

# GEORGE R. R. MARTIN'S **MEATHOUSE MAN**



  
**JET CITY**  
COMICS

ILLUSTRATED AND ADAPTED BY:

**RAYA GOLDEN**

# MEATHOUSE MAN



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Based on the short story  
"Meathouse Man" by  
**GEORGE R.R. MARTIN**

  
**JET CITY**  
COMICS

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Published by Jet City Comics, Seattle  
www.apub.com ISBN: 9781477898840

THAT FIRST TIME, WHEN PAYDAY CAME, TRAGER WENT STRAIGHT FROM THE ORE-FIELDS TO THE MEATHOUSE WITH THE OTHERS.

HE TRAILED BEHIND THE OLDER BOYS, SCARED BUT SOMEWHAT EAGER.

THINK HE'LL EVEN KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH IT?

AW, C'MON, GIVE THE LITTLE GUY A BREAK!

I PRACTICALLY HAD TO BEG HIM TO COME ALONG.



COX HAD SAID THAT TRAGER **HAD** TO COME, EVEN IF HE DIDN'T WANT TO.

HE PAID HIS MONEY TO A MAN AT THE DOOR AND GOT A KEY.

DAZED, HE FOUND HIMSELF STANDING IN FRONT OF AN OPEN DOOR.

SUDDENLY HE WAS ALONE... WITH HER.

NO, IT. NOT HER. IT, HE REMINDED HIMSELF.

AND THEN PROMPTLY FORGOT.

IT WOULD BE BETTER IF HE COULD BATHE FIRST. HE STANK OF SWEAT AND SULFUR LIKE ALL WHO WALKED THE STREETS OF SKRAKKY.

BUT THERE WAS NO HELP FOR THAT. THE ROOM HAD NO BATH.

JUST A SINK, A DIRTY BED...

AND A CORPSE.

WAS SHE ALWAYS THAT WAY?

LEGS SPREAD, STARING DEEP INTO NOTHINGNESS, BREATHING SHALLOW BREATHS.

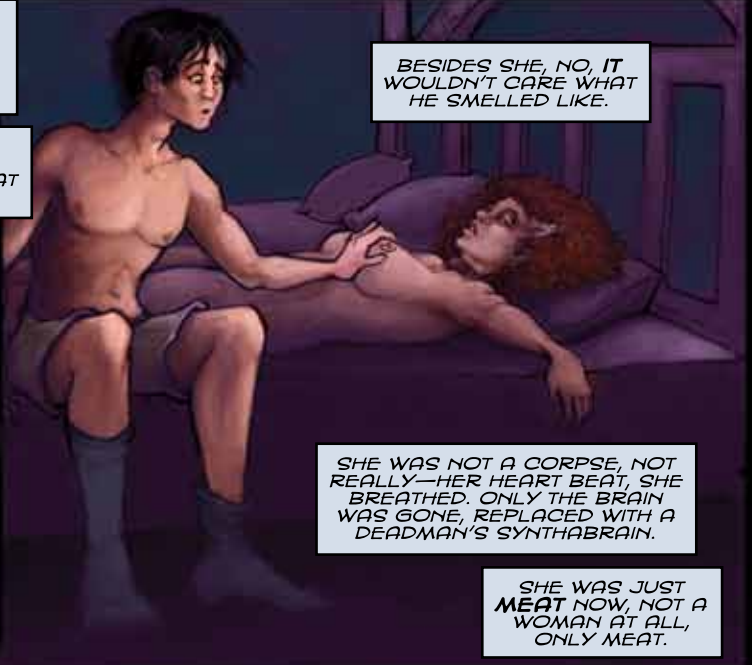
OR HAD THE MAN BEFORE HIM ARRANGED HER THAT WAY... AS A COURTESY?



HE DIDN'T KNOW, HE DIDN'T WANT TO KNOW, BUT HE KNEW WHAT TO DO NOW.

THEY HAD FORCED HIM INTO HANDLER'S SCHOOL WHEN HIS MOTHER DIED. HE'D GRADUATED YOUNGEST ON SKRAKKY BY FAR, AND HE WAS GOOD AT HIS WORK.

EVEN THOUGH HE'D NEVER DONE THIS BEFORE, HE KNEW WHAT TO DO, YES, HE DID.



BESIDES SHE, NO, IT WOULDN'T CARE WHAT HE SMELLED LIKE.

SHE WAS NOT A CORPSE, NOT REALLY—HER HEART BEAT, SHE BREATHED. ONLY THE BRAIN WAS GONE, REPLACED WITH A DEADMAN'S SYNTHABRAIN.

SHE WAS JUST MEAT NOW, NOT A WOMAN AT ALL, ONLY MEAT.



SHE MOVED SUDDENLY, THRUSTING HERSELF AT HIM. SHE WAS HOT, WET. HE TREMBLED ABOVE HER WONDERING HOW THEY DID THAT?



COULD SHE REALLY GET EXCITED WITHOUT A MIND, OR DID THEY HAVE LUBRICATING TUBES RUNNING THROUGH HER, OR WHAT?

THEN HE STOPPED CARING.

IT FELT GOOD, REALLY GOOD, BETTER THAN ANYTHING HE'D EVER DONE TO HIMSELF.

HE FELT STRANGELY PROUD THAT SHE HAD BECOME SO EXCITED. BUT HE WAS TOO NEW, TOO YOUNG. IT TOOK ONLY A FEW STROKES, THEY CAME TOGETHER...



...THEN SHE SHUDDERED AND BECAME LIFELESS ONCE MORE.

HE STILL HAD TIME LEFT, SO HE EXPLORED, POKING AND PRODDING EVERYWHERE HIS FINGER WOULD GO. MAKING SURE TO GET HIS MONEY'S WORTH, ROLLING IT OVER AND LOOKING AT EVERYTHING.

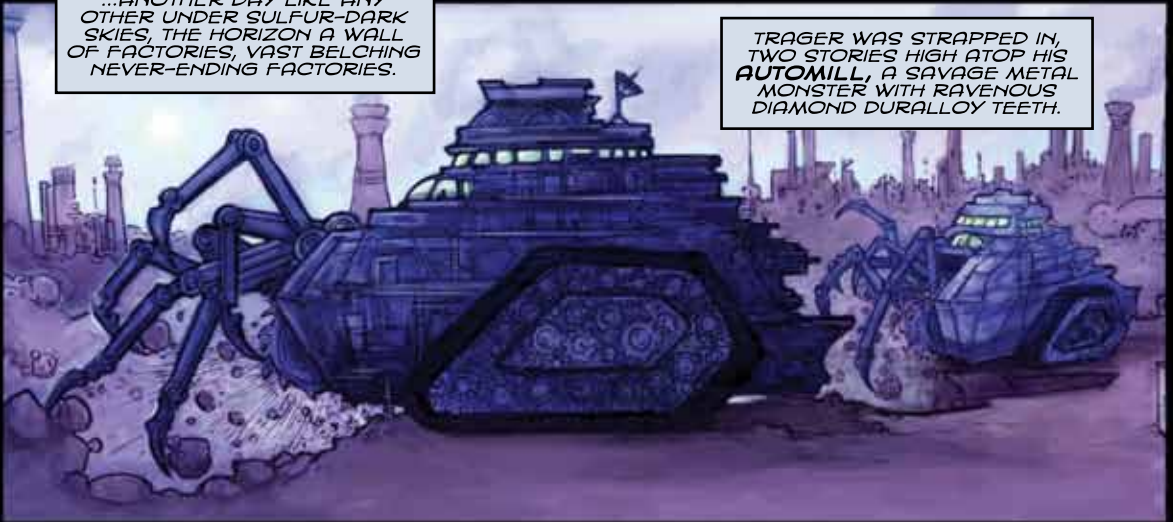
THEN HE LEFT THE DEAD MEAT AS HE'D FOUND HER, LYING FACE UP ON THE BED WITH HER LEGS APART.



MEATHOUSE COURTESY.

...ANOTHER DAY LIKE ANY OTHER UNDER SULFUR-DARK SKIES, THE HORIZON A WALL OF FACTORIES, VAST BELCHING NEVER-ENDING FACTORIES.


TRAGER WAS STRAPPED IN, TWO STORIES HIGH ATOP HIS AUTOMILL, A SAVAGE METAL MONSTER WITH RAVENOUS DIAMOND DURALLOY TEETH.



