

WILLIAM'S GAMBIT

John Ebbert
(writing as E.B. Quib)



Partial Mock-Up
Artwork not Final

Where reality denies the
miraculous, magic comes
from people who don't know
they're creating it.

William doesn't know his own power. He doesn't realize that he can warp time. He certainly has no idea that his energy is being used to trap him inside a magical space he has projected from his mind. All he knows is that he's stuck in a strange, blinding whiteness where he is being forced to create the "perfect story" to save himself.

Much of **William's Gambit** takes place inside a mystical book where the white of the page demands its due respect, and the letters are not to be denied their chance at becoming the characters they are meant to be.

Imagine *Hugo Cabret* being shoved through the *Phantom Tollbooth* by a 108-year-old woman and her troupe of highly trained circus cats.

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Highly Illustrated MG

~56,000 words with black and white illustrations

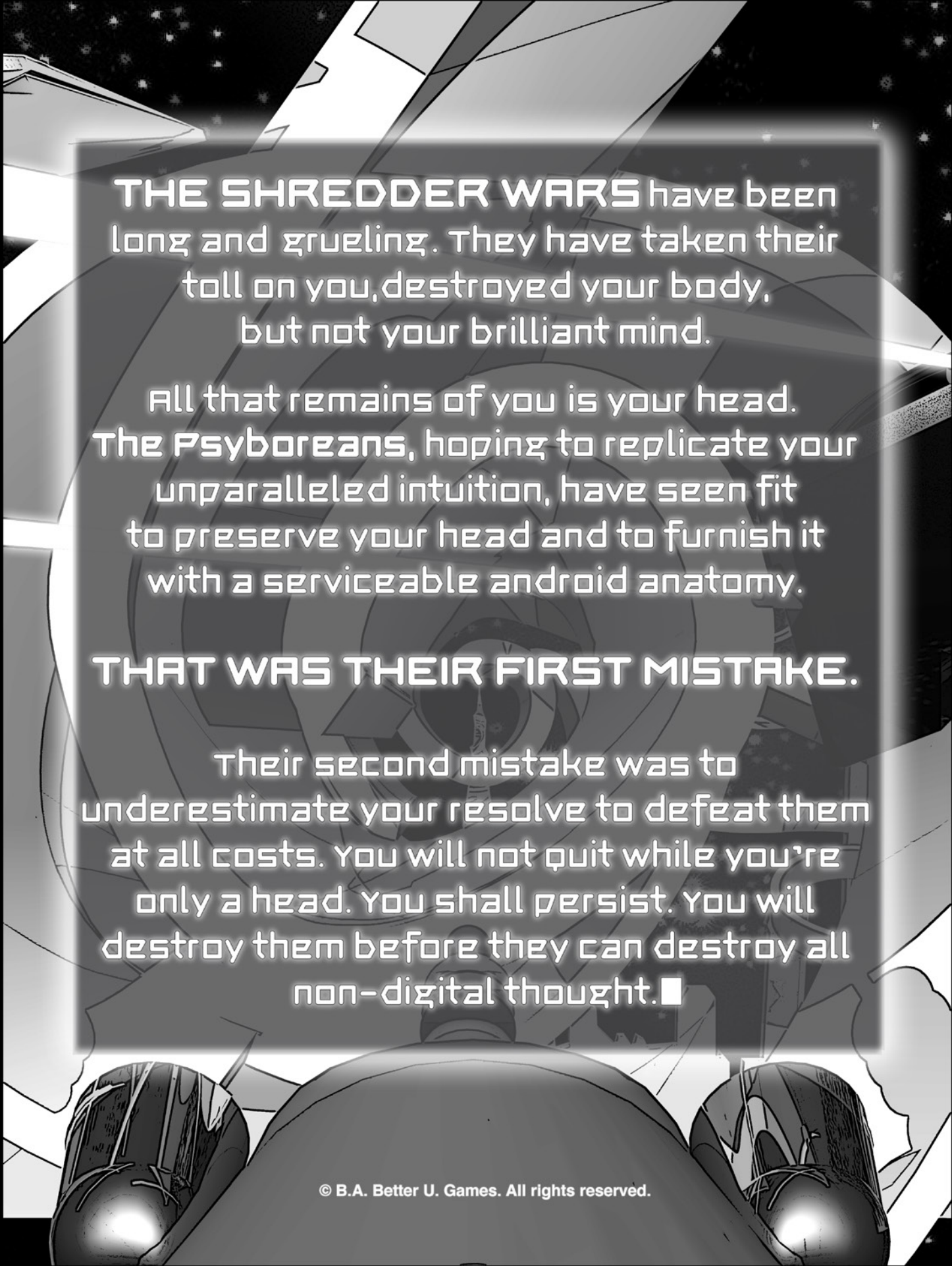
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Dreams tend to mash details together. The dreamer then tries to assemble a coherent story from squashed fragments of sense. In hypnosis, a story is given and the participant is asked to populate it with relevant memories. Magic, though, is a pure creation. A person uses their amazing memories of details to construct a viable space where one may seek what one may wish to find.

