

# “STARS, LIKE WATCHFUL EYES”

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## CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

**HALBETH and SWIFFT** – The two main characters. Both are exiled royals of Heir in their late 20s/early 30s, but otherwise they're dissimilar, appearance-wise. They dress expensively, but that will gradually fade as the story progresses. They should look distinct, so that the reader can identify them in a scene no matter what they're wearing.

**HRI** – A male assassin. Lean and lanky. On each of his hands, there is a cybernetic sixth finger – a creepy, jointed appendage of wicked metal.

**WHITE WENDRE** – A female assassin. She wears mostly white. Maybe there could be single bloody red handprint on that whiteness, hinting at some untold story, if you think that works.

PAGE 1 (4 panels)

**Panel 1**

Large panel. Establishing shot of a towering cliff face surrounded by verdant flora. Incongruously built into its rock is a balcony. In the foreground – in front and to the side of all this -- there's a dazzling waterfall, situated so that someone standing on the balcony can see it in the distance. It's populated by a school of alien fish swimming \*up\* its cascade.

Basically, the panel is a gorgeous vista on Therra.

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic)**

Sublime.

**Panel 2**

Our first good look at HALBETH, at the balcony. He's wearing the sci-fi version of expensive summer casual wear. He's also sporting a small comm device on one ear, but it doesn't necessarily need to be visible yet this panel.

We see him from the front, aiming what looks like the much more unwieldy cousin of a sniper rifle over the balustrade. The gun's muzzle is unusually large – the size of a fist. One of his eyes is looking through the scope, the other closed. A smile plays on his lips. Behind him, the balcony doors are open.

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic)**

The sous-chef used to be some minor Institute drone. He's developed this chemical process...

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic)**

The food's taste somehow permeates *into* your mouth tissue. I could taste it for hours after.

**Panel 3**

Halbeth from behind now. He's firing his gun, which we can now see is aimed at the waterfall in the background – in the far, far, far distance. We see a big projectile zooming from the gun towards the waterfall.

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic)**

I never expected to say these words as a compliment, but I wanted to bite off and swallow my tongue!

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic)**

-sigh- *Sublime*... I don't know how you're getting by with only that Nutrados make-do.

**HALBETH**

Oh, I've found a workaround.

**Panel 4**

Close up on the waterfall. One of the fish is being slammed into by the projectile, which it turns out looks like some clockwork butterfly. In contrast to its predatory purpose, it appears incongruously delicate – ornate and filigreed (though maybe that's not evident yet in this panel since it's, you know, slamming into a fish).

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic)**

To get real meat? On *Therra*? If the authorities there find out –

**HALBETH (no tail)**

-- I'll just shed another skin.

**HALBETH (no tail, partial tiny text)**

I mean, isn't that the great thing about this... twilight life? Lives?

PAGE 2 (5 panels)

**Panel 1**

The butterfly, carrying the now-dead fish in manipulators, is in the middle of flying back to the balcony at incredible speed. It's traversing the huge empty space between.

**HALBETH (no tail)**

You and me, Swift... We're free from the cages of identity. Of *names*.

**Panel 2**

The butterfly (with fish) is flying lazily past Halbeth at the rail, towards the balcony doors. He's not even looking at it as he speaks to it; he's enjoying the expansive view.

**HALBETH**

Just as we're free from the cages of geography, custom...

**HALBETH**

Free from everything that encloses the rest of them and keeps them small in their souls.

**HALBETH (tiny text)**

Straight to the kitchen, please. Recipe seven.

**SFX on BUTTERFLY**

chmm

**Panel 3**

Interior shot of what's on the other side of those balcony doors: the living room of Halbeth's current residence. The décor screams luxury suite. There are almost no personal belongings, though, as it's a temporary residence. On one wall, we see a prominent door. Also, there's a potted plant that has fur instead of fir.

The butterfly (with fish) is mid-air within, zipping towards the off-panel kitchen.

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic, tiny text)**

Free to speak forever without getting to the point, apparently. Don't forget that one.

**HALBETH (no tail)**

We're free to explore all the worlds, and in doing so, our hearts as well.

**Panel 3**

Close-up on Halbeth's face, tilted back, eyes closed. He's just basking in how great life is.

**HALBETH**

*In a life like this, anything is possible.*

**Panel 4**

Halbeth's face again, but now one eyebrow's raised and there's the twitch of a smile. He's amused, is what he is.

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic, partial tiny text)**

"Life." Speaking of which, that reminds me... You'll need to move soon.

**SWIFFT (no tail, electronic)**

You-know-who called today. Tells me he has a bead on you...

***Panel 5***

The assassin HRI shoulders his way through that distinctive door in the living room, barging inside. We've jumped ahead in time, and now it's three weeks later and night time – everything's darker, though that doesn't need to be immediately obvious this panel.

PAGE 3 (2 panels)

**Panel 1**

This panel takes up most of the page, so that it's almost a splash. Hri staring at the living room, which we now see is abandoned; maybe there are a few loose papers on the floor, or upturned furniture, to indicate that. The weird fur plant is still there, to help make 100% clear it's the same room. \*Now\* the time jump should be obvious.

He's either holding or carrying on him a conspicuous gun that ends in a tuning fork-looking thing (or something equally weird.)

**SWIFFT (caption)**

"He'll be there in three weeks."

**SWIFFT (caption)**

"So you make sure you aren't."

**Panel 2**

Tiny panel of Hri's fist clenched in anger. Its creepy sixth digit is prominent.

(Note to **letterer**: Could ALL Hri's word balloons be in a creepy mixed case whisper?)