AROUND HIM LAY ITS MIND, EVERY LIGHT AND SWITCH BLURRED WITH TRIPLE IMAGES. HE SAW THE WHEEL, THE CONTROLS THAT WOULD WARN OF TROUBLE IN THE REFINERY UNDER HIS FEET, THE BRAKE RELEASE VALVE, FUEL-FEED GAUGE, THE ORE-SCOOPS—THESE IMAGES WERE CLEAR AND STRONG.




BUT THAT WAS NOT ALL HE SAW...



THERE WERE FAINT IMAGES FROM OTHER CONTROLS AS WELL, OTHER HANDS. CORPSE HANDS.

THE CORPSE CONTROLLER HUMMED THINLY ON TRAGER'S BELT. AMPLIFIERS BROADCAST MULTIPLE SIGNALS THAT TICKLED AT HIS TEMPLES AND FINGERTIPS.

HE MOVED THOSE OTHER HANDS SLOWLY AND CAREFULLY, WHILE IN ANOTHER PART OF HIS MIND HE KEPT HIS OWN HANDS, HIS REAL HANDS, STILL. THE CORPSES SWAYED, UNMASKED, IN THE FUMES OF THEIR CAREFULLY ALIGNED AUTOMILLS.




EVERY DAY, THE PIT GREW LARGER. NEW LAYERS OF ROCK AND ORE WERE STRIPPED AWAY. ONCE A MOUNTAIN RANGE HAD STOOD HERE, BUT TRAGER DIDN'T REMEMBER THAT.




EVERY DAY, THEY STOOD AT ITS EDGE. THE LINE OF SHABBY JUGGERNAUTS RUMBLLED IN PERFECT FORMATION, READY TO DESCEND INTO THE GLOOM.

ANY DECENT HANDLER COULD DEAL WITH TWO ALIGNED BODIES. IT WAS WHEN YOU HAD NUMEROUS CORPSES PERFORMING MULTIPLE TASKS THAT THINGS GOT TRICKY.



BUT A GOOD CORPSEHANDLER COULD DO THAT, UP TO A SIX-CREW.



THEN THERE WERE THE FAMOUS THEATRICAL HANDLERS WHO COULD CONTROL EIGHT OR EVEN NINE DEADMEN. NINE SYNTHABRAINS LINKED TO A SINGLE HANDLER, WHO COULD MOVE THOSE DEADMEN LIKE SECONDARY BODIES.

OR LIKE HIS OWN BODY.

IF HE WAS GOOD ENOUGH.

TRAGER WAS A GOOD HANDLER, BUT THE HANDLER FROM THE MEATHOUSE, NOW SHE MUST BE A TRUE ARTIST!

HE IMAGINED WATCHING EACH OF HER CORPSES THROUGH HOLOS AND PSI CIRCUITS.

WAS IT A FLUKE THAT IT HAD BEEN SO PERFECT, OR WAS SHE ALWAYS THAT GOOD?

BUT TO MOVE A DOZEN CORPSES, TO MATCH THE RHYTHM OF EACH CUSTOMER SO EXACTLY?

THE AIR BEHIND HIM WAS BLACK WITH ROCK-DUST, HIS EARS WERE FULL OF SCREAMS, AND HIS FILTER MASK STANK OF FERMENTING FRUIT.

BUT TRAGER KEPT HIS HARD-ON ALL ACROSS THE PLAIN AS THE AUTOMILL SHOOK BENEATH HIM.

THE CORPSES WERE WAREHOUSED AT NIGHT, BUT HE HAD HIS OWN ROOM.

A SLICE OF SPACE IN A STEEL-AND-CONCRETE WAREHOUSE WITH A THOUSAND OTHER TINY SLICES.

MOST OF HIS NEIGHBORS WERE HANDLERS TOO, SO WHY BOTHER GETTING TO KNOW THEM?

NIGHTS WERE LONG. HE SPENT MOST OF THEM READING, OR LISTENING TO THE MUSIC HIS LONG-GONE FATHER HAD LEFT HIM, THINKING...

TONIGHT HE THOUGHT ABOUT PAYDAY COMING AGAIN, AND HOW COX WOULD BE AFTER HIM TO RETURN TO THE MEATHOUSE.

BUT IT WAS SO CHEAP, SO EASY, DIRTY. THERE HAD TO BE MORE, DIDN'T THERE? LIKE LOVE?

HE TOLD HIMSELF IT WOULD BE BETTER WITH A REAL WOMAN. IT HAD TO BE.

AND HE HAD TO TRY, HAD TO, OR WHAT SORT OF LIFE WOULD HE EVER HAVE?

BUT A FEW DAYS LATER...

ALL RIGHT, TOAD, WHATEVER, GO N' HIDE UNDER YOUR ROCK.

AIN'T NO GREASE OFF MY TREAD, WHATEVER IT IS YOU DO WITH YOUR DAMN BORING SELF... HA!

SOMEHOW IT FELT LIKE IT WOULD PROVE SOMETHING IF HE DID GO AGAIN, JUST ONCE...

A DIFFERENT ROOM AND A DIFFERENT GIRL THIS TIME BUT, AGAIN, THE PERFORMANCE WAS SUPERB.

NEXT TIME COX DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO ASK. TWO VISITS, THEN FOUR—HE WAS BECOMING A REGULAR NOW, HALF-HEARTEDLY ACCEPTED BY THE OTHERS.



TRAGER'S DISLIKE FOR THEM GREW. THEY WOULD BE MEATHOUSE MEN AS LONG AS THEY LIVED. HE KNEW HE COULD DO BETTER.



HE WOULD FIND LOVE.

HIS ADMIRATION FOR THE LADY MEATHOUSE HANDLER GREW WITH EACH VISIT, UNTIL IT WAS ALMOST WORSHIP. IF HE COULD ONLY MEET HER!

ONE DAY OVER A BEER AT THE LOCAL TAVERN, HE TOLD COX AND THE OTHERS ABOUT HIS FEELINGS FOR THE MEATHOUSE HANDLER AND HER TALENTS. SOMEONE SNICKERED.

THEN THEY ALL BEGAN TO LAUGH.

WHAT AN ASS YOU ARE KID, REALLY! I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU DON'T KNOW THIS SHIT.

THERE'S NO FUCKING HANDLER, DUMBASS! HA! DON'T TELL ME YOU'VE NEVER EVEN HEARD OF A FEEDBACK CIRCUIT, HUH?



WHEEEEEE



HA HA HA HA HA!

OKAY, THIS IS HOW IT WORKS...

IN HIS HOPELESSLY YOUNG AND TRAGICALLY NAIVE WAY, HE WAS SURE IF HE COULD FIND THIS REAL WOMAN, HE WOULD LOVE HER.

YOU HANDLE YOUR OWN MEAT. AHHH...ALWAYS GOOD FOR A LAUGH, YOU ARE!

HA HA HA HAAAAH

ANYWAY, THERE'S THIS CIRCUIT BOX BUILT INTO THE BED, YOU SEE.

THE MEAT IS TUNED TO THE BOX, AND THE BOX PICKS UP ON WHOEVER IS IN THE ROOM WITH AN ACTIVE BRAIN. IT PUMPS OUT ENOUGH JUICE TO WORK WITHOUT AN AMPLIFYING HALO OR GLOVES.

BRILLIANT, REALLY—DIDN'T YOU EVER WONDER WHY RUBES WHO DON'T HANDLE THINK THOSE GIRLS ARE ALL...YAH KNOW, DEAD...

HA HA HAHAHAAAAHA!

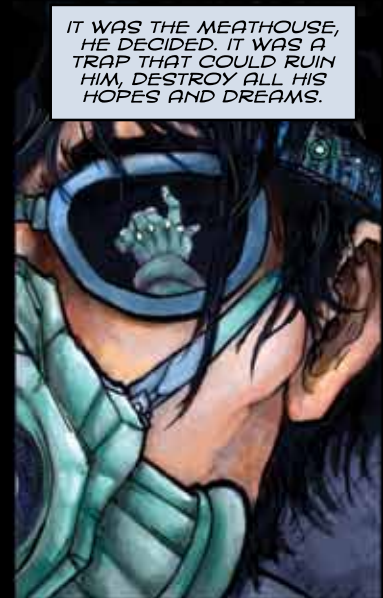
WHAT A RIOT YOU ARE!

THAT'S WHEN TRAGER REALIZED WHY THE SEX WAS ALWAYS SO PERFECT. SO REAL...

...HE WAS A BETTER HANDLER THAN HE COULD EVER HAVE IMAGINED.

HE WAS GOOD AT HIS JOB, PROUD OF THAT, BUT THE REST...

