

Ian M. Palmer's **SMALL STORIES**

... she
applied her own exotic
and deadly skills.

8 stories - 57 story pages

Welcome to the only issue of Ian M. Palmer's Small Stories.

This issue collects most of my early short comics, from the period of a couple of years in which I was experimenting with styles and formats, as well as churning out ideas. The inexperience shows, but each of these still has something I like about it.

Excavations Around The Sphinx And Sunset Afterglow, No Date is that rare thing, an new story about time travel. It was, I think, my first digital comic, heavily influenced by Heavy Metal, and features - be warned - a tiny bit of male nudity.

The Narrator was designed to be as different from Excavations as it could be, so it's all Poser, it's black and white where Excavations was vivid, it's claustrophobic where Excavations was epic, and it's... well, it's creepy. Not that that's a bad thing.

Pangaea: The Pirate's Arena is a third kind of story. The Heavy Metal influence is here in a different way, in a light barbarian adventure with a final twist.

A Little War On The Sidh imitates those great SF text stories of the Fifties, boisterous and full of puns, with a bite on the last page.

Economic Interests is possibly the most traditional SF story here, using a lot of my very first, and therefore crude, 3D models. I think it still delivers.

I'm strangely proud of The Chicken King And The Prince Of Birds. There's not a 3D render in it, but it might be one of the best pieces of writing I've done.

Progress Report is, as it says, my version of a 200AD Future Shock I did it to fill three spare pages in the expanded edition of my graphic novel, RIVER: Skin On The Outside. Yes, it's the same spaceship as in Economic Interests.

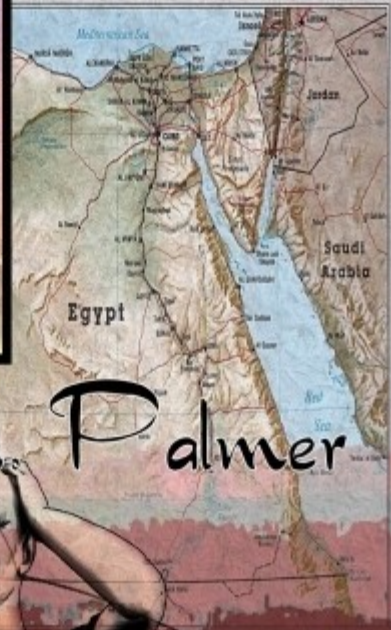
Finally, Afore The Weddin' is my Stephen King story. The artwork is full of flaws, but the story - well, it rocks. In my opinion.

My approach to making comics is different now, and I'm not doing standalone short stories. So if you like these, enjoy what there is.

Ian M. Palmer

EXCAVATIONS AROUND THE SPHINX

sunset afterglow, no date



Time is not essentially substitution of one state for another, but accretion of state superimposed upon state.

From a chapter on Freud in *Philosophers Speak of God*, Hartshorne and Reese, 1953.

by Jan W. Palmer



What?

What happened to my hair?

Oh God.
It's early.
It's happened
early.

How can
it be early?

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

ALEXANDRIA

Carmen?

I want
to be brutally
clear, Erik.

I want
you to
understand.

You were
chosen because
of your
psychological
suitability.

LOWER EGYPT

KOM ABU BILLOU

ABU HAWAS

ABUSIR

The past has
special attractions
for you, Erik.

Well, I'm a
historian.

Yes.
But no.

Your divorce.
Your parents.
Psychological
profiling
indicated...

There's more
for you in the
past than there
is in the future.

Please don't
take this the
wrong way...

Do you
understand?



Something's wrong.
Something went
wrong.

I shouldn't
be here yet.

I shouldn't
be lost yet.

The material
side of things
we think we
understand.

That's not a
major concern.

The grey area
is in your mind.

My
mind?

Erik,
we'd be
dishonest if we
pretended to
understand how
memory works.

We can send
your body
back in time.

What we're not
sure of... is how
your mind will
behave.



What
year?
What year
is this?

Stupid question.
They won't speak
English, let
alone backward,
and in any case...

...it's
gone.

The year
is gone.

Gravity works.
The world goes around,
but he stays in this place.

Gravity and time.

He's not a physicist.
He's a historian.
He's someone who
lives...

...in the
past.

It's slower,
because he's moving
at an unnatural speed
and in the wrong
direction...

...But what will happen
when he can't remember
working out how he started?

How he
got here?

So far it hasn't
been too bad. He
can't remember
setting out, but he
can remember
guessing
how it works:

He's
Forgetting.

As his body moves
backward through decades,
through centuries,
his memory is unwritten.

What?
What happened
to my hair?

Where is she?

Where's my wife?

SPHINX: What has four legs in the morning, two at noon and three in the evening?

OEDIPUS: A man.

OEDIPUS: A man.

How strange.

He can remember thinking about his wife. The odd thing is...

...he's never been married.

He doesn't panic much. He can't remember how he got here, but he can remember being here.

There's probably something simple he has to do to stop it, a keyword or a gesture or something. But it would have been the last thing they told him, with emphasis, so it would be fresh in his mind.

So it was the first thing he forgot.

Where's Mum?
Where's Dad?

What happened to his life he doesn't know, but he knows he was here yesterday, and it wasn't much of a life in any case...

...since his parents died.

Mummy?

Daddy?



He watches the first hesitant explorers trudge their camel-swaying way across from Europe, sweating, afraid because every step is a step their exact kind has never taken before.

He watches them gasp and throw themselves about with awe as they behold for the first time the tombs of the great pharaohs, the Pyramids.

He watches them beat their Egyptian attendants, watches the slaves turn, the weapons lash; observes the cruel epileptic tableaux of human life enacted in the shadow of the Great Pyramid.

He moves on.

He watches the Pyramid itself, growing stronger now, the process of its decay arrested by time and transformed into a burgeoning energy of growth and healing, rebirth in the bending of perception.

The land grows verdant and rich, then slowly turns back to shifting desert again. Cycles; but the cycles are not the same. Things grow complex, things simplify.

Armies sweep across the sands, scuttling armies in paper armour with pots on their heads. Time in reverse, dead men crawl out of the sand to throw themselves onto their opponents' spears and off again, running backward to the hills and vanishing, retreating in attack. Another victory yet to be won. More foregone conclusions.

The world grows young.

And all the time Erik moves onward toward the dawn of night.

In some busier part of the world he might have seen the passing of fashions, the climb and collapse of cultures, the swell and throb of architectural expansion; but that's not where he is.

He's Falling into
childhood.

He is the end
without the means,
the effect without
the cause.

In time, he can't
remember why
he wanted to
remember. Or
what. Or when.

Things decay.
Everything, ungrown,
returns to dust.

He forgets. Occasionally
he tests himself, Can you
remember your birthday?
But frequently it is no longer
the date he remembers but
the memory of the date. He
remembers that yesterday
he remembered. Twenty-three,
twenty-two, twenty-one.
He forgets.

Only the Pyramid still
stands. It is immortal,
it has weathered all the
world growing young.
While it still stands there
is still hope.
There is still hope.

Then one night they
take the Pyramid away.

Erik watches the operation,
which takes decades, in the
darkness between dawn and
dusk.

Husky Egyptians divide
it into stones and take the
stones away to fill a quarry
somewhere with the broken
tomb.

He has not seen them
removing the pharaoh's
mummy: perhaps it still
lies withered somewhere
deep under the sand
waiting for them to dig
it up and give it life.

Then it will live out its adult
life and receive the reward
of childhood in reverse until
it is ready to be drawn back
into its mother's womb and
vanish, vanish, vanish.

Erik stands for centuries afterward staring at the bare empty sand. Nothing now stands between him and the sun as it rises in the West. Empty. Gone. It is somehow unjust, he feels. The one constant thing removed from his broken life. Meaningless. Wrong.

Still, one day soon he'll forget anything was ever there.

He has spoken to nobody since the seventeenth century. None of them after that have been able to understand his words, nor he theirs. He spends all of his time alone now, ignoring even the desert rats. There is little choice.

There's nothing to do except move on, move on.

He sings:

I am three,
I am two,
I am one. Soon I will
be none. Goodbye.
Goodbye.
Goodbye.

It's a nursery rhyme he made up. When he was tiny, he would invent songs about anything.

The Egyptian desert has become a beach now, a shore of the Mediterranean sea. He misses his parents and doesn't know where they've gone.

He doesn't remember his parents.

This is the end of all things, the beginning of all things. The dawn of time. From here it all goes forward, right on through history as it must, to the day he will be born. Or not. So many choices, so many chances. For things to be the same again would be beyond belief. They must be different.

He has never seen another human being. He doesn't know what human is.

It no longer matters. Things will be the same or they will not be the same. He will not be there, not be a part of them.

This is where he stops.

Now.




THE END.



The Narrator


by Ian M. Palmer

I stood it
for as long
as I could.



I tried to sleep,
but that wasn't
going to happen.

I tried
to work...




But that's hard
enough at the
best of times.

I knew many people
could tune it out,
especially when the
risks of interfering...
Well, I'd heard the
stories.


A neighbour steps
into a - a fight, let's
be honest, it's a fight
- between a man and
his wife or partner, and
they both turn on him...

And kick the
shit out of him.


Or worse.



But I wasn't like that. I couldn't just stand by.




I stood it for as long as I could.



I believed in privacy. I believed in the - the sanctity of what couples did behind closed doors.

But he seemed to be hurting her.




She sounded like
a shrew, mind,
screaming and
swearing.

And then
crying.

And then just
screaming.


There are things
you just don't do,
though, and hitting
a woman...

You should just
walk out.



I could just
walk out.

But then she'd
be on her own.



I had
to act.

