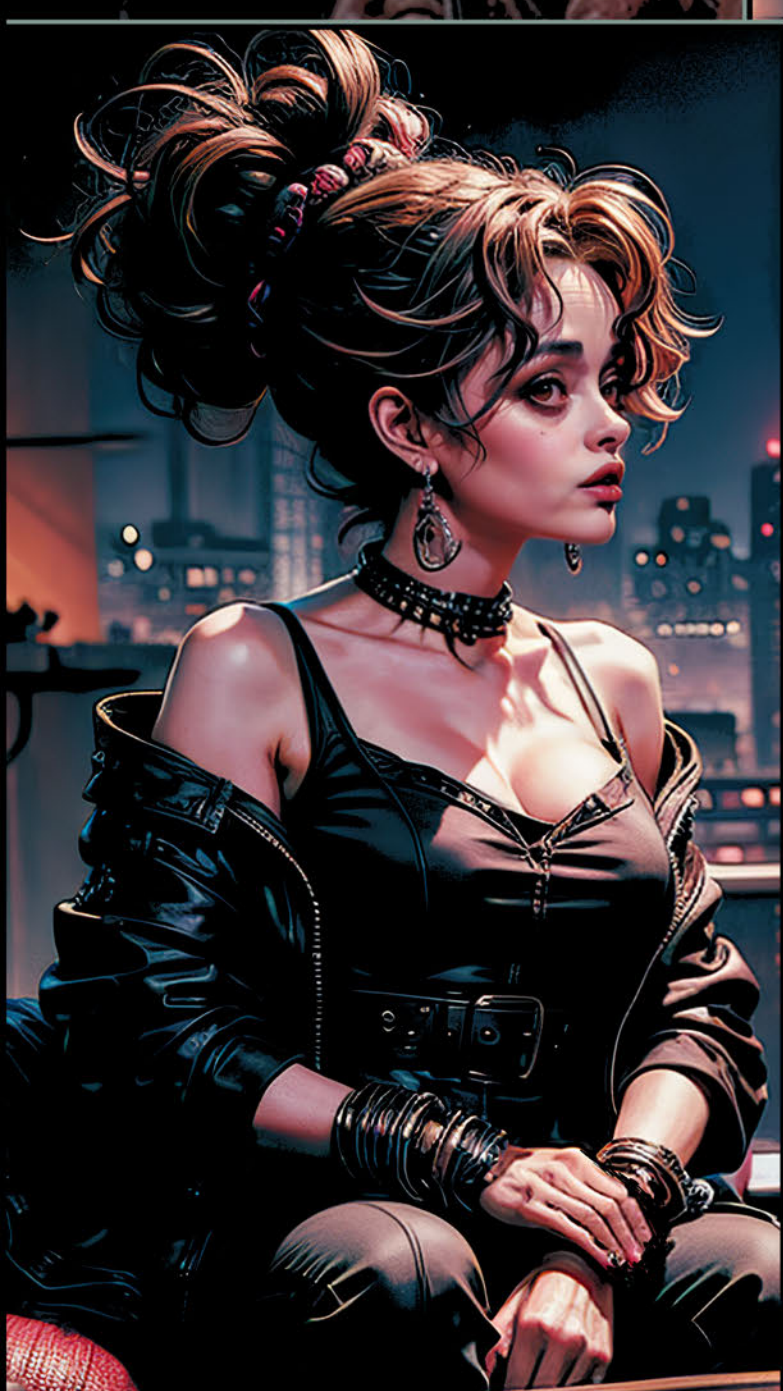
“WHEN THE FOX HEARS THE RABBIT SCREAM
HE COMES A-RUNNIN’, BUT NOT TO HELP.”

- THOMAS HARRIS

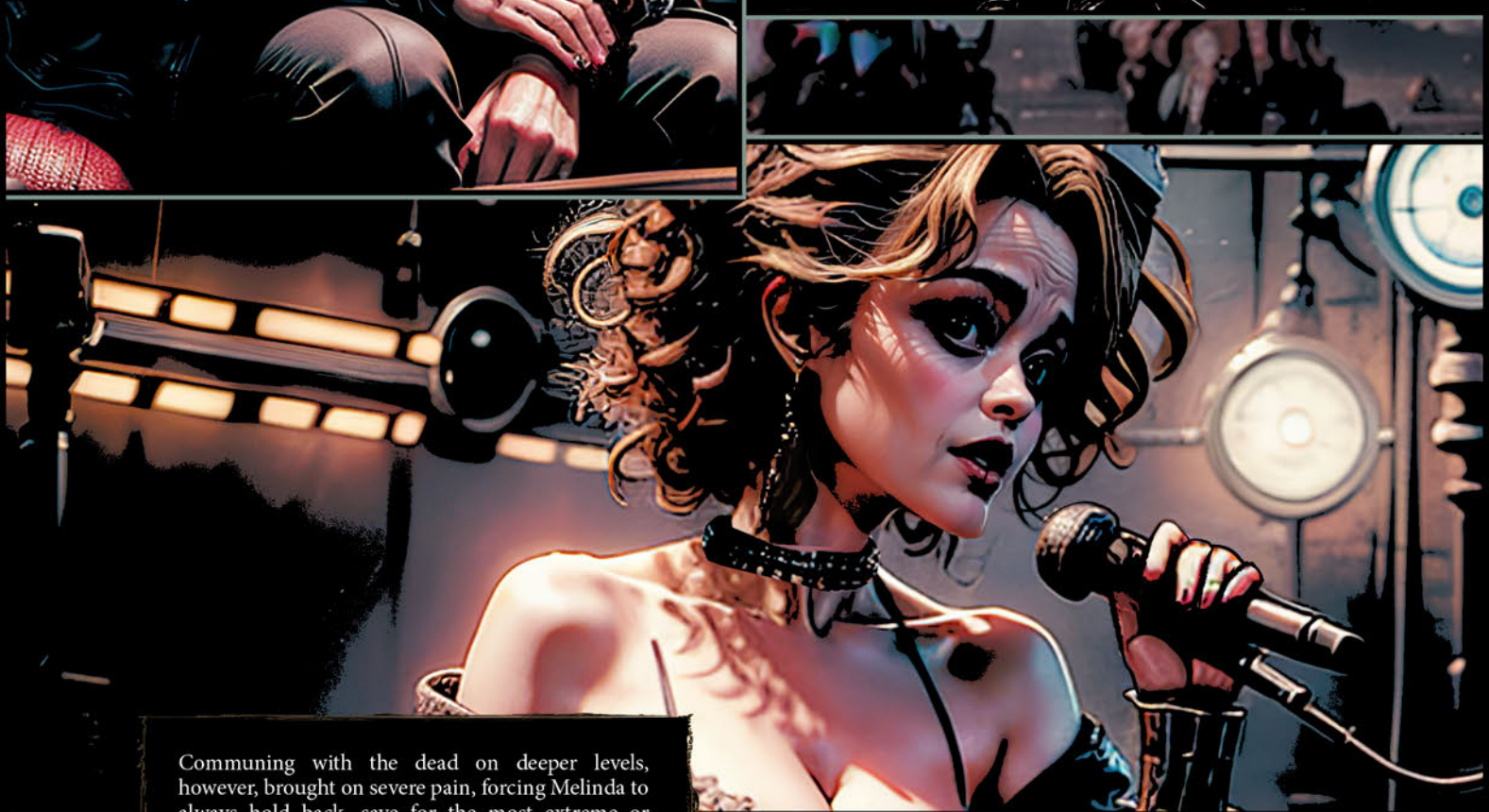




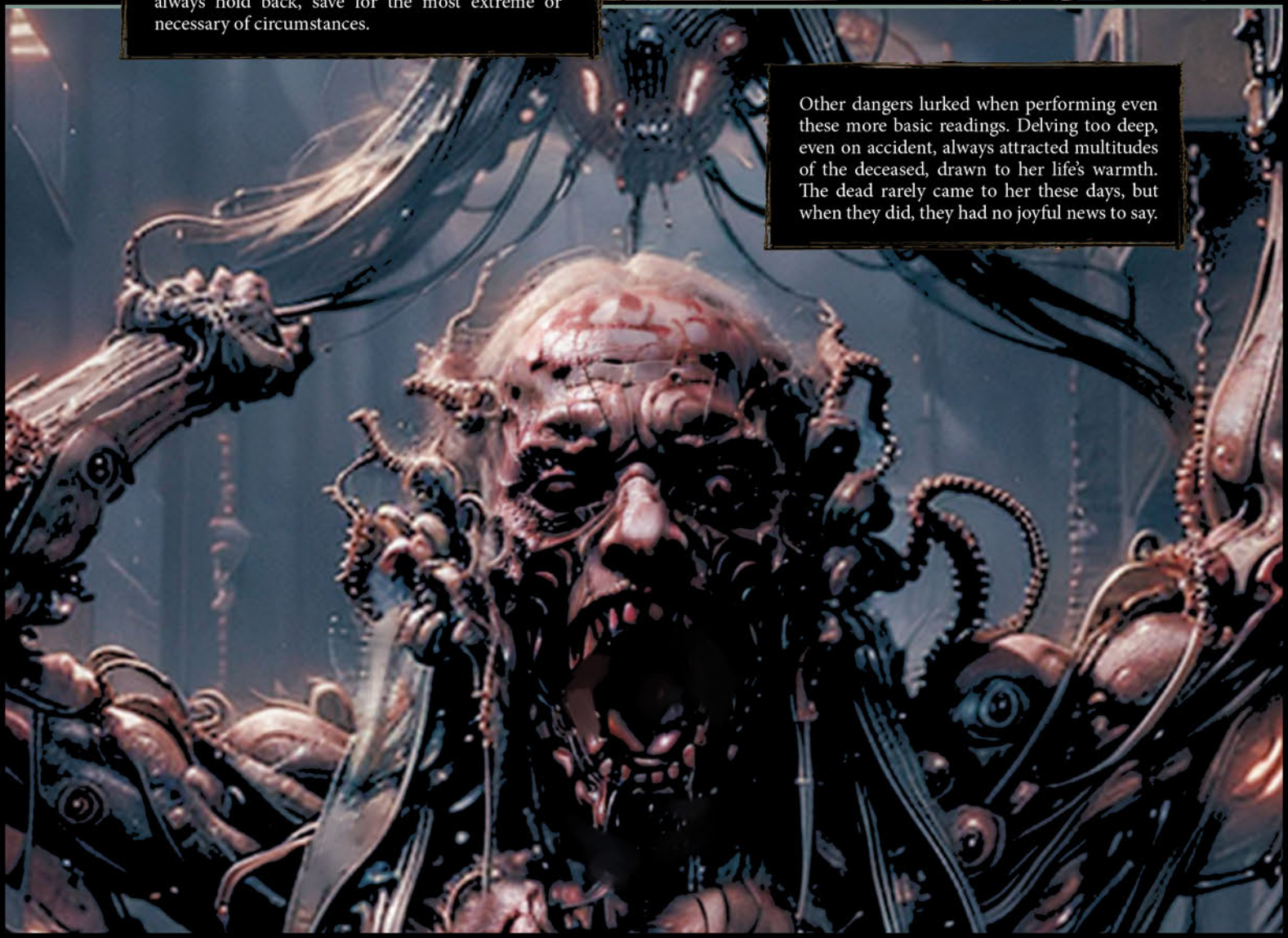
However, as much as the process seemed nothing more than a well-rehearsed shtick, the fact remained it was also the truth.



It was easy, Melinda could sense it just by looking in their eyes. That was the real gift, an instinctual glimpse of a person's life and desire where she read not just from the other side, but from the person's own thoughts and emotions as well.



Communing with the dead on deeper levels, however, brought on severe pain, forcing Melinda to always hold back, save for the most extreme or necessary of circumstances.



Other dangers lurked when performing even these more basic readings. Delving too deep, even on accident, always attracted multitudes of the deceased, drawn to her life's warmth. The dead rarely came to her these days, but when they did, they had no joyful news to say.



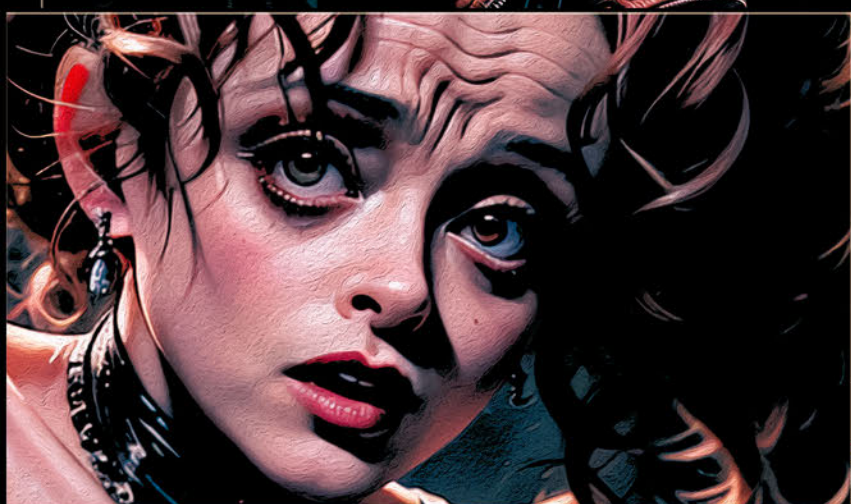
Those that would speak of hopes and dreams and joyous things spent very little time within Melinda's sphere.

She often thought that they must be transcending to some other form; content to leave the matters of the living to the living. Those that remained, however, they wanted only revenge for a life cut down – deserved or otherwise. Their rage, grief, or pain refused to loosen its grip, instead consuming them utterly. As Melinda wrapped up her introductory readings and began to segue into the meat of her show, Jennifer couldn't help but be impressed. It was the subtle things that caught her attention. Bits and pieces of information Melinda relayed were too unique to guess and far too specific.

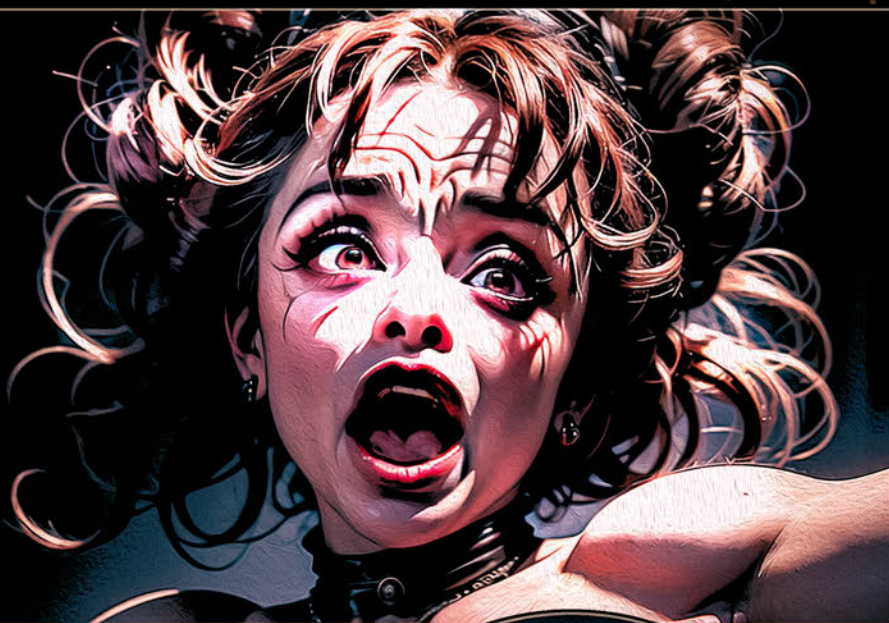
In fact, she never led her audience into revealing information like most “psychics” do, with the goal of repackaging what the audience revealed by accident as new insights to amaze.



As Melinda's gaze drifted over the audience, gleaning the secret truths of their inner mind, her eyes met those of Jacob, and an odd thing occurred. Melinda White felt charged – powerful even!

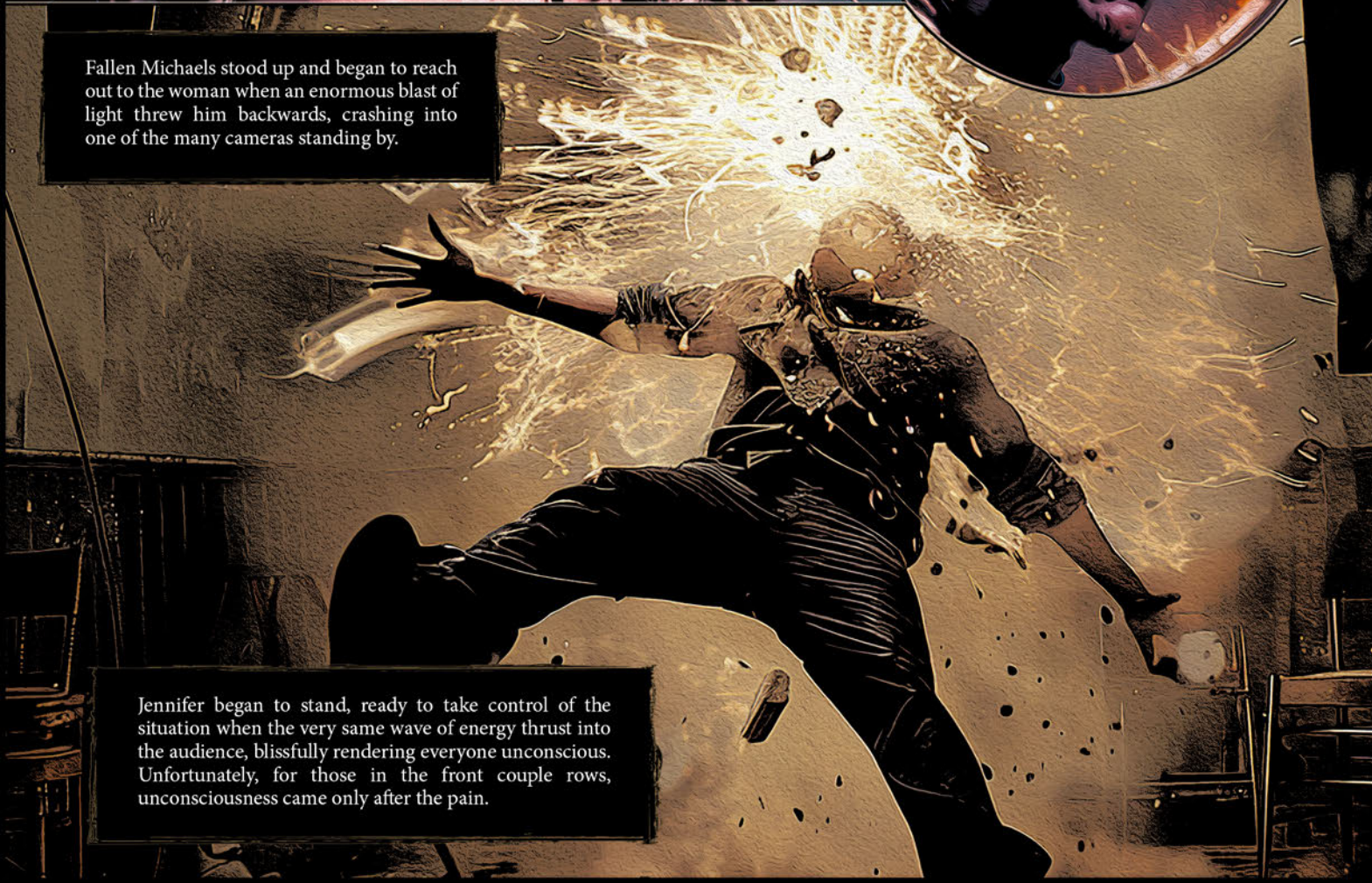


An electric wave washed over her body starting in her extremities and coalescing within her mind. Melinda's grip tightened on the chair, tearing into the fabric. The audience's fear became palpable as the acclaimed psychic contorted in agony yet made no sound.



Fallen Michaels stood up and began to reach out to the woman when an enormous blast of light threw him backwards, crashing into one of the many cameras standing by.

Jennifer began to stand, ready to take control of the situation when the very same wave of energy thrust into the audience, blissfully rendering everyone unconscious. Unfortunately, for those in the front couple rows, unconsciousness came only after the pain.



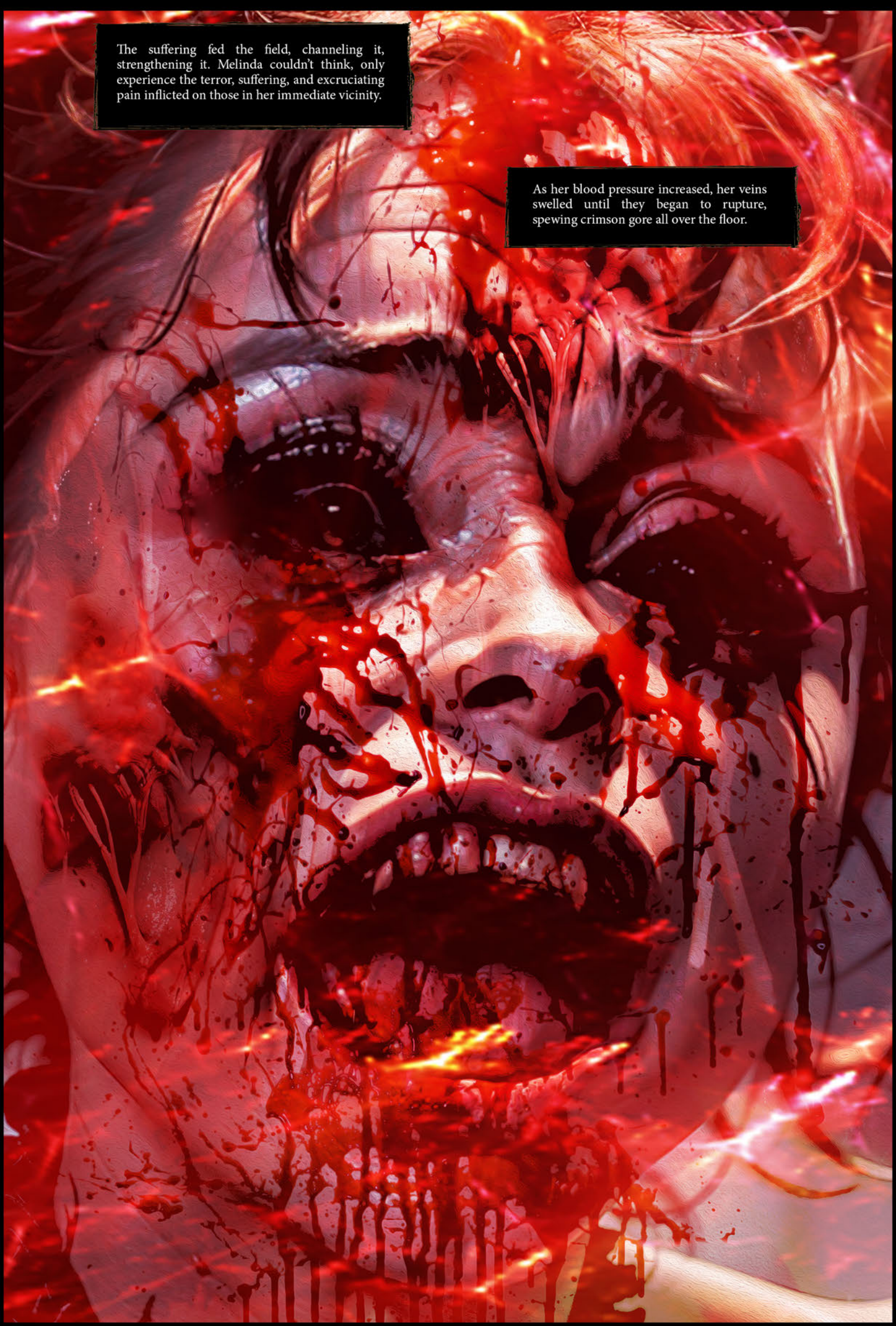


As the light blinded the audience members in the front rows, the first sensations they experienced were not of bliss, but of the frightfully slow peeling of their cracked flesh, starting at their fingertips and moving ever forward toward their head.



While in truth, the flash happened all within a moment, the event horizon of the field behaved like that of a black hole.

The primary effect was one of slowing the audience's death to what seems like unimaginable hours of excruciating pain as their very flesh peeled away from their bodies, sending signal after signal to their brains, ensuring that every moment of suffering was felt in its entirety.



The suffering fed the field, channeling it, strengthening it. Melinda couldn't think, only experience the terror, suffering, and excruciating pain inflicted on those in her immediate vicinity.

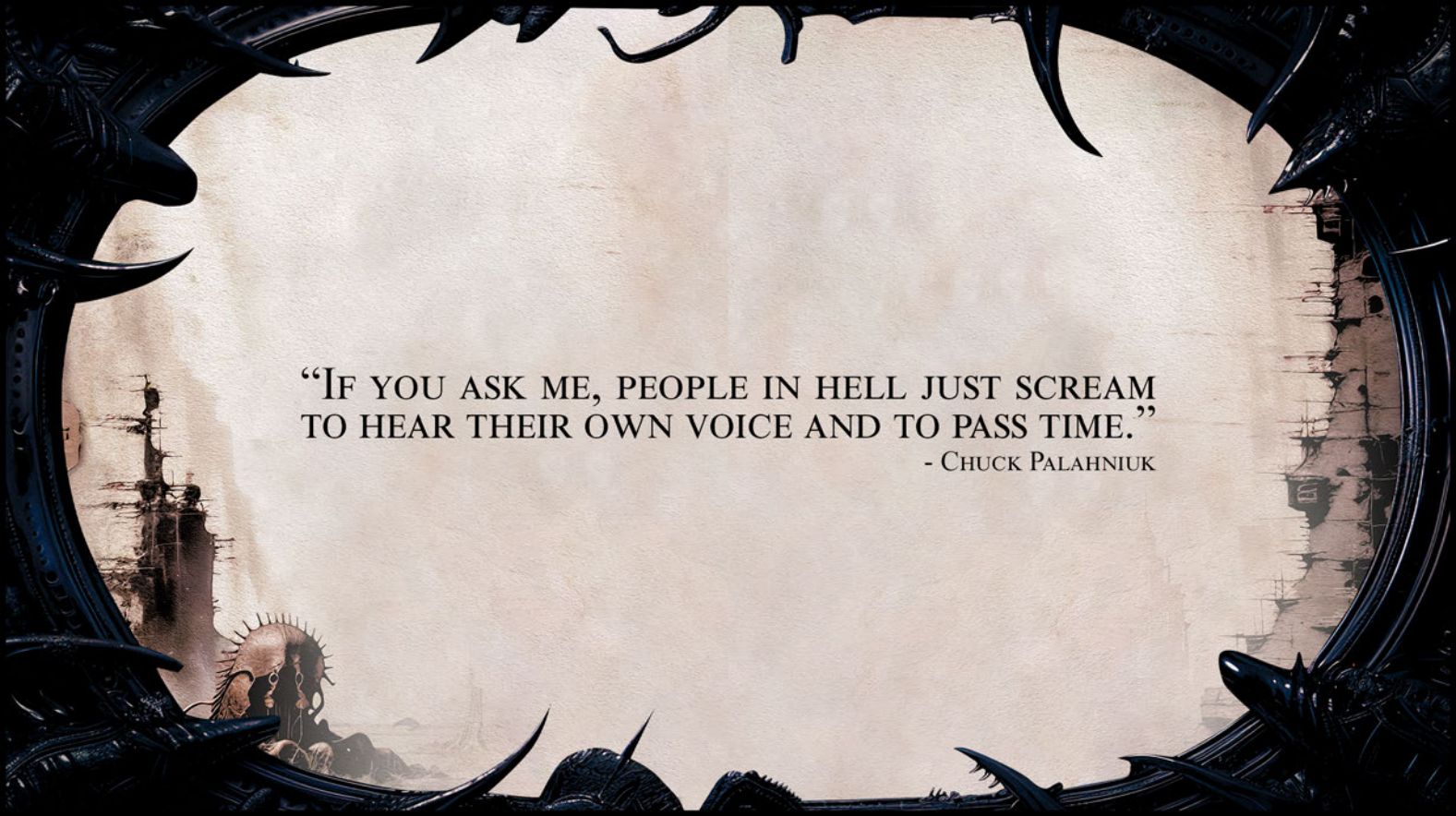
As her blood pressure increased, her veins swelled until they began to rupture, spewing crimson gore all over the floor.

Her heart burst deep within, as the incredible energy tumbled out of her, fed from the innocent child just outside the reach of her destructive field.



Jacob convulsed in his unconscious state, thrashing back and forth, surrounded by his fellow unconscious audience members and mother. As Melinda's surge of power reached its crescendo, the explosive energy ruptured her eyes before exploding her head, releasing the totality of all the suffering, pain, and monstrous energy. Finally, and with explosive effect, the door to the other side was open.



The image features a quote by Chuck Palahniuk centered on a light, textured background. The quote is enclosed within a dark, ornate border that resembles a thorny or spiked frame. The background also shows faint, dark, industrial or mechanical structures on the left and right sides, partially obscured by the border.

“IF YOU ASK ME, PEOPLE IN HELL JUST SCREAM
TO HEAR THEIR OWN VOICE AND TO PASS TIME.”

- CHUCK PALAHNIUK



Wandering down the street, a gangly-looking man moved with purpose as the sky continued to darken. A strange storm had sprung up, seemingly centered around a collection of sky scrapers downtown, spreading outward minute by minute.



The man walked with a smile on his face as he entered the darkened bar around the corner.

Not particularly noteworthy, few if any noticed the newest arrival.





A solitary figure known as Bob to the bartender, a frequent customer that often sat sipping his drink and ignoring the world around him, held up an empty glass toward the bartender who in turn asked "Another one, Bob?"

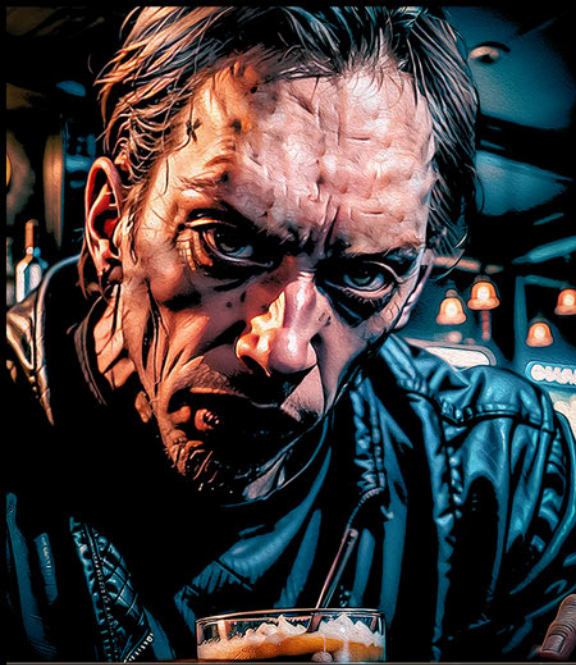


The man approached the counter at the bar wearing a ratty coat with an overall disheveled appearance. The bar wasn't a complete dive, but the wad of cash the man placed before the bartender ensured he wasn't likely to be forced out.



Ordering a whiskey on the rocks, the isolation Bob sought was ruined by the stranger who, without introduction, began speaking as if asked to relate his entire life story.

"Bob, do you ever fear the secret sins of your past? Ever worry that the moment you let your guard down, those sins will race on in and fill the void of your soul with all the wrongs you've committed?"



They do that you know. Sneaking back to haunt you while you piss the remainders of your day away drinking that swill." Bob looked incredulously at the stranger.



The stranger's eye's met Bob's for a terrifying moment that made Bob's hair stand up on the back of his sweaty neck. "Screw off buddy; I don't know you."

"True enough Bob, I've only seen you from afar when I used to frequent this establishment. Only when I walked by and saw you did memories stir. You see, we know many of the same... people."

They spoke of you often. Ever wonder what it's like to die, Bob?" Bob studied his drink, trying to focus his thoughts on threats that would relieve him of this intrusion, but he found himself crippled with anxiety. Unknowing horror crept up from below, paralyzing his body, leaving Bob only with the ability to listen to the stranger's words.



The bartender looked on from a distance, ready to step in should the scene turn ugly. "When it happens, death I mean, when it happens it's a sudden thing. It's the same for everyone, a blinding flash then nothing.

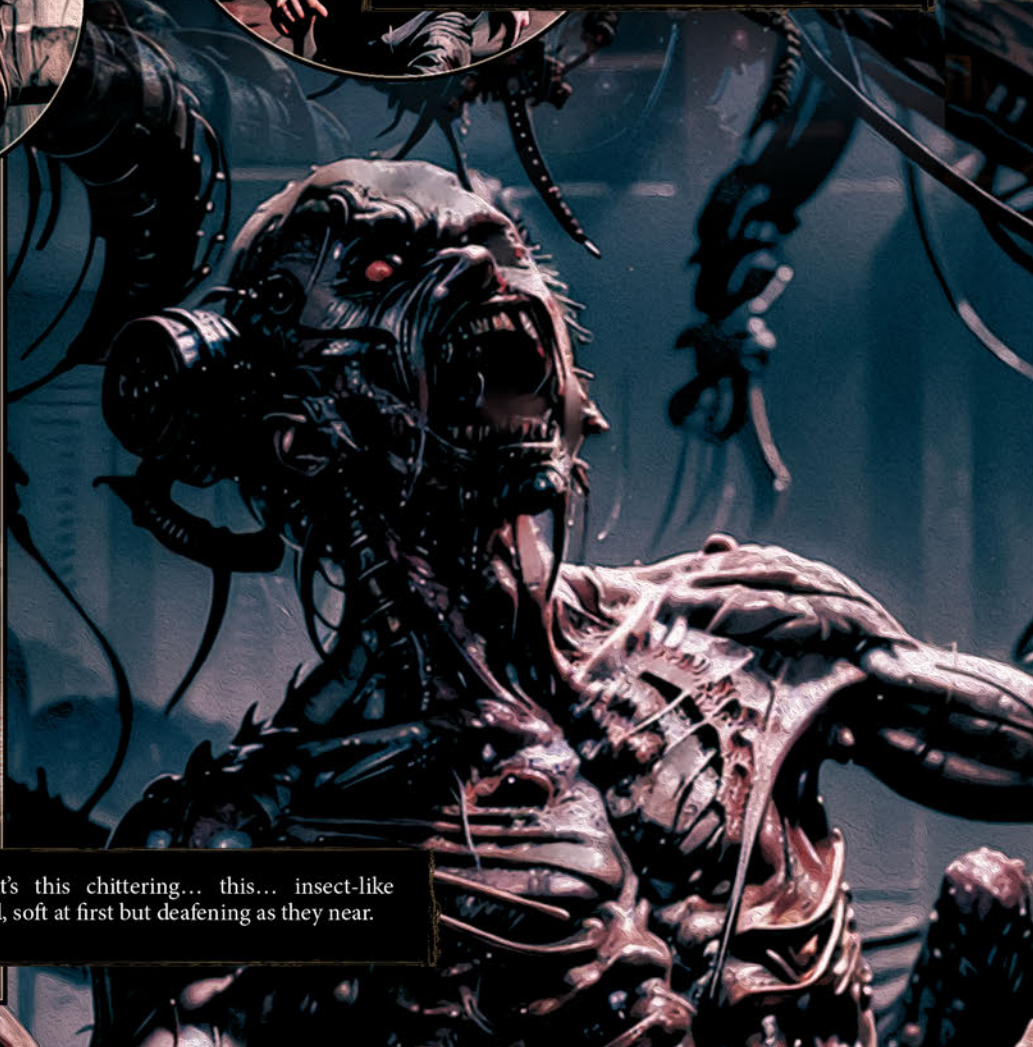
You always expect flash, bang, excitement and wonder, but no. That comes after. After THEY are through with you." Bob felt nauseous, wanting to flee. He took a long sip from his drink before whispering "they?" "Yes Bob, They, Them, The Old Ones.



You hear them scurrying in the dark – the blackness is so total; you can't see your own fingers in front of your face. But you can hear them working. It's not growls or words, those I could take better I think.



No, it's this chittering... this... insect-like sound, soft at first but deafening as they near.





That's when the tearing starts. You feel your body ripped apart and the more you try to scream, the louder the chittering is."



"Oh, they do enjoy their work, you can tell by the excited sounds as they find what they're looking for."
"It lasts for days as they search... you would cry out for mercy, but no sound could ever escape your lips."