IT WAS THE MEATHOUSE, HE DECIDED. IT WAS A TRAP THAT COULD RUIN HIM, DESTROY ALL HIS HOPES AND DREAMS.



HE WOULD NOT GO BACK—IT WAS TOO EASY. HE WOULD SHOW THEM ALL!

HE WOULD TAKE THE HARD ROAD, FEEL THE PAIN AND MAYBE EVEN THE LOVE.

EVERY NIGHT HE RESISTED, HE WOULD GO BACK TO HIS ROOM TO READ.

TO DREAM.



TRAGER DIDN'T RETURN TO THE MEATHOUSE.



THERE, AS YEARS PASSED, HE WAITED PATIENTLY FOR HIS LIFE TO BEGIN.

JOSIE WAS THE FIRST.

HE RAN A FULL FIVE-MAN CREW THESE DAYS. MORE THAN COX, MORE THAN ANY OF THEM. A MAN OF ONE-AND-TWENTY, HE WAS SOLID NOW, STABLE, AND UNEMOTIONAL.

HE FIT IN WELL WITH HIS CORPSES. HE TOUCHED NO ONE, AND NO ONE TOUCHED HIM.

HE STILL HAD A FAINT GLIMMER OF HOPE ALIVE INSIDE HIM, SOMETHING HE HUNGERED FOR, YEARNED FOR. SOME NIGHTS HE'D WAKE, DRESS, WALK THE CORRIDORS FOR HOURS, RESOLVING EACH TIME THAT TOMORROW WOULD BE THE DAY HE CHANGED HIS LIFE.

TOMORROW...

ONE DAY, WHILE WORKING THE LOW HILLS AND FIGHTING YARD BY YARD TO STRIP WHATEVER ORE HE COULD, ONE OF THE EYE ECHOES CAUGHT HIS ATTENTION.



SUDDENLY THE WHOLE BOARD WAS AWASH WITH CRIMSON. WITH A PUFF OF SMOKE HIS THIRD CORPSE'S AUTOMILL CAME TO A SHRIEKING HALT.



TRAGER BEAMED OUT FOR A TECH...

HE HAD ALREADY UNSTRAPPED AND CLIMBED DOWN THE SIDE OF THE MILL AND WAS ON HIS WAY UP TO ITS CONTROL PANEL TO CALL AGAIN BY THE TIME SHE PULLED UP IN HER SKIMMER.

THEY MET IN THE SHADOW OF THE MIGHTY MILL'S TREAD...

HE AND JOSIE.



SHE WAS FIELD-WISE, HE KNEW THAT AT ONCE. YET SOMEHOW THE GREASE SMEARED ON HER FACE AND SCARRED LEATHER UTILITY BELT ONLY SERVED TO MAKE HER MORE BEAUTIFUL.



HEY, THERE—  
NAME'S  
JOSIE.

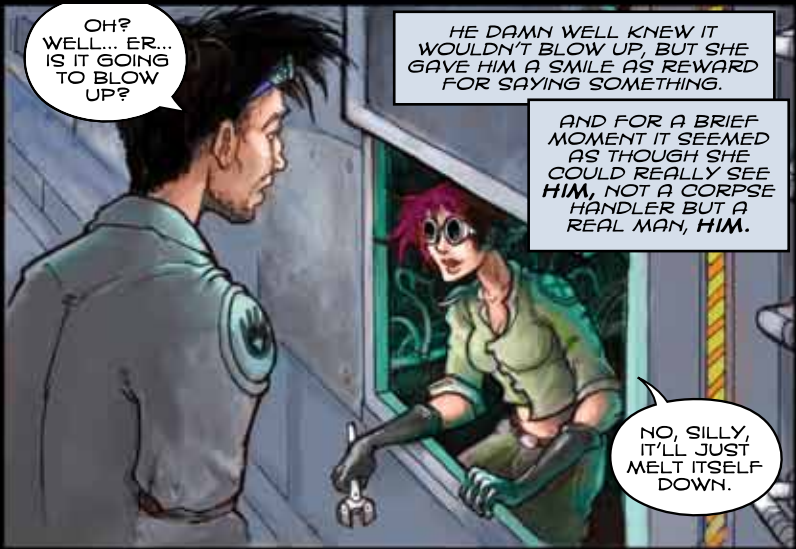


GOOD  
DAY FOR  
IT, HUH?

THIS IS  
YOUR ACCESS  
PANEL TO THE  
REPAIR BAY,  
YEAH?

UHH...  
YEAH.

DON'T GO IN THERE,  
OKAY? YOU'VE GOT  
A DAMPER FAILURE,  
AND THE NUKES ARE  
RUNNING AWAY.



OH?  
WELL... ER...  
IS IT GOING  
TO BLOW  
UP?

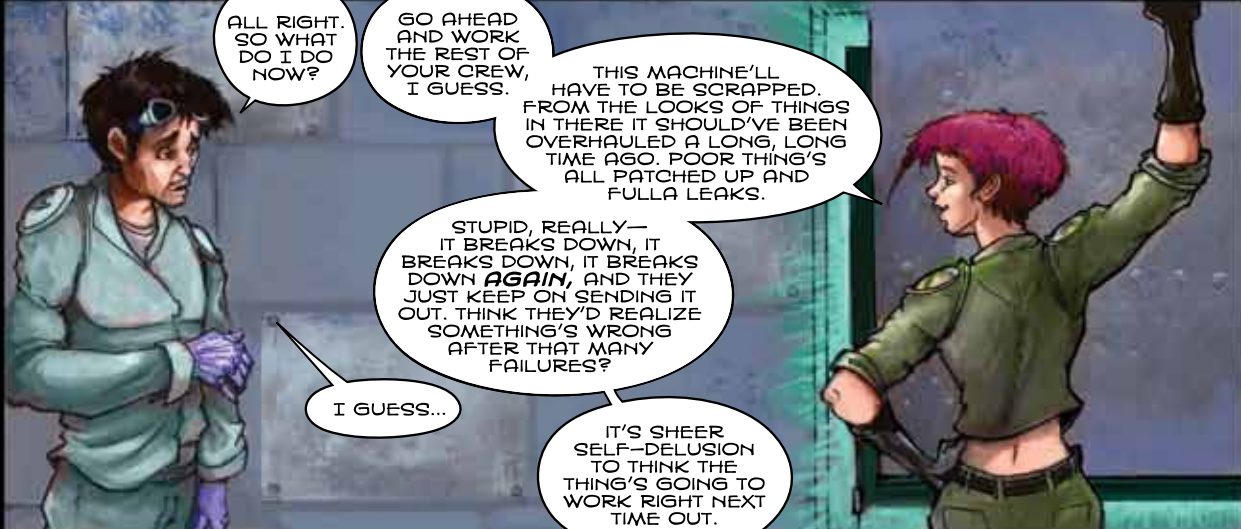
HE DAMN WELL KNEW IT  
WOULDN'T BLOW UP, BUT SHE  
GAVE HIM A SMILE AS REWARD  
FOR SAYING SOMETHING.

AND FOR A BRIEF  
MOMENT IT SEEMED  
AS THOUGH SHE  
COULD REALLY SEE  
HIM, NOT A CORPSE  
HANDLER BUT A  
REAL MAN, HIM.

NO, SILLY,  
IT'LL JUST  
MELT ITSELF  
DOWN.



ALL THAT SHIELDING YOU'VE  
GOT IN HERE—IT  
WON'T EVEN GET  
HOT TOPSIDE.



ALL RIGHT.  
SO WHAT  
DO I DO  
NOW?

GO AHEAD  
AND WORK  
THE REST OF  
YOUR CREW,  
I GUESS.

THIS MACHINE'LL  
HAVE TO BE SCRAPPED.  
FROM THE LOOKS OF THINGS  
IN THERE IT SHOULD'VE BEEN  
OVERHAULED A LONG, LONG  
TIME AGO. POOR THING'S  
ALL PATCHED UP AND  
FULLA LEAKS.

STUPID, REALLY—  
IT BREAKS DOWN, IT  
BREAKS DOWN,  
IT BREAKS DOWN  
**AGAIN**, AND THEY  
JUST KEEP ON SENDING IT  
OUT. THINK THEY'D REALIZE  
SOMETHING'S WRONG  
AFTER THAT MANY  
FAILURES?

I GUESS...

IT'S SHEER  
SELF-DELUSION  
TO THINK THE  
THING'S GOING TO  
WORK RIGHT NEXT  
TIME OUT.



WAIT!