**HRI (off-panel)**

...

**HRI (off-panel)**

Not again.

PAGE 4 (5 panels)

The following three pages are flashbacks. The first panel on each page takes place at one point in the past, the remaining panels at a second point in the past.

Three tiers each page: 1 panel in the top tier, 2 panels each in the remaining tiers, giving a total of 5 panels. For reasons that will become clear.

***Panel 1***

A room in Halbeth's personal estate on Heir. It's richly – in every sense of that word – decorated: Paintings, small statuary, brass, etc. But the furniture looks sleek, geometric, modern, to show he has a touch of the unconventional.

Halbeth and SWIFFT sit together at a table, talking. Swiftt has a nice chair, but Halbeth's using some pet lion-esque animal as a giant cushion.

(The table acts as a giant computer screen. It's displaying headshots of various assassins, but that doesn't need to be clear yet in this panel.)

**CAPTION (distinct lettering)**  
BEFORE

**SWIFFT**  
Yes, again. From the top...

**HALBETH**  
Sure. First, we stage some huge falling out in public – at the next Rights Auction maybe.

**HALBETH**  
Let everyone know Halbeth and Swiftt are now sworn enemies...

***Panel 2***

Swiftt, sitting at a table in an upscale bar on Heir. (We'll label it Bar U.) We see him from the point of view of the person seated across from him, who he's looking at. There doesn't need to be much of the background visible, just enough so we understand it's a different location entirely.

Built into the table, in front of him, there's a tiny rectangular base surrounding a small mass of roiling mush that's forming weird, random shapes.

**HALBETH (caption, straddling this panel and the next panel to the right, so it encompasses both)**  
"We'll give time for the news to spread. Then..."

**SWIFFT**  
I wake up, and there it is in my head. Every day.

**SWIFFT**  
The memory of his self-righteous face...

***Panel 3***



Similar to the previous panel, only it's Halbeth instead of Swift, and he's sitting in a different bar. This place is more run-down, dimmer. (Suggestion: Wood everywhere, in contrast to iPhone-style curves and sleekness at the first bar?) We'll label this Bar R.

**HALBETH**

...looking at me with such unearned arrogance. I need it gone from this world.

**WENDRE (off-panel)**

...And who is it wears this face?

***Panel 4***

Swift in Bar U, conviction on his face. He's jabbing a data chip into the rectangular base. The goo is cohering into a replica of Halbeth's face and neck.

**SWIFFT**

Halbeth, né of the Sirrimo Corporation.

***Panel 5***

Halbeth in Bar R, conviction on his face. He is showing the screen of a 3W3M version of a tablet. On it is an image of Swift.

**HALBETH**

Swift, né of the Narmouth Corporation.

PAGE 5 (5 panels)

**Panel 1**

Similar to panel 1 of the previous page, with Halbeth and Swift at the display screen/table. Only now it's a close-up on said table, which is displaying the profiles of numerous assassins (headshots, data, etc.).

Halbeth and Swift's heads and hands are maybe visible at the edges of the panel; they're examining the profiles.

**HALBETH**

Of course, there's the question of *whom* to contract.

**HALBETH**

The right sort, with the right touch.

**Panel 2**

Bar U again, only we're now looking from Swift's POV at the person sitting cross: Hri, looking at the reader. He's the still, silent sort of assassin, so there's not much visible emotion. His six-fingered hands rest on the table.

**SWIFFT (off-panel)**

And you're just the assassin to rid me of him, I understand.

**SWIFFT (off-panel)**

You're... focused. Point A to B. You're a goddamn bullet.

**HALBETH (caption)**

"Unimaginative. Unable to see through to what's really going on."

**Panel 3**

Bar R again, only now we're looking from Halbeth's POV at the person sitting across: WHITE WENDRE, looking at the reader. Unlike Hri, she actually has the expressiveness of a human. She has a drink in front of her; inside the liquid floats a tiny weird fetal critter.

Standing right behind her, in the background, another assassin is talking to someone off-panel.

**HALBETH (off-panel)**

Second, you're a known quantity. Some of your newer peers, so eager to make their names, they get into ten kinds of nonsense...

**RANDO ASSASSIN (tiny text)**

...and that's how I learned, never fire a gun with your foot.

**HALBETH (off-panel)**

You're *reliable*.

**HALBETH (CAPTION, not balloon)**

"Predictable."

**Panel 4**

Bar U. Swifft's POV on Hri looking at the reader. He's smiling now, very noticeable on his normally frozen face.

**SWIFFT (off-panel)**

Also, it's not enough for him to die. I *need* to savor it.

**SWIFFT (off-panel)**

Keep me up to date as you go. Every lurid detail as you hunt the pus-riddled wretch down.

**HALBETH (caption)**

"Vain. Willing to share every detail of their progress."

**Panel 5**

Bar R. Halbeth's POV, on the table, where the three assassin school coins now lie. From out of the bottom frame, Halbeth's hand points to the isfunda coin.

**HALBETH**

And you're isfunda. You're strong.

**HALBETH**

When his end comes, he'll feel it.

**HALBETH (caption)**

"Isfunda. *Not* speedy, *not* stealthy."

PAGE 6 (5 panels)

**Panel 1**

Similar to page 4, panel 1, with Halbeth and Swiftt at the display screen/table. Now, Halbeth's pet is breathing vapors at his face, which he's inhaling – it's the uber-wealthy's version of a hookah, only alive.

**HALBETH**

I'll tell you whenever your assassin draws near. You do the same for mine. We stay three steps ahead of them.

