

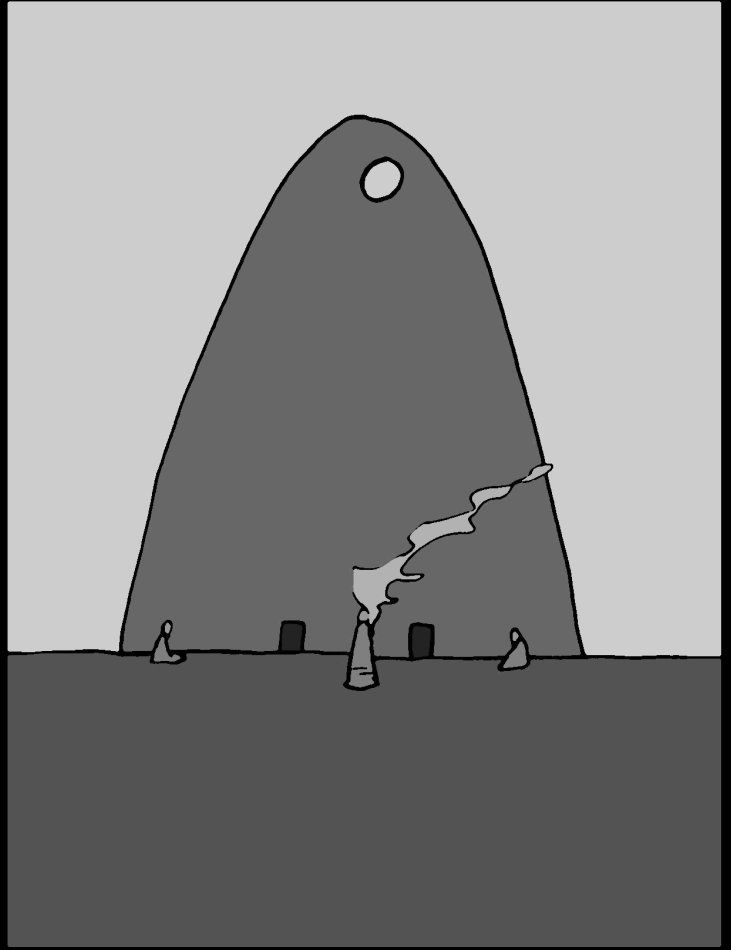


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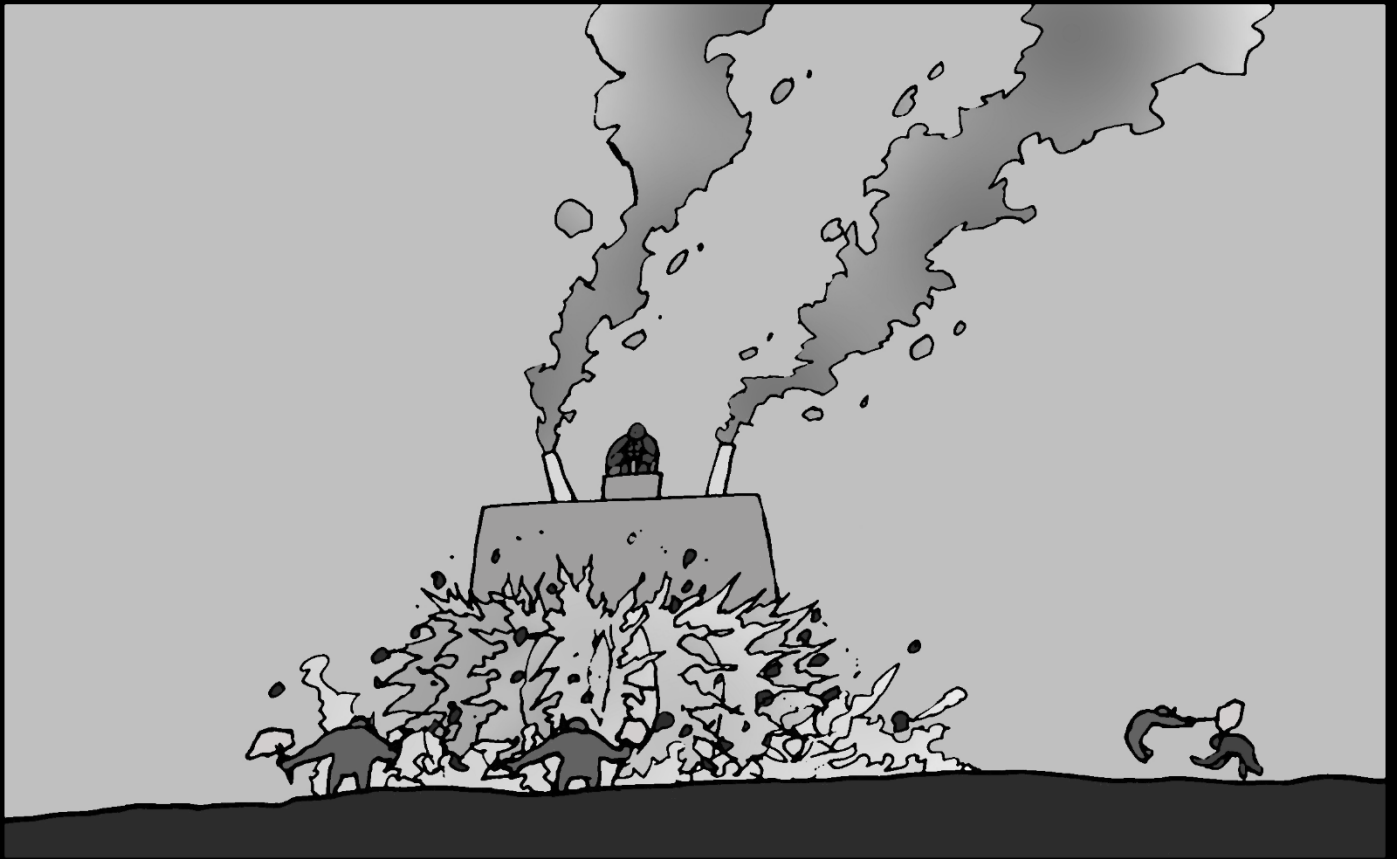
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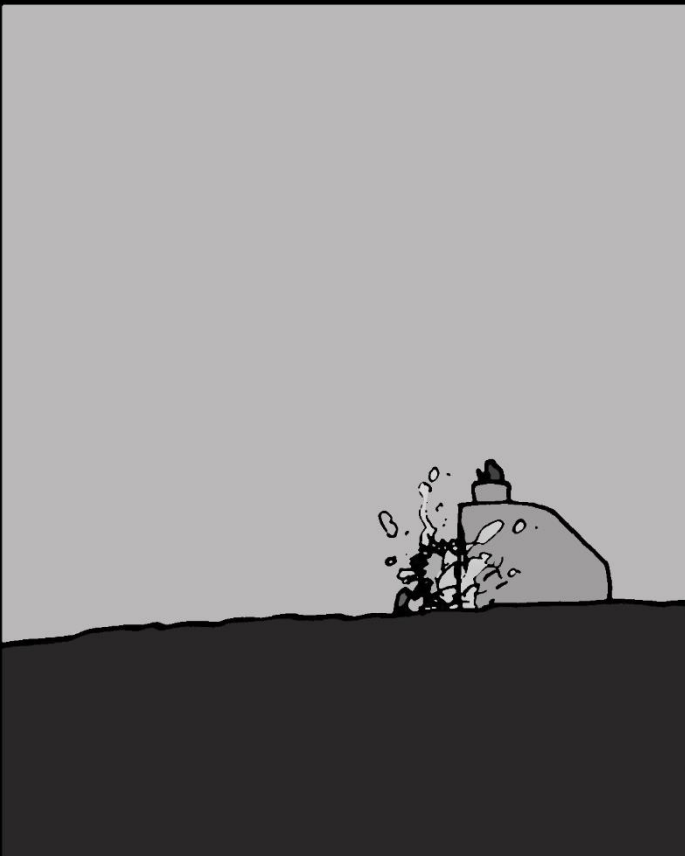
# THUG!