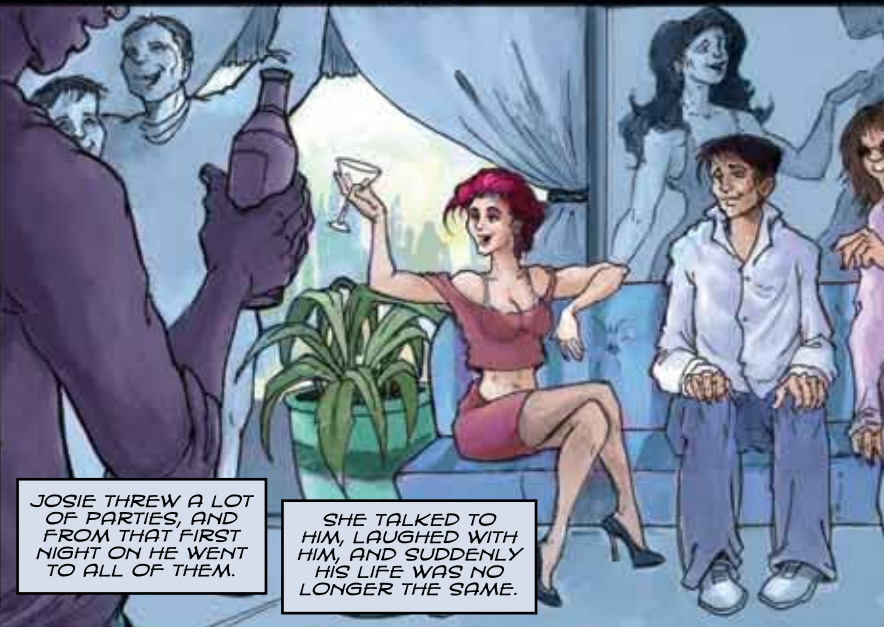
UH, WILL I SEE YOU AGAIN?



HELL, I DON'T SEE WHY NOT. I'M THROWING A LITTLE PARTY THIS WEEKEND. WHY DON'T YOU SWING ON BY?



HER WORDS FILLED HIM WITH FIRE AND LIFE, AND FOR DAYS HE CHEWED UP ROCK AND ORE WITH SOMETHING CLOSE TO JOY...



JOSIE THREW A LOT OF PARTIES, AND FROM THAT FIRST NIGHT ON HE WENT TO ALL OF THEM.

SHE TALKED TO HIM, LAUGHED WITH HIM, AND SUDDENLY HIS LIFE WAS NO LONGER THE SAME.



HE SAW PARTS OF SKRAKKY AS HE'D NEVER SEEN THEM BEFORE, DID THINGS HE'D NEVER DONE.

HE STOOD IN CROWDS THAT GATHERED IN THE STREETS FOR THE FESTIVAL SEASON.



HE PROWLED THE VAST REC-MALLS WITH HER, HUGE WAREHOUSES FILLED WITH GAME ROOMS AND CAFETERIAS, MUSIC PANELS AND ENDLESS BARS.

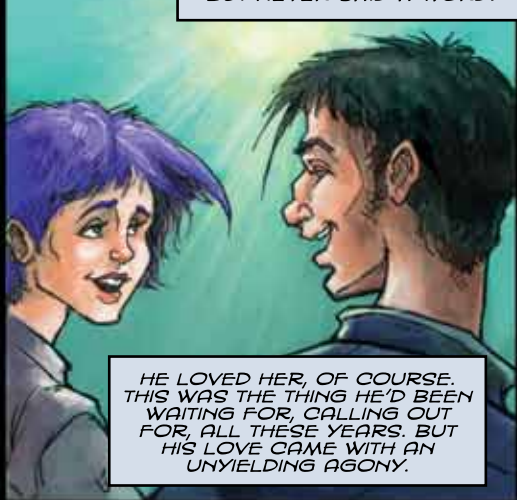
THEY ROAMED COUNTLESS HOURS THROUGH THE STRANGELY SILENT AND WHITE FOREVER-CLEAN UNDERGROUND OFFICES WHERE OFF-WORLDBERS AND COMPANY MEN LIVED AND WORKED.

HE HARDLY NOTICED THE OTHER PEOPLE WITH THEM. HE WOULD TELL HIMSELF ONLY HE AND JOSIE WERE GOING OUT. THE OTHERS JUST TAGGED ALONG.

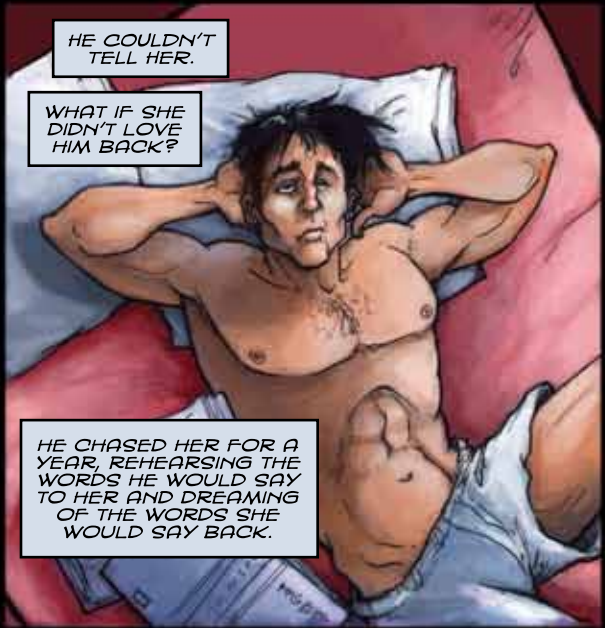
ONCE IN A GREAT WHILE, THINGS WOULD WORK OUT SO THEY WERE ALONE FOR A TIME.

OF POLITICS, LIFE ON SKRAKKY THE OTHER WORLDS SHE HAD SEEN, BOOKS, OR ABOUT NOTHING AT ALL. HE TALKED A LOT, BUT NEVER SAID A WORD.

THEN THEY WOULD TALK.



HE LOVED HER, OF COURSE. THIS WAS THE THING HE'D BEEN WAITING FOR, CALLING OUT FOR, ALL THESE YEARS. BUT HIS LOVE CAME WITH AN UNYIELDING AGONY.



HE COULDN'T TELL HER.

WHAT IF SHE DIDN'T LOVE HIM BACK?

HE CHASED HER FOR A YEAR, REHEARSING THE WORDS HE WOULD SAY TO HER AND DREAMING OF THE WORDS SHE WOULD SAY BACK.

HE WAS MORE ALONE THAN EVER NOW—THE PEACE OF HIS ROUTINE, OF HIS HALF-LIFE WITH HIS CORPSES, WAS GONE. IT WAS A YEAR OF PAIN AND PROMISE...

THE FIRST YEAR HE EVER LIVED.



HE WOULD TELL HER, HE WOULD. THEN ONE DAY...

JOSIE.



YEAH, DARLIN'?



I LOVE YOU!



OH, SWEETS, NO!

NO, NO, NO, YOU CAN'T!

I'M SO SORRY, DARLIN', AND I CAN'T SAY I DIDN'T SEE THIS THING COMING, I TRIED TO DISCOURAGE YOU, DEAR...

YOU'RE SUCH A GREAT GUY AND ALL, BUT...

IT'S NOT THAT I DON'T LIKE YOU! IT'S JUST I THINK IT WOULD BE BETTER, YAH KNOW, IF WE WERE JUST...

...FRIENDS...



IT'S OKAY...

I WANTED TO BELIEVE, EVEN IF IT WASN'T TRUE...

I SUPPOSE I REALLY KNEW ALL ALONG. I'M SORRY, JOSIE. SO SORRY!

I'LL LOVE YOU FOREVER, NO MATTER WHAT.

JUST DO ME ONE FAVOR, ALL RIGHT?

ANYTHING FOR YOU.

OH, GREG... JUST DON'T GO BACK TO BEING WHAT YOU WERE.

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF! PROMISE ME YOU WON'T GIVE UP! YOU'VE GOT NO LIFE HERE ON SKRAKKY! GET YOUR ASS OFF THIS ROCK AND FIND SOMEONE WHO'LL MAKE YOU HAPPY!



THERE IS SOMEONE OUT THERE FOR EVERYONE...

STOP BELIEVING THAT, AND YOU'RE NOTHING... DEAD!

MANY YEARS PASSED.

HE DID FINALLY LEAVE SKRAKKY, AND MADE A NEW LIFE, AND NEW FRIENDS, ON A NEW PLANET.

VENDALIA.

QUIET AS DEATH TONIGHT.

