

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

A COLLECTION OF COMICS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE





Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Cover Designed by Martina De Geronimo

The comics were created by 25 students from the **Aldini Valeriani High School - Bologna** within the framework of the **European Program Erasmus+ ClimART 2.0: Innovative Methodologies for learning Climate Change through Arts and Comics.**

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spostaMenti



"*TIME IS RUNNING OUT*"

"***TIME IS RUNNING OUT***" is a collection of 4 comic strips and a short story made by 25 students of the **ALDINI VALERIANI High School in Bologna (Italy)** within the framework of the **Erasmus CLIMART 2.0 European Project - "Innovative methodologies for learning about climate change through comics"**.

The issues addressed concerning global warming and its consequences range from disasters linked to climate change (floods, hurricanes), melting glaciers, acid rain, genetic modifications linked to the evolutionary adaptations of living organisms, pollution, to the mismanagement of energy resources and aspects more related to the lack of foresight of human beings and their lack of environmental awareness.

The five stories tackle these themes through different comic genres, from noir to adventure, to fantasy.

So, we start with the adventures of "***OUT IN SPACE***", which sees the protagonist involved in a mission to find an "alternative" world to our current one, as the Climate Clock strikes, and who is forced to move away from his loved ones; to the comic noir of "***WHO KILLED THE EnvironMAN?***" whose characters are the personifications of the real protagonists of this climate change: Environment, Humanity, Money.

The collection continues with the adventures of a family in "***SECOND CHANCE***" who flees their flooded city in search of new sustainable lifestyles; to the fantasy world of "***WHAT A RAINY DAY!***", in which the reality of the protagonist mixes with the fantasy world populated by genetically modified creatures from two opposing worlds.

The fifth and last in the collection is a short story entitled "***DEEP BREATH***", that takes its cue from a dystopian tale in which the kidnapping of a powerful man will hopefully overturn the inevitable fate to which humanity seems to be condemned due to the mismanagement of energy resources.

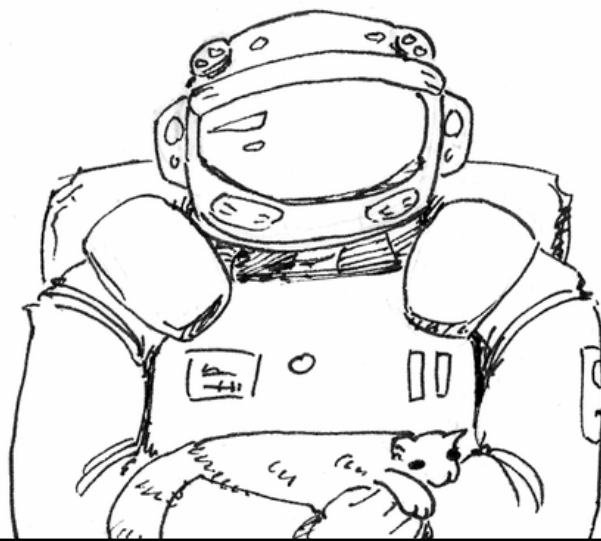
Given the critical nature of the subject matter, a positive ending is not always guaranteed.

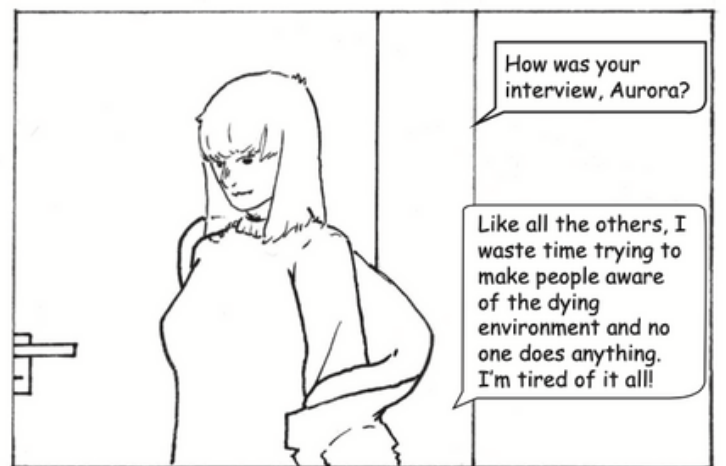
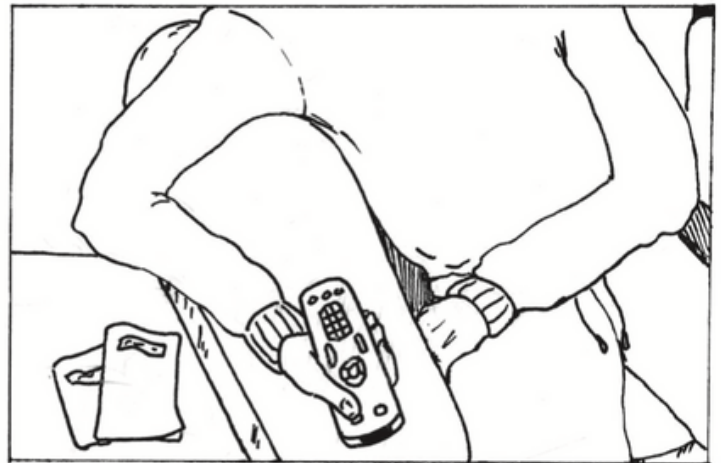
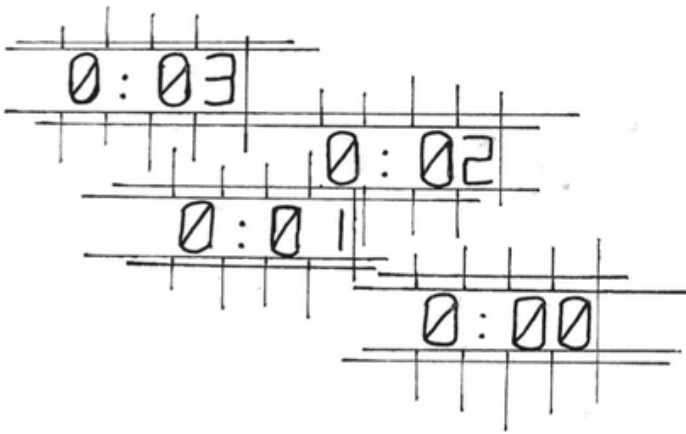
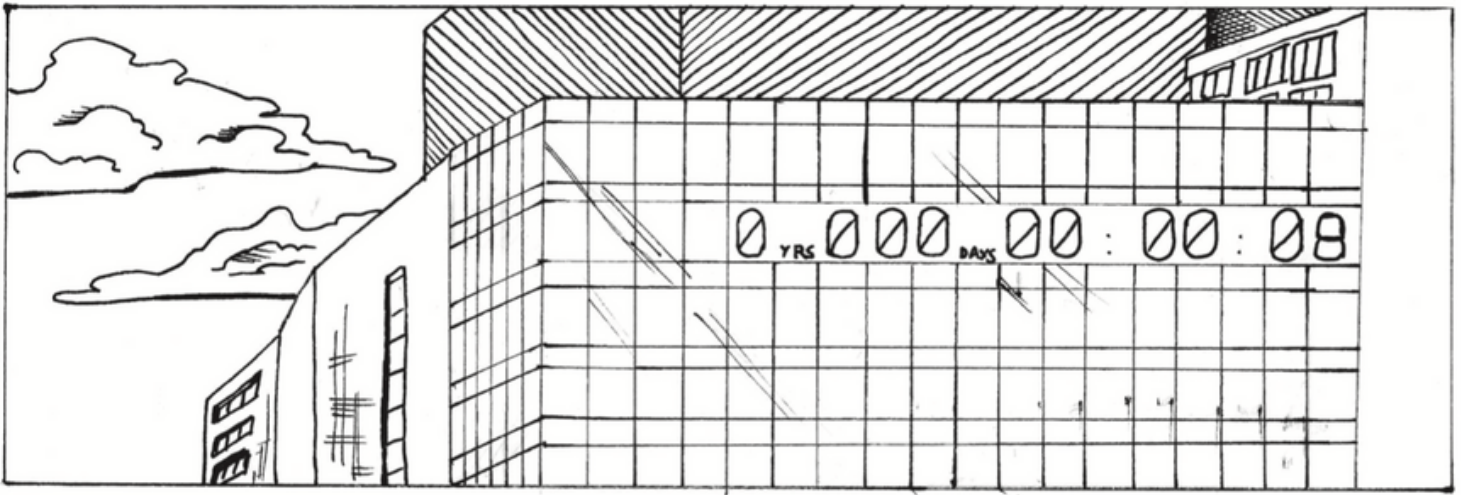
Enjoy the reading!

INDEX

1. OUT IN SPACE _____	p. 5
2. WHO KILLED THE EnvironMAN? _____	p. 17
3. SECOND CHANCE _____	p. 29
4. WHAT A RAINY DAY! _____	p. 41
5. DEEP BREATH _____	p. 57
CREATORS AND CARTOONISTS _____	p. 68
COLLABORATIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS _____	p. 69

"OUT IN SPACE"





How was your interview, Aurora?

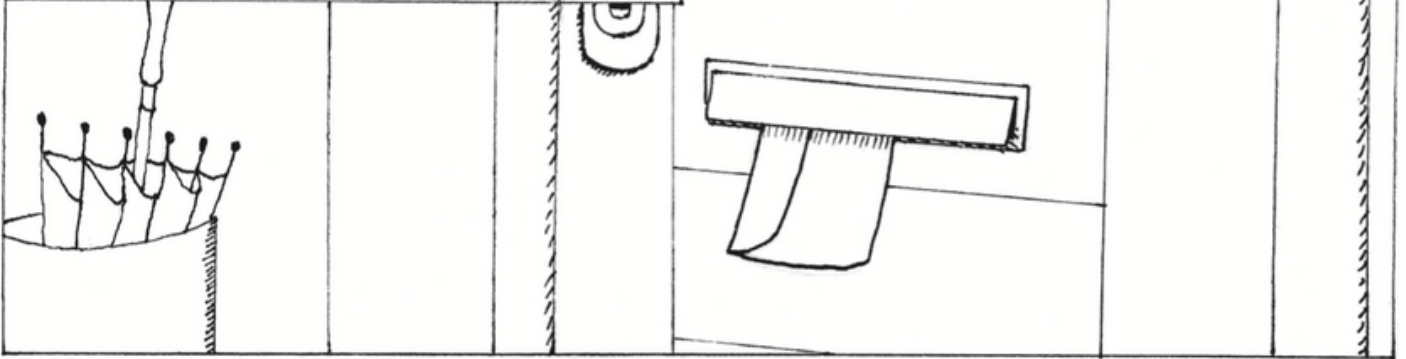
Like all the others, I waste time trying to make people aware of the dying environment and no one does anything. I'm tired of it all!



You look particularly shaken, are you okay?

No, the climate clock has finished its countdown, environmental pollution has become irreversible and we have reached a point of no return.

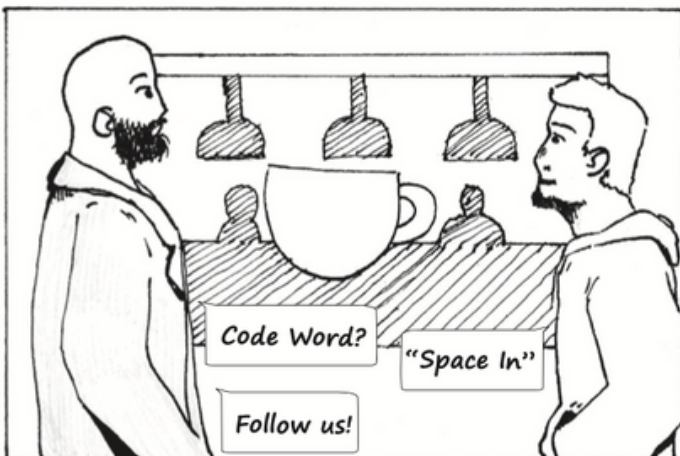
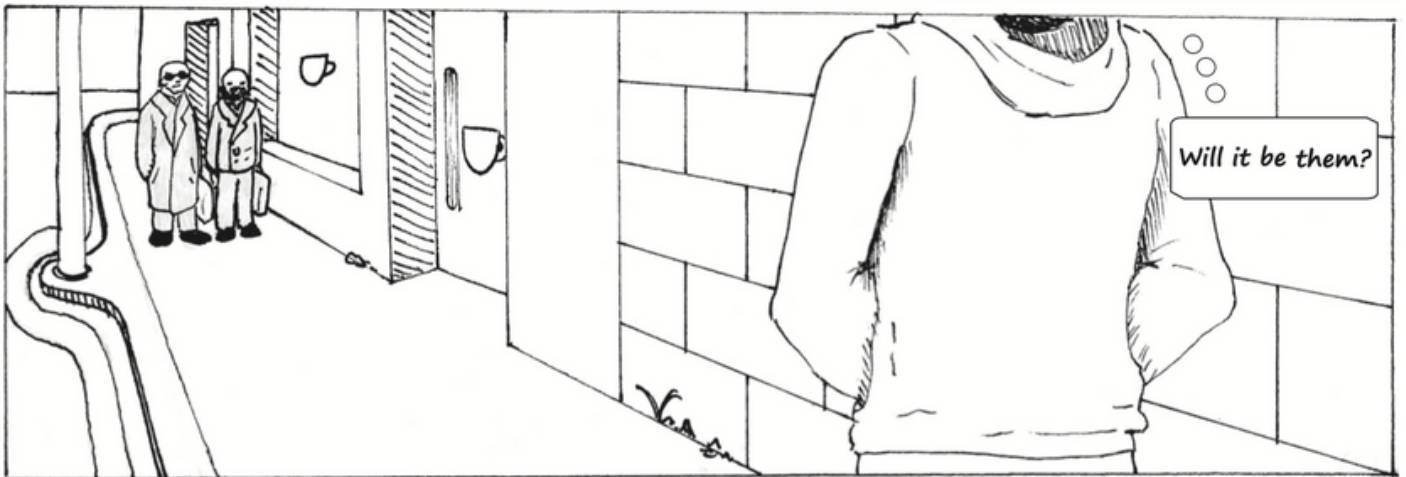
5 YEARS 9 MONTHS 20 DAYS BEFORE
THE POINT OF NO RETURN...

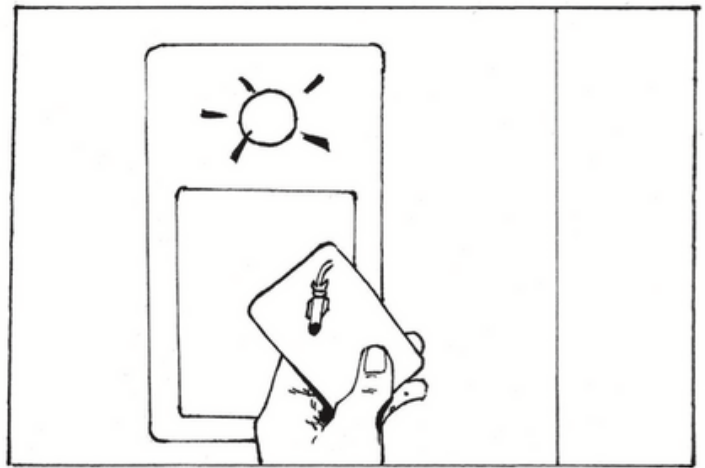
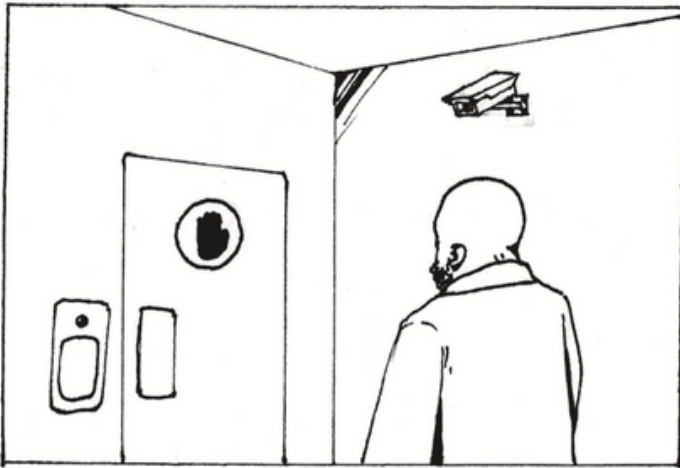


Dear Mr. Julio Rodriguez,

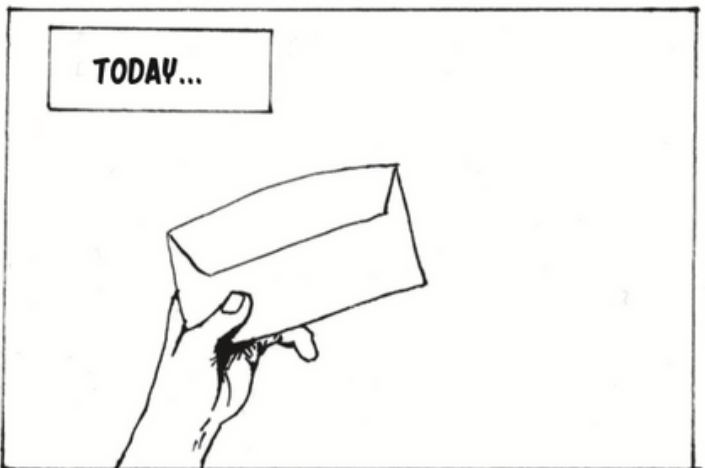
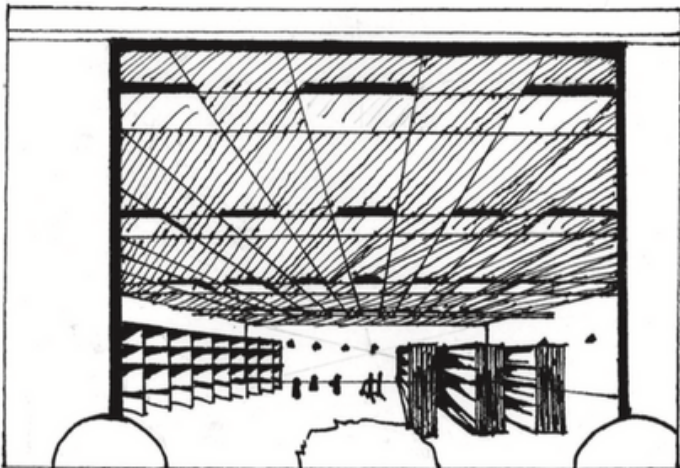
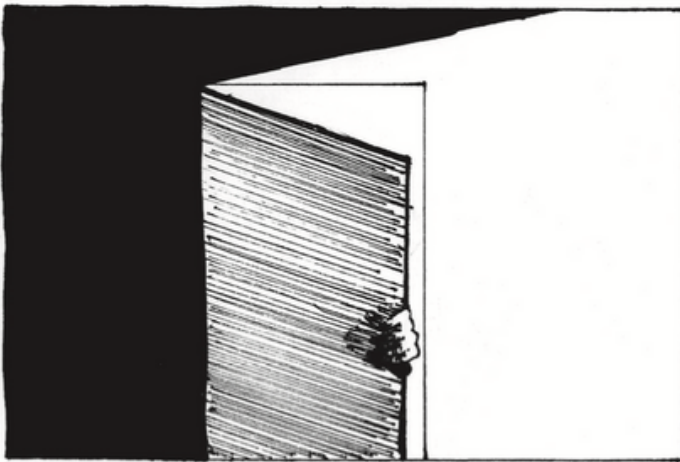
I am writing to involve you in one of the greatest projects that human beings will ever see and accomplish. I hope you can keep this confidential. If you want to join the last superhero team that will save the whole planet and become the new idol of children, come to the bar.

...I AGREED TO MEET THEM AT THE INDICATED PLACE, NOT BECAUSE I WANTED TO GAIN FAME BUT BECAUSE I WAS VERY CURIOUS ABOUT WHAT THE PROJECT DESCRIBED BY THE LETTER WAS.





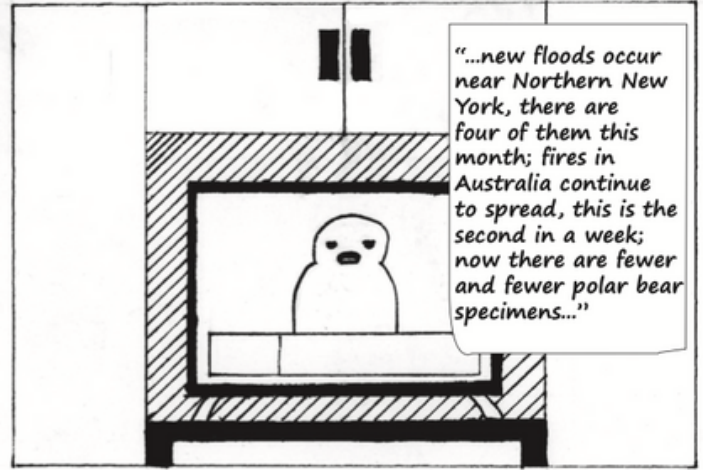
ONCE INSIDE THE BAR, WE MADE OUR WAY TO THE TOILETS WITH A CARD IN OUR HANDS, WE APPROACHED THE DOOR AND AN ELEVATOR OPENED. ONCE INSIDE, THE ELEVATOR STARTED TO DESCEND AND, WITHIN SECONDS, WE WERE IN A HUGE WAREHOUSE.



Dear Mr Rodriguez,

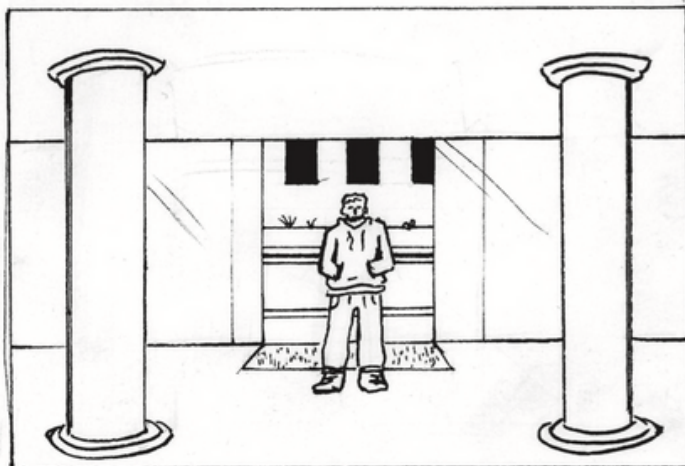
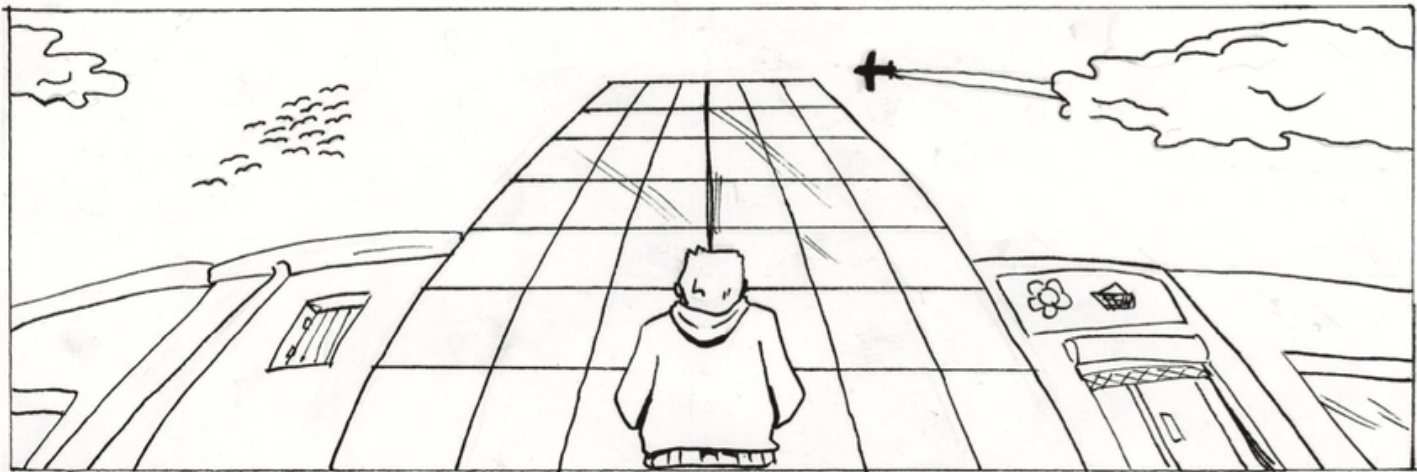
We have sent you this letter due to your involvement with the top secret Space In project, which you were a part of five years ago. We are recently calling everyone who took part in the project like you. We kindly ask you if you can take part in it once again. For the moment, we cannot tell you anything about it, we will explain everything in person. For now, we wish you a good continuation of the day.

Best regards!



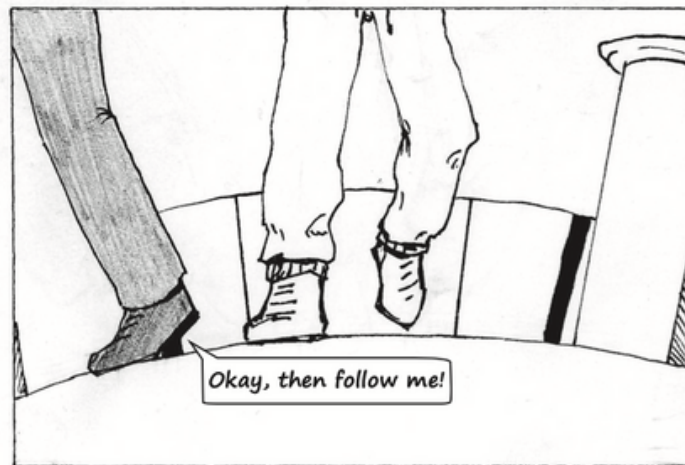
"...new floods occur near Northern New York, there are four of them this month; fires in Australia continue to spread, this is the second in a week; now there are fewer and fewer polar bear specimens..."

ALMOST EVERY DAY, NEWS OF FLOODS, ANIMALS INCREASINGLY AT RISK OF EXTINCTION AND FIRES WAS HEARD. I WASN'T CONVINCED TO GO BACK TO THOSE PEOPLE, THEY ONLY CARED ABOUT SAVING THEIR OWN SKIN, BUT I HAD TO.