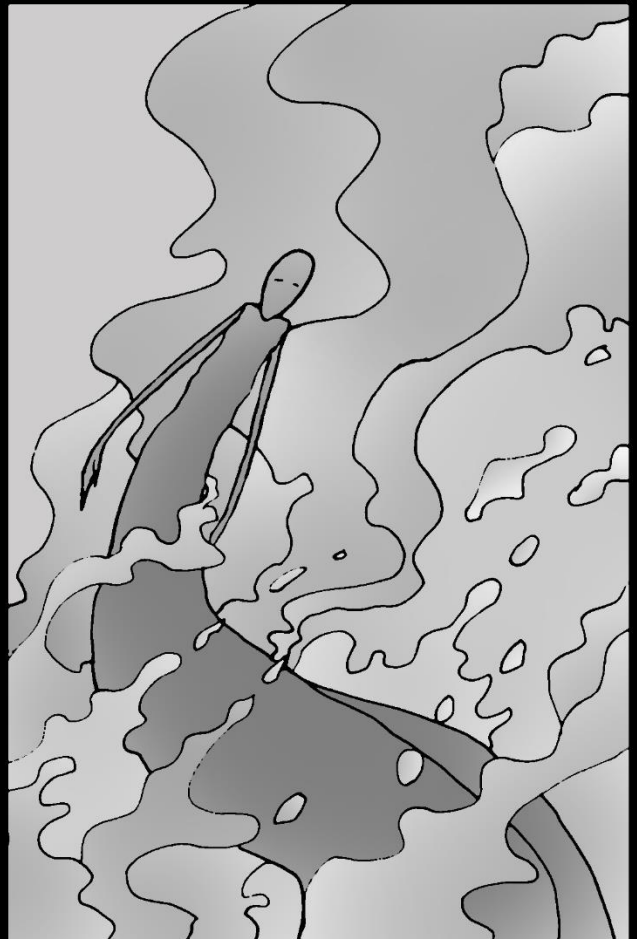
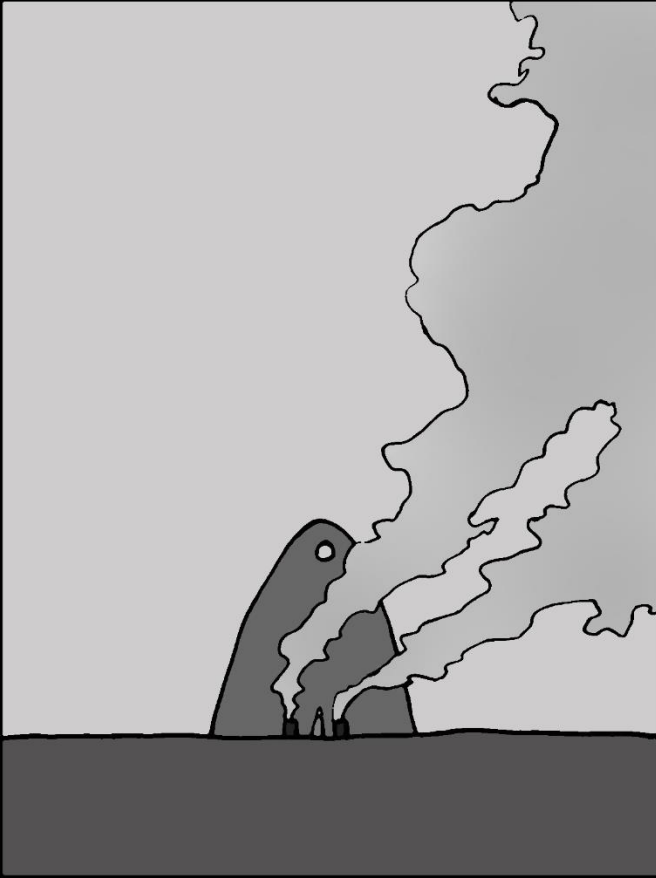