...ACTUALLY, I CAME TO VENDALIA WITH THAT IN MIND. WENT TO ONE OF THE SMALLER GLADIATORIAL EVENTS ONCE.

ONLY ONCE.

THE WHOLE IDEA OF IT MAKES ME SICK.

YOU'D DO GREAT IN THE ARENA, IS ALL I'M SAYING... FORESTING WITH A FULL SIX-CREW, FLYING BUZZTRUCKS, THAT'S NOT EASY!

OUT HERE THE MONEY IS CRAP, BUT THE WORK IS, WELL, **CLEAN**. YOU KNOW?



SORT OF. STILL, IT ISN'T LIKE IT'S REAL PEOPLE IN THE ARENA—IT'S ONLY MEAT.

ALL YOU DO IS MAKE THE BODIES AS DEAD AS THE MINDS ARE!

LOGICAL? YOU REALLY OUGHT TO TRY **FEELING** A LITTLE MORE THAN YOU THINK, DON.

NEXT TIME YOU'RE AT THE ARENA TAKE A GOOD LOOK. IT'S UGLY!

BUT WHY NOT? I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

YOU'D BE SO GOOD AT IT! YOU'RE THE BEST, AND I'VE SEEN THE WAY YOU WORK YOUR CREW.

IT'S... **LOGICAL**. THAT'S WHAT I THINK ANYWAY.

IT'S BUTCHERY WITH CHEERING. THEY **LAUGH**, DON! LAUGH! **NO!** NO.



THERE WAS A GIRL... BACK ON SKRAKKY.

A GIRL I LOVED.

I WANTED JOSIE TO LOVE ME, I DON'T KNOW. SHE'S GONE NOW, OF COURSE, BUT STILL...

THAT'S WHAT'S MOST IMPORTANT TO ME, FINDING SOMEONE LIKE HER, SOMEDAY.

SOMEDAY **SOON**, I HOPE.

IT DIDN'T WORK OUT. THAT'S KIND OF WHY I'M HERE.

SO, I'M LOOKING FOR ANOTHER GIRL LIKE THAT ONE, SOMEONE WHO CAN ADMIRE ME. LOVE ME.

AND I DON'T THINK A GIRL LIKE JOSIE WOULD ADMIRE SOMEONE WHO HAD A JOB LIKE THAT ONE. I COULD NEVER FIND THE PERSON I'M LOOKING FOR AS AN ARENA CORPSE-MASTER...



**GIDYON.**

*CITY OF CITIES,  
THE HEART OF  
VENDALIA.*

*AND THROUGH IT, OF  
SLAGG AND SKRAKKY AND  
NEW PITTSBURG AND ALL THE  
OTHER CORPSEWORLDS, THE  
HARSH UGLY PLACES WHERE  
MEN WOULD NOT WORK AND  
CORPSES HAD TO.*

*GIDYON—THE  
CITY OF ROT, THE  
CORPSE CITY, THE  
MEAT MART.*

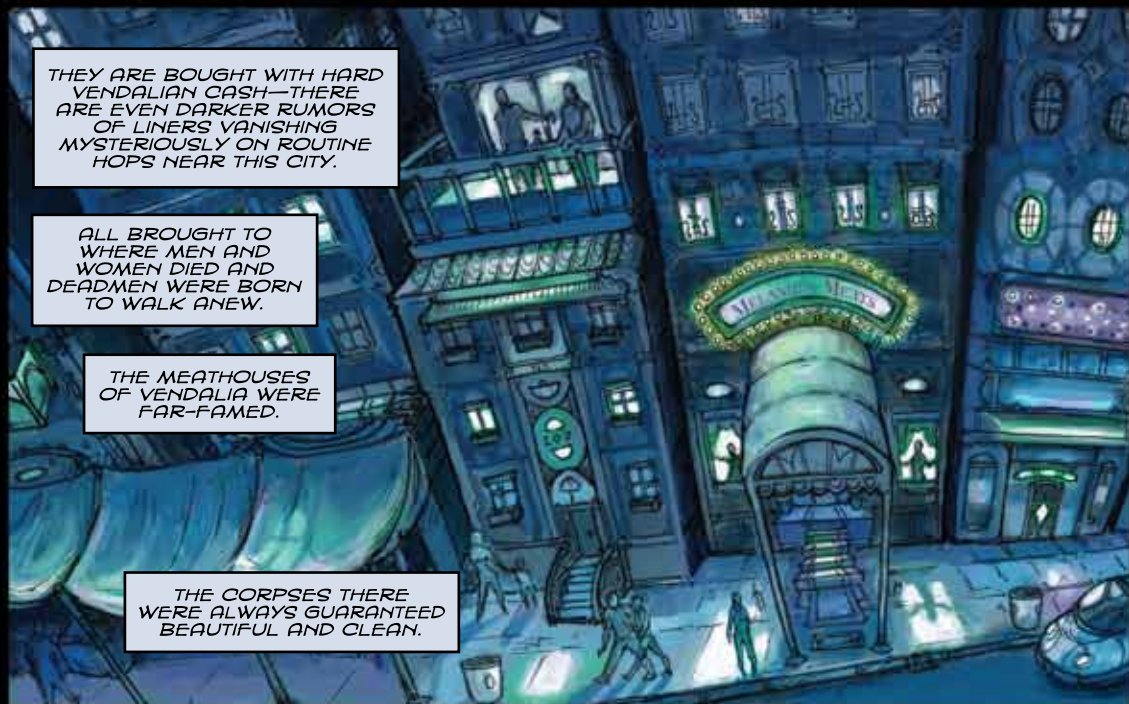
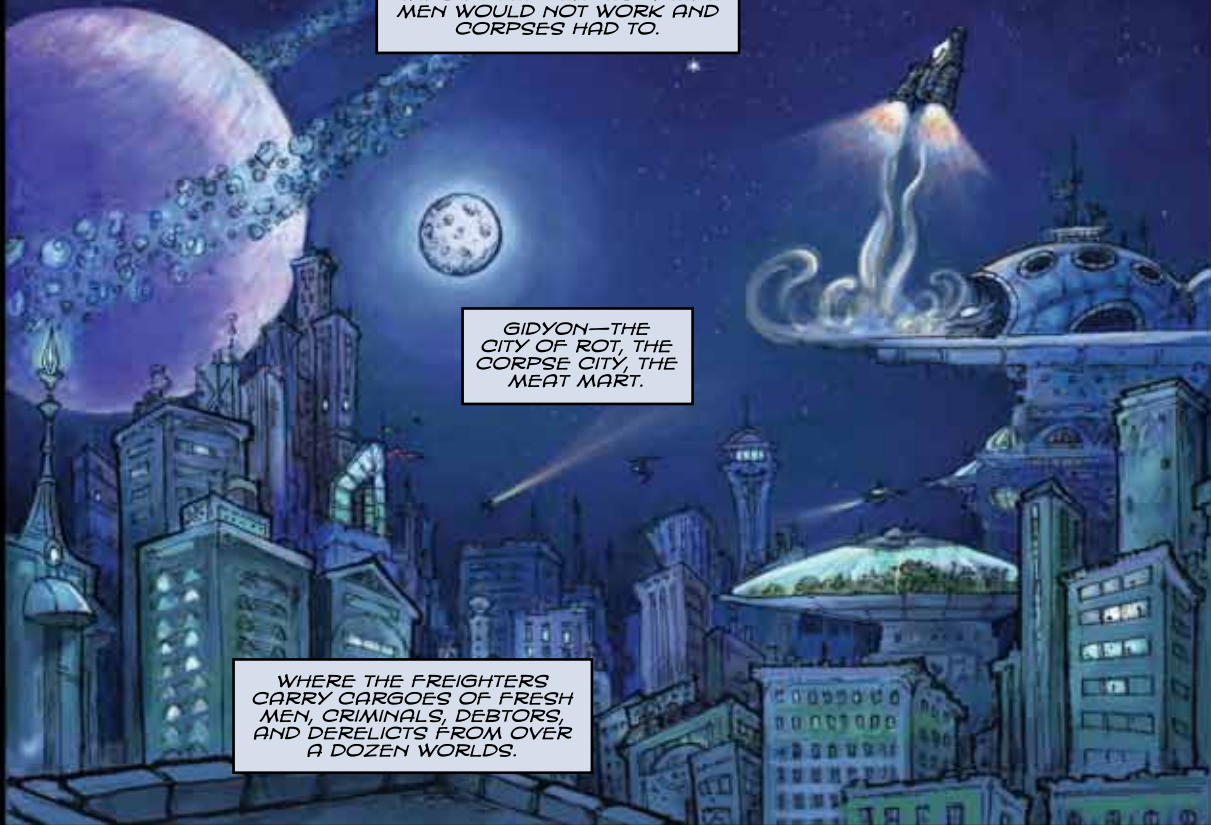
*WHERE THE FREIGHTERS  
CARRY CARGOES OF FRESH  
MEN, CRIMINALS, DEBTORS,  
AND DERELICTS FROM OVER  
A DOZEN WORLDS.*

*THEY ARE BOUGHT WITH HARD  
VENDALIAN CASH—THERE  
ARE EVEN DARKER RUMORS  
OF LINERS VANISHING  
MYSTERIOUSLY ON ROUTINE  
HOPS NEAR THIS CITY.*

*ALL BROUGHT TO  
WHERE MEN AND  
WOMEN DIED AND  
DEADMEN WERE BORN  
TO WALK ANEW.*

*THE MEATHOUSES  
OF VENDALIA WERE  
FAR-FAMED.*

*THE CORPSES THERE  
WERE ALWAYS GUARANTEED  
BEAUTIFUL AND CLEAN.*



TRAGER SAT OUTSIDE, AT A CAFE ACROSS FROM ONE OF THOSE INFAMOUS MEATHOUSES RIGHT NOW, SIPPING A BITTERSWEET WINE.