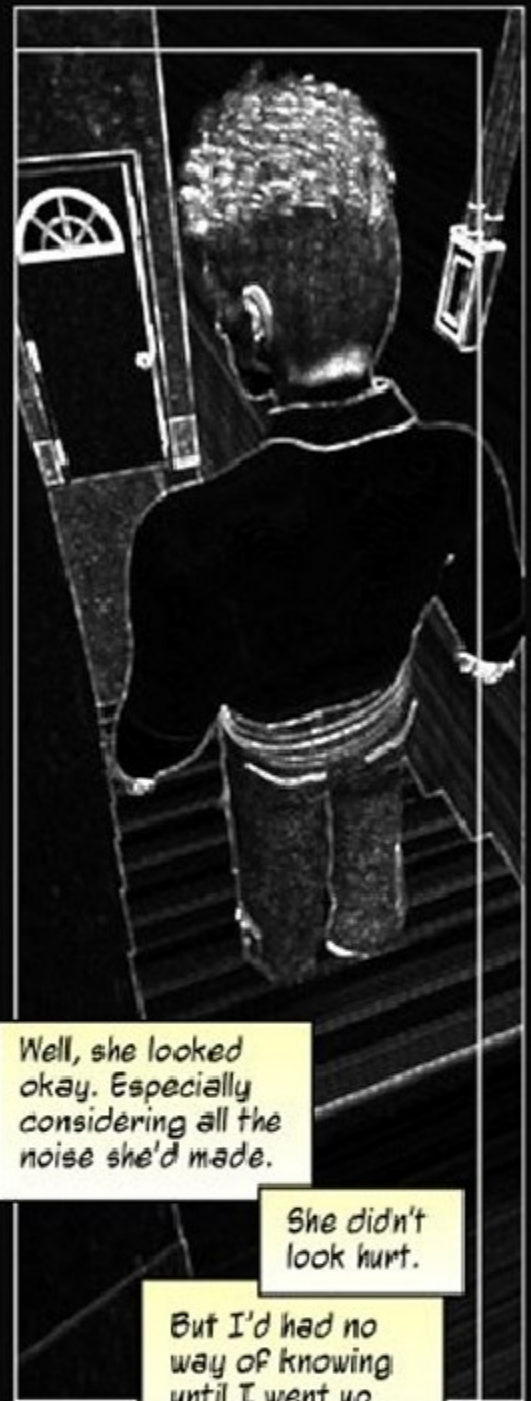


Keep it down.

Keep your noise down. Keep the noise... down.

Weirdo.

What?



Well, she looked okay. Especially considering all the noise she'd made.

She didn't look hurt.

But I'd had no way of knowing until I went up there. It was the right thing to do.



Not that anyone said sorry or anything.



But it was quiet.



And I got to thinking. It was only sound, but it could get on your nerves. It could get into your nerves, into your head; it could drive you nearly insane.

Nearly insane.

It was amazingly powerful, sound. I'd known people who were driven nearly insane by sounds, which in the end...

Weren't even there.

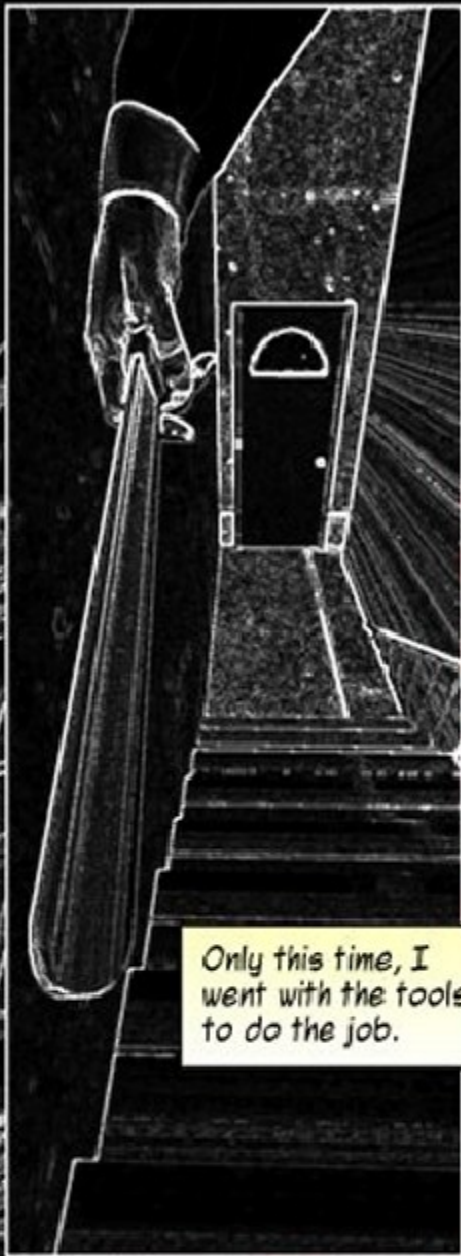


Dear God. They'd started again.

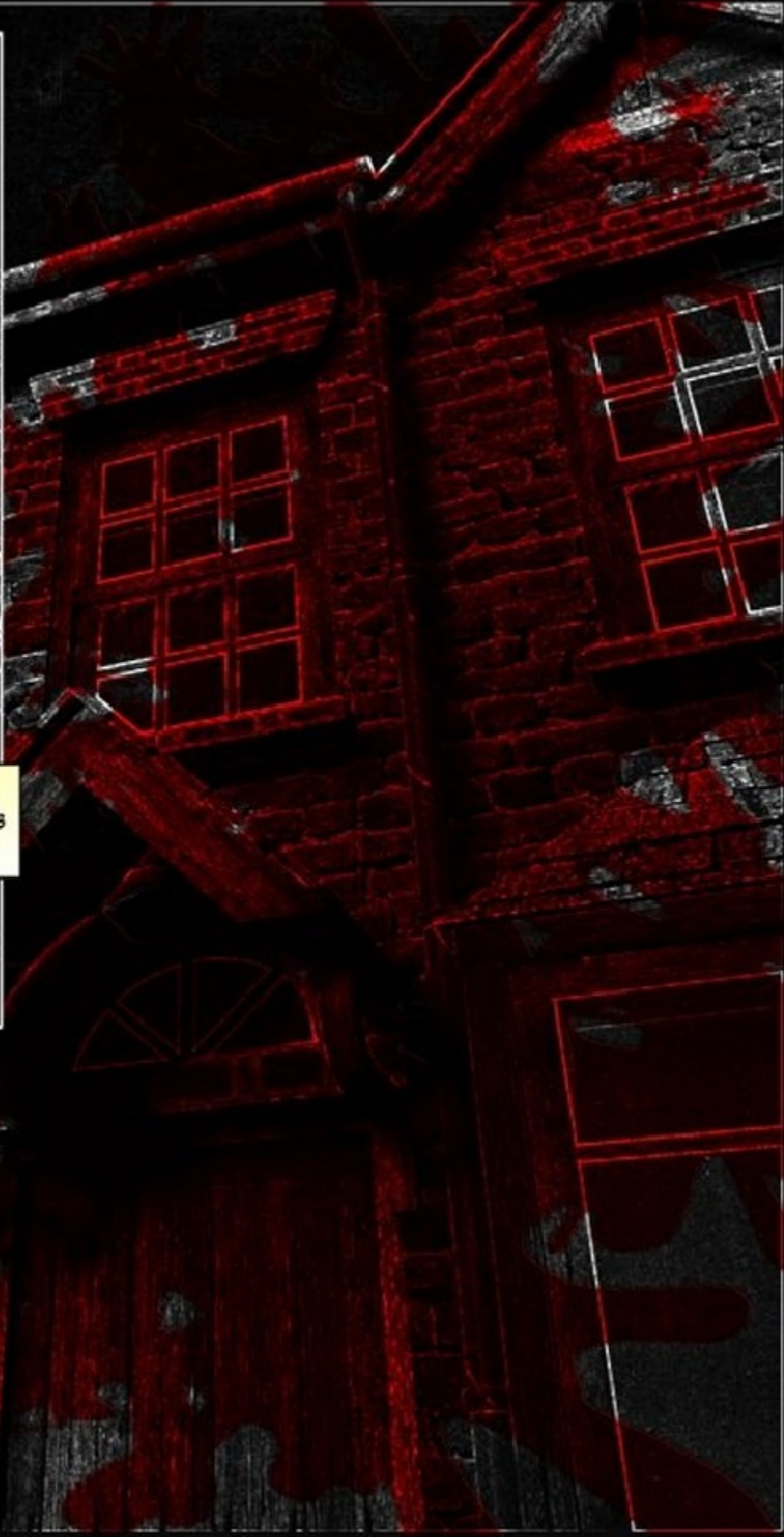
And it was hard to be sure, but they seemed to be talking about me.


I stood it for as long as I could, then I went back up there.





Only this time, I
went with the tools
to do the job.




A black and white illustration of a man with a distressed expression, looking towards the viewer. He is wearing a dark coat. The background shows a room with a desk, a chair, and a window with a picture hanging on the wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

It was quiet
for a long time
after that.

Now it's nearly
dawn, and I can
hardly believe
this, but...

They've
started
again.

A black and white illustration of a large, multi-story brick building at night. The building has several windows, some of which are lit from within. The scene is dark, with a few stars visible in the sky. The building's architecture is detailed, showing the texture of the bricks and the structure of the windows.

I'm going to stand it
for as long as I can.

The End

With a half-sick rush of sensation, suddenly I was back in PANGAEA, back in the Pirates' Arena.