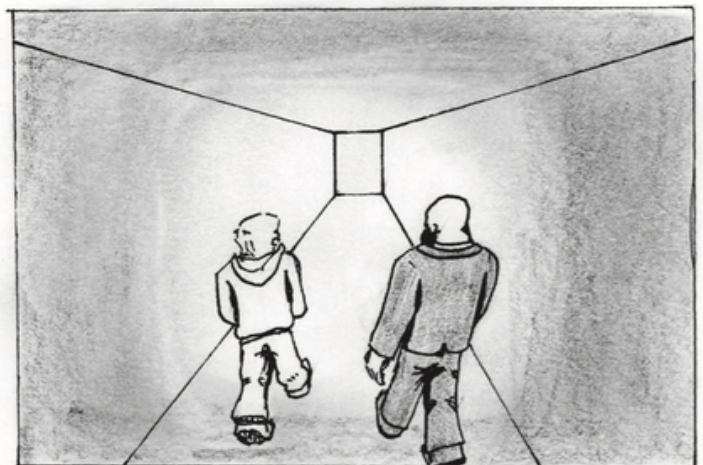


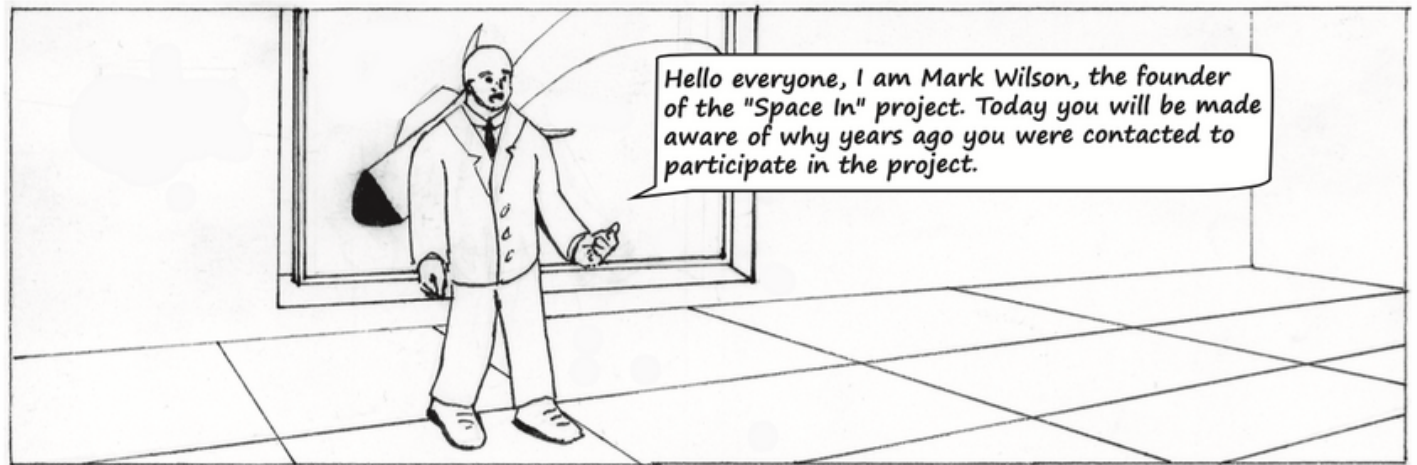
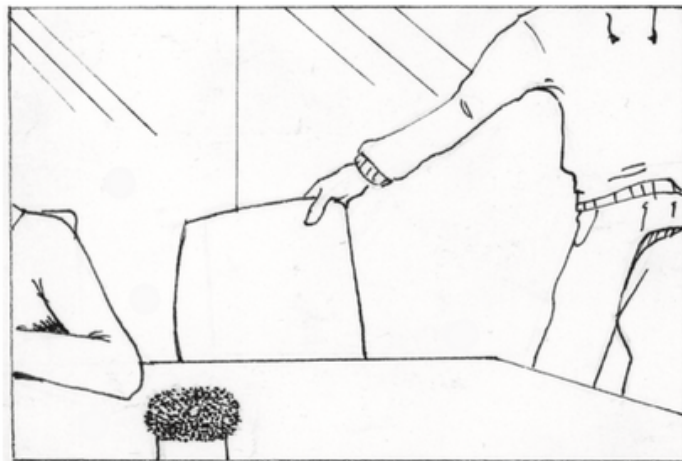
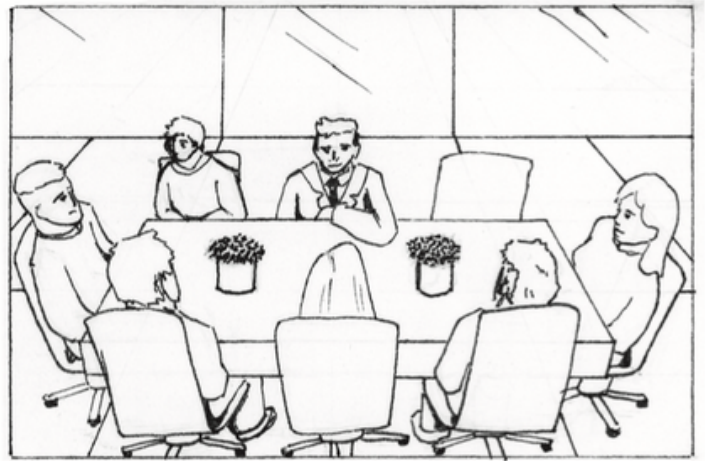
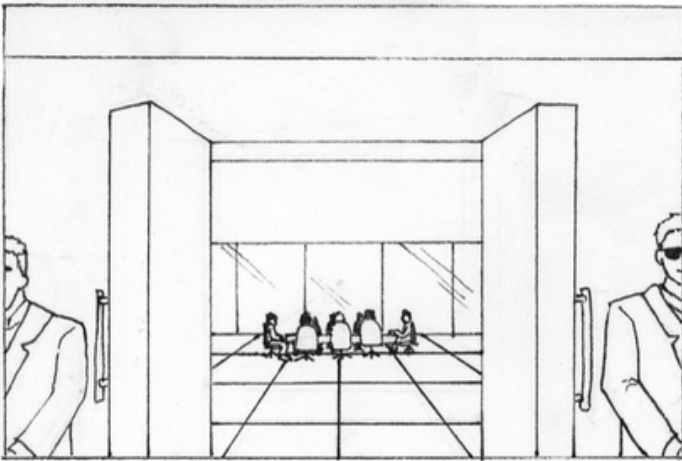
Are you looking for someone, sir?

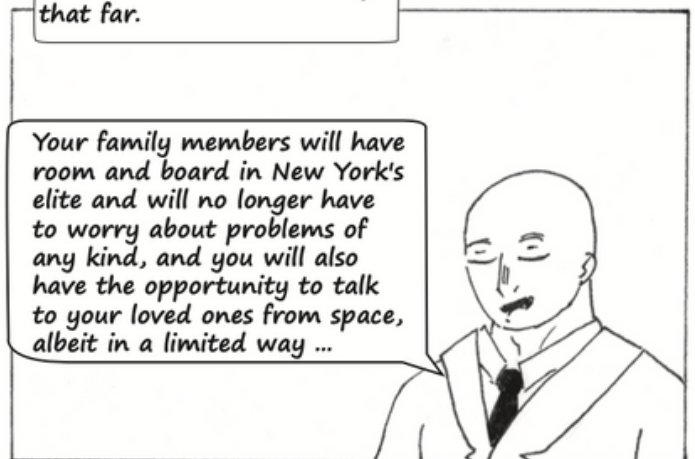
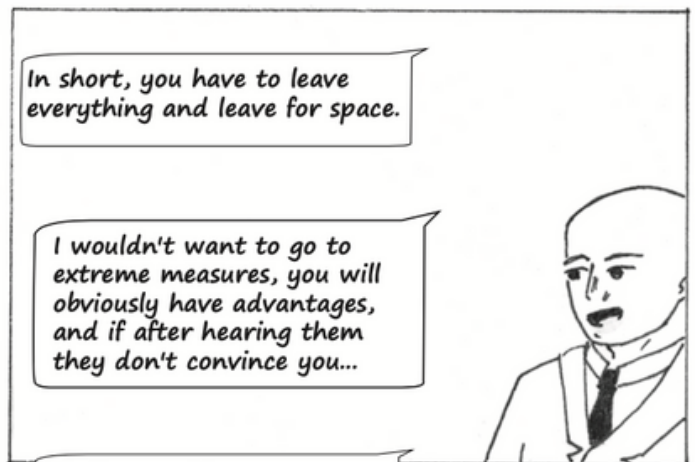
Yes, I was looking for the contact person of Space In.



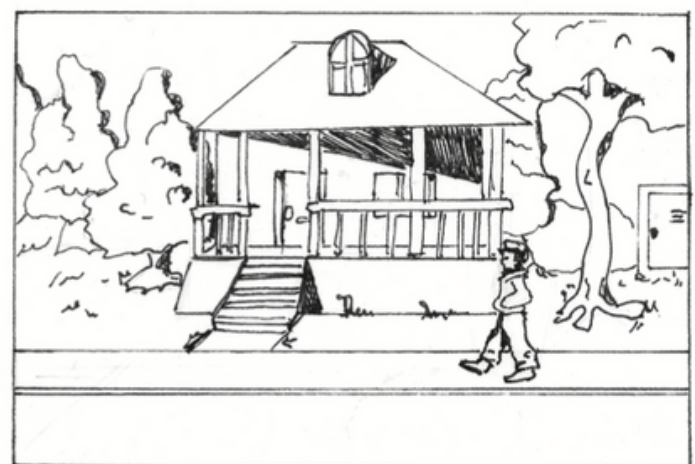
Okay, then follow me!





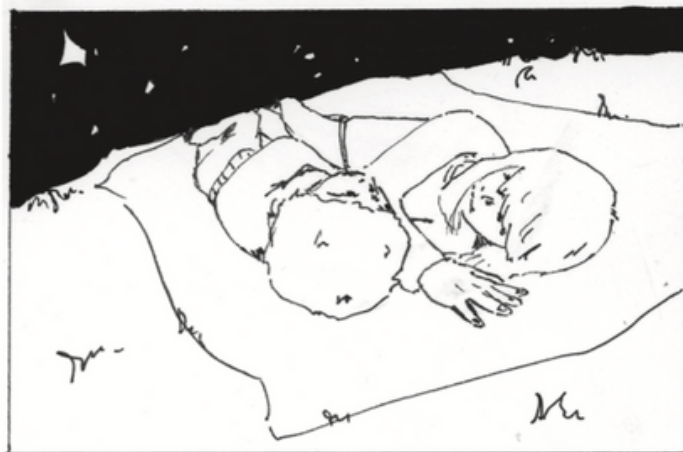
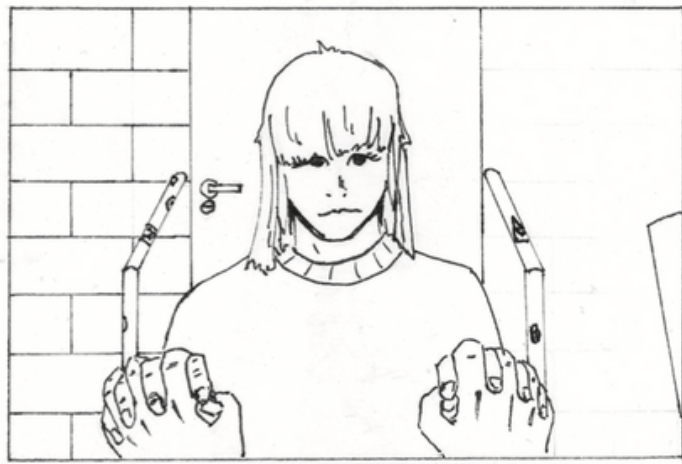
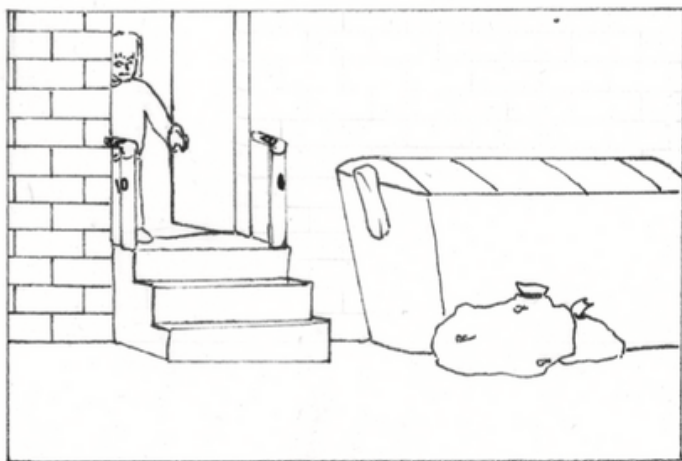
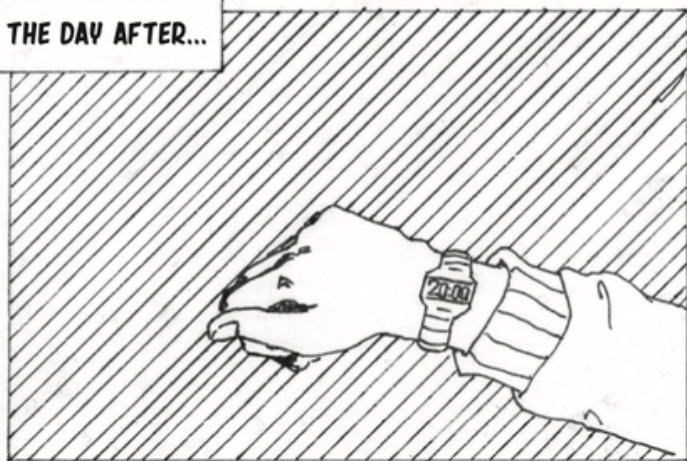


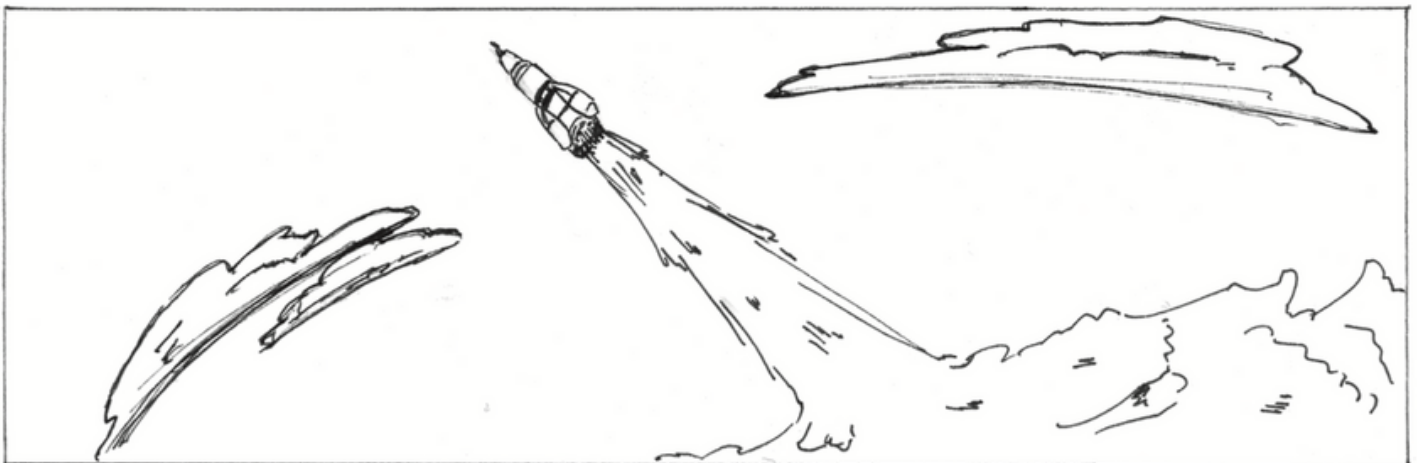
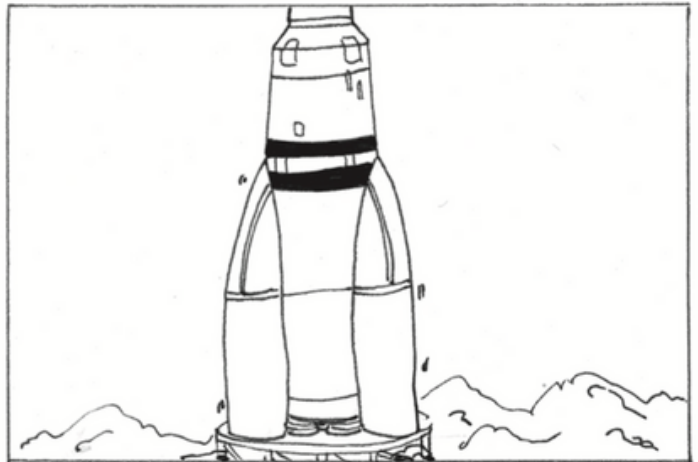
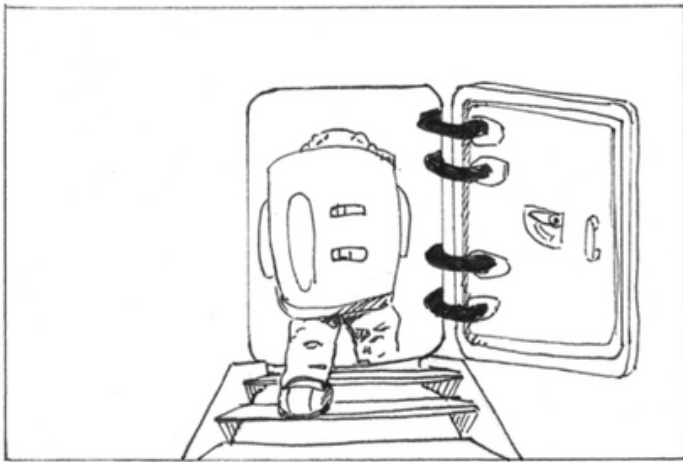
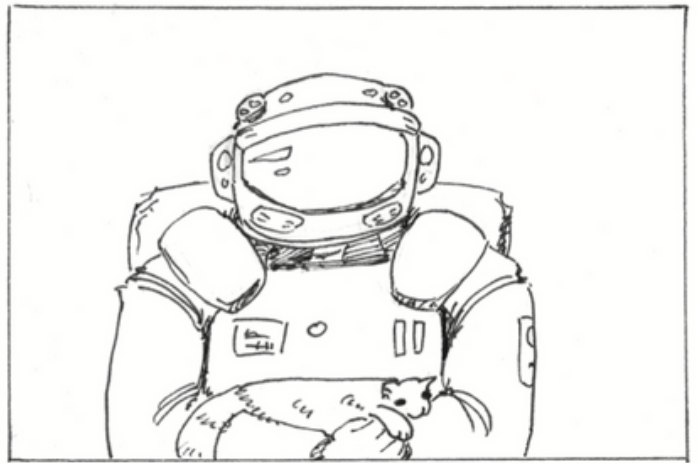
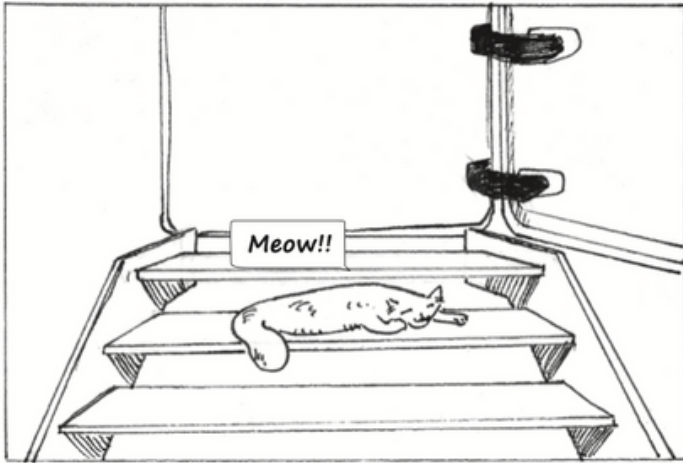
"... Mr. Preece, you don't have to worry about these matters, we have given you our word. I don't want to rush you too much, but the launching will be done within a week. Remember that you cannot and must not talk about this with anyone; having said that, I wish you a good evening and hope to see you again."

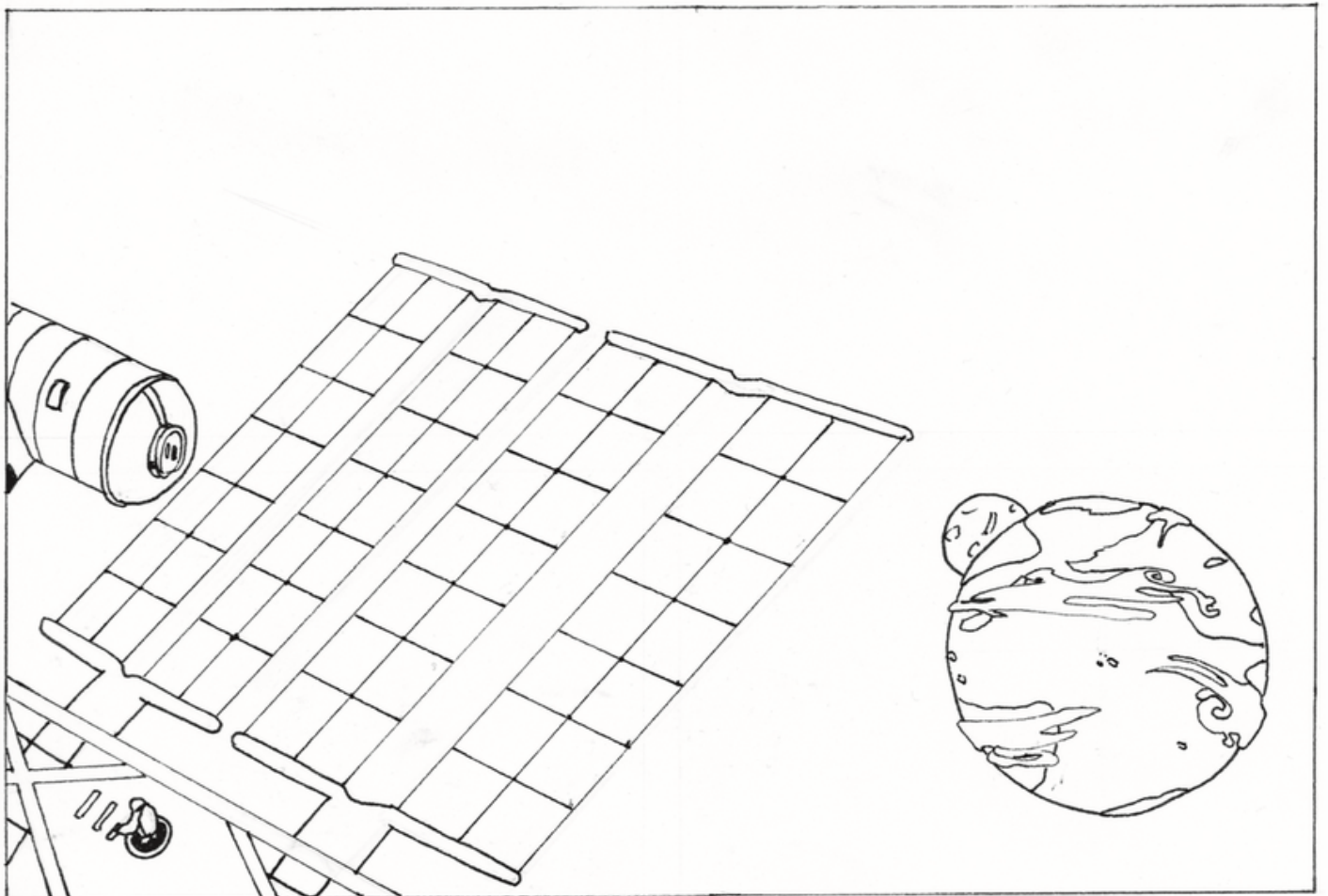
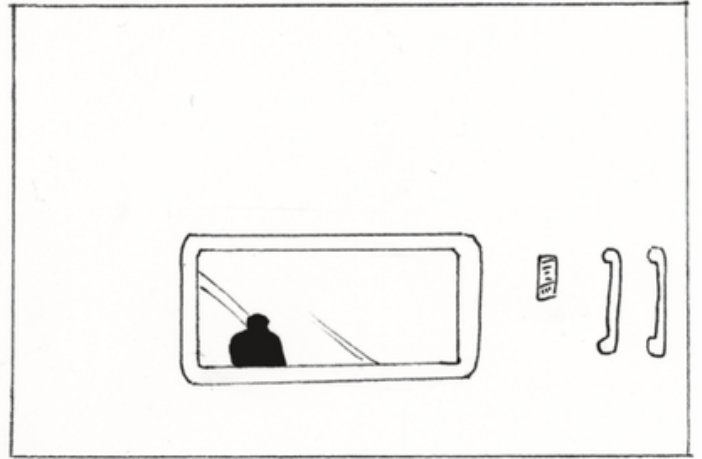
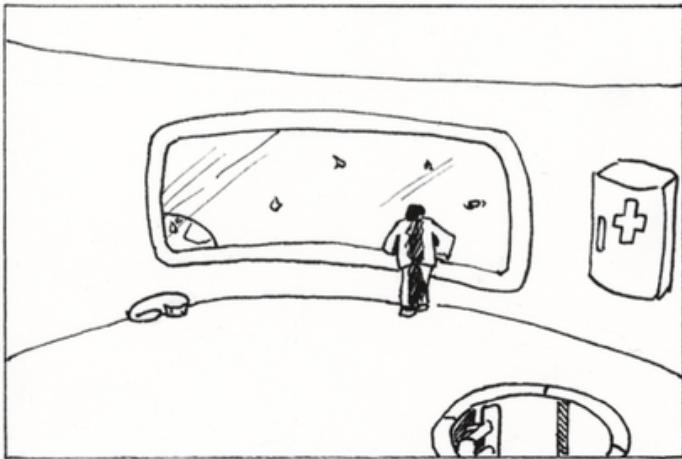
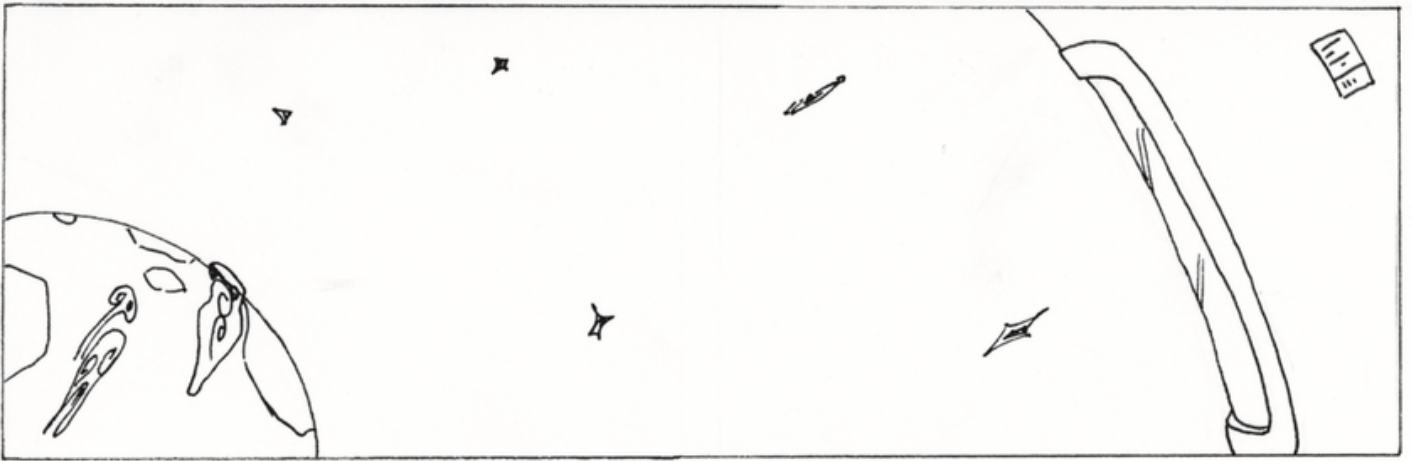