Emma Withervane, *C.A.T. Spells Magic*



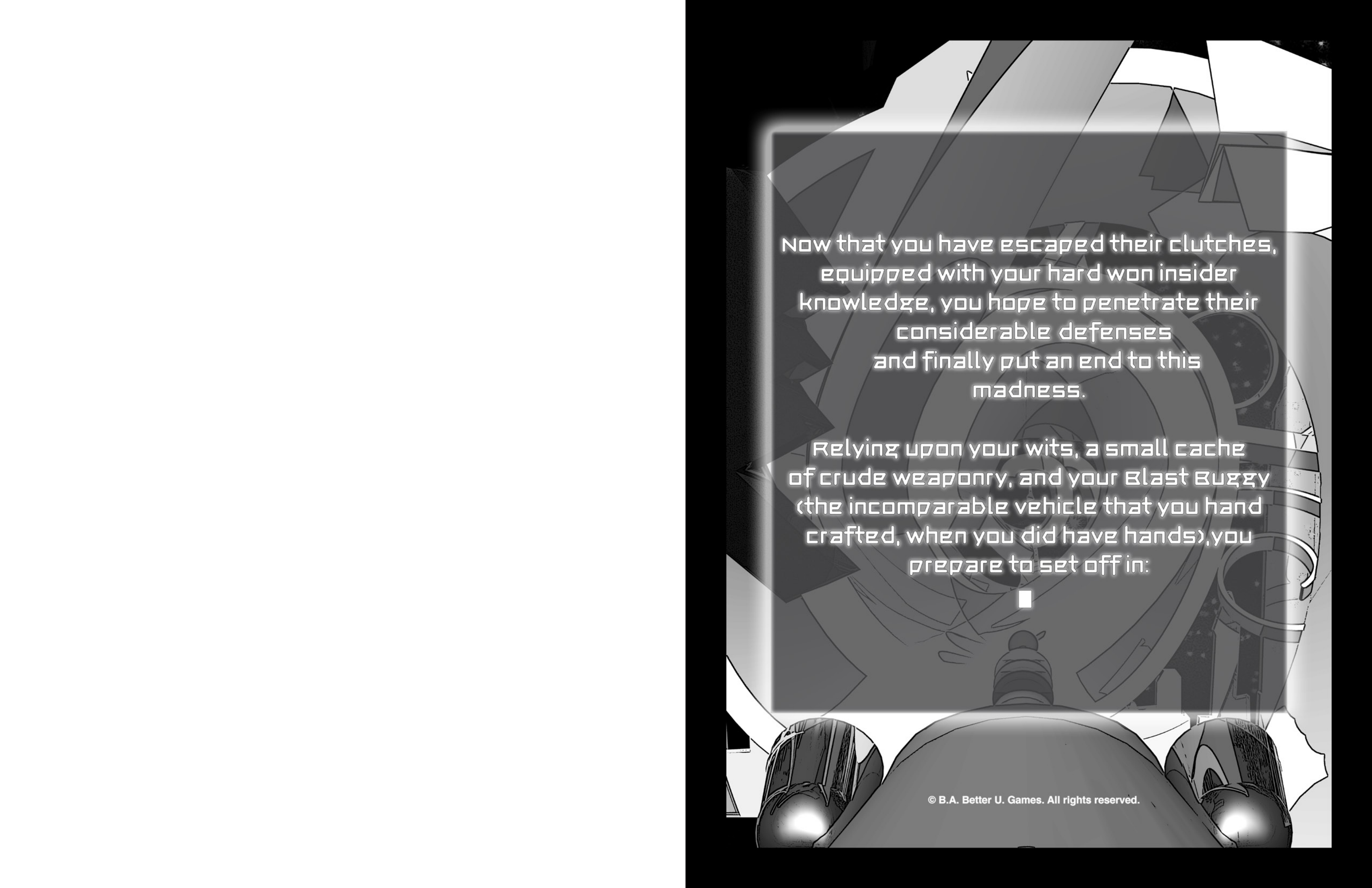


THE SHREDDER WARS have been long and grueling. They have taken their toll on you, destroyed your body, but not your brilliant mind.

All that remains of you is your head. The **Psyborgs**, hoping to replicate your unparalleled intuition, have seen fit to preserve your head and to furnish it with a serviceable android anatomy.

THAT WAS THEIR FIRST MISTAKE.