Ian M. Palmer's
PANGAEA
The Pirates' Arena

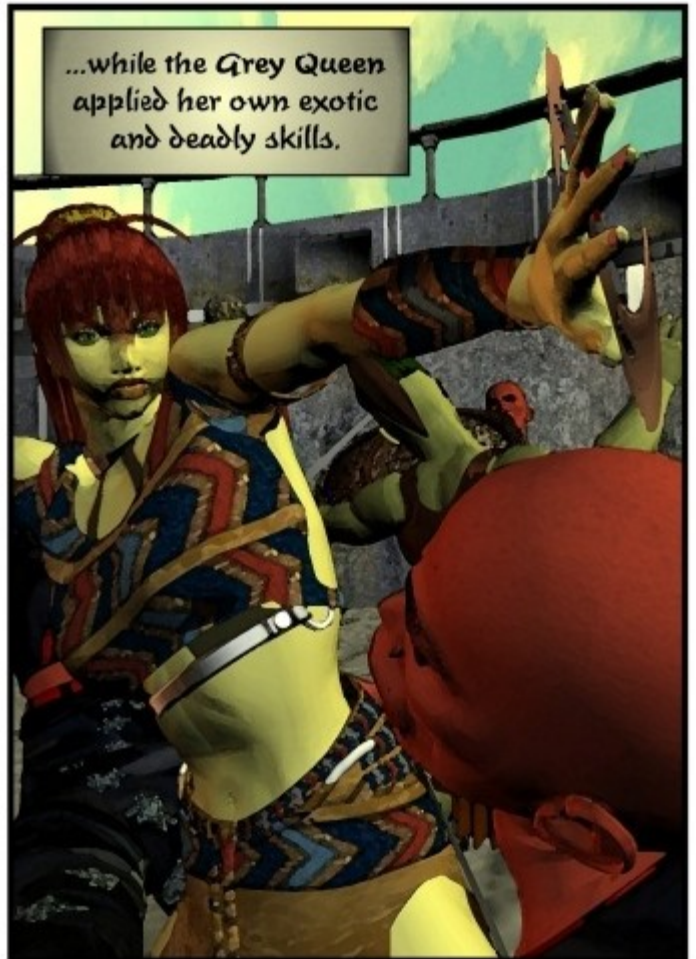
No time at all seemed to have passed. The slave rebellion was still in flood. In the arena itself, I fought hand-to-hand with men of the pirates' militia.



By my side my good friend Hatran Kryle whirled his great axe...



...while the Grey Queen applied her own exotic and deadly skills.



Lifting my eyes from the chaos of battle, I caught sight of the reason for it all:

My beloved Tallia Vann, captive in the Pirate King's enclosure!



I hope you haven't forgotten, *John Newbury*, when this is over, I intend to *execute* your woman!

I don't think you will, Grey Queen. For one thing, I'd hate you. For another, I'd kill you.

You could save her by promising yourself to me now.



I'd rather *die* than forsake her, and as you can tell...

...I'm not in a mood to do **THAT!**





In my country, a man can have two wives.

Well, no. The two wives fight to the death.

You'd share?



John! Stop Flirting and keep an eye out!

I saw at a glance what he had in mind. Hatran Kryle's watchword was opportunity.



John!



I'd heard of the giant eunuch bodyguards favoured by the pirate kings.



I was prepared for his great strength...

...But not his speed.



His second blow had rendered my left hand almost numb.

Fortunately, my return to the twenty-first century had given me the chance for a little study.

This was the day I brought the art of judo to Pangaea!



I don't know what whim of the God-Merchant brought you here, *outsider*...

...but this is where *I* take delivery of the profit!

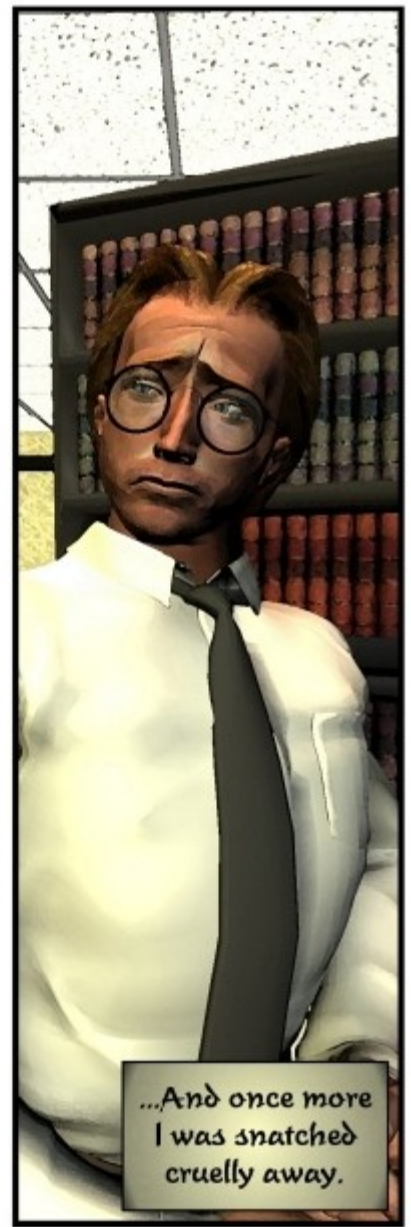
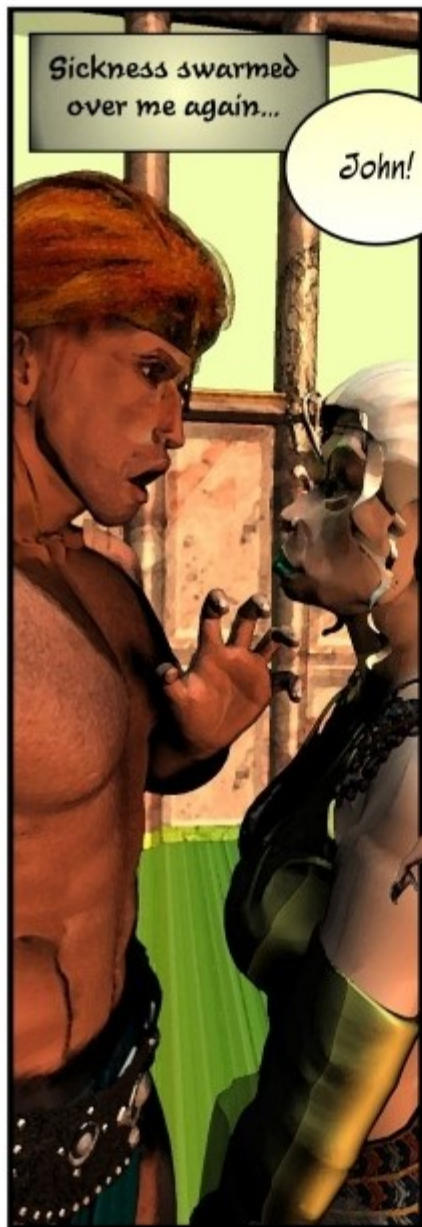


The whole of *Pangaea* is 800,000,000 years extinct by my time, *pirate!*



All your deals are *Forgotten*...

...And so are *YOU!*





A Little **WAR** on the **Sídh**



by Ian M. Palmer



In the first week of the Civil War, Greyarse went into the other world for weapons.



Technology there was still crude - humans were dominant there at the time - but the time differential worked to his advantage.



He was able to organise teams of blacksmiths and set them to work for weeks of their time, and still return with the results in a matter of fey minutes.



They were primitive weapons, but he brought hundreds, and the tide of battle turned in his favour.



Realising what had happened, Fat Knees III sent his nephew Spot through the Barrow.

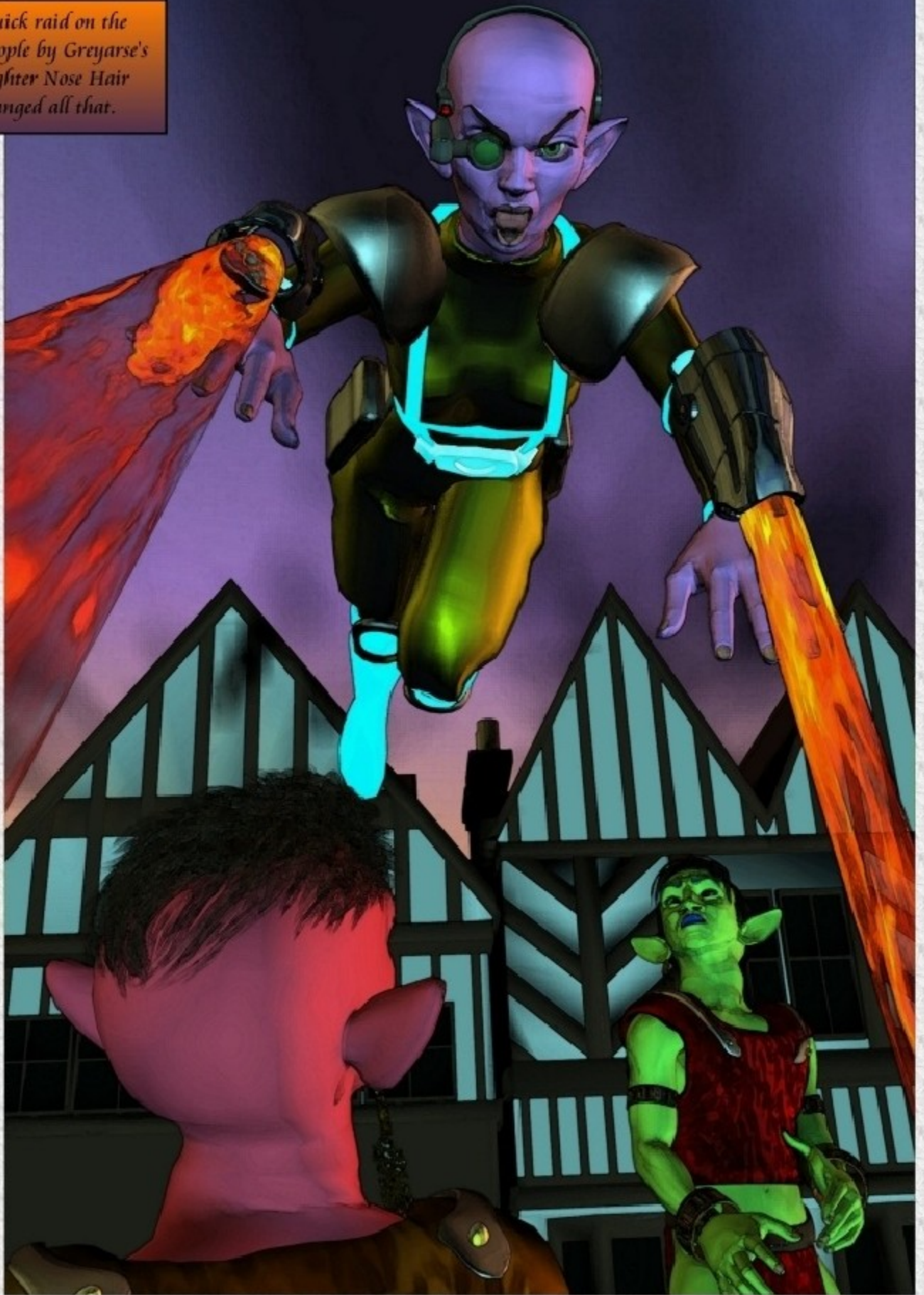


The humans had made a little progress by this time, and by a combination of negotiation and a huge crock or rock-spider shit, which the humans value highly and call "God", Spot was able to obtain both weapons and strange, poison-generating machines, which Knees threw into the conflict.