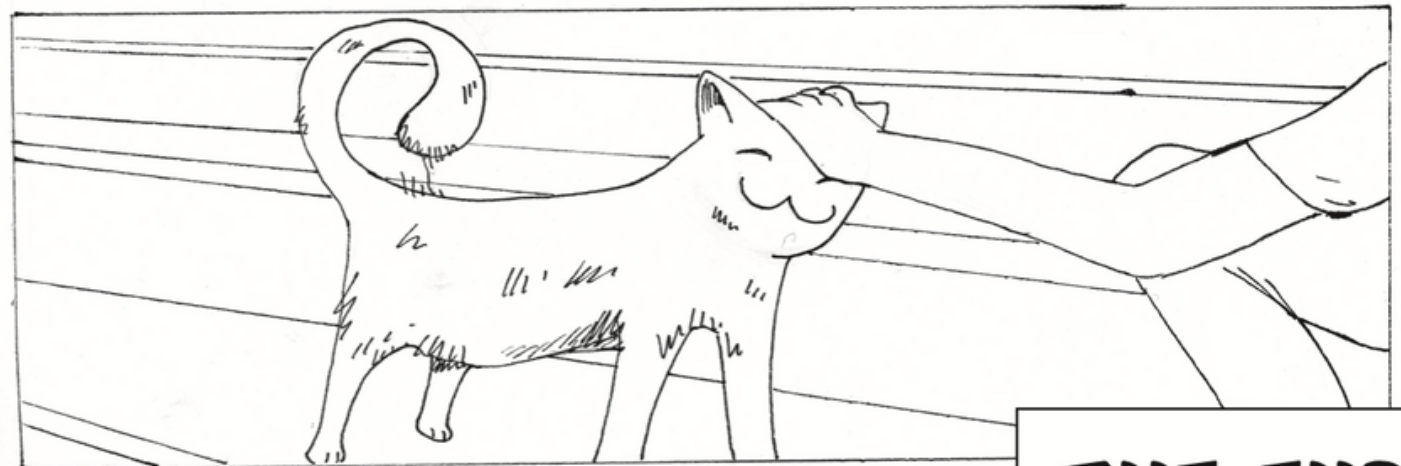
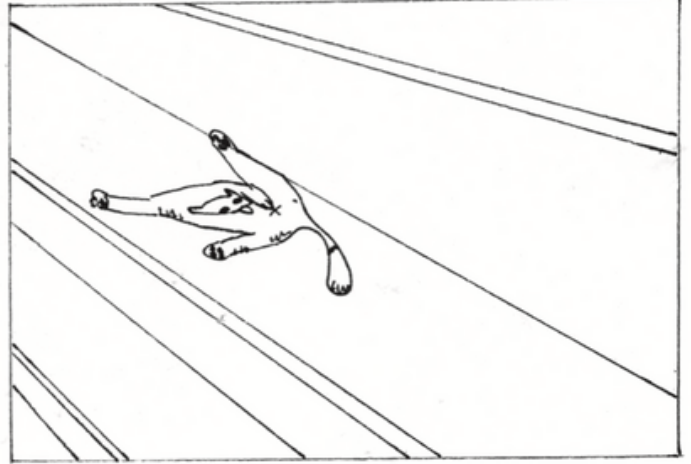
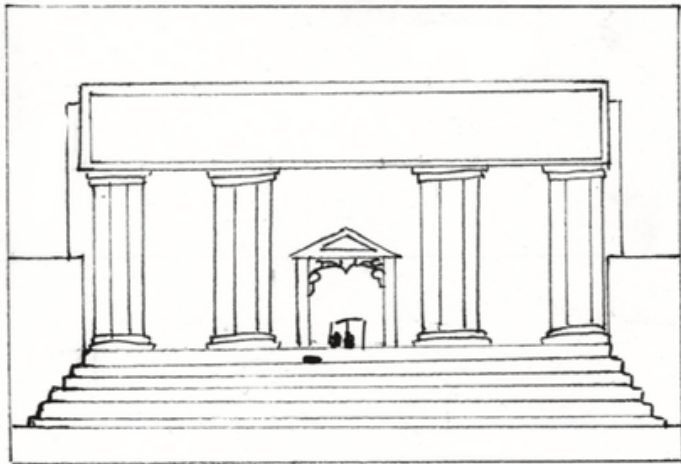
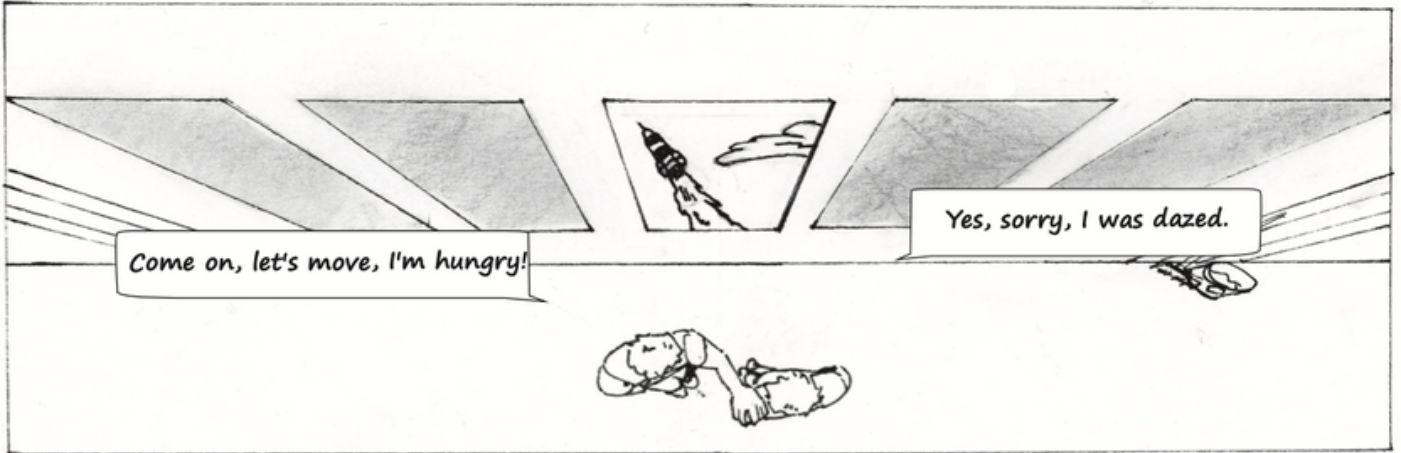


THE DAY AFTER...









THE END



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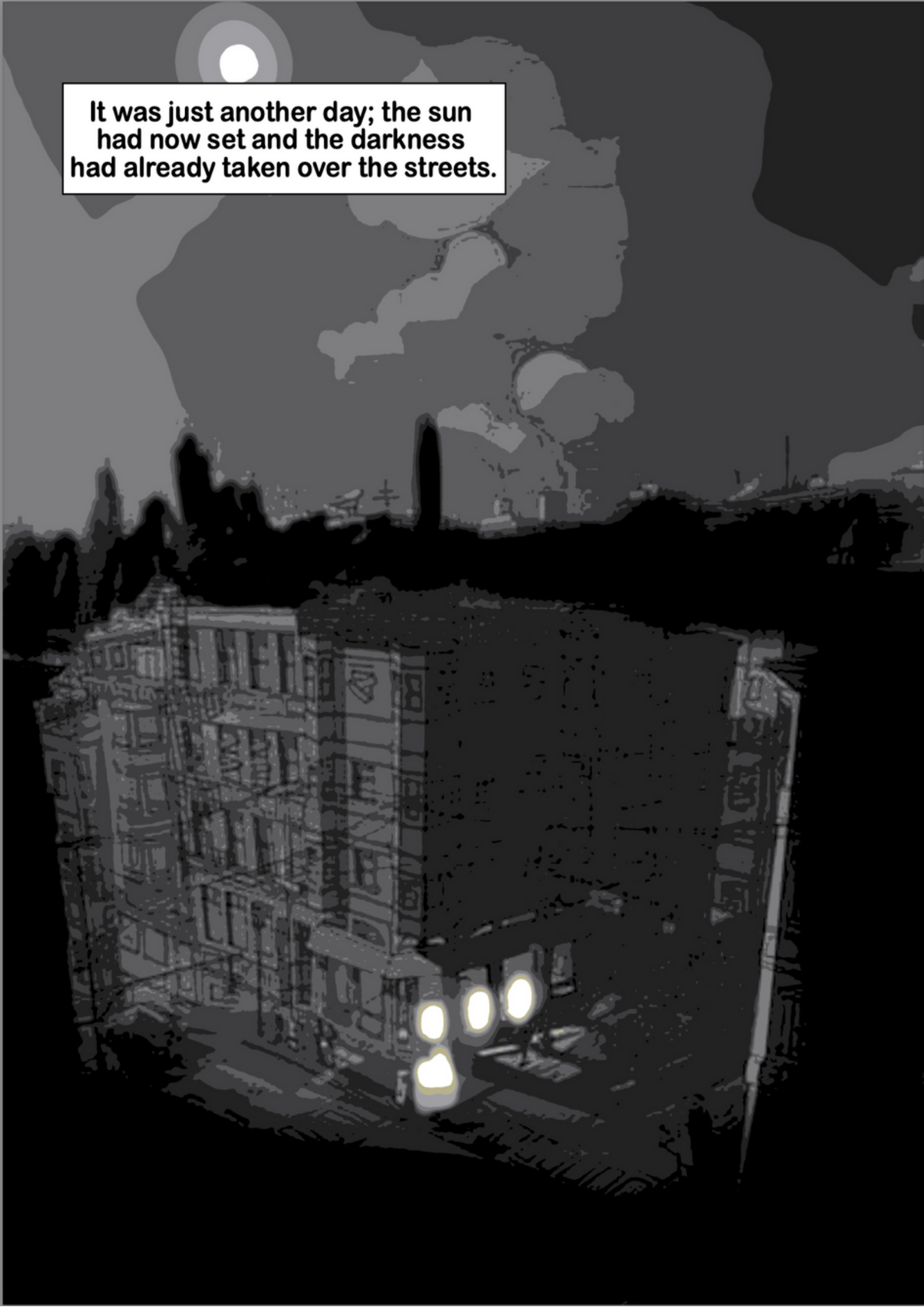


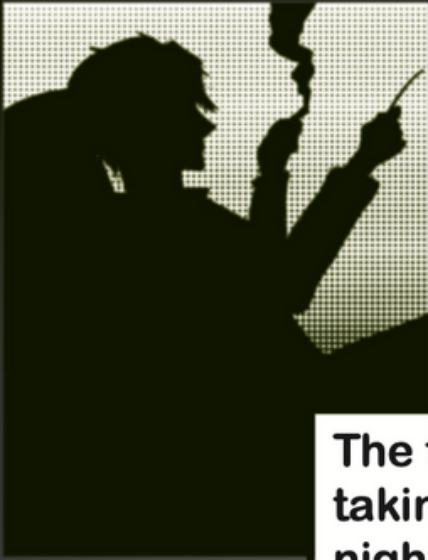
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“WHO KILLED THE EnvironMAN?”

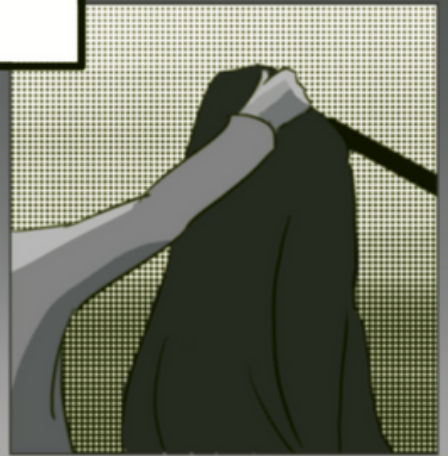


It was just another day; the sun had now set and the darkness had already taken over the streets.





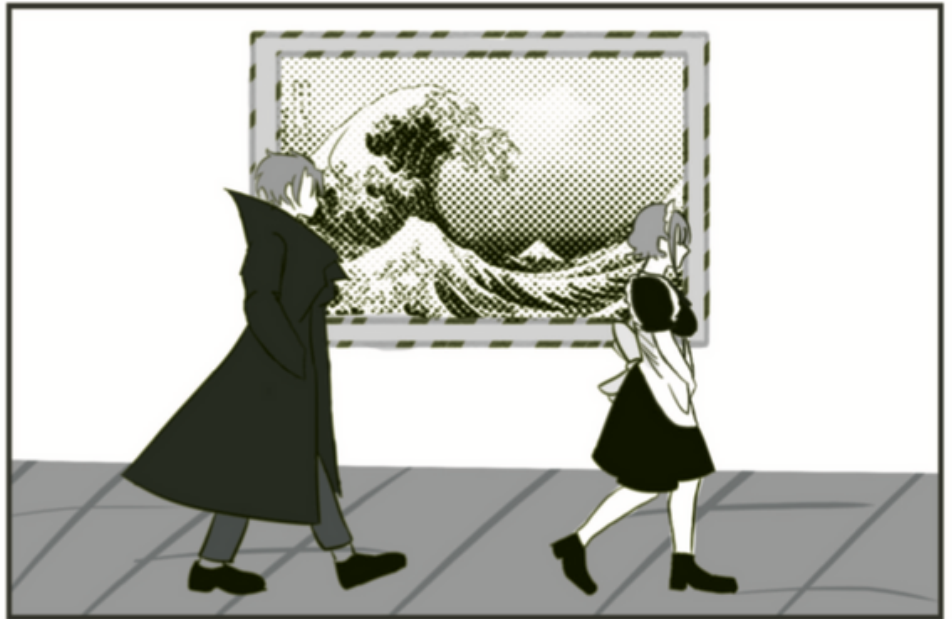
The filth of this city was taking over again but that night something was about to change forever.



Mr. EnvironMan died that night...



Please follow me, the lady is already waiting for you.





Sorry for the hour, but everything happened so fast.



Don't worry, if you don't mind, I would like to ask you a few questions about your husband.



Sure...



Did Mr. EnvironMan have any enemies or just people who didn't like him very much?

I see and when was the last time you saw him?

Okay, I got it, that's enough. Thank you for your cooperation.



Yes, there was this kind of gang.

Today at around 6 a.m., but an hour ago the police came in.

I, on the other hand, said goodbye for the last time about two days ago since he had come to the bank for a money withdrawal.

When we got to the crime scene, there were cops and reporters.



It would have been impossible to retrieve information, but, luckily, I had a source.



Tell me, what happened?



He was shot in the back of the head, I managed to take some pictures.

I see, have you found anything yet?

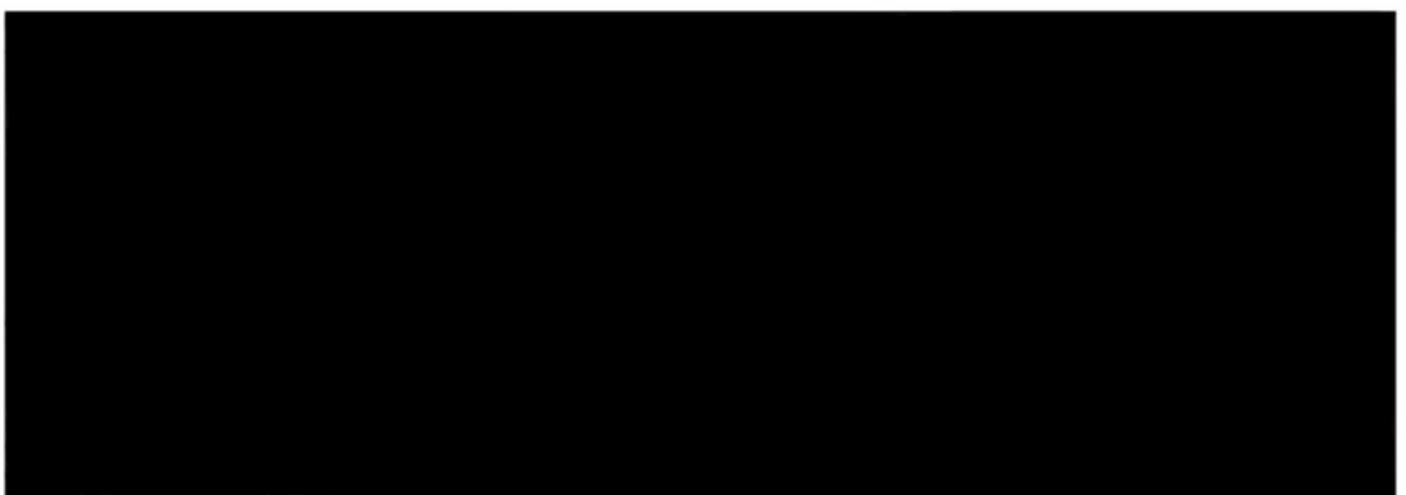
Any idea of who killed him?

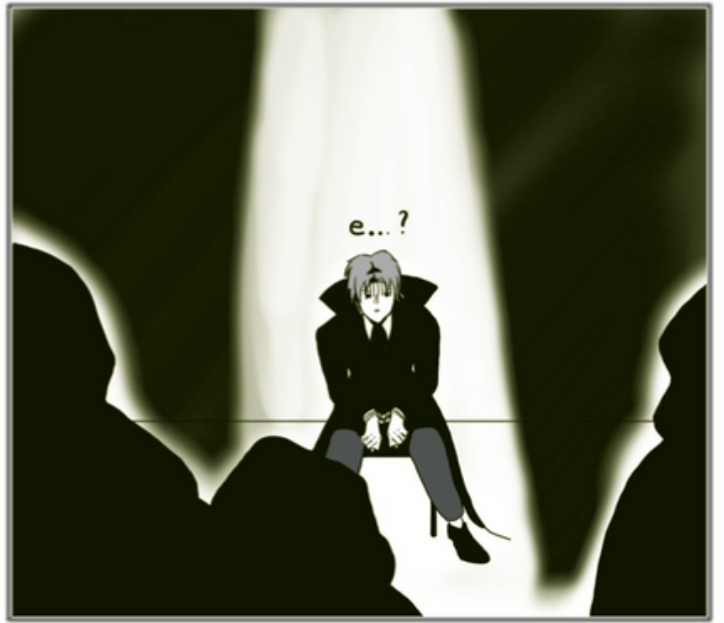
No, since he was in the river, it will be difficult to find something.



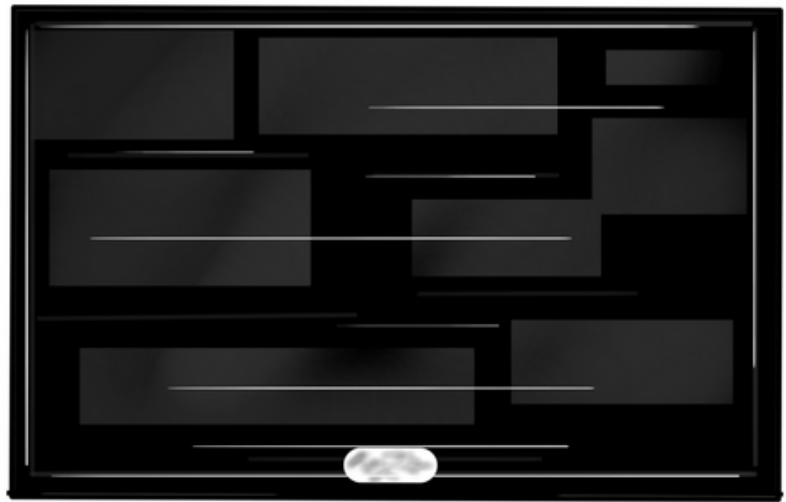
Maybe he was killed because he was kind and generous to some people but pitiless to others.



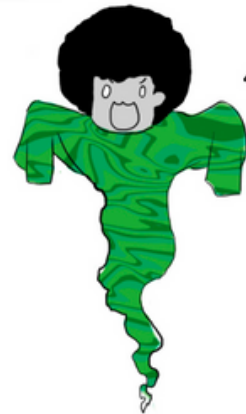




At that point, I reported everything and continued my research in the garage.



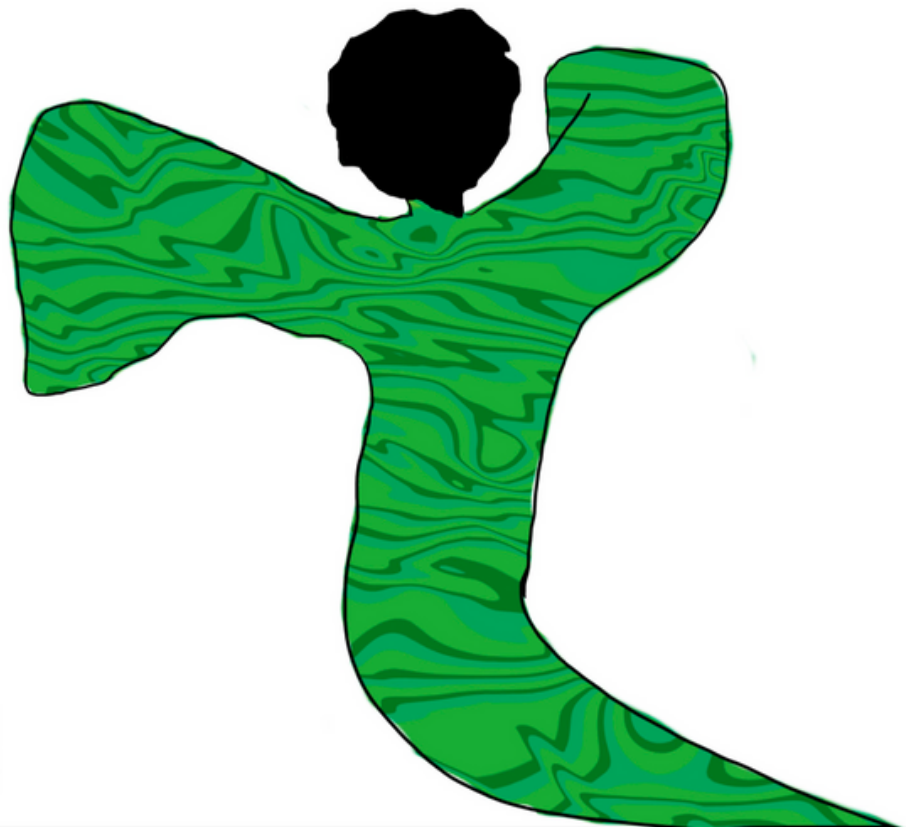
So, you're the Jesus Christ everybody is talking about.



I am the ghost of Mr. EnvironMan.



Okay, tell me what you know about the case.



It was a day like any other. As usual, I was recycling garbage in the garage, I was working there.



At one point, I started to notice that my forehead was warm and I felt my head melting like a glacier would, so I decided to get out of there, but the doors were sealed.



A greenhouse effect began to be created, the gases could no longer get out, my fever kept rising and I was getting sweatier and sweatier.



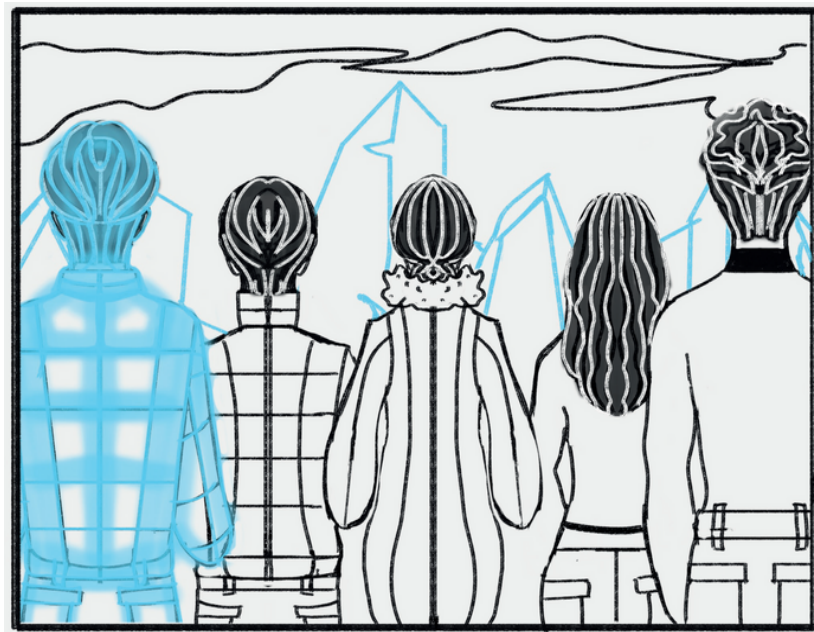


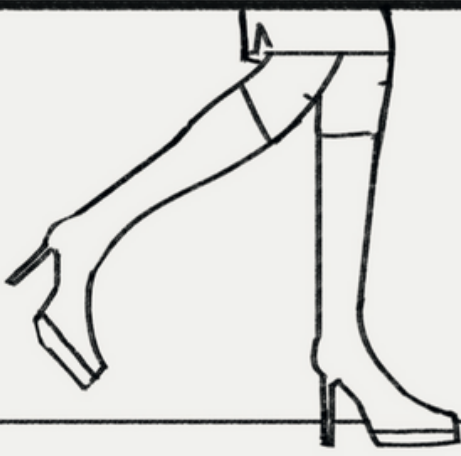
**At that point, the organisms
on me began to die.**

A high-contrast, black and white photograph. The background is a bright, almost white sky. In the foreground, there are dark silhouettes of a tree on the right side, with its trunk and branches extending upwards. The top of the frame is filled with the dark, leafy canopy of the tree. At the bottom, there are silhouettes of tall grasses. The overall composition is stark and dramatic, emphasizing the natural elements through their dark outlines against the light sky.