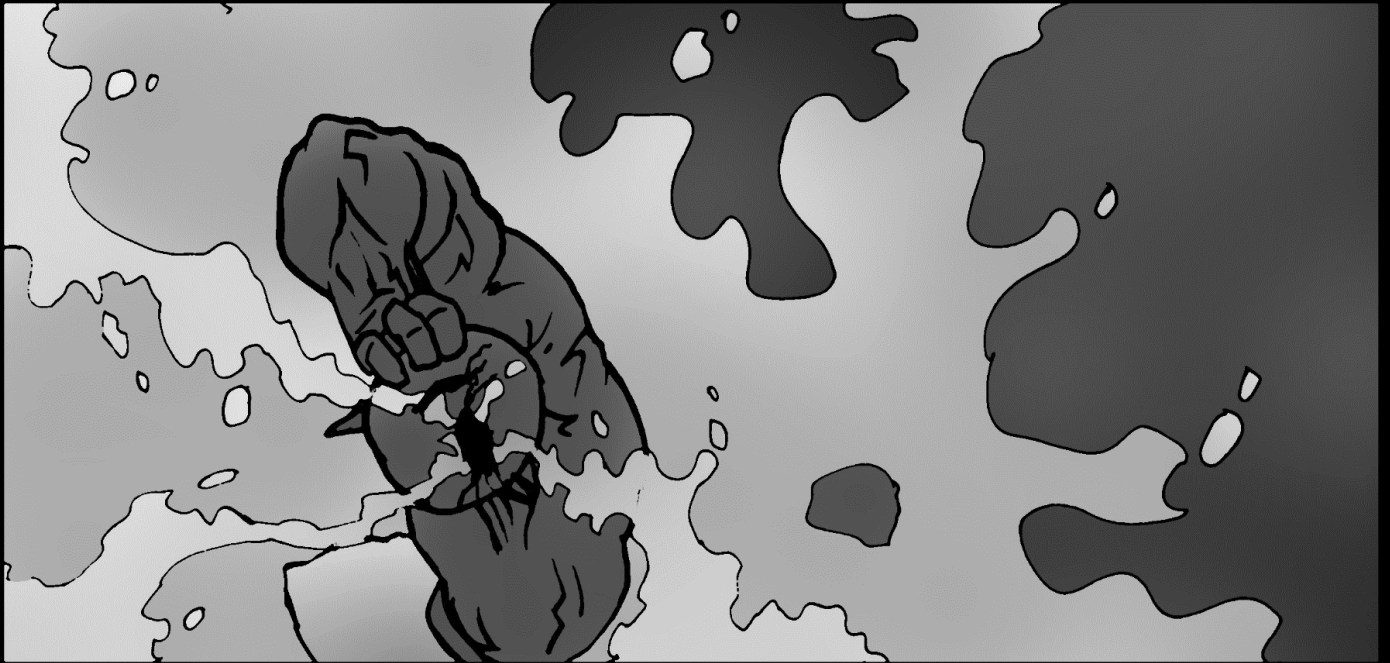


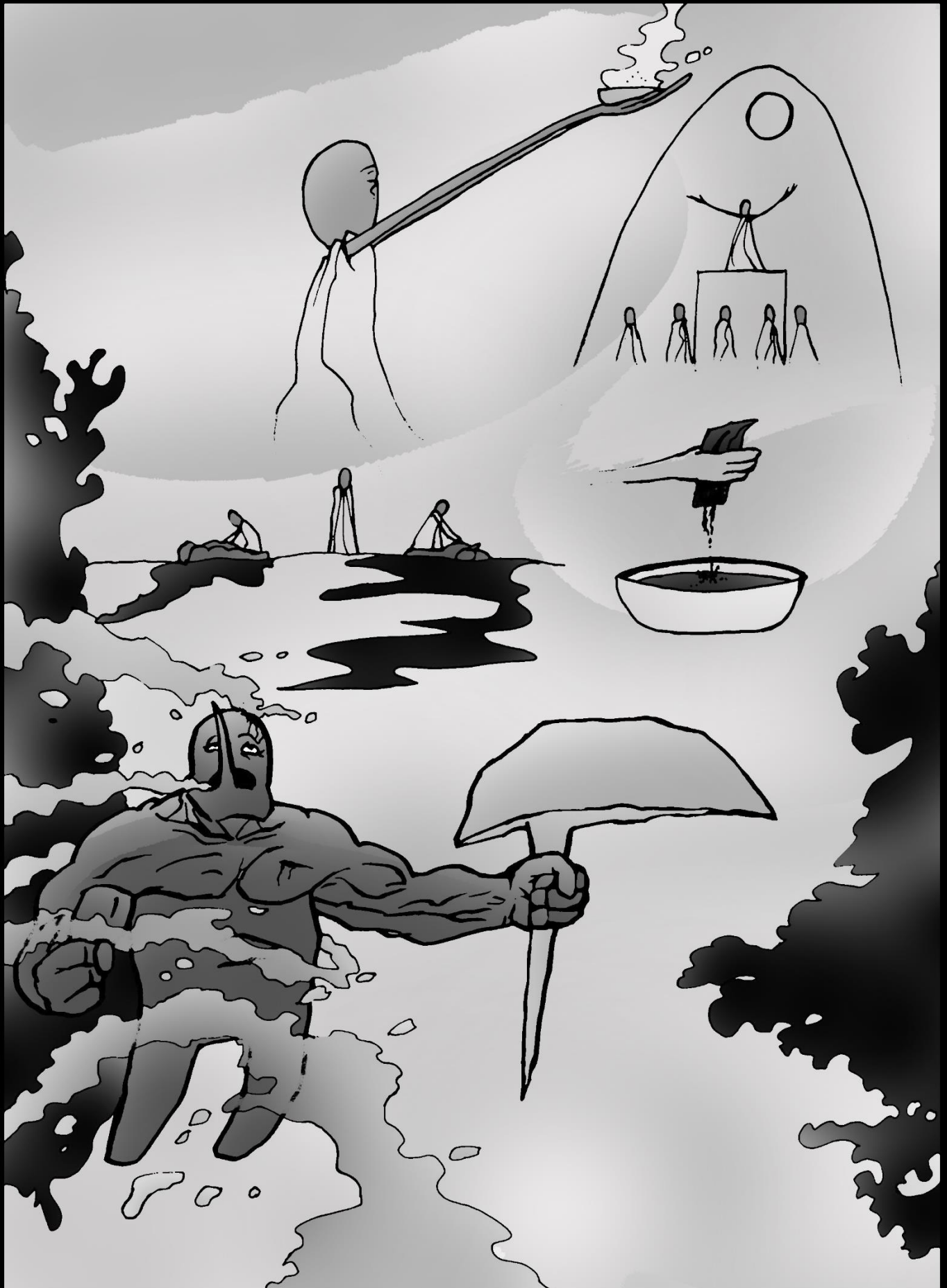