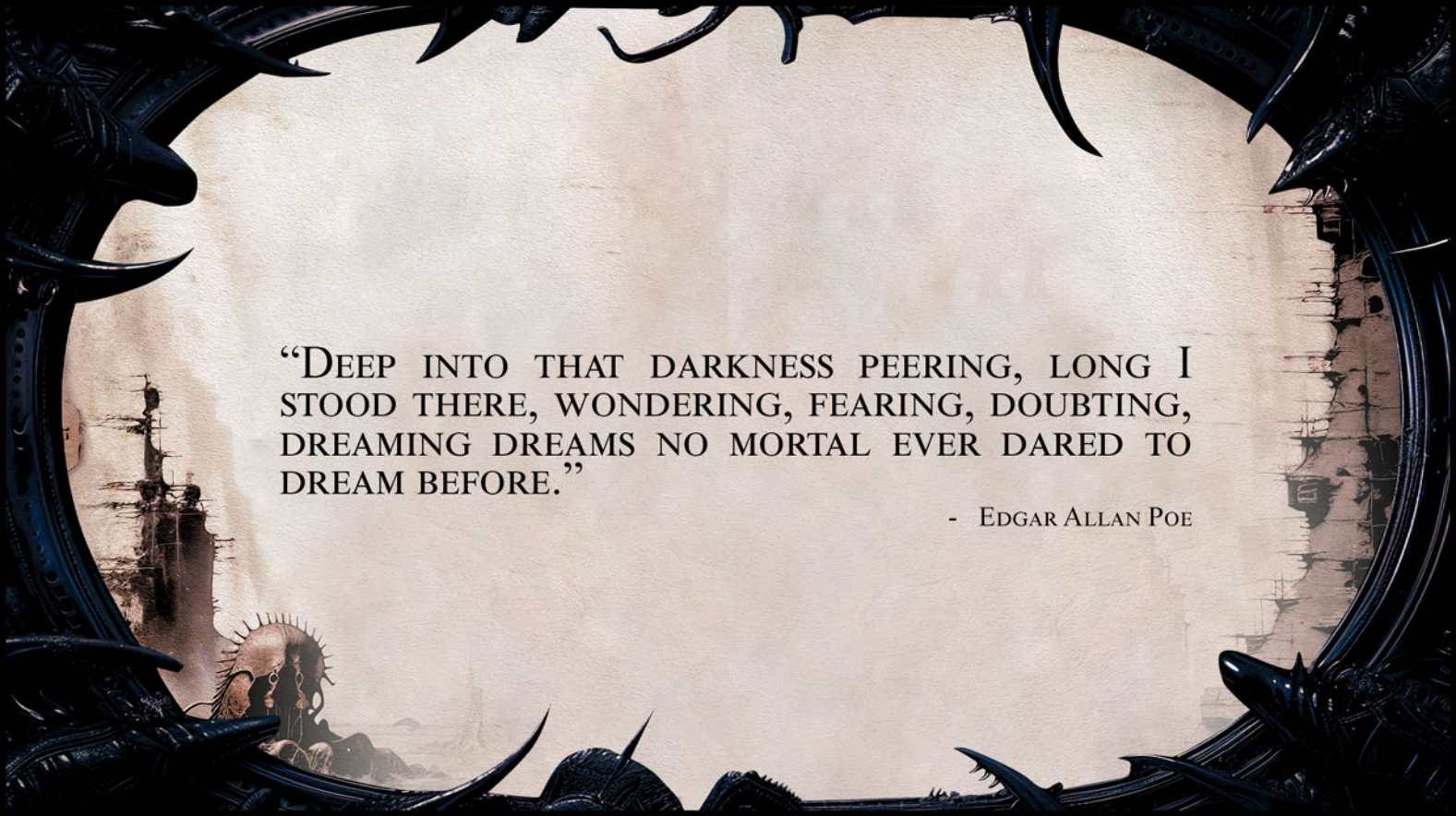
"So you do the only thing you can do, look within and try to find some corner of your mind to hide in. And just as you find it, that's when they begin to squeeze."



"I hear it's the same for everyone - you find the one refuge within your mind, and that's what they searched for."

"Oh, and when they find it... the tortures of the body become the happy place because what's next is so much worse."





“DEEP INTO THAT DARKNESS PEERING, LONG I
STOOD THERE, WONDERING, FEARING, DOUBTING,
DREAMING DREAMS NO MORTAL EVER DARED TO
DREAM BEFORE.”

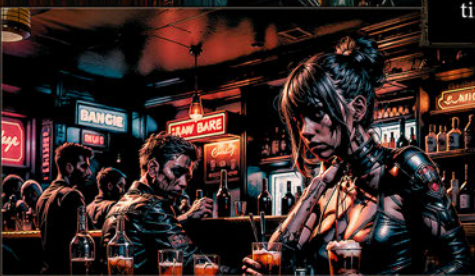
- EDGAR ALLAN POE

"I don't want to hear this!" Bob trembled as he tried to will his body to escape. The stranger merely inched closer, his voice now a mere whisper, mesmerizing in its tone.

"So you get what I'm saying right? Not a fun place, not one bit. So after what seems like a century of these games, a whisper starts floatin' around. See, there's this one guy that has a way out."

It'll be a free for all, many wouldn't make it, and even for those that did, it would only be a 24-hour field trip most like, but I figure, what's there to lose? "

"At least once I get out, I'll have some shiny new memories of fun and frolic top side to keep me sane down in the hole. So when the time was right, we made a break for it! "



"We?" Bob began to smell rotting putrescence emanating from the stranger. The world Bob knew felt wrong, felt larger, more immense than ever, yet filled with darkness. "



His sweat dripped down his forehead into his empty glass as he motioned for another. "It was cray-z! First, the source, that was this psychic chick, her head just popped! Overloaded her brain we did. Then it was open skies and all them pretty lights! Just stuck in their sacks of meat. "Some were practically begging to be set free. So we did! Just a little nudge really, then you're in the driver's seat! 24 hours o' fun and glory! We figure 24 hours since anybody we're not meant for just starts to, well, rot." Bob searched his mind for a rational explanation to the terror that welled up within him.



An animal reflex of fight or flight struggled with his rational mind for control while his lips finished off yet another whiskey, hoping the biting gold liquid would dull his fear. "I can see I'm borin' you, though, so I'll take my leave."

Besides, I've got more people to meet!" With that he turned, facing those scattered about in the bar, drawing what appeared to be a machete from the recesses of his tattered coat, a sneer on his face as he examined his prey.



A woman screamed as the stranger swung wide, taking the bartender's head off in a single swipe.



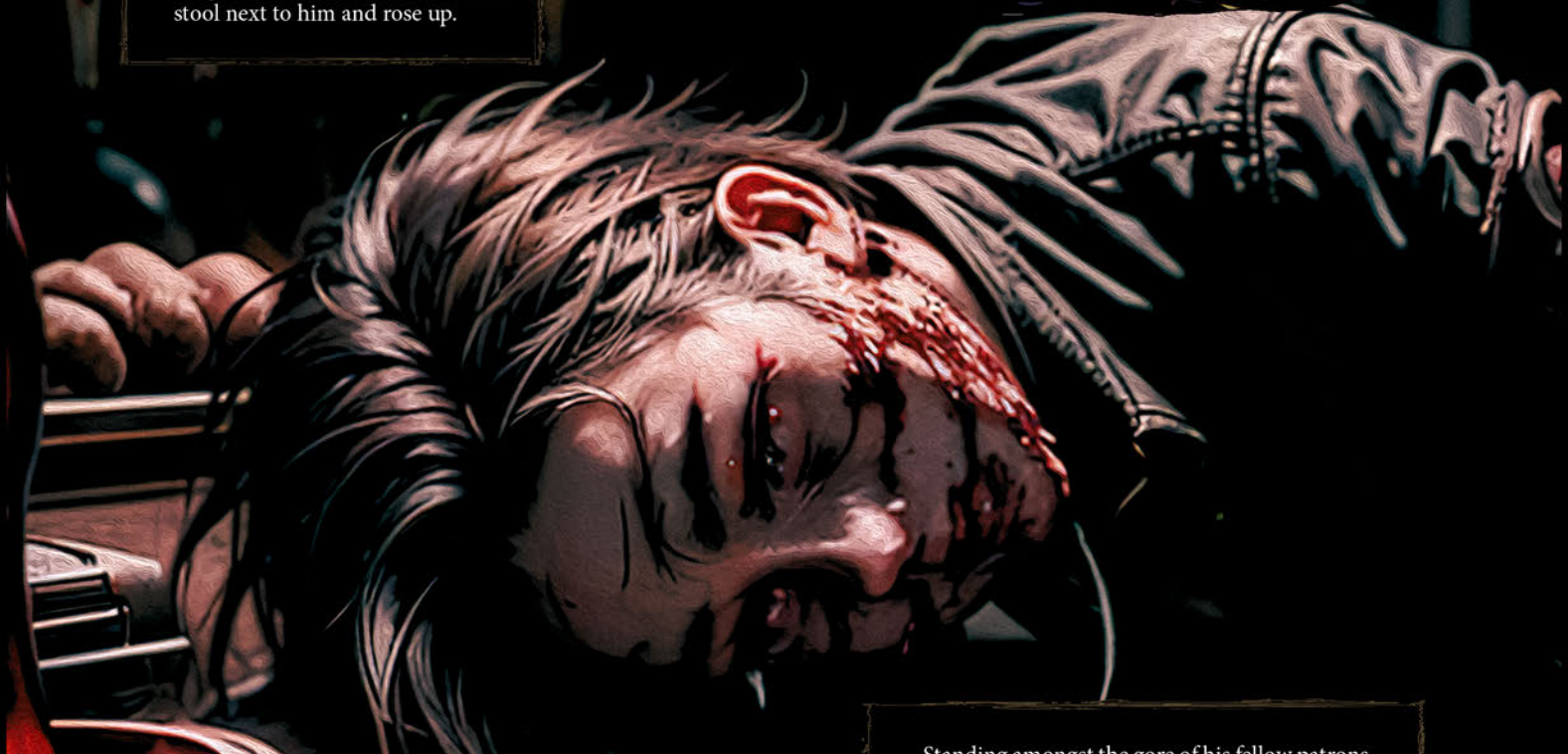
Bob crumpled to the floor, cowering in the corner as the stranger knelt before him. "Don't worry Bob; this will only take a minute. I see a kindred spirit in you. You're my new buddy! So just wait here while I wrap this up!"



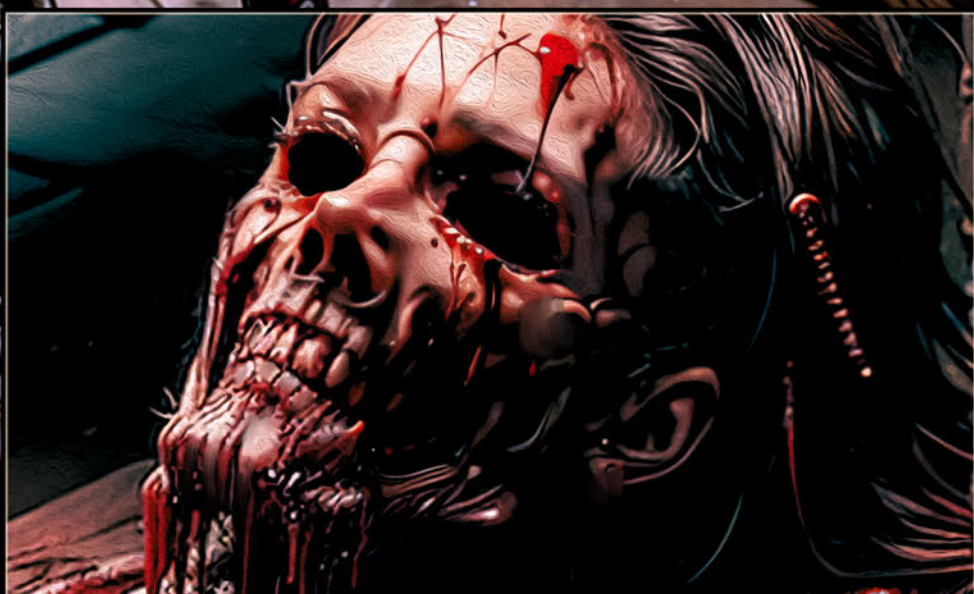
Bob felt the darkness closing in from the periphery of his vision, feeling his consciousness ebb as sticky gore splashed upon his head. Blissful unconsciousness welcomed him as a chorus of screams faded into the distance.



The man sheathed his machete as he gathered his hat from the bar stool next to him and rose up.



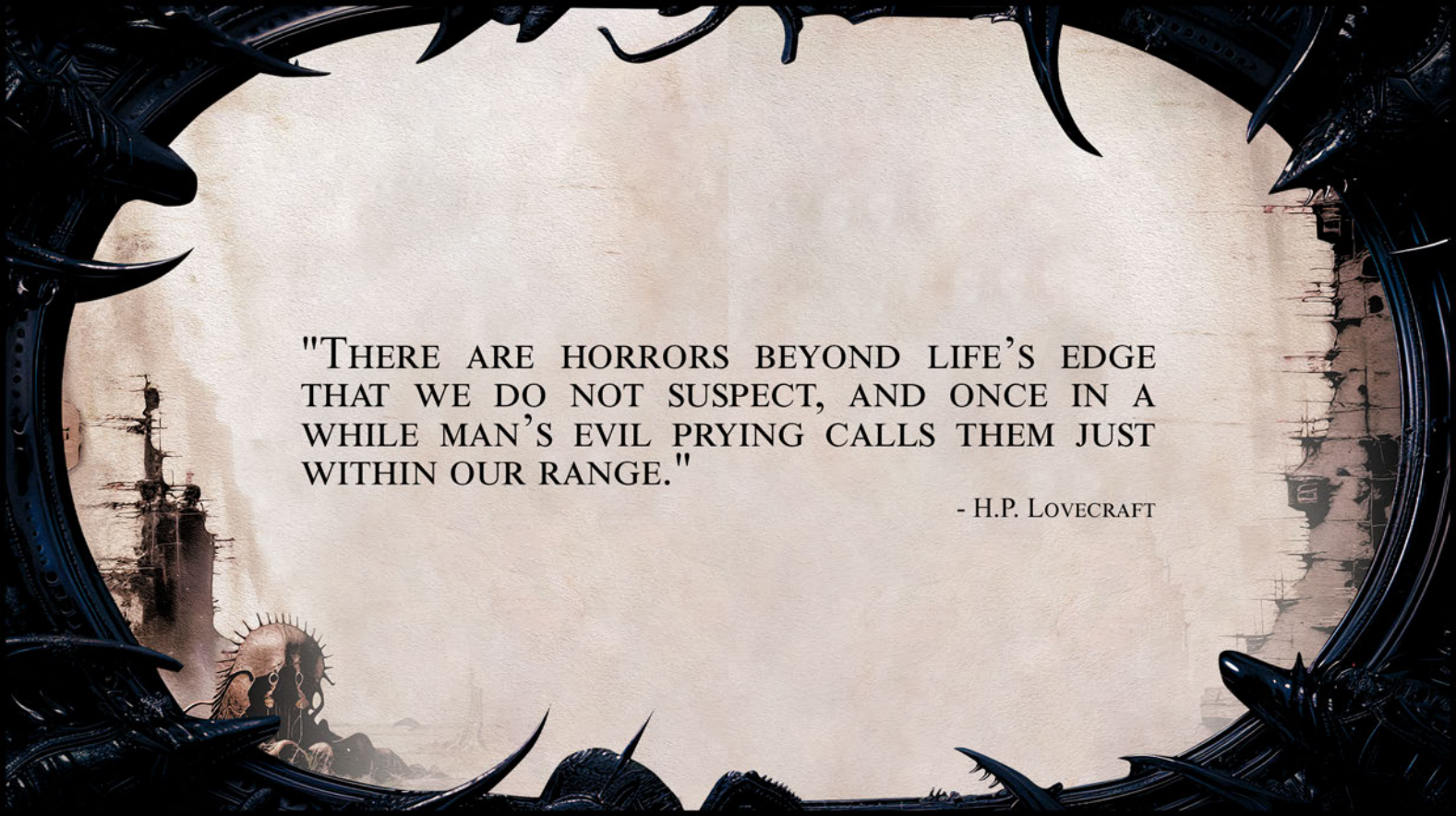
Standing amongst the gore of his fellow patrons, he examined the details of his work – this mutilation was just a warm up for his grandest statement yet – the night promised lots of inspiration and already new horrors were springing to his mind.



Admiring his handiwork, he grinned with satisfaction. The taste of blood had never left his lips, not once while in the pit. But the taste of liquor, now that was worth the trip all alone.







"THERE ARE HORRORS BEYOND LIFE'S EDGE
THAT WE DO NOT SUSPECT, AND ONCE IN A
WHILE MAN'S EVIL PRYING CALLS THEM JUST
WITHIN OUR RANGE."

- H.P. LOVECRAFT



Knowing that he had nothing to lose brought about a sense of euphoria – the man could work without fear or restraint. Sadly, his drinking partner was no longer conscious.



Thankfully, there is a solution to every problem, thought the stranger as he lifted Bob up and propped his head against the bar. The machete cleaved the spine in two, letting the torso fall to the ground. The stranger placed the head on the tabletop in front of an empty glass. Admiring his handiwork, the stranger let out a joyous laugh. This would be a night to remember. Throughout the night a great many atrocities were committed. Reports of men and women going on sudden and inexplicable rampages, often mutilating both relatives and strangers without remorse. What was unleashed moved like a wave through the city, flooding outward from the television studio where the unsuspecting psychic made a connection and a door had opened.



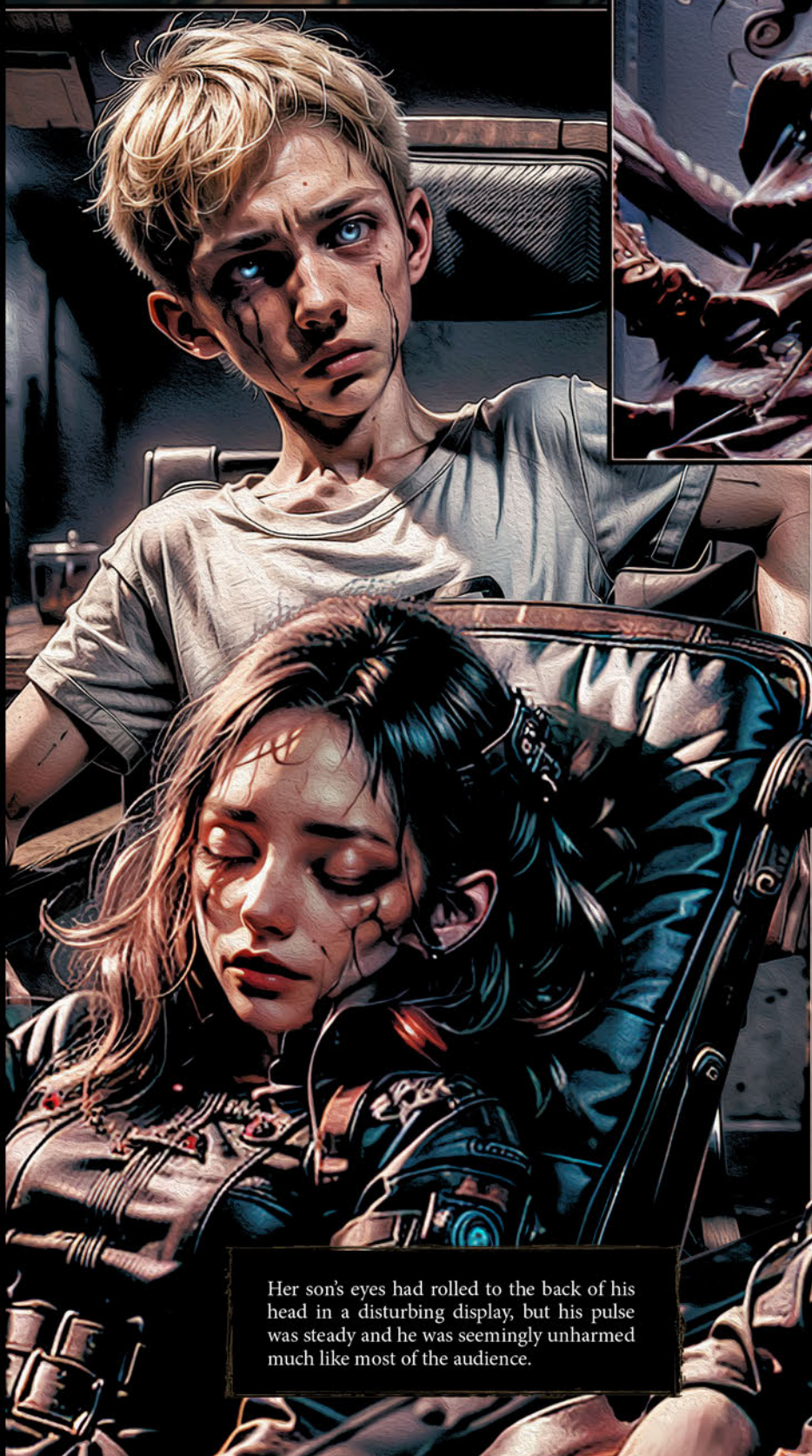
The dead, struggling to escape the pit, had hungered for their chance – not to escape, because there was no such thing as an escape from eternity - but to spread their misery onto those that so callously take their existence for granted.

Pure spite was unleashed and spread as more and more escaped. The psychic's head splattered in a grim pattern across the walls of the studio as the dead continued to surge forth. The audience, however, was blissfully unconscious – all but Jacob Kale. Jacob sat, unmoving.

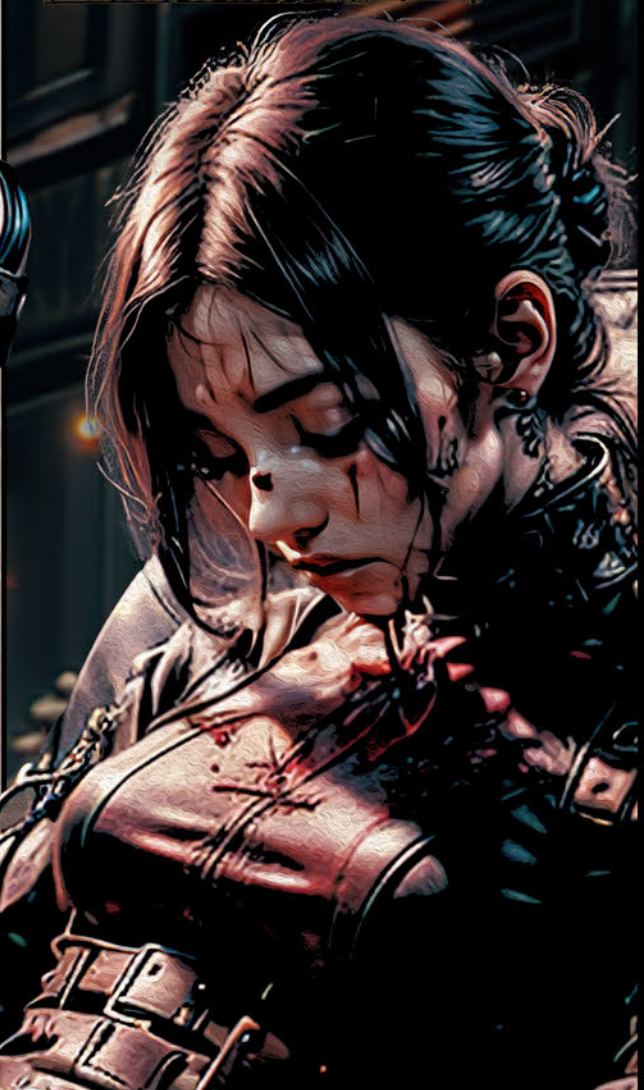
Deep within his eyes, you could see a little glow. The door was open, and he provided the key.



When the paramedics finally made it into the studio, most of the audience had begun to stir. Jennifer, the mother, was replaced by Detective Kale once more as her instincts took over.



Her son's eyes had rolled to the back of his head in a disturbing display, but his pulse was steady and he was seemingly unharmed much like most of the audience.



A cinematic illustration of a city street at night. In the foreground, Detective Kale and Melinda White are running towards the viewer. Kale is on the left, wearing a dark police uniform with a badge, and Melinda is on the right, wearing a dark jacket. They are both looking forward with determination. In the background, other police officers are visible, and the street is illuminated by the blue and red lights of police cars. Tall buildings line the street, and the sky is dark with some clouds.

Panic, desperately pushing at the edges of Detective Kale's mind, was held in check by her strength of will and professionalism; her son was safe for the moment.

Shutting off her emotions in place of pure analytical thought was Detective Kales well-rehearsed safety net ensuring decisiveness in even this outlandish situation. What remained of the psychic Melinda White, however, was either slumped in a bloody heap in the studio chair or dec-orating the walls in a grisly display.

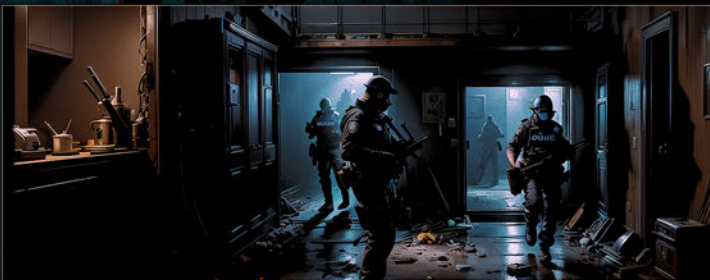
A close-up of Melinda White's face. She has blonde hair and is wearing a dark jacket. Her eyes are closed, and there is blood on her forehead and cheek. She appears to be in a state of shock or unconsciousness. The background is dark and out of focus.

Fragments of her skull were plastered along the ceiling in a gory coating, still drip-ping to the floor. Her upper torso stiffened as if in mid seizure.

A close-up of a severed head. The head is pale and has a single, large, red eye. It is surrounded by dark, bloody liquid. The background is dark and out of focus.

Her fingers continued a rhythmic twitch as the last ounces of her life spat across the front row out of the stump that remained on her shoulders. Jacob still was not waking up unlike the others.

The panic within Detective Kale threatened to take hold.



911 became flooded with emergency calls as a wave of horror continued to spread. All emergency rooms became wartime triage as lives hung in the balance. Young Jacob, in stable condition, was given a room far away from the madhouse the emergency room had become, mostly as a favor to Detective Kale. The room sat relatively silent, save for the rhythmic beep of the electronics.

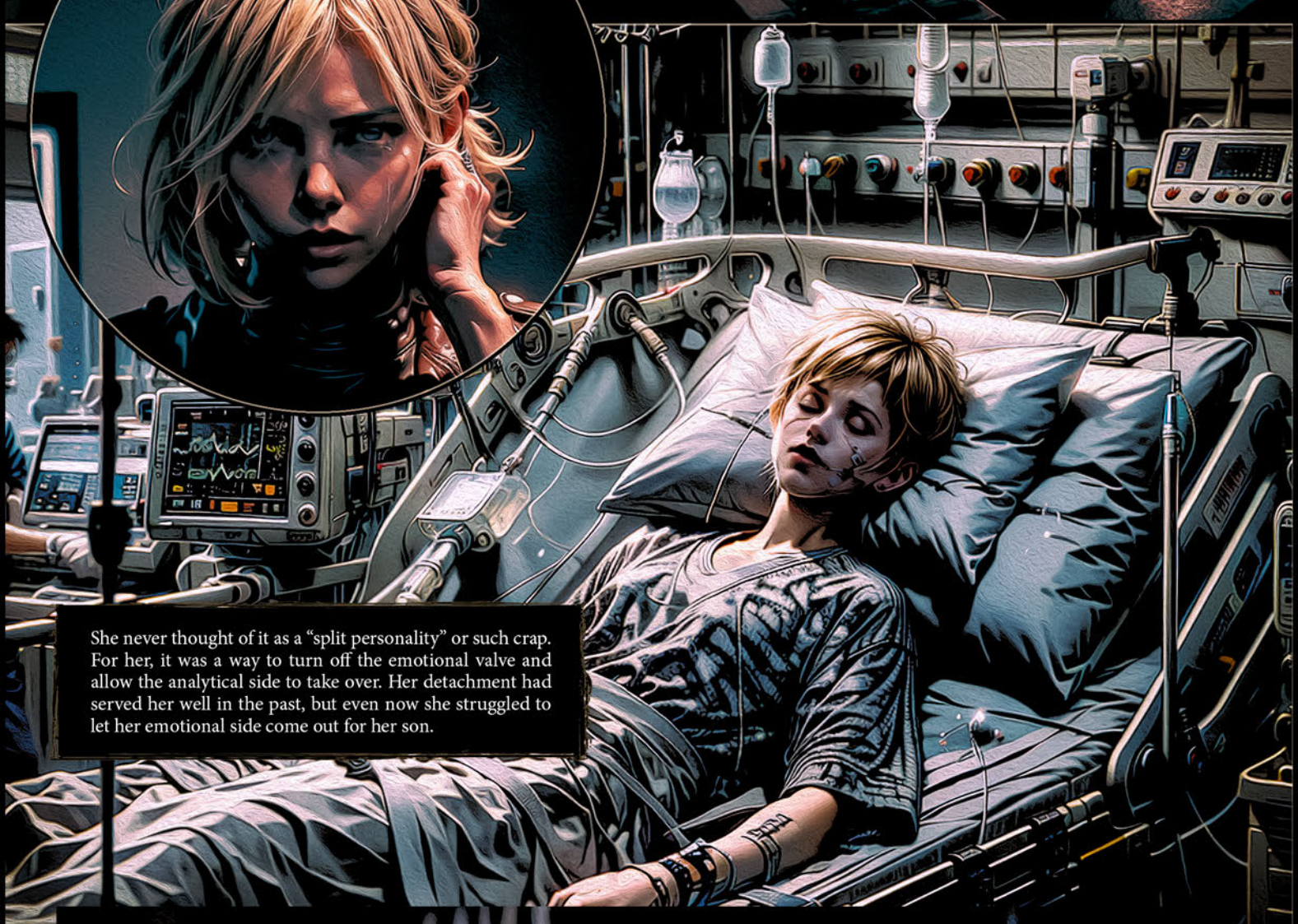


Detective Kale raised her head to look at her son, laid out in the hospital room in a coma. The Detective began to take a back seat to the mother as Jennifer resurfaced.

An old habit from her distant, abusive past, Jennifer long ago learned to compartmentalize her life in times of need.



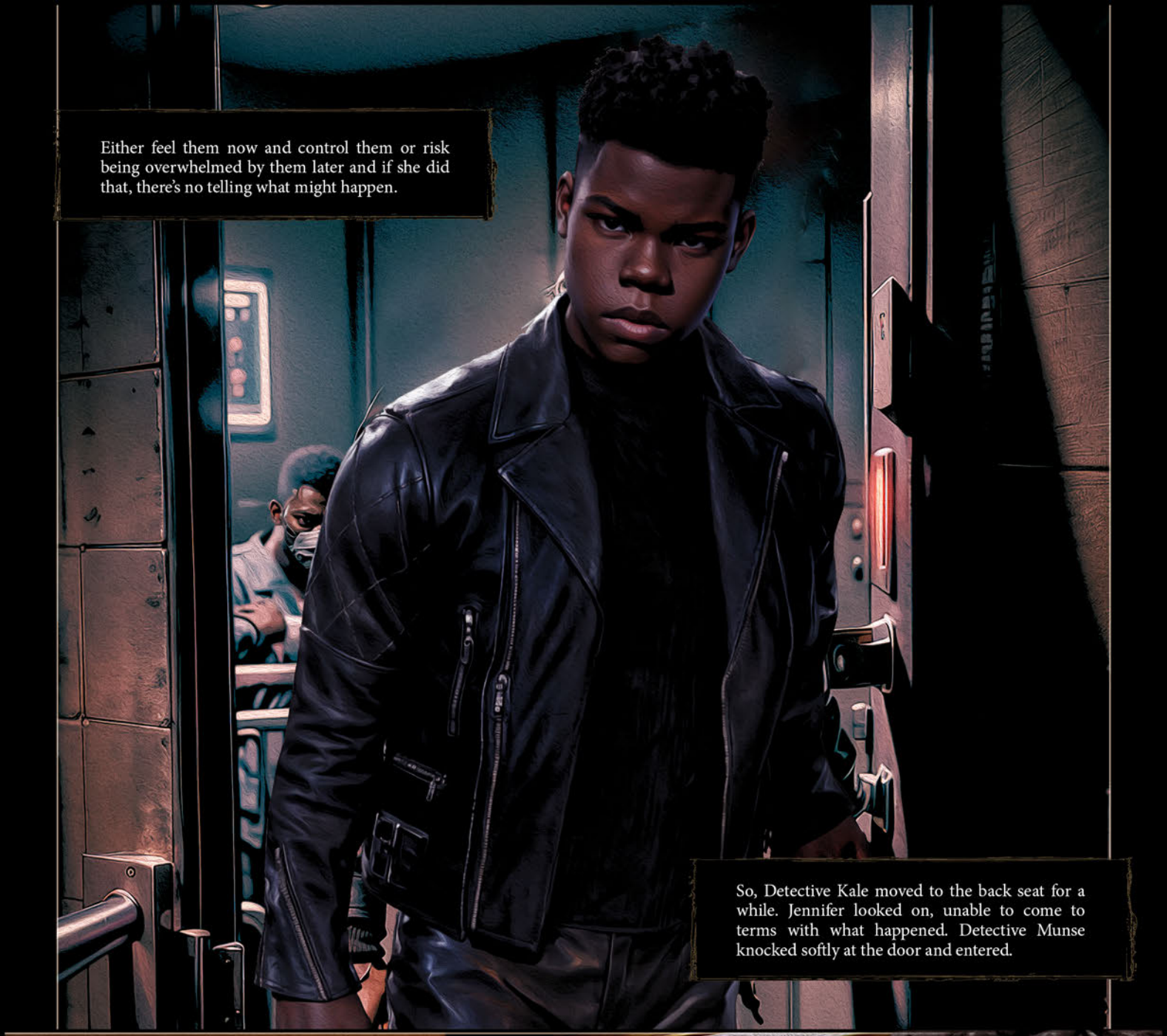
She never thought of it as a "split personality" or such crap. For her, it was a way to turn off the emotional valve and allow the analytical side to take over. Her detachment had served her well in the past, but even now she struggled to let her emotional side come out for her son.



She knew, even the logical side knew, that Jacob needed a warm, loving mother. Allowing that side of her to exist, much less even surface was a deep struggle, however.



At times like this, seeing her child in danger, she honestly wanted to shut off the valve. Only years of therapy gave her the strength actually to feel the emotions and control them.



Either feel them now and control them or risk being overwhelmed by them later and if she did that, there's no telling what might happen.

So, Detective Kale moved to the back seat for a while. Jennifer looked on, unable to come to terms with what happened. Detective Munse knocked softly at the door and entered.



Jennifer made her partner swear to keep her in the loop as all channels reported the absolute madness the city had devolved into. She needed control of something, anything, to keep her sane and focused while still staying in place for her child.