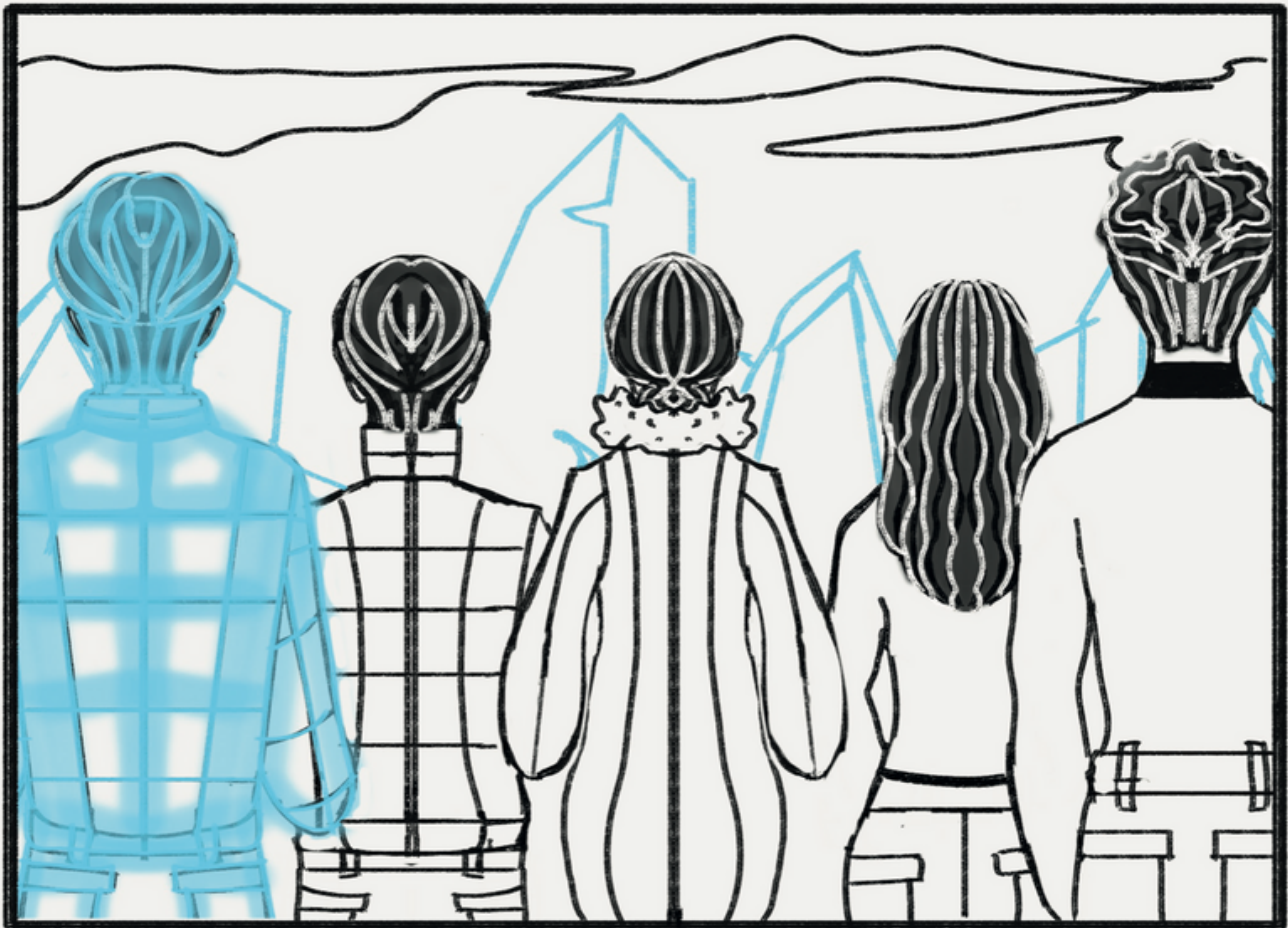
**“The Environment is not as
immortal as we think.”**

"SECOND CHANCE"

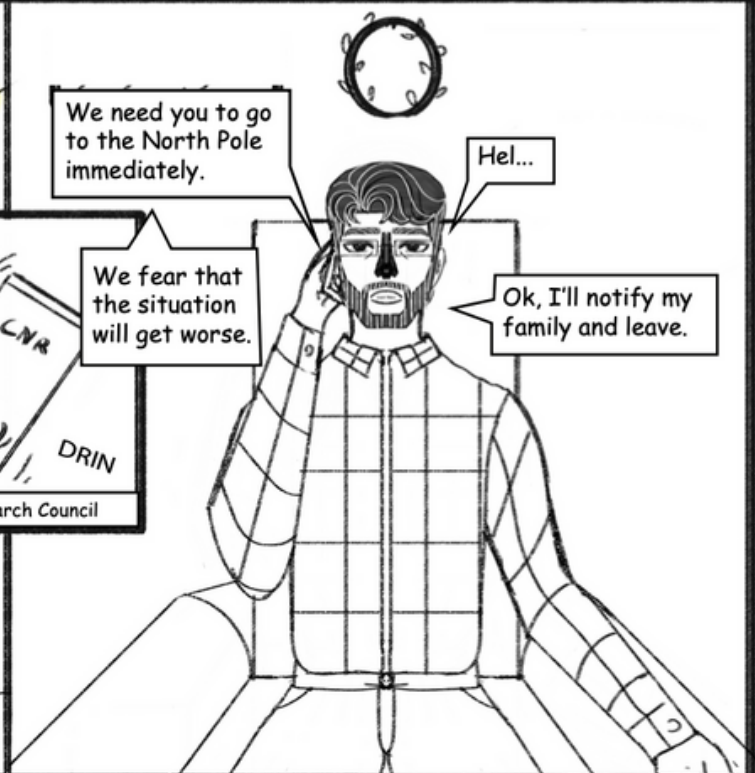
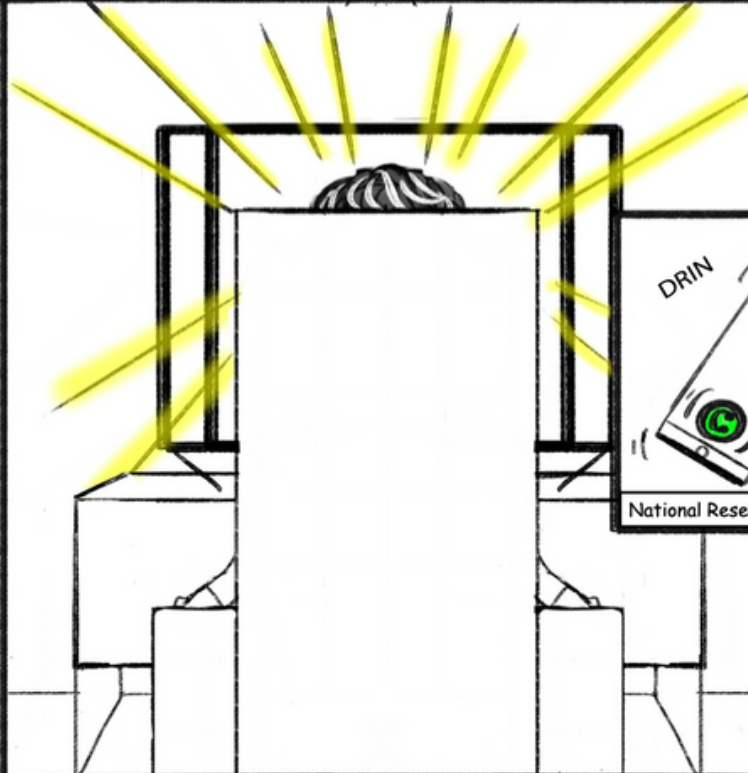
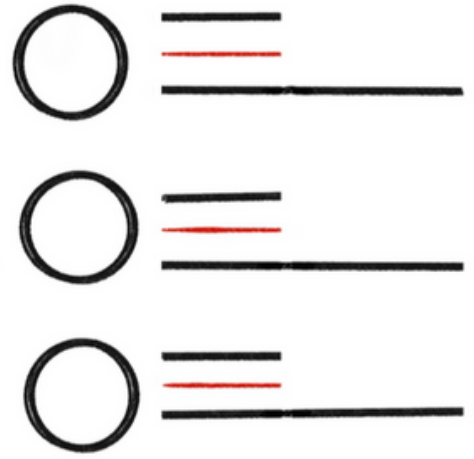
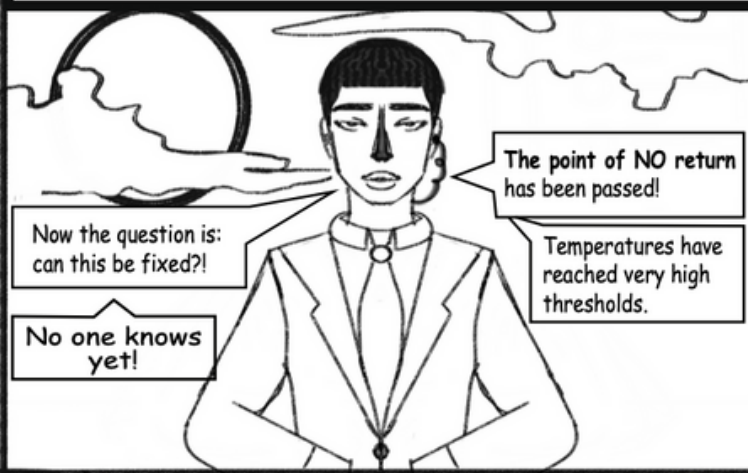




WHAT A BEAUTIFUL DAY TO TELL A STORY!

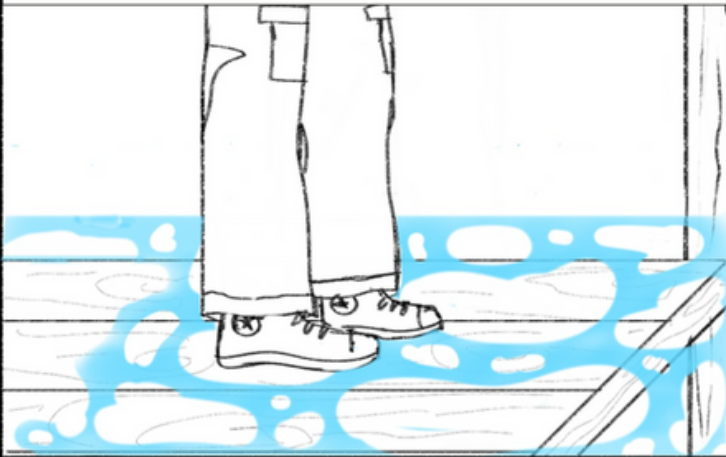


IT ALL STARTED WITH A BAD NEWS STORY ON THE NEWS...

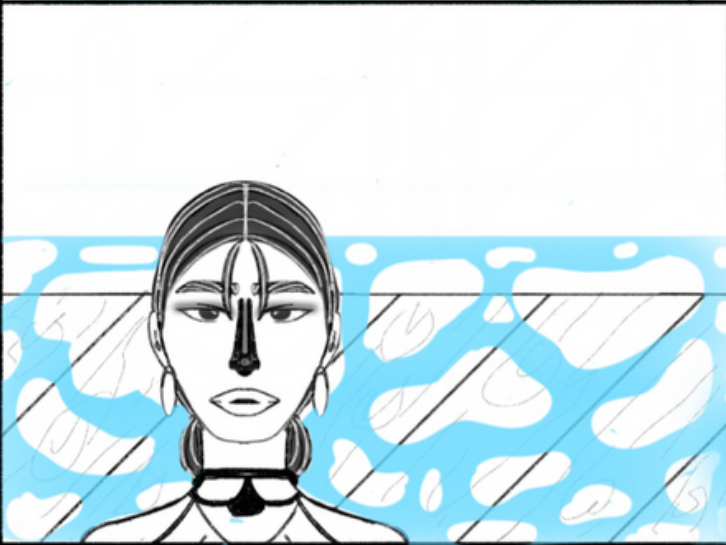


THE NEXT DAY

The day did not get off to a good start for the family...



Guys, the water is rising.



We need to get out and take cover.

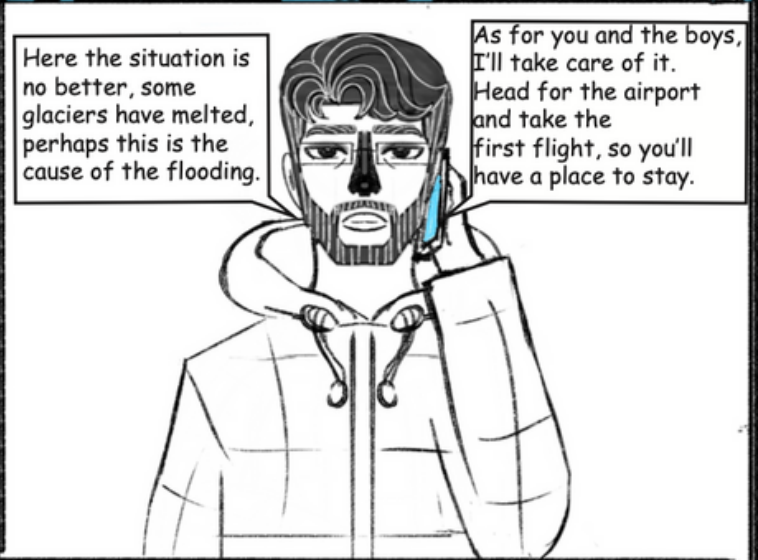
I'll call your dad and tell him.



Venice is being flooded.

Our boys and I can't stay here any longer.

Darling, you cannot understand what is happening.



Here the situation is no better, some glaciers have melted, perhaps this is the cause of the flooding.

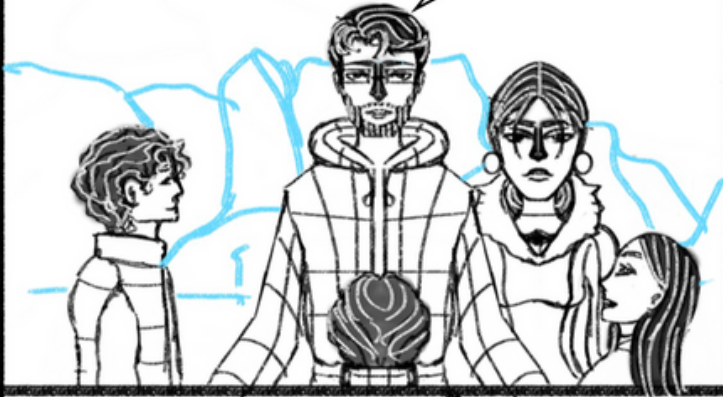
As for you and the boys, I'll take care of it. Head for the airport and take the first flight, so you'll have a place to stay.

NORTH POLE

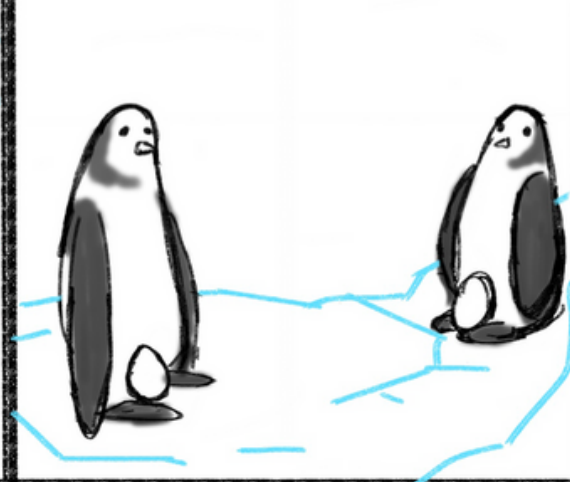


A FEW DAYS LATER

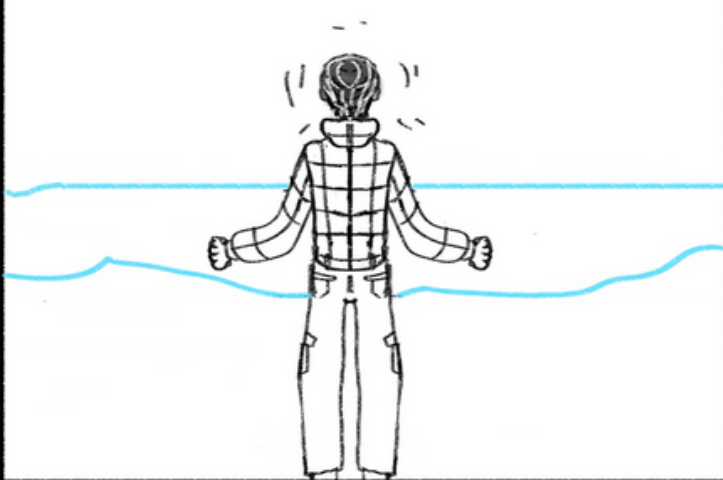
Kids, come! I'll show you what the North Pole looks like.



Look at those animals! Poor them, they're going to die because of climate change.



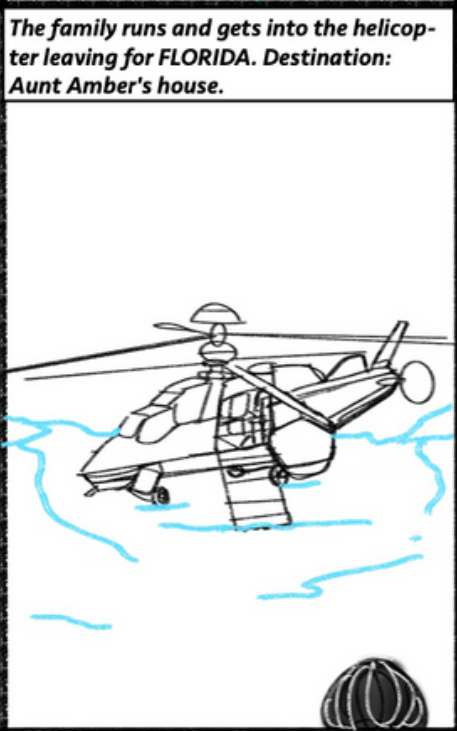
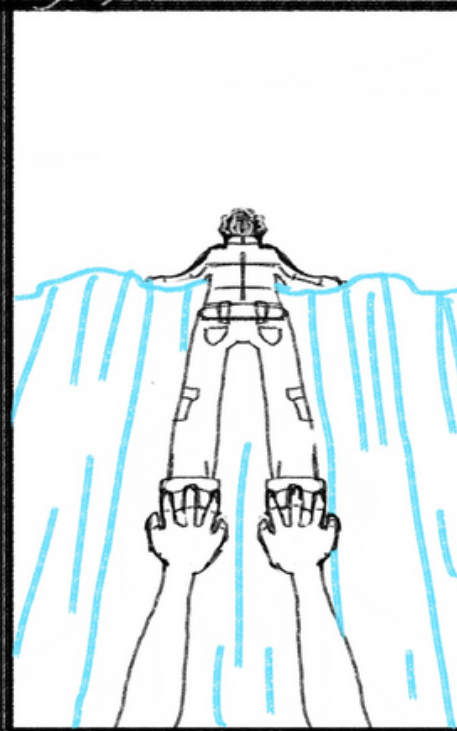
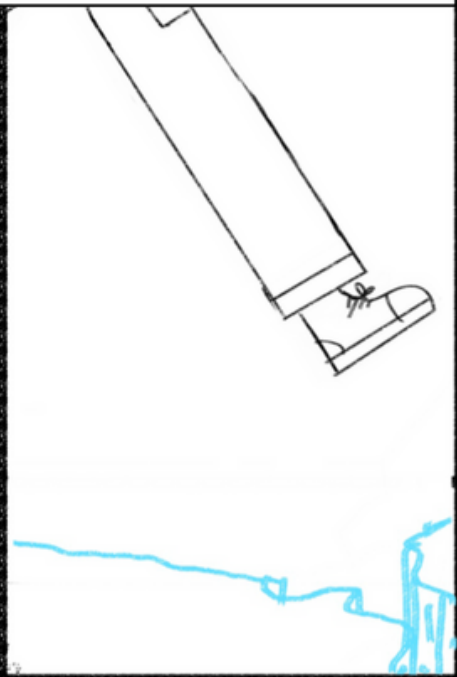
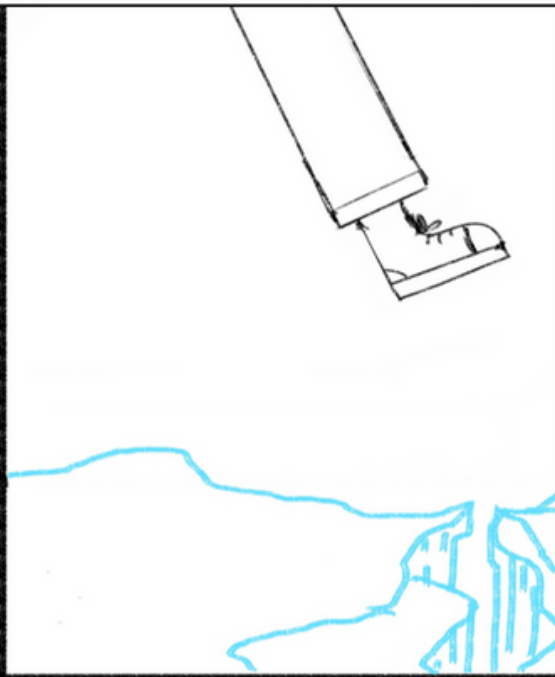
On their way back something went wrong...



Guys, this is not a safe place anymore. We must run!

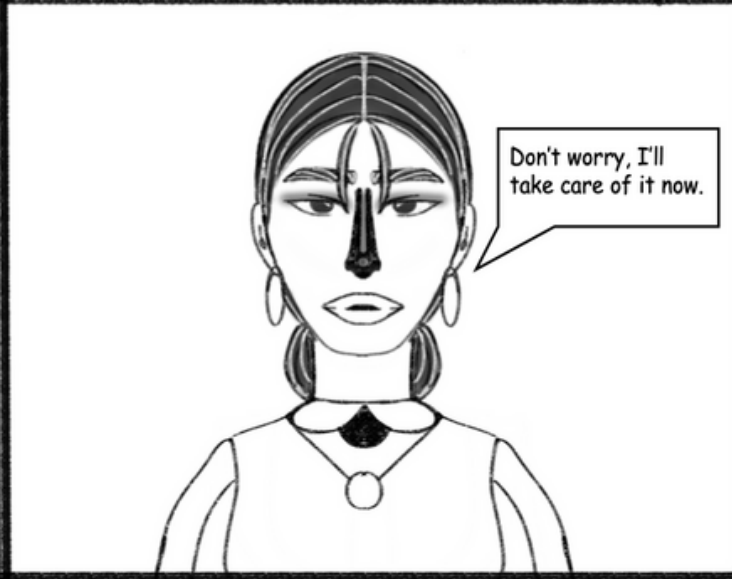


As they race to the helicopter, Tom falls behind.





What are we going to do now that dad is gone?



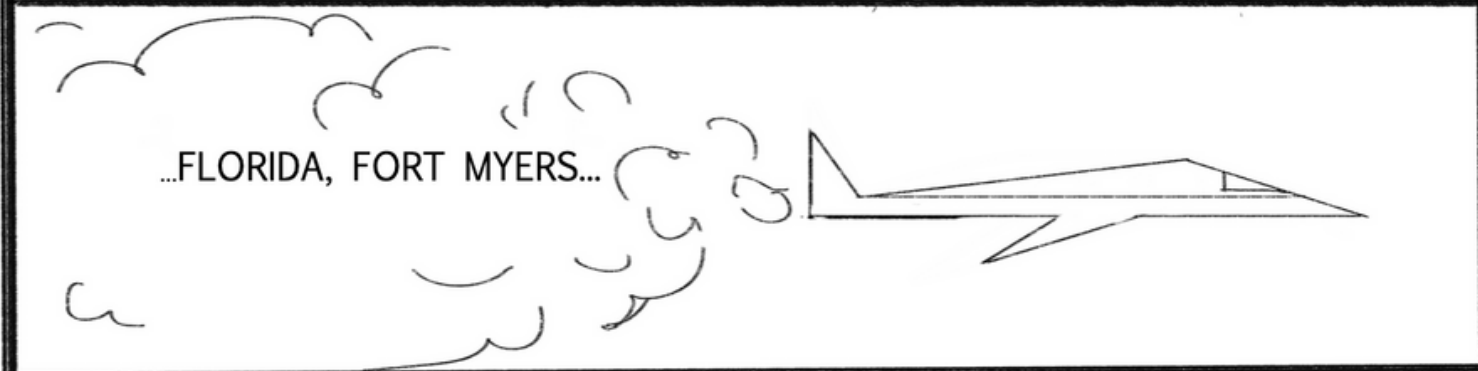
Don't worry, I'll take care of it now.



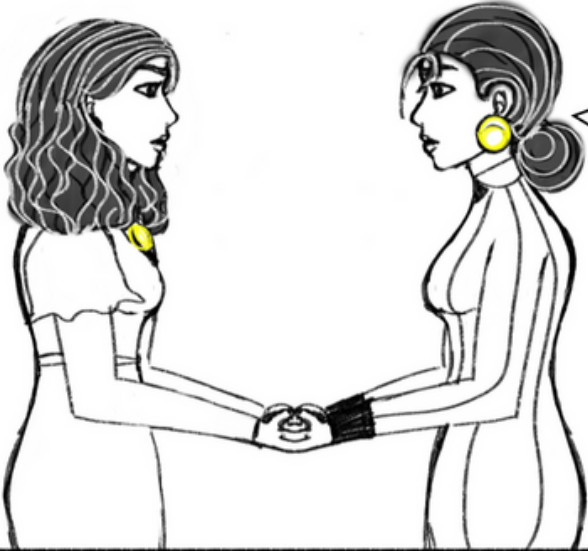
Amber, something terrible has happened, we need somewhere to go.



Don't worry, come to me.




...FLORIDA, FORT MYERS...




I heard about your arrival...and what happened to your father. I am very sorry.

Thank you for having us, we are grateful. Did something strange happen here too?




No. I hope nothing bad will happen. Do you know what is happening to the Earth?



Yes. The point of no return has been passed.

But we don't know what that might entail.

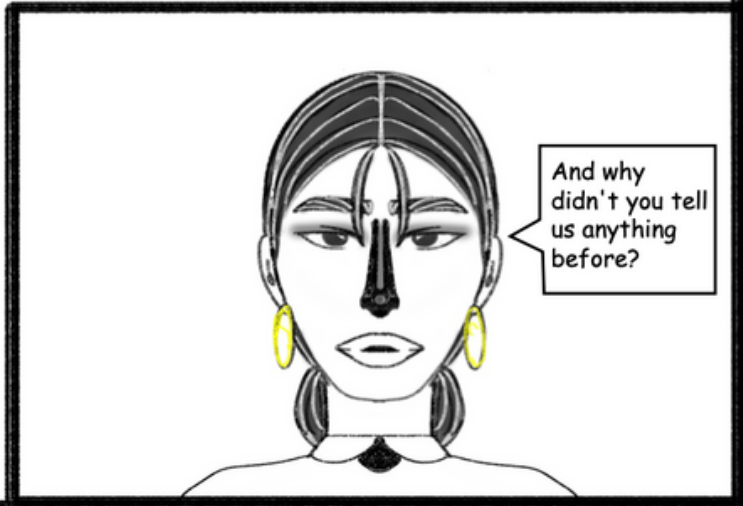


Let's hope it all works out!