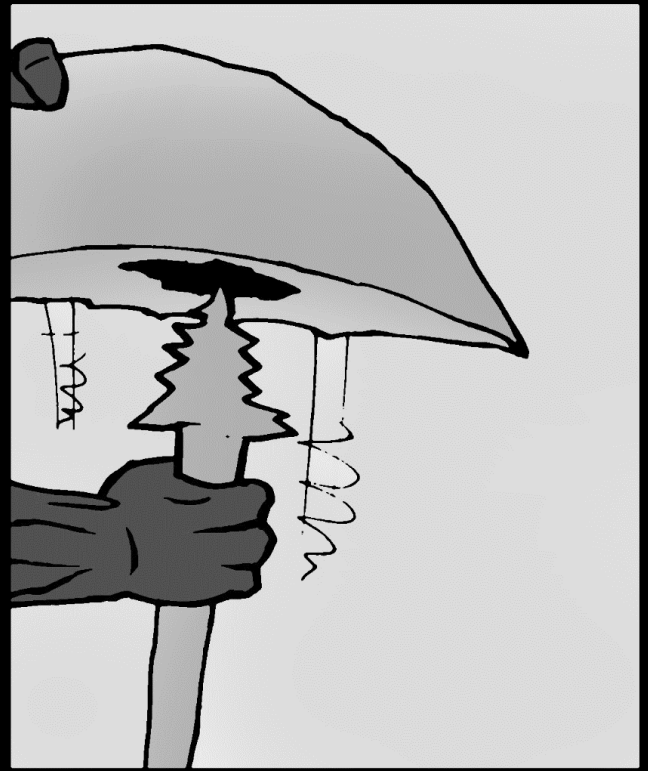
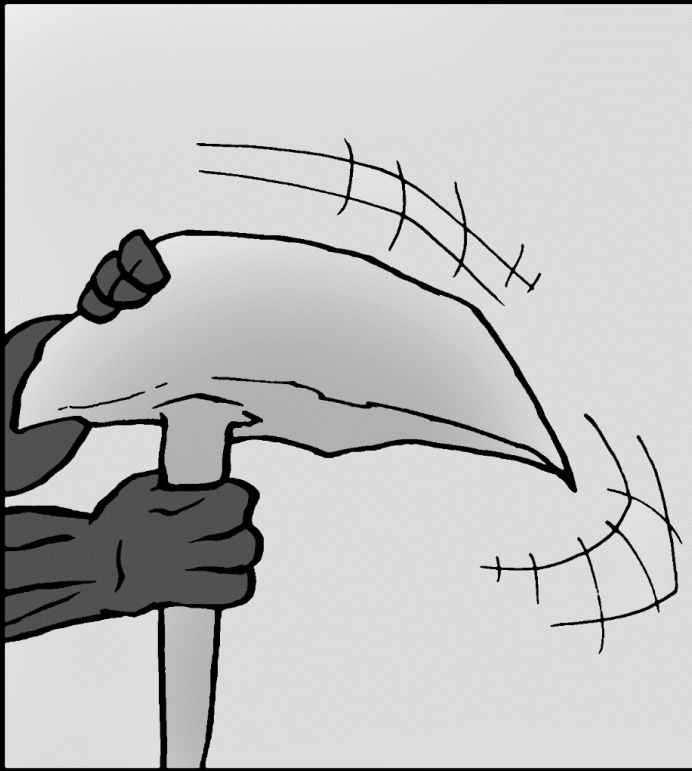