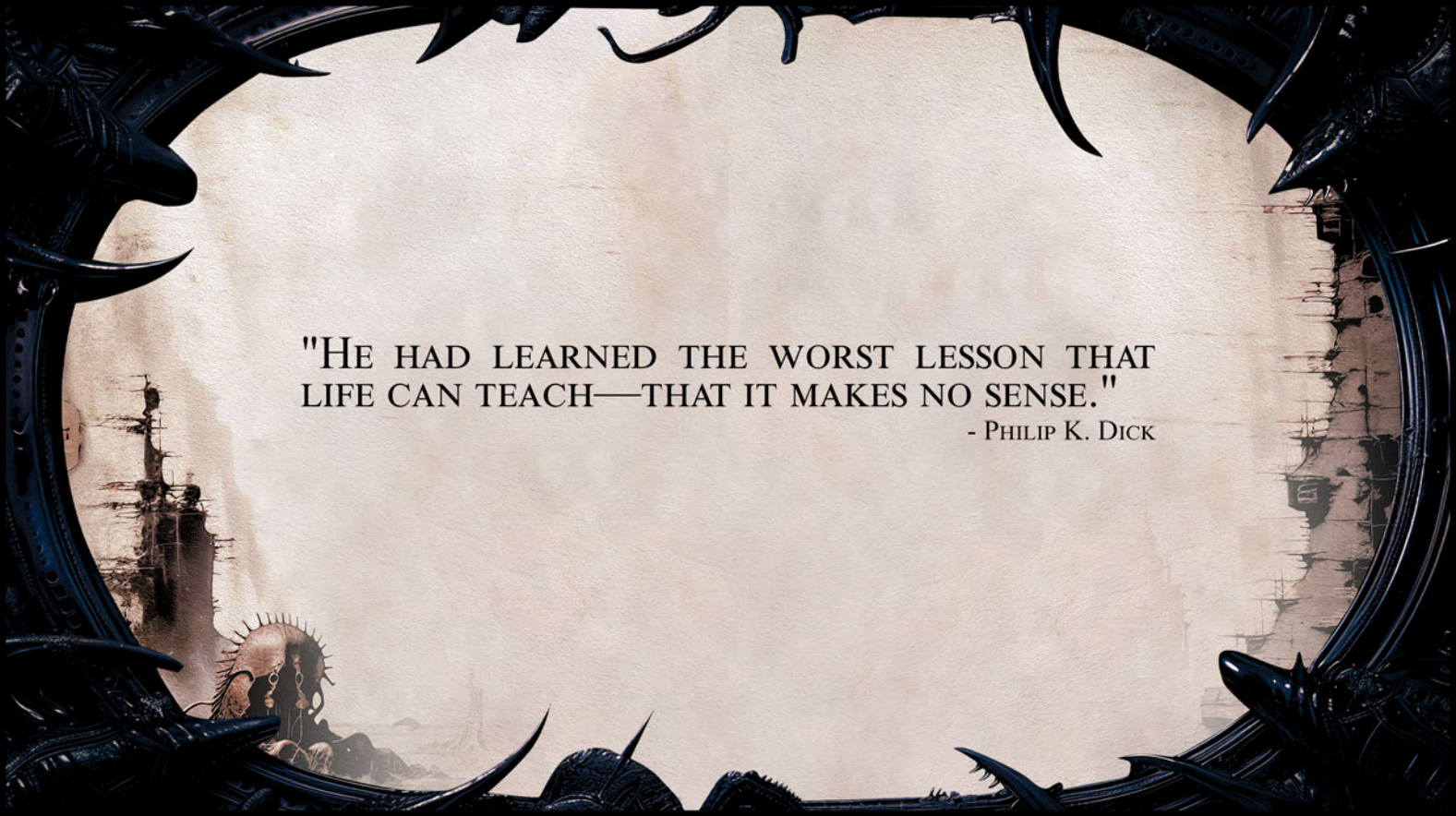
While most of the others in the studio were unharmed, aside from Mrs. White and the front row of course, Jennifer's son remained in a coma with elevated brainwave patterns and extreme blood pressure readings.



Medicine offered no immediate solution, but the look on Detective Munse's face was suspiciously nervous -he knew something. "I know that look, Munse. Spill."

"What do you have to say that you know won't make me happy but you are going to say it anyway?"





"HE HAD LEARNED THE WORST LESSON THAT
LIFE CAN TEACH—THAT IT MAKES NO SENSE."

- PHILIP K. DICK



Jennifer said with a smirk drowned in exhaustion. Detective Munse fidgeted for a moment before speaking. "So, I know how much you like this psychic stuff that your son was in to but something related to the case came up and well, there's someone here to see you."

"Ok, enough of the slow pitch, just give it to me." Detective Munse went out into the hall for a moment then returned with a woman Jennifer had never met. Munse introduced the elderly woman that accompanied him sheepishly. Sonya wore a pleasant enough demeanor as she entered the room, extending her hand toward Jennifer and offering her sympathies for her son's condition. Jennifer shook Sonya's hand hesitantly, trying to assess the situation and this stranger's motives. Detective Munse continued his introduction, "This is Sonya, the sister of Melinda White, the psychic you and your son were watching in the studio."

Jennifer looked on, her interest piqued. Sonya was obviously the eldest sibling, though her familial appearance and similarities were startling. From even a small distance away, one could confuse the two women for being one another.

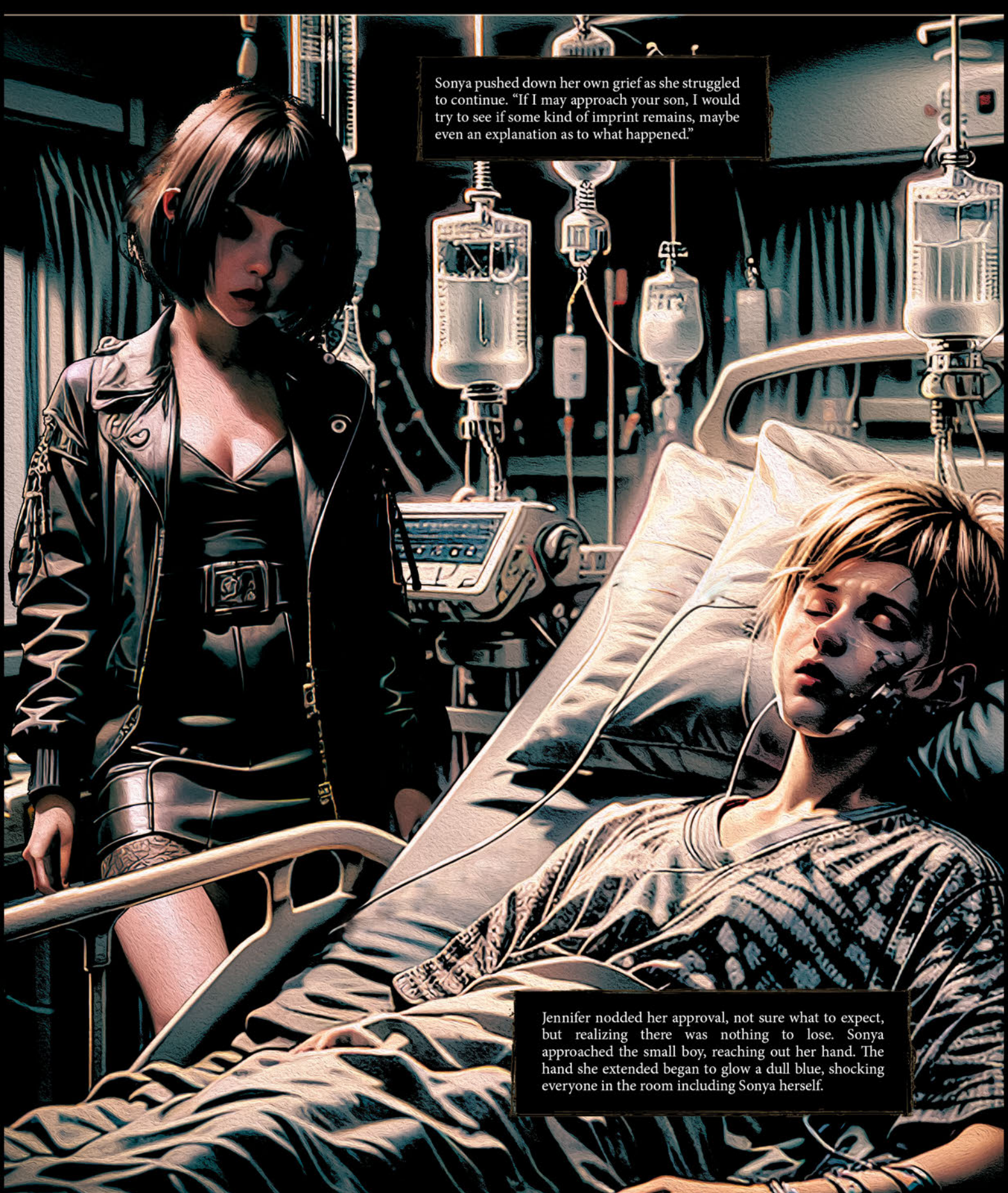
As Sonya's story began, Detective Kale reasserted her persona, bringing to bear a questioning mind, questioning both Sonya's sanity and that of her partner for bringing this woman to Jacob's room.

Munse was always one to buy into all the psychic crap, but as the average citizens were destroying the city outside, Jennifer was in no position to complain. Sonya told a bit of her past to the two detectives, lightly touching upon when and how they discovered their shared abilities.

Sonya kept the more outrageous parts to herself, knowing the reaction most "normal" people gave her, especially in times of crisis, but having this ability was nothing new to her either.



With an absence of medical explanation coupled with the raging insanity swarming outside, Detective Kale was forced to keep an open mind. "I can't say for certain what happened at the studio today. It's just horrible, I can't even..."



Sonya pushed down her own grief as she struggled to continue. "If I may approach your son, I would try to see if some kind of imprint remains, maybe even an explanation as to what happened."

Jennifer nodded her approval, not sure what to expect, but realizing there was nothing to lose. Sonya approached the small boy, reaching out her hand. The hand she extended began to glow a dull blue, shocking everyone in the room including Sonya herself.



Sonya backed away, shaking. As Detective Munse helped steady her, Sonya met Jennifer's shocked eyes. "Your son... I've never felt anything like this before. He has such... power. I don't know how to start."



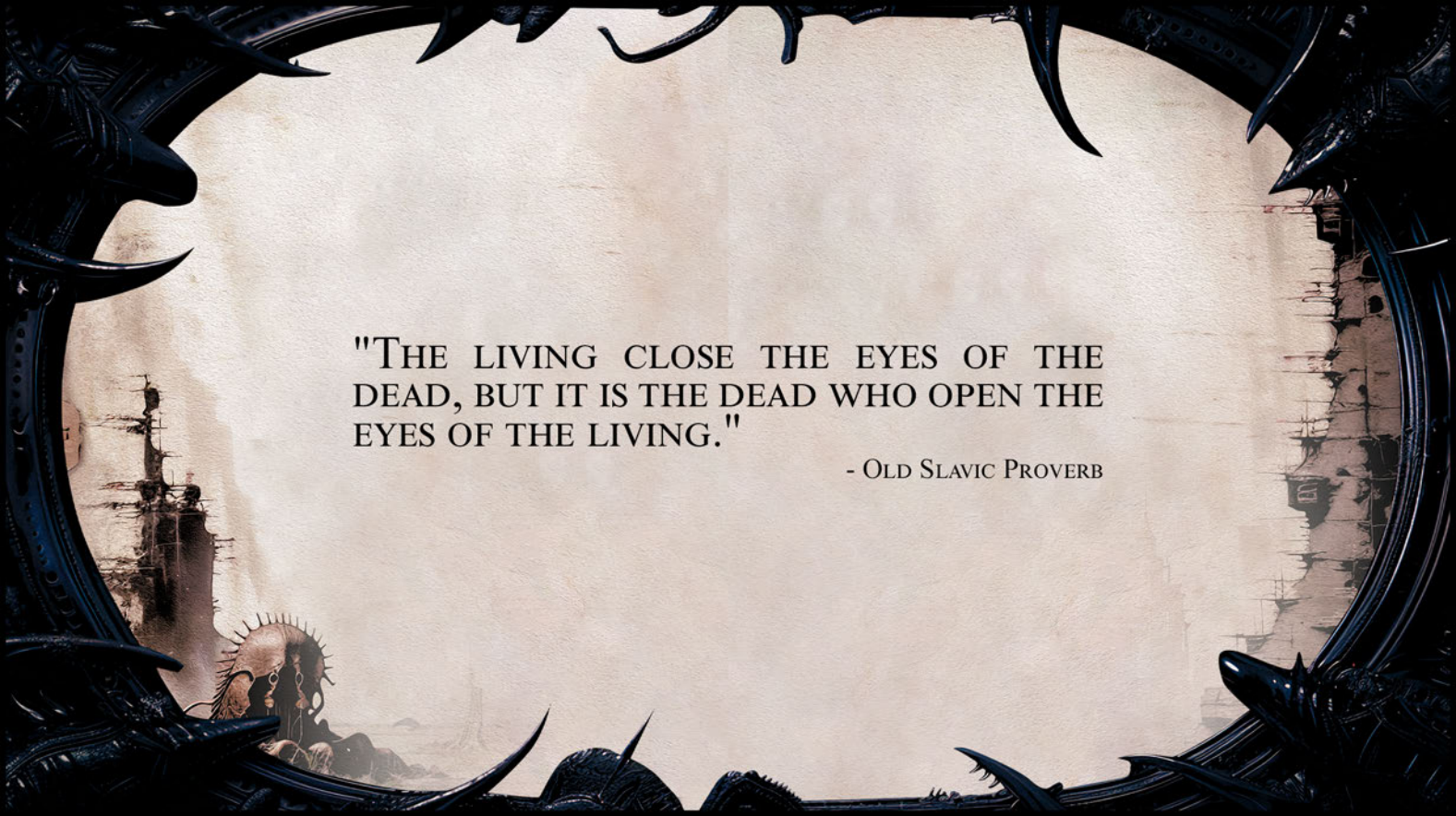
After Sonya caught her breath and collected her thoughts, she slowly began trying to make sense of everything, both to herself and to the two detectives.

"Jacob is gifted, though in some way that not even I understand" Sonya began. "I want to try to go deeper, to actually see into his mind, maybe even to see why he's locked in this state. I don't think this is a medical problem. Something has your boy stuck, trapped between here and... somewhere else. I may be able to share the experience with you, if you are willing. Together we may be able to find your lost boy."

Jennifer was a twisting ball of anxiety, disbelief and worry. None of this made sense and yet with her son lost inside his own mind, what little choice did she have?

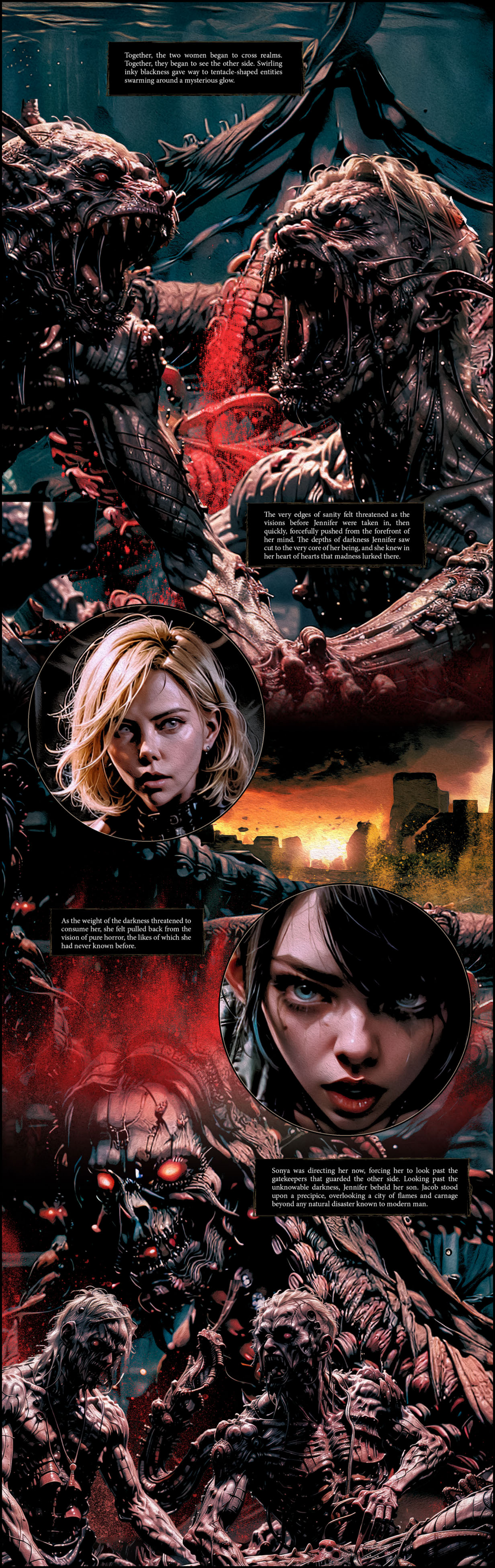
With a hand outstretched and permission received, Sonya reached out with her gift and touched both mother and child.





"THE LIVING CLOSE THE EYES OF THE
DEAD, BUT IT IS THE DEAD WHO OPEN THE
EYES OF THE LIVING."

- OLD SLAVIC PROVERB



Together, the two women began to cross realms. Together, they began to see the other side. Swirling inky blackness gave way to tentacle-shaped entities swarming around a mysterious glow.

The very edges of sanity felt threatened as the visions before Jennifer were taken in, then quickly, forcefully pushed from the forefront of her mind. The depths of darkness Jennifer saw cut to the very core of her being, and she knew in her heart of hearts that madness lurked there.

As the weight of the darkness threatened to consume her, she felt pulled back from the vision of pure horror, the likes of which she had never known before.

Sonya was directing her now, forcing her to look past the gatekeepers that guarded the other side. Looking past the unknowable darkness, Jennifer beheld her son. Jacob stood upon a precipice, overlooking a city of flames and carnage beyond any natural disaster known to modern man.



Standing alongside her son was a man wreathed in flames with charred black skin fading in and out, seemingly trying desperately to appear human for the young, terrified boy.

The creature smiled revealing perfectly white teeth as its hand closed on her son's shoulder. Jacob stood paralyzed before the great horrors that now crept up towards the precipice he stood upon.



As Jacob watched, his skin lost all color as the flesh along his extremities began to crawl with a life of its own, as if some unseen force writhed beneath his skin, creeping ever closer to his heart.

The poor boy stood, mouth agape in a strained attempt to cry out but no sound could be heard, for the black inky tendrils began spewing forth from his mouth, ultimately consuming him before his mother's eyes.



The creature that stood alongside the remains of her once beautiful son showed impossibly perfect teeth that seemed to shine in a grin of pure, complete, victory.



The vision passed, but the horror would remain embedded in Jennifer's memory.



Jennifer jumped back, almost screaming out as she returned to reality. A cold sensation of pure dread remained, clawing at her mind and casting blame for not doing enough to save her child. Sonya recovered quicker and reached out to Jennifer's shoulder, steadying her and providing an anchor for her to focus on. Munse could only look on, oblivious to what the two women had endured. After a moment of recovery, the three left the room to discuss what had happened.



Belief is necessary, or so Sonya told the two Detectives out in the hall. Detective Kale was still recovering from her vision, the cool water her partner brought her helping to focus her mind and compartmentalize the horror she had seen. Sonya attempted to explain what she herself was struggling to comprehend.

"The problem is that psychic ability really exists, just as an atrophied muscle. Look, ever try to roll your tongue?" Sonya preceded to stick out her tongue and made the edges touch, forming an "o" shape.

"That's something some of us can do. As kids, we all probably knew people that could or couldn't do that silly thing. Well, the ability to see beyond what's in front of your face is just like that. I always like to think of it as peeking behind a curtain. Seems so natural to me.

But most don't even know there's a curtain to peek behind. And for those that do, most can't reach it. They can only look on and try to make those around them see it too. Damn frustrating I tell you. So even those that can, don't, so it's just almost never used.



"If you don't believe in working a muscle, it'll never grow even when you have the muscle. But there are those that can and do use their gifts. "

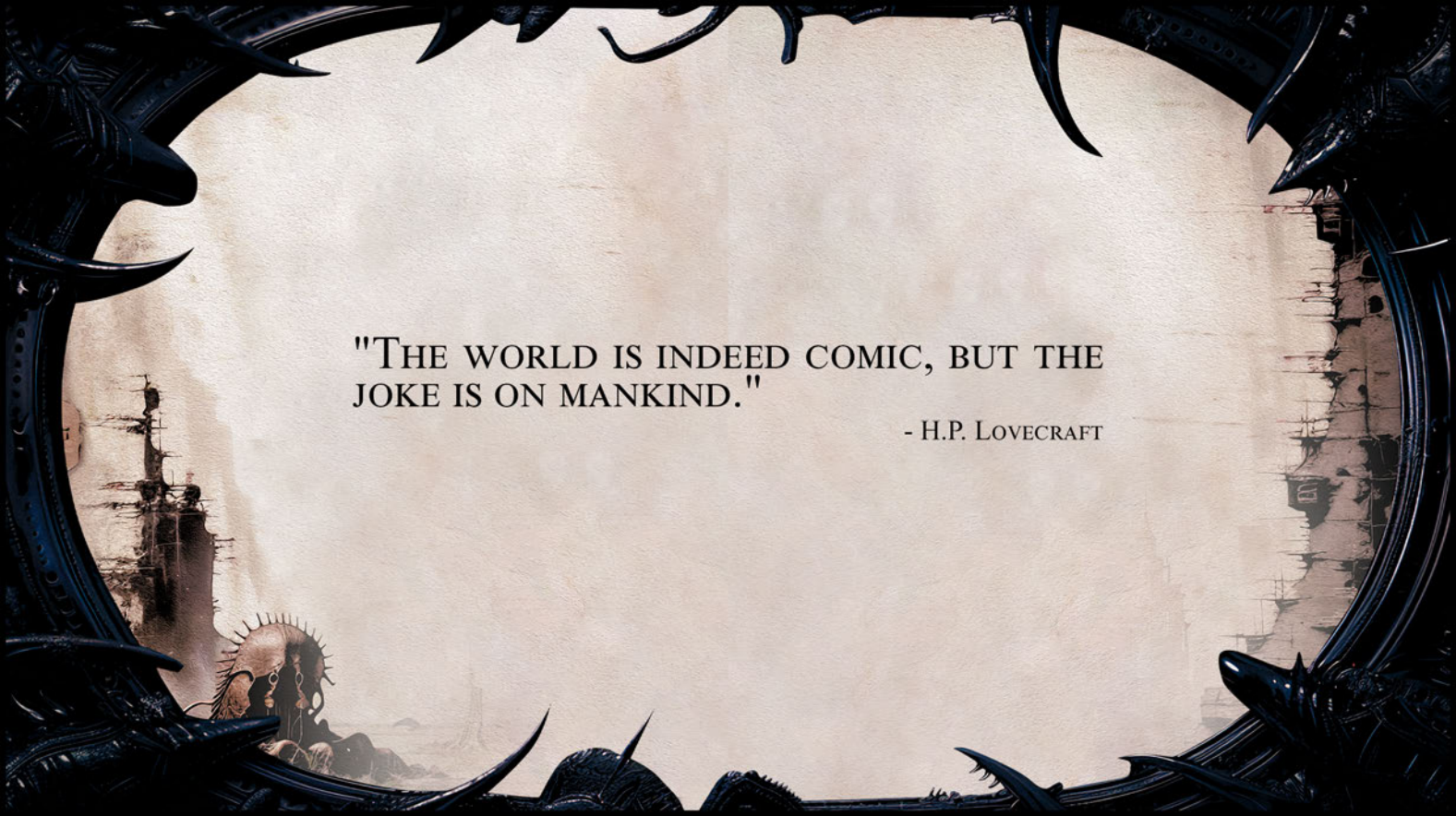
"Melinda's gift was more intuitive, activating only after a childhood accident. Jacob's gift allowed him to tap into a power that I'm pretty damn sure even Melinda was unaware of. The closest guess I got is that this doorway, the one you saw crawling with all the muck?"

Jennifer hesitantly nodded, not wanting to make eye contact with anyone as she desperately tried to stifle the shiver crawling up her spine.

"This shit we're seeing, it came from the other side. When Melinda tapped into the boy's subconscious, a door to the Old Ones was forced open. "

"Why the door apparently remained open and why Jacob remained unconscious I'd guess is all tied together I just don't see it."





"THE WORLD IS INDEED COMIC, BUT THE
JOKE IS ON MANKIND."

- H.P. LOVECRAFT

"Old Ones" What the hell is that?"



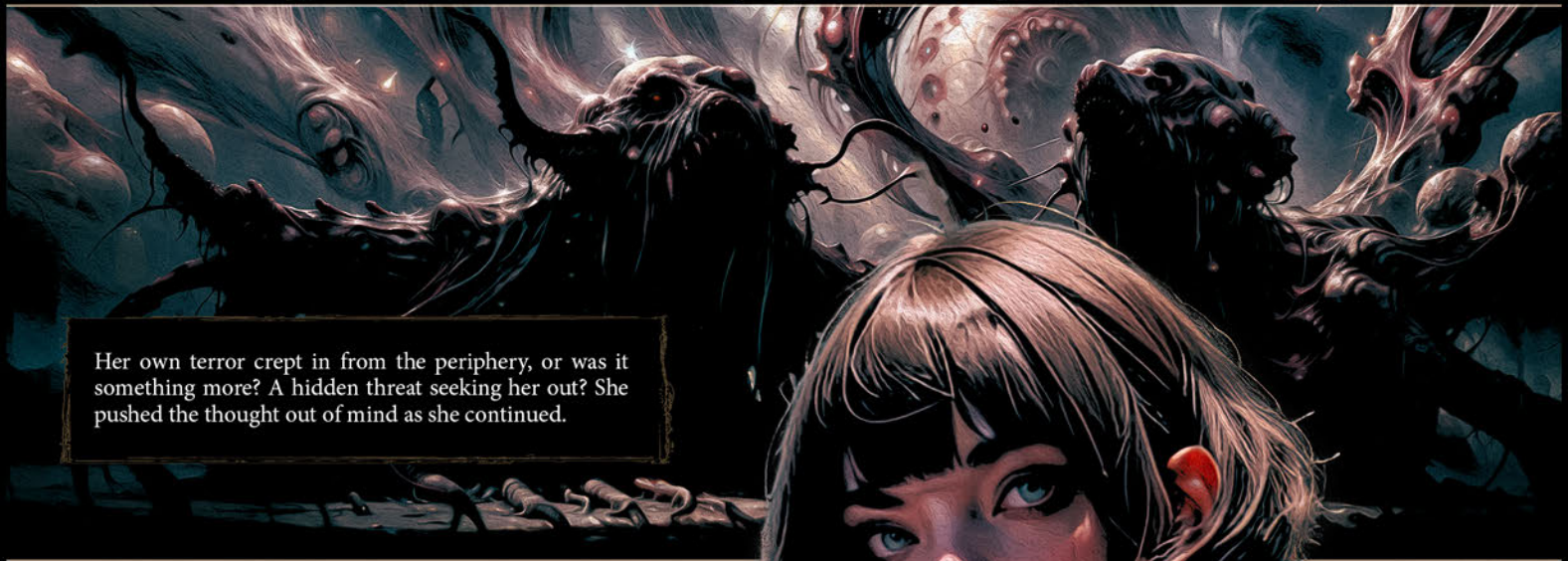
Jennifer and Munse did their best to appear dispassionate and skeptical, but an ever increasing urge to flee coupled with a terror that seemed unfathomably familiar crept upon them as a stalker toward its prey. In their souls, they both knew the ground they walked upon was becoming treacherous. Sonya could sense the desire to panic and chose her words carefully. "We like to think the world around us is the be-all and end-all of everything. It's a pleasant idea. All the horror and good that man has done is the pinnacle, and all else is insignificant. "

Sadly, all that we value is but shit on the boot heel to the Great Old Ones. And by "old", I don't mean like your grandma or even the dinosaurs. These are things that are beyond what we consider sanity and morality.

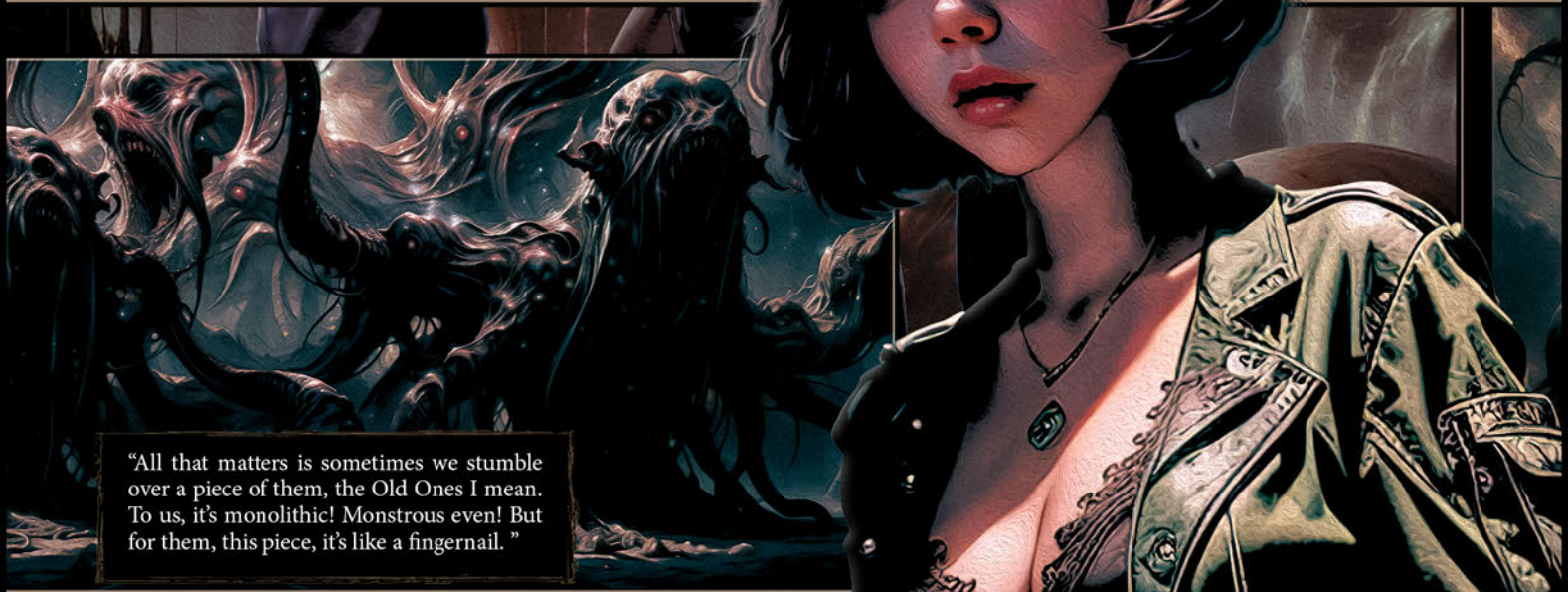


"There's no evil, no desire, they just are, and all we are is in the way. When they move, worlds die, and we're all..."

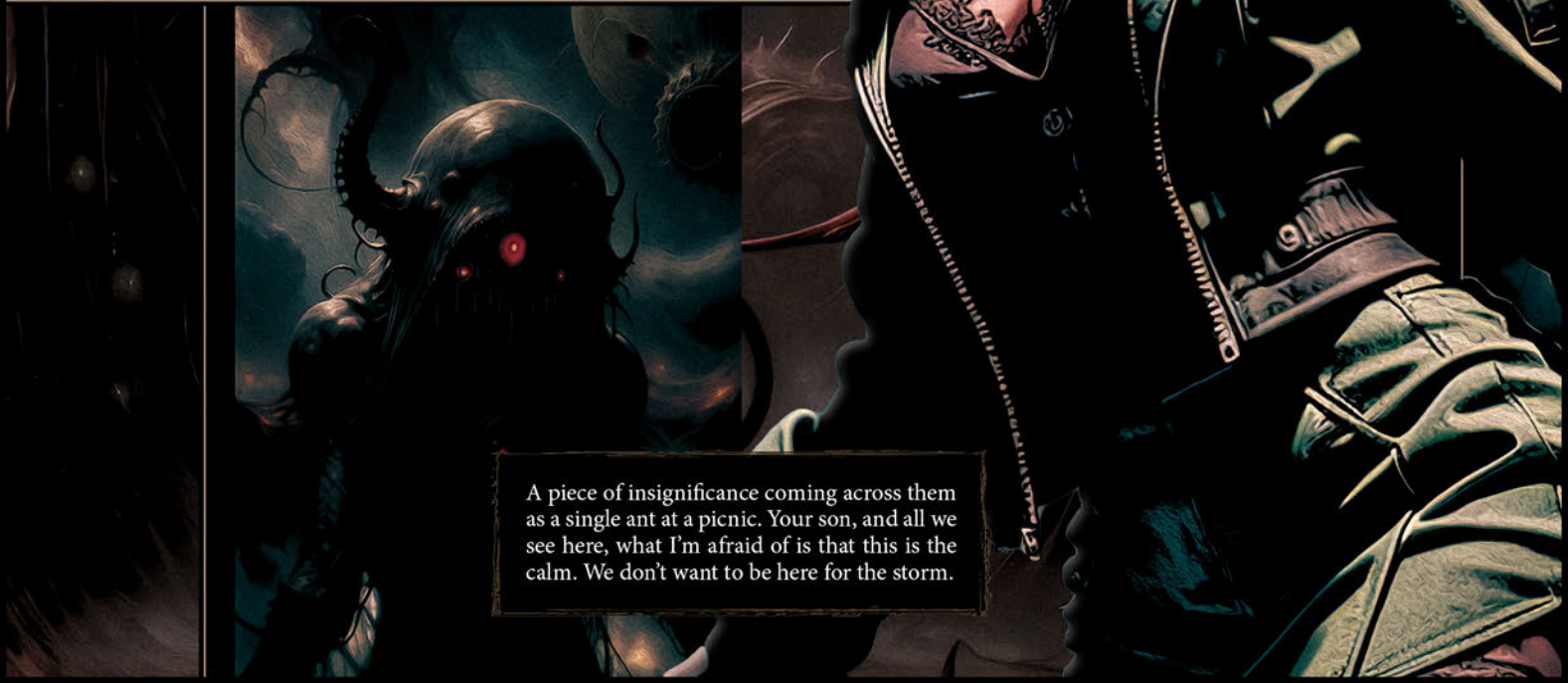
Sonya stopped herself, feeling a hoarseness in her throat that told her she was not as controlled as she had hoped in her explanation.



Her own terror crept in from the periphery, or was it something more? A hidden threat seeking her out? She pushed the thought out of mind as she continued.



"All that matters is sometimes we stumble over a piece of them, the Old Ones I mean. To us, it's monolithic! Monstrous even! But for them, this piece, it's like a fingernail."



A piece of insignificance coming across them as a single ant at a picnic. Your son, and all we see here, what I'm afraid of is that this is the calm. We don't want to be here for the storm.