Instead, we know much more. Everything that is happening is because of climate change. We already knew about it, but no one ever really wanted to do anything about it.

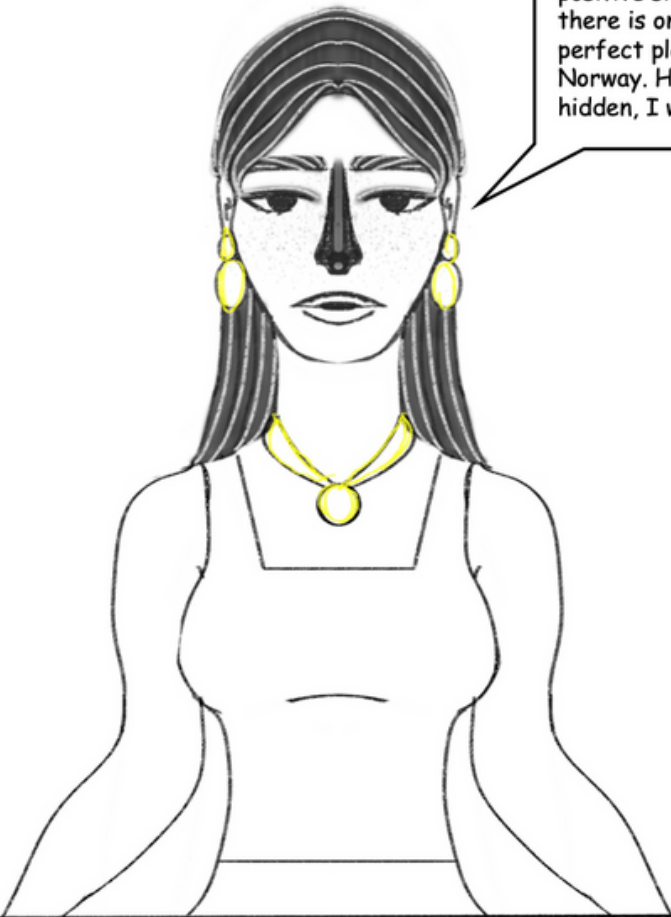


We can no longer think of living, but of **surviving!** Many parts of the world will only be a distant memory if we don't act now and in a direct manner. We, too, are not safe right now; with rising temperatures, the number of hurricanes will increase and we are in an area that is hit many times by them.



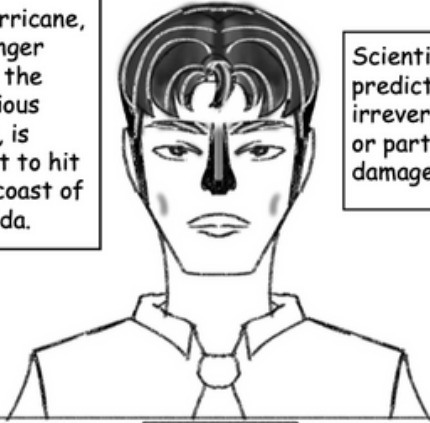
And why didn't you tell us anything before?

Because I have always tried to see the positive side of these catastrophes. And there is one: I discovered what could be the perfect place to live with climate change, Norway. However, I didn't want to keep it hidden, I was afraid you wouldn't listen to me.



Don't worry, now hopefully nothing bad will happen.

A hurricane, stronger than the previous ones, is about to hit the coast of Florida.



Scientists predict irreversible or partial damage.

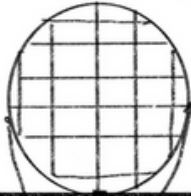
You heard the news. We have to get out of here. The hurricane is coming to town. We have to leave for Norway right away!



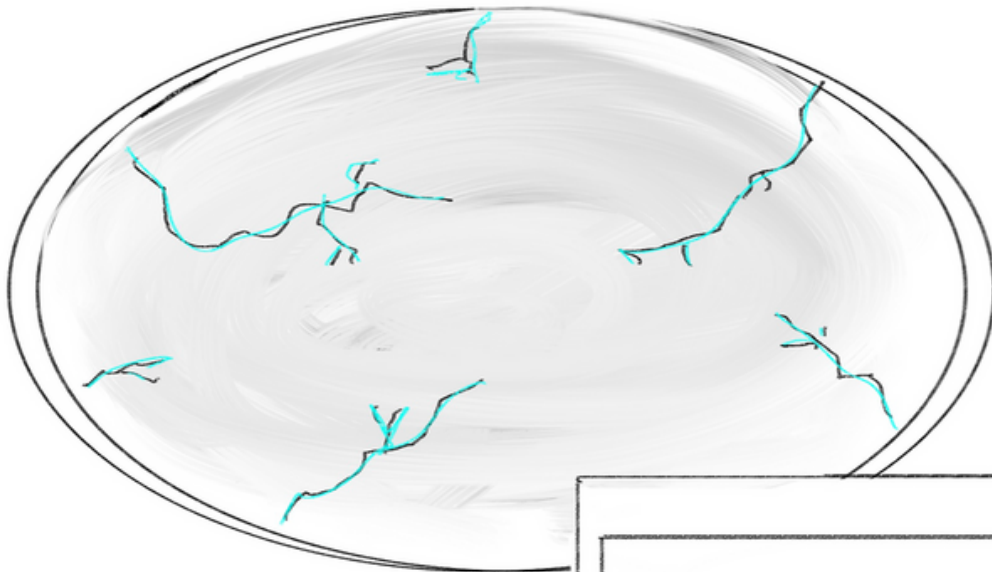
We must move, or we risk missing the only flight that can save us.



All flights will be cancelled shortly, due to the incoming hurricane. The last remaining flights are as follows: Norway, Italy, Greece, and Spain. They will all depart shortly!



I know it is a huge risk to fly when there is a hurricane going on, but we have to choose between that and live, or die without having tried.



Yes, it's me, Rose. I'm here to talk about what is going to happen...

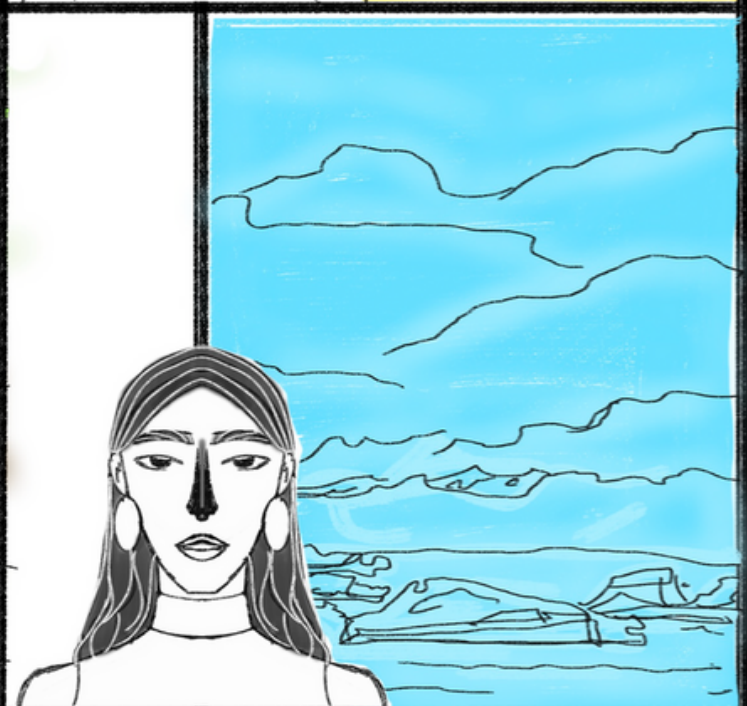
Look at this picture. Because of the continuous heat waves, fires in the world have increased and will increase, and as you know...no trees no oxygen. The heat will also affect food crops, ruining them, and in this way, world hunger will no longer just be a problem in poor countries, but all over the world.

The heat will not only affect plants but also animals, a source of food for us humans. With the destruction of their habitats and due to heat, many animals are forced to emigrate and move higher and higher, others thrive because the longer and longer summers increase the availability of food. So, climate change impacts wildlife in countless different ways. Climate change also has numerous effects on hibernating mammals. These are forced to hibernate further, altering their biological cycle and, most importantly, affecting the birth and mortality of the entire population.

"THE WORLD IS ON FIRE"

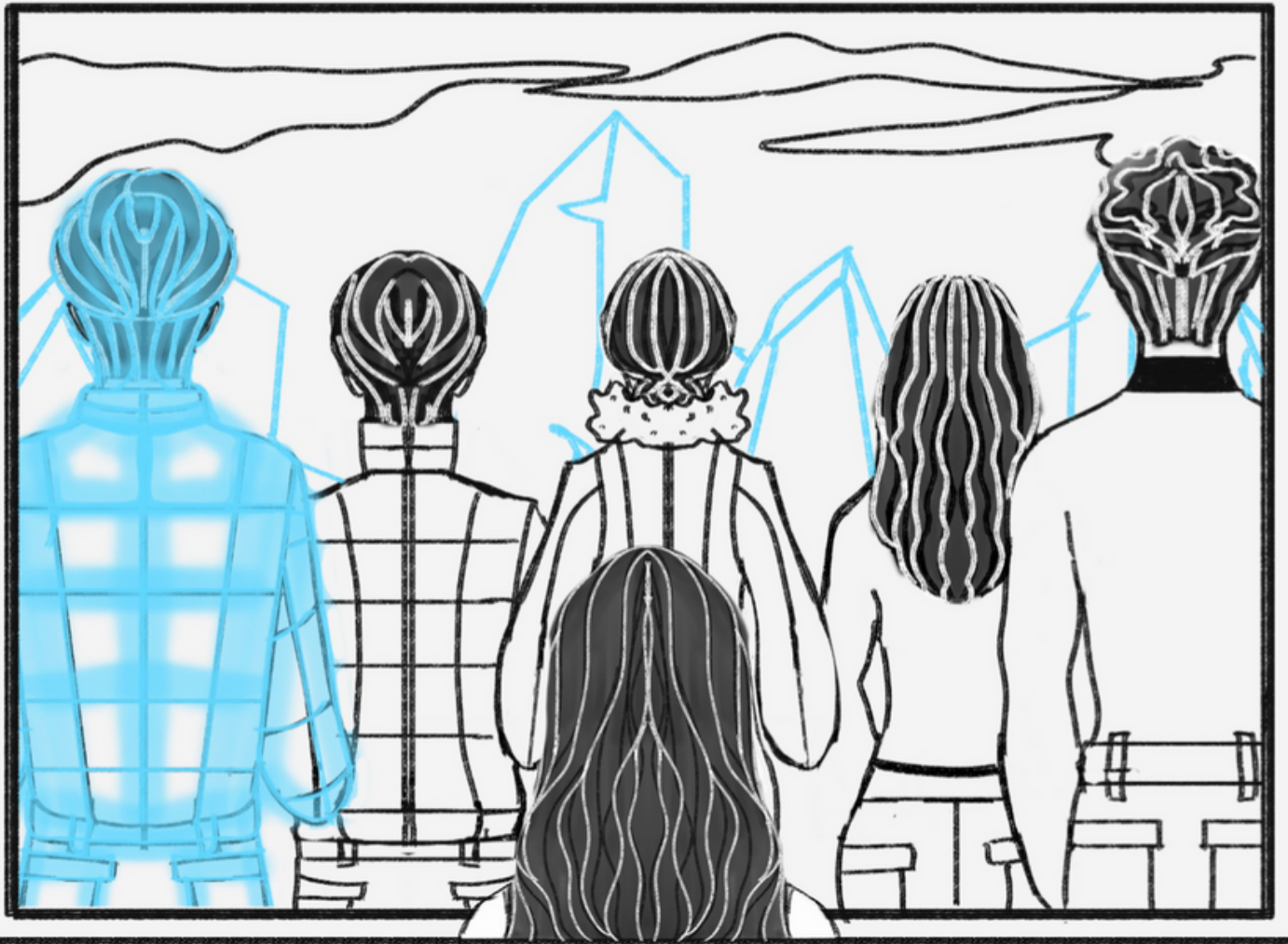


"NO MORE LIFE"

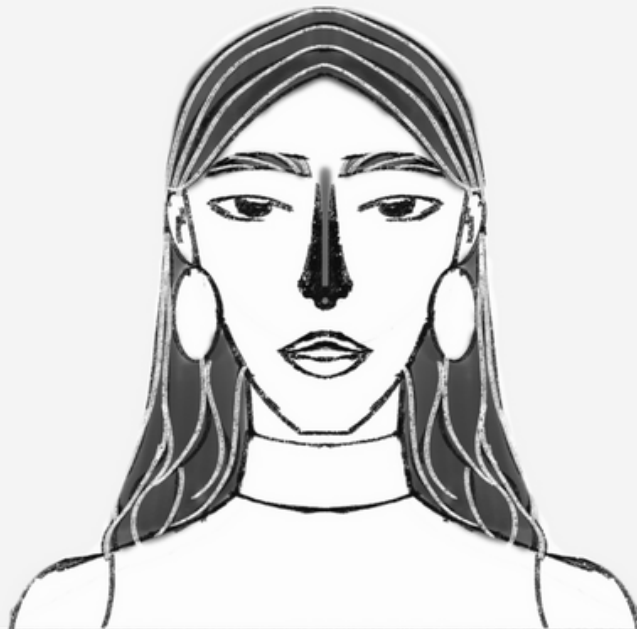


How not to mention rising water levels? Sea level rise is due to two main causes: thermal expansion caused by ocean warming and increased melting of ice on land, such as glaciers and ice sheets. Future scenarios indicate that, as sea levels continue to rise and extreme events become more frequent, without the adoption of adaptation strategies and measures, we will see increased flood risks for coastal communities and give rise to epochal migrations with ripple effects on the international order.

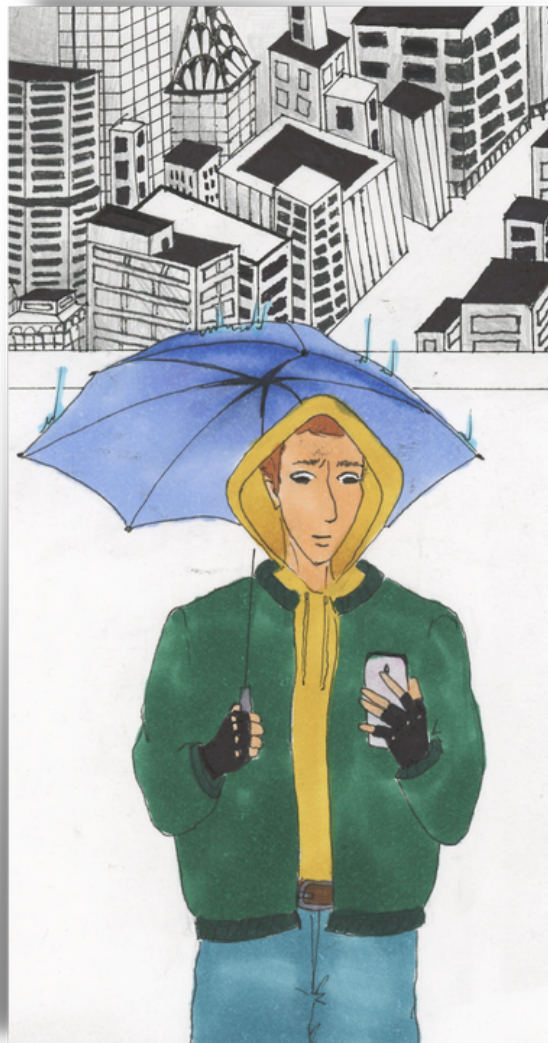
Climate change will lead to irreversible damage to our glaciers and permafrost, which contains large amounts of greenhouse gases, microbes and other chemicals. One of the risks associated with thawing permafrost is the potential release into the air of chemicals and microbes that have been trapped for thousands of years in the ice. What is certain is that the changes taking place in Antarctica and the Arctic could trigger devastating consequences for the future of humans on Earth. These areas, in fact, help balance the climate of the entire planet. A warmer Arctic would have devastating consequences for the climate around the globe.



By 2050, 200 million people may need humanitarian aid each year due to the climate crisis, twice as many as today. A timely response to disasters is not enough and does not save enough lives, and it is necessary to work with nature in a sustainable way to protect people from the climate crisis.



"WHAT A RAINY DAY!"



NEW YORK 2030



Why does it always have to be like this?

FIRELOVE

18:28

Are you there?

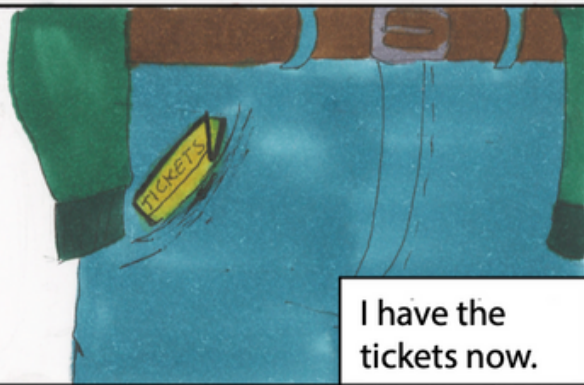
Rosalia

No sorry, today I can't come anymore. I'm so sorry!

But why? I already bought the tickets!

Rosalia

Sorry, I just can't come. Maybe next time!!

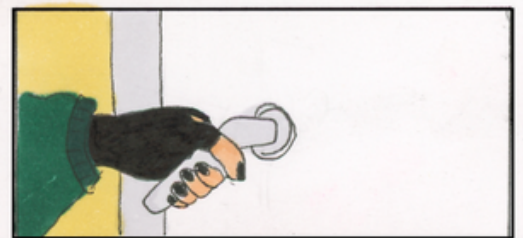
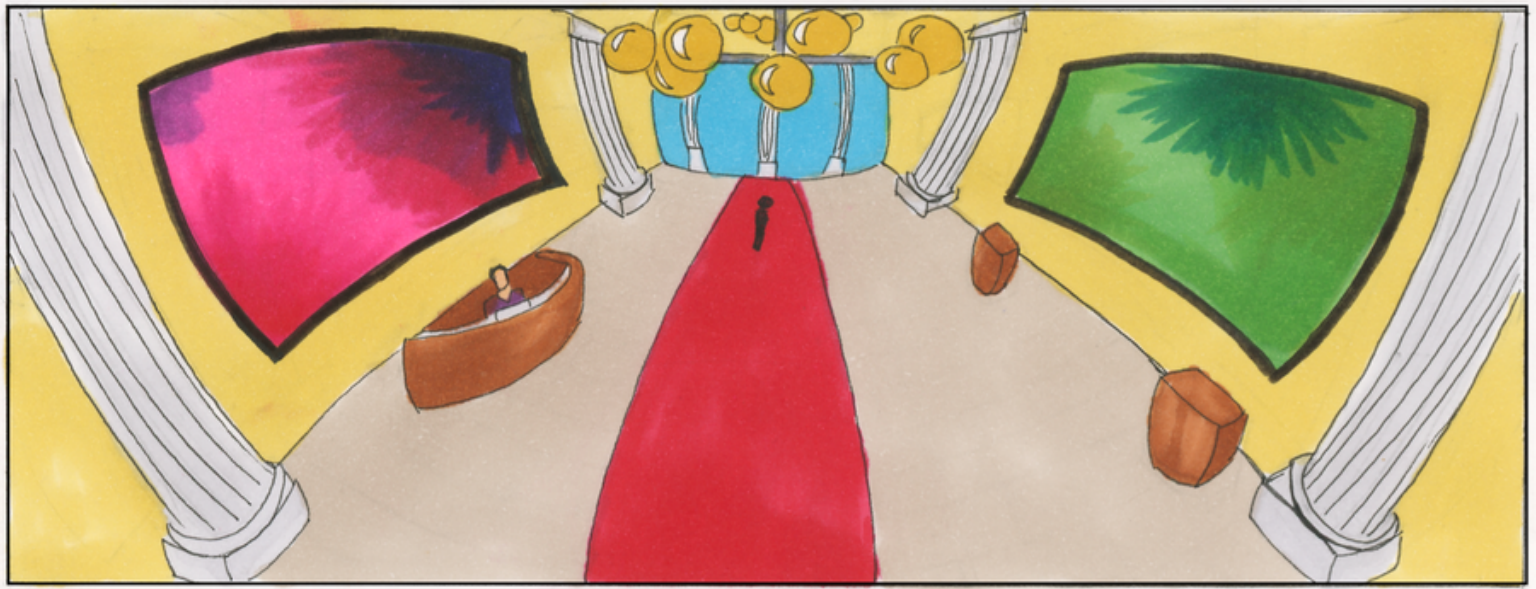


I have the tickets now.

And I don't have time to meet my friends.



I guess I'll have to go alone.





What is this place?

Where am I?

**Why is everything
so sad?**



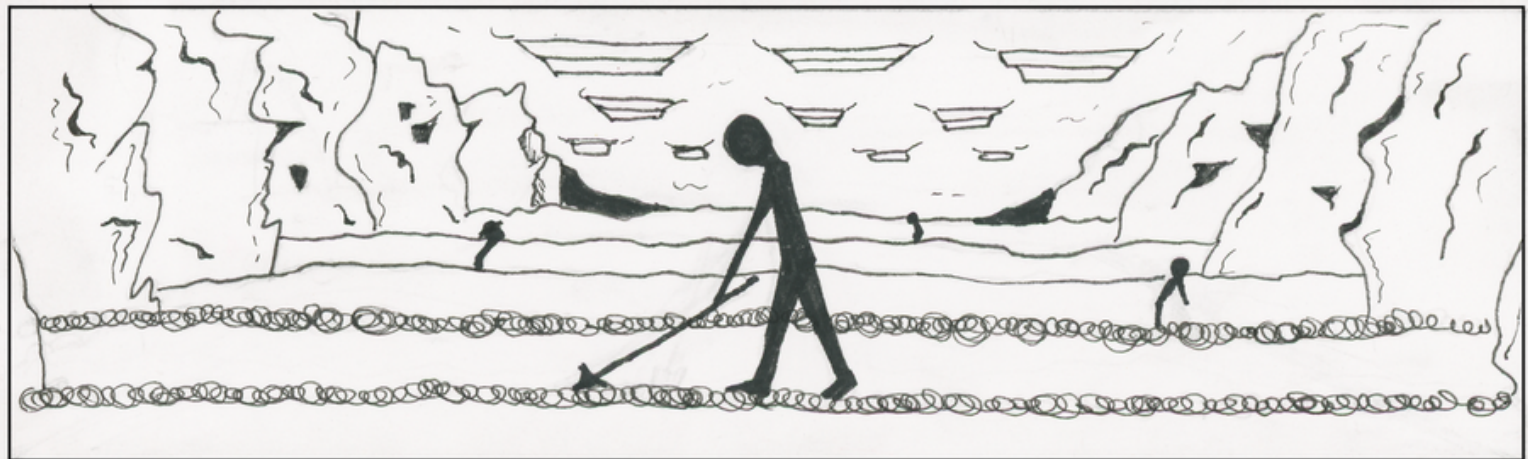
Young man, remember that you have your share to pay!

Hey Yuri!
How are you?
How's it going with the potato crop?