**HALBETH (tiny text)**

Fff. That's the stuff...

**HALBETH**

As long as we're in *this* duel, no one can challenge us to another.

**Panel 2**

Bar U. Swiftt still looking at the reader/Hri. He's shaking hands with Hri, whose hand is reaching in from the bottom frame.

**HALBETH (caption)**

"And this duel, we can make sure *never* culminates."

**SWIFFT (caption)**

"Hal', we'd have to use cover identities –"

**HALBETH (caption)**

"A series of skins, yes. Easy enough to arrange for men of our means."

**Panel 3**

Bar R. Halbeth looking at the reader/Wendre. His stare is intense, earnest, to match up with the caption text. This moment is a big deal for him, and every inch of his face shows it.

**HALBETH (caption)**

"And we'll be free.

**HALBETH (caption)**

"For that, I will happily offer to the pyre a name that has only ever been a weight hooked to my heart."

**Panel 4**

Bar U. Hri looking at the reader. Dead expression again. Before him is the holographic hourglass from DUELS I, now activated.

**HRI**

And now it begins.

**Panel 5**

Bar G. Wendre looking at the reader. She's casually working a toothpick. Before her is the holographic hourglass from DUELS I, now activated.

**WENDRE**

And now it begins.

**WENDRE**

Best start running, blueblood. Until, one way or *the other*, you get to stop.

PAGE 7 (data page, no art)

(Text below. Could the parts I highlighted be written in kreska? Unless that's a hassle.)

## **KODO DE DUELEJ**

### THE CODE OF DUELS

1. If one commissions an assassin, one must put their own life at risk in corresponding fashion. These two mirrored commissions constitute a 'duel.'
2. Only exiled royalty of Heir may commission an assassin.<sup>1</sup>
3. An assassin cannot refuse a duel requested, nor delay it.
4. A royal cannot take part in two duels simultaneously.
4. A duel ends when and only when one of the commissioning royals dies.<sup>2</sup>

**THIS IS THE ENTIRETY OF THE CODE OF DUELS** (barring the 14 volumes of the Code of Duels Appendix)

<sup>1</sup> For a precise definition of royalty, see Appendix Section 33 (Genealogy)

<sup>2</sup> For a precise definition of death, see Appendix Section 51 (Philosophical Troubleshooting)

PAGE 8 (9 panels)

Each of these panels depicts one of our two assassins barging into a room looking for their quarry, only to find the place abandoned. To make it clear the rooms have been vacated, there's a bunch of different signifiers we can throw in: Upturned furniture, a cobweb, papers on the ground, a plate of food with insects buzzing above it, etc. Whatever you feel works best for the panels.

***Panel 1***

Back in the abandoned suite from the opening scene. The same moment as page 3, panel 1, with Hri looking at the empty room. Maybe include the fur plant again if we need to help make clear it's the same location.

**HRI**  
Not again.

***Panel 2***

Wendre breaking down a door, barging into a room. An abandoned room. She's wielding a gun.

**WENDRE**  
Swift of the Narmouth! You ran swift and true, friend. But now -- oh.

***Panel 3***

Hri breaking down a door with his shoulder, barging into a different empty room. Entwined on one arm is a bulky animal that doubles as a gun. Maybe a snake-like thing whose mouth is the muzzle.

***Panel 4***

Wendre breaking down another door. She's holding a crossbow-like weapon now.

**WENDRE**  
Swift of the Narmouth! You ran swift and... ah.

***Panel 5***

Hri popping out of a giant delivery box. On its side is some symbol to make clear what it is, maybe a variation on a "this way up" arrow or "caution: fragile" cracked cup. Hri's about to toss some wicked throwing spear in his hand... except the room is empty.

**CAPTION**  
The assassin hunts.

***Panel 6***

Wendre barging into a room while wearing a chef disguise. She's sweeping the toque off her head to reveal a gun device mounted atop her noggin.

**WENDRE**  
Swift of the Narmouth. You... -sigh-

***Panel 7***

Hri halfway through a ventilation shaft, entering a room, seeing it's empty.

**CAPTION**

He pursues.

***Panel 8***

A tiny one-person drilling vehicle is popping out of a tunnel it's bored through the floor. Wendre is stepping out of it, angry at the emptiness.

**WENDRE**

***Voda-in-Damnation!***

***Panel 9***

A despondent Hri sitting in the middle of an empty room. An exotic hunting beast is at his feet, gazing at him in pity. It has a bizarrely giant nose/snout, to make clear it's some kind of tracker.

**CAPTION**

He suffers.



PAGE 9 (6 panels)

Four tiers: Tiers 1 and 3 are two panels each, tiers 2 and 4 are one panel each.

**Panel 1**

A profile view of Swift sitting at a table, facing the right. He has a champagne flute. The wall behind him looks like a floor-to-ceiling giant ant farm: Behind the glass, giant-sized rainbow-iridescent insects crawl through their tunnels.

**SWIFFT**

...hit an artery, but **that** wasn't fatal. He was wearing one of those smartsuits, with the built-in paramedical?

**Panel 2**

A profile view of Halbeth sitting at a table, facing the left. He also has a drink, but in a differently shaped glass. With panels 1 and 2 side-by-side, you'd almost think the two panels are one long panel of Halbeth and Swift at opposite ends of a table... if not for how the table, chairs, and the background completely differ between them. Halbeth is grimacing.

**SWIFFT (off-panel, electronic)**

But the assassin's bullet was laced with weaponized coagulant. My cousin's entire blood stream froze solid across six minutes. **That** was fatal.