HE THOUGHT ABOUT HOW HIS LEAVE HAD EVAPORATED ALL TOO QUICKLY, TRYING NOT TO LET HIS EYES WANDER OR REST ON THE BECKONING DOORWAY ACROSS THE STREET.

HE FELT UTTERLY CUT OFF FROM LIFE.

HE COULD NOT TOUCH **ANY** OF THESE PEOPLE—HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO REACH THEM.

HE COULD WALK OUT INTO THE STREET AND GRAB ONE OF THEM, AND STILL THEY WOULD NOT TOUCH, THE STRANGER WOULD ONLY PULL FREE AND RUN AWAY.

HE'D GONE THROUGH SO MANY OF THE BARS AND CAFES OF GIDYON, FORCED A THOUSAND CONTACTS, BUT NOTHING CLICKED.

NOTHING.

NO ONE...

HIS HANDS TREMBLED AS HE PAID HIS BILL.

FORGIVE ME, JOSIE...

IT HAD BEEN **SO** MANY YEARS...

BACK AT THE WILDERNESS CAMP, HE DROVE HIS CORPSES LIKE MEN GONE WILD. THE BUZZSAWS BURNED RED, CLAWING THEIR WAY THROUGH THE FOREST.

BUT HE WAS STRANGELY SILENT THAT NIGHT UNTIL AFTER THE OTHERS WENT TO THEIR TENTS.



YOU KEEP SAYING I SHOULDN'T GIVE UP, SO YOU'D BETTER NOT.

I WENT IN. AFTER ALL I'D SAID, ALL I PROMISED, I STILL WENT IN.



JUST REPEAT WHAT YOU ALWAYS SAY—STOP FEELING SORRY FOR YOURSELF AND HAVE THE COURAGE TO LOOK.

FUCKING LOT EASIER TO TELL YOU THAN TO DO IT MYSELF.

COME ON DUDE, YOU'RE NOT A MEATHOUSE MAN. YOU'RE A DREAMER, REMEMBER?

FEELING PAIN IS BETTER THAN FEELING NOTHING, RIGHT?

YOU'RE RIGHT, DON...YOU'RE RIGHT.



AND THEN ONE DAY...HER NAME WAS LAUREL.



SHE WAS NOTHING LIKE JOSIE, SAVE IN ONE THING—HE LOVED HER.



I CAN'T BELIEVE I HAVE TO GO BACK SO SOON!

I'M A LITTLE NERVOUS—I DON'T THINK I WANT TO LEAVE...

THIS IS A VERY NICE CITY...



SHE WAS NEW TO GIDYON, A STUDENT FORESTER FRESH FROM SOME VENDALIAN OUTBACK SETTLEMENT. HE MET HER WHILE ON LEAVE. HE HAD TWO WEEKS, AND THEY SPENT IT ALL TOGETHER EXPLORING ALL THE WONDERS OF THE LARGEST CITY ON A PLANET CARVED OUT OF ENDLESS TOWERING TREES.



THEY HARDLY EVER SLEPT THOSE FIRST FEW WEEKS. THEY DID EVERYTHING TOGETHER.



THE LOVEMAKING WAS A JOY, A GAME, AND A GLORIOUS DISCOVERY EVERY TIME. NEVER AS GOOD TECHNICALLY AS AT THE MEATHOUSE, BUT HE HARDLY CARED.

HE TAUGHT HER EVERY SECRET HE HAD, AND WISHED HE HAD MORE TO TELL.



POOR JOSIE, SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT SHE MISSED! I'M SO LUCKY— THERE COULDN'T BE ANYONE ELSE LIKE YOU.



NO, DARLING, I'M THE ONE WHO'S LUCKY!

DON CAME TO LIVE ON GIDYON AND JOINED THE THEATER. HE SAID THE FORESTRY WORK HAD BEEN BORING WITHOUT TRAGER THERE TO TALK TO.



THE THREE OF THEM SPENT A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER.

HE WANTED DON TO SEE HOW HAPPY HE WAS, TO SEE HOW FAR HE HAD COME.

I LIKE HER.



I KNOW, ISN'T SHE GREAT?



NO, I MEAN I REALLY LIKE HER.



HONEY, I THINK DON IS... WELL, Y'KNOW, INTO ME.

GOD. REALLY?

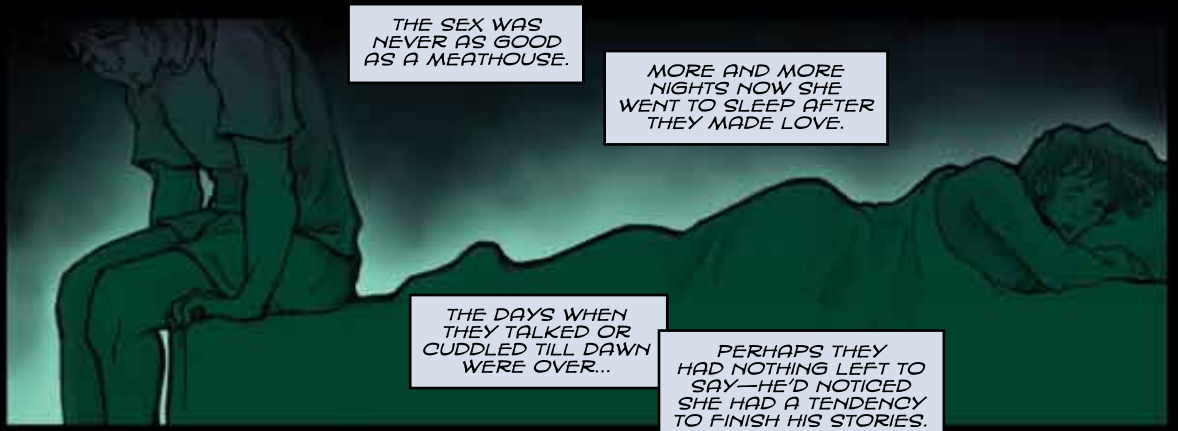
I DON'T KNOW HOW TO HANDLE IT...

CAREFULLY.



HE'S VERY VULNERABLE. YOU'RE PROBABLY THE FIRST WOMAN HE'S EVER BEEN INTERESTED IN.

DON'T BE TOO HARD ON HIM. HE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO GO THROUGH THE STUFF I WENT THROUGH, YOU KNOW?



THE SEX WAS NEVER AS GOOD AS A MEATHOUSE.

MORE AND MORE NIGHTS NOW SHE WENT TO SLEEP AFTER THEY MADE LOVE.

THE DAYS WHEN THEY TALKED OR CUDDLED TILL DAWN WERE OVER...

PERHAPS THEY HAD NOTHING LEFT TO SAY—HE'D NOTICED SHE HAD A TENDENCY TO FINISH HIS STORIES.



AND THEN...

HE SAID WHAT?

WELL, WHAT DID YOU SAY?

I CAN'T TELL YOU THAT! IT'S BETWEEN DONNY AND ME.



HE SAID IT'S NOT FAIR THE WAY I TURN AROUND AND TELL YOU EVERYTHING THAT GOES ON BETWEEN US, AND HE'S RIGHT!

RIGHT!  
BUT I TELL YOU EVERYTHING!

WHAT'S GOING ON, LAUREL, HUH? I'M SCARED!