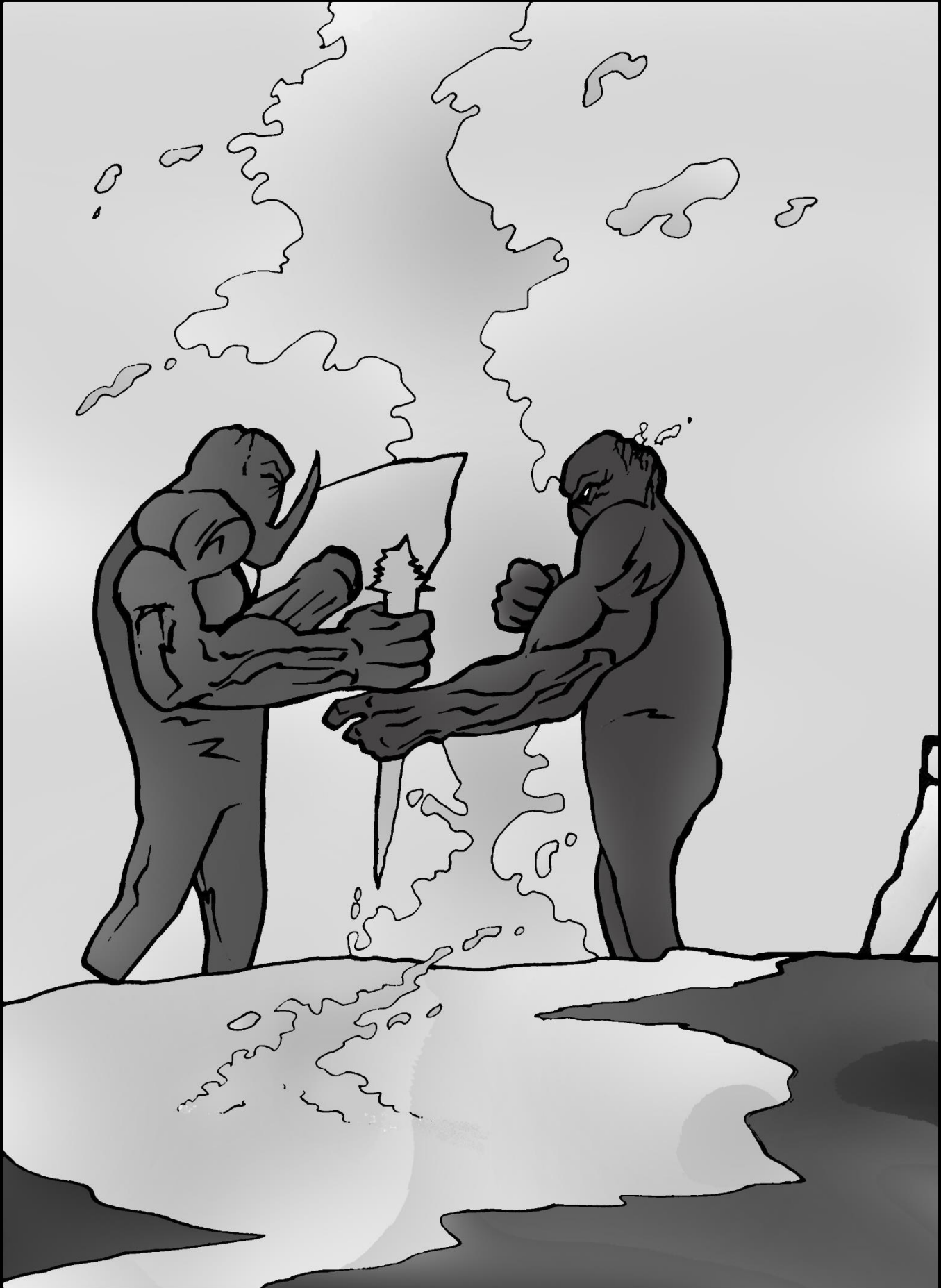


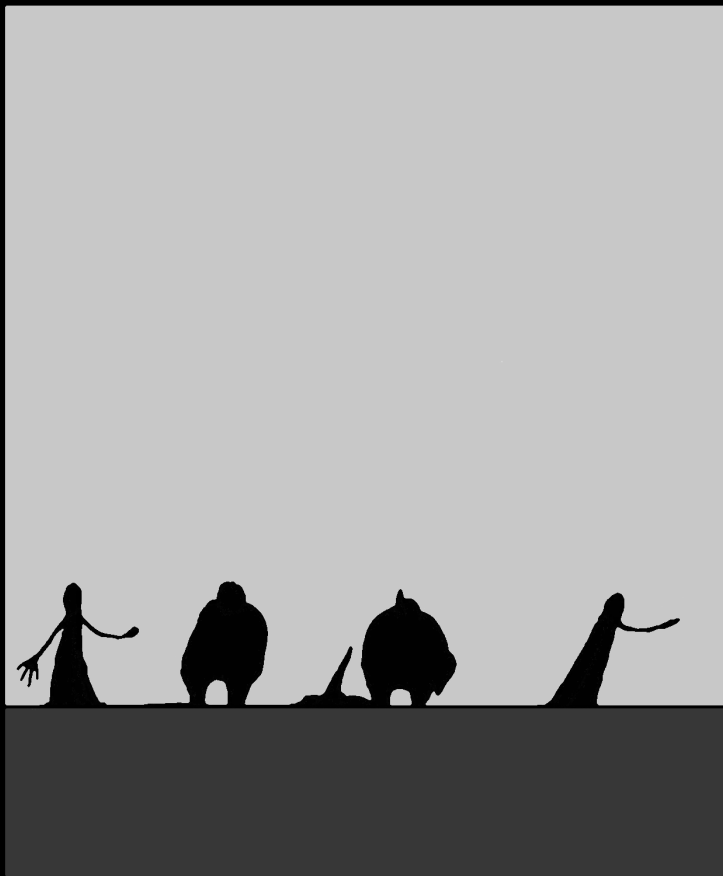