**HALBETH (tiny text)**

And painful...

**Panel 3**

Long panel. The left half of the panel is similar to panel 1, with Swift facing the right. The right side, however, shows the other end of Swift's table: Sitting there, facing left, is Halbeth's hologram. There's some blur or static effect on it to show the communication's patchy. The giant not-quite-ant farm covers the whole wall.

**SWIFFT**

Just the latest unseemly corpse for the Narmouth mausoleum, right?

**Panel 4**

Similar to the left half of panel 6: Profile view of Swift's own patchy hologram seated at Halbeth's table. It's facing right.

**SWIFFT (electronic)**

...Where I'd probably be too already, if not for this arrangement of ours. I mean, Sebastio was a tier **below** me in succession.

**Panel 5:**

Similar to the right half of panel 3: Halbeth's hologram, facing left, seated at Swift's table.

**SWIFFT**

What I'm saying is...

**SWIFFT**

Halbeth, my dearest friend, you saved my life. ***Thank you.***

**HALBETH (electronic)**

Oh, don't be daft.

***Panel 6***

Long panel. Halbeth's room, with Swift (left, holographic and patchy) and Halbeth (right, flesh) on opposite ends of the table. They're now raising glasses in salute to one another.

**HALBETH**

We saved each other.

PAGE 10 (6 panels)

**Panel 1**

The interior of a bustling luddomo on Heir. Folks gambling and playing games. Lots of emotions at play. There's no need to actually depict what's in the below caption.

**HALBETH (caption)**

A woman with gold-inlaid fingers loses her life savings. With a sly smile, she places a thumb as collateral for the next round.

**Panel 2**

Largest panel. In the luddomo, Halbeth is part of a crowd watching what's in the foreground: A table where two cyborg animals are fighting. Maybe a dog-sized rhino vs. some land-squid (or whatever vs. whatever, really). Think Robot Wars competitions, only with scientifically augmented animals. Each is being mentally controlled by a competitor wearing some techno-helmet.

Halbeth isn't really looking at the fight. Rather, he's amusedly eyeing the kissing couple next to him: Two men who could not be more disparate. (Maybe one's in a fancy suit and the other bare-chested with a semka tattoo over his back?)

**HALBETH (caption)**

A mathemedic retires after her sixth winning hand. Exultant, she swaggers to the nearest Mandelbrothel to celebrate.

**HALBETH (caption)**

*The luddomos.* People don't understand them. "Loci lawless." They're loci of *life*. *And there's nothing else like them.*

**HALBETH (caption)**

They are triumph, tragedy, joy, will. Every hue of humanity, together in rainbow array. A saga around every...

**Panel 3**

Small panel. Halbeth sees, in the distance past the couple, what looks like the blurry silhouette of a six-fingered hand turn around a corner.

**HALBETH (caption)**

...corner.

**Panel 4**

As readers, we see what's around the corner, but Halbeth can't: A woman wearing decorative antlers, one of which was the silhouette. She's being excitedly pulled by a friend wearing matching headset.

**HALBETH (caption)**

That couldn't be...?

**HALBETH (caption)**

Obviously not. He's still nosing around Ordo.

**HALBETH (caption)**

The only way he could be here is if Swift was lying about that, and obviously he wouldn't.

**Panel 5**

Halbeth's face, looking thoughtful.

**HALBETH (caption, tiny text)**

Granted, with so many of his kin dead lately, he'd be more powerful than ever if he returned to...

**HALBETH (caption)**

Pft. Enough silliness.

**Panel 6**

Halbeth amidst the packed crowds. Only now they're making him visibly worried and uncomfortable.

**HALBETH (caption)**

Back to the bustle, Halbeth. *The electricity*. The many people making and breaking fortunes. A story in every eye.

**HALBETH (partial tiny text)**

All the... many people.

PAGE 11 (4 panels)

**Letterer**, a suggestion: For this page, maybe we could do the captions in a different font, as they're an excerpt from a diary?

**Panel 1**

Akva. A huge queue of people lining up in a cave, as if for a ride. There are stanchions to keep the queue in place.

**LOG (caption)**

Travel log, entry 39.

**LOG (caption)**

Spoke to H the other day, which is always a kick. Sounded a little off, though.

**LOG (caption)**

Said he didn't visit the luddomos much last time he was on Heir. Something about too many people? I thought that's why he liked them!

**LOG (caption)**

Sounded nervous, almost like he wasn't saying... something.

**Panel 2**

Largest panel. We now see the end of the queue: A huge cavern wall that's sprouting haphazard bunches of crystal formations all over. Light slants down from an opening above, making the crystals shine INTENSELY. Folks wearing what could best be described as "ceremonial sunglasses" over their eyes are sitting beneath the wall, staring at it.

Swift is at the front of the line now, holding one of those pairs of shades. Next to him is a woman dressed in a uniform/religious garb: a cave caretaker, who's holding an ornate bowl containing piles of the shades.

**LOG (caption)**

But come on. What would he need to keep from me?

**LOG (caption)**

~~I mean, unless he decided to let that white terror finally get me, haha.~~

**LOG (caption)**

Maybe being back on the old sin-sphere just got him homesick. ~~Does he have regrets about our new liv~~

**SWIFFT**

So the precise way light reflects off the Teeth and wind sounds through the rock induces a hypnotic state of... fractal meditation?

**CARETAKER**

'S the secular spin, sure.

**Panel 3**

Close-up on one of the people sitting at the wall. A thin trickle of drool trails out their mouth.

**SWIFFT (off-panel)**

Isn't this kind of...exposed?