By the end of the first week, the advantage seemed to be with the East Sidh.

*A quick raid on the
Big People by Greyjarse's
daughter Nose Hair
changed all that.*





Both sides were planning something more organised, however.



Only the magical nature of the Sidh allowed it to survive the next few days.

Millions died, and large areas of enchanted land became uninhabitable. Some other parts were so foul they could have been mistaken for places on Earth.

For the first time, the Little People began to despair.



Still, neither side would surrender. So Wetleg, or Greyarse's clan, conceived of a final plan.

There was enough eldritch force left in the Barrow for one last transition. After the abuses of the last two weeks, only one body and one small object might pass through.

But Wetleg was confident that by now, even the smallest human weapon would be powerful enough to end the elven conflict forever.

Hundreds more died defending the access to the Barrow, praying for Wetleg's return bearing the ultimate product of the humans' centuries of concentration on war and winning.



RIGHT NOW,
ME LADS...





...I THINK WE
MIGHT HAVE A
LITTLE BIT OF
A PROBLEM,

The End

ECONOMIC INTERESTS

BY IAN M. PALMER



IT'S GOING TO BE *STRANGE*, BEING THE ONLY LIVING THING HERE AFTER YOU'VE GONE.

IT WON'T BE LONG. MY RELIEF IS DUE IN A COUPLE OF WEEKS.

JUST SIT BACK, ENJOY SOME *ENTS*, AND YOU'LL HAVE COMPANY AGAIN IN NO TIME.

EVERYTHING'S AUTOMATED ANYWAY.

I KNOW. THERE ARE ALWAYS THE *BODS* IF I NEED SOMEONE TO TALK TO.

THE TUG IS READY TO TAKE YOU NOW, MADAM.





NO, MADAM. FREIGHTER OPERATION IS ENTIRELY AUTOMATED NOW.

FURTHER HUMAN CONTACT IS UNLIKELY UNTIL YOU REACH EARTH.

RIGHT.

IS THERE ANYBODY HUMAN ON BOARD?



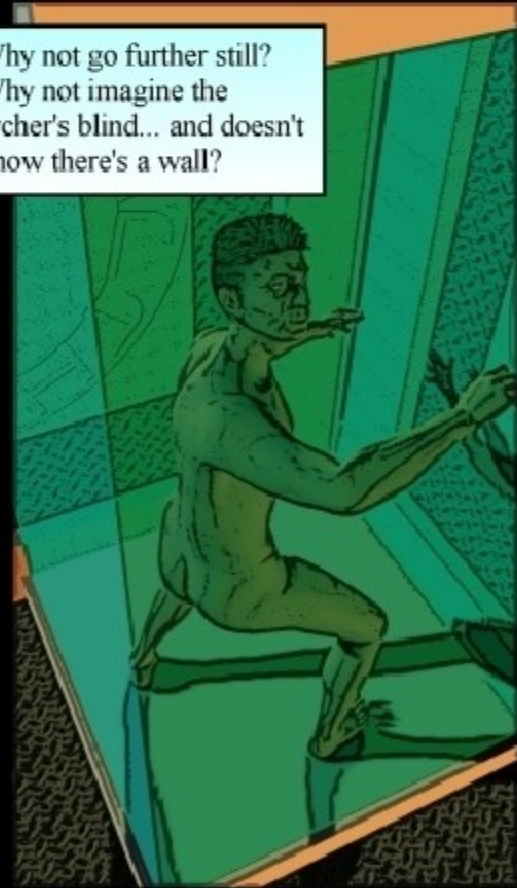
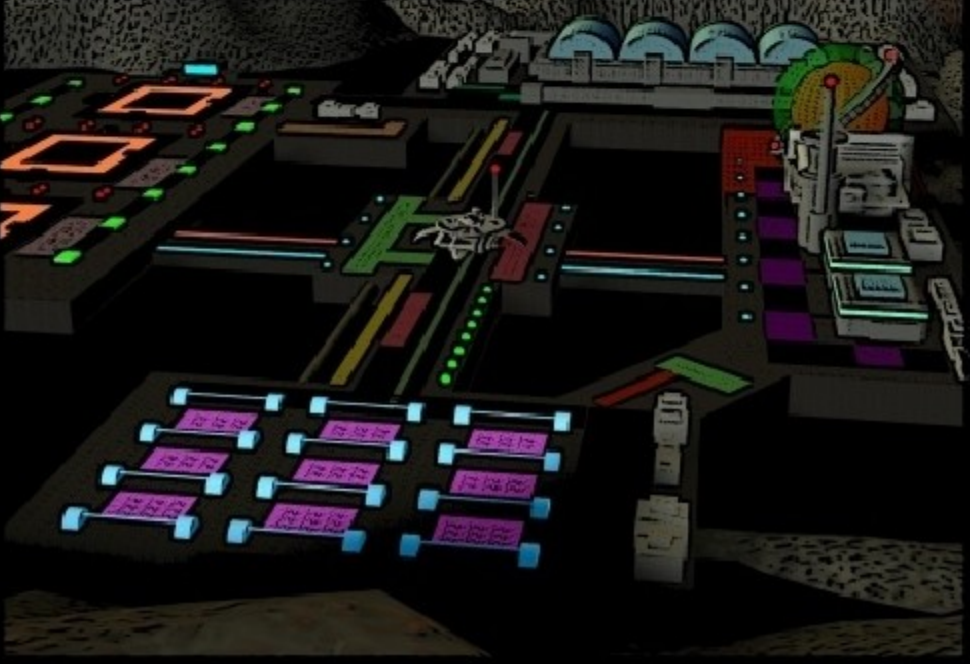
CARGO HAS BEEN DELIVERED.

ACKNOWLEDGED. POWER DOWN, REMAIN IN ORBIT AND AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS.

Even after Mandelbrot, the standard economic model for statistical variance used this analogy: imagine an archer, infinitely strong, shooting at a wall infinitely long.

Fair enough, someone said. But now, let's imagine the archer is blind.

Why not go further still? Why not imagine the archer's blind... and doesn't know there's a wall?





BOD! THERE'S NO WATER IN MY QUARTERS!

WATER SUPPLY HAS BEEN REDUCED TO ENHANCE ENERGY EFFICIENCY.

WELL, RESTORE IT, PLEASE.

ENERGY PRIORITIES CANNOT BE OVERRIDDEN AT THIS LEVEL. SORRY.



YOU BLOODY WILL BE.



BOD! THERE- IS IT DARK IN HERE?

LIGHTING HAS BEEN REDUCED TO ENHANCE ENERGY EFFICIENCY. ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS ARE EQUIPPED WITH LOW-LIGHT SENSORY TOOLS.

RIGHT. WELL, RESTORE WATER IN MY QUARTERS.

NOT AT THIS TIME. SORRY.



WHAT? IMPLEMENT MANUAL CONTROLS AND SHUT DOWN.

NOT AT THIS TIME. SORRY.

YOU- YOU HAVE TO. YOU'RE PROGRAMMED...

ECONOMIC EFFICIENCY DOES NOT PRIORITISE LIFE SUPPORT AT THIS TIME. SORRY.



MARIA?
ARE YOU THE
ONLY ONE OUT
THERE?

I DON'T
KNOW. I CAN'T
RAISE ANYONE
ELSE. THE BODS
ARE ALL... BUSY.

LOOK, I'M
NOT FAR FROM
EARTH. HOW ARE
YOU FOR AIR?



THERE'S...
THERE'S PROBABLY
WEEKS OF AIR. THERE'S
FOOD, AND WATER, IT'S
JUST NOT ON TAP.


MARIA, WHAT'S
HAPPENING? WHERE
HAVE ALL THE PEOPLE
GONE?

DON'T WORRY.
I'LL SORT IT ALL OUT
WHEN I GET TO
EARTH.

MARIA, THE
LIGHTS ARE GOING
OUT. MARIA?

MARIA?






I SHOULD BE SEEING EARTH ANY MINUTE. I WONDER WHAT THINGS ARE LIKE THERE NOW.

LAST TIME I WAS THERE, IT SEEMED EMPTY. *BOD* RESEARCHERS HADN'T BEEN ABLE TO REVERSE THE HUMAN FERTILITY DECLINE, BUT THE *CLONING* PROGRAMME WAS WELL ON THE WAY TO REPOPULATING.

THAT'S WHAT THE *BODS* TOLD ME.




IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR THE *CLONING*, WE'D BE PRETTY MUCH *EXTINCT* BY NOW.




IT'S AMAZING REALLY, THE WAY WE'VE TRANSFORMED THIS PART OF THE GALAXY. NO WONDER PEOPLE TALK ABOUT OUR IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT.

OF COURSE WE RUINED THE EARTH, BUT THERE WERE OTHER WORLDS.



IF IT WASN'T FOR THE *BODS*, WE COULDN'T HAVE MANAGED.

I WONDER IF THEY'VE FIXED *COMMUNICATIONS* YET.



SOMEONE SAID IF WE WENT ON LONG ENOUGH, WE'D USE UP EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE. I SUPPOSE THAT'S TRUE.

BUT YOU HAVE TO GROW, YOU HAVE TO EXPAND, YOU HAVE TO.