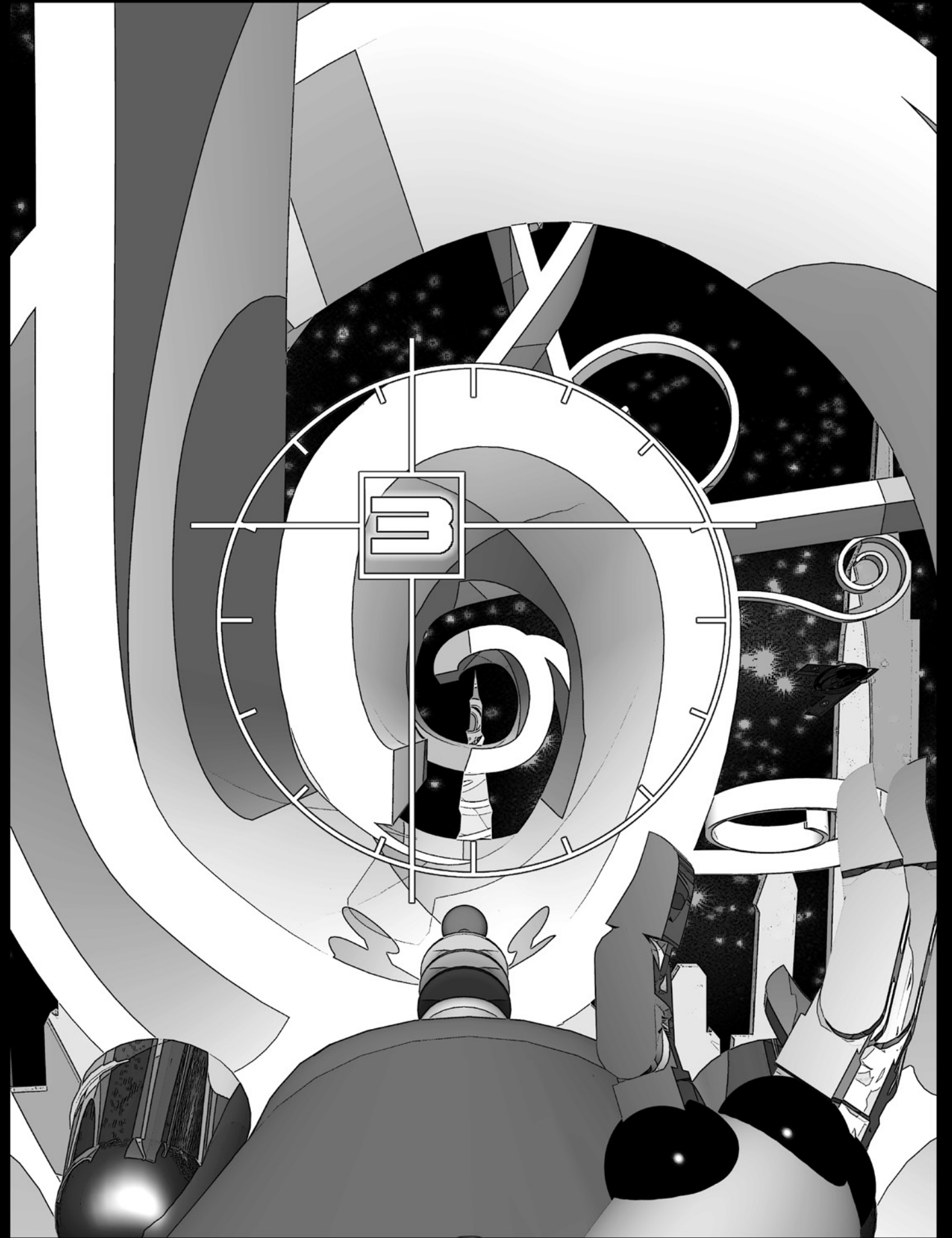
Their second mistake was to underestimate your resolve to defeat them at all costs. You will not quit while you're only a head. You shall persist. You will destroy them before they can destroy all non-digital thought. ■