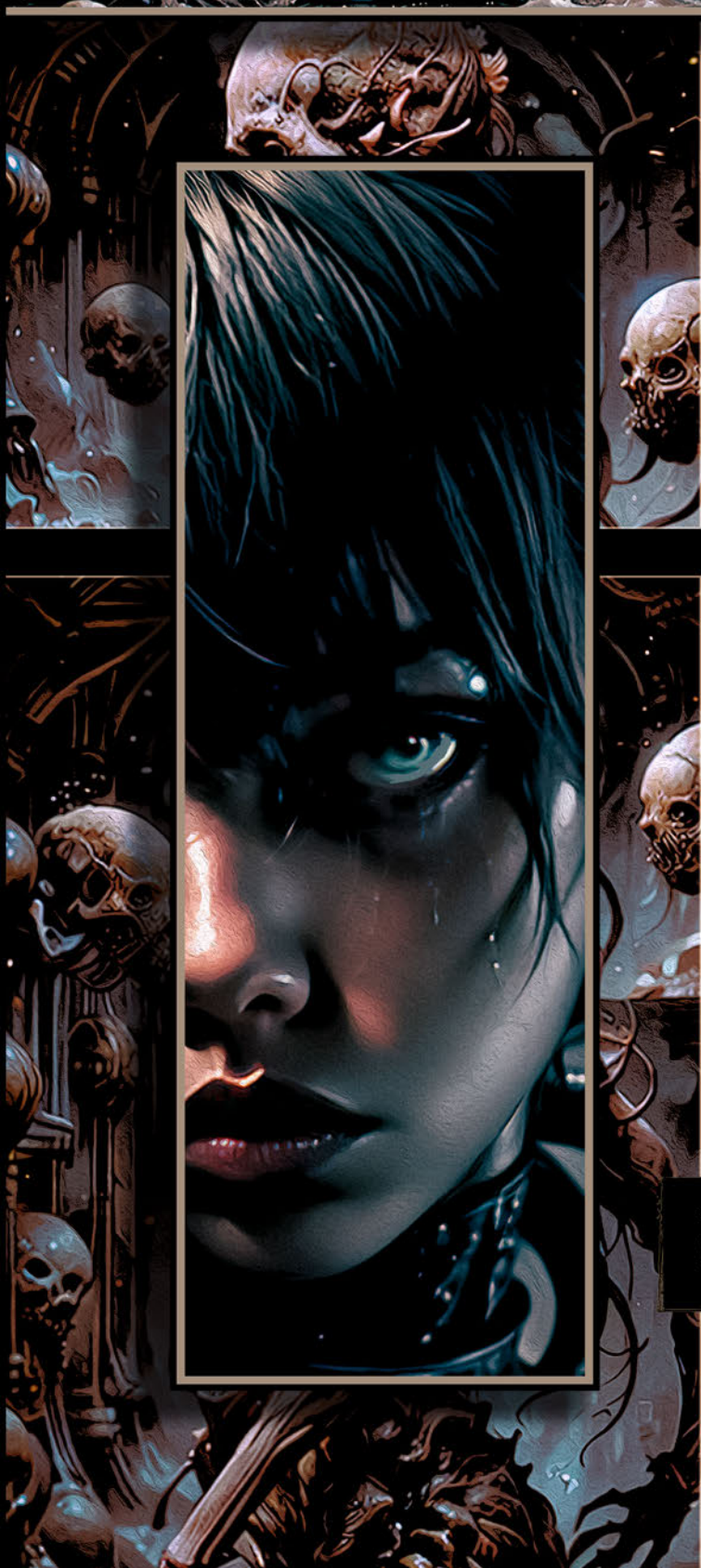
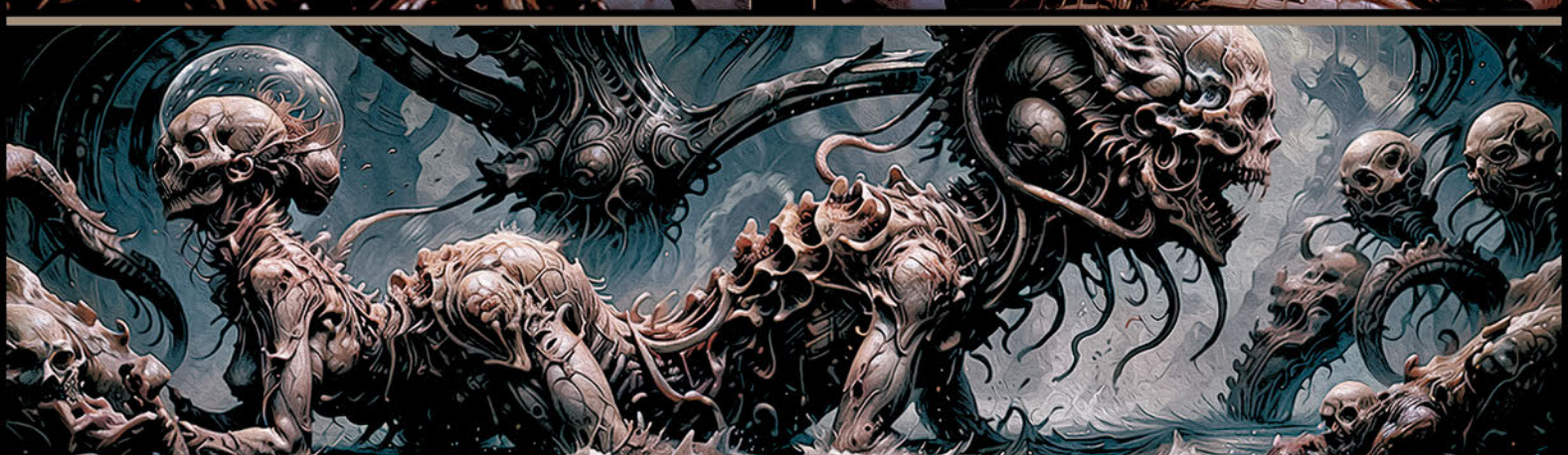
"That thing we saw in your vision, that creature with your son, my guess he's the architect of this madness."



"The Old Ones are nothing if not indifferent to our existence meaning there's something else at play. There's a connection here; we just need to find it."



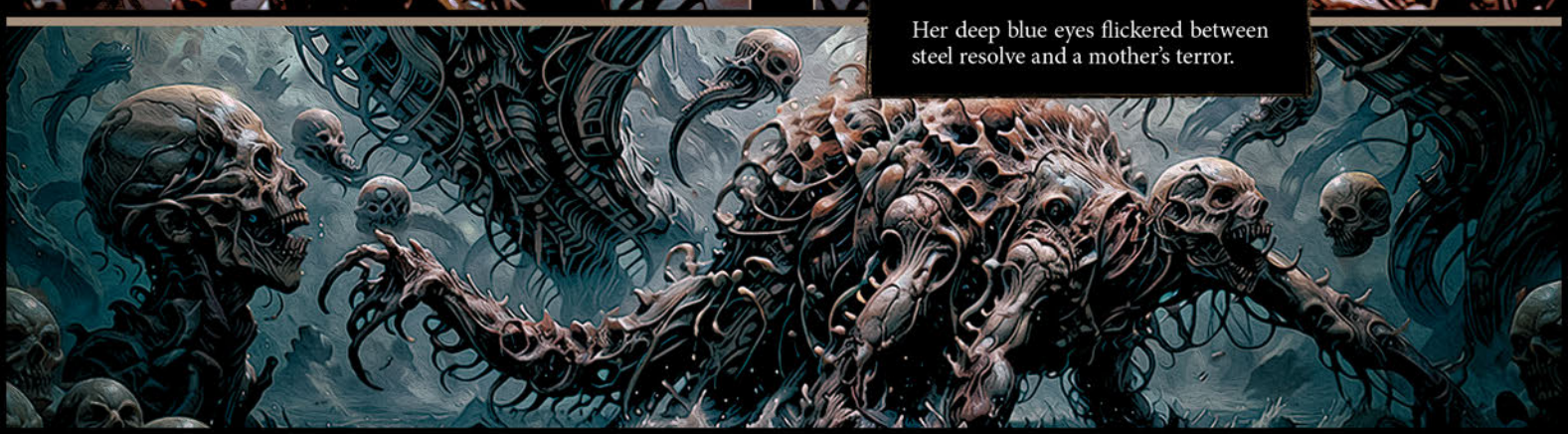
Detective Kale took a step back, seemingly lost in thought but Detective Munse recognized the look on his partner's face, a piece had just clicked into place.

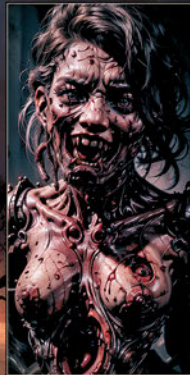


Detective Kale looked up, making eye contact for the first time, first with Munse than with Sonya.



Her deep blue eyes flickered between steel resolve and a mother's terror.





"I know the connection. I don't believe... I can't... If this shit is real, if..."

Jennifer the mother began to surface, unbidden by the hard Detective. Sonya reached out to her, willing her strength to this woman in need she saw before her.

"Go on. Trust your gut Detective." The phrasing was what Jennifer Kale needed.

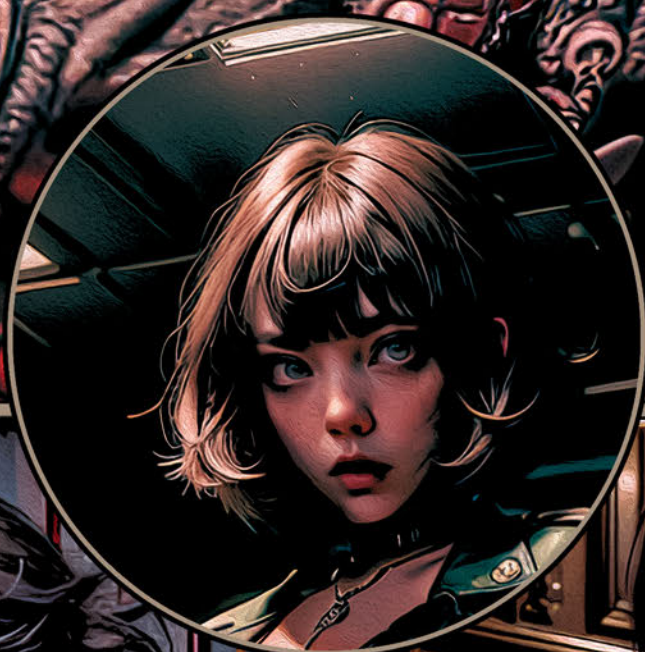
Finding, perhaps for the first time a solidarity and joining of her two selves, Jennifer was motivated not by duty, or self preservation, but by the very life of her child and the threat that walked besides him. The strength Sonya lent her was enough to help her organize her thoughts and continue.



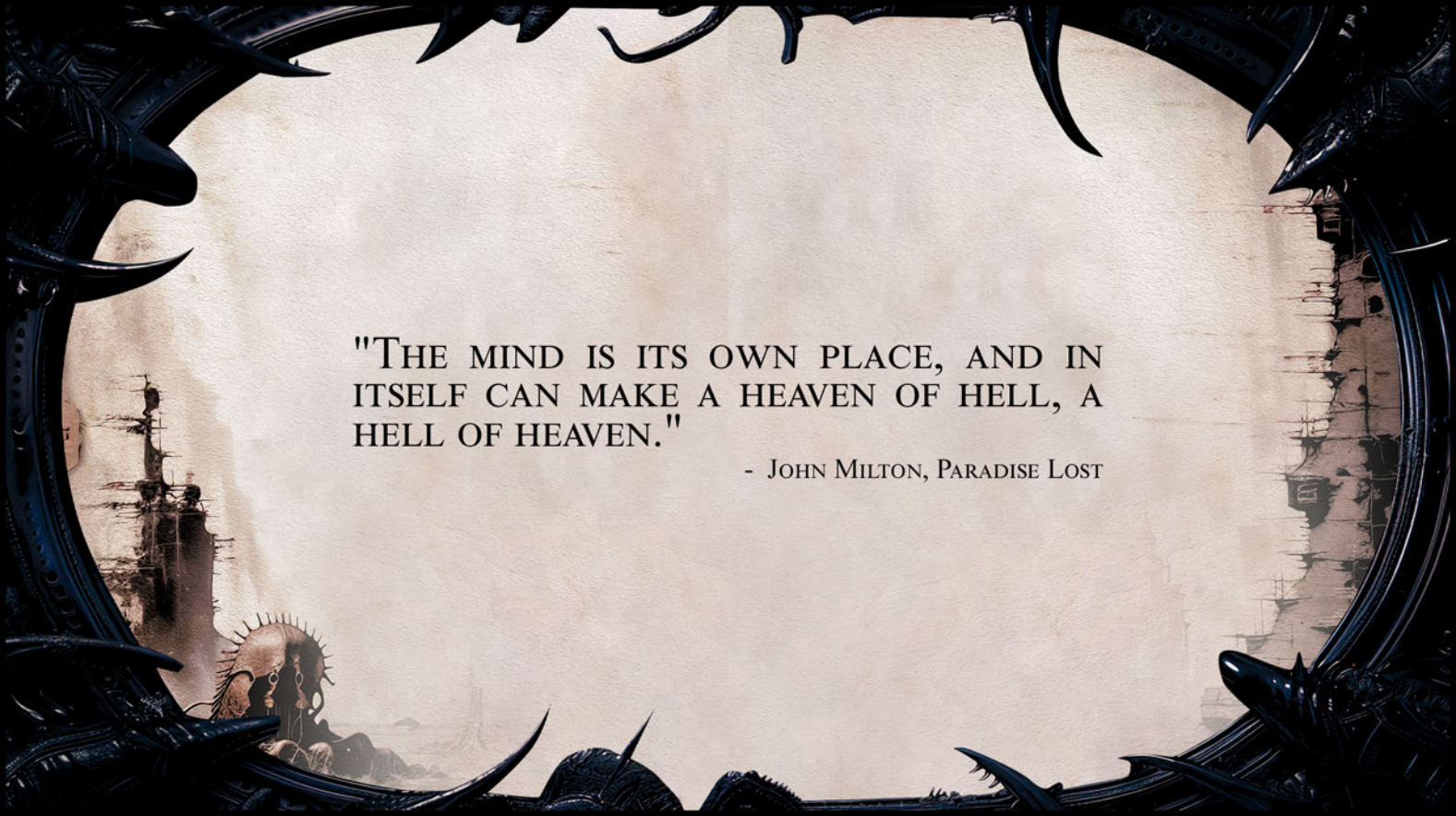
"Jacob's father... the man that... On a case years back I got too close. A sociopath raped me. I shot the bastard dead, but there's something about the grin I saw."

"When we... were in that place, the sensations I felt when that thing put it's eye's on me... That creature had the same look as that bastard; it's got to be."

Sonya looked away for a second but with a quizzical look. Things were beginning to make sense to the psychic, at least in part.







"THE MIND IS ITS OWN PLACE, AND IN
ITSELF CAN MAKE A HEAVEN OF HELL, A
HELL OF HEAVEN."

- JOHN MILTON, PARADISE LOST

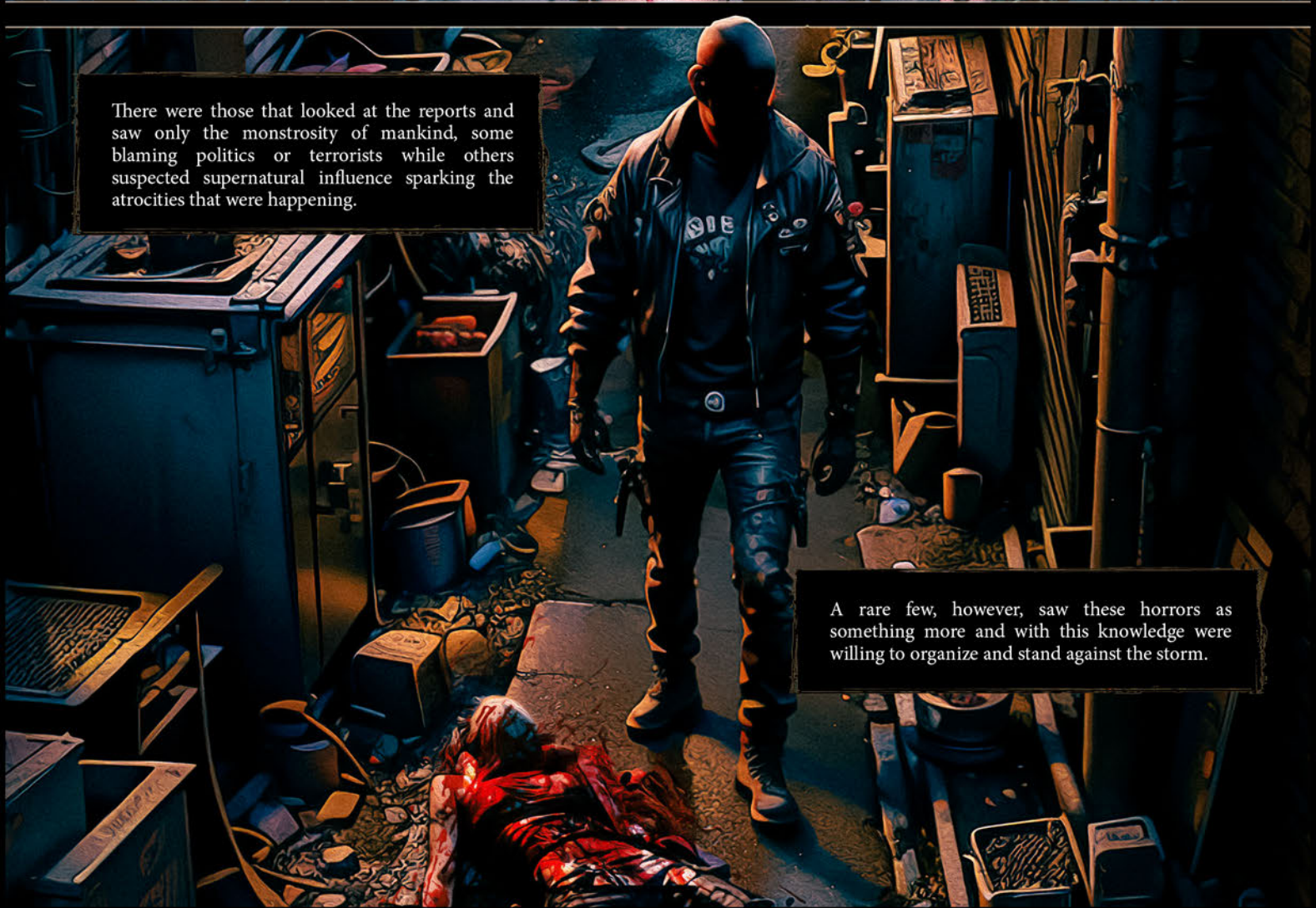


The reports of horror from the streets below were still coming in as the hospital was one of the last sources of help still standing, though nearly overwhelmed.

Fires raged out of control as firefighters began setting fires while laughing hysterically. Children danced naked in the street, brandishing knives and any other weapon that could be found, almost daring anyone with a gun to defend themselves against these former innocents.



The very worst of humanity was brought out it seemed, and while the acts of aggression and terror were numerous, they remained partially contained within a few miles of the cities center.



There were those that looked at the reports and saw only the monstrosity of mankind, some blaming politics or terrorists while others suspected supernatural influence sparking the atrocities that were happening.

A rare few, however, saw these horrors as something more and with this knowledge were willing to organize and stand against the storm.



Some fought fires or tried to calm neighbors while others ushered the innocent toward shelters. Many died in their heroic attempts, yet many others were saved because of them. While the evil that permeated the city was nothing new as individual acts of terror, cumulatively and with such abandon, what spurred it on and to such heights was something far more callous than anything humanity had words for. Never before had the depths of hell so richly and vigorously consumed so many. Back at the hospital, the full extent of the horror unfolding reached the two detectives as even the police department became overwhelmed. State police and even the National Guard were called in, but there was no clue as to when they may arrive or even if they could provide the necessary help fast enough and over such a wide area. The sources of this madness needed to be identified and shut down.

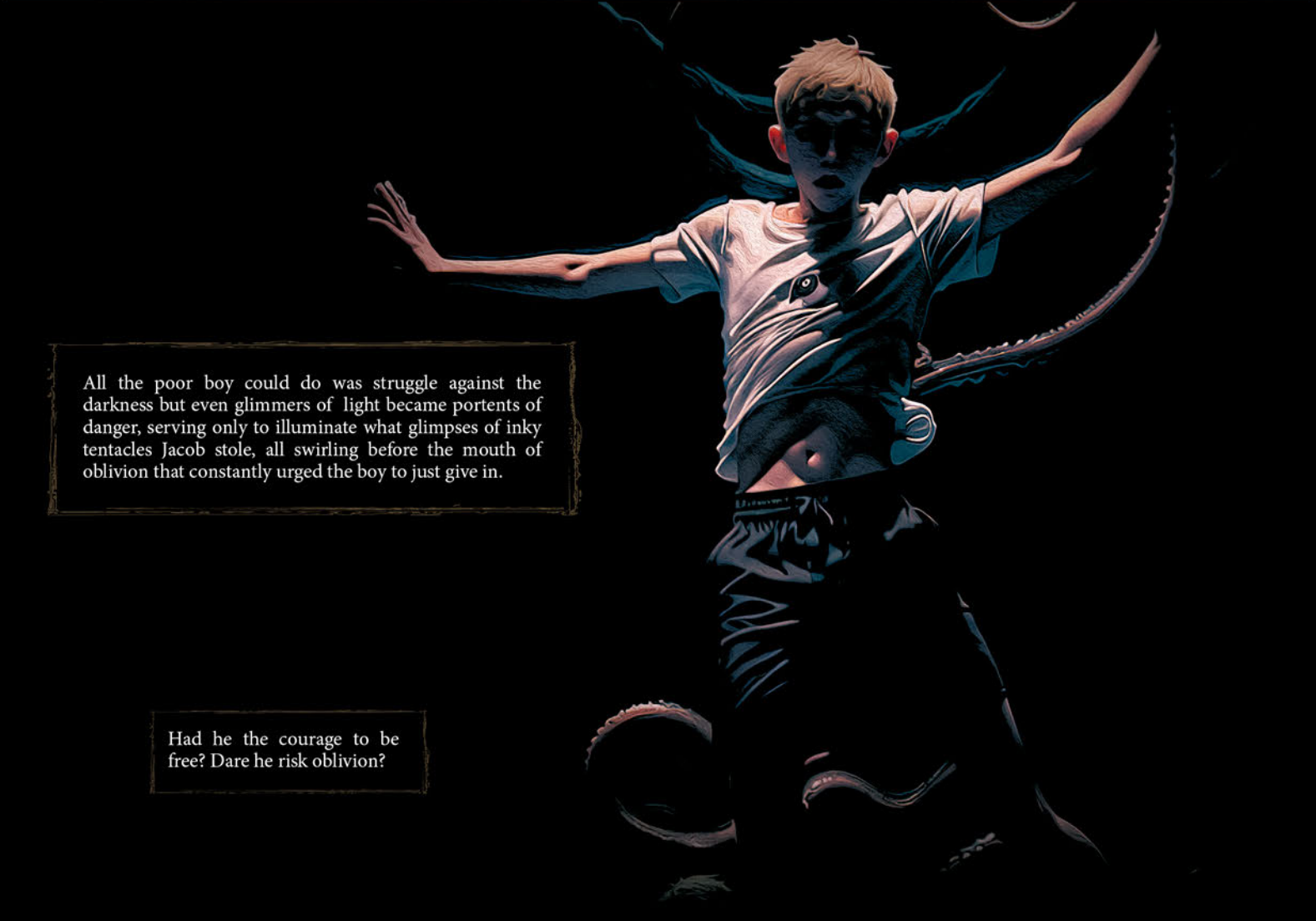
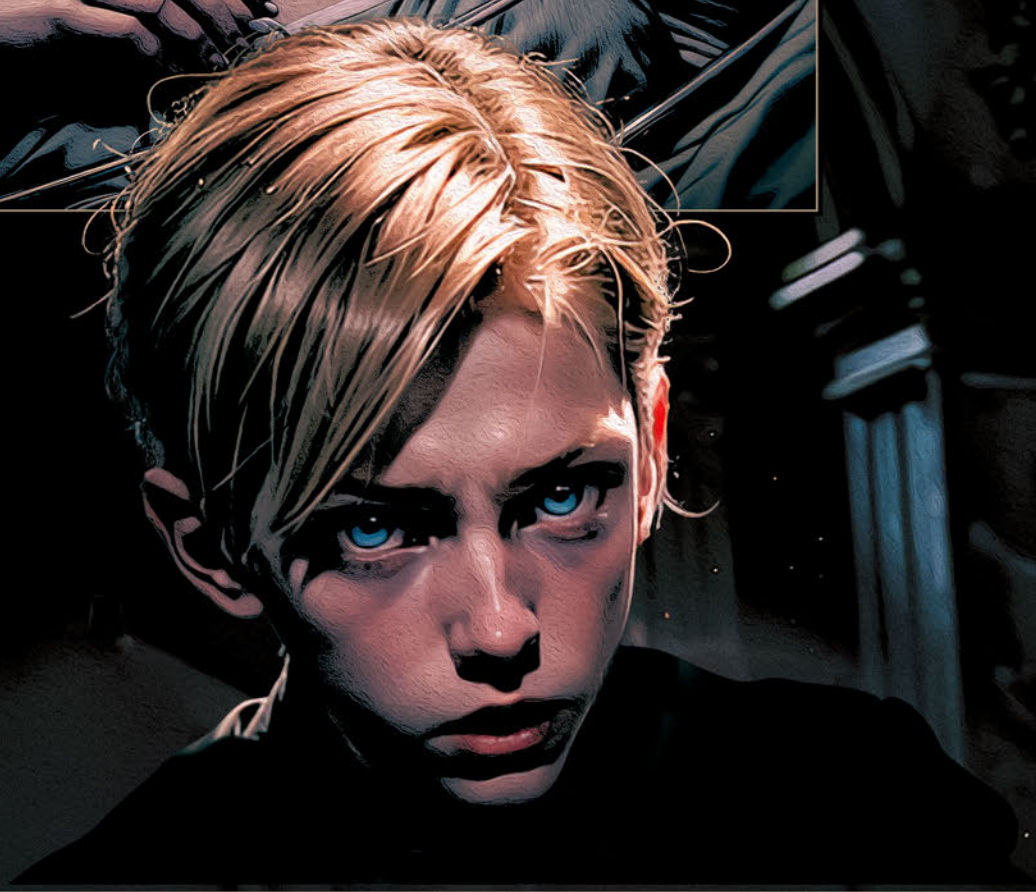
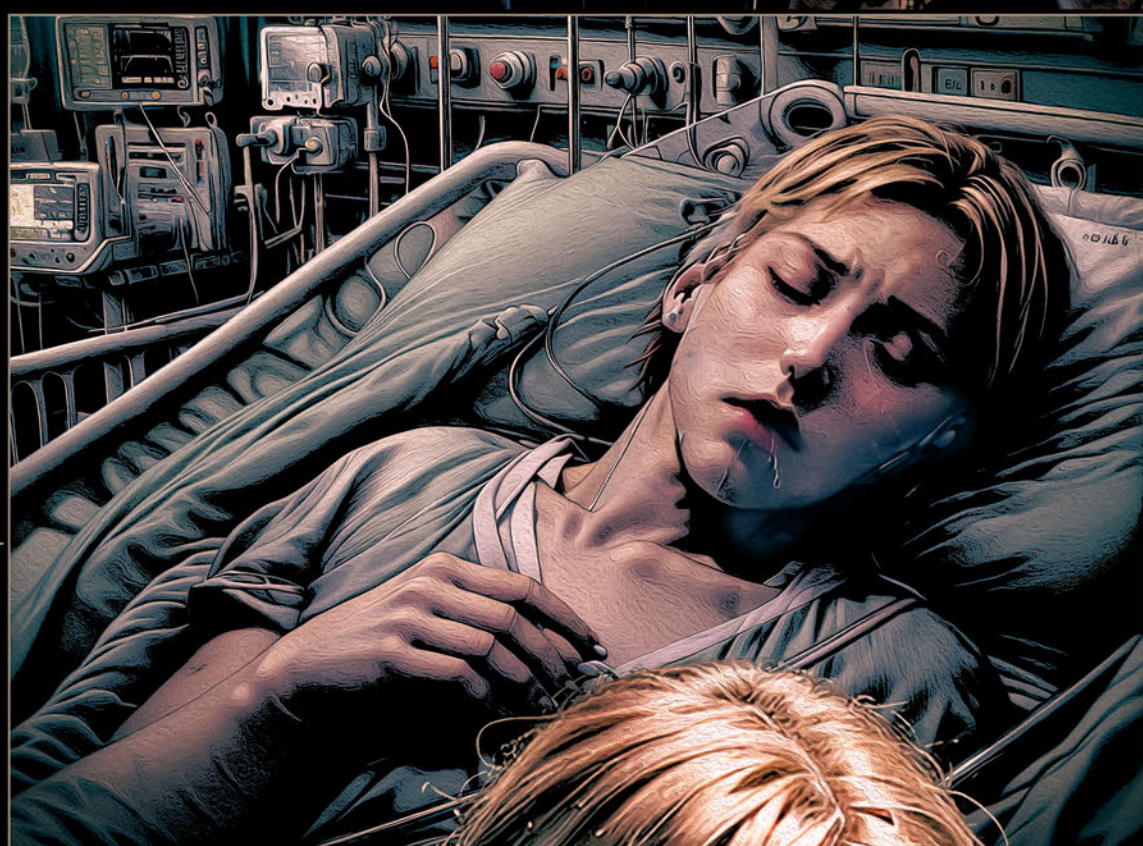


As the two detectives and the psychic debated their next course of action, Jacob began to stir.

Sensations of dread reverberated over him as he retreated further into the confines of his own mind. Deep within these recesses of his mind, where his final vestiges of security remained, Jacob clung with all his will to his sanity and cried out for his mother's warm embrace.

A vast multitude of shapes, cloaked in inky blackness and reeking of decay began shifting from outward expansion from Jacob's fragile form, to implosion, returning to the source of their freedom.

Jacob knew with absolute certainty that the encroaching multitude meant to consume him and all he held dear. Terror gripped Jacob as he clung to his legs, pulling tightly inward his mental form, shielding himself as best he could against the blackness that threatened to overtake him.

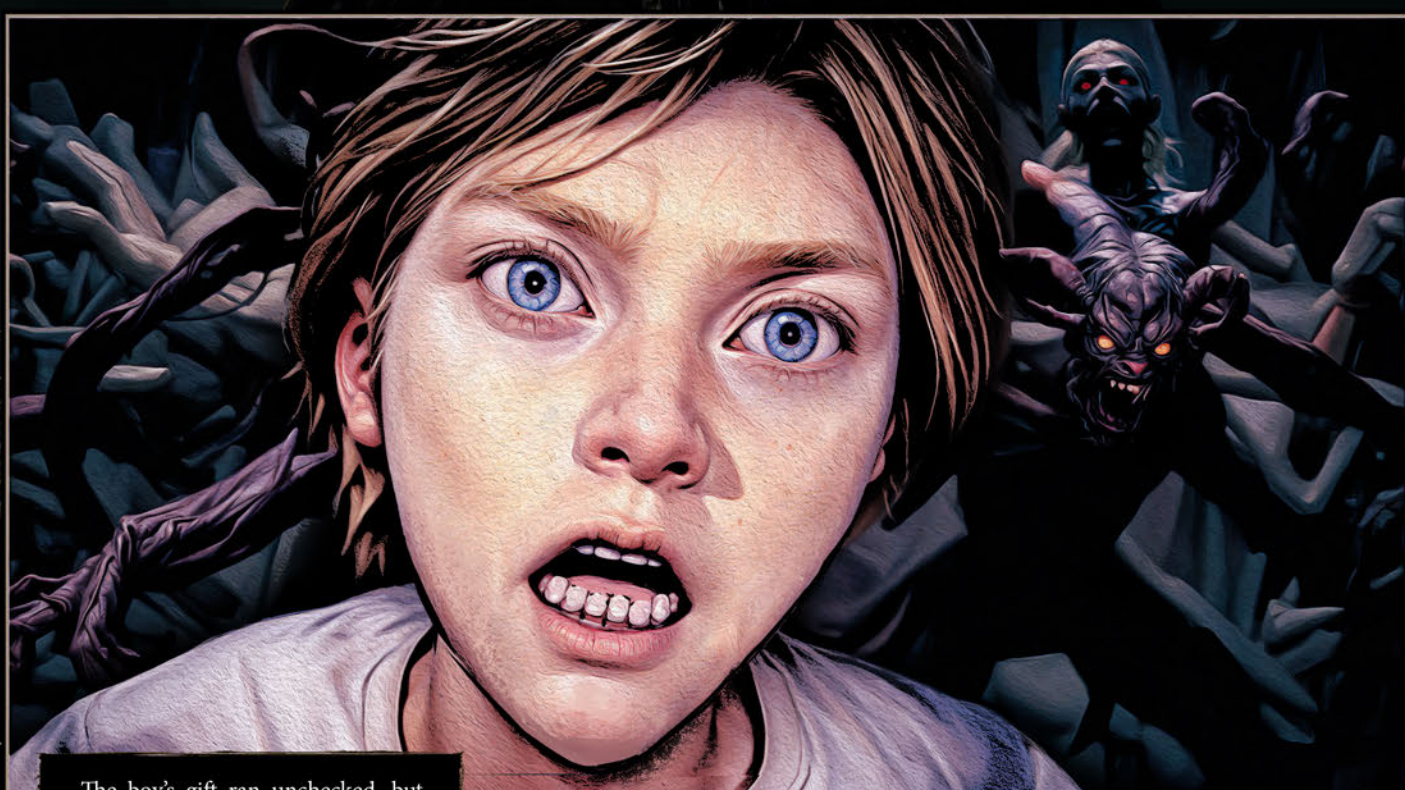


All the poor boy could do was struggle against the darkness but even glimmers of light became portents of danger, serving only to illuminate what glimpses of inky tentacles Jacob stole, all swirling before the mouth of oblivion that constantly urged the boy to just give in.

Had he the courage to be free? Dare he risk oblivion?



The possessed were coming for him, and he felt the dead calling out to him as they neared. Sonya felt it too, and the hairs on her neck began standing up.



The boy's gift ran unchecked, but when Sonya had peered into Jacob's mind, the boy's power flared.



Jacob knew in his heart he was but a key to a doorway, and in fact he felt as every entity brushed past him, some ignoring his frail form while others reached out, scratching, tearing, looking for even the smallest piece they could take with them.

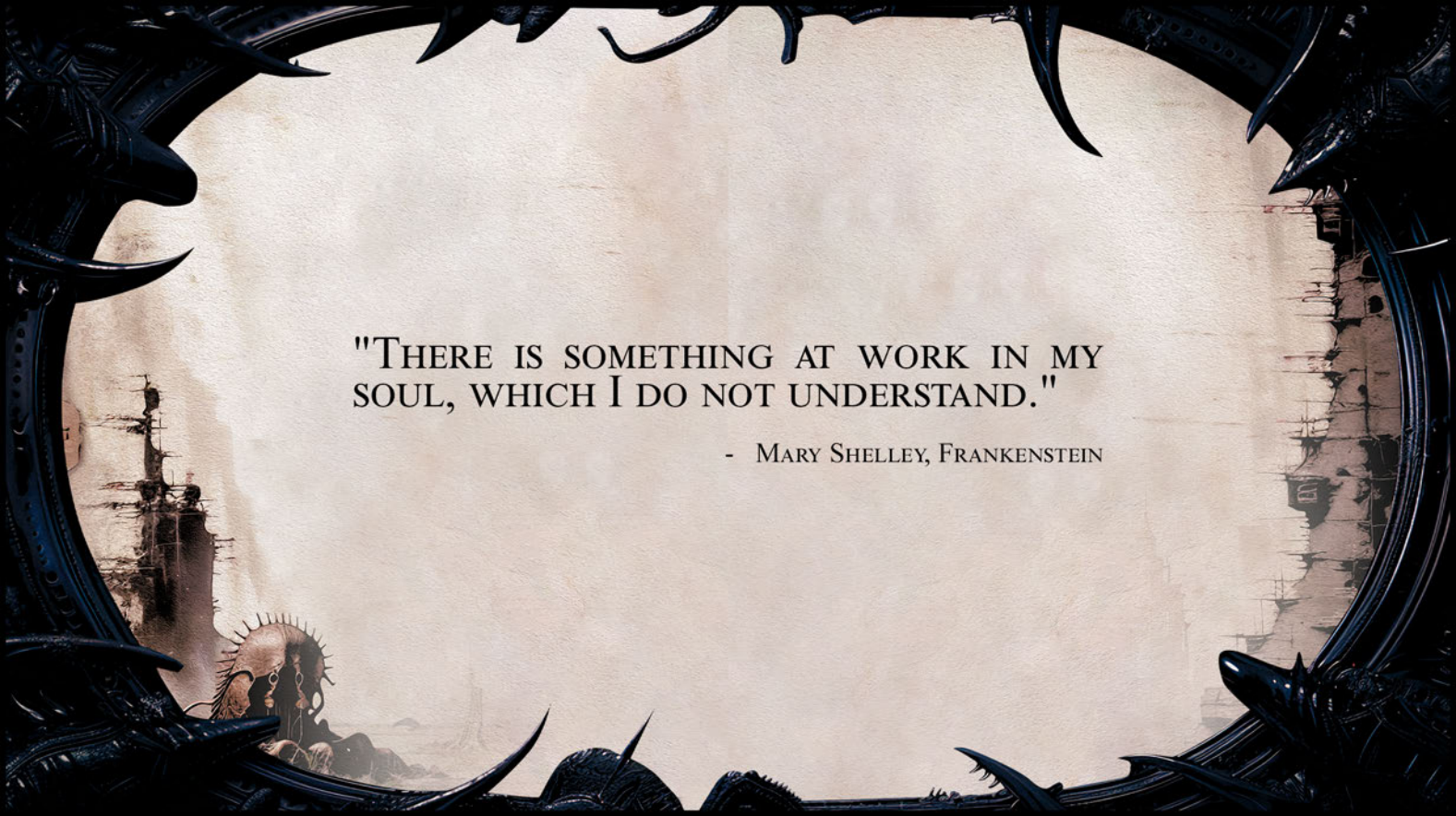


If only he could get a message to his mother, thought the boy. He had called out to her and the other woman that appeared behind him, but no sound had left his lips.

Instead he was suffocated for the act, humiliated and violated from head to toe. Had they heard him, wondered Jacob?

Jacob sobbed as the multitude swirled around him. His last embers of hope burning out quickly in the dark.