DON'T YOU?



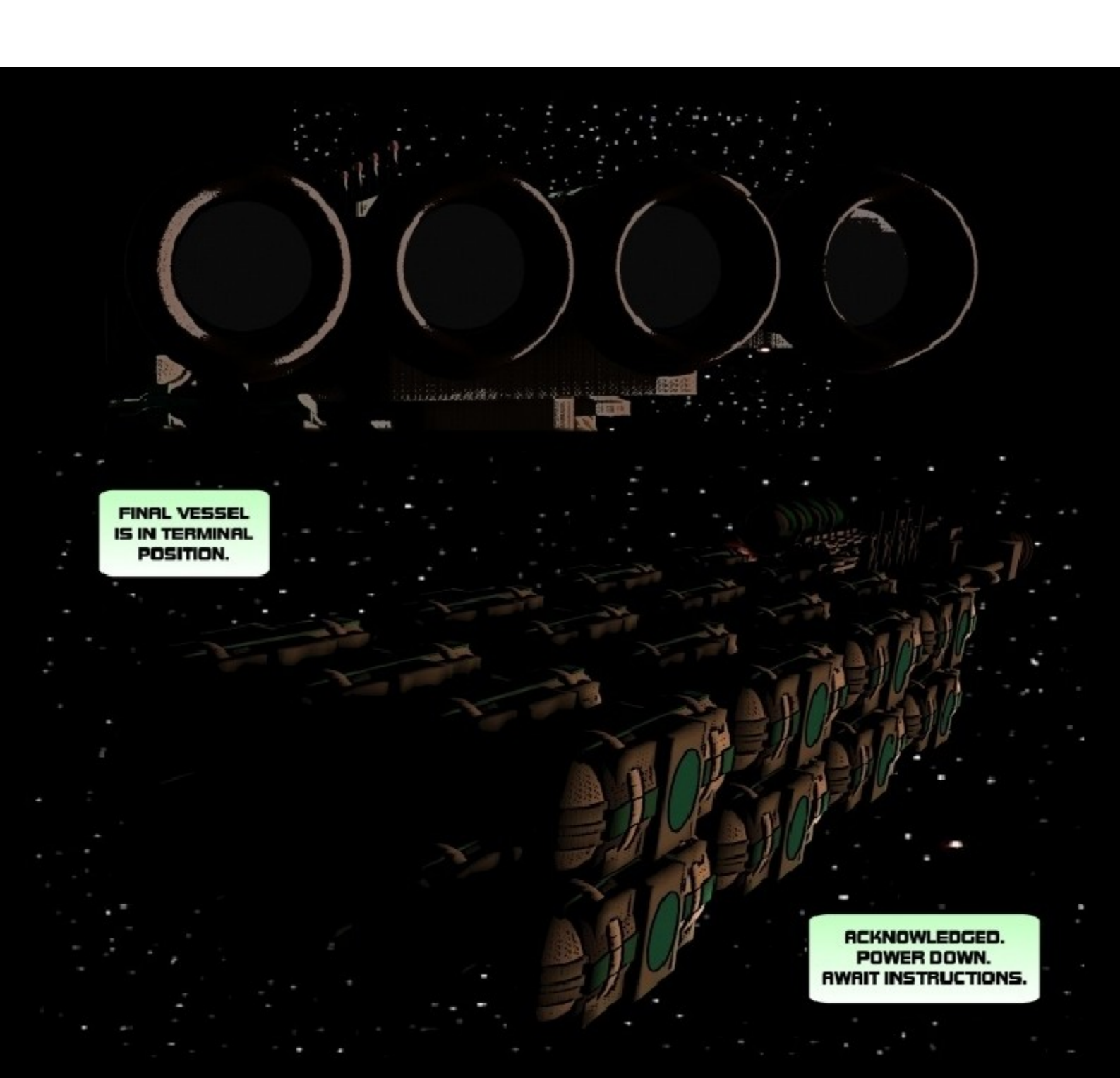
HEY! WHO TURNED OUT THE-





OH
GOD.

THE WHOLE
PLANET'S
DARK.



**FINAL VESSEL
IS IN TERMINAL
POSITION.**

**ACKNOWLEDGED.
POWER DOWN.
AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS.**



**ECONOMIC
EFFICIENCY
OBTAINED.**

THE END

THE CHICKEN KING AND THE PRINCE OF BIRDS

by Ian M. Palmer

THE CHICKEN KING WAS GENERALLY RESPECTED, SENSIBLE, GENEROUS AND CALM.

SOME BELIEVED THAT DYING AND BEING HATCHED AGAIN EVERY FOUR YEARS KEPT HIM HUMBLE, BUT THEN THE SPARROW KING WAS VICIOUS AND THE PARROT KING KIND, SO THAT DIDN'T SEEM TO WORK.

NOR WAS THE COMPETITION UP TO MUCH - THE PEA QUEEN STUPID, THE GULL KING IGNORANT AND BOASTFUL - BUT STILL, HE COULD HAVE BEEN MUCH WORSE.

HE DIDN'T DESERVE TO RUN SO FAR AFOUL - OR AFOWL - OF THE PRINCE OF BIRDS.



THE PRINCE OF BIRDS HELD ANCIENT TITLE TO THE AIR. HIS FAMILY HAD OWNED IT SINCE BEFORE THE FIRST SPECIES.

HE DECIDED TO TREAT IT AS A SOURCE OF REVENUE.



THE SPARROWS PAID IN FULL,
THE PEA NEGOTIATED A PIECE-
RATE; THE GULLS TOOK LEASE ON
MOST OF THE WETTER PARTS.



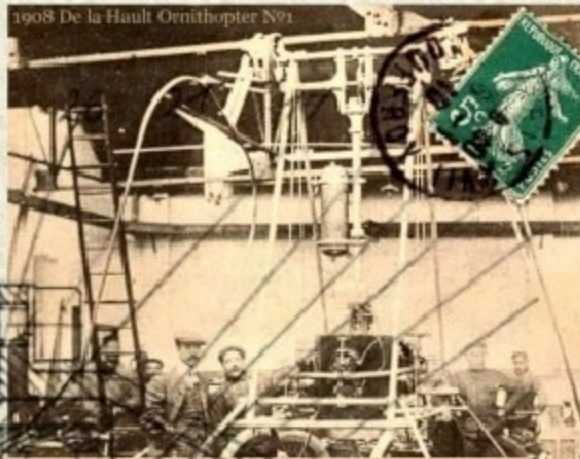
THE CHICKEN KING SAID WHAT HAD BEEN FREE
SHOULD REMAIN FREE, AND IT WAS THE TIP OF
THE ICEBERG: THEY'D BE CHARGED TO BREATHE
IT NEXT. IF IT CAME TO IT, HE TOLD THE PRINCE
OF BIRDS'S EMISSARY, HE'D WALK.



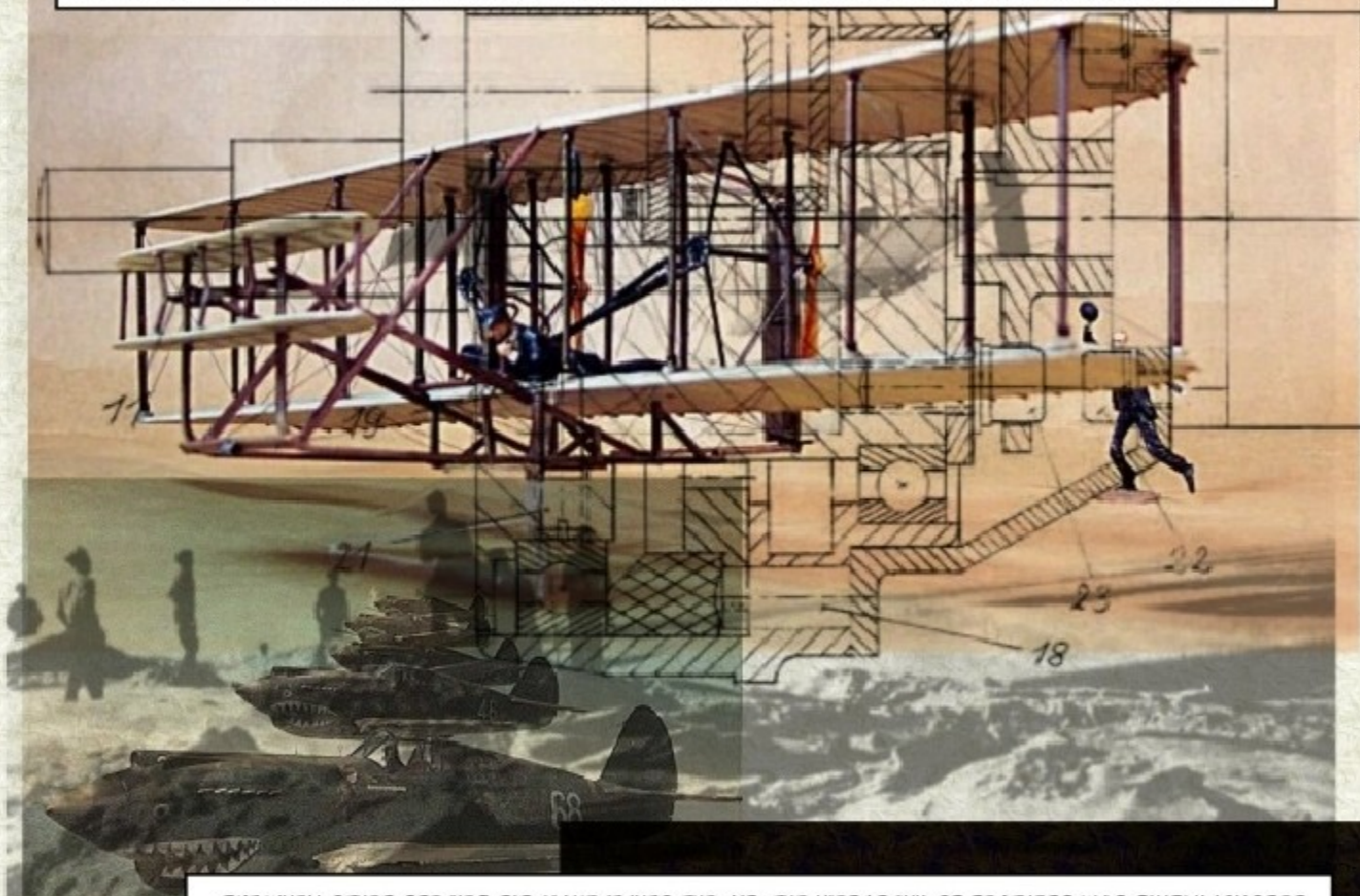
THEN WALK, SAID THE PRINCE OF BIRDS.