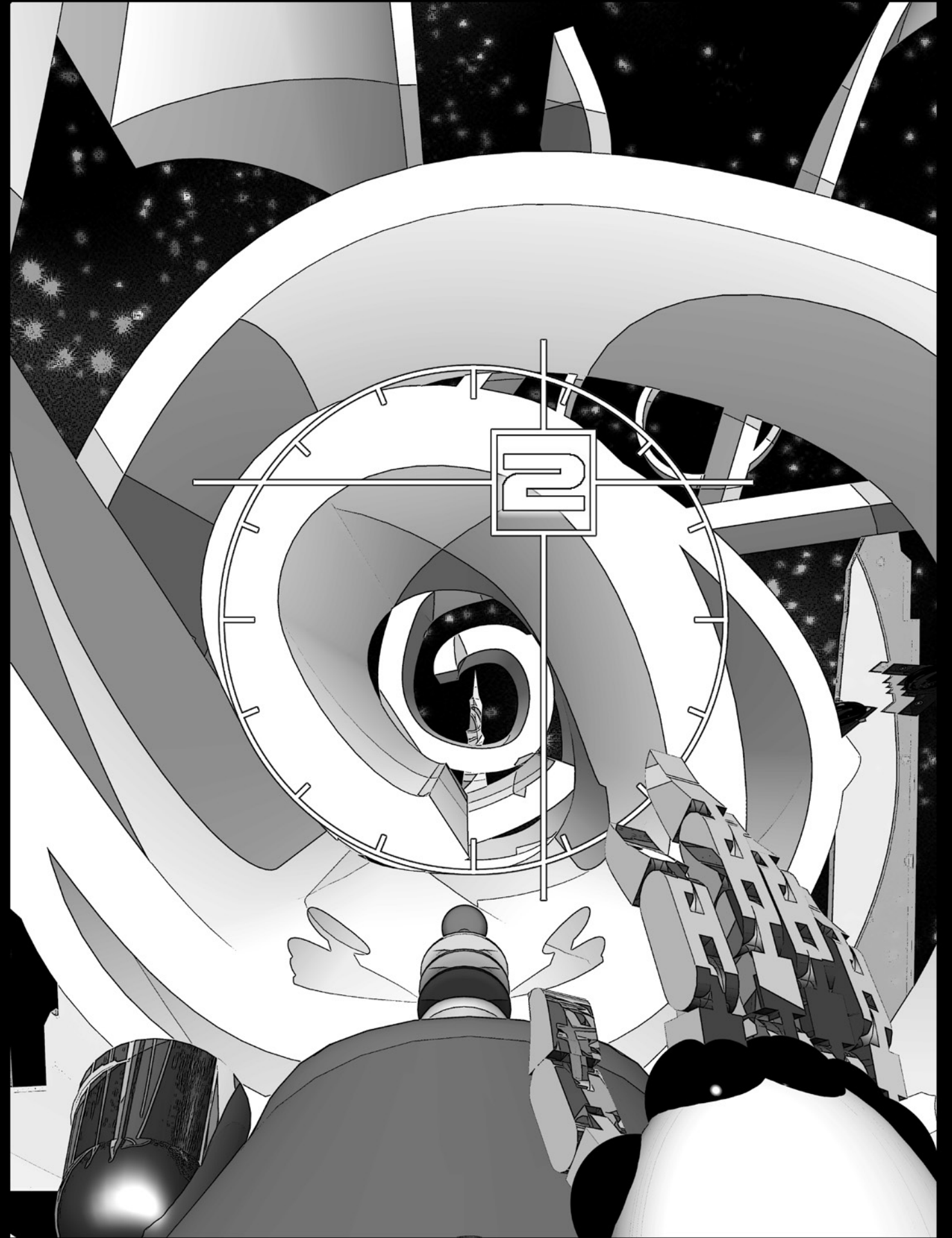


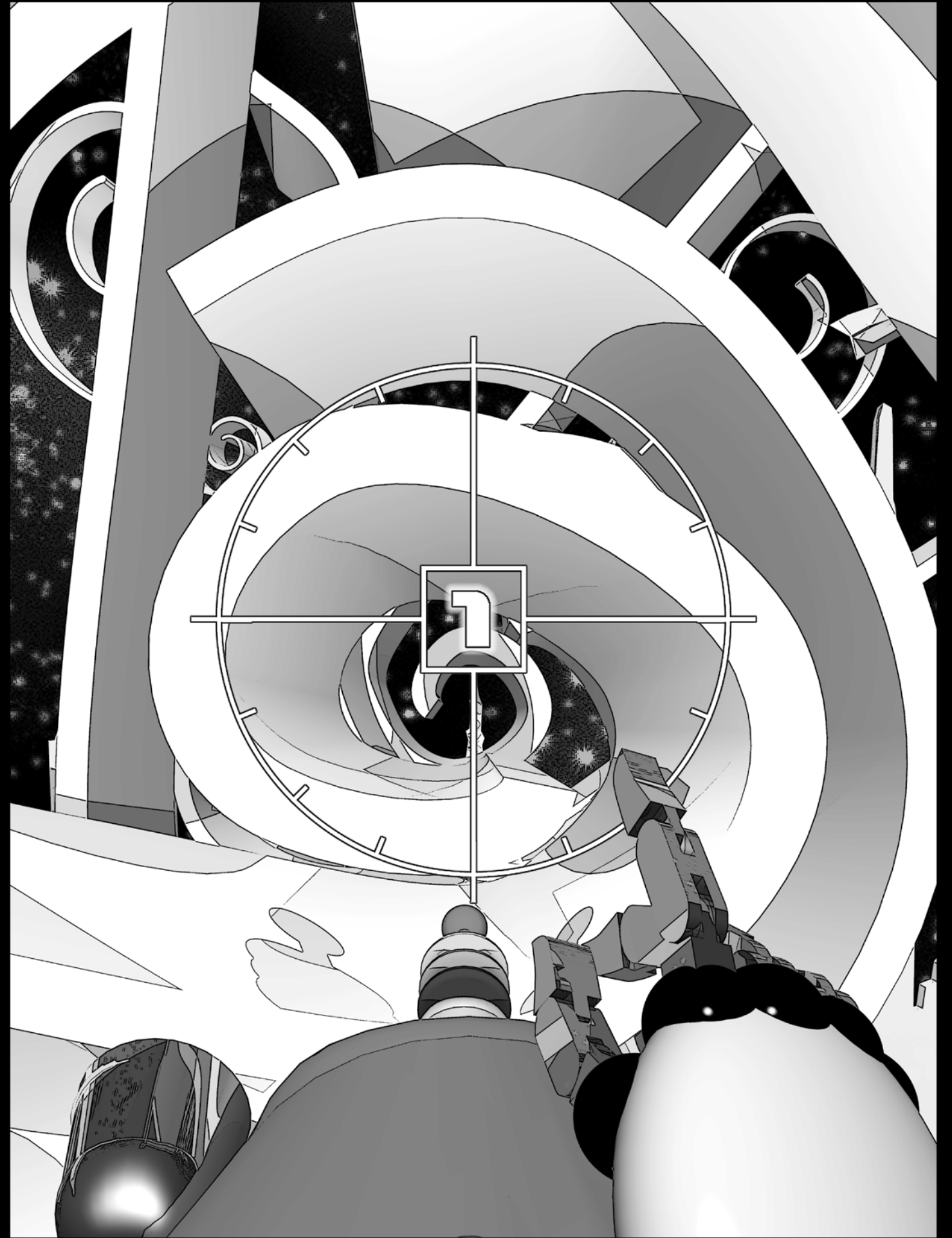
Now that you have escaped their clutches,
equipped with your hard won insider
knowledge, you hope to penetrate their
considerable defenses
and finally put an end to this
madness.

Relying upon your wits, a small cache
of crude weaponry, and your Blast Buggy
(the incomparable vehicle that you hand
crafted, when you did have hands), you
prepare to set off in:





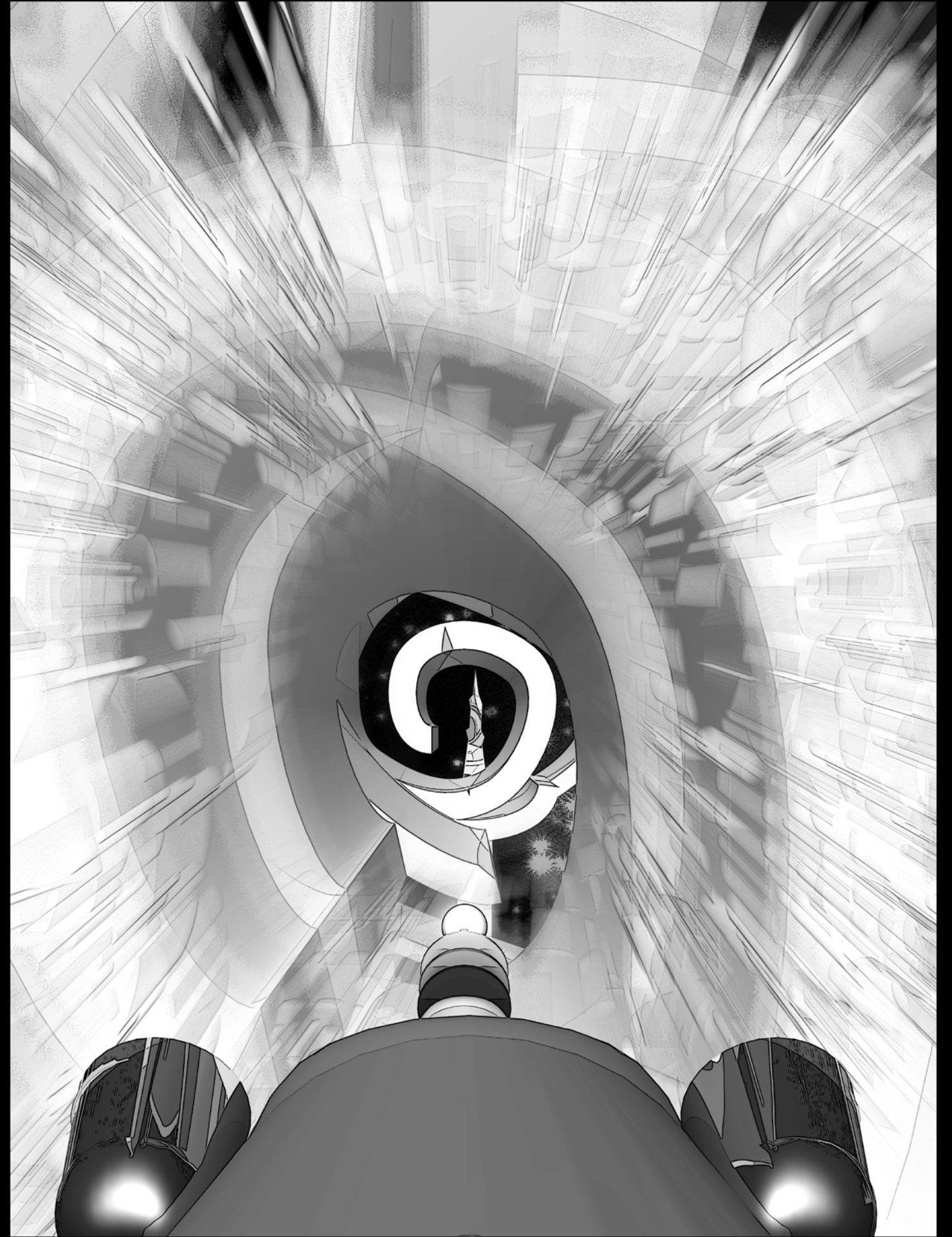




GOOD LUCK
COMMANDER



C



C A



C A T



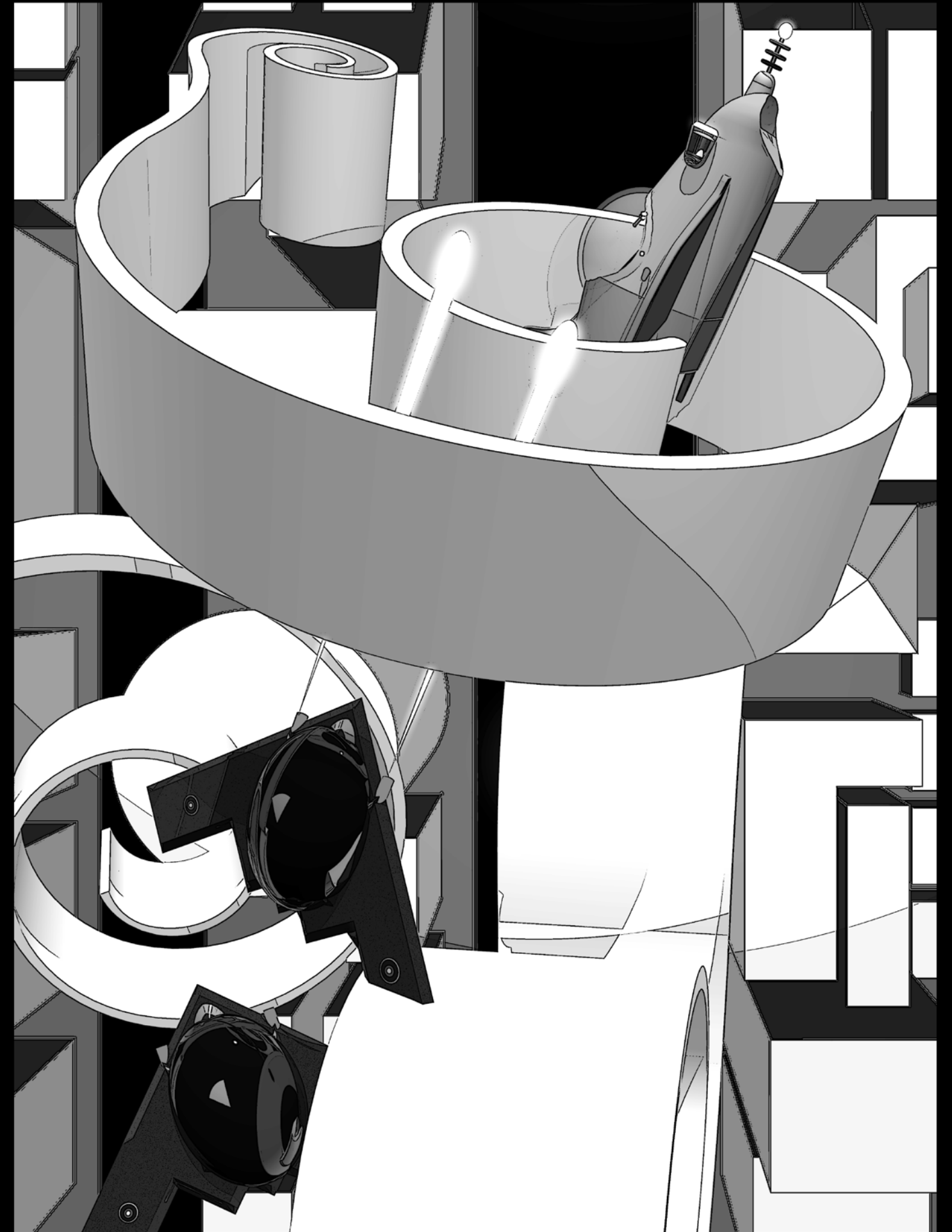
C A T R



C A T E R



CHA TER



CHAPTER



**CHAPTER
1**

**ALONG FOR
THE RIDE**



This boy wants to save the universe by destroying as much as he can.

“Holy Snakes! Scissor Teeth! A whole squadron!”

He's good at destruction, and today, he's special. He's beyond normal time and space. He's in a place where his moves are flawless, decisive, swift, precise. He's a well-tuned machine of menace that makes the quakes that shake the device that dances in his hands. He sets his course knowing where he's going and planning to arrive there in style.

“Oh, thought you'd blindside me? Well, how about a little Quasar Pulse? *Blam!* Yeah!”

He launches his latest assault in a furious volley of syncopated thumb taps while narrating his every move in a cracked voice that rises and falls with the urgency of his actions.

“Taste some digital death! Yeah! Yeah! *Yeah!*”

For every on-screen dodge, duck, and dive there's a real-world equivalent—a shoulder shrug, a neck jerk, a facial twitch. His head bobs sharp strays of hair at his eyes, but he won't be distracted. Those eyes barely blink. They stay locked on the action that swirls upon his screen. The screen itself gives back a ghastly glow that ages the boy's face into a grimace of concentrated wrath. The two have become one—the device and the boy, the Commander and his quest.

"Four to go! Yeah, you better scram! Boo-Yah! Three!"

"William."

His name tries to sneak in at the edges, battling feebly with the ominous power chords and weapon blasts that pour in through his earbuds.

"Two!" His excited voice squeaks and snaps like a dry stick.

"William!"

There's his name again, but it barely registers. He ignores it while he tears through blast debris and unconsciously leans into the turn when the taxi his body sits in bounces a left onto Broadway.

The Commander is so engrossed in battle maneuvers that he hardly flinches when a fingertip grazes his cheek.

"Ah!" he cries when his right earbud is yanked out—catapulting his mind from infinite space into the cramped confines of the cab's backseat.

"WILLIAM TALISMAN DAPPER!" screams through his ear hole and directly into his brain.