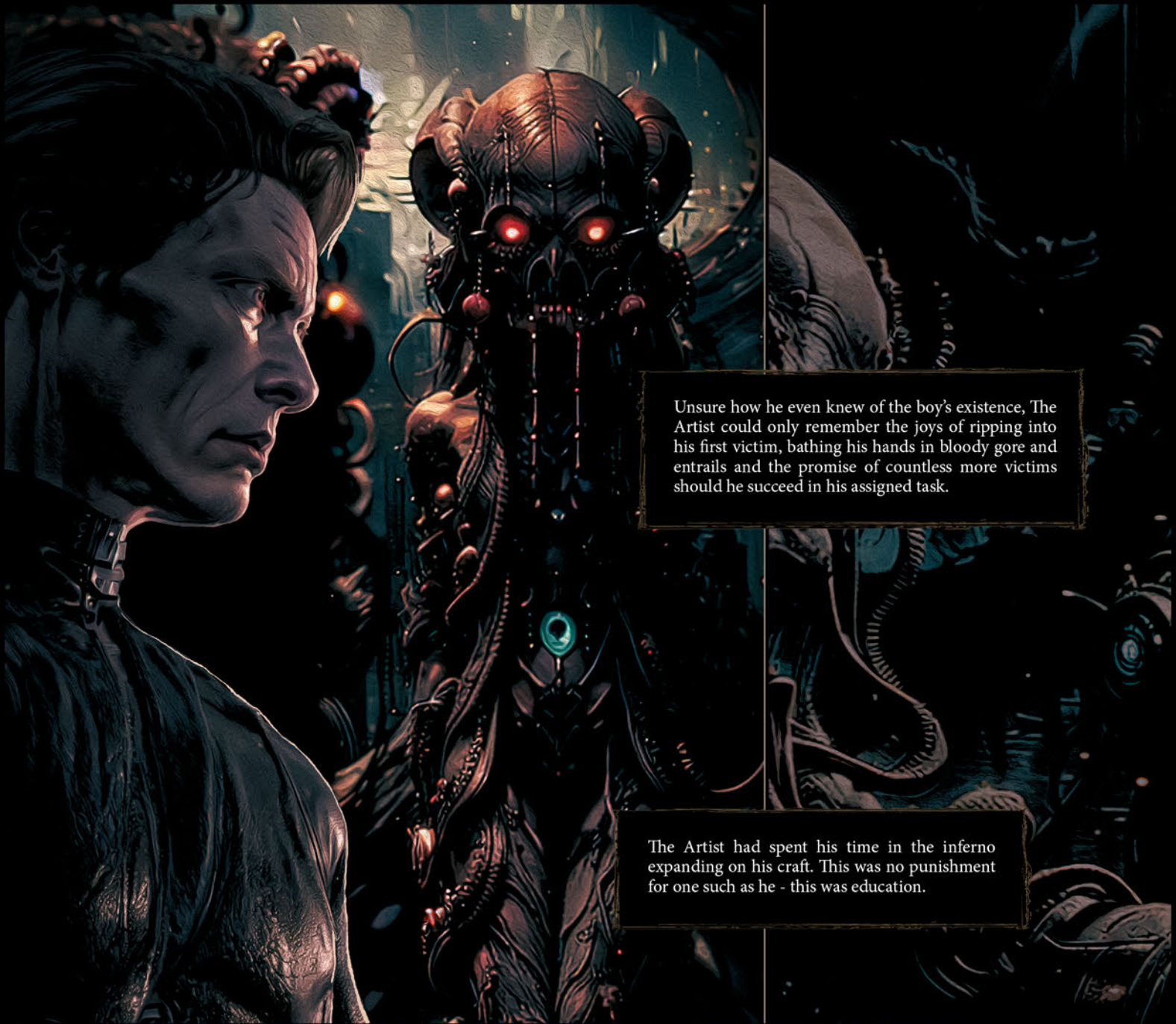
"THERE IS SOMETHING AT WORK IN MY
SOUL, WHICH I DO NOT UNDERSTAND."

- MARY SHELLEY, FRANKENSTEIN



The Artist had sensed the potential within his son from the other side. Why had he cared?

What was his motivation? He no longer knew nor had he ever truly cared. The Darkness Beyond had spoken, and he had heard its commands. In truth, The Artist had forsaken his free will decades ago when, as a small child he sacrificed his pet rabbit on the cold alter of stone he found out back of his parents house. As a boy he had frequented this holy place many times. On many occasions the boy would awaken from his nights slumber upon the very same alter, having walked out into the woods asleep. The whispers of the unseen things soothed him and gave knowledge far beyond his years. This knowledge came at a price though, as the boy felt all vestiges of his humanity fall away as his intellect expanded. The Artist thought back to these early years as he considered his son and the task set before him. The Artist had no earthly cares for the boy, in fact, he no longer even remembered his name.

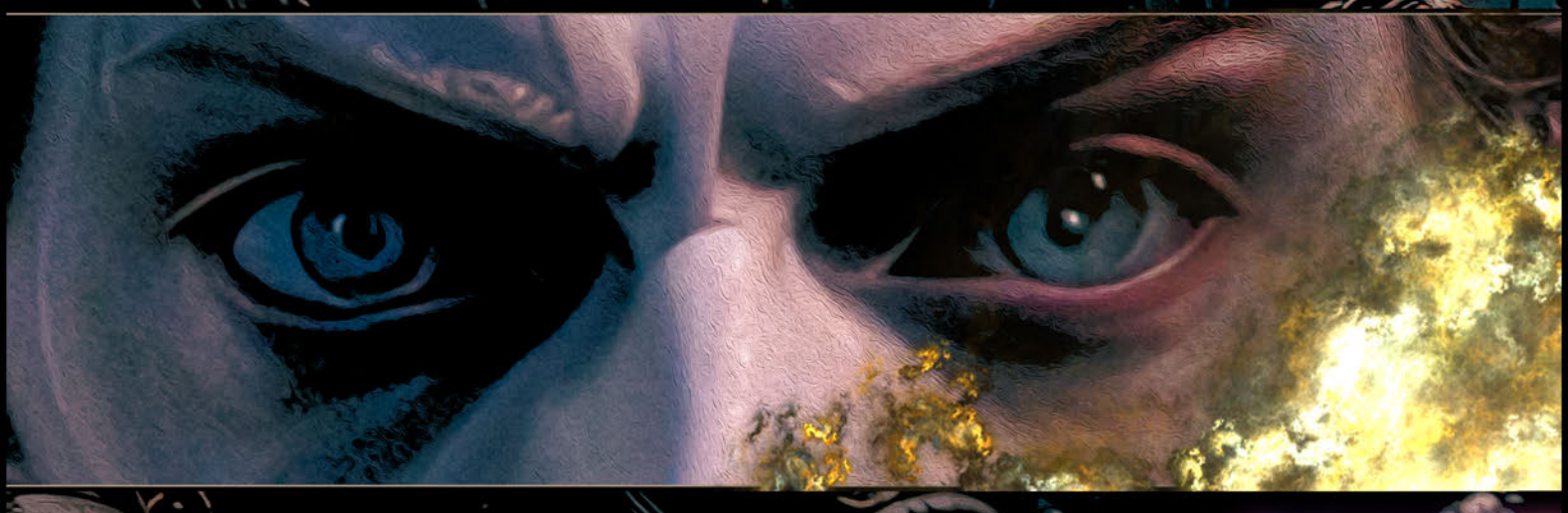


Unsure how he even knew of the boy's existence, The Artist could only remember the joys of ripping into his first victim, bathing his hands in bloody gore and entrails and the promise of countless more victims should he succeed in his assigned task.

The Artist had spent his time in the inferno expanding on his craft. This was no punishment for one such as he - this was education.



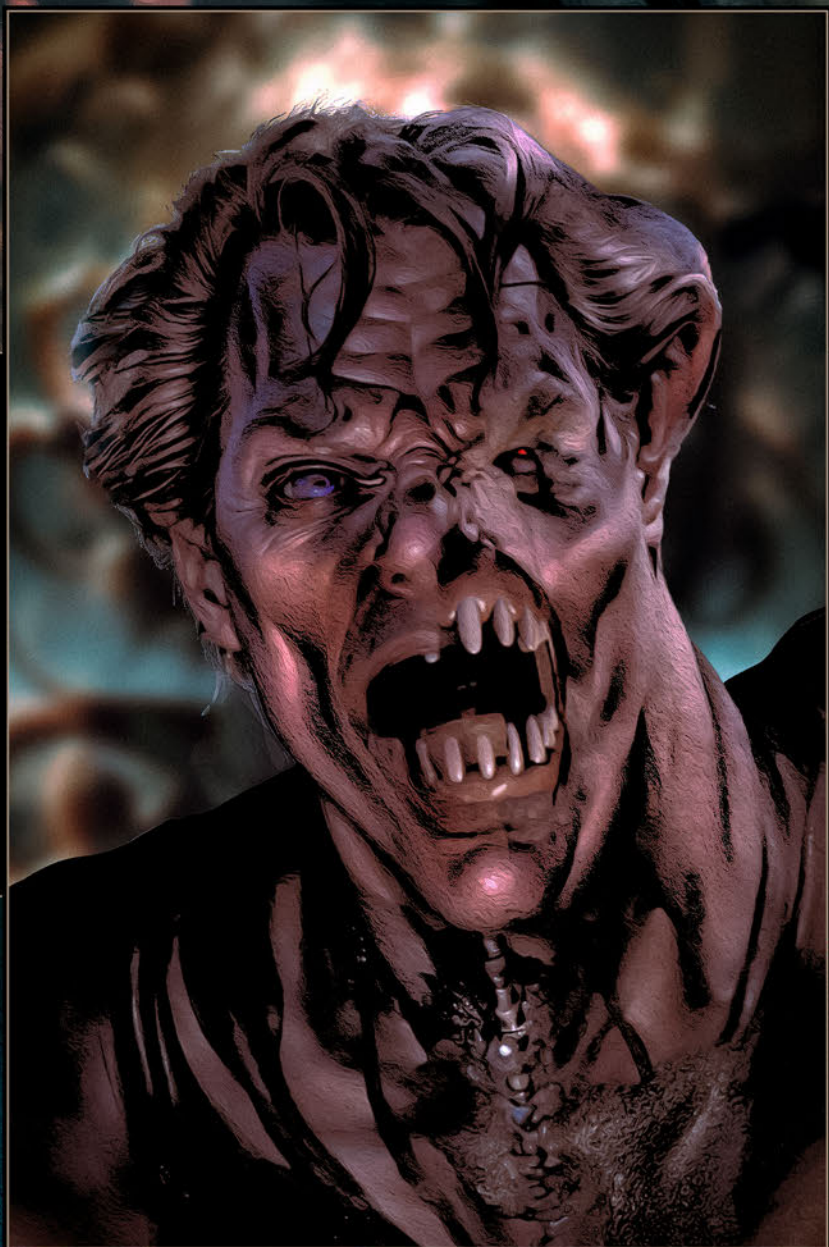
A lot can be learned in the arts of dissection and dismemberment in the afterlife, more so when pain and torture have always been a part of your existence.



The Artist all but welcomed the horror of the other side and the expanded education he was gaining, but still he sought a way to finish the task he started so long ago, always nudged forward by the voices of the abyss and their promise of never-ending rewards.



The Artist needed a way back, to once again bathe in the innards of his subjects and complete his masterpiece. He was given power and purpose and a chance to bridge the gap when his son's ability began to awaken.



Like a beacon of warmth in a never ending ocean of arctic ice, this warmth offered a glimpse of the world left behind. It called out to one and all in the abyss, but only The Artist could sense its location and the potential it represented. The connection, thin as it was, still sufficed to bridge the gap between realms and this bridge only grew stronger with time.

A plan was finalized and all the players assembled. The Artist was ready and willing to make the necessary sacrifices.



At best, the boy would be consumed almost immediately from within by the escaping souls, if The Artist acted too soon.



That is, unless the boy was strengthened, and strengthen he must do for the Great Old Ones had commanded. None within the infernal realm knew what ultimately was at stake, but The Artist had a ready and willing army of distractions all eager to strike when directed.

Thoughts and ideas germinated within The Artist's consciousness, expanding his wants and desires until he barely recognized himself any longer. Indeed he had become the instrument of change that was needed, but was it ever what he desired?

Fleeting remnants of humanity coursed through his being but just as quickly as they formed, so to were they vanquished. Instinctively, he knew that the boy held power over the doorway, and there were others that would seek to close it.



Decades earlier the foundations of this great work were laid by others, ensuring a necessary piece of this cosmic puzzle would be at the ready.



If the boy was the key, a doorway would be needed to help share in the burden. The psychic and the boy would meet, the Great Old Ones had foreseen it, after all they had planted the necessary seeds in all those it would require for this chance meeting to occur.

The psychic would supply the power the boy needed to create the initial breach. The doorway open, the psychic would draw the legions of the damned through her, instead of the boy, preserving the child for the next phase of the plan. In this lay the weakness and flaw in the grand design.

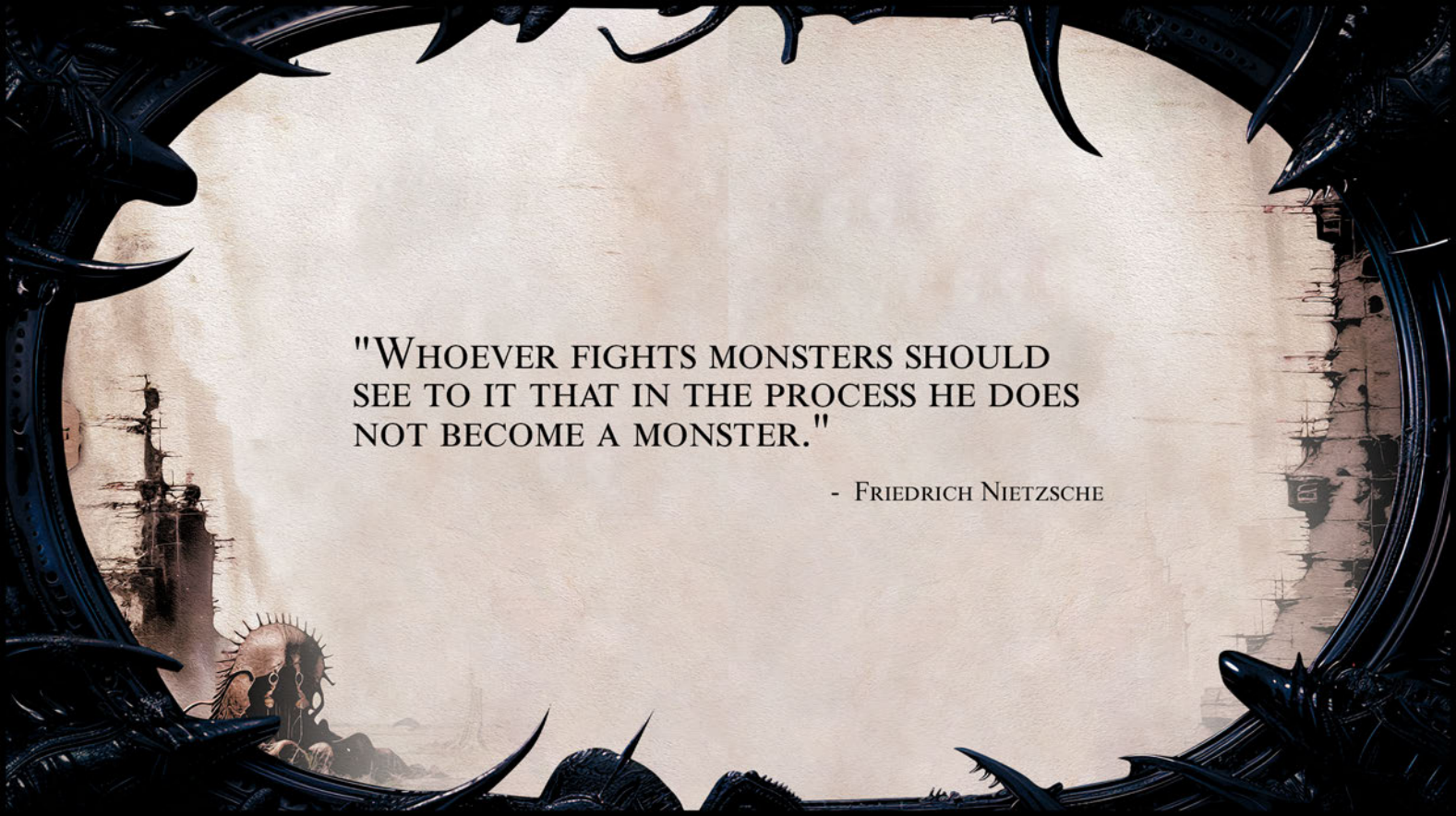


The boy could be reached, swayed, or worse. For the final phase to be completed, the boy must be left to complete his task uninterrupted. He would need protection and solitude. The boy must be saved so the Others could wake.



The other side could hold the door open permanently with The Artists plan, but for that, time was needed. Deep within the bowels of the earth, Things began to stir and Sonya alone bore silent witness...





"WHOEVER FIGHTS MONSTERS SHOULD
SEE TO IT THAT IN THE PROCESS HE DOES
NOT BECOME A MONSTER."

- FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

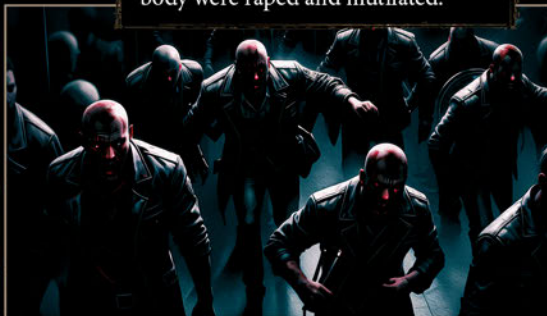
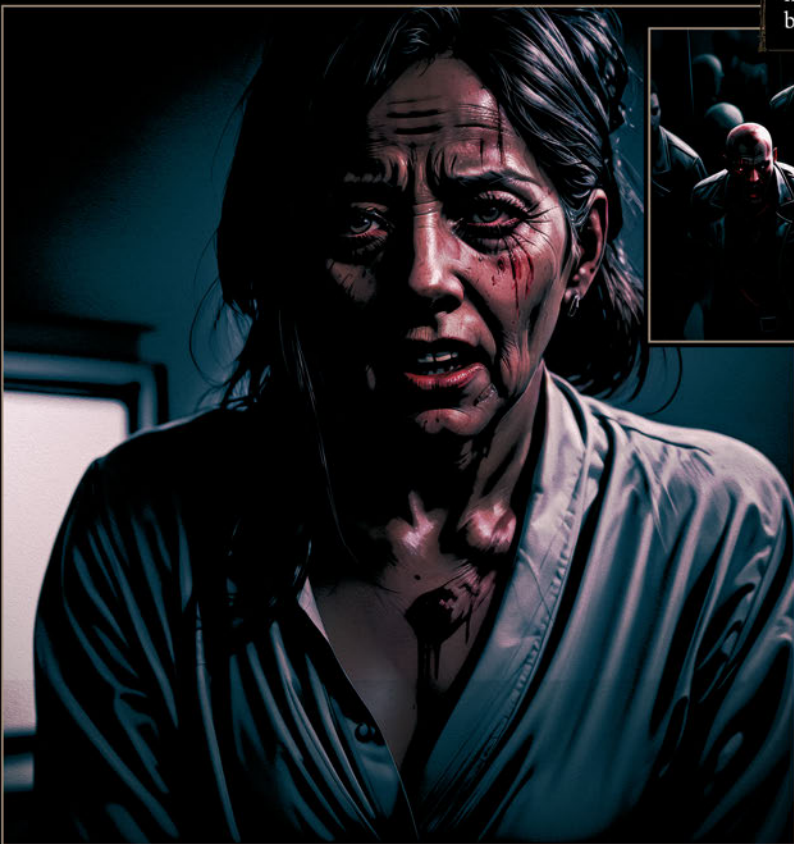
Blood filled the streets as wave after wave of the possessed rioted across the city, slowly converging on the hospital that housed Jacob Kale.



Blood filled the streets as wave after wave of the possessed rioted across the city, slowly converging on the hospital that housed Jacob Kale. The media reported the violence as some form of mass hysteria or potentially even some form of terrorist attack, but the reasons behind the madness mattered little. The possessed had instinctual knowledge, passed on to them by The Artist, driving them like flocking birds towards their target. As the mob neared the hospital, roadblocks set up by emergency services did little to stem the tide as when any of the possessed bodies were cut down, a new host was immediately found, turning a deadly situation into one of utter chaos. Eventually the mob of possessed crashed through the lobby door, flooding the hospital. Most were driven on by pure madness, yet some retained enough free will that they took the opportunities to sate their perverse desires on the staff fleeing for safety.



The horrors they unleashed would never be forgotten as body after body were raped and mutilated.



No one was spared from the bloody carnage, not the elderly, infirm, or even the children. The horde was unrelenting in their debauchery. Spurred on by the knowledge The Artist was all too eager to share. The ever growing mass of possessed fully under his sway became so crazed with the idea of freedom they were driven to enraged extremes of force beyond their understanding as they raced for the upper floors. This taste of the physical pleasures of the world energized the mob into a fury like no other as the whispers of the Great Old Ones gave purpose behind the destruction. Groups and consultants from the CDC, FBI, Ellium, and more had little power to stem the tide as all looked for physical reasons for the riots, but there, of course, were none to be found, and all the while the madness continued to spread.



The recent displays of power and general insanity had erased any lingering doubt in the minds of the two Detectives, that what they were told by the psychic Sonya was the absolute truth.

Nearly crippled with fear, Jennifer Kale had to save her son. This was the mother within her, and while this is where her love and generosity originated, so to did the panic attacks and lack of critical thinking spurred on by her past trauma.

The professional side of her mind, Detective Kale, needed resolution while also maintaining order and reason within her.

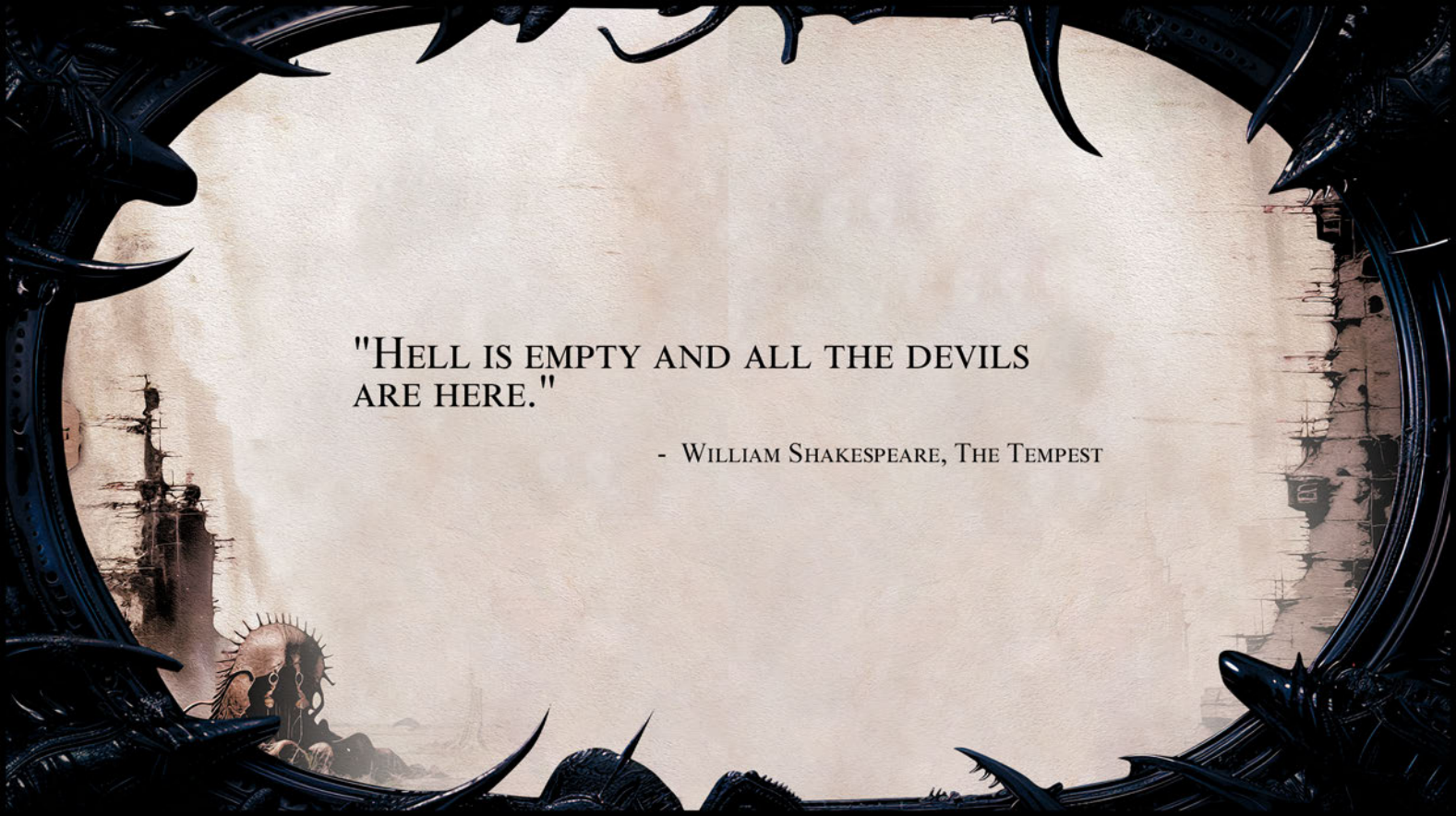
More than ever, the two personalities felt in unison over their direction however, as both knew her son must be saved and indeed without a doubt was the target of the possessed. This fueled her, giving Jennifer the strength she needed.



Sonya's waking vision continued to delve deeper within Jacobs mind.

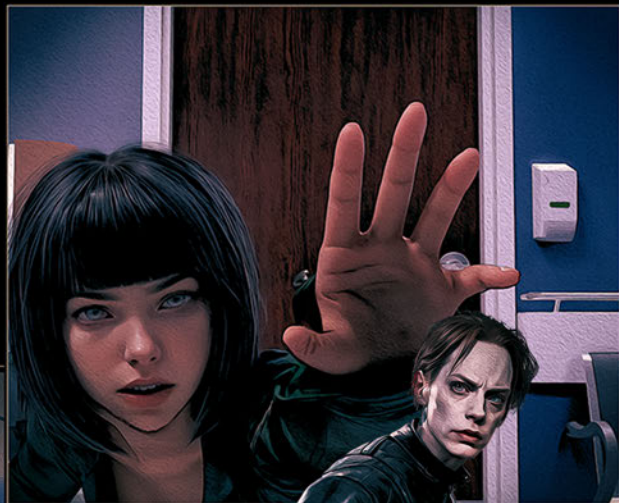
Speaking aloud to the two detectives, Sonya's mind struggled to remain connected to Jacob the visions quickening yet always illusive. "The Other Side will seek to hold the door open. We're looking at a jail break, as mundane as that may sound. "The only way for these pieces of shit to continue terrorizing the living is for the barrier to remain down, even if just a little. They need your son, he's the wedge that's keeping it open now that my sister sprung the leak. The good news is they'll protect his physical form, but they're not going to care one bit about his mind." Sonya broke out in a cold sweat as terror began creeping through her body. As the mass of murderers, rapists, and monsters climbed the floors of the hospital, their intent overwhelmed her. Her vision became clouded with the sights and sounds of the Deep Dark that waited on the other side. She felt her innards twist in terror of the knowledge of what was to come and she saw that Jennifer felt at least some of it too. Sonya cried out in psychic anguish until she collapsed to the floor.



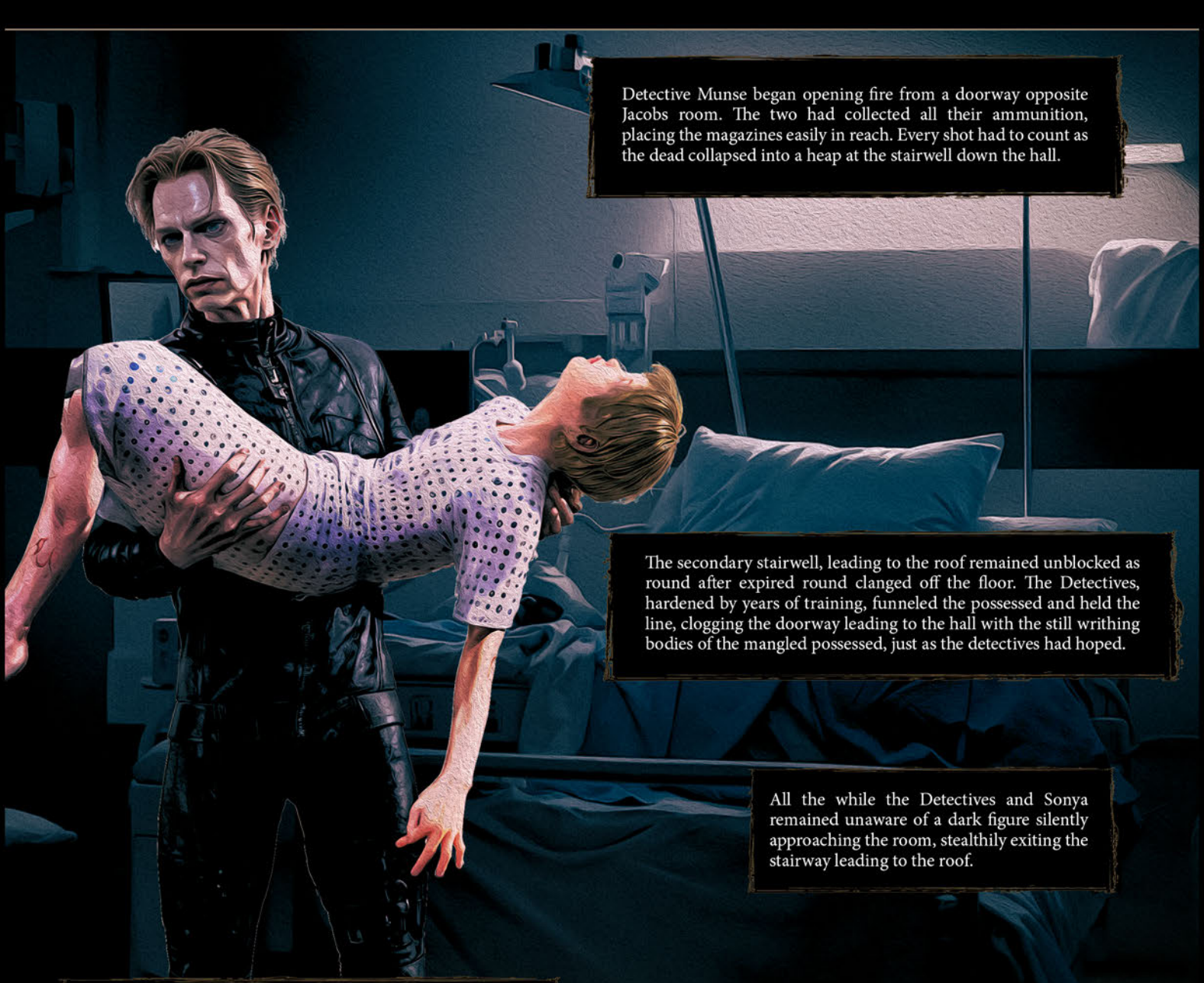


"HELL IS EMPTY AND ALL THE DEVILS
ARE HERE."

- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, THE TEMPEST



Recovering on the arm of Jennifer, Sonya looked the two in the eyes with tears streaming down her cheeks. "They're almost here!" The possessed neared the upper floor and there was no time to move Jacob. Their only hope was to hold the room in the vain hopes of clogging the floor with the possessed before running out of bullets, then if they bought enough time maybe reach the stairwell, if the opportunity arose. Sonya became overwhelmed by the voices of the dead and those they served. Their torments and desires forced into her mind, she held herself as they neared, crumpled to the floor quivering as she tried to block them out.

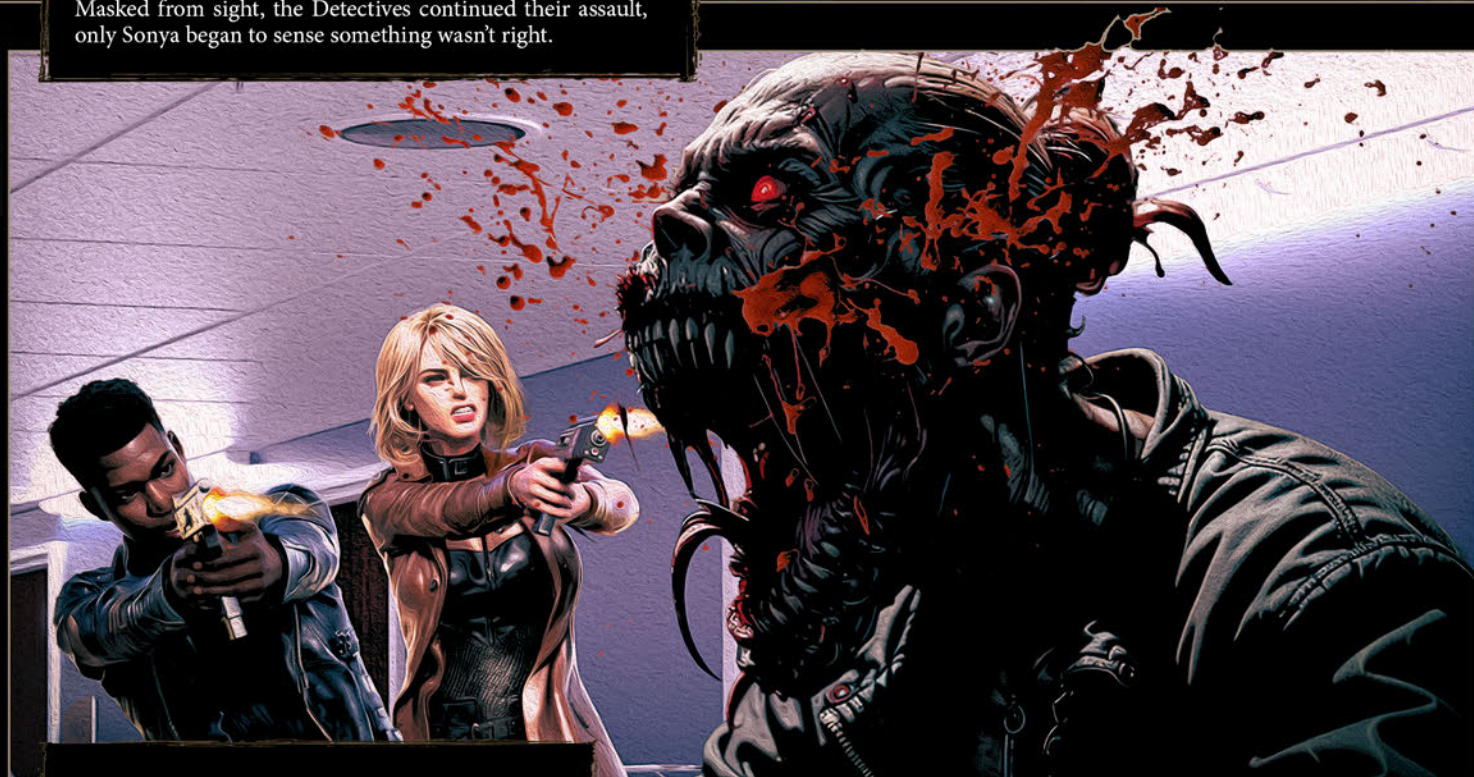


Detective Munse began opening fire from a doorway opposite Jacobs room. The two had collected all their ammunition, placing the magazines easily in reach. Every shot had to count as the dead collapsed into a heap at the stairwell down the hall.

The secondary stairwell, leading to the roof remained unblocked as round after expired round clanged off the floor. The Detectives, hardened by years of training, funneled the possessed and held the line, clogging the doorway leading to the hall with the still writhing bodies of the mangled possessed, just as the detectives had hoped.

All the while the Detectives and Sonya remained unaware of a dark figure silently approaching the room, stealthily exiting the stairway leading to the roof.

The Artist moved with purpose, approaching the slumbering child. Slipping between shadows, this no longer was simply a possessed body, but a true avatar of those that lurk beyond. Masked from sight, the Detectives continued their assault, only Sonya began to sense something wasn't right.



Reaching out her hand in a silent scream, the psychic put all her effort into crying out a warning yet no sound escaped her lips. Within moments shadow swallowed her whole as she passed out.



The Artist had little trouble lifting the child without notice. Carrying the boy out of his room and up to the roof was child's-play so long as his masters cloaked him from the sight of the Detectives.