**SWIFFT (off-panel)**

While my mind's swimming mathematical realms, someone could... run up and toss me into the Teeth or something.

**CARETAKER (off-panel)**

Huh? Pal, why would anybody want to do that?

***Panel 4***

Swift departs back in the direction he came, tossing the shades back at the caretaker. If we can see his face, it's clouded with frustration.

**LOG (caption)**

Well, no looking backwards for me.

**LOG (caption)**

I'm beyond excited to see the Teeth of Incandescent Numen tomorrow.

PAGE 12 (16 panels)

A four by four panel grid.

**Panel 1**

Swift's face speaking into a ~~phone~~ er, comm device on his ear. He's relaxed, in a good mood.

**SWIFFT**

Wait, are you in ~~So~~ the region or ~~So~~ the city in the region?

**Panel 2**

Swift's cheery face again. (If you'd prefer to merge panels 1 and 2 into one extra-long panel, that's fine.)

**SWIFFT**

I always find that so confusing...

**Panel 3**

Halbeth's face speaking into a different-looking comm device. He too is in a good mood.

**HALBETH**

I...

**Panel 4**

No art. Just a blank panel containing text.

**TEXT**

Why do you want to know? *wonders Halbeth.*

**Panel 5**

Halbeth's face, now cast into nervousness, tension – suddenly, everything's turned awkward. This will be the tone for the rest of the conversation.

**HALBETH**

...Heh. Yes, **confusing**. So much for Ordo's vaunted –ugh- "pragmatism," eh?

**Panel 6**

No art. Blank panel.

**TEXT**

Hesitation? *wonders Swift.* And evasion?

**Panel 7**

Swift's face. Also nerves and tension for the rest of the conversation, starting now.

**SWIFFT**

Ha. Yeah. Yeah.

**Panel 8**

Swift's face. He's facepalming. (Like with panels 1-2, if you'd prefer to merge panels 7-8, that's fine.)

**SWIFFT**

...

**SWIFFT**

So what have you been up to?

**Panel 9**

No art. Blank panel.

**TEXT**

*And Halbeth pauses to imagine:*

**Panel 10**

Panels 10-12 should have some effect to denote they're Halbeth's imagination. Maybe different panel borders or/and coloration?

Halbeth's face.

**HYPOTHETICAL HALBETH**

I've taken to the local avian choir scene, believe it or not.

**Panel 11**

Swift's face.

**HYPOTHETICAL SWIFFT**

Yes, avian music, he said. He'll probably be at the local zoos.

**Panel 12**

Hri's impassive face, talking into his own comm. (Suggestion: Whatever border/color we're using to differentiate the imaginary sequence, would it maybe be a good idea to crank differentiation a step further here? To set this one panel apart as the exclamation mark on the page's checkerboard?)

**HYPOTHETICAL HRI**

Understood.

**Panel 13**

Back in reality. Halbeth's face.

**HALBETH (partial tiny text)**

...Oh, not much. Just...living life. As one does.

**Panel 14**

Swift's face

**SWIFFT**

...Right. Well, um. Good. **Good.**

**Panel 15**

Halbeth's face. Facepalming.



**HALBETH**

Yes. Um, and you? Any plans?

**Panel 16**

No art. Blank panel.

**TEXT**

Why do you want to know? *wonders Swift.*

PAGE 13 (5 panels)

Each panel this page will be a POV shot from Swift's eyes. Each panel should be the same dimensions.

**Panel 1**

Fayrii. The view from Swift's eyes as he rides a bike-like vehicle down a street. Hands on handlebars at the bottom of the panel. Buildings border the street's sides, and the nearest one has a convenient window so that we can see Swift's reflection in it and know whose POV we're in. Ahead, there's an intersection.

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

Thine estimated arrival time at the nearest Bank strand is 12 minutoj. Though we must hurry if we would avoid --

**Panel 2**

The view is now of further up the street: Swift's stopped in front of the intersection. A parade of people is starting to cross said intersection: Men and women all dressed in matching ceremonial masks and outfits. On each person, the same patch of skin is exposed (the shoulder?), displaying a brand burnt into the flesh. On the right side of the street, between the intersection and Swift, there's an alley.

Floating near Swift is a drone that's essentially his vehicle's AI. (I'm picturing a floating screen displaying a giant old school pixilated emoticon, but that's just me; it can look like whatever you want.) It's tethered by some cord to the vehicle, though I'm not sure how apparent that will be until the last panel.

**SWIFFT (no tail, partial tiny text)**

The Fête of Brand Loyalty. Complete with interminable parade.

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

Re-perpending: Thou wilt arrive in 51 minutoj.

**SWIFFT (no tail)**

Huh. You know, with those masks, it could be anyone underneath, couldn't it? A neighbor, an old acquaintance...

**SWIFFT (no tail, tiny text)**

a killer.

**Panel 3**

Swift's shifted his head to the right, so the perspective shifts accordingly – and the handlebars are further to the left of the panel now. Swift's vision's centered now on the alley, which is quite dark.

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

Perpending: Exceedingly improbable. 'Tis unlikely a killer would don such a disguise...

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

...for 'twould be far, far simpler to merely wait in ambush in an alley.

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

After all, thou wilt cross 21 such alleys along thy present route.

***Panel 4***

Swift's raised his head, so the POV has shifted up to a roof. The handlebars are now off-panel. One hand is raised to shade his eyes, crowding the edges of the panel/POV.

The drone is mainly off-panel, but we can see its edge poking past the bottom panel border.