William jerks away from his mother's shout and meets pain head-on. Savage sunshine beats through the window and brutalizes his bleary eyes. He clamps them shut—his face a pucker of disgust. Rumbling a low groan, he calms himself, then looks down at the screen and inspects the damage done to his quest.

"Whew!" Through all this turmoil, he has miraculously managed to maintain on-screen control.

(tap) PAUSE

William sucks in and holds a great breath. Drops the phone to his lap. Rakes his buzzing fingertips up through his mop of hair and meshes them against the back of his neck.

"Phew! Couldn't wait until I got past Level 5?" he snarks.

William's mother grabs his chin and tilts his gaze up toward her. "William, listen to me. We have a few stops to make before we meet your father for lunch." She looks away to check the cab's progress. "Wait a second."

Dropping his chin, she leans forward and talks through the partition to the driver. "Excuse me. This is our stop up here."

The driver chatters into his headset.

"Excuse me," she repeats.

Waving her off, the driver snorts a laugh and keeps yammering.

William mashes his fingers into the corners of his burning eyes. He listens to the world rattling around while he stirs the sparks that linger behind his eyelids. Seat springs creak. The onboard monitor garbles something about buckling up (*as if there were working seatbelts*). The driver prattles on. His mother's appeals of "Right here! Right Here!" get more urgent.

"The corner of Prince Street!" she shouts. Her pitch has risen to a level that grates on nerves in a way that makes teeth itch. William shudders. It's a tone he knows from home.

The cabby mumbles some sort of complaint into his headset. The car swerves right. William's stomach sloshes left. Horns blare. Brakes screech. Tires scud sideways. The car wrenches to a sudden stop. The boy skids off the seat and slams into the thick plexiglass divider between him and the driver.

William's world goes black with a dull thud.

U A P R
H 2 E
T

EM'S SPACE

"Alright, Mister Scuppers. We're here. Time to get to work."

The old lady clicks off the ignition and unclasps her seat belt. She reaches over to the van's passenger seat and scratches the dozing grey cat between the ears.

"Scuppers, Scuppers, always too sleepy for work... but first in line for any breakfasts or brunches, lunches, dinners, or suppers," she croons as she tickles under his chin.