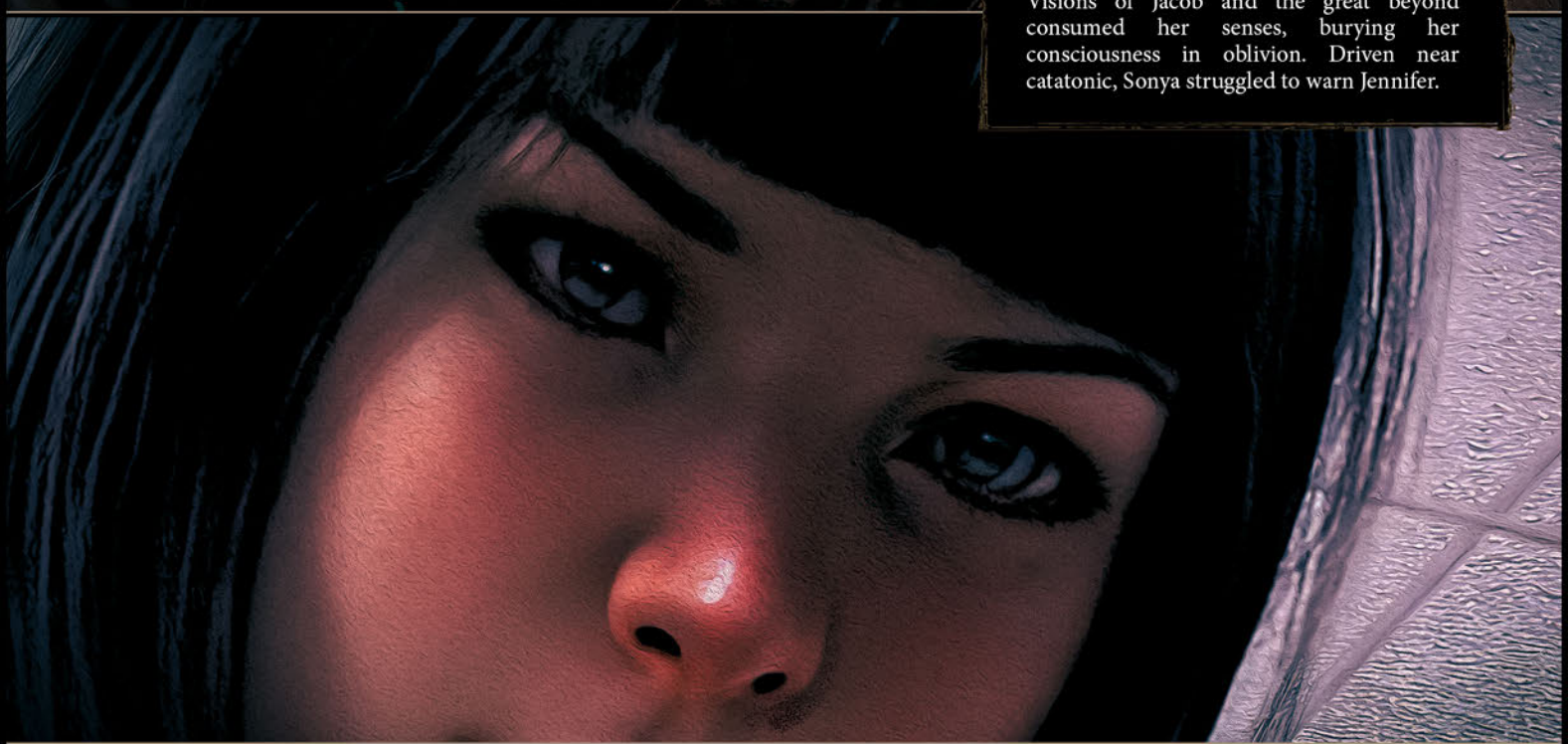
The possessed weaved around the crumpled horde the Detectives had shot down, covering the retreat of The Artist with their bodies.





Sonya regained her composure as the possessed slowed their approach, only to be struck by the immense realization and horror of what was about to happen on the roof.

Visions of Jacob and the great beyond consumed her senses, burying her consciousness in oblivion. Driven near catatonic, Sonya struggled to warn Jennifer.

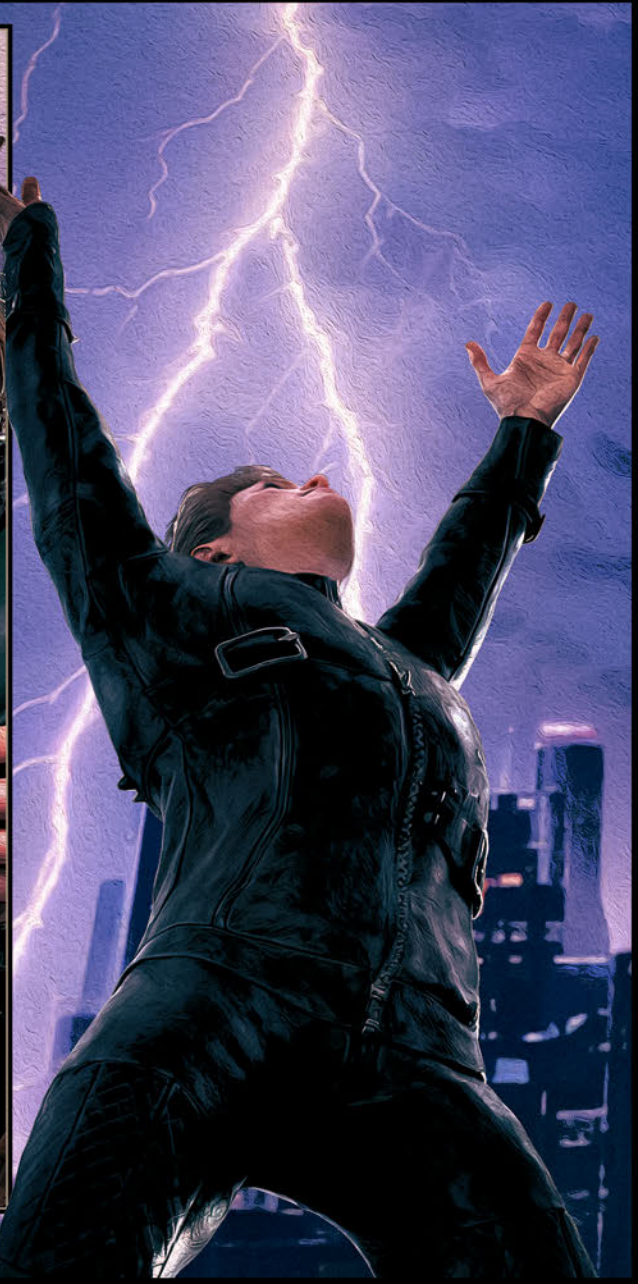


Sonya fought to regain her individuality and sense of self, all while the darkness from beyond inched closer to her very soul.

Panic set in as the two detectives took a moment to assess their ammo, realizing the hopelessness of their situation.



Only the mangled bodies that clogged the hall gave them a moment's reprieve. Sonya finally regained her voice, howling in dismay as she pointed to the now vacant bed, crying out in near panic "The roof! They have him on the roof!"





Jennifer and Munse leapt to their feet, shaken and confused as to how anyone could have snuck by them carrying an unconscious child. Jennifer grabbed onto Sonya's arms, bringing the woman to her feet. "What do you mean the roof? Who was here? How did they take my son?" Sonya wept as she spoke. "It's the beast, the one who started all of this madness."

"We saw him on the cliff, standing with your son! They're going to the roof now, to finish what he started!"

Detective Munse knew they needed more time. "I've got this, go! Get your son back and stop this!"

Munse finished reloading his gun and took up position by the door once more, not waiting for a reply.



They all knew if this wasn't stopped from the source then nothing would matter, they were dead already as there was no stopping the possessed. Jennifer, grabbing Sonya by the arm, nearly wrenching it from the socket as she tore off for the stairs. Jennifer and Sonya made their way to the roof unhindered for the moment as Detective Munse barricaded the door to the stairs from within the stair well. Munse had noticed a fire axe on the opposite wall and used it to pin the door, at least partially. With luck they won't even think to try the stairs, Munse hoped. If not, his last two magazines were all that stood between them and his partner. Many of the possessed regained partial individuality once Jacob was captured. The Great Old Ones behind The Artist refocused their energies on the portal. Some of the possessed continued on their way up to Jacobs room, running on pure instinct alone, but the majority became distracted by their own perversions and debauchery once more. Munse swore to himself that he would hold them off as long as needed.

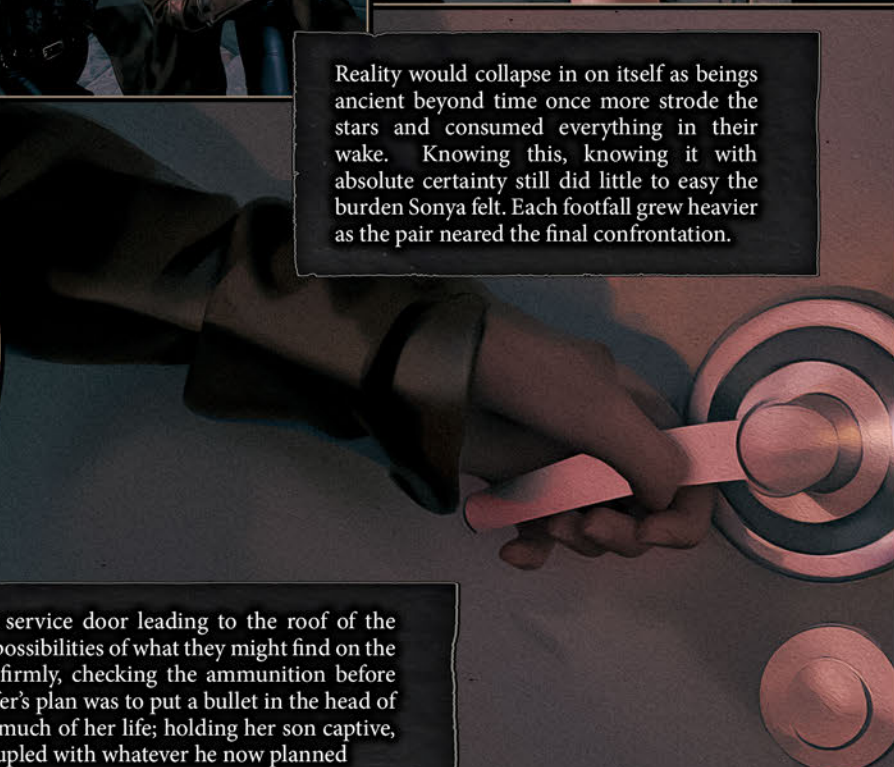
As the unlikely pair of psychic and detective raced to the building's roof, Sonya knew what needed to be done. All open doors can be closed but the cost? Could anyone - should anyone be asked to pay such a cost? To allow the portal to remain open not only meant the total erosion of Jacobs mind and soul but the end of all things.

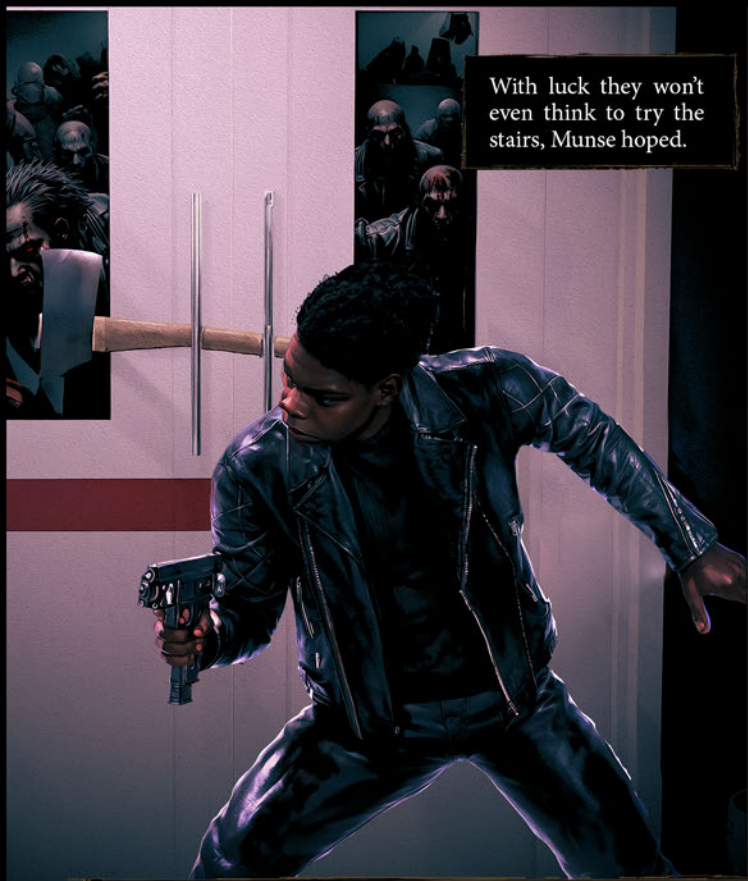


Reality would collapse in on itself as beings ancient beyond time once more strode the stars and consumed everything in their wake. Knowing this, knowing it with absolute certainty still did little to ease the burden Sonya felt. Each footfall grew heavier as the pair neared the final confrontation.



Jennifer and Sonya Carefully opened the service door leading to the roof of the hospital. Both women were terrified at the possibilities of what they might find on the other side. Jennifer gripped her fire arm firmly, checking the ammunition before venturing out into the cool night air. Jennifer's plan was to put a bullet in the head of the bastard that had already consumed so much of her life; holding her son captive, torturing him in some unknown limbo, coupled with whatever he now planned



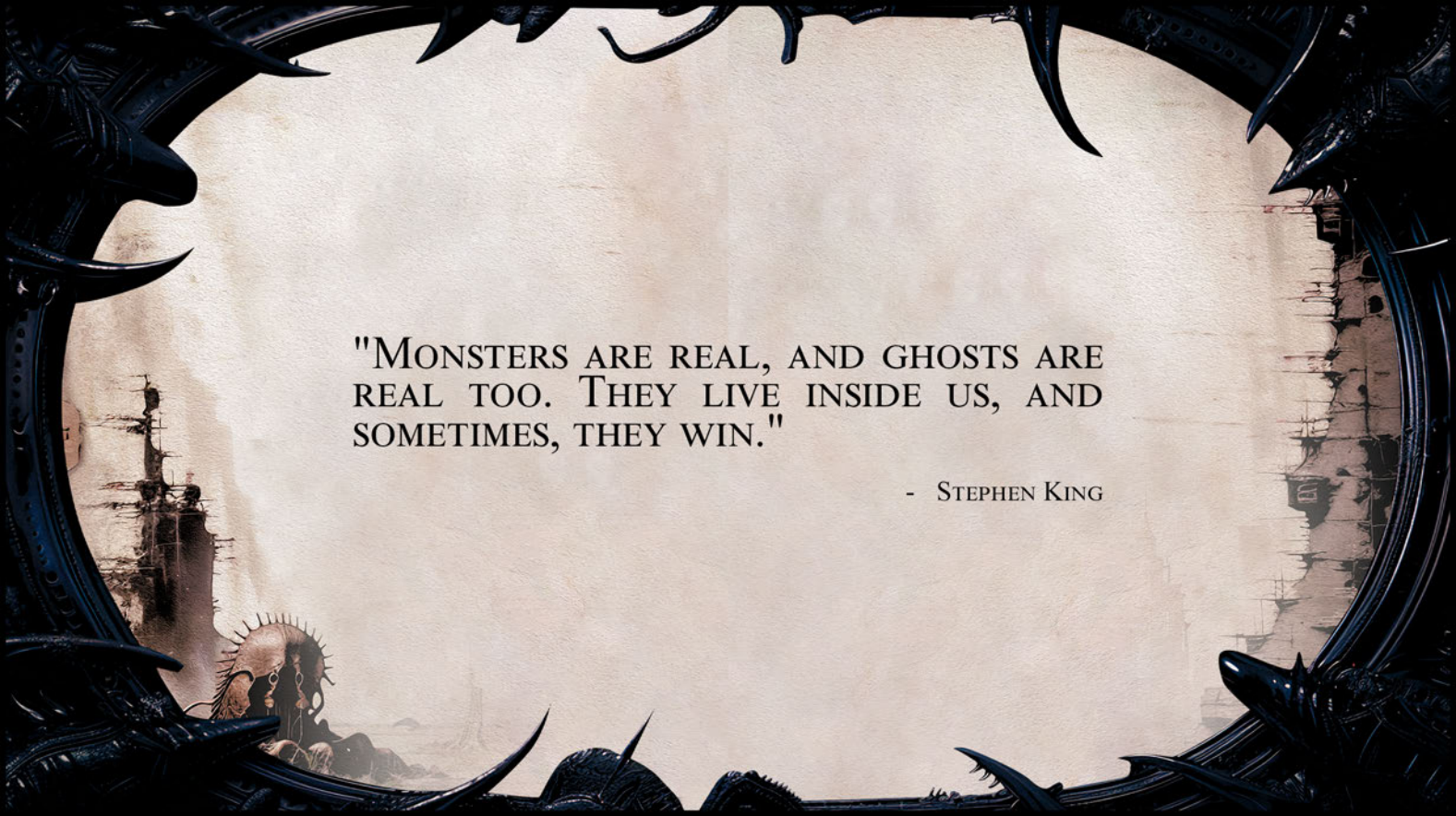


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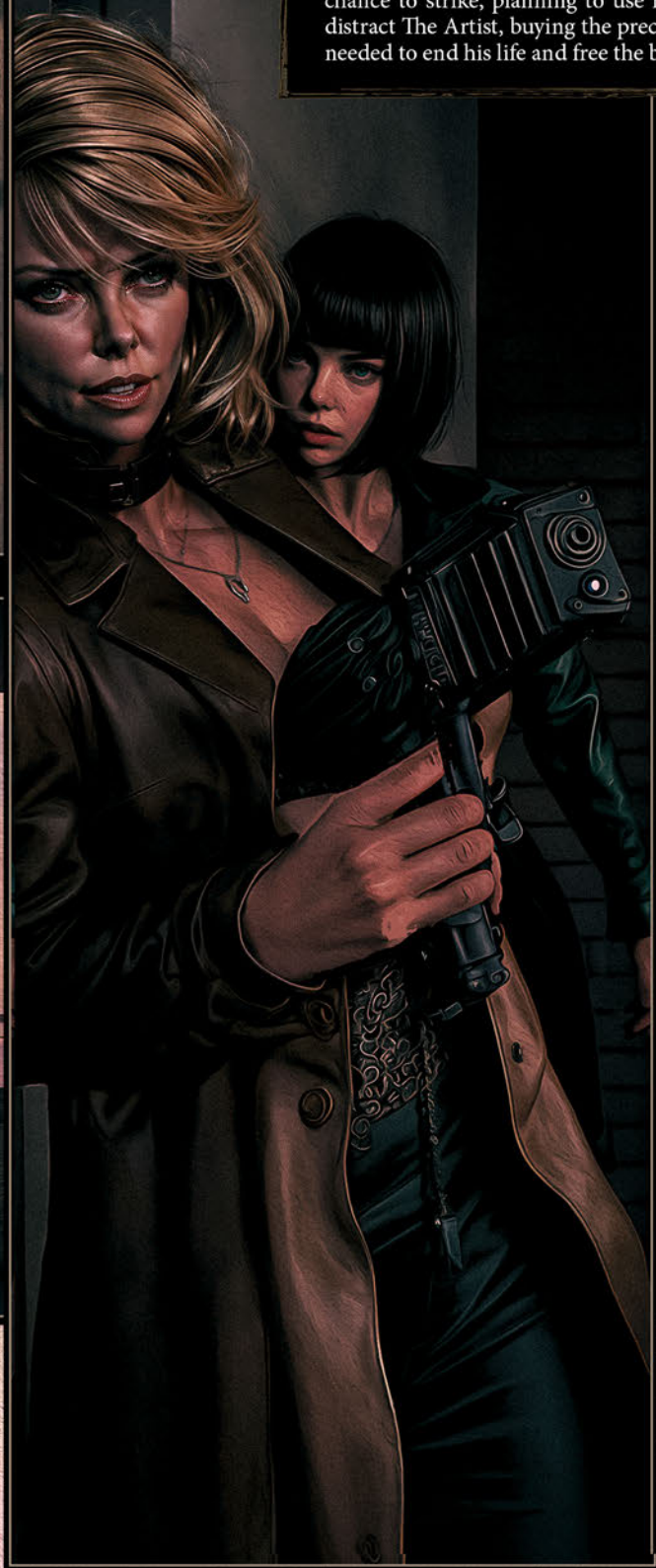




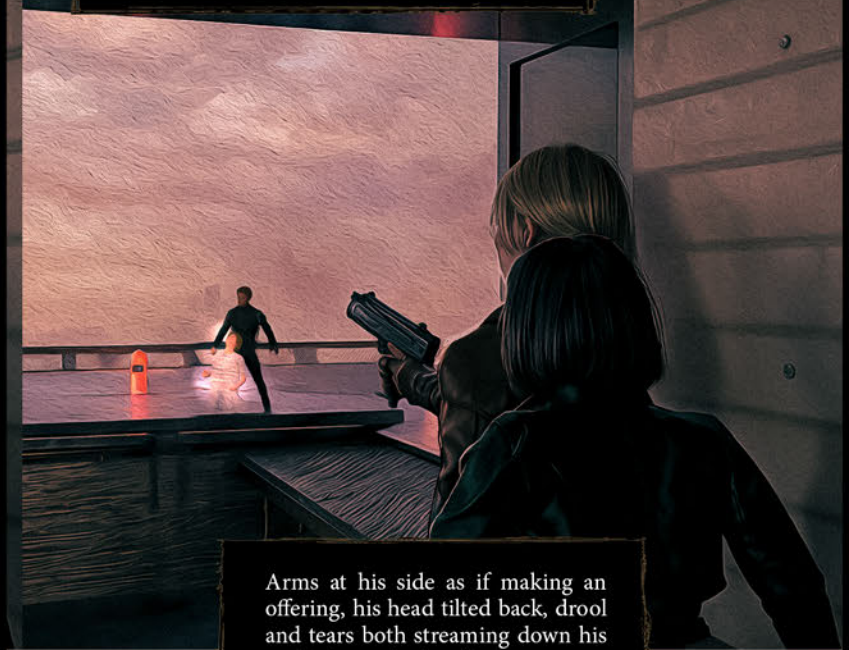
"MONSTERS ARE REAL, AND GHOSTS ARE
REAL TOO. THEY LIVE INSIDE US, AND
SOMETIMES, THEY WIN."

- STEPHEN KING

Jennifer knew she would savor the moment that bullet did its job and found its mark. Sonya's plan was much more challenging. Sonya awaited her chance to strike, planning to use her abilities to distract The Artist, buying the precious moments needed to end his life and free the boy.



What the two women encountered however, as they rounded the corner of various air conditioning units froze the pair in place. On the ground, slumped on his knees was Jacob.



Arms at his side as if making an offering, his head tilted back, drool and tears both streaming down his perfectly motionless face.

A near-blinding light emanated from his mouth and eyes creating a terrifying visage to behold.

Above the child, amid a swirling mass of clouds and blackened sky a giant sphere of darkness loomed, seemingly absorbing the light like some demonic black hole.



Behind the boy stood The Artist, preparing the final piece of his long awaited masterpiece.

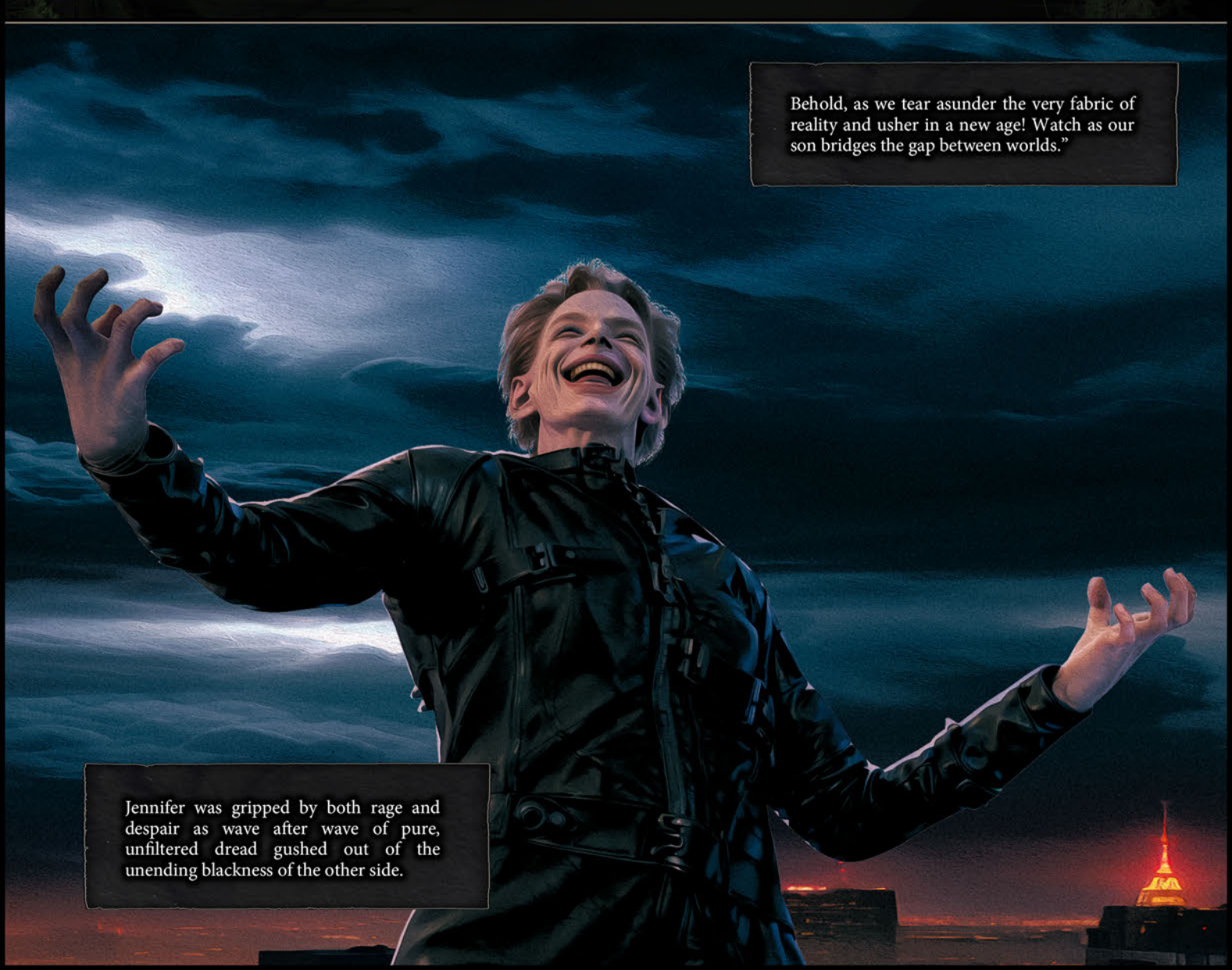


Torn clothes, covered in stab wounds, gunshots, and gore, the man gazed at them with a horrific grin, and he welcomed them to the finale.



"Jennifer, you honor us with your presence. And is this Sonya who accompanies you? Oh yes, my masters have watched you with great interest my dear. You were never intended to receive the great gift they offered. No, that was reserved for Melinda alone, a plan decade's in the making."

"It is good though, that you are here. See the fulfillment of your sister's great sacrifice! See the culmination of my life's work, for which none would be possible without your willing sacrifice Jennifer."



Behold, as we tear asunder the very fabric of reality and usher in a new age! Watch as our son bridges the gap between worlds."

Jennifer was gripped by both rage and despair as wave after wave of pure, unfiltered dread gushed out of the unending blackness of the other side.



This abomination standing before them and all the horror he had inflicted crushed against her spirit, threatening madness as he laughed into the limitless darkness above.

The same dead eyes with a hint of demonic glee met her gaze as his cackle rose above the tumultuous roar of the wind, building to its inevitable conclusion.

She saw The Artist's bloody lips move with the rhythm of a conversation she could no longer hear over the storm.



Perhaps taunts and snide remarks, perhaps not.

All Jennifer knew for sure was that before her stood everything she despised and when the creature took notice of Sonya reaching from the shadow that was when Jennifer took aim and fired.



The bullet fragmented upon impact, shattering the left side of the monster's skull, freeing Jacob from his grip.



Sonya, seizing her opportunity, locked her gaze onto Jacob.

The horrors that had spread throughout the city all stopped their carnage and looked up into the sky. Something had changed.



They begin to feel the familiar tug; some even begin to hear the chittering sounds of the dark calling them home. Sonya fell to the ground, tears of blood streaming from her eyes as the horror's from beyond struck back at the psychic, wrenching at her fragile sanity as they tore asunder her mental defenses. Falling to her knees, Jennifer reached out to help support Sonya as the light continued to spew from her child's body, creating a barrier of wind and debris swirling around him. Deafening screams rose up from all corners of the city as the dead were pulled back, ripped from their hosts' bodies violently, causing the bodies to gush blood and fluid from every orifice as the transfer occurred.



Sonya spoke in a hushed gurgle, choking on bile, she struggled trying to tell Jennifer what needed to be done. "You can't kill the dead..."

As she spoke, a knife gouged through Sonya's head, releasing a torrent of blood while The Artist laughed with glee. Jacob blinked and was himself, but only for a moment. Sonya had done far more damage than her sister ever could. Tampering with forces beyond her understanding, Sonya's gamble to sever Jacobs connection to the dead side had the opposite effect. The door was swinging open once more, and this time, it threatened to never close. Jacob looked up to his mother, and as the portal began to grow he cried out: "Help me, I'm so cold!" Jennifer lashed out in horror not knowing how to save her son, as his body was seemingly being consumed by the energies it contained within.

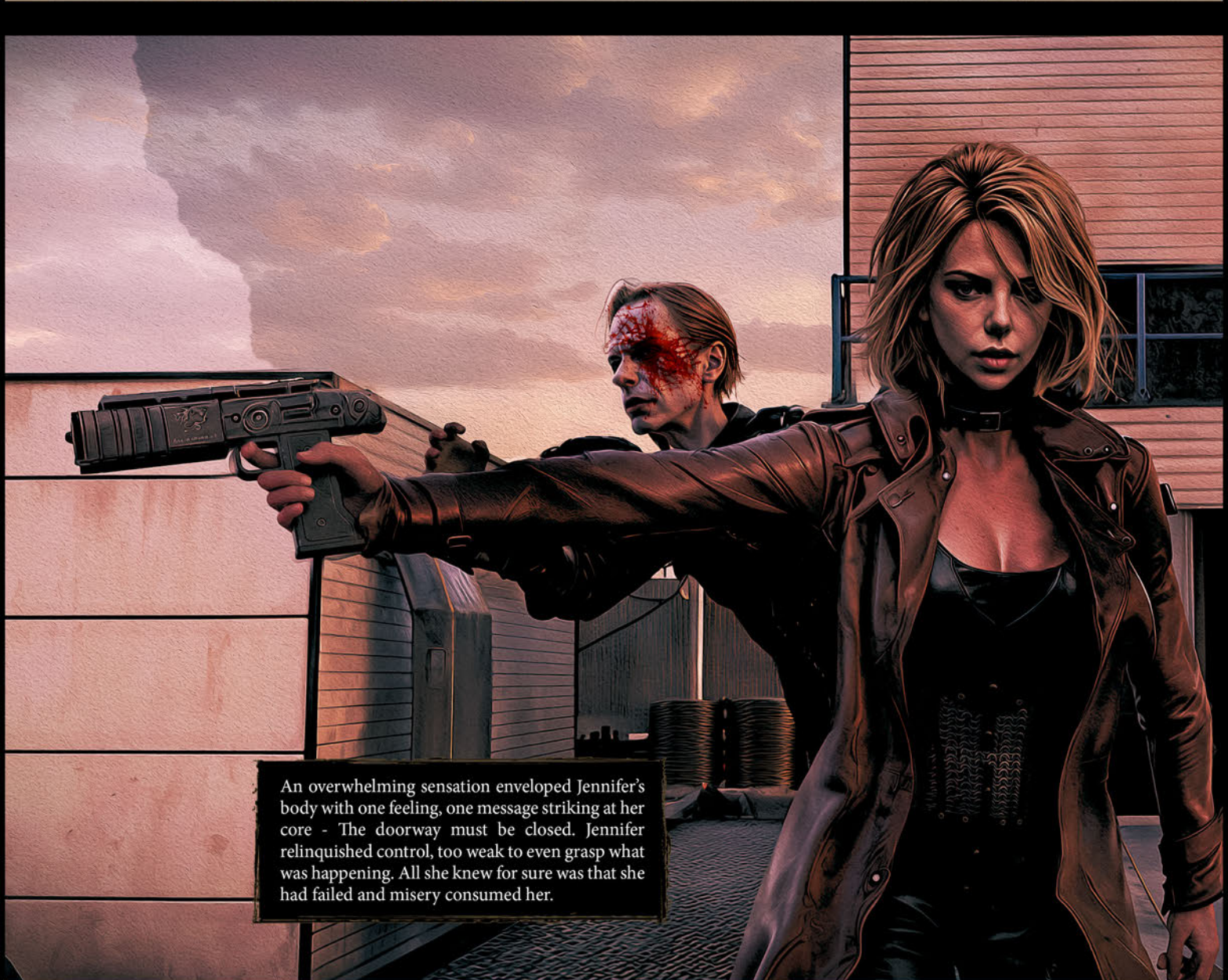


As Jennifer wept, and the forces of darkness forced their way into our world once more, The Artist rejoiced. His cries of ecstasy rang out from the rooftops as his work had finally been



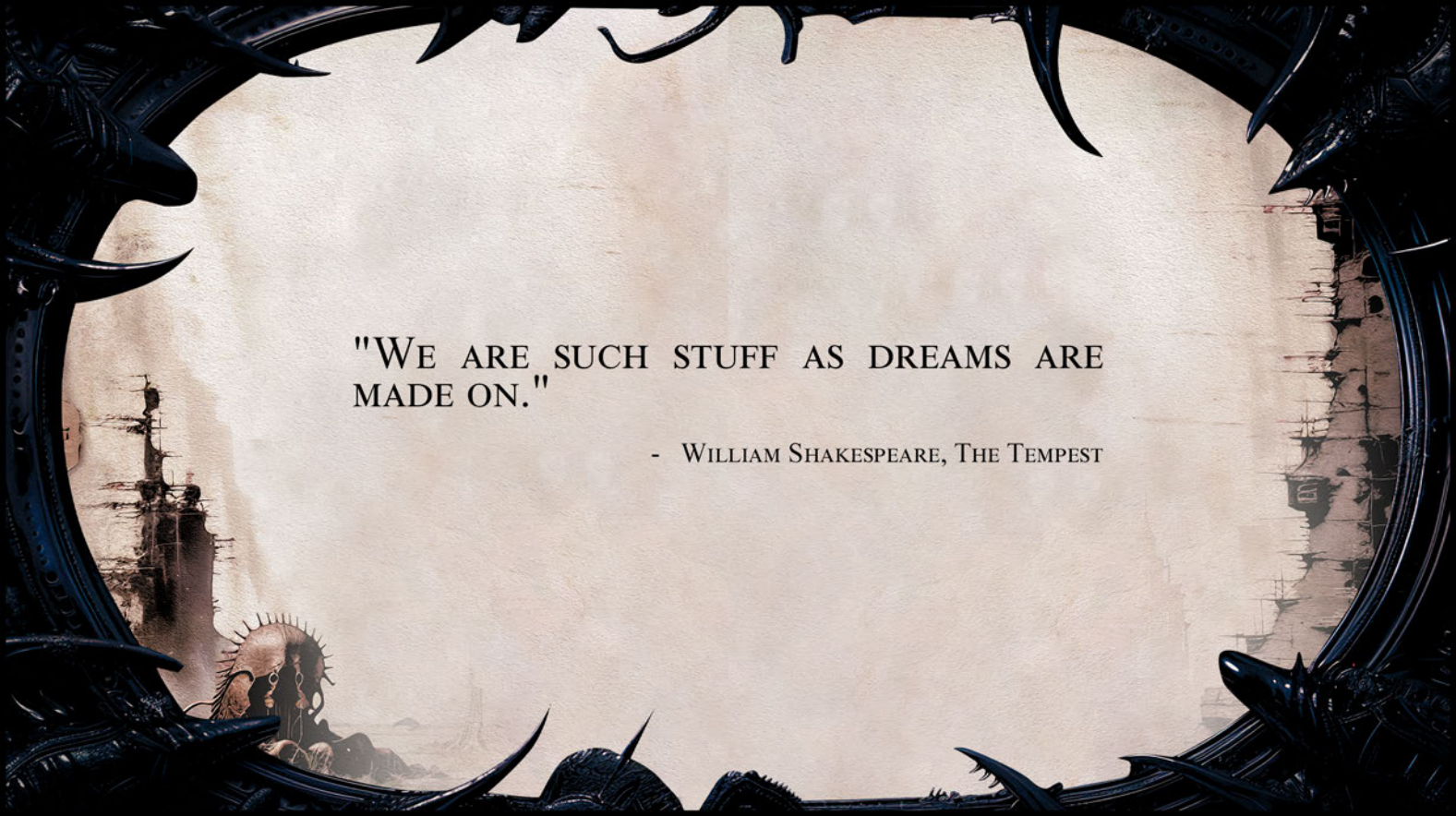
Jennifer felt only anguish and despair as she tried to shut out the world around her. From the darkness within the recesses of her mind, Jennifer began to feel another presence.