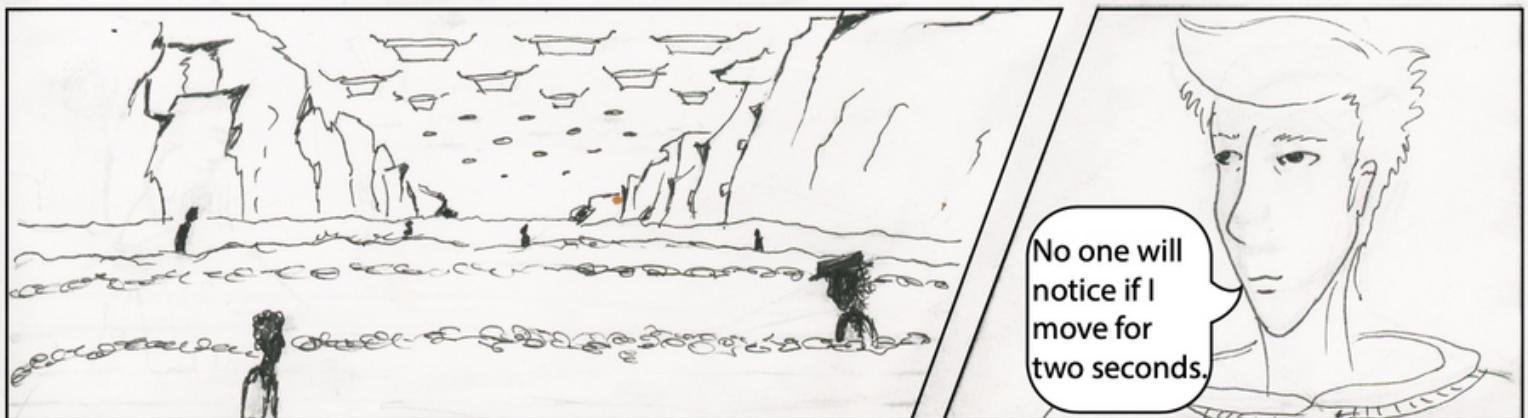
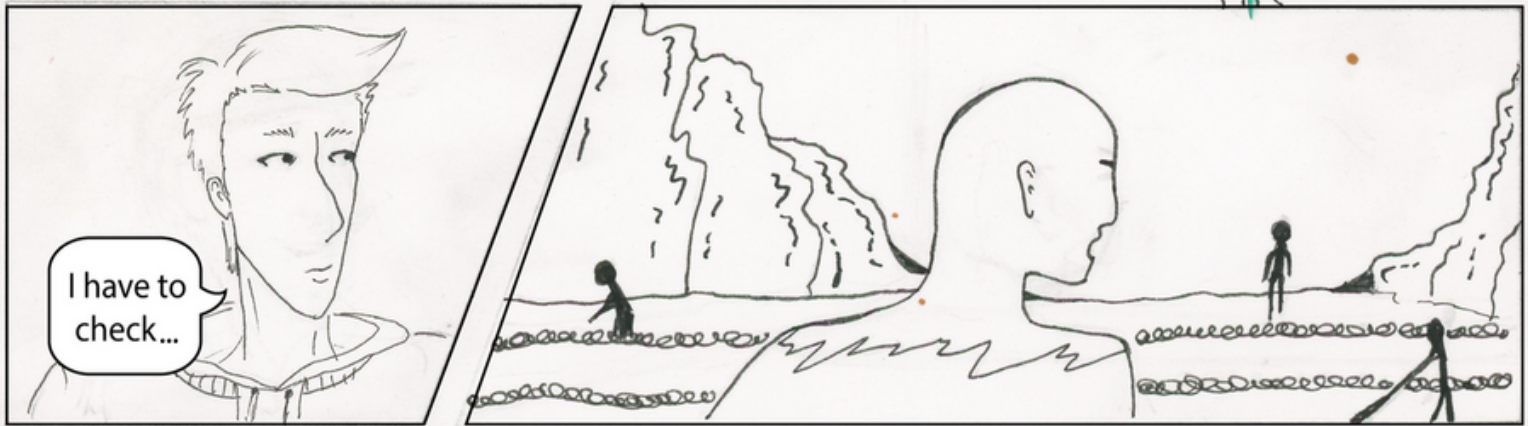
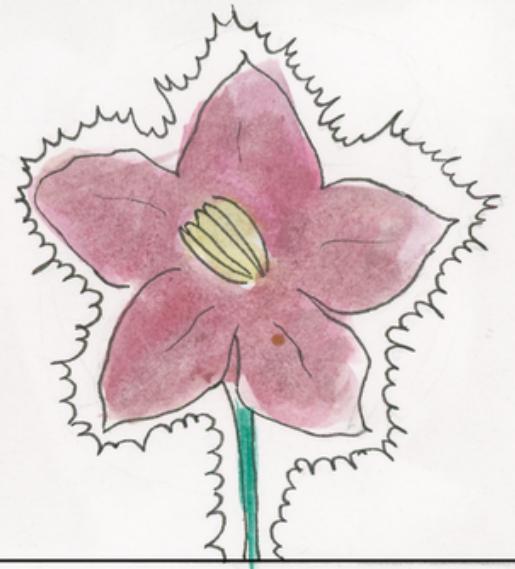
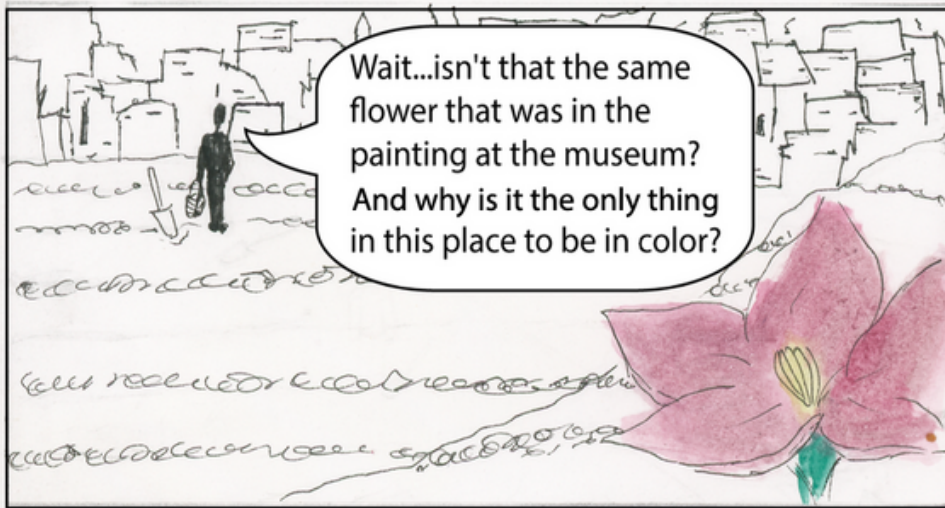
You don't want to recreate last year's famine, do you?

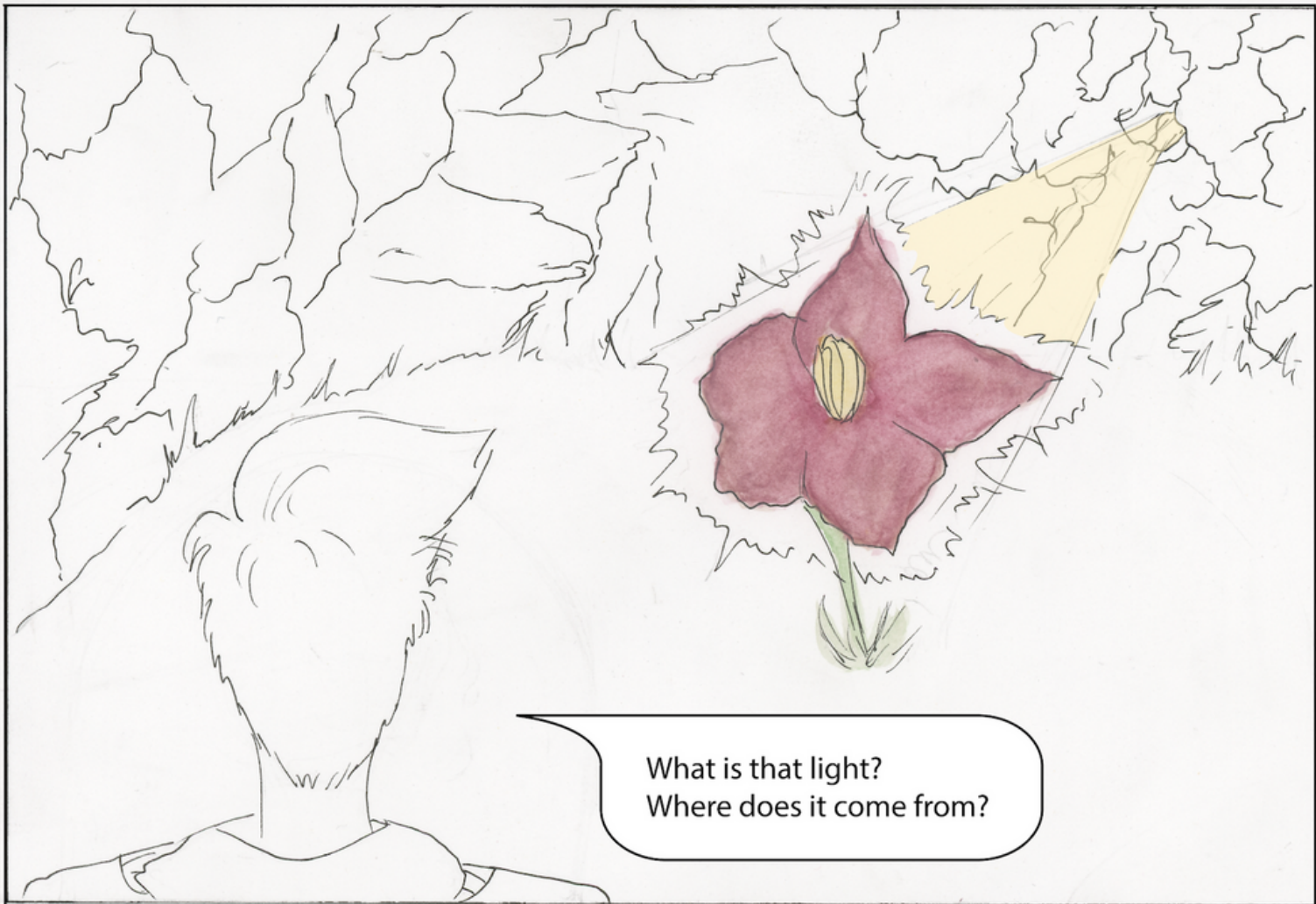
Famine? Who are these people? How do they know me?
Secondly, why are they all so shabby?

WHY ARE YOU NOT DOING ANYTHING? GET BACK TO WORK NOW!

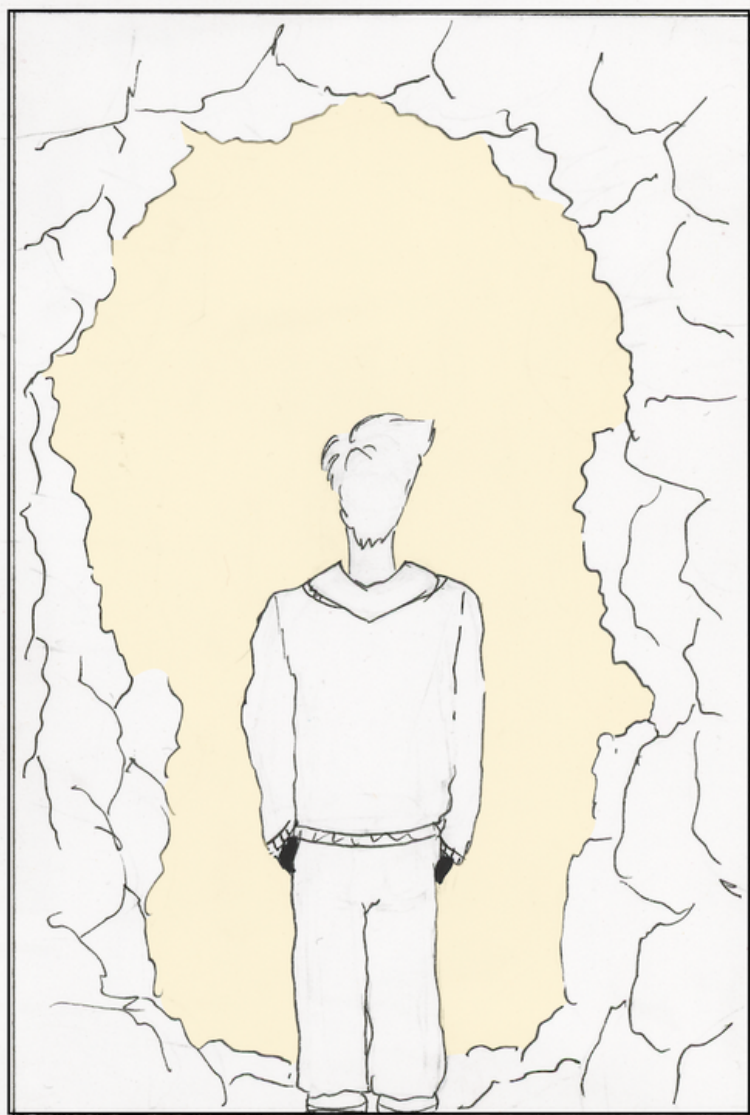
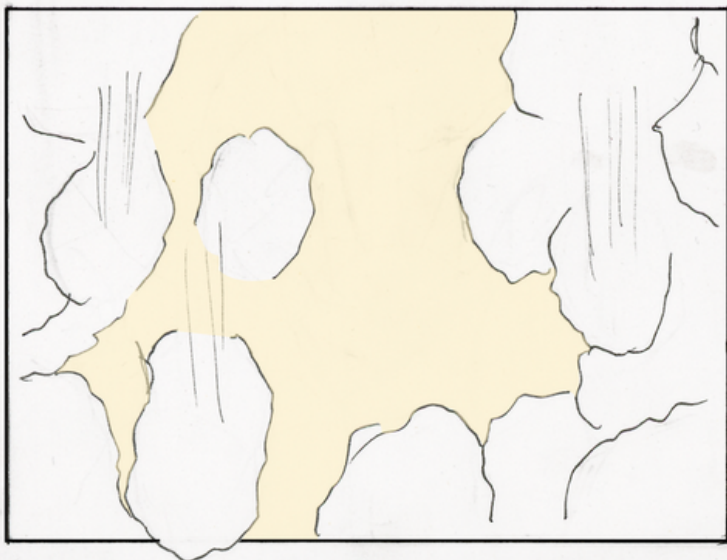
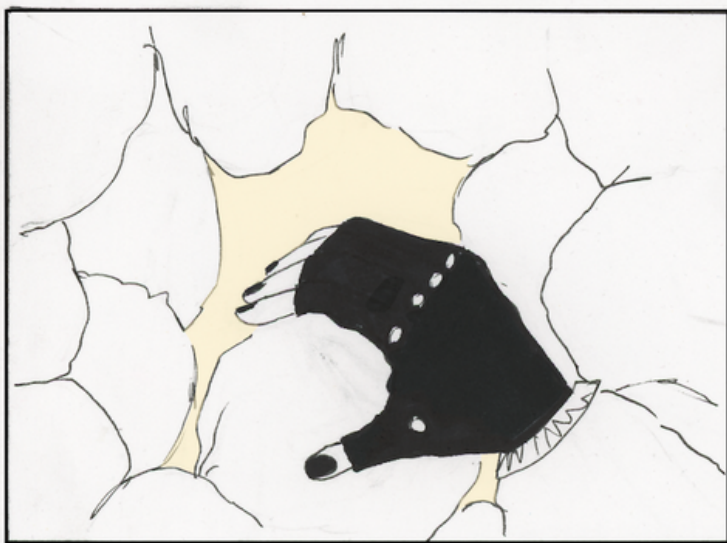


AFTER FOUR HOURS OF WORK





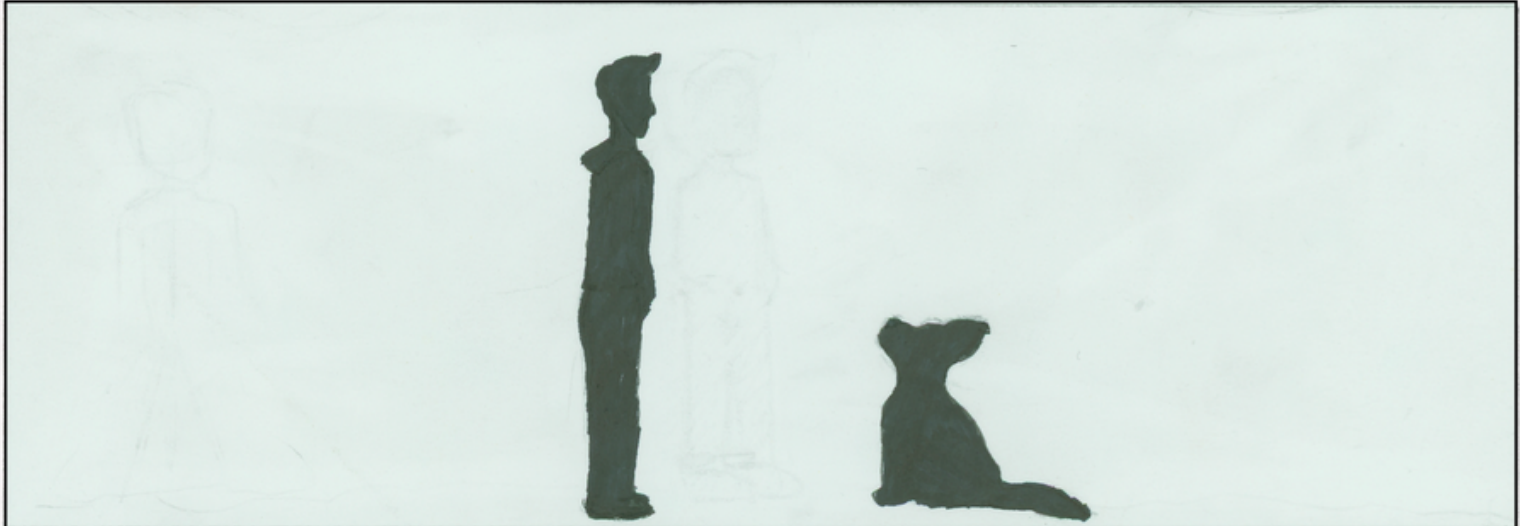
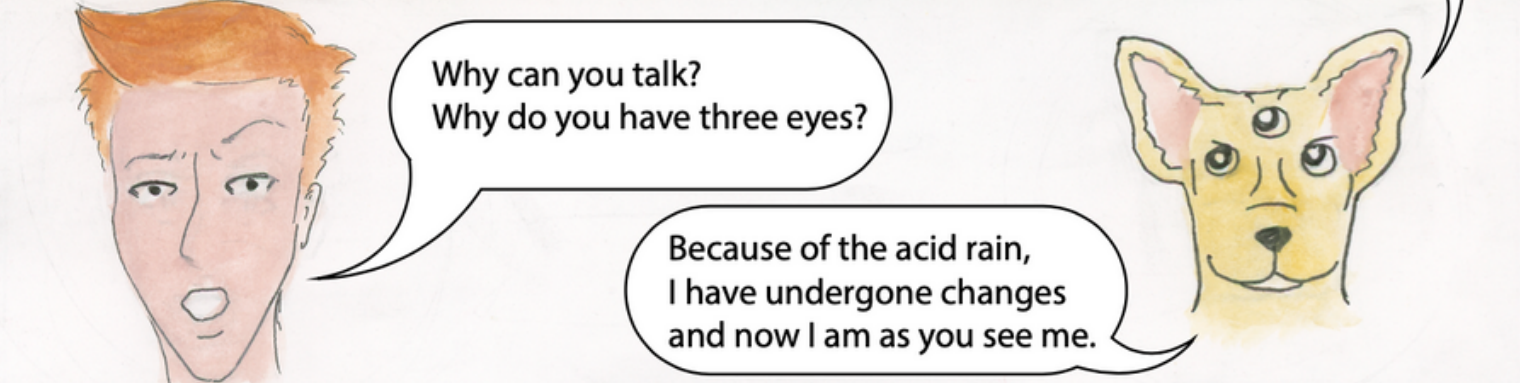
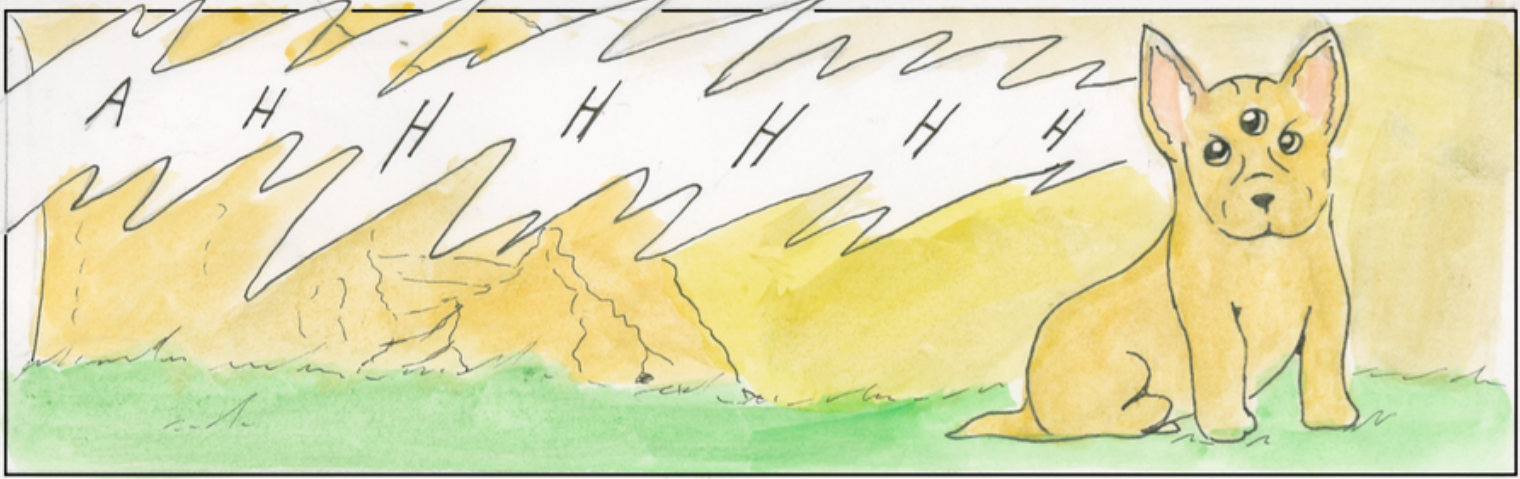
What is that light?
Where does it come from?

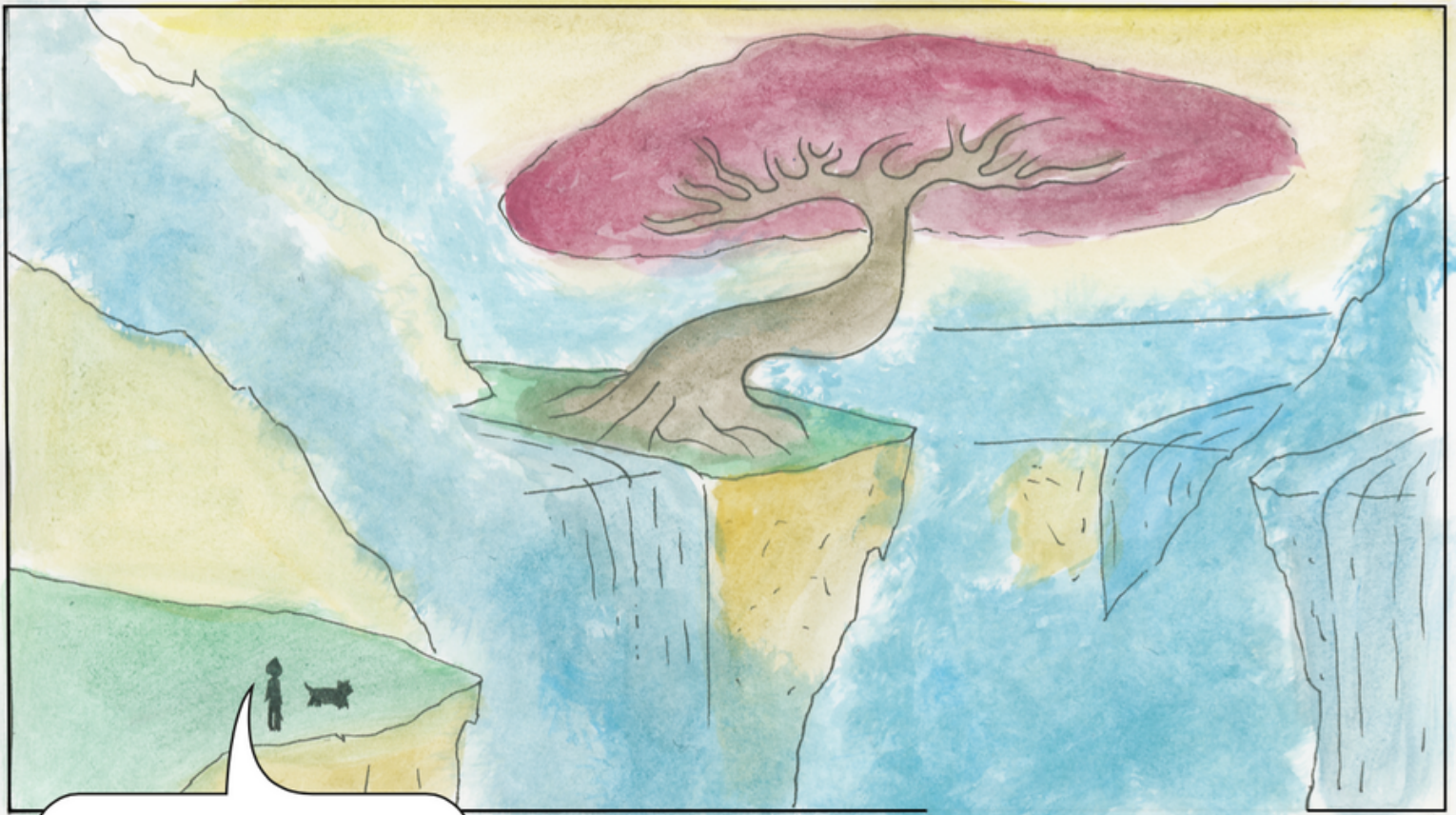




CRACK!

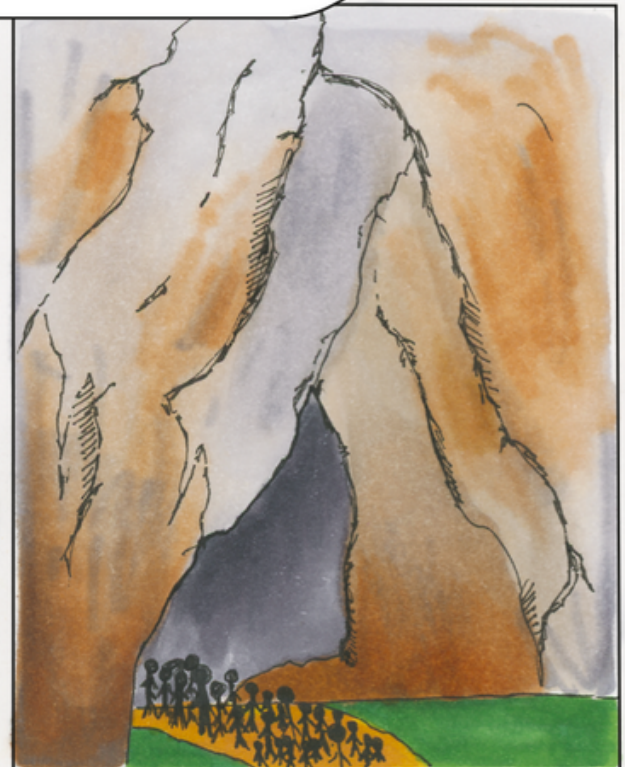
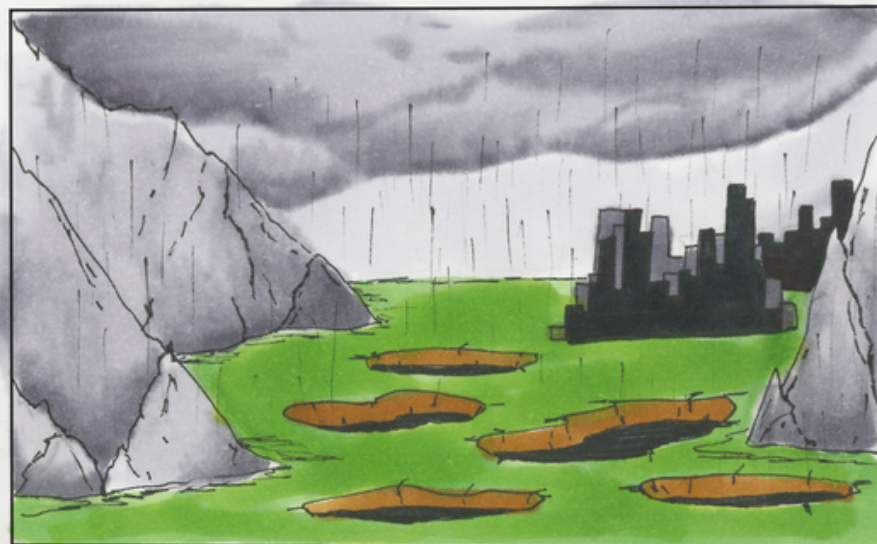


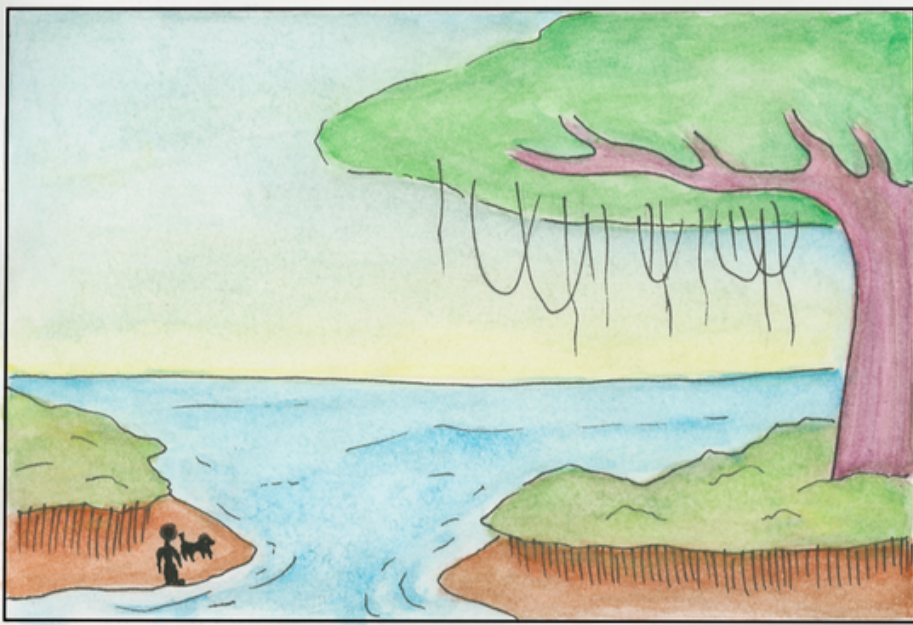




What is this place? Why is it like this?