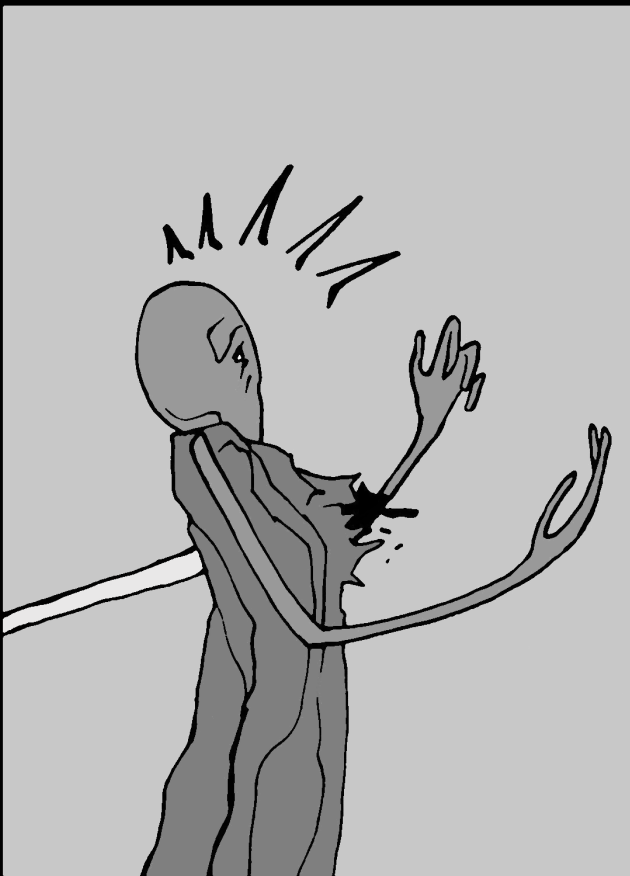
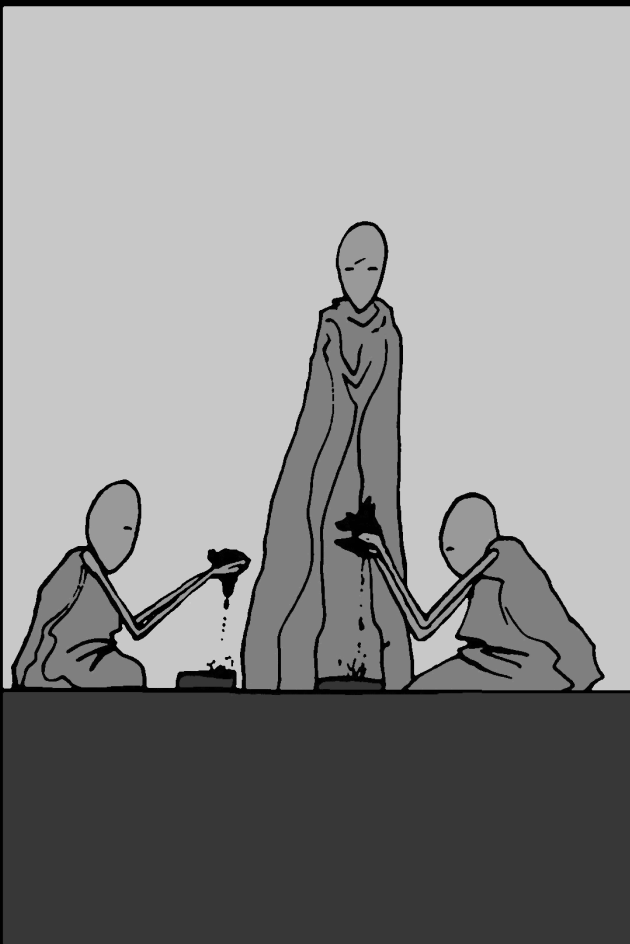