The cat yawns big.

"Oh, my, look at that mouth! What are you, a lion?" She chuckles. "Maybe next time I should see if I can get my head inside. We could take *that* show on the road."

Scuppers glares and hisses at her.

Come on, Scuppers. Don't you cut those dragon eyes at me." She pinches kissy lips on his face and says, "Now, get up, fat cat."

The cat sits up tall and looks away; fends her off with flicks of his long tail. As an afterthought, he licks the back of his six-toed paw and swipes it past his ear.

The woman reaches behind her seat and pulls a well-worn satchel onto her lap. She examines its contents as she talks to the cat. "What's with that attitude?" A big dull ball of yarn tumbles from her grasp that she catches then tucks deep down into her bag like it's the most important thing ever. "I'm not saying you're *fat fat*." She opens, then slides shut a telescoping extenda-grabber wand and tucks that in, too. "Lord knows, you're nothing if not figure conscious." Dropping in a Phillips-head screwdriver, she mutters, "Just in case." She looks over at the cat and plops in one, two, three, four, five, six tear-drop-shaped blue crystals. "What I'm saying is, you're my *Fat Cat*—my kitty crime boss." Finally, she slips in a book and

a tightly wrapped parcel and snaps the satchel shut.

Just then, four soon-to-be-bald tires skid to a stop behind the van, eliciting a chorus of howls from back in the cargo hold.

"Now, you all just settle down." She casts a commanding look into the rear-view mirror. "You don't want mean old Miz Emma coming back there and setting you straight." The eight or so cats immediately hush. "You all need to stay still and quiet. There's no sense trying to draw all kinds of attention to yourselves. Scuppers and I have a little job to do this morning before we head on up to the park."

Glancing at the side mirror, she sees an old yellow taxi angled in inches from her bumper. "Guess I'll be going round front." Miz Emma looks at the cat preening in the passenger seat and takes a deep breath. "We're going to do things a bit different this year." She inspects herself in the front mirror, making sure there's no craziness stuck in her hair. Satisfied, she says, "I've got a really good feeling it's going to work, this time."

With a final look toward the back, Emma turns to Scuppers. "You ready, Mister Crime Boss?" Ducking her head under her bag's shoulder strap, she cracks open the door. "Now, you just stay there. I'll come around and get you."

The old lady checks the traffic and hops out with the lightness and bounce of a woman half her age, then shimmies between the van and the dark car in front. She pulls the passenger side door open just wide enough to let a silver shadow slip down to the curb.

The cat looks up to Emma as she scans the rush of pedestrians.

About ten feet off, a wild-haired boy stands with feet planted and arms crossed, watching as his mother feels for something on the floor in the back of the

cab. The old lady juts her chin in his direction, and the cat sets off.

Scuppers slinks silently behind the boy and swipes some static from the boy's pantlegs with his whiskers. The woman joins the cat, and they whisk through the current of tourists like a sharp-prowed canoe heading upstream. Ducking a left onto the quiet cross street, they dash towards the back of the building they've chosen.

"Come on, Scuppers. We've got to get things set before that static wears off."

They turn down Mercer Street. Scuppers skids to a stop, sits back on his haunches, and scans the scene. The street is empty. All the bustle is over on Broadway. The back of the building is under construction. Plywood panels encase the sidewalk in a chute that runs under a roof of scaffolding.

The cat growls.

"See, I told you this would be easy." Stepping into the shadow of the scaffolding, Emma slaps a panel on the building-side wall. "It's not even locked, really—just a chain looped on a peg inside is all."

Scuppers wrinkles his nose, then stares at her with narrowed eyes—one green and one blue—that catch a gleam that seems to smolder. His growl turns into a howl.

"What a racket!" Setting her bag on the sidewalk, Emma walks out from under the roof. "What do you mean, you're getting too old for this *merde*?" She stops and rests her hands on her hips. "Must I remind you? You're Scuppers the Fourth. I wasn't any little chicklet, either, when your great grandfather was just a kitten, and you don't hear *me* complaining. Six toes... What kind of Hemingway cat are you, anyway? Afraid of a little adventure."

She laces her fingers together, making a basket with her hands. "And merde? When did you start speaking French? Bad cat." Flexing her knees, she leans forward like she's showing Scuppers a bird's nest.

The cat looks less than pleased by her offering.

"Shoots and Ladders!" she shouts.

Scuppers pumps his tail twice and runs straight at the old woman. In four bounds his four paws strike her palms. Her shoulders barely dip as she slings the cat skyward. He's on the scaffolding roof and through an open window in less than two seconds.

A minute later, a chain slumps to the ground, and a plywood door swings open. Emma grabs her satchel and slips inside without a backward glance.

The cat saunters around the big empty store like he owns the place.

The crow's feet at the corners of Emma's eyes seem to funnel extra light into them as she smiles. "Not bad, Scuppers... But what took you so long?"

She snugs the door shut and re-loops the chain.

"Oh, good. There are still shelves here. That'll help."

C *A* *P* *R*
H *3* *E* *T*

REBOOT



It's like someone has hit a reset button and there's a pause before William flickers back to life. In a daze, he squinches open an eye and is confronted by a river of consonants pouring across the hack license that's bolted about an inch from his cheek. The letters swim like they've been freed to roam.

William waggles his jaw and grunts.

"It'll be forty-one thirty-five," says the driver.

"Okay. Here's fifty," William's mother says.

"What?" William can't believe it. *How didn't she see me smash into the divider?*

He regains his focus watching her long, tanned arm reach through the partition.