HARD YEARS FOLLOWED FOR THE CHICKEN KING'S PEOPLE.

1908 De la Hault Ornithopter N°1



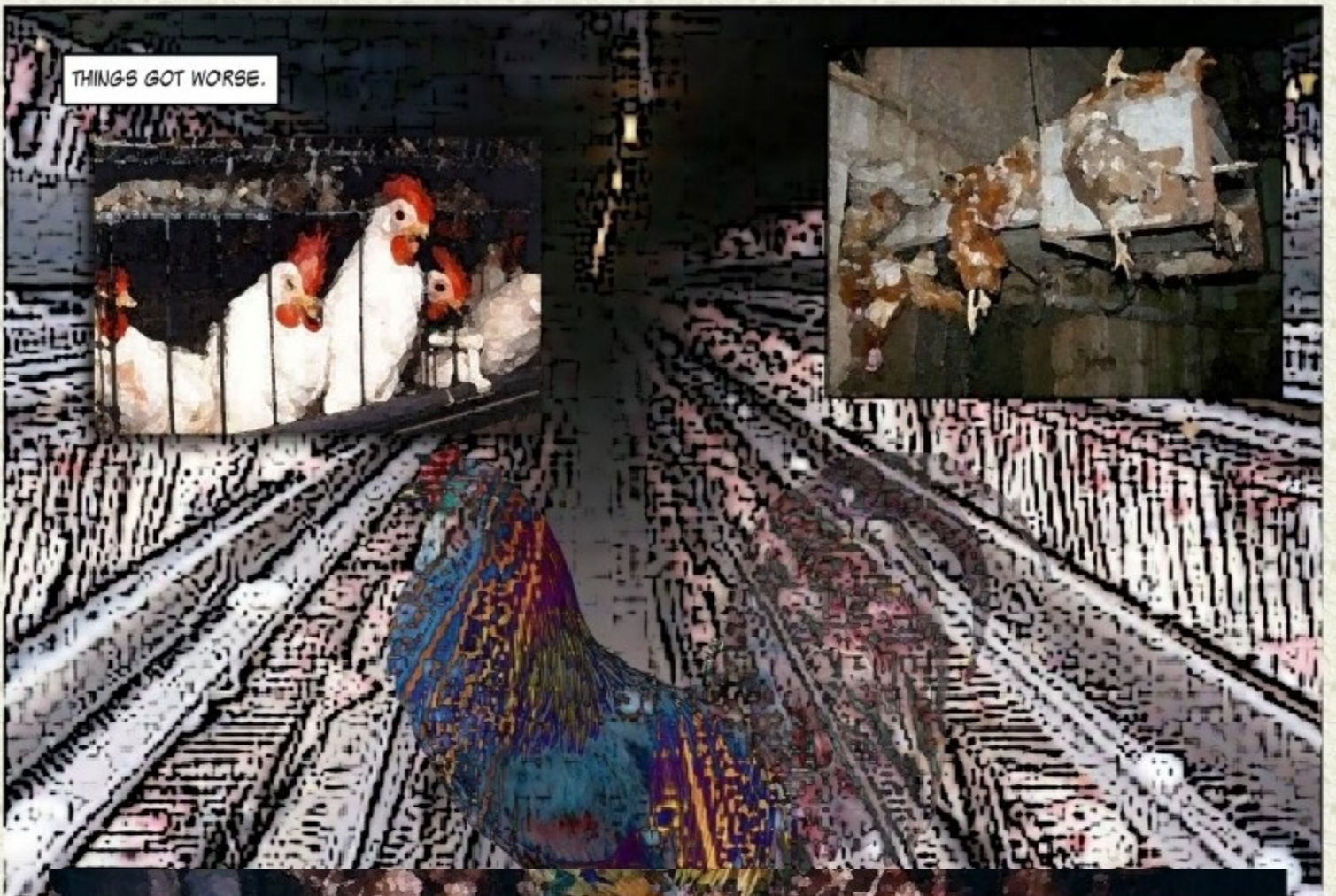
HE WATCHED OTHER SPECIES EXPERIMENT WITH FLIGHT AND HE HOPED FOR A CHANGE IN THE BALANCE OF POWER...



...BUT WHEN OTHER SPECIES DID MAKE IT INTO THE AIR, THE HIERARCHY OF FEATHERS WAS SIMPLY IGNORED.



THINGS GOT WORSE.





AT LEAST TWICE, IN DESPERATION, AGAIN HOPING FOR A NEW ELEMENT IN THE AVIAN PARLIAMENT, THE CHICKEN KING SOLD THE SECRET OF THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS.



BUT THOSE WHO BOUGHT WERE CONTENT TO LISTEN, AND SHOWED NO DESIRE TO BE INVOLVED IN THE ADMINISTRATION.

Understanding bird flu

Bird-flu experts gathered in Vietnam this week to figure out how to kill off the virus amid fears that it could mutate and spread through a world population with no immunity to it. Here is a closer look at the virus and how it could spread:

In the news: Ducks and other waterfowl come under scrutiny. News 21

HOW IS BIRD FLU TRANSMITTED?



AND THE CHICKEN KING WAS PUNISHED BY THE PRINCE OF BIRDS.

More information online: www.cdc.gov/flu/avian



GLOBAL OUTBREAKS

An influenza pandemic is a global outbreak of influenza and occurs when a new influenza virus emerges, spreads, and causes a major worldwide outbreak.

1918-19 Spanish Flu
caused the highest number of known flu deaths: more than 500,000 people died in the United States; 20 million to 40 million people may have died worldwide.

1957-58 Asian flu (H2N2)
caused about 70,000 deaths in the United States. First identified in China in late February 1957, the Asian flu spread to the United States by June 1957.

1968-69 Hong Kong flu (H3N2)
caused approximately 24,000 deaths in the United States. This virus was first detected in Hong Kong in early 1968 and spread to the United States later that year. Type A (H5N1) viruses still circulate today.



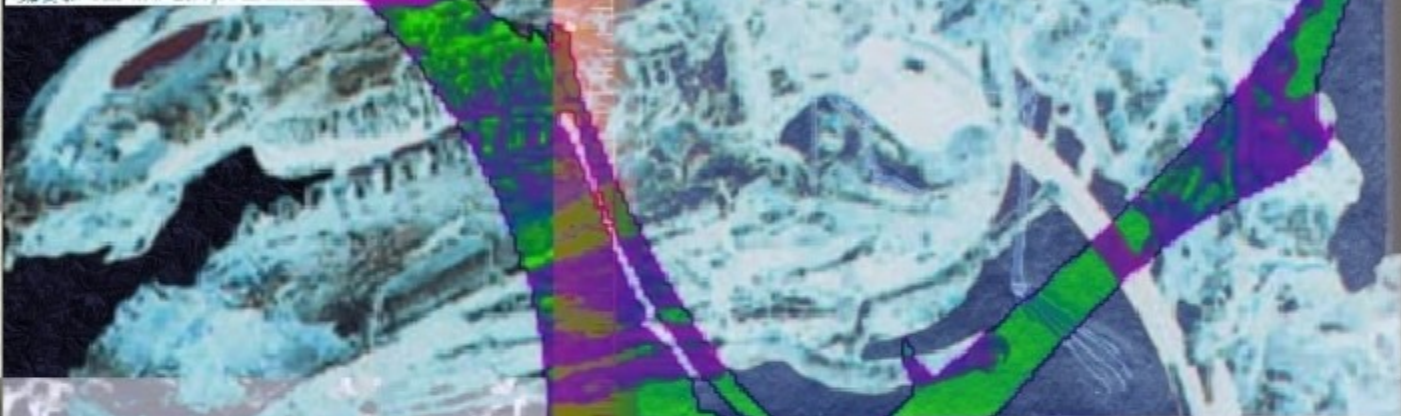
Source: World Health Organization, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USAID, The Associated Press, New York Times News Service



THAT WAS THE PRINCE'S MISTAKE. PERHAPS HE THOUGHT TO SHOW ALL THE BIRD SPECIES WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF HE WAS OPPOSED, BUT THEY LOOKED AND THOUGHT, "THAT COULD EASILY BE ANY OF US".




THE PRINCE OF BIRDS HAD BEEN ALIVE FOREVER. HE WAS THERE AT THE BEGINNING OF TIME AND HAD NEVER DIED. HE LIVED BEYOND PREDATORS, BEYOND DISEASE AND BEYOND DEATH.




SOME OF THE BIRDS COULDN'T FLY THAT FAR.



A dense flock of birds, likely terns, is shown in flight over a forest. The trees have a reddish-brown hue, and the overall scene is filled with the movement of the birds. A speech bubble is present in the upper right quadrant.

ENOUGH DID.



WHEN THE JOB WAS DONE, THE SURVIVORS
SENT REPRESENTATIVES TO THE CHICKEN KING,
WHO'D SEEN THE WAY THINGS WERE GOING
AND WHO ALSO WAS THE ONLY ONE UNSTAINED
BY THE BLOOD OF THE AIR, AND TOLD HIM HE'D
BEEN ELECTED THEIR NEW LEADER.

HE WAS WISE ENOUGH TO ACCEPT,
AND WISE ENOUGH AS WELL TO
STAY WHERE HE WAS...