I LOVE YOU, REMEMBER? HOW CAN THINGS CHANGE SO FAST?



OH, HUN, DON'T WORRY, I LOVE YOU. I ALWAYS WILL, BUT IT'S JUST...

I LOVE DON TOO, I GUESS.

YOU KNOW?

WELL...

WHO DO YOU LOVE MORE?



YOU, OF COURSE!



ALWAYS YOU!

HE WALKED TO WORK THAT DAY HAUNTED BY THE IDEA OF DON AND LAUREL TOGETHER. IT KEPT EATING HIM AWAY INSIDE.

WHEN HE GOT THERE HE FOUND THE THREE BIGGEST CORPSEHANDS WORKING AT THE THEATER.



AND HE CONFRONTED HIS FRIEND.



I THINK IT'S ABOUT TIME WE GOT THINGS OUT IN THE OPEN AROUND HERE, DONELLY.

LAUREL ASKED ME TO PRETEND I DIDN'T **KNOW**, BUT IT'S A STRAIN.

I DON'T WANT TO HURT YOU, MAN.



**THEN DON'T!**

BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN I'M GOING TO PRETEND I'M **DEAD**, EITHER!

I'M **NOT!** I LOVE HER!

AND I HAVE MORE IN COMMON WITH HER THAN YOU DO!

YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE MY FRIEND, DON, SO LOVE SOMEONE ELSE— YOU'RE ONLY GOING TO END UP HURT THIS WAY.



OH, I DUNNO. SHE LOVES **YOU** MORE ANYWAY. SHE **SAID** SO. I NEVER SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED ANYTHING ELSE.

I FEEL LIKE I'VE STABBED YOU IN THE BACK. I—

SHIT, MAN, I CAN'T TAKE THIS. LOOK, DON, YOU HAVEN'T STABBED ME. C'MON, DON'T TALK LIKE THAT.

I GUESS IF YOU LOVE HER, THEN I UNDERSTAND.

I JUST HOPE YOU CAN GET OVER IT SOON, SO EVERYTHING GETS BACK TO NORMAL.



I DON'T LOVE YOU ANYMORE, GREG. I'M SORRY. I DON'T.

IT SEEMED REAL FOR A LONG TIME, BUT NOW IT FEELS ALMOST LIKE IT WAS ALL JUST A DREAM.

I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF I EVER LOVED YOU, REALLY.

DON.



**DON'T YOU SAY ANYTHING BAD ABOUT DONNY!  
I'M TIRED OF HEARING YOU RUN HIM DOWN!**

OH, LAUREL, DON'T YOU REMEMBER THE THINGS WE SAID, THE WAY WE FELT?

I'M THE PERSON YOU SAID THOSE THINGS TO.



BUT I'VE GROWN. I REMEMBER PERFECTLY FINE.

I JUST DON'T FEEL THAT WAY ANYMORE, THAT'S ALL.



LAUREL, DON'T...

**KEEP YOUR HANDS OFF ME!**

I TOLD YOU ALREADY, IT'S OVER!

YOU HAVE TO LEAVE NOW—DONNY IS COMING BY IN JUST A LITTLE WHILE.

IT WAS WORSE THAN JOSIE.

A THOUSAND TIMES WORSE.



THE SKY WAS BRIGHT WITH THE LIGHTS OF GIDYON AND FULL OF LAUGHTER, BUT HE COULD HEAR ONLY ONE SOUND.



HYUUUGFH

PAIN.

THWACK  
SPLUTCH

HE TRIED TO STAY ON AT THE THEATER, BUT DON WAS ALWAYS THERE, SMILING, BEING FRIENDLY. SOMETIMES LAUREL CAME TO MEET HIM AFTER THE DAY'S SHOW AND THEY WOULD LEAVE ARM IN ARM...



HE QUIT.



HYUFF  
HUUUGK  
HUUUH

WHUD  
SPLORTCH

TRAGER WAS A STATUE, PART OF THE STONES ON WHICH HE SAT. THE REST OF THE WORLD THROBBED BENEATH HIM.

NOT EVEN HIS EYES MOVED.

BUT HIS MIND...

THE CORPSE BELOW HIM POUNDED UNTIL THE WALL WAS SLICK WITH BLOOD AND ITS FISTS WERE MANGLED CLOTS OF TORN MEAT.



BEEP BEEP

THEY MADE HIM PAY BEFORE HE ENTERED THE BOOTH. THEN IT TOOK THEM OVER AN HOUR TO PATCH HER THROUGH.



JOSIE...



HELLO?  
WHY, HELLO THERE, SWEETIE! HOW YOU BEEN?

HE TOLD HER...



OH, THAT'S SAD. DARLING, I'M SORRY.  
BUT DON'T LET IT GET TO YOU, KEEP GOING, CHIN UP, RIGHT! THE NEXT ONE WILL WORK OUT BETTER. THEY ALWAYS DO!



JOSIE... HOW ARE THINGS?

DO YOU...MISS ME BACK THERE ON SKRAKKY?



OH, SURE. THINGS ARE PRETTY GOOD!

IT'S STILL SKRAKKY, THOUGH. YOU'RE BETTER OFF WHERE YOU'RE AT.



OH HEY, BUDDY, I GOTTA FLY. SOMEONE'S AT THE DOOR. GLAD YOU CALLED, LOVE! BUH-BYE!

AND WITH THESE WORDS HE LOST HIMSELF COMPLETELY.

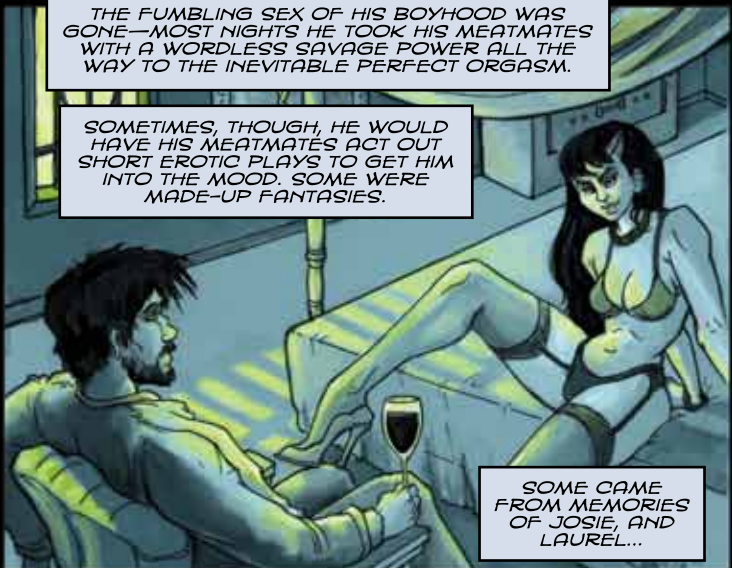


HE ABANDONED HIS DREAMS OF LOVE AND TURNED TO THE MEATHOUSE FOR CHEAP SOLACE.



THE FUMBLING SEX OF HIS BOYHOOD WAS GONE—MOST NIGHTS HE TOOK HIS MEATMATES WITH A WORDLESS SAVAGE POWER ALL THE WAY TO THE INEVITABLE PERFECT ORGASM.

SOMETIMES, THOUGH, HE WOULD HAVE HIS MEATMATES ACT OUT SHORT EROTIC PLAYS TO GET HIM INTO THE MOOD. SOME WERE MADE-UP FANTASIES.



SOME CAME FROM MEMORIES OF JOSIE, AND LAUREL...

ONCE DURING THEIR BRIEF TIME TOGETHER, HE AND LAUREL HAD GONE OUT INTO THE WILDERNESS TO MAKE LOVE UNDER THE STARS.

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?

OH, IT'S NOTHING...

IT'S OKAY, YOU CAN TELL ME.

IT'S JUST THAT SOMETIMES I GET SCARED. I'M AFRAID SOMETHING WILL HAPPEN TO US. SOMETHING WILL SOMEHOW RUIN IT ALL...

...AND I'LL LOSE YOU.

NOW EACH NIGHT, BEFORE SLEEP TOOK HIM, HE TORTURED HIMSELF WITH HER WORDS.

THE GOOD MEMORIES LEFT HIM WITH ASH AND TEARS; THE BAD ONES WITH A WORDLESS EMPTY RAGE.

HE SLEPT WITH GHOSTS. HE AWOKE TO NOTHING EACH MORNING.

A HUSK OF A DEAD DREAM WAS ALL THAT WAS LEFT TO HIM.

I DON'T EVER WANT YOU TO LEAVE ME.