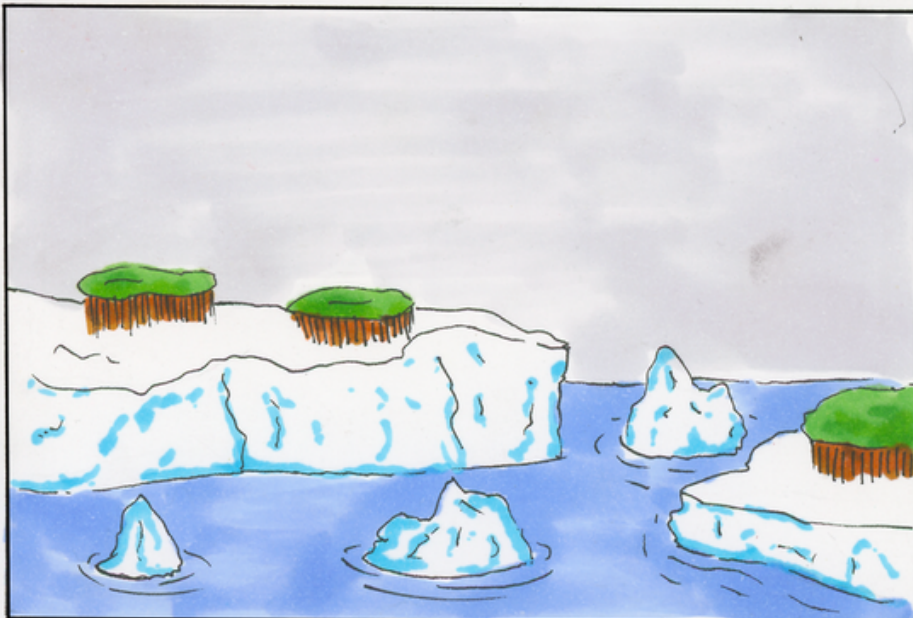
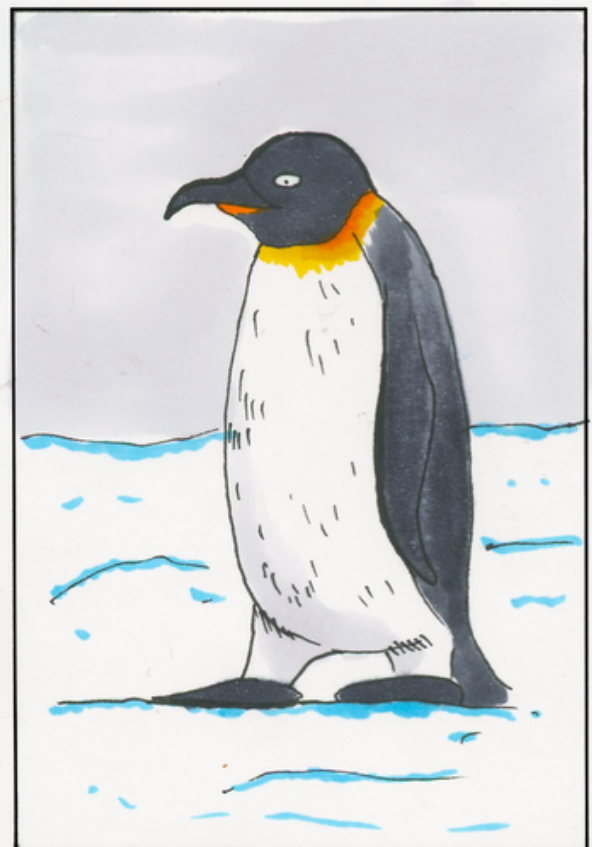
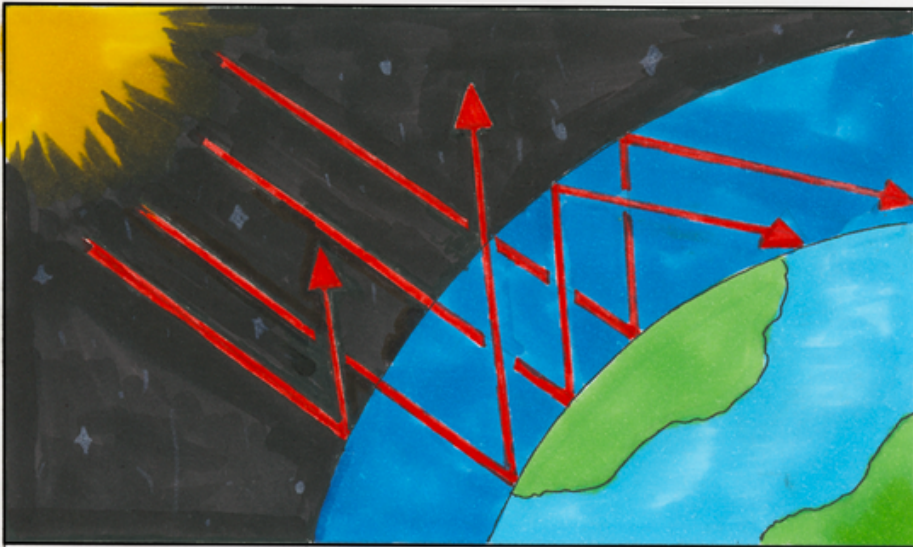
When the acid rain started, humans took refuge in the underground caves to survive, while it was more difficult for animals. For the weaker species, which could not cope with the mutation, there was no escape, while others managed to cope and adapt. Not long after the rains ended, the flora managed to regrow, also undergoing mutations.





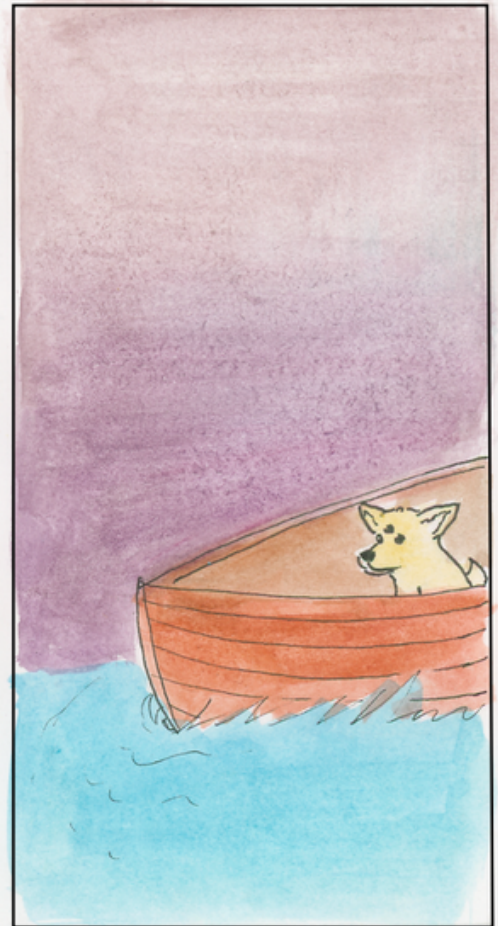
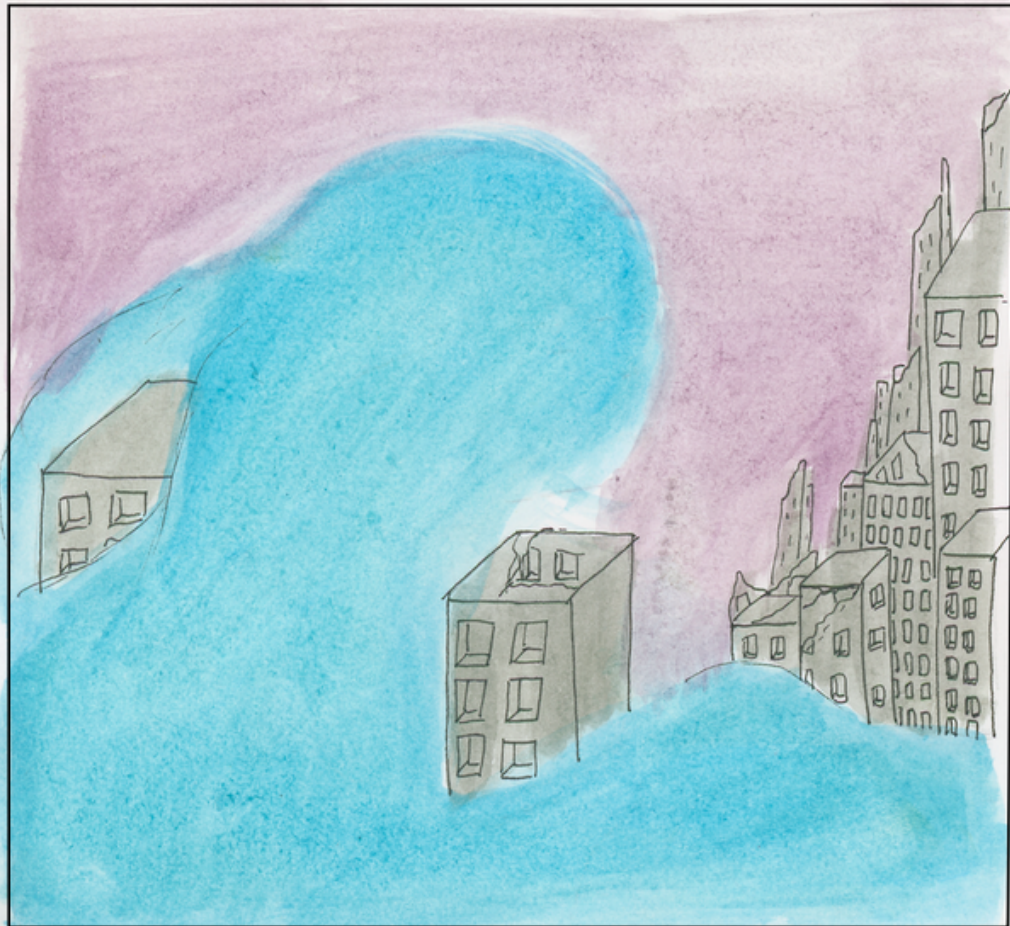
Due to the greenhouse effect, the sun's rays enter the atmosphere, bounce and remain trapped under the greenhouse gases (CO₂, methane).

In addition, due to global warming, animals have had to adapt by changing, as in this case: penguins have taken on some characteristics of parrots.





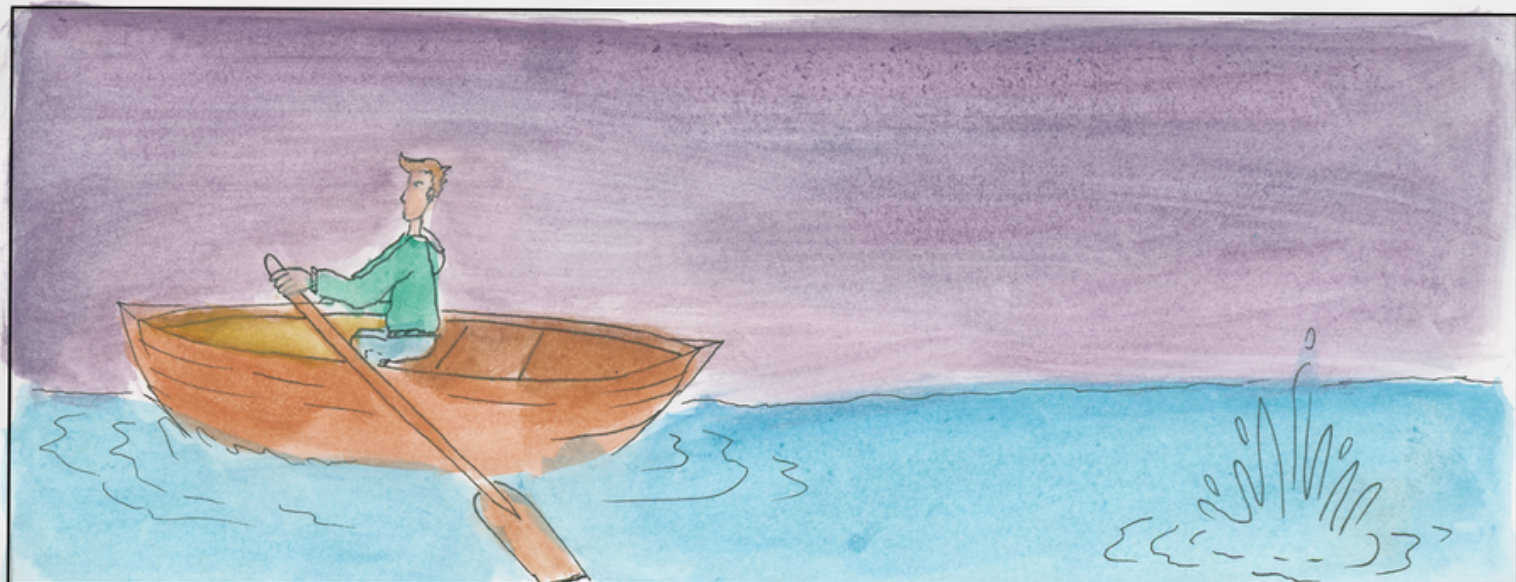
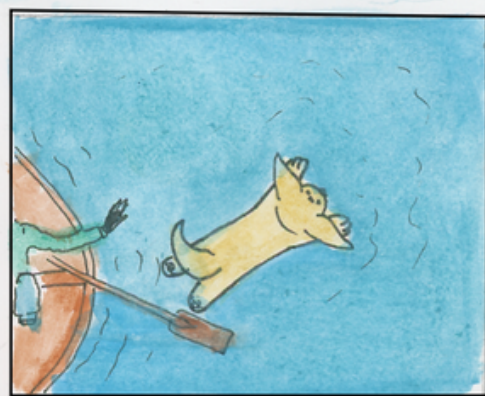
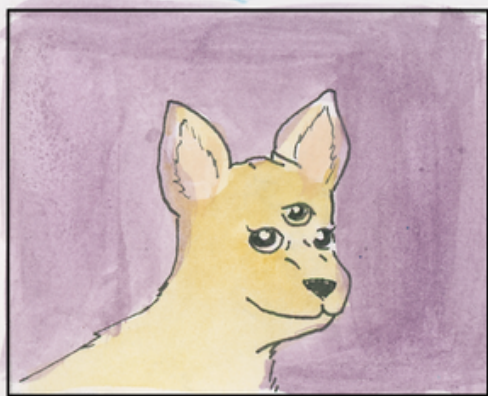
Everything is flooded due to the melting of the glaciers, which have raised the sea level and the water has reached the cities.

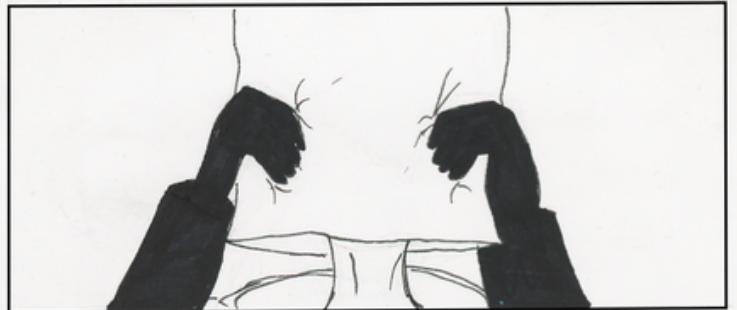
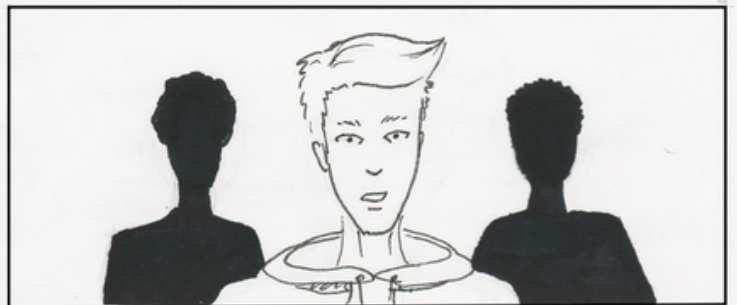
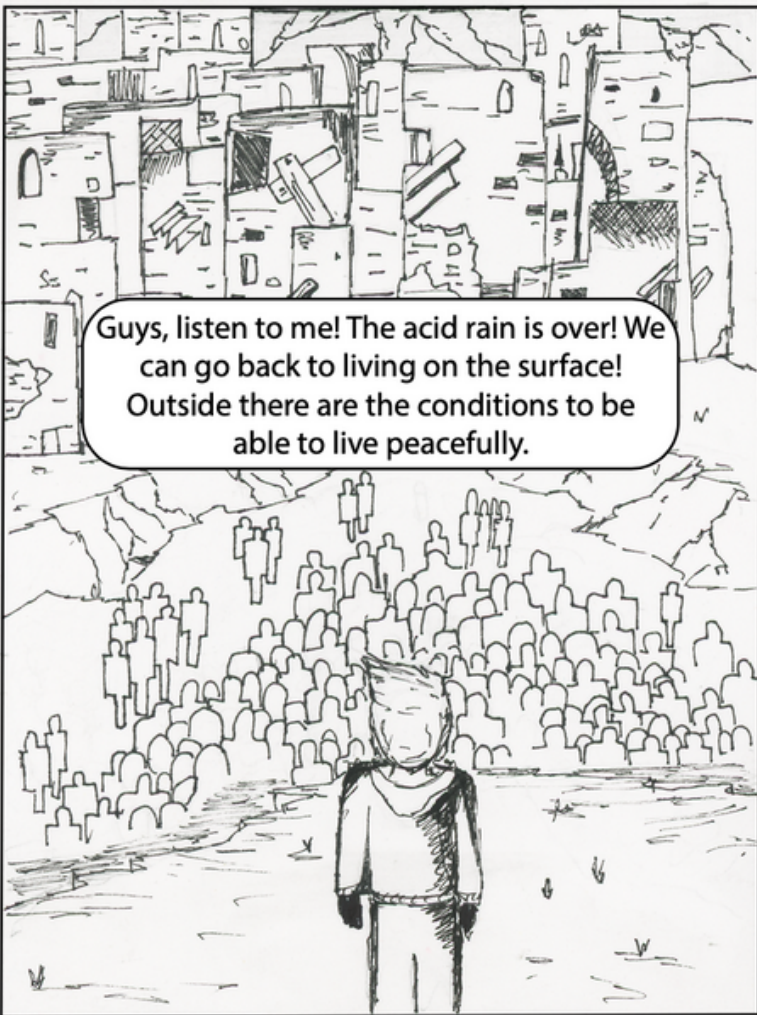
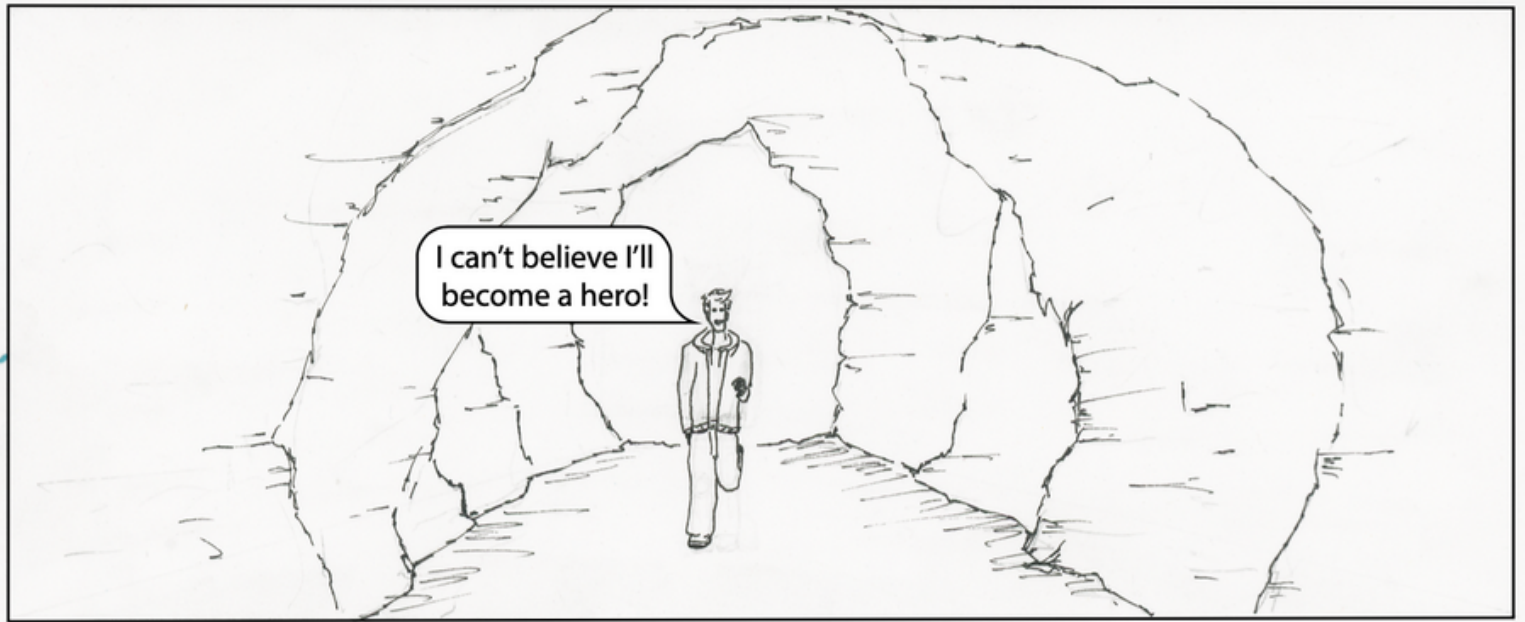


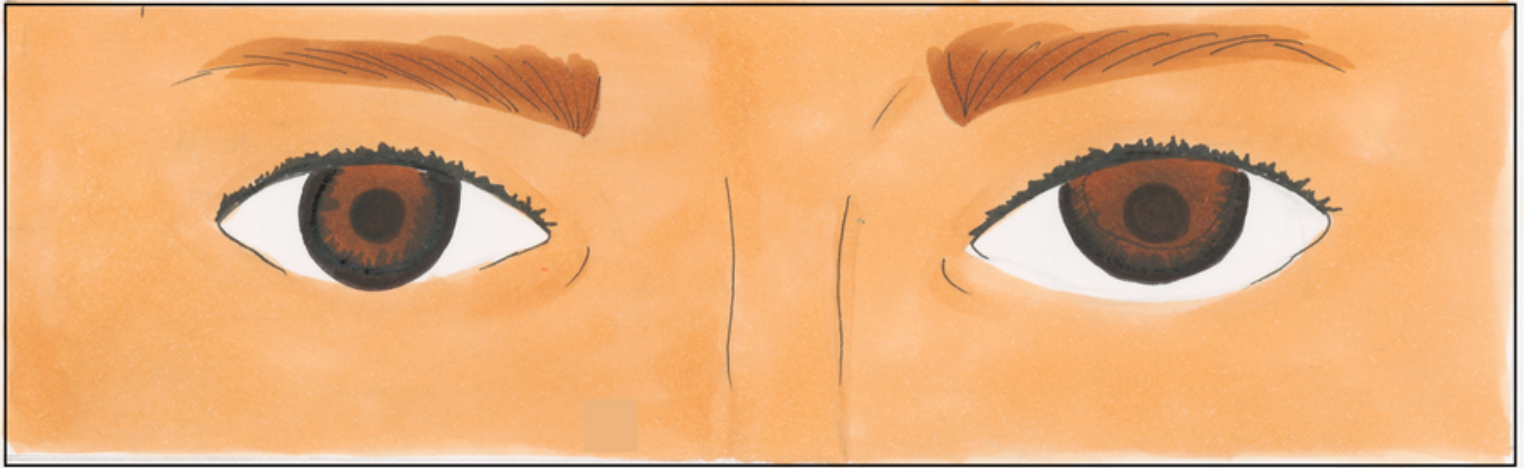
Great! Now I can go and call the others too! They will be happy to come back to the surface and I will be recognised for making this discovery. I will become very rich!

No, you can't do that! I have already told you that humans are a problem for this ecosystem.

I don't care, I don't want to keep working all day. Besides, if I told them, I would become a hero!