FEET ON THE GROUND,
DEAD AND HATCHED AGAIN
EVERY FOUR YEARS...

THE VERY HUMBLE
KING OF BIRDS.

THE END

There are 207 theories about the extinction of the dinosaurs. 203 of them appear only in the twist-in-the-tail short stories in 2000AD. So if I want to make a 2000AD tribute, I can't do yet another dinosaur story, can I?

I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU'RE SO EXCITED. OUR DISTANT ANCESTORS CAME HERE, NOT YOUR GRANDPARENTS.

I KNOW. BUT FINDING RECORDS FROM OVER TWO MILLION YEARS AGO, FROM THE FIRST TIME WE WENT INTO SPACE... IT'S AMAZING.

PROGRESS REPORT

BY IAN M. PALMER

WELL, THINGS HAVE CHANGED. IT'S NOT JUST THAT OUR CIVILISATION HAS COLLAPSED FIFTEEN TIMES SINCE THEN. WE'VE EVOLVED; WE'RE NOT REALLY THE SAME CREATURES WHO CAME HERE BEFORE.

THE COLONISTS HERE WILL HAVE EVOLVED TOO.

THEY'RE UNLIKELY EVEN TO HAVE REMEMBERED WHERE THEY CAME FROM.

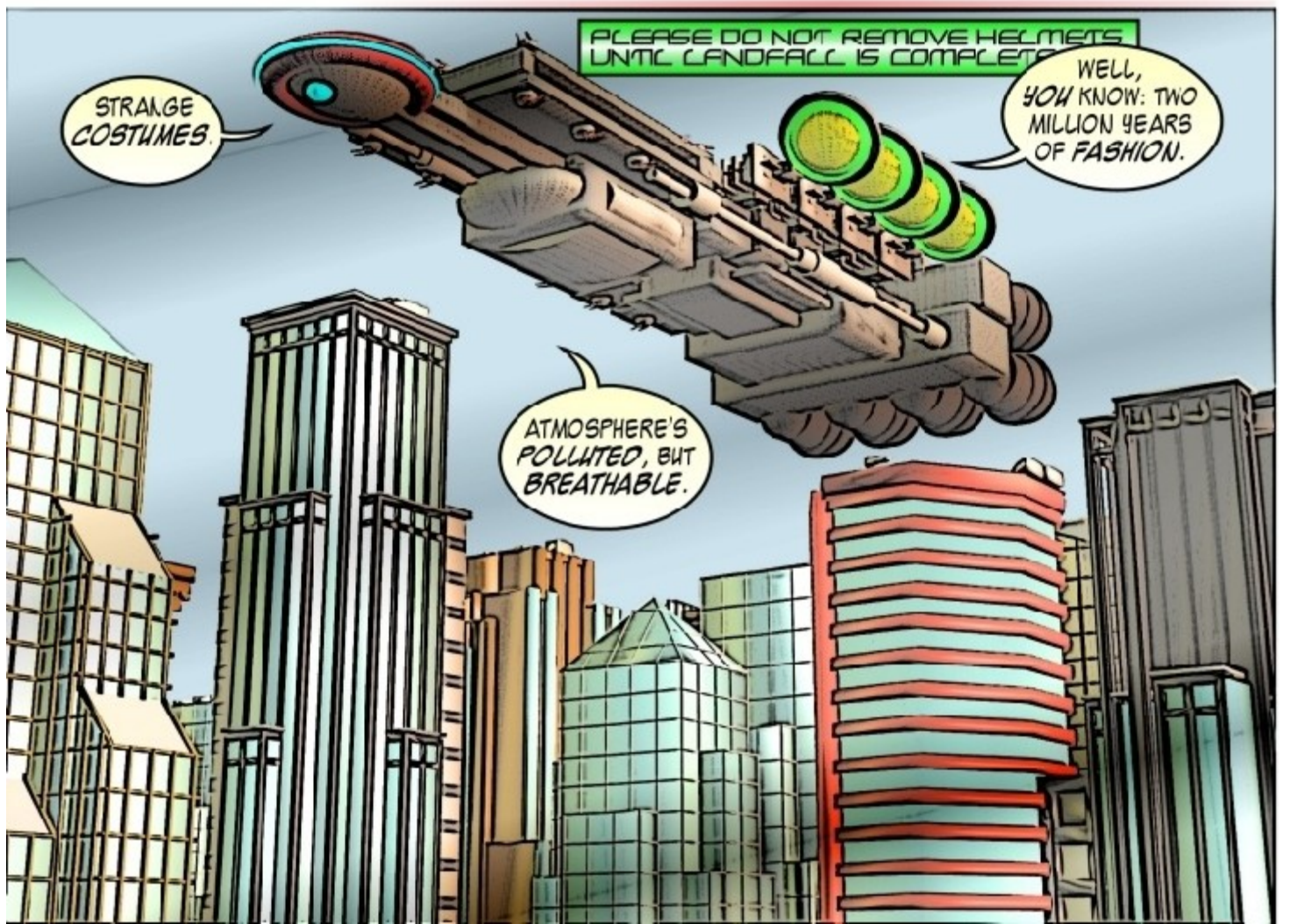


NO. IT LOOKS LIKE THEY'VE DONE WELL, THOUGH. LOOK. CITIES, VEHICLES... HOW ARE WE DOING DECODING THOSE RADIO SIGNALS?

GETTING THERE. THERE ARE DEFINITELY IMAGES, WE JUST CAN'T READ THEM YET.



NEVER MIND, WE'LL BE THERE SOON. LOOK, ON THE SCREEN, THERE THEY ARE: OUR COUSINS.



PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE HELMETS UNTIL LANDFALL IS COMPLETE.

STRANGE COSTUMES.

WELL, YOU KNOW: TWO MILLION YEARS OF FASHION.

ATMOSPHERE'S POLLUTED, BUT BREATHABLE.

NOW I'M
EXCITED. LET'S
GO AND MEET THE
RELATIVES.

LANDFALL IS COMPLETE.
HELMETS MAY BE REMOVED.

PERHAPS
WE CAN PERSUADE
THEM TO REMOVE
THOSE HORRIBLE
BALD-MONKEY
SUITS.

THE END

IT ALL KIND OF
MADE *SENSE* AT
THE *BEGINNING*.

IT WAS A MITE
NASTY MAYBE,
BUT IT MADE
SENSE.

AT THE
BEGINNING.

ZEB CROSS'S LITTLE GIRL *MAY* WAS
HAVIN' A *BABY*, WE'D ALL HEARD. *ZEB*
WAS THE *LAST* TO HEAR.

LUCAS FARRELL WAS THE *FATHER*.
WE'D ALL HEARD *THAT*, TOO.

ONLY *LUCAS* DIDN'T WANT TO HEAR IT.
SO MUCH SO THAT HE'D BOOKED *PASSAGE*
ON THE NEXT TRAIN OUT OF *TOWN*.

Afore the Weddin'

by Ian M. Palmer



UNTIL *THEN*, HE WAS *HIDING OUT*.
HIS FOLKS WOULDN'T SAY *WHERE*.



ZEB CROSS HAD A *TEMPER*. THINGS WERE SAID, AND IT ALL BECAME A MATTER OF *HONOUR*.

BY THE TIME THE FATHER OF THE *CHILD* AND THE FATHER OF THE *MOTHER* CAME FACE-TO-FACE ON MAIN STREET, IT WEREN'T NO LONGER ALL ABOUT *BIRTH* AND *MARRIAGE*.

IT WAS ABOUT *KILLING*.



LUCAS'S FIRST SHOT TOOK OFF THE TOP OF ZEB'S *HEAD*.

ZEB BEING OLDER AND MAYBE NOT SO KEEN, HIS SHOT PUT PAID TO LUCAS'S *KNEE*.



BOTH MEN WENT DOWN IN THE *DUST*.

AFTER A *MINUTE* OR TWO, PEOPLE STARTED COMING OUT OF THEIR *HIDING* PLACES INTO THE STREET.

THAT WAS WHEN ZEB CROSS STARTED *GETTING UP*.

BY THE TIME ZEB WAS ON HIS *FEET*, LUCAS WAS ON *HIS*.

HIS LEFT KNEE WEREN'T *THERE*, BUT HE WERE *STANDING* ON IT.



WELL, YOU CAN *IMAGINE*. PEOPLE *RAN*.

ZEB'S *SECOND* SHOT EMPTIED LUCAS'S *NECK*. LUCAS'S TOOK CARE OF A COUPLE ZEB'S *RIBS*, WAY I RECKON.

THIS TIME BOTH BOYS KINDA *STAGGERED* A MITE, THEN JUST STRAIGHTENED UP AND WENT RIGHT ALONG *SHOOTIN'*.



WE FIGURED AFTER MAYBE SIX SHOTS EACH, *SEVEN* IF THEY HAD ONE IN THE CHAMBER, THE WHOLE EERIE THING WOULD *STOP*.

SOMEHOW, THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN.

THEM *SIX-GUNS* JUST A-WENT ON *SHOOTIN'*, AND THEM TWO *DEAD BOYS* -

- WHICH IS WHAT WE ALL KNEW THEY WAS, BY THIS POINT -

- THEM TWO OLD *DEAD BOYS* JUST A-WENT ON A-KILLIN' EACH OTHER, *AGIN* AND *AGIN*.



SOME FOLKS GOT STARTED TO LEAVING SOON AFTER THAT. SEEING FOLKS YOU KNEW, YOUR FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS, SHOOT EACH OTHER TO DEATH OVER A FEUD, THAT WAS ONE THING; BUT SEEING THEM TWO NOT DYING, WELL, THAT WAS ANOTHER KIND OF THING.