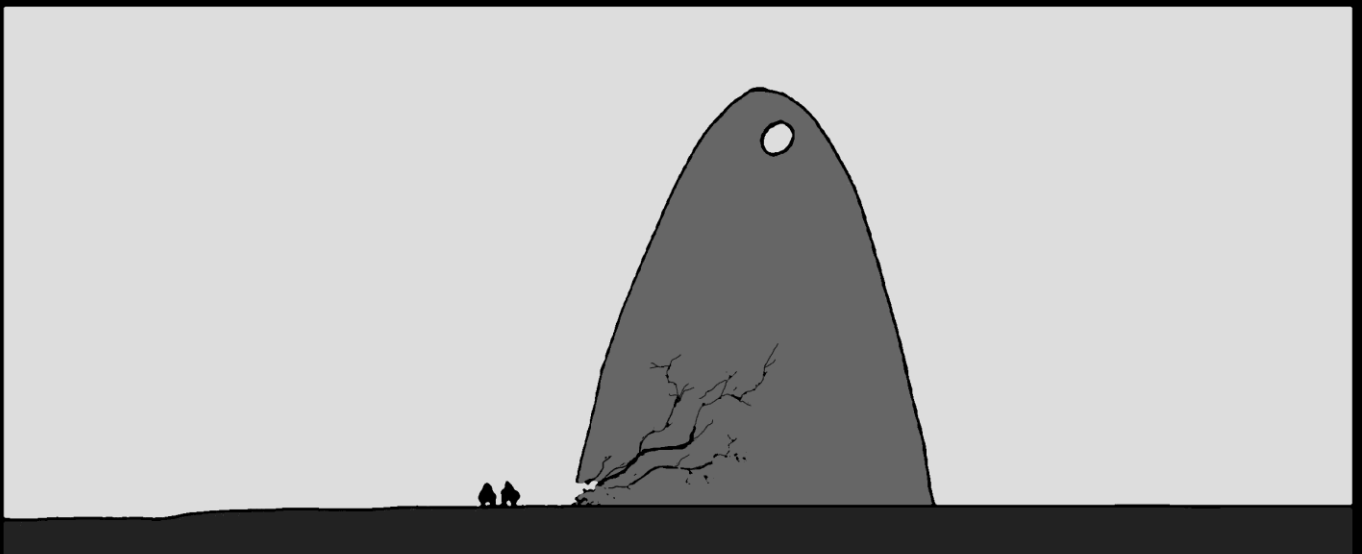
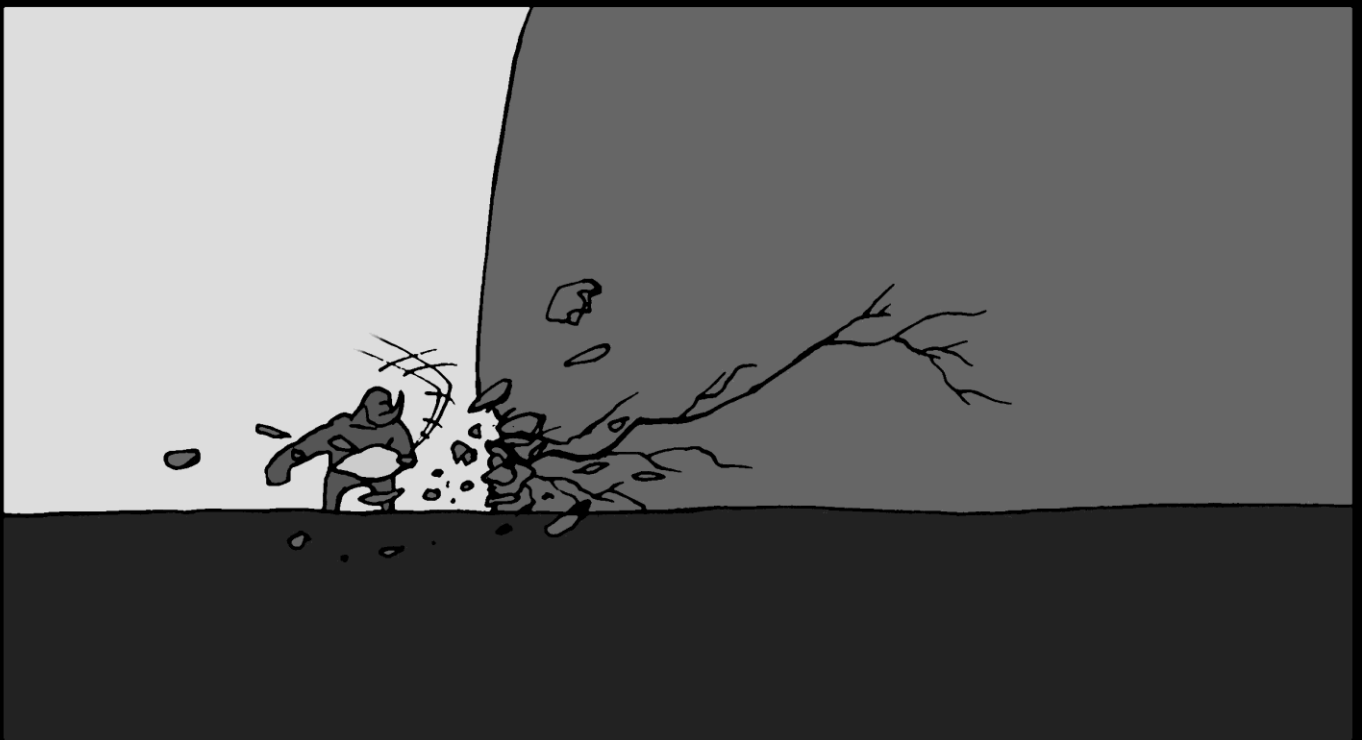
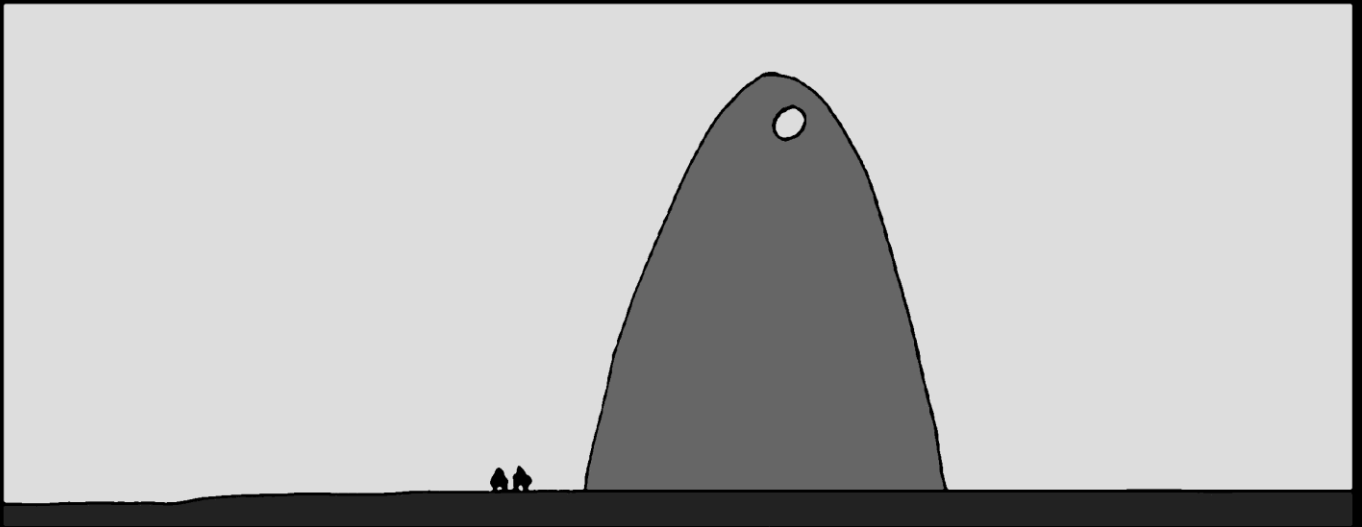