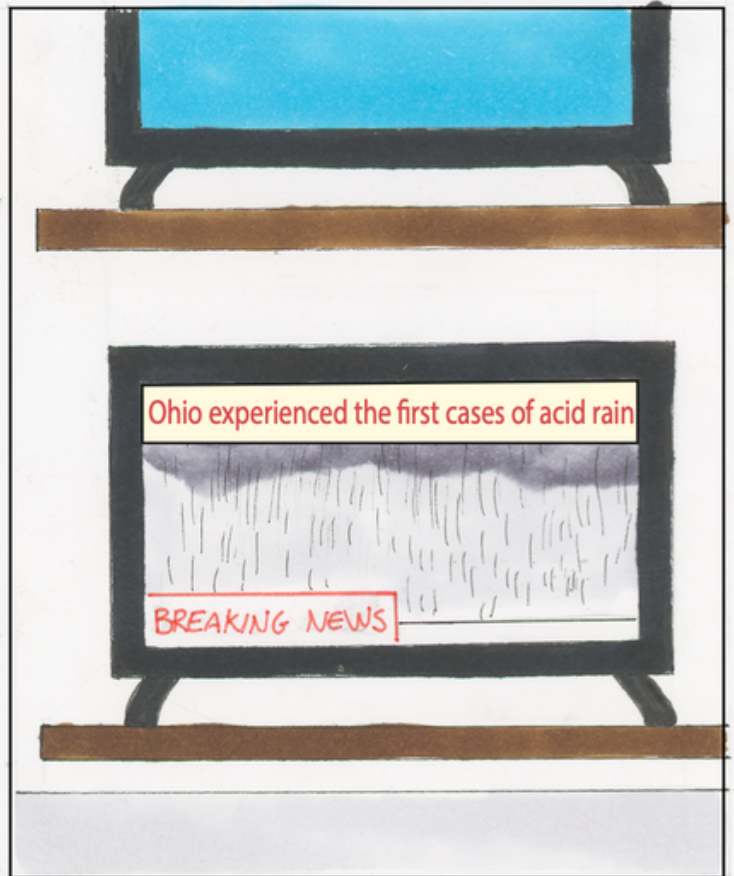
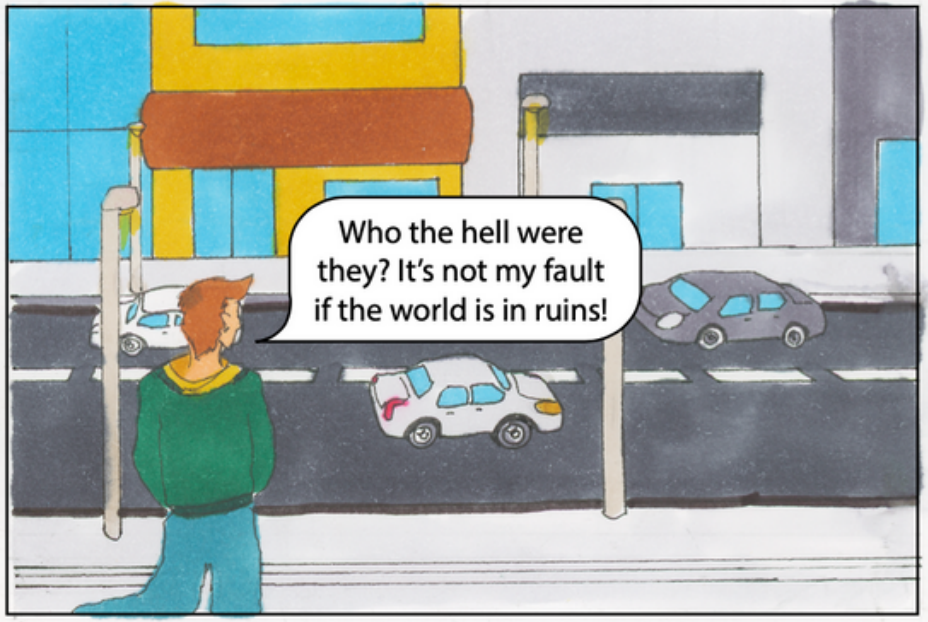


GAME OVER

YOU ARE YET ANOTHER DEMONSTRATION THAT WE ARE
A SPECIES DOOMED TO EXTINCTION. YOU HAVE
DEMONSTRATED ONE OF THE MOST DESTRUCTIVE
CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR SPECIES,
NAMELY SELFISHNESS.

EXIT





"DEEP BREATH"

“Don’t worry, Mr. Whitebell, our instructions are simple and clear. Marmoreo’s guys aren’t dumb, you’ll likely be fine.”

The minister tried to reply under the gag, yet no one understood. Diré took the gag off the man, just to let him gas out a bit.

“Commie bast....! We don’t negotiate with terrorists! If you love red sooo much, we’ll be happy to throw you in the flames of the Steam Lungs boiler!”. Suddenly, the gag was between his teeth again. Replying was useless, at least until the end of the ride. From the fibres of the blindfold, the minister could see some lights alternating with the darkness usually present at night. The only thing he could tell was that they were going through a residential area, filled with lampposts. He kept growling for the entire ride, he kept making muffled noises, that made sense only in his mind. The car jerked on ventilation pipes, making the man that always had all the protection that an important minister gets leap forward. The failure of such protection could only mean one of two things: either he wasn’t important at all, or who abducted him was really good at being a terrorist. “For my own sake, it better be the second option”, he thought.

A sharp pain suddenly struck the right side of his neck making him jump and yelp like a dog hit by a human. It was incredibly fast and sharp, an unnatural invasion on his neck, a bite that spat venom in him. The syringe that the man to his right was holding was still dripping.

Under the blindfold, the man’s eyes widened in a furious, yet invisible, expression of doubt and rage; then his face changed again, almost instantly, becoming apathetic and, as far as it could be seen, gradually duller and duller.

Finally, he stopped growling and complaining, focusing on the only thing that could have calmed him down. Even though he couldn’t see, he knew that closing his eyes would have helped him. His attention fell on the sound of the wheels, on the air pipes on the road that gave the trip a constant rhythm, making the car jump whenever one met the wheels. He was tasting the powdery taste of the gag that had been accompanying him for almost forty minutes. Only by focusing on the sounds from the road could he not vomit.



Slowly he felt further and further away from the car... *Maybe it’s just a dream. Yeah! Nothing bad is going to happen.* The continuous sound of the tires hitting the pipes began getting louder, almost familiar. The attention slowly slid from the street to the ticking of the gears. Familiar gears. In his ears, he could hear the Steel Lungs colossal alveoli, while in his mind came back into focus the enormous brass mechanisms on which he walked every day, or that he watched in the sky when a glow came in contact with his retina. The city breathed, drank, and got wet. And the great minister Howard Whitebell worked perpetually for the wealth of the citizens.

The sudden golden glow of a lamppost stopped in his eyes and got imprinted in his mind. It was manipulated, deformed, refined, taking the shape of what the minister walked on just an

hour before. Before him, there were the gigantic gears of the system for the depuration and supply of rain floating over his head. He was observing them from the window of a private zeppelin coming from the Marmoreo Palace, which was docking on a small quay that jutted out from the platform like a brass promontory, piercing the sky and the clouds, which dissolved as soon as they met it on their route. The airship attached itself to the platform with a weak jolt, and after a few minutes, the Home Secretary emerged, peeping out of the armoured door on the belly of the balloon in a nice green pinstripe suit. To welcome him, in addition to the eager ranks of journalists and photographers, there was the leader of the Alveolus, behind whom stood numerous uniformed figures all alike, one a shadow of the other, there for the sole and sacred reason of protecting Howard Whitebell from the heat of the opponents who did not support the work of the party and, consequently, of the entire lifestyle they had all had to adopt. The leader of the Alveolus removed a heavy brass gas mask with three filters from his face, reddened by the prolonged use he had made of it, and came towards him, stretching out a hand smeared with grease and soot, while with the other he adjusted the braces of his work uniform. For him, there was no minister who stood up to the dress code. He was the head of the Alveolus, what the heck, it was thanks to him that the crops did not corrode at the mercy of the acid rain. After the obligatory pleasantries, five policemen rushed from behind the director's back, taking their own shape from the shadows they were, and distributed themselves around the minister to escort him through the crowd of journalists and possible fanatics with pistols in their inside jacket pockets.

The platform was immense, a sheet of brass almost forty metres thick and hundreds in size, in constant excitement because of the enormous gears that lurked in its belly and held aloft by mighty steam and anbaric energy reactors that had been spinning non-stop for decades. The gear tips glittered high in the sky, reflecting the light filtered by the huge diesel-glass dome that ensured the circulation of air from the surface to the deepest alveoli.

He could now see them clearly, the gears. What he had observed from the window had been deviously distorted by perspective, making those monstrosities appear much smaller than they were. In addition to the constant vibration of the platform, there was a continuous background noise due to the movements of the huge steel and brass wheels that moved in every direction, interspersed with small paths that led through the whole Alveolus to guide the workers to their work, reaching deep into the fifteen floors where the rainwater purification and supply apparatus was developed.

He shook hands with the head of the Alveolus, despite the fact that his almost ostentatious unkemptness tickled that part of his mind that urged him to identify as an opponent anyone who, at the very least, did not prostrate himself to him with a kissing hand. Here comes one of the highest offices of state, and he doesn't even bother to wash his hands? *Workers, scum! But I'll fix this one! I'll teach him respect!*

The minister smiled, as if to probe, just one last time, how deep his disrespect could go. He found that it was bottomless.

The guards, led by the head of the Alveolus, led Whitebell and a retinue of other government officials up to a stage on the western edge of the platform, surrounded by a jumble of springs and mechanisms that spewed steam as soon as the tangle of gears beneath them clicked forward or in any other direction that might serve to send the rain filtering down. The head of the Alveolus stopped at the top of a ladder, allowing himself to be overtaken by the minister and his retinue of officials making their appearance on the stage.

As soon as the minister's face appeared from behind the gears that framed the stage and the audience, a tumult of applause covered the noise of the platform for a moment, which only resumed when the minister raised his hands to quell them. He gave the floor to some officials who introduced the party's major campaigns, followed by a list of the works that taxpayers' money was funding to contribute to the collective welfare.

"What is it that we are inaugurating?" the minister asked one of the escorting policemen in a whisper.

"The restoration of the water supply pavilion, sir."

"Ah, the right restoration, thank you."

"It is an honour to be able to help you."

After another cascade of applause, less resounding than that offered to the minister a little earlier, Whitebell placed his notes on a wooden lectern and swiped three joined fingers of his right hand upwards from the sternum to the chin, accompanying this gesture with the words 'Long Breathe, Lucky People', then began his inauguration speech:

"My fellow citizens, my friends, I speak for the entire Marmoreo team as I speak to you on this stage. We have treasured your trust and restored to the highest standards this colossal facility that is responsible for keeping our fields, our food, thriving. We have efficiently employed the resources of the state treasury to ensure that our partnerships with the Steamlung will ensure that we have perfectly congenial and snappy mechanisms that will take care of the city's well-being." He stared for a moment at the blank sheets of paper he'd been pretending to read.

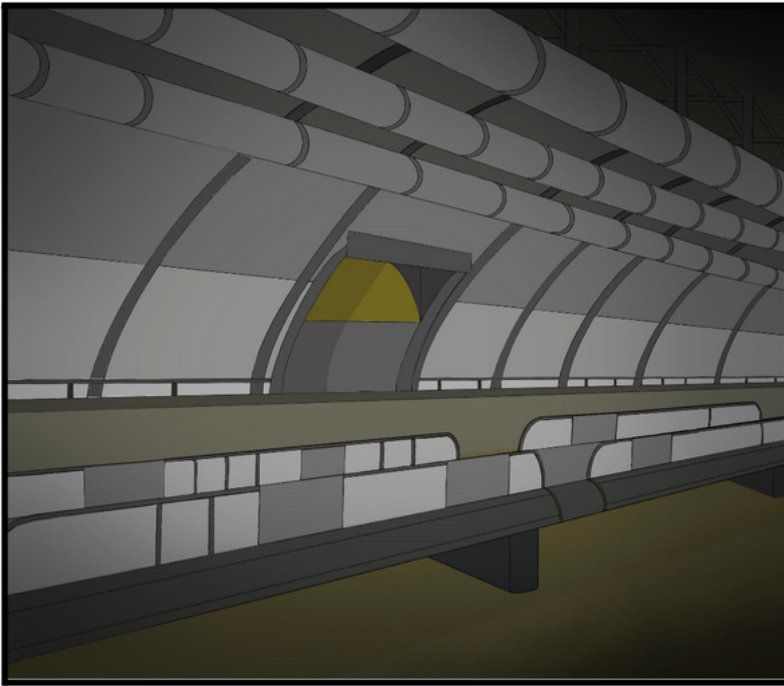
"We have received threats. Communists, revolutionary people, who will never aim for standards that will ensure prosperity for our nation. Look behind me," he said, jerking his arms back near his shoulders, stretching two short, bony thumbs towards a complex web of huge gears that loomed over him, turning and grinding in glitters of gold and brass.

"The colour of these mechanisms is gold. What would affiliate with people like that get you? To coal-black, cheap mechanisms, left to themselves, in total anarchy. The plantations would burn, and poverty would seep into our streets like a raging river," he shouted, slamming his hand on the lectern.

"Our fruitful collaborations with Steamlung and a perpetual flow of these gears will be the pillars that will hold up our society, they will be what will keep wealth flowing through our streets, clean air, water, it will be the era..." the minister's words were abruptly dispersed by the mighty vibration of the air, deep and grave, which started from the throat of a powerful explosion that blew up the complex brass plant behind him into a luxurious and brilliant burst of gold.

The papers from the minister's lectern first shuddered, then were projected into the sky, from where they fell back onto the minister's head as he collapsed to the ground, knocked over by the explosion as if he were a sheet of paper himself. For a moment nothing could be heard, a sudden disaster had shattered the eardrums of the entire audience. Faint hisses of steam hurled gears of all sizes upwards, unhinging and carrying with them hundreds of components from at least ten other floors. The gleaming brass that animated the view of the mechanisms became covered in soot, while those still clean reflected the glow of a fiery mushroom that erupted from the right corner of the stage and behind the minister, coming within a few metres of the dome. The screams coming from the audience were not only of terror, but they were also triggered by the fallout of the hot, heavy pieces on the crowd, by the burns from the vapours and by the loose skin, melting in the clothes.

Howard Whitebell found himself lying half on the ground, his elbows propping up the floor, staring wide-eyed at the rainwater purification plant turning into the tenth circle of hell. A loud tinnitus suddenly burst inside his ears. In the distance he saw the lips of the head of the Alveolus moving fast. Hearing him was almost impossible, his voice was slurred with a loud whistle that trampled all other sounds. He was waiting for him with the other two officers a short distance away, pointing with his arm to a trapdoor that allowed access to the lower floors. He felt pain, Howard Whitebell.



However, the confusion in which he was immersed prevented him from concentrating to understand where it was coming from.

Where they arrived there were no workers, or machinery. From the stench that mingled with the general commotion, they deduced they were in the sewers. They stood there for almost twenty minutes, saying nothing, helplessly listening to the screams of journalists and citizens who had bothered to go and see their favourite minister. Then Whitebell pressed his ear hard.

He had finally calmed down enough to locate his pain. Now he could worry about something else. His auricle had collapsed onto the rest of the organ, leaving a mess of burnt skin and cartilage that obstructed the passage of sound.

With his other hand, the minister leaned against the wall to lift himself off the muddy, slimy ground on which he was sitting. He froze as he heard numerous footsteps rushing down the sewer. In the dim light passing the border of the manhole, he saw that everyone he had gone down with was sitting in front of him.

No one was standing. He saw them emerge from the end of the tunnel. A dark mass of men ran in their direction.

"Are you the rescuers? Who's down there?" A cold, sharp stain spread like water poured down the back of his neck. The thick mass rushing towards them was now clearer, and it was enough for the minister to see what the oncoming men were clutching in their hands to understand what was on his neck.

"I knew it," he hissed through his teeth. The five policemen reached for their scabbards, when the head of the Alveolus yelled from behind them: "Don't touch the guns, otherwise he dies." They turned around, seeing the minister almost bursting into tears, held back by the hand of the head of the Alveolus on his shoulder and the pistol pointing at the back of his head.

"You will now slowly remove the pistols from their scabbards and leave them on the ground. You have thirty seconds."

After the clanking of the pistols thrown to the ground, the only other noise that echoed along the veins of the sewers was the explosion of the workers' rifles on the heads of the minister's escort.

In the seven years that Mr. Whitebell had fulfilled, or abused, his office, his face had become more and more mixed in the satisfied and complacent smiles that the feeling of commanding gave him. However, it had never been something more complex than managing money or inaugurating new pavilions in the Steel Lungs. His face tended more and more to get stuck into the static, unchanging features of a rubber mask, indestructible and resistant to every blow. Crowned in a perpetual black bowler hat, he had never hinted at lowering his lips from that constant mocking smile with which he directed the lives of thousands of hopeful voters. This peculiar property was probably due to the fact that no one had ever had the strength or even the idea to approach him with a match and melt the gum off that grotesque face of his.

Whitebell was pushed forward by the persuasive touch of the pistol. Three workers detached themselves from the crowd, welcoming him with a hemp rope that tangled around his wrists, ending up with two bandages that made him blind and mute.

Now he wasn't smiling anymore. His face was dripping to the ground and his smile had gone. He, Howard Whitebell, Home Secretary, had been beaten. Beaten by the tiny force of fifteen workers, who together had rubbed the stick of revolution into his face until it caught fire.

"Diré", said the head of the Alveolus.

One of the three workers, the one with the dirtiest soot on his face, stepped forward, pulling out a revolver wedged in the waistband of his jeans faded by years of wear.

"Go with Thomas, take Whitebell and board my airship. Take him to the trade union. Remember, lights out." Thomas also stepped forward. The faint light filtering through the manhole broke on the compact layer of soot that covered his face. There would have been no need for balaclavas or means to mask their identity. Working at the Alveolus of Purification and Rain Supply had placed a sufficiently effective mask on their faces.

2

After the car came the shadow. Or at least, *during* the car there was a shadow.

Whitebell had summoned it up to avoid looking further into the well into which he was falling at breakneck speed aboard a Mercedes 770. He almost thought he could see his face melt into that shadow. The dream was then followed by discomfort, almost as real as the dream, except that the minister really felt it. It penetrated his right shoulder vaguely, prolonged for a few seconds and then ended abruptly. Perhaps there was the border with the shadow: there it had begun.

I'm in the shadows. It wasn't hard to notice this. Instead, it was difficult to establish a contact with the dark aura that surrounded him. Of the fleeting shreds of dreams that rained down on his head, one of these was coloured with reality and consciousness and this gave him a tangible difference from all the others. When this shred of concrete truth settled in Whitebell's mind, the minister had no choice but to cling to it, close his eyes and let himself be guided towards the way out of that shower of dreams and memories. And so, he had come to *perceive* the shadow. It was little more than a veil, made so by the brief and incomprehensible sensations coming from the other side. It too was a border. It took a long time before the noises and lights took a sensible shape. When it did, a jolt on the other side helped tear the veil apart, allowing the minister to cross to the other side. It was a forced

passage. The minister noticed this as soon as he had passed through the shadow, or the veil. He only had to look at Diré and the red-hot iron he held in his hand.

"Wh-ch-today?" the minister mumbled.

"What?"

The question was in his mouth, but the effect of the drug administered to him in his sleep kicked it in, letting out only sore words that were only a vague spectre of the concept they wanted to express.

He nearly returned to the other side of the veil.

Another jolt hit his face. It was so quick that the roasted meat smell came over before his scream, which sounded something like "What day is it today?"

"What day? You haven't exaggerated with the sleeping pill, I hope!"

"I don't think so, but even if I did, I don't care. We need him alive, not conscious."

"Thomas, it's sure that when you want to be an idiot, you do it really well. He has to be able to talk to prove he's alive."

"Hmm. I don't like being called an idiot."

"You'll make it right for you."

The minister's eyes widened when Diré almost melted them in jerking the hand that brandished the red-hot iron towards Thomas, missing him by inches.

"How long did you make me sleep?" he said straining every word he tried to process.

"You only slept for two hours, Howard," replied impatiently the one who, from what Whitebell understood, had to be Thomas. With his gaze he looked for any hole through which the sun could pass, and finding a skylight in the ceiling, he had confirmation of what he had just been told, since he didn't see any sunbeams passing through it.

Diré leaned over him, grabbing him by the collar of his pinstripe suit and pulling him towards him. He looked him straight into his eyes, trying to figure out how much of him was still making the transition through the veil.

"Try to wake up, you'll soon be speaking to the city," he said then, with an almost maternal look.

"Respect," mumbled the minister in reply.

"Respect?"

"Yyyes, yes here, respect. Call me 'sir', boy." Getting a sentence out of his mouth that really made sense required a great effort. He had to wade through the substance clouding his mind in search of the right glue to hold the words together. And how such an improbable request had ever occurred to him, he never got to wondering, because he was only partially aware of what he was saying, and after this day he could not remember anything else.

"Respect you say, Howard? And where would your respect be? You said you wanted to burn us in the flames of the Steel Lungs. Your politics disrespect a lot of people, Howard."

"Iiii do, I provide, I provide for the welfare of our society."

"Keep yourself together, old Howard. We will soon turn on the radio and you will have to sit down at that table and lay down our conditions."

"Conditions?"

Diré looked at the minister straight in his eyes, sensing the effort he was making to assemble the reality around him. His consciousness was still soaked in sleeping pills and his gaze lay inert in the middle of what appeared to be a thick psychological blizzard. The abductor who

had stuck a needle in his neck helped him to his feet, then led him to a radio, in front of which he was seated with a paper in his hands.

"Who would ever listen to such a radio?"

"Many do, certainly at the Marmoreo they will have someone willing to constantly monitor it. Don't worry, someone will be there."

Diré then flicked a switch underneath him, bringing a microphone close to his mouth. With a nod, he told him to start. Behind him, Thomas began pressing the cold barrel of a gun against the back of his neck.

"I am Howard Whitebell, Home Secretary. The heroes of this day, the Anti-Privatisation Front, have taken me into custody. They will be willing to release me, only if in return they obtain the deprivatisation of air circulation, the purification of rain and the circulation of clean water. If measures are not taken, with related laws, to fulfil this rightful task, I will be carried above the airspace of the Marmoreo palace and will be dropped, and then I will stick into the spires protruding from the roof. You have 12 hours."

3

Two hours later, Whitebell was immersed together with his two captors in an unnatural calm that had found its unnatural origin in the constant hollow sound of the radio, which had almost hypnotised and numbed the senses of everyone in that room. The radio, still in front of him, hissed, munching incomprehensibly the empty signal coming from the Marmoreo official radio. No one had come forward yet.

"How boring," Diré exclaimed, after a silence that had lasted several hours.

This sentence reached the minister's ears lucid and full of its meaning, dry from any type of drug he had been injected with hours earlier.

"What?" he hissed from behind the radio.

"Are you bored? Is this supposed to be a fun situation?" the minister continued, raising his voice.

"Take it easy, Howard. I don't enjoy being here and, if it were up to me, you would have been skewered on those spires for days now."

Nervously, Whitebell gave a hint of a laugh.

"And what would you have hoped to gain from my death? Certainly not deprivatisis..."

"Chaos", he interrupted him.

"Chaos? Of course. You are a bunch of reckless anarchists. Chaos..."

"Diré speaks for himself," Thomas interjected.

"None of our comrades would ever approve of such a plan."

From Thomas, the minister's gaze returned to Diré, who in turn shifted an angry look from Thomas, towards him, now turning it into a gaze full of hatred.

"No one here has shown any appreciation for me, but I seem to see a singular hatred in your eyes," Howard attempted to continue.

"As Thomas, you idiot, must have pointed out to you, I have no particular sympathy for you."

"You were bored, weren't you? So, show me the reason for so much hatred. The reason why me. There are many other people in government, like Phileas Patten, much more influential, much richer."

"Richer, Howard? Are you sure? You see, the idea of taking you under our protection is still mine, but this time, unlike the other, it was approved."

"I do not understand..."

"I think you understand very well," Diré said as he stood up, pointing a finger at the minister's face as he walked.

"You know perfectly well why you are richer and perhaps even more influential. Steamlung."

"It doesn't belong to me."

"But isn't your brother, William Whitebell, the current manager of the company? Wasn't it because of your family's activities that we all now live under this cursed dome?"

"The dome saved us; it prevents toxic air from coming into contact with good air and the same goes for the rain and you know that well."

"I wasn't referring to the nature of the dome. But to what perhaps could have been done 150 years ago to avoid ending up in it. You will know this well, since it was mainly your family's fault."



"They weren't alone; it is unfair to blame all the mistakes on them. They were with others."

"And look what they led us to!" said Diré raising his arms as if they were the wings of an angel.

"Diré, he is right, it is not only his family's fault," Thomas interrupted him.

Diré raised his chin upwards, curling his mouth and eyes in an expression of disdain, he hissed towards the minister: 'But he still killed a lot of people. Anyone who doesn't pay, you kick him out.'

"That's right, our services are offered..."

"YOUR SERVICES ARE UNJUST! MY MOTHER HAS PAID THE PRICE, AND SO HAVE THOMAS'S PARENTS." Diré's finger was now inches away from the minister's face, intimidated by the twitch his captor had made towards him.

"You could have done a lot. You did nothing. The Steamlung has been around for almost 300 years. What a beautiful opportunity it must have been to let the forests burn, poison the rivers and the air, really well thought out!" Then, starting to wag his forefinger in front of Whitebell's face, Diré said, "But now it's over."

"It wasn't our fault; the governments of the world were twiddling their thumbs the whole time."

"But you could have influenced, spent all your money on something useful, but you thought it would be more profitable to push in this direction. Now you manage water and oxygen, but you used to dominate the market as one of the largest conglomerates in the world. You had factories everywhere, you dumped your waste into the sea, the water you purify for us is full of mercury because of you! But not just because of Steamlung, no no, but because of all those governments, those companies, which decided to dump the problem on us, without foreseeing how it would explode. We are one of the 17 cities still alive on Earth, there must be about 60 million of us left. Everyone else, ...burnt, asphyxiated and poisoned."

"I wasn't even born then."

"But you could have done something now," Diré continued, then sat down.

"But you did nothing. There are people, right now, whose lungs are corroded by the unhealthy, poisonous air you charge them for. You force them to pay for their cancer. But maybe the only real cancer here is you. You have forced us to live like this, if we must continue this way, then we will do it in the most dignified way possible. Without paying you a penny."

The radio blared, and from the empty hiss maintained for the previous two hours, the voice of what they recognised as Phileas Patten, current superintendent of ministers and major shareholder in Steamlung, emerged.

"Anti-Privatisation Front. I am Phileas Patten. I don't have much to tell you except that we have no intention of dealing with terrorists. We have decided that, for the good of our community, we will look for a new minister. Mr Whitebell, if you're listening, please understand that we appreciate what you've done so far, and that if your captors weren't lying, you will forever be remembered as a martyr when we catch them."

The superintendent's voice faded into the cosmic hiss of the radio, giving way to an undefined croaky signal.

The unusual silence of the radio was also joined by that of the minister and Thomas. From above Whitebell's face, Diré outlined an ever-widening smile on his mouth.

"You're not really going to do this, are you?" whispered Whitebell in a choked voice.

Diré stood up, took out his pistol and thrust it against the back of the minister's head.

"Get up, or I'll blow your other ear off and then I'll carry you to the car."

Instinctively the minister stood up, but then froze in place.

"But wait, you don't really think you want to kill someone? That way you'd just make me a martyr and..." his face was slowly starting to bead with tears.

With the gun still pointed at the back of his head and his legs now almost moving on their own, the minister was carried to the car, which would head to the land airport, where the minister would take off for the last time.

THE END



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"TIME IS RUNNING OUT"

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