**SWIFFT (no tail)**

Um.

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

Alternatively, a killer could simply snipe from a roof. Or activate a cloak. Or disguise a picomine as any of the pebbles beneath thy feet.

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

All of which would be far easier than the illicit procurement of a regicorporation branding iron.

***Panel 5***

Swift's gotten off the vehicle, so we can see it properly in the panel now. He's retreating backwards, his hands raised into the frame in a scared-to-hell "back off" palms-out gesture at the scene. Because he's stepped back, our POV is slightly further back along the street.

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

Ergo: logically, thou hast no need to fear the revelers.

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

Sir? Whither goest thou?

**VEHICLE (mixed case, robotic)**

Sir?

PAGE 14 (7 panels)

**Panel 1**

Akva. A figure walking down a wide hallway in a classy hotel. They're wearing a huge cloak or coat, so that they're practically a shapeless mass. A hood and large eyewear obscure most of their face. This is Halbeth incognito, though the reader won't know until the final panel. He is carrying a loaded shopping bag.

He is encircled by a forcefield – an oblong dome – that's greedily crowding most of the hallway space. As he walks, a person passing him in the other direction is bumped harshly by the edge of the field.

NO TEXT

**Panel 2**

Oblivious, Halbeth's arrived at a pair of double doors that are labeled by a gold-engraved kreska number. As he presses a button on his wrist, the forcefield dissipates. Far off, the other person is waving a fist at him angrily.

NO TEXT

**Panel 3**

Interior of Halbeth's hotel suite: He is entering through the doors.

NO TEXT

**Panel 4**

Inside, doors now closed, Halbeth has discarded the bulky cloak/coat, which has been tossed onto a nearby low table. He is taking off the eyewear. Underneath it all, he is wearing some Iron Man-esque protective body armor (but sans weapons). \*And\* he's wearing someone else's unrecognizable face.

NO TEXT

**Panel 5**

He's now also discarded the armor, its parts lying atop the coat. Underneath, he's wearing what looks a lot like chainmail.

NO TEXT

**Panel 6**

He's now also discarded the chainmail, which is lying atop the armor pieces. Finally, he's in 3W3M casual wear.

NO TEXT

**Panel 7**

He's pulled apart the false face along a vertical seam in the front, revealing Halbeth's true visage beneath. (Sort of like a Russian nesting doll but heads.) His face is beaded with sweat.

NO TEXT

PAGE 15 (2 panels)

**Panel 1**

Taking up most of the page, I'd like this panel to be what Google tells me Scott McCloud calls a polyptych, where the same figure appears in multiple places across a continuous background. For example: <http://michelfiffe.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Hamlet1.jpg>

In a blank room, multiple images of Swift pace around a lone Halbeth standing in its center. Swift is emotional, gesticulating wildly. Halbeth (actually a simulation, but the reader doesn't know yet) is just standing there completely still.

Other than a lone door, the room is \*completely\* featureless, to an unnatural degree: Just pure white walls and floor, no textures or cracks or anything.

**SWIFFT**

The thing is, if I'm worried that you want out, then maybe *you're* worried that *I* want out. I don't, but...!

**SWIFFT**

Even if you don't want out, if you think *I'll* betray *you*, you might decide to do a little pre-emptive backstabbing.

**SWIFFT**

It'd be the only safe course.

**SWIFFT**

Or what if you fear that I fear that you fear I want out! If you think I'll pre-emptively move to stop *your* betrayal, then you'll pre-empt my pre-emption and...!

**SWIFFT (tiny text)**

And on and on. It's like a perverse version of one of those pretentious mise-en-abyme paintings...

**SWIFFT**

And I can't just talk to you about these concerns because that's exactly the sort of thing that'll start you worrying I'll turn!

**SWIFFT**

So why don't I then just do it first, right? Just let that twelve-fingered freak sneak up on you.

**SWIFFT**

Well, one, if you've gotten anywhere as cautious as me lately, then he might fail. At least the first time. And then you know what's up.

**SWIFFT**

It becomes a *proper* duel. And *she* might get *me*. Don't like those odds...

**SWIFFT**

Also, well, you know. *I don't want to kill you.*

**SWIFFT**

Gods, if only we could talk through this. *Really* talk, I mean.

***Panel 2***

Small panel. Maybe inset? Swift is leaving the room through its door. We see the Halbeth copy turn into white goop, melting into the floor – a bigger version of the shapeshifting mush in Bar U.

**SWIFFT**

-sigh- Suite: Spin down H facsimile.

**A.I. (robotic, no tail)**

Spinning down.

PAGE 16 (5 panels)

Each of these panels occurs at a different time, on a different planet.

**Panel 1**

Therra. Daytime. Halbeth sits at a desk, muttering to something perched on its surface but off-panel.

**HALBETH**

You spend your whole life thinking you are yourself. I mean, whom else would you be?

**HALBETH**

You waddle in this misapprehension until one day, you meet someone.

**Panel 2**

Akva. A panel that parallels page 9, panel 6: Halbeth sitting at a table. Only the seat on the opposite (left) side is now completely empty. It shouldn't actually be the same room and table as in the earlier page, though; it's a different location. To make that clear, let's have it set underwater. In the background, the entire wall is taken up by a glass plate, with coral and alien fish on the other side.

**HALBETH**

You strike up a conversation and he understands you. And you understand him. And something beneath everything else... clicks into place.

**HALBETH**

And you discover, here with him, you are somehow more yourself than when you are by yourself.

**Panel 3**

Flashback to a panel we'll see in context later in the story, on page 20, panel 1: Teen Halbeth perched on a window, looking to the right.

