

## SWORDS OF THE SKULL-TAKERS

2044 - NEO-Tokyo-13/02

My name is ACID. Not my real name, of course, but so what? It's what I chose a lifetime ago, when my business card returned the holographic "Member of the Honorable Society" kanji on my Sirius Pearl Withe Ice. I still clutch this piece of paper in my hand from time to time. It reminds me of the ceremonial in front of superiors, the thrill of excitement in the face of risky work, and the world melting into an amalgam of neon and din as I speed along on a motorcycle, like an angel ready to crash to the ground, enveloped in radiance.

The lights remain, though - the energy stored by the mammoth towers of Defallsonic Industries will probably outlive the inhabitants of NEO-Tokyo. I can watch the repetitive loops of mega-screen advertisements from my refuge, a BHLS storage center located in a squalid sector of the city sprawl proliferated by the gentrification of the Shibuya district. The flashes between a greedy mouth stretched to chew a Piranha Atomic's pret-a-porter nigiri give me a date: 13/02/2044. It feels like a lifetime ago. No one could have expected it all to end so quickly.

Skull-Takers appeared like a plague, spreading with surprising rapidity. Monstrous biomachines, they take particular pleasure in corrupting and destroying organic matter. It is said that they have been summoned by the Cult that has spread through the upper floors of the megalopolis, attracted by the dream of divinity and transcendence. I'm sure that at least one of the skeletons I see them dragging during the day, to turn them into their hideous soldiers, is theirs. The bastards got what they wished for. But for the rest of us, hell has just begun.



*Type: Fighter*

*State: Fine*

*It's only just begun*



## 14/02/2044 – Day 1

Today I drove up to Shybuia in search of supplies. It seems that as desperate as the situation is, no one has yet had the courage to loot the polyorganic crap out of the Calypso Deliveries vending machines. Good for me. I was about to break the glass of the vending machine when a noise in the inner showroom alerted me. An employee, medium height, definitely out of shape - a sight as anonymous as the snacks in front of my eyes. Yet he had pleased me. It almost seemed as if I had managed to pull him out of his lair, a useless barricade of tables and promotional products. Then he heard my name. His joy faded, turning to suspicion: he shouted that he wasn't going to be fooled by some random punk, and threatened to shoot me. Somehow this irritated me; I ran away, even though I was aware of the hollowness of his threats. Some things from your past don't seem to want to let go of you.

The thought of that man kept me awake through the long night, as the incoherent religious murmurs of the Skull-Takers grew close. What an idiot. If he wants to die so be it. Why dwell on it too much?

## 15/02/2044 – Day 2

I wandered into the sprawl, among the mazes known to certain members of an infamous Honorable Society. The area is not mine, but every city follows its own repetitive schemes, like viruses or patterns on the cover of a dollar bill: even with some variation, you always know where to look to find the right place. And indeed, at a crossroads between a gyoza bar and a clothing store that was far too luxurious for the area, I found what I was looking for: a gold buy, strangely immaculate compared to the rest of the area. Thanks to the business card, I was able to disable the security systems and the threat of a .35 caliber bullet from the automatic security turrets. The interior, of course, isn't for Gaijin or high rollers looking for easy money: it's a weapons supplier, bound by a code of honor to the family I once belonged to. I was hoping to find someone, but no luck. I grabbed a duffel bag, filling it with a couple of semiautomatics and a military knife - the place has sadly already been looted by a few other members. I hope they fare better than I did. **(Two of swords)**

I would thank God for the dumb luck of my research if I didn't think he was somehow involved in this whole thing. Twice tonight, the Skull-Takers threw themselves at the storage center. I managed to activate the building's security systems, fending off some of them, before finishing off a wave of them by emptying my new weapons on them. Seeing these...beings on the ground brings me back my old thrill. They can die: it's risky work, but doable. **(Two of Swords)**

## 16/02/2044 – Day 3

Today I made a sortie to one of the Defiant Solutions branches. It was weird; I was hanging out with a chick who worked here, a Korean woman with a fascination for Irezumi and squatting practices of the right to housing movements. When she was here, it felt like the space around her was being distorted to accommodate such an out-of-place personality. Now, the walls of the room have taken on their cold authority again: I am an intruder here. I searched for a long time, but found nothing to help me fortify the security systems of my new home. I was left alone with my memories.

The Skull-Takers rocked the base again tonight; luckily the system still held up. Now I hear them murmuring sweet promises; they say I'll stop feeling pain, and I'll see my girlfriend in heaven. I obsessively assembled and disassembled the guns, albeit unloaded, to ignore their lies.

## 17/02/2044 – Day 4

Another wasted day. I tried to head to the neighborhood clinic, but the streets are crawling with the things. I still tried to push on, but in front of a column of those beings my courage failed. They march as if in a procession, murmuring their lies, weapons in their fists. The halos are the worst part. What kind of being could give them that semblance of divinity?

They seem to be patrolling other areas - tonight was quiet. Haven't they received any news of their comrades that I killed? Why don't they attack? Staying here makes me nervous.