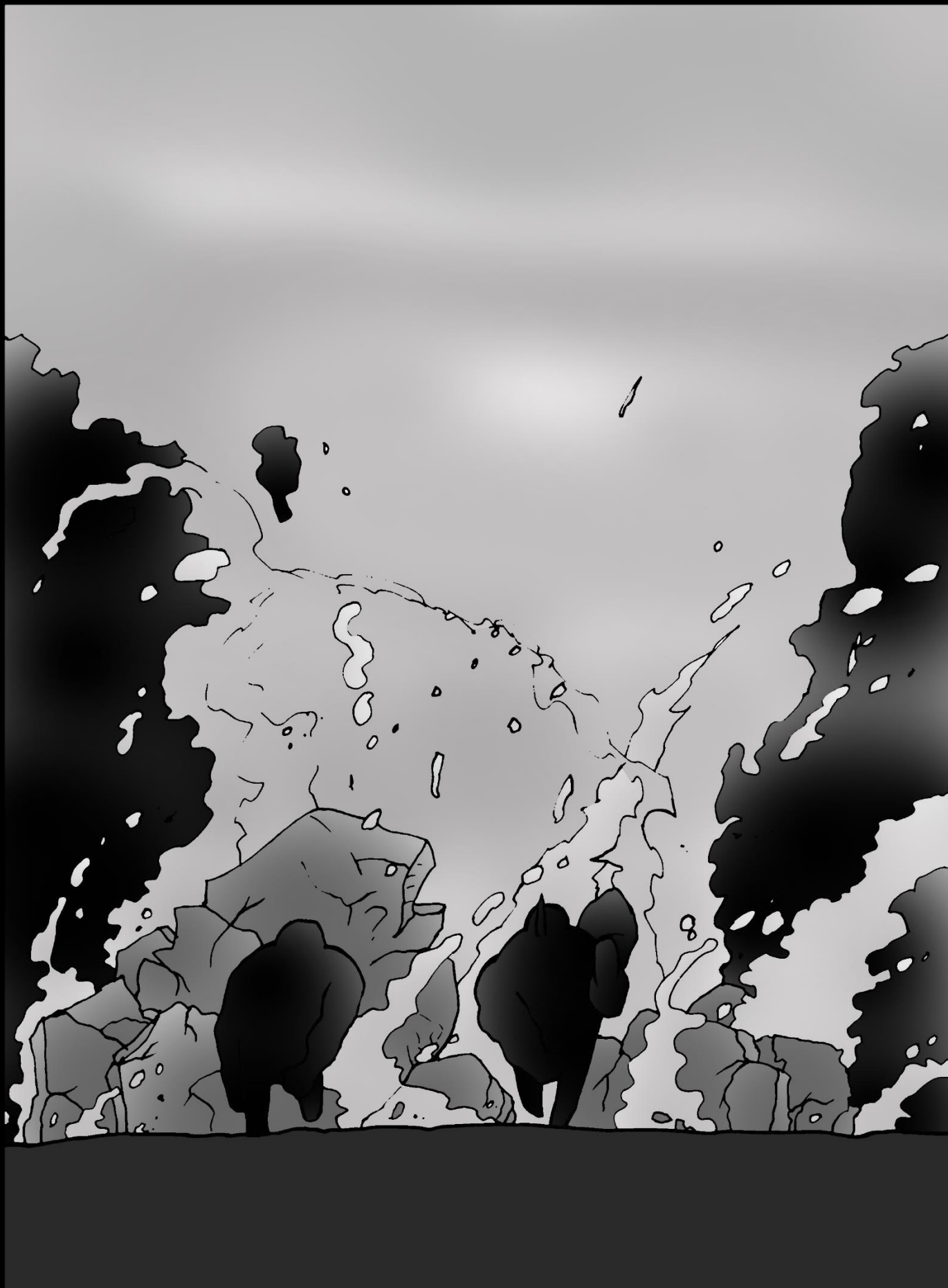














## “Smashed Like a Stony Sentinel!”

Slender shafts of light from outside of the cave's entrance glimmered on the viridescent crystalline steps. He stood hesitant, scratching his chin-horn, his bulky, stout figure silhouetted in the cave's opening. The translucent emerald steps disappeared into the dark depths. A gust of wind passed over him from the stygian caverns below. He soldiered on with his mallet resting firmly secured on his left shoulder, stepping with caution as he descended.

Moving through the inky atmosphere, he lost all sense of direction and balance. He stopped as a faint sound echoed from far below. His mallet suddenly felt awkward and heavy on his shoulder. A slimy substance fell on his head, and a low, aching growl issued out of the darkness as the cavernous walls closed around him.

When the soldier regained consciousness, a stony statue squatted one-and-a-half meters tall before him like a sentinel; its circular face glared at him with puckered lips and hollow eyes. He grunted as he stood up and looked around the tiny room. His mallet was nowhere in sight and the air was stale and heavy. There was no door.

He pounded on the rocky walls to determine how thick they were. They were dense and smooth. He sat down and considered his next move when a low hum filled the air. Part of the wall became transparent and a lighted room shown on the other side. The room was full of machinery, wires, and small blinking lights.

Little, rectangular machines skittered across the floor in the other room. He looked over at the garish statue, picked it up, and pitched it at the transparent wall. It crashed through, creating a sizable hole.

He clamored through the opening in the wall and stumbled into the other room. Two of the small, rectangular machines crashed into his feet. He kicked them away and started to walk over to the strange machinery.

A golden mist descended, blocking him from approaching the machinery. Within the aureate haze, shapes resembling two heads and four metallic tentacles formed. A voice sounded out, filling the room with an unfamiliar language.

Two roughhewn hands grabbed him from behind. The statue had become sentient and subdued him. He struggled to free himself, but was unable to break its granite grip. He scanned the room for a potential weapon but found none. The living statue's strong grip stymied any counterattack.

The two heads lowered to examine the soldier, causing him wince slightly as the brilliant mist crackled and stung his face. One of the glimmering head's eyes radiated a menacing reddish glow, making him feel woozy.

"So, you are from the preeminent soldier species within this part of the galaxy," a gravelly voice said in a language he could understand.

Another voice asked, calmly "Were you sent here to destroy me and my laboratory?"

He did not answer as he continued to twitch in the stony grip, testing it for any weak points. The glimmering entity continued to scan the soldier's mind, replying, "Ah!"

In the near distance, he saw his mallet resting against one of the machines. He surged forward, pulling the living statue with him. They stumbled and fell, causing the stony creature's grip to loosen.

The soldier broke free and rolled toward his trusted weapon, snatching it up with one hand. He threw it like a missile toward the statue. Its impact shattered the statue's body into pieces.

The room became dark. The glowing entity, all of the machines, and the remains of the statue's body disappeared. On the ground before him sat a large seed.

He reached down to pick it up along with his mallet. After a brief hesitation, the soldier ascended the steps.