I WON'T LEAVE.

DON'T WORRY, LOVE...

HE HATED THEM. ALL OF THEM ...

HE HATED HIMSELF FOR HATING.

HER NAME DOES NOT MATTER. HER LOOKS ARE NOT IMPORTANT.

ALL THAT MATTERS IS THAT SHE WAS.

TRAGER TRIED TO BELIEVE, BUT HOW MANY TIMES CAN YOU SPEAK THE SAME WORDS AND BELIEVE THEM LIKE YOU DID THE FIRST TIME?

AND EVEN IF YOU SAY THEM, DO THE WORDS MAKE YOU ANY BETTER AT LOVING? OR DO YOU ONLY BECOME BETTER AT FOOLING YOURSELF?

ARE THOSE WHO'VE SAID IT A HUNDRED TIMES, A THOUSAND, ANY CLOSER TO BELIEVING THE LONG AGO ABANDONED DREAM?

IN TRUTH, THOSE WORDS ARE ONLY STEALING THE NAME OF LOVE TO MASK THEIR DEAD LIES.

I LOVE YOU.

HE REALIZED THAT HER WORDS MEANT NOTHING TO HIM, NO MATTER HOW SWEET THEY SOUNDED. HE SAID THE WORDS AND TRIED, BUT DIDN'T MEAN THEM.

OVER AND OVER, THEY BOTH KNEW THEY WERE PRETENDING.

HE HAD HER, AND YET VISIONS FROM THE PAST HAUNTED HIM STILL...

I DON'T WANT TO HURT YOU.

I NEVER WANTED TO HURT YOU.

I'M SORRY. I JUST DON'T...

HOW MANY TIMES CAN YOU SAY THE WORDS AND BELIEVE?



NEW WORLD:  
DANGFON.

A PLANET OF  
STORMS AND  
RICHES.


WHERE CLOUDS  
HANG HEAVY EVERY  
DAY, AND THE SKY  
THROBS PAINFULLY  
WITH FLICKERING  
SCARLET FLAMES.



WHERE COLISEUMS AND ELABORATE  
HOMES ARE CARVED DIRECTLY INTO  
THE BLACK GRANITE MOUNTAINS  
SURROUNDING THE CITY OF **CRUXUS**.

IS HE DREAMING? THE  
PIT IS EMPTY, TUCKED INTO  
A VALLEY. THE ARENA SITS  
SILENT IN THE FACE OF A  
BELLOWING, ENDLESS  
STORM.

AT THE CENTER OF THE PIT SHE  
STANDS IN THE DARKNESS. YOU CAN  
TELL THAT SHE'S FIELD-WISE.



SHE IS STANDING  
CONFIDENT, ALONE,  
AND SHE HAS THE  
ANSWERS...

STUPID, REALLY-  
IT BREAKS DOWN,  
IT BREAKS DOWN, IT  
BREAKS DOWN AGAIN,  
AND THEY JUST KEEP ON  
SENDING IT OUT. THINK  
THEY'D REALIZE  
SOMETHING'S WRONG  
AFTER THAT MANY  
FAILURES?

IT'S  
SHEER SELF-  
DELUSION...

"...TO THINK THE THING'S  
GOING TO WORK RIGHT  
NEXT TIME OUT."

**RAAAAAH!**

**KILL  
HIM!**

**YAAAAH!**

**C'MON!**

**SHOW  
US!**

**AIEEEE!**

**BLOOD!**

TRAGER AWAKENS  
WITHIN HIMSELF  
TO THE SOUND OF  
THUNDER.

FEELS THE SURGING  
POWER IN THE MEAT HE  
CONTROLS, MUSCLE STILL  
DWARFED BY THE MASS OF  
HIS CHALLENGER.

THIS IS THE FINAL BOUT FOR THE DAY. HIS GREATEST CHALLENGE AS A HANDLER.

THE ENEMY DEADMAN IS THE LARGEST HE HAS EVER FACED.

ITS TORSO RIPPLES WITH MUSCLES, THE BYPRODUCT OF MONTHS OF FURIOUS TRAINING AND MULTIPLE WINS.

TRAGER STARES OUT ACROSS THE ARENA FROM HIS PRIVATE THRONE HIGH ABOVE THE CROWDS, FAR FROM THE BLOOD-SOAKED ARENA DUST.

HIS OPPONENT SEEMS CAREFUL, CAUTIOUS. TRAGER WAITS CALMLY.

HE CAN FEEL THE GROUND BENEATH HIS CORPSE'S FEET TREMBLE FROM THE HEAVY ROAR OF ANTICIPATION THAT SEETHES THROUGH THE BLEACHERS.

EVERY SAGGING BREATH IS FILLED WITH THE RANK SMELL OF DAMP SAWDUST AND BLOOD.

PATIENCE...

HE WILL MOVE HIS CORPSE FAST ENOUGH AND WELL ENOUGH WHEN THE TIME COMES.

HE KNOWS IT.

SO DOES HIS OPPONENT.

THEN, AS EXPECTED—

—THE  
MONSTER  
LUNGES...



...EXPECTING TO USE  
REACH AND STRENGTH  
TO ACHIEVE THE KILL  
RATHER THAN  
SURPRISE.



A MISTAKE.



TRAGER/THE CORPSE  
SNAPS HIS COMMAND/  
SWINGS HIS MORNINGSTAR...



AND, ALMOST LAZILY, THE STUDED  
BALL DRIFTS GRACEFULLY AND  
ACCURATELY...



...TO ITS  
MARK.

THE ENTIRE ARENA  
HEAVES WITH A MINDLESS,  
GRUESOME JOY.



**RAAAAAAH!**

THIS HAS BEEN TRAGER'S  
TENTH CONSECUTIVE KILL.  
SOON THE CHAMPIONSHIP  
WILL BE HIS.



HE HAS BUILT  
SUCH A RECORD  
AND REPUTATION  
THAT THEY CAN NO  
LONGER DENY HIM  
ANY MATCH.

**DENY HIM  
ANYTHING.**



SHE IS BEAUTIFUL, HIS LADYLOVE.

SHE AWAITS HIS RETURN FROM THE ARENA AND HIS COUNTLESS ADMIRERS.



SHE IS ALWAYS WAITING, EAGER AND PLAYFUL AND LOVING.



YOU'RE LUCKY, YOU KNOW.

I KNOW, I MISSED YOU.



VERY, VERY LUCKY.

THEY LIE TO YOU OUT THERE, LOVE.



THEY TEACH YOU A SILLY SHINING DREAM, THEN THEY'LL TELL YOU TO BELIEVE AND CHASE FOREVER AFTER THAT SINGLE SPARK...



...AND THEY SAY THAT THE DREAM IS REAL, THAT FOR EVERYONE, EVEN YOU, THERE IS SOMEONE.

BUT IT'S ALL WRONG.

THE UNIVERSE  
ISN'T FAIR.

IT NEVER HAS  
BEEN, AND NEVER  
WILL BE. SO, YOU  
CHASE THE PHANTOM,  
AND YOU LOSE.

THEY'LL TELL YOU NEXT  
TIME, ALWAYS NEXT TIME,  
BUT IT'S ALL ROT, EMPTY  
STINKING ROT. NOBODY  
EVER FINDS THE DREAM.

THEY JUST KID  
THEMSELVES.

THEY TRICK  
THEMSELVES INTO  
BELIEVING—BUT THEY'RE  
CLUTCHING AT AN EMPTY  
LIE DESPERATE PEOPLE  
TELL EACH OTHER—WISHING,  
BELIEVING, HOPING TO  
CONVINCE THEMSELVES.



AND OF ALL THE  
BRIGHT, CRUEL LIES  
THEY TELL YOU, THE  
WORST, THE MOST  
DEVIOUS...

...IS THE ONE  
THEY CALL  
LOVE.



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

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George R.R. Martin sold his first story in 1971 and has been writing professionally since then. He spent ten years in Hollywood as a writer-producer, working on *The Twilight Zone*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and various feature films and television pilots that were never made. In the mid '90s he returned to prose, his first love, and began work on his epic fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*. He has been in the *Seven Kingdoms* ever since. Whenever he's allowed to leave, he returns to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he lives with the lovely Parris and two cats named Augustus and Caligula, who think they run the place.

## RAYA GOLDEN

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Raya Golden has a unique, stylized vision and brings her work into the world using a variety of mediums ranging from watercolors to digital multi-media. She was born in Manhattan and has slowly made her way across the United States in a steady jaunt westward. She currently resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with her boyfriend, Tyler, and her cat, Mr. Boogie.