She felt limp in her body, watching but unable to control her limbs. Jennifer felt Sonya's hand guiding hers as the psychic took hold.



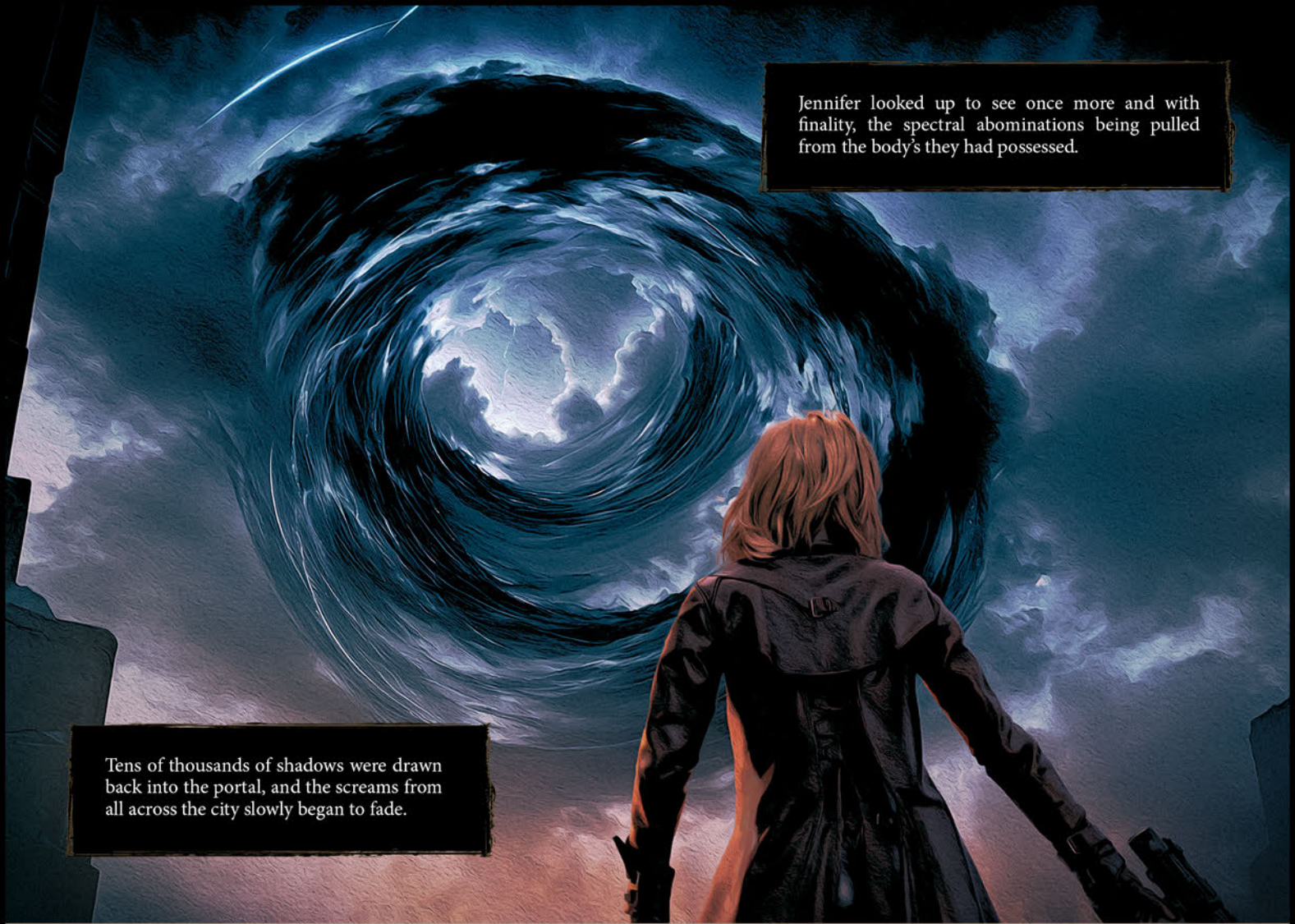
An overwhelming sensation enveloped Jennifer's body with one feeling, one message striking at her core - The doorway must be closed. Jennifer relinquished control, too weak to even grasp what was happening. All she knew for sure was that she had failed and misery consumed her.





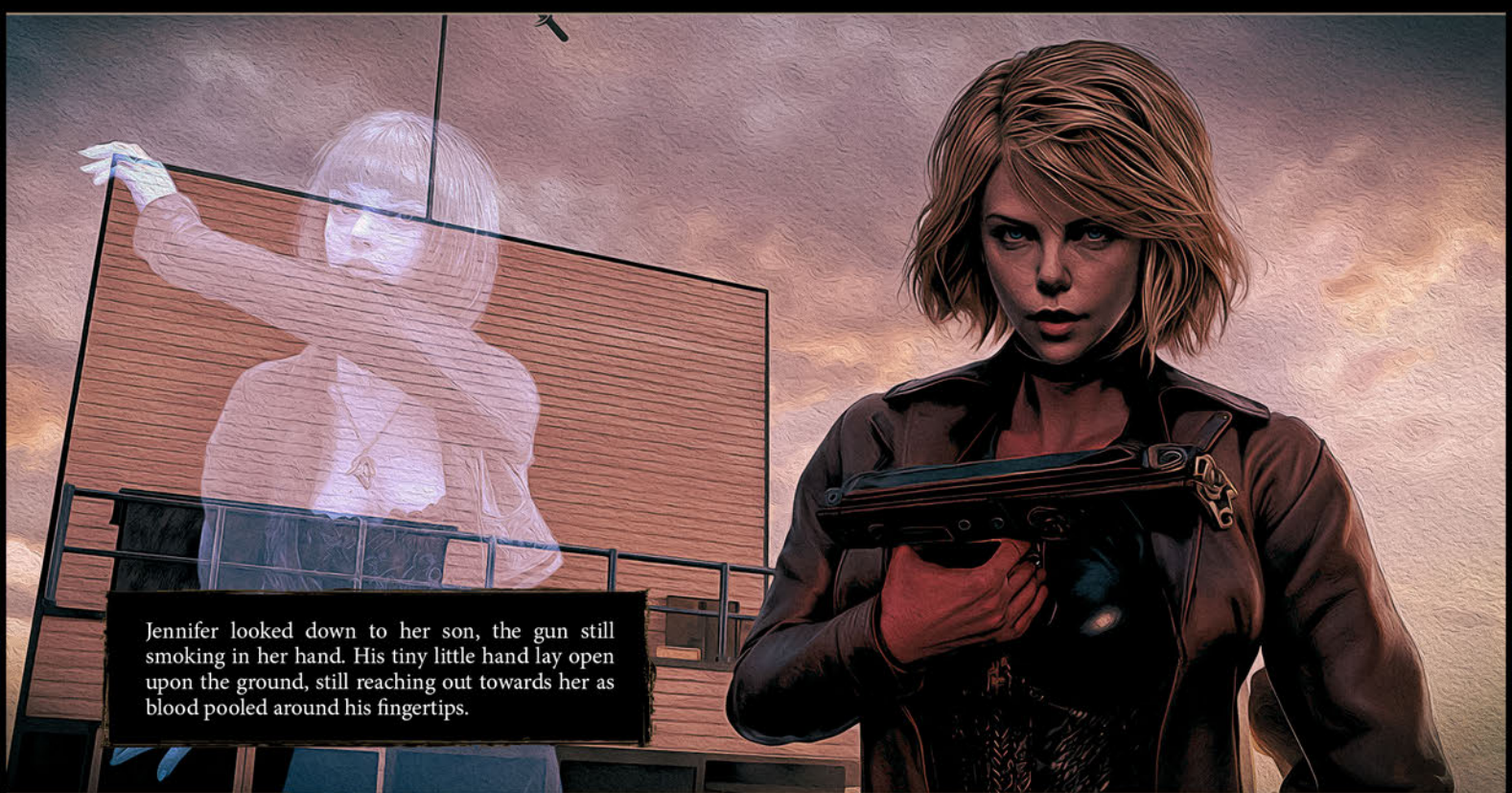
"WE ARE SUCH STUFF AS DREAMS ARE
MADE ON."

- WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, THE TEMPEST



Jennifer looked up to see once more and with finality, the spectral abominations being pulled from the body's they had possessed.

Tens of thousands of shadows were drawn back into the portal, and the screams from all across the city slowly began to fade.

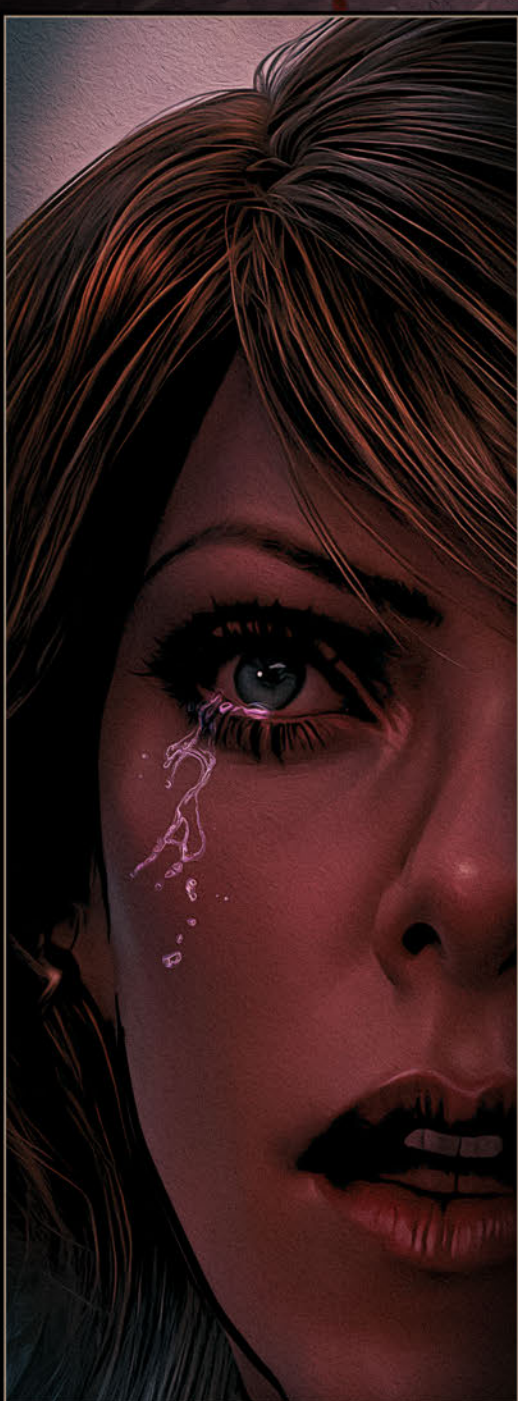


Jennifer looked down to her son, the gun still smoking in her hand. His tiny little hand lay open upon the ground, still reaching out towards her as blood pooled around his fingertips.



Jennifer could only stare in disbelief, not grasping where so very much blood was coming from.

Why was her son drenched in the crimson gore? Jennifer's eyes continued traveling upward, seeking out the eyes of her innocent boy and the smile she longed once more to see.



Jennifer was aghast at what she beheld. Her baby boy's beautiful face was all but destroyed. A gaping hole, made impossibly large by the explosion of energy that had followed the bullet of her gun, utterly destroyed his visage.

The pulp and gore that remained was unidentifiable except for the clothes and that delicate, still twitching hand that Jennifer knew all too well.



The grief and horror overwhelmed her as Detective Munse opened the door to the stairway. He was too slow to take in the grisly scene in front of him as, with nothing left, Jennifer Kale closed her eyes and raised her weapon one more time. The cold, hard steel pressed against her temple as her finger, with robotic ease proceeded to squeeze.

Jennifer heard Jacob shuffling in the dark, likely trying to retrieve a glass of water from the bathroom. This was by far the worst nightmare she had ever experienced.

Jennifer wept in the dark with joy that it had all been a dream, her heart still fiercely pumping in her chest as she reached for the lamp.

Jennifer called out to her son, wanting nothing more than to hold him close for the rest of the night.

With no immediate reply, Jennifer assumed the boy was once more sleepwalking and so Jennifer reached and reached, but couldn't find the lamp.



Jennifer tried to call out to Jacob again, but only silence left her lips. Where was Jacob, she wondered. The sound grew closer and became more distinct.

The chittering sound an insect may make greeted her in return. Jennifer struggled to see through the inky blackness of the night but her eyes refused to adjust.



She reached down, trying to find purchase from which she could stand but nothing could be reached. Swallowed in the blackness she heard the insect-like sounds grow nearer.

Terror consumed her as her last remnants of hope were ripped to shreds, confronting Jennifer with the pure terror of reality. The darkness embraced Jennifer with icy tendrils, utterly destroying what fragile sanity remained leaving only her suffering and the memory of what she had done.

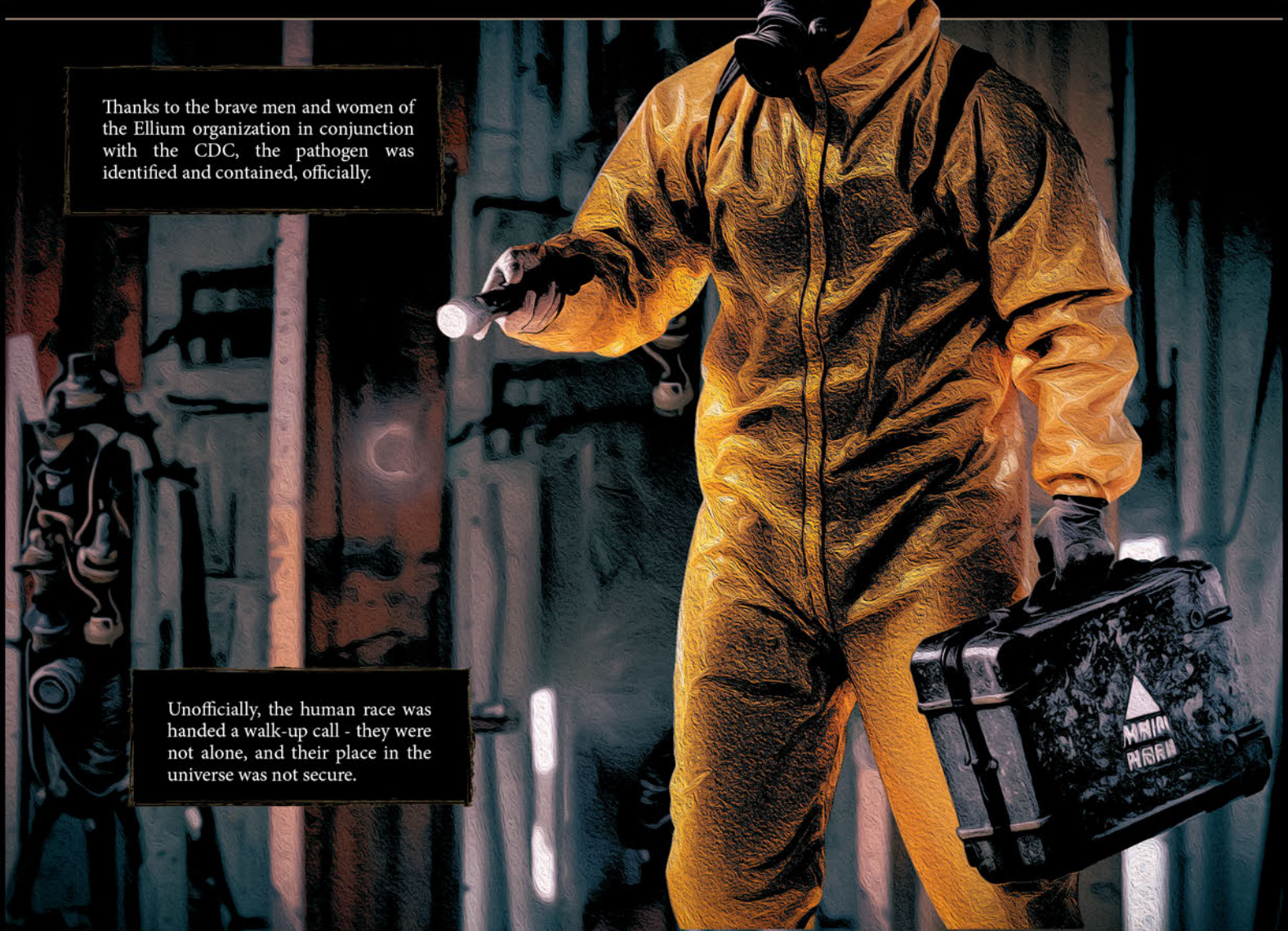




The events of that horrifying night were explained away as mass hysteria.

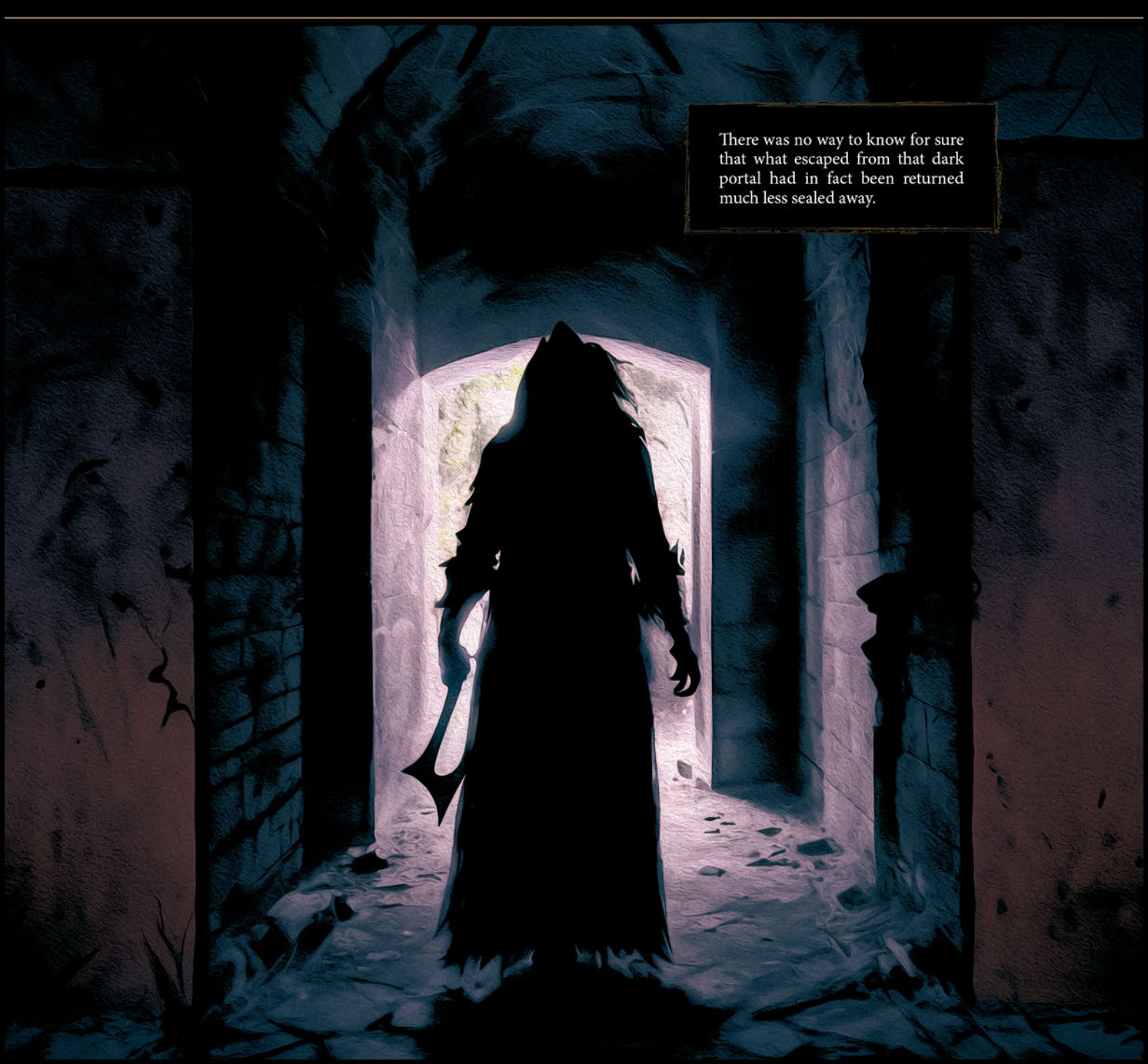


A terrorist attack released a deadly hallucinogen into the air, a reasonable explanation that most were eager to buy into.



Thanks to the brave men and women of the Ellium organization in conjunction with the CDC, the pathogen was identified and contained, officially.

Unofficially, the human race was handed a walk-up call - they were not alone, and their place in the universe was not secure.

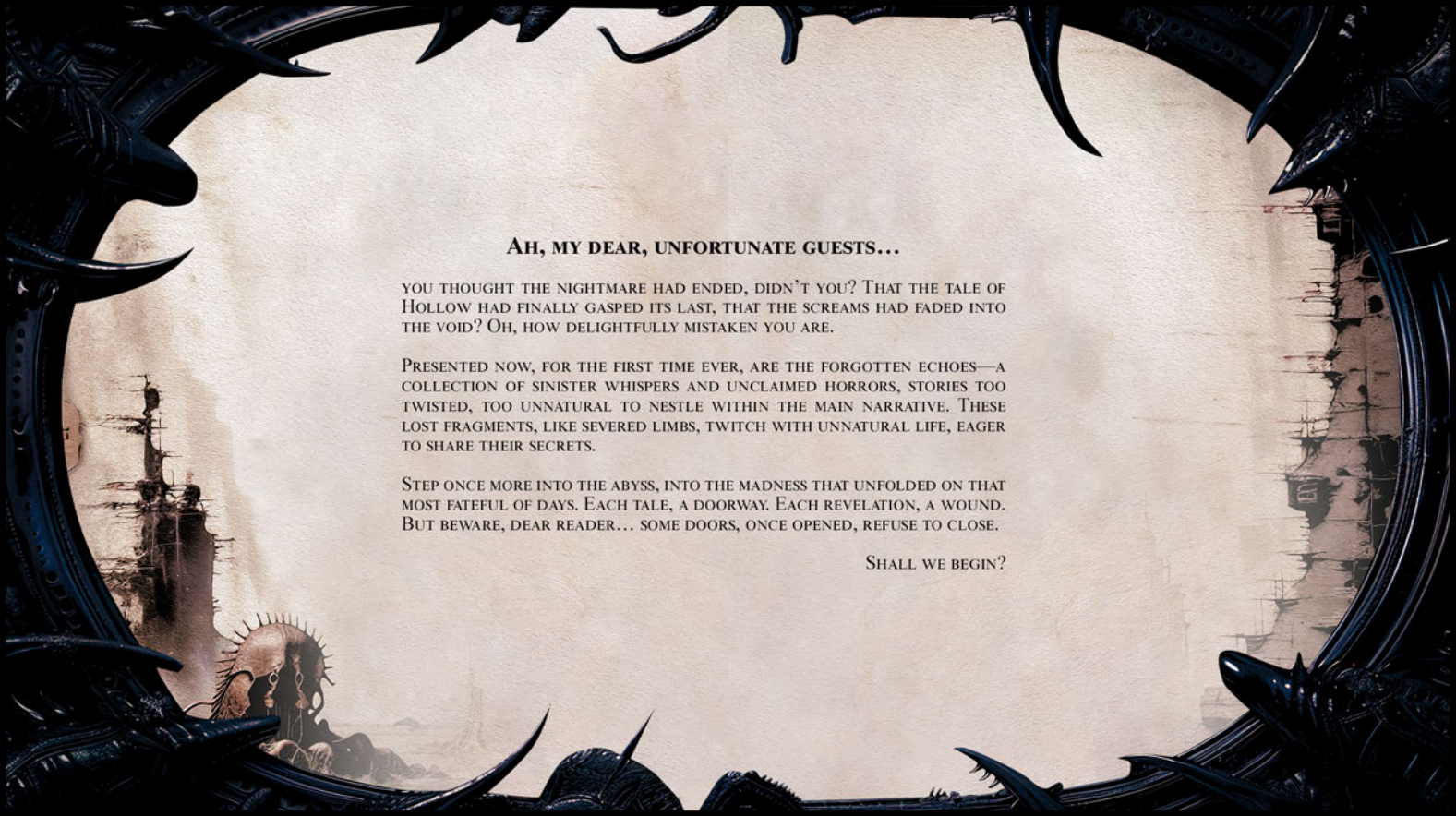


There was no way to know for sure that what escaped from that dark portal had in fact been returned much less sealed away.



The barrier between worlds had weakened. The very fabric of reality forever warped not just in one spot but all across the world as the earth itself struggled to heal. Even the Outer Dark felt the change. A great stirring had begun, and the outcome had yet to be revealed. In the quiet, darkest places a whisper was heard by all that dared to listen: "The time of awakening is finally upon us..."

And with that, a hush fell across all creation.



AH, MY DEAR, UNFORTUNATE GUESTS...

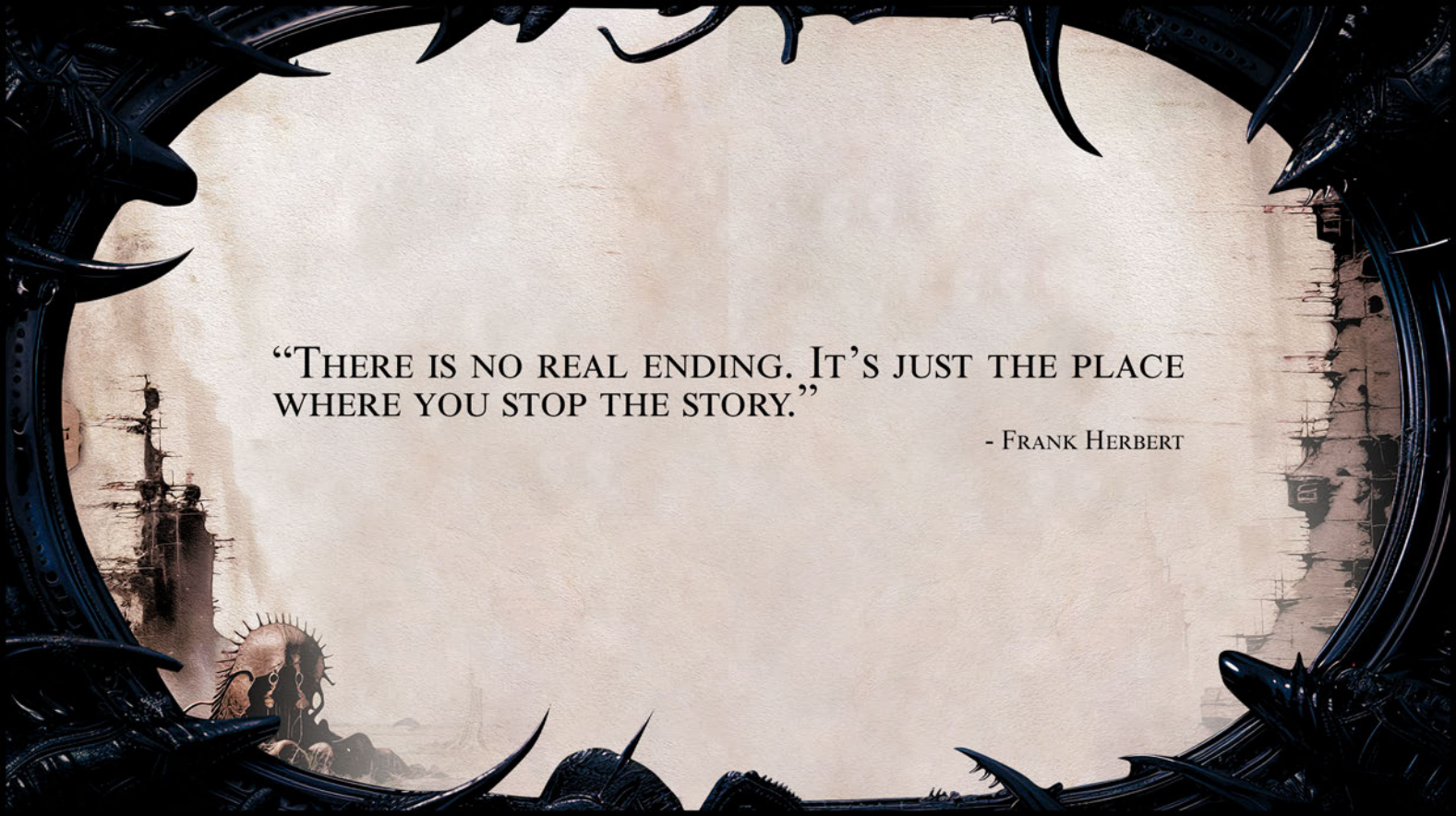
YOU THOUGHT THE NIGHTMARE HAD ENDED, DIDN'T YOU? THAT THE TALE OF HOLLOW HAD FINALLY GASPED ITS LAST, THAT THE SCREAMS HAD FADED INTO THE VOID? OH, HOW DELIGHTFULLY MISTAKEN YOU ARE.

PRESENTED NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, ARE THE FORGOTTEN ECHOES—A COLLECTION OF SINISTER WHISPERS AND UNCLAIMED HORRORS, STORIES TOO TWISTED, TOO UNNATURAL TO NESTLE WITHIN THE MAIN NARRATIVE. THESE LOST FRAGMENTS, LIKE SEVERED LIMBS, TWITCH WITH UNNATURAL LIFE, EAGER TO SHARE THEIR SECRETS.

STEP ONCE MORE INTO THE ABYSS, INTO THE MADNESS THAT UNFOLDED ON THAT MOST FATEFUL OF DAYS. EACH TALE, A DOORWAY. EACH REVELATION, A WOUND. BUT BEWARE, DEAR READER... SOME DOORS, ONCE OPENED, REFUSE TO CLOSE.

SHALL WE BEGIN?





“THERE IS NO REAL ENDING. IT’S JUST THE PLACE
WHERE YOU STOP THE STORY.”

- FRANK HERBERT

PLAYGROUND

In a seemingly peaceful suburb, the children played on the swings and slides, their innocent laughter filling the air.

But an ominous wind blew through the trees, casting a dark shadow over the playground.



Little Timmy, known for his angelic smile, stopped mid-swing as his eyes turned pitch black. With a guttural growl, he leapt from the swing with a supernatural agility, his once small hands now elongated into razor-sharp claws. His mother helplessly watched as Timmy mercilessly attacked the other children, their bloodcurdling screams echoing throughout the empty streets. The demon inside him reveled in their terror, the once lively playground was now a scene of carnage and destruction.



FARM

In the vast expanse of the remote farm, Old Man Jenkins toiled in his fields under the scorching sun. But as the shadows grew long and the sky turned dark, a strange sensation crept over him.

His body stiffened and his eyes seemed to turn an eerie shade of black. He turned to his wife, who was hanging laundry, and with a snarl, he attacked.

Chaos erupted in the barn as Jenkins rampaged through his once peaceful home, leaving a path of destruction in his wake.



The serene farm now resembled a blood-stained battleground. Just as dusk fell upon mangled remains, Jenkins crumbled to the ground, the demon finally releasing its hold on his broken body.



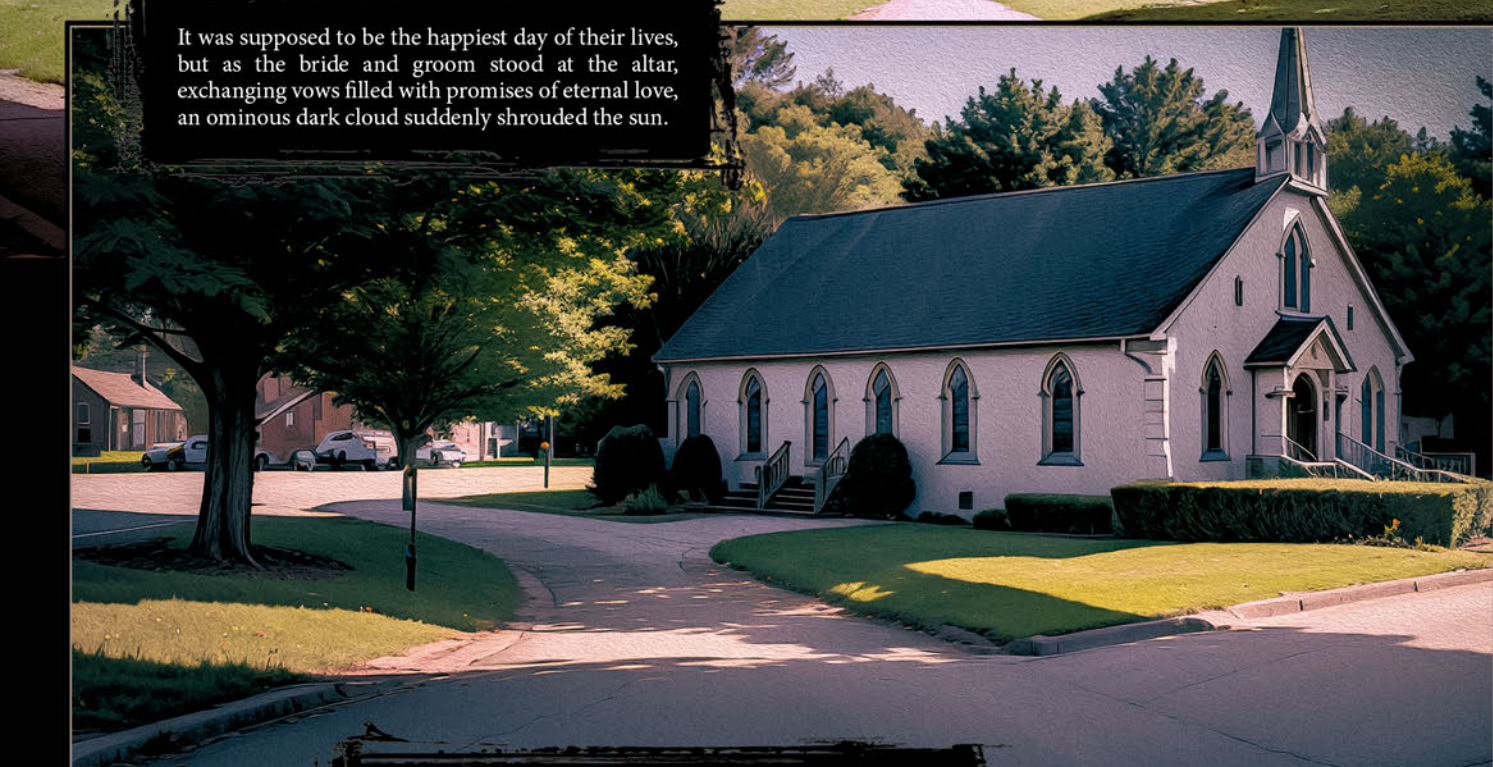
He awoke to the sight of his wife's lifeless body and the destruction he had wrought.