**HALBETH (no tail)**

You become who you were always supposed to be...

**Panel 4**

Ordo. A panel that parallels the ones on page 4, panel 1 and page 6, panel 1, where Halbeth and Swift were discussing their plan at a table. Though, again, it shouldn't \*actually\* be the same room and table, and should in fact be decidedly less furnished and classy. Halbeth is now sitting on some ugly, shabby manatee-oid instead of the lion-oid.

**HALBETH**

The version of yourself you were always searching for, without realizing. You look at yourself and, wide-eyed, whisper, "Finally. There I am."

**Panel 5**

Fayrii. Evening. Similar to panel 1, with Halbeth sitting at a different desk. The room is noticeably shabbier than the one in panel 1. (Suggestion: In the décor, maybe lean into the vaguely medieval-fantasy quality of some of the Fayrii designs, to accentuate the difference from panel 1?)

This time, we do see who he's talking to: the mecha-butterfly, perched on his desk. Only it now looks much worse for wear, and probably isn't even flight capable. Maybe one wing's broken/missing?

Through a large open window in the background, we see the night stars.

**HALBETH**

A liberation that dwarfs even the greatest Eskapi. Here, at your true friend's side.

**HALBETH**

And nowhere else.



PAGE 17 (1 panel)

I'm thinking about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of this page is one giant panel, with the remaining  $\frac{1}{4}$  taken up by a giant text box. A bunch of objects in the panel have floating numbers on them (see: <https://pictures.abebooks.com/isbn/9780194343558-us.jpg>). The text box is a key, explaining what each of those numbered items is.

As for the image itself: The interior of Swift's current Ordo abode, a mediocre studio apartment. It's a tad messy; he's not been taking the best care of it. He's sitting against a wall, looking miserable.

See the **TEXT BOX** farther below for a description of the objects, which should be scattered throughout the room. Some notes on some items' depictions:

The encryption engine (1) is a device attached to a computer terminal.

The black market pills (2) are spilling out of their container.

The barrier font (4) is some machine with an interface. It has wires or whatever leading to various spots on the walls.

The winterwarp (5) is a huge beast of a machine, taking up an uncomfortable amount of space.

(**Colorist**, a suggestion: Maybe depict most of the room in more muted tones or even black and white, with only Halbeth and the numbered items in regular colors to stand out. Would that work?)

**CAPTION (top of page)**

THE DUEL, DAY 1463

**TEXT BOX (distinct lettering, small text)**

[1] "Live" encryption engine. Harnesses mind of infant otherdimensional predator to encrypt all communications via impossible geometries. Nigh impossible to decode; outright impossible to decode while maintaining sanity.

[2] Black market pills to supposedly prevent dream-hacking. 22% chance of nausea and/or reduced creativity as side effect.

[3] He's forgotten what this is.

[4] Barrier font. Strength level: Siege. Renders room impenetrable. Also renders room temperature 110 gradoj as side effect.

[5] Winterwarp, for cooling down barrier font's heat to (barely) bearable levels. Produces incessant, annoying whine as side effect.

[6] Window. Amazing view of original Singurail. Blinds kept closed 3 weeks and counting.

[7] Guest slippers. Never used.

Eat your heart out, Hemingway.

PAGE 18 (4 panels)

**Letterer**, a suggestion: Could we do some effect or font to mark the third person narration on this page as something different from the first person narration earlier?

***Panel 1***

Establishing shot. Therra. Evening. A weathered, second story apartment in a weathered part of town. Somewhere, we see graffiti of a Judge's head and their blood-soaked hand. The stars shine brightly.

**CAPTION**

Four years and two months into his wanderings across the worlds, Halbeth finds himself back in Therra yet again.

**CAPTION**

This time, he rents a room in the Old Triquetra. One approximately the size of his childhood closet.

**CAPTION**

Anything else would be too conspicuous, he feels. Better to blend in.

***Panel 2***

Halbeth sitting against the wall of his current apartment, which is as weathered inside as out. And tiny. And made tinier by all the security equipment scattered everywhere. He looks...resignedly hopeless.

Somewhere, the butterfly drone, broken and kaput, is now a paperweight atop an untidy pile of papers.

**CAPTION**

He checks for the third time in the last horo if he has properly locked all eleven locks (nine in physical space, two outside) on his door.

**CAPTION**

Its hinges last slid a week ago, when he left to refill his Nutrado stock.

**CAPTION**

He reminds himself of how lucky he is.

***Panel 3***

A flashback to a panel we'll see in context later in the issue, on page 20, panel 3: Teen Swifft, looking at Halbeth from his window perch, his thumb pointing away.

**CAPTION**

He is magnificent. He is golden. He is free.

**SWIFFT IN FLASHBACK**

Come on, let's get out of this pit.

**CAPTION**

Free of the cage of identity, of names.

**CAPTION**

Free to explore all the worlds, and in doing so, his heart as well.

***Panel 4***

Close-up on Halbeth sitting against his wall, a tableau of abnegation and sadness. A window reveals the cold, bright stars outside.

**CAPTION**

In a life like this, anything is possible.

PAGE 19 (6 panels)

**Panel 1**

Establishing shot. Heir, evening. Some kind of mansion surrounded by woodland. A bunch of zeppelin-like vehicles are docked to the roof.

**CAPTION (same distinct lettering as "BEFORE" on page 4, panel 1)**  
FURTHER BEFORE

**Panel 2**

A high society function. The attendees are clustered in small groups.