"May I have a receipt, please?" she asks, leaving her hand dangling there.

"It's broken," the driver says without even pretending to offer her any change.

"Great..." William's mother lets out a huff, adjusts her gilt-edged sunglasses, and thrusts open the door. "Come on, William." She swings her legs out over the curb.

William sits there with his head still pressed up against the divider. He squeezes his eyes shut and then pops them open a few times.

"William! Snap out of it! Come on!"

Rolling his shoulders, twisting his neck, and with a white cord dangling from one ear, William drags himself across the seat toward the open door where his agitated mother stands in the harsh sunshine, tapping her toe.

"Jeez, William, will you come on? The only time you move quickly is when you're playing one of those stupid games!"

"Mrumpph," he starts but decides it's not worth the effort and mopes out after her.

The cab jolts. It's about to take off before his mother can even shut the door.

"Wait!" she screams. The car jerks to a stop with her clawing at the door handle. William has that sinking *what-now* feeling. He crosses his arms and watches as she presses her knee into the seat, reaches down into the foot well, and snatches up the smartphone wedged there.

Slamming the door, she turns on him. "What am I going to do with you?" She shakes the phone at him. "If you had lost this, how would we get in touch with your father?"

William rolls his eyes. "But—"

"Don't you *but* me, William!" she says a little too loudly, then softens her tone when passersby start giving her sidelong looks. "Come over here." She draws him out of the jostling stream of tourists and into the shadow of a parked cargo van. She looks him over and tugs an unnecessary adjustment on his hoodie.

William jams his hands into his pockets and says, "You know, I didn't even want to be here."

"Oh, come on, William, we've been over this a hundred times. I can't leave you home alone all day."

"You never let me do anything," he complains. "Aiden's mom—"

"I don't care *what* Aiden's mom does. What would you do there anyway? Melt your brain playing video games all day? One of these days, I swear you're going to get trapped in one of those fake game worlds, and we're never going to get you back."

"I'm not going to melt my brain," he scoffs.

"You've got so much potential. I would love to see you use it in the *real*

world. And what if there was a fire, or you cut yourself, or something? I would never be able to live with myself." She tugs an adjustment to the hem of her own shirt. "Besides, don't you want to see your father? You hardly ever have the chance these days."

William blows an irritating strand of hair from his forehead. "Well, he doesn't seem to want to see *me*. I don't even think he likes me that much. I always feel like I'm some kind of problem he wishes he didn't have to deal with."

"What are you talking about? He loves you! He can't help it that he has to travel so much for work."

"Yeah, right, Mom—traveling for work. Now who's not living in the real world?"

"That's not nice," she says, sniffing and swallowing hard.

"And, when he does stop by, it seems like he's trying to buy my silence or something. I mean, how many times is he going to try to give me that stupid 'Lemmings' game? Don't you think I'm a little too old to chase a bunch of huge-eyed fur balls off a cliff?" After a pause, he adds, "And then, you guys go off and start shouting at each other."

William goes silent. He looks down and scuffs his foot on the sidewalk like he's trying to roll off some gum.

His mother purses her lips and runs her fingers through the charms on her wrist. After a few seconds, her voice brightens when she says, "I'll tell you what..."

William looks up. He knows there's a deal coming.

"Listen. I'm going to the bank," she says, "for just a few minutes. I'm giving you a choice. You can come with me, or look, here's Reada Goode." She motions

grandly across the walkway. "It's a bookstore. Maybe you remember it from when you were little? We used to bring you down here when we still lived in midtown. You can go in there and have a look around." Her voice is a few tones too high, but William just rolls with it. "If you're sweet, I might even let you pick out something for yourself. Maybe you'll even find something you might want to *read* for a change."

William examines the lines on his empty palm.

"Well?"

"I'll go in here then, I guess," he answers with a shrug, not making any move toward the building. "Can't be any worse than the bank."

"Alright. That's great. I'll be right back." She plucks off her sunglasses and centers herself in front of him, forcing him to look up into her face. "But you have to promise me you'll stay right in that store."

"Okay," he answers, focusing his attention on her arching left eyebrow.

"I mean it, William! Pay attention to me!" She shakes his shoulders as if waking him and bores her eyes into his. "Don't you go traipsing off anywhere. This is a big city with lots of crazy people doing who knows what. You have to be careful."

"*O-kay*, Mom." He sucks at his lips like he's tasted something sour.

She dons her shades and turns to go. Wavering on heels pointed south, her lean frame bends back to him as if there is something magnetic about the boy. Stopping herself in the first stride, she turns back to him. "Maybe you should just come with me," she says finally, in a way that William can almost see the tragic scenarios playing out in her head.

With a little talk-to-the-hand wave, he says, "No. No. I'll be alright, Mom."

"You're sure?"

William glances at the phone she grips by her side.

"I'm sure. Jeez!"

"Well then, give me a kiss." She tilts her cheek to him.

"Come on, Mom. It's not like you're going off on some voyage. I think you can probably leave me alone for like a couple of minutes."

"Come here, you." She pulls him into a loose one-armed headlock. "Give me a kiss."

"Ughh. Alright. There." William gives his mom a little peck on the cheek, and in one motion he slides his hand down her free wrist and plucks the phone out of her hand. She stands him out at arm's length and grips his shoulder as if to anchor him in place.

“Okay. I’ll be *right* back.” And with that, she gives him a tweak on the nose.

“Ouch!” *What was that for?* William spins away, eyes closed, clutching his nose, while his mother joins a pedestrian flow that’s suddenly...

Way.

Too.

Slow.