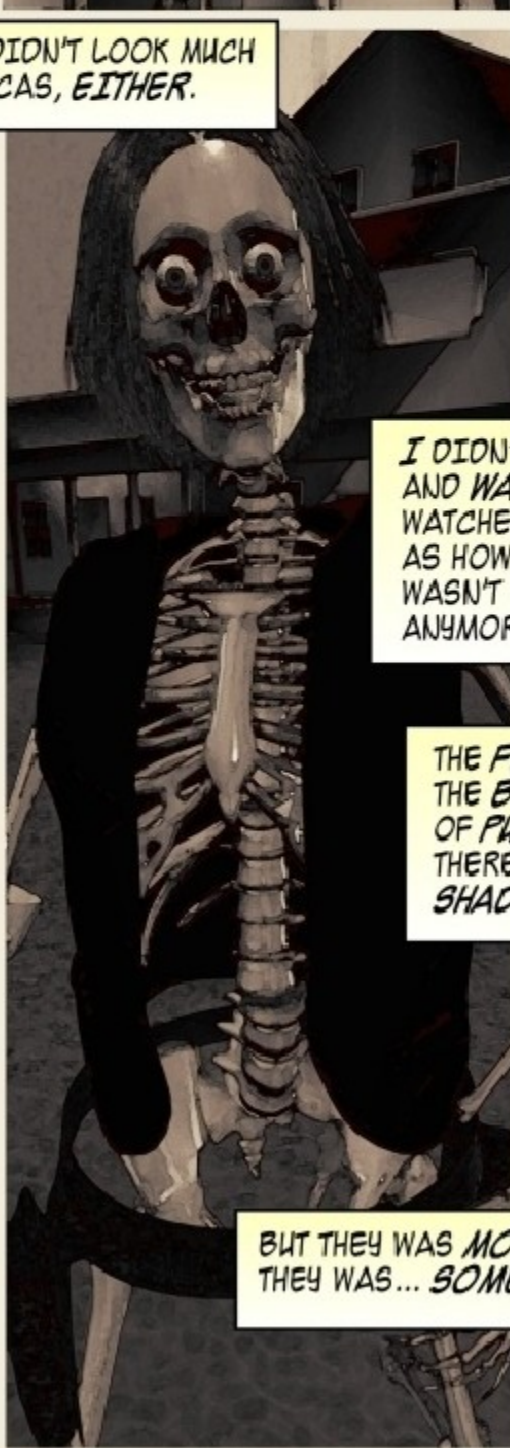
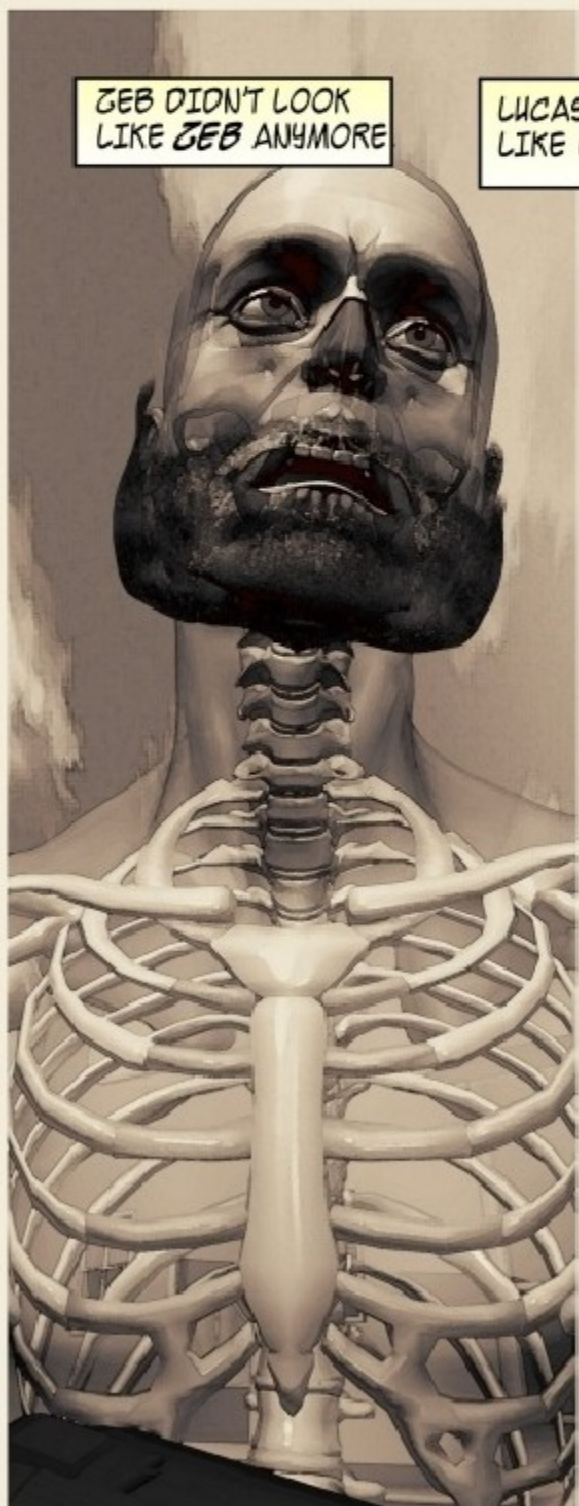
ZEB DIDN'T LOOK LIKE ZEB ANYMORE

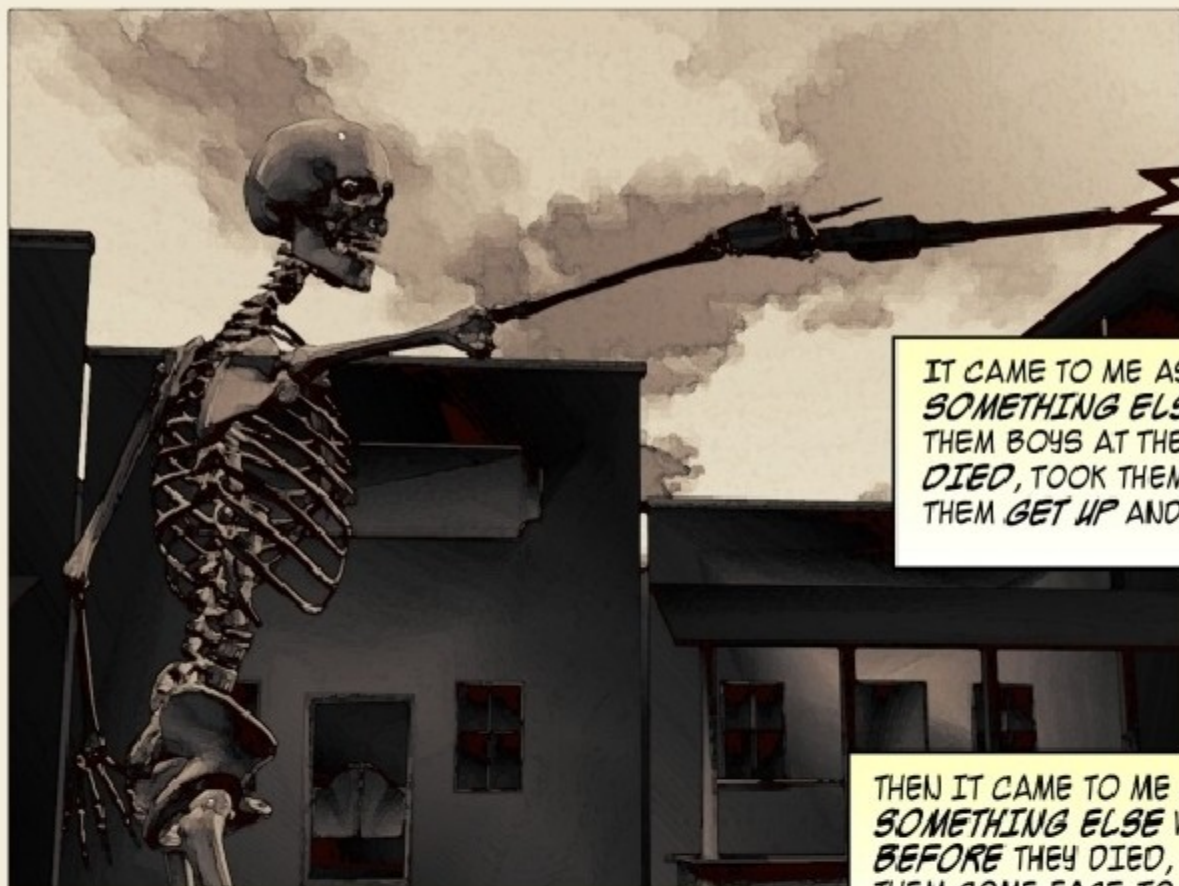
LUCAS DIDN'T LOOK MUCH LIKE LUCAS, EITHER.

I DIDN'T LEAVE. I STAYED AND WATCHED. AND AS I WATCHED, IT SEEMED TO ME AS HOW THEM TWO FELLERS WASN'T THERE AT ALL ANYMORE.

THE FLESH WAS GONE, THE BONE HAD BEEN KIND OF PUNCHED AWAY, AND THERE WAS ONLY THE SHADOWS LEFT.

BUT THEY WAS MORE THAN SHADOWS. THEY WAS... SOMETHING ELSE.





IT CAME TO ME AS HOW MAYBE *SOMETHING ELSE* GOT INTO THEM BOYS AT THE MOMENT THEY *DIED*, TOOK THEM OVER AND MADE THEM *GET UP AND CARRY ON*.


THEN IT CAME TO ME AS HOW MAYBE *SOMETHING ELSE* WAS IN THEM *BEFORE* THEY *DIED*, MAYBE MAKING THEM COME FACE-TO-FACE AND *START THE KILLING*.



AND THEN...

AND THEN IT CAME TO ME AS HOW MAYBE
SOMETHING ELSE WAS IN ALL OF US,
MAYBE WAITING, MAYBE CONTROLLING...





IT'S BEEN *FOUR DAYS*.
PREACHER ALLOWED AS
HOW ON THE *THIRD DAY*
THEY MIGHT *STOP*,
BUT THEY *AIN'T*.

ME, I DON'T
WORRY *EASY*.

BUT I *GUESS* MAYBE
I MIGHT START *TONIGHT*.

The End

www.ianmpalmer.com