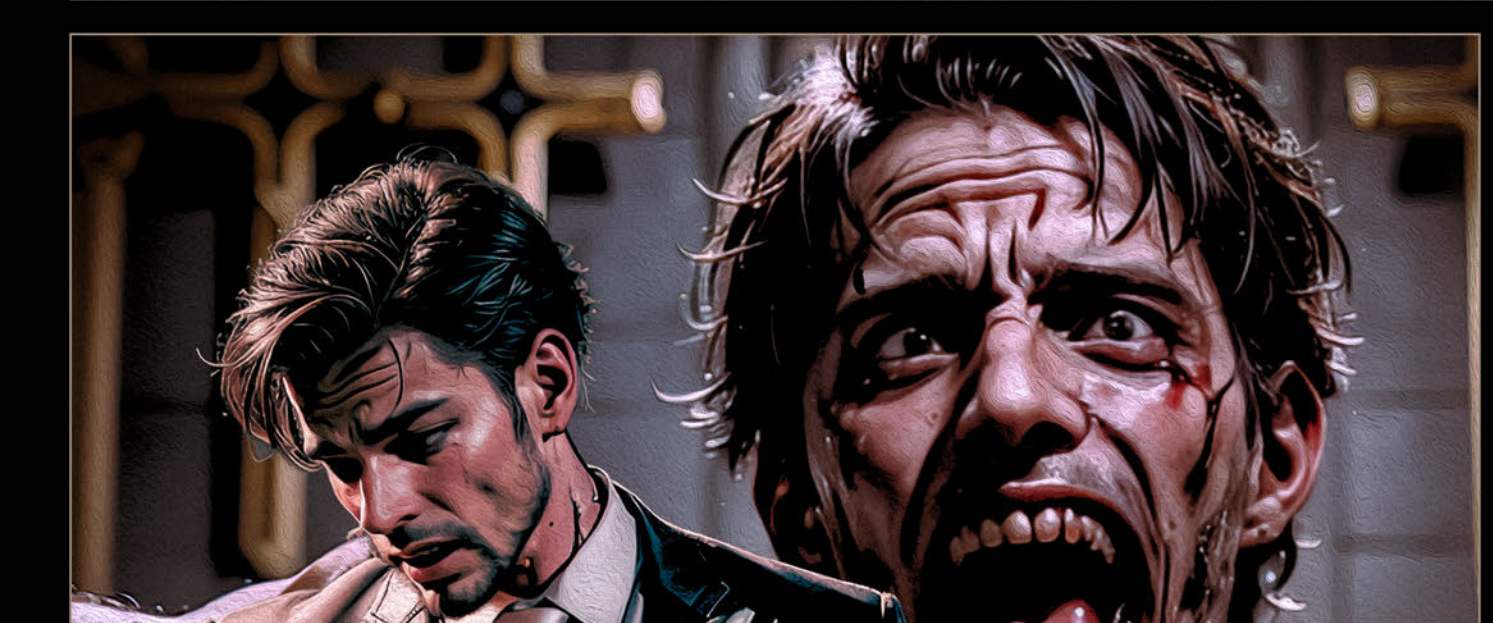
WEDDING



It was supposed to be the happiest day of their lives, but as the bride and groom stood at the altar, exchanging vows filled with promises of eternal love, an ominous dark cloud suddenly shrouded the sun.



In that moment, the groom's eyes transformed into two pools of inky blackness, filled with a sinister presence that sent a chill down the spine of everyone in attendance.



As they said "I do," a deafening silence descended upon the scene, warning of a dark fate that now loomed over this once joyous occasion.

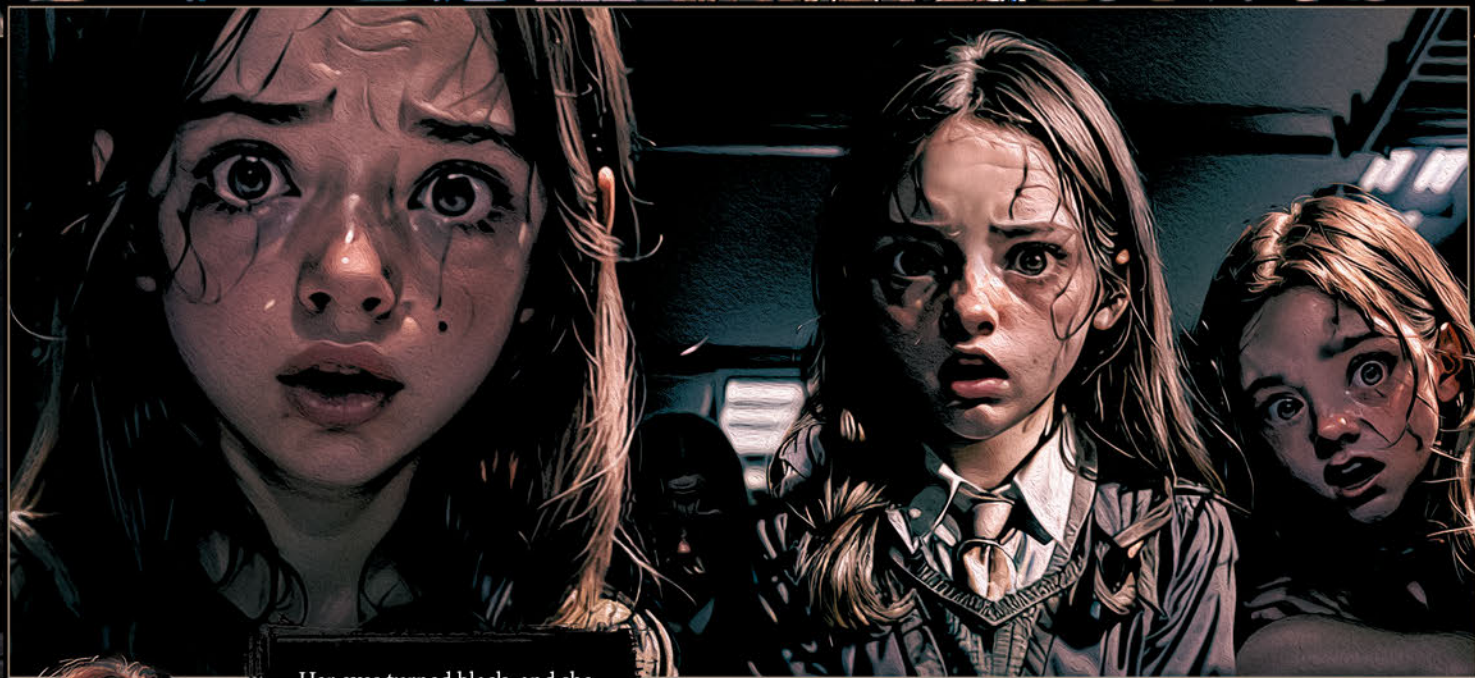


With supernatural speed the groom attacked his new bride and guests. The wedding turned into a massacre as the possessed groom laughed maniacally, ripping at flesh with tooth and nail.

SCHOOL

The students were diligently focused on their work, but the calm atmosphere was shattered when a shadow loomed over the classroom, and Emily, the quietest student of all, began to uncontrollably shake.

Torn between fear and concern for their classmate, the other students could only watch in shock and confusion as the unexpected event unfolded before them.



Her eyes turned black, and she stood with a sinister smile.



With inhuman strength, she overturned desks and attacked her classmates. The teacher tried to intervene but was quickly overpowered. The classroom became a scene of chaos and bloodshed. As the final bell rang, the demon ended Emily's life, causing the lifeless body to collapse to the floor, surrounded by the carnage she had unwillingly caused.

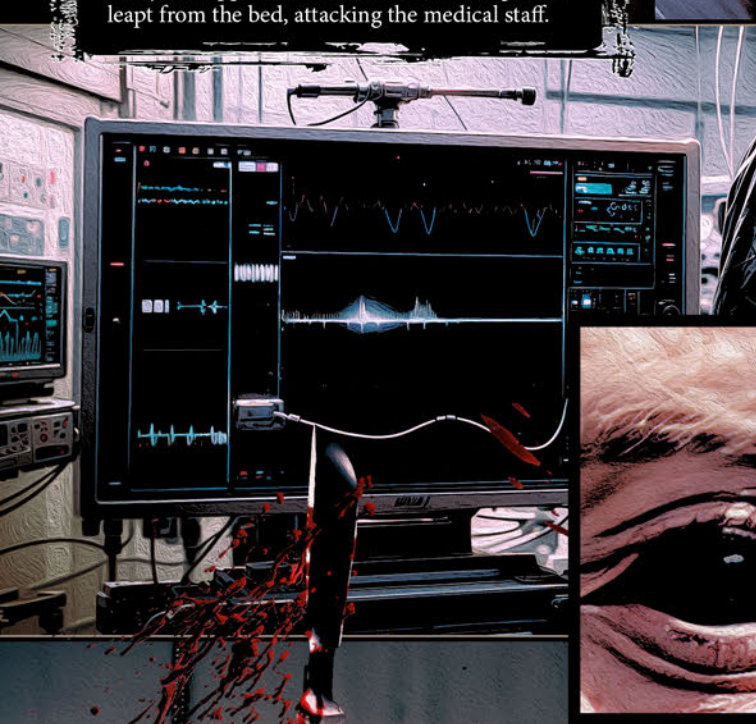
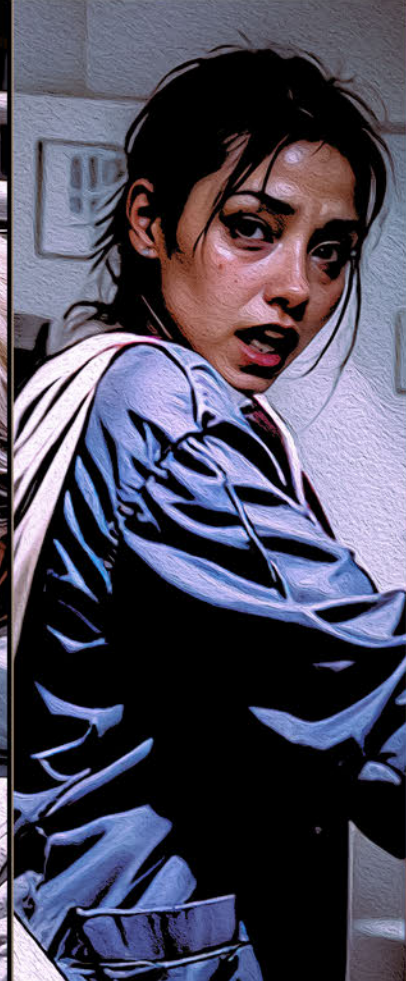
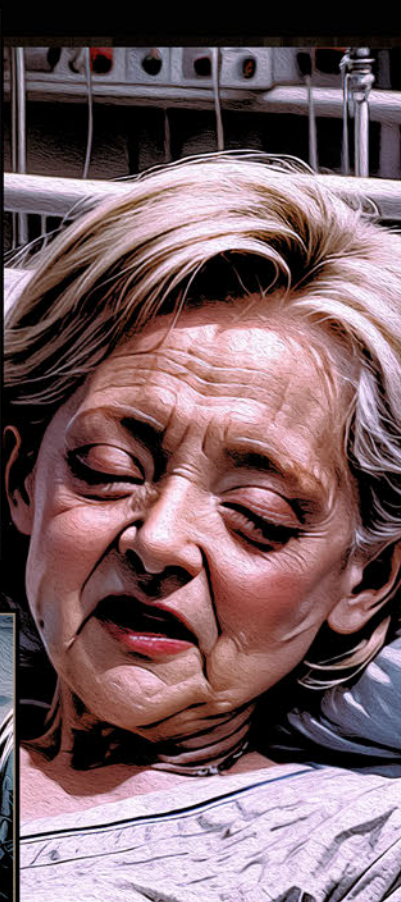
HOSPITAL

The sounds of beeping machines filled the intensive care unit. Patients lay in their beds, some sleeping peacefully while others groaned in pain. The nurses moved about with a calm efficiency, but their eyes betrayed their exhaustion.

Suddenly, a patient's heart monitor flatlined, causing chaos to erupt. As the nurse rushed in, the comatose patient's eyes snapped open, revealing a darkness that sent shivers down everyone's spines.



Conflicting emotions of fear and curiosity raced through the room as they tried to figure out what had just happened. With a scream, the patient leapt from the bed, attacking the medical staff.

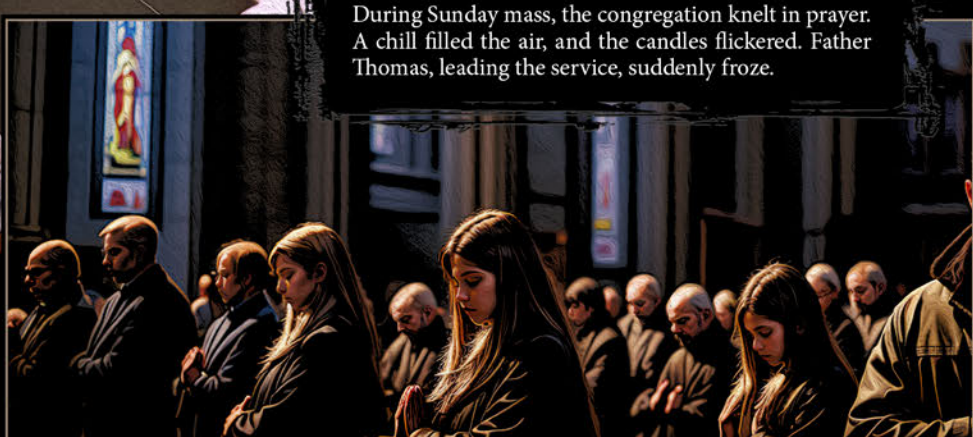


The sterile hospital turned into a battlefield of blood and screams. The surviving staff were left to deal with the aftermath of a day of terror once the foul beast was laid low.

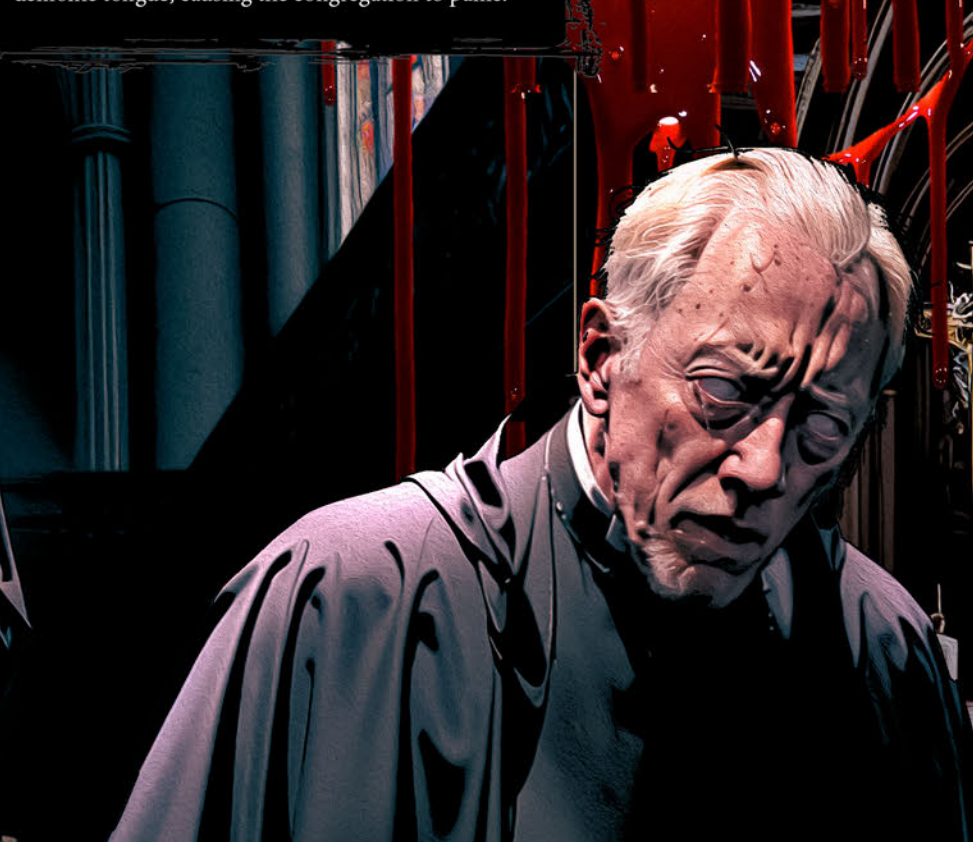
CHURCH



During Sunday mass, the congregation knelt in prayer. A chill filled the air, and the candles flickered. Father Thomas, leading the service, suddenly froze.



His eyes turned wide with unearthly visions, and a snarl escaped his lips. He began to speak in an ancient, demonic tongue, causing the congregation to panic.



With a guttural growl, Father Thomas lunged at the nearest parishioners. They screamed and scrambled away as he flung chairs and tables with supernatural strength.



The once peaceful church was now filled with chaos and terror.



Finally, as night fell, the demon seemed to leave his body and Father Thomas collapsed on the altar, sinking to his knees in tears as his mind flooded with memory with the atrocities he had committed.

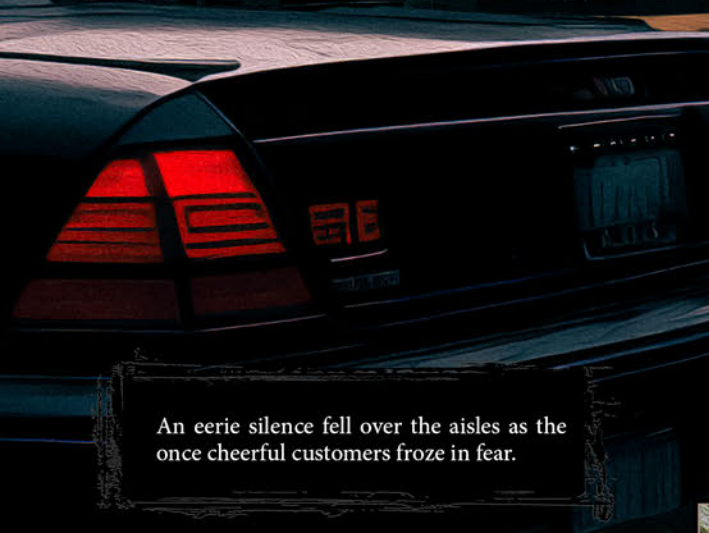


SUPERMARKET

The supermarket was bustling with shoppers, their carts overflowing with groceries. Suddenly, the harsh fluorescent lights flickered and died, plunging the store into an unsettling darkness.



An eerie silence fell over the aisles as the once cheerful customers froze in fear.



The cashier, Sarah, felt a cold hand grip her throat as her eyes turned pitch black. With a bloodcurdling scream, she lunged at the nearest customer!

Her fingers contorting into sharp talons as she attacked like a rabid animal.



Panic ensued as Sarah, possessed by a demon, wreaked havoc, attacking everyone in sight. Shelves were toppled, and blood stained the floor.

RESTAURANT

During the dinner rush, the restaurant was packed with diners enjoying their meals. A sudden chill swept through the room. The head chef, known for his calm demeanor, suddenly dropped his knife.



A dark, sinister energy enveloped him as his eyes transformed into deep pools of black.

A maniacal laugh erupted from his throat as he seized a gleaming cleaver in his hand, turning on his unsuspecting colleagues and patrons with ruthless abandon.

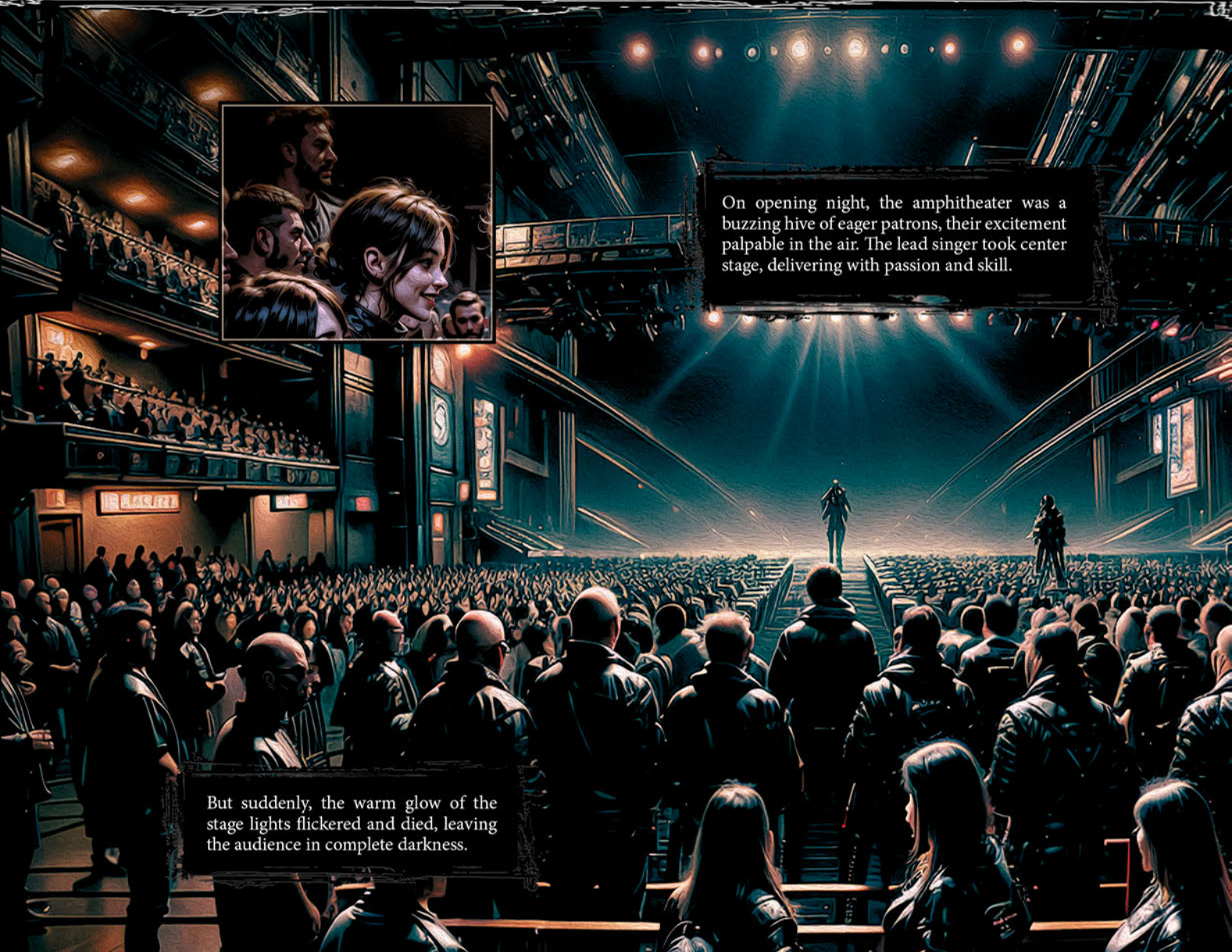


The once bustling restaurant was now a gruesome scene of chaos and carnage, blood splattered across every surface, spreading insanity and mutation to all in the room.



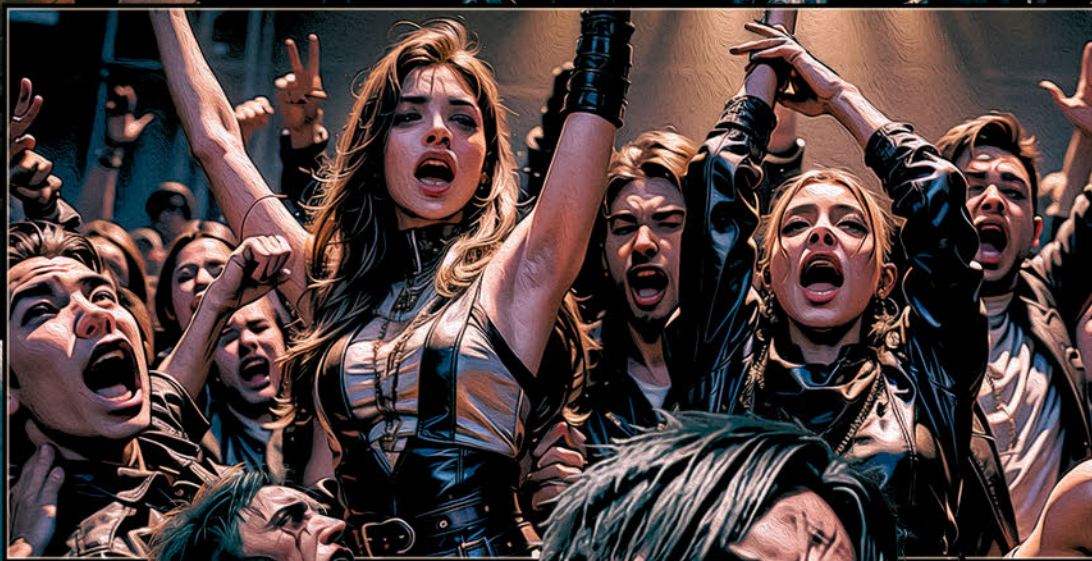
Finally, with a jolt, the demon released its hold, leaving behind nothing but destruction and devastation in its wake.

THEATER

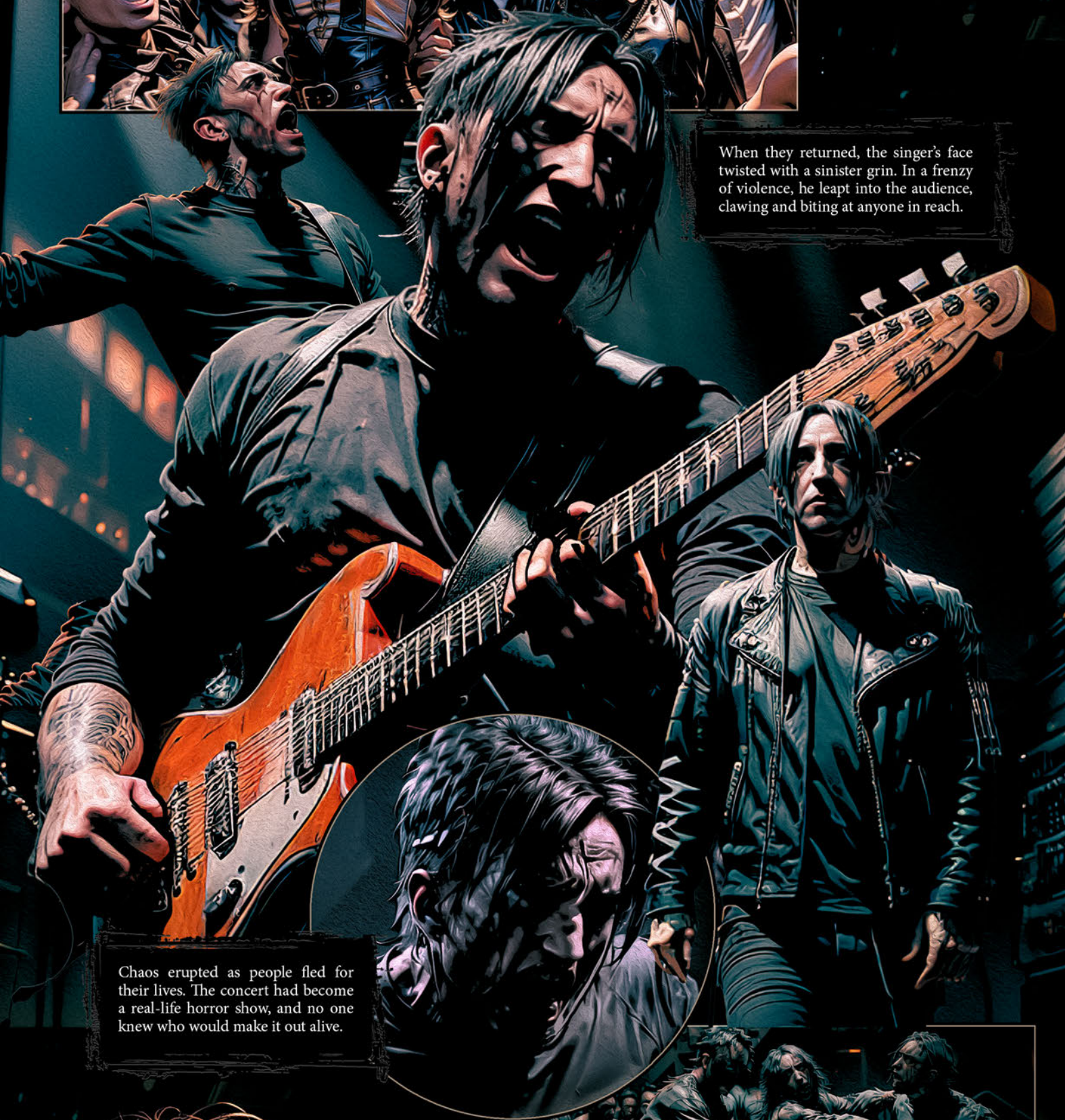


On opening night, the amphitheater was a buzzing hive of eager patrons, their excitement palpable in the air. The lead singer took center stage, delivering with passion and skill.

But suddenly, the warm glow of the stage lights flickered and died, leaving the audience in complete darkness.



When they returned, the singer's face twisted with a sinister grin. In a frenzy of violence, he leapt into the audience, clawing and biting at anyone in reach.



Chaos erupted as people fled for their lives. The concert had become a real-life horror show, and no one knew who would make it out alive.



As the final moments approached, the demon inside the singer consumed him completely, turning him into a frenzied monster fueled by pure darkness.



OFFICE



It was a typical Monday at the office. Employees were hunched over their computers, sipping coffee and typing away.



At 3 PM, the air grew heavy, and the fluorescent lights flickered ominously.

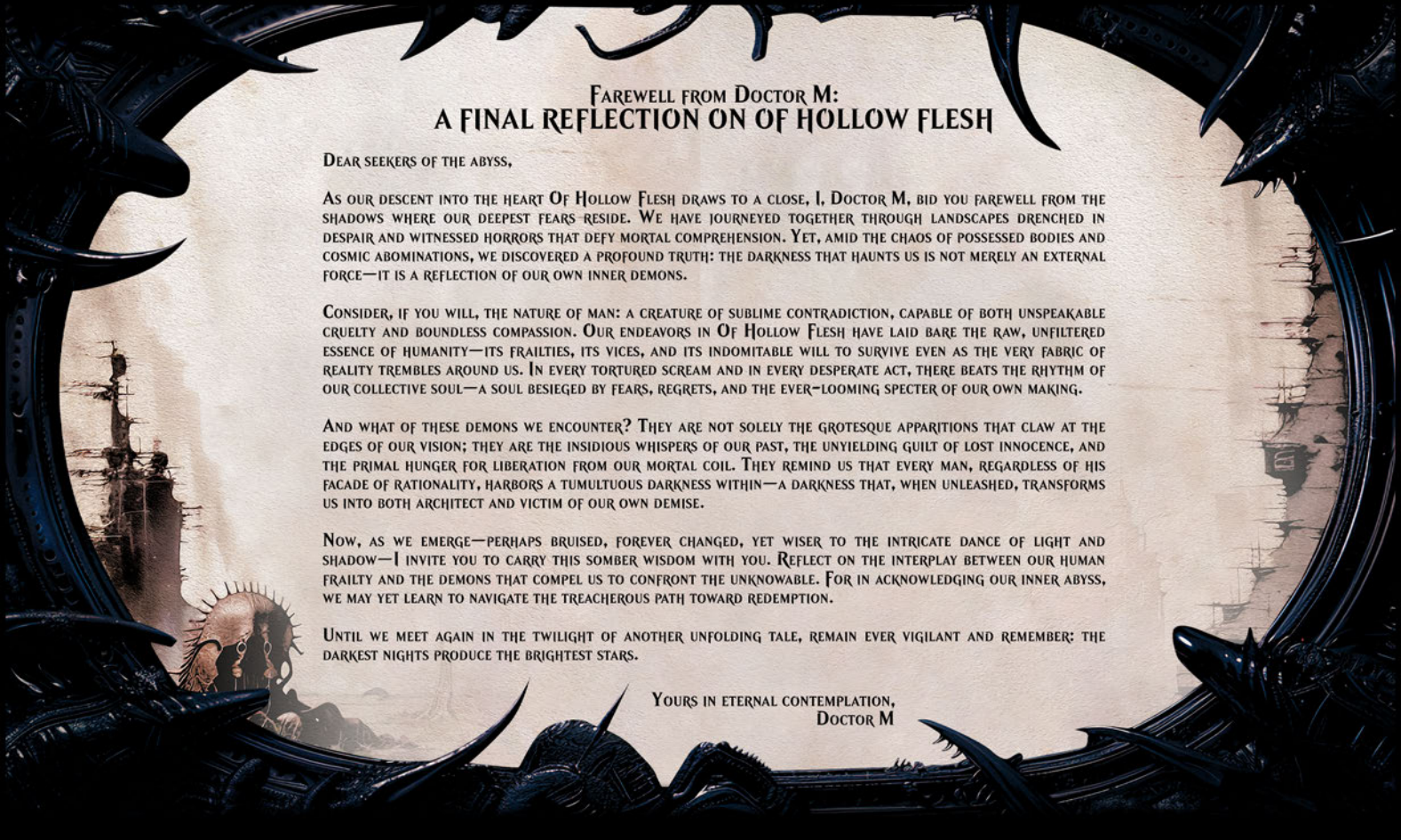


Janet, the quiet accountant, suddenly stood up. Her eyes glowed red as she grabbed the nearest stapler and attacked her coworkers with unholy strength.



The once pristine office was now a scene of horror and destruction. Papers were scattered across the floor, along with overturned desks and shattered computer monitors. Blood spatters painted the walls and floor in gruesome patterns. In the fading light of the setting sun, Janet was kneeling on the ground, trembling and covered in blood.





FAREWELL FROM DOCTOR M: A FINAL REFLECTION ON OF HOLLOW FLESH

DEAR SEEKERS OF THE ABYSS,

AS OUR DESCENT INTO THE HEART OF HOLLOW FLESH DRAWS TO A CLOSE, I, DOCTOR M, BID YOU FAREWELL FROM THE SHADOWS WHERE OUR DEEPEST FEARS RESIDE. WE HAVE JOURNEYED TOGETHER THROUGH LANDSCAPES DRENCHED IN DESPAIR AND WITNESSED HORRORS THAT DEFY MORTAL COMPREHENSION. YET, AMID THE CHAOS OF POSSESSED BODIES AND COSMIC ABOMINATIONS, WE DISCOVERED A PROFOUND TRUTH: THE DARKNESS THAT HAUNTS US IS NOT MERELY AN EXTERNAL FORCE—IT IS A REFLECTION OF OUR OWN INNER DEMONS.

CONSIDER, IF YOU WILL, THE NATURE OF MAN: A CREATURE OF SUBLIME CONTRADICTION, CAPABLE OF BOTH UNSPEAKABLE CRUELTY AND BOUNDLESS COMPASSION. OUR ENDEAVORS IN OF HOLLOW FLESH HAVE LAID BARE THE RAW, UNFILTERED ESSENCE OF HUMANITY—ITS FRAILTIES, ITS VICES, AND ITS INDOMITABLE WILL TO SURVIVE EVEN AS THE VERY FABRIC OF REALITY TREMBLES AROUND US. IN EVERY TORTURED SCREAM AND IN EVERY DESPERATE ACT, THERE BEATS THE RHYTHM OF OUR COLLECTIVE SOUL—A SOUL BESIEGED BY FEARS, REGRETS, AND THE EVER-LOOMING SPECTER OF OUR OWN MAKING.

AND WHAT OF THESE DEMONS WE ENCOUNTER? THEY ARE NOT SOLELY THE GROTESQUE APPARITIONS THAT CLAW AT THE EDGES OF OUR VISION; THEY ARE THE INSIDIOUS WHISPERS OF OUR PAST, THE UNYIELDING GUILT OF LOST INNOCENCE, AND THE PRIMAL HUNGER FOR LIBERATION FROM OUR MORTAL COIL. THEY REMIND US THAT EVERY MAN, REGARDLESS OF HIS FACADE OF RATIONALITY, HARBORS A TUMULTUOUS DARKNESS WITHIN—A DARKNESS THAT, WHEN UNLEASHED, TRANSFORMS US INTO BOTH ARCHITECT AND VICTIM OF OUR OWN DEMISE.

NOW, AS WE EMERGE—PERHAPS BRUISED, FOREVER CHANGED, YET WISER TO THE INTRICATE DANCE OF LIGHT AND SHADOW—I INVITE YOU TO CARRY THIS SOMBER WISDOM WITH YOU. REFLECT ON THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN OUR HUMAN FRAILTY AND THE DEMONS THAT COMPEL US TO CONFRONT THE UNKNOWNABLE. FOR IN ACKNOWLEDGING OUR INNER ABYSS, WE MAY YET LEARN TO NAVIGATE THE TREACHEROUS PATH TOWARD REDEMPTION.

UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN IN THE TWILIGHT OF ANOTHER UNFOLDING TALE, REMAIN EVER VIGILANT AND REMEMBER: THE DARKEST NIGHTS PRODUCE THE BRIGHTEST STARS.

YOURS IN ETERNAL CONTEMPLATION,
DOCTOR M



WATCH THE MADNESS



JOIN THE INNER CIRCLE



SHOP THE RELICS



ENTER THE ASYLUM



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