In the foreground we see Halbeth's mother, who is projecting holo-data from a jewelry-like wrist device, to show to a couple of peers. She has a tattoo of the Vetludi Code symbol somewhere (cheek?) on her. Next to her is Halbeth, age 15 or so. He looks restless – maybe his hand's scratching the back of his neck, while his eyes wander?

It's fine if we can't immediately recognize young Halbeth as Halbeth (or young Swift as Swift later). Feel free to make them look different from their older selves.

**HALBETH'S MOTHER**

...So many possibilities, now that we've got them on principal plus 15% over rate of inflation. Priority secured, accounted *weekly*. Granted, the recreational tox market will...

**Panel 3**

Halbeth starts walking away. His mother doesn't turn her head, instead continuing to talk shop with her peers.

**HALBETH'S MOTHER**

Halbeth, don't wander too far. Some of these rooms contain folded space.

**HALBETH**

Don't worry, mammo.

**HALBETH (tiny text)**

It's not as if there's a single thing I could actually get in trouble over in this still life gallery...

**Panel 4**

Halbeth is walking down an empty hallway towards a restroom door. He's glancing behind him, making sure no one sees him.

NO TEXT

**Panel 5**

From the interior of the restroom, we see Halbeth surreptitiously enter. The room has flagrant flowers growing out of emplacements in the walls. (The rich spare no expense to make even their shit come up smelling like...well.)

NO TEXT

***Panel 6***

Halbeth is climbing through a restroom window.

NO TEXT

PAGE 20 (3 panels)

**Panel 1**

Exterior view of the window, with Halbeth in the middle of climbing out. His faced is turned to our right.

**HALBETH**

Wh--?

**Panel 2**

Zoom out, so that we see both Halbeth and what's to the right: another teenager (Swift), in the middle of climbing out of another window. They stare at one another in surprise.

NO TEXT

**Panel 3**

This panel should be as HUGE as we can make it without making the others too cramped. Swift, larger than life in this moment, is looking at Halbeth/the reader from his place at his own window. Behind him are the bright night stars. One thumb points to the beckoning woods in the distance. He's smiling.

**SWIFFT**

Don't think we've met yet. I'm Swift.

**SWIFFT**

...Come on, let's get out of this pit.

**SWIFFT**

Anything's better than this, right?

**TITLE**

**Stars, Like Watchful Eyes**

or A Précis on the Longest Duel in Heir History

PAGE 21 (data page, no art)

(Text below. Could we put the Akva symbol on the page, if it's not a hassle?)

## THE TEETH OF INCANDESCENT NUMEN

[Alternate names: The Godsgrip; the Teeth of White Numen]

A combination of (1) the patterns light makes as it bounces off the crystals and (2) the haunting sounds the wind makes as it blows through the rock of the cave produce a hypnotic state that can best be described as **fractal meditation**, in which a person perceives all the moments of their life as an intricate gestalt.

Contrary to the claims of the more zealous who swim Akva's ecclesiocceans, there is nothing supernatural about this experience. One does not see moments of the past that they were previously unaware of.

Rather, the revelation one gains from the experience comes from the holistic perspective it provides on one's extant memories. One sees the web of cause and effect, action and consequence. One sees where the moments of one's life are suspended upon it, and the structure of the shape they make. One sees letters they were always aware of, only now from a high position where they can see the sentences and even pages those letters form, and ultimately they can read the whole book. That book being Oneself.

People come away from the Teeth discovering their true purpose or true contentment. They come to see what and who truly matter to their lives.

And they pity those who do not get to know the Teeth's bite and so remain blind to these truths of the self.

PAGE 22 (9 panels)

At the top of the page, we see a...

**TITLE**

EPILOGUE: DUALS

...which is not a typo.

**Panel 1:**

Hri rams his shoulder through a door, barging his way in.

NO TEXT

**Panel 2**

Hri sees Wendre standing in the room. A broken window (her ingress) in the background. Furniture and décor in general are in disarray from her own intrusion.

**HRI**

...?

**WENDRE**

Let me guess, good sir. You came sniffing after a peculiar spending trail, one bearing the tang of anonymized wealth.

**Panel 3**

From off-panel, Wendre's hand points to the right, to an uncomfortable-looking, unassuming guy just standing there awkwardly.

**WENDRE**

Might it be a high son of Heir, you reckoned. As did I. But no, it's *this* fool. Excommunicated gold priest, of all things...

**Panel 4**

Hri speaking from off-panel left, Wendre from off-panel right. The focus of the panel is the ex-priest standing there awkwardly. Maybe he's wringing a wrist or scratching his neck.

**HRI (off-panel)**

-sigh- I swear, this assignment... *Every. Single. Time.*

**WENDRE (off-panel)**

Yeah, don't I know it. Looked so simple, too, this one.

**Panel 5**

Similar to the previous panel. The ex-priest still looking awkward.

**HRI (off-panel)**

Somehow it's always the ones you least expect.

**WENDRE (off-panel)**



Hnh, got that right. *Got that right.*

**WENDRE (off-panel, tiny text)**

At this rate, I'll be lucky if my daughter remembers what I look like.

**Panel 6**

Similar to the previous panel. The ex-priest still standing around awkwardly.

**HRI & WENDRE (off-panel)**

-sigh-

**Panel 7**

Hri and Wendre sitting against a wall, side by side. Staring at nothing.

NO TEXT

**Panel 8**

Same as previous panel.

NO TEXT

**Panel 9**

Similar to previous panel, only now Hri is looking at his shoulder.

**HRI**

I think my shoulder's suffered permanent damage, I've burst through so many doors.