## 18/02/2044 – Day 5

I spent the day tinkering with the facility's systems, trying to turn some lots into makeshift traps to crush intruders. To my enormous surprise, my work was interrupted by a female voice. A survivor! She says her name is Hemlock, and that she thought she might find someone here as a result of the Skull-Takers' activities on previous nights. Something about her appearance, or perhaps her manner, is disturbing: it's as if this chaos has slipped over her, leaving only design flaws in her movements hidden by the synthetic fiber coat, sometimes too stiff, sometimes unnatural. Is she human? Or is she perhaps one of them? She says she wants to reach Koto; she believes there may be an answer there to why this invasion is happening. **(The High Priestess)**

I spend the night standing guard; I can feel a faint breathing behind me, and it gives me confidence. No one is coming to attack us.



## 19/02/2044 – Day 6

We move on to clean up the last of the stores in the area before heading to Koto. Behind me, I can feel Hemlock's tense expression, like a discharge directed at the back of my head from a swarm of microelectrodes. She's not happy about staying, and to be honest, neither am I. But launching into a new area without a contingency plan is suicide. My mentor used to argue that the condition of a successful job is knowing by heart the entrance and exit of every building you enter. But we're out of luck, and the neon advertisements almost seem to mock us, showing us unreachable treasures as we retreat back to base.

At night the biomachines hit us like a mallet, out of the blue. Now they scream as they try to get in, and finally two of them manage to break in by unhinging an air vent from the sorting room. I manage to knock one of them out by shattering his halo with a makeshift weapon, but the second manages to get his hands on my neck, squeezing with superhuman power. It's only Hemlock's timely intervention that saves my life. Her voice is firm and reassuring, but the guilt of risking my life in such a stupid way has **shaken** me.

## 20/02/2044 – Day 7

Fuck, fuck, fuck. We took too many risks today. We decided to split up to check even more buildings, but Hemlock got jumped by one of those bastards. When she got back to the base she said nothing, refusing to even get her wounds checked. But she took the hit, I'm sure of it. Her movements are even more erratic than before. **(NPC exhausted)**. I can't help but feel guilty: I'm

accumulating too many risks, but I can't seem to make a decision about what to do. I found traces of a battle, a few blocks away; by a miracle, I managed to disassemble a command deck from one of the soldiers engaged in suppression operations, recovering the carbon black silhouette of his combat drone. It will come in handy for tonight. **(The Strength)**

The assault lasted until the early hours of dawn: my fingers danced over the drone's control console until they became extensions of the keyboard's mechanical system. My eyes still retain the emerald flashes of night vision as the drone mowed down dozens of deflected angels. We are safe, once again. But I have no intention of delaying my decision any longer.

## 21/02/2044 - Day 8

**Interlude I (Draw -4 cards at night):** We move at dawn leaving the bulky drone behind **(Strength)**, by taking advantage of the Interstate corridor; the tires of the Yaiba Kusanagi CT3-H parade through the graveyards of cars like an obsidian blade through the ribcage. A risky move, but never as dangerous as getting stuck at the intersection of one of the sprawl streets, where the crossfire of Skull-Takers would tear us apart. The air is heavy, vitiated by smog and fear. I turn on the radio, and who knows why I catch a track from an unknown rock station:

*I feel depressed, I feel so bad*

*Cause you're the best girl that I've ever had*

*I can't get your love, I can't get a fraction*

*Oh little girl, psychotic reaction!*

What a lame ass song! Behind me I can hear Hemlock gasps. I think she's crying, but I realize she's humming the chorus. Something warm and wet clutches my stomach. I speed up, singing louder as the landscape melts into shades of dull yellow. Memories fire the synapses. I am a fallen angel again, and I have a beautiful girl by my side. I'll buy her dinner somewhere fancy, and with any luck we'll slip into a capsule hotel and make love. And tomorrow, my superiors will promise to cut off my fingers if I don't get my ass to headquarters on time. And the world will continue to run its course.

It's a dream that won't break, won't break, won't break, won't...



22/02/2044 - Day 9

When I woke up this morning Hemlock was not there. I think she attempted a sortie to the heart of Koto, to the skeletal fingers of skyscrapers stretched to the sky like a beggar's hand to God. It's a different geography than sprawl, a morphosyntactic babel specifically constructed to deter intruders, with its absence of chain restaurants and its honeycombs of insurance offices. It succeeds brilliantly, at least with me. But I think for her, the wait has been far too long.

From our new refuge, a three-room apartment straight out of a brochure for the bored rich people, located in a building on the edge of the neighborhood, I even manage to capture an image of the bay and the sea. The iridescent reflections of the oil stains provide emerald plays of light in other times fascinating. They make me think that the imprint of our race on this corner of the world will not disappear for a long time. That at least something will remain after all this.

I scoured the area for weapons, but the signs confused me, pushing me toward a maze of overpriced fluorescent storefronts. I was about to give up, when the sound of a shattered storefront alerted me. I followed the sound of profanity and broken glass, finding a young woman rummaging through the cables and holographic projectors of an RLCJ Acoustics store. I frightened her, but somehow managed to wrestle a name from her and a promise not to make any sudden movements. Her name is Andromeda: she's a jumble of contradictions, with her crushed nose and Gucci clothes that clearly belonged to one of the mannequins in the area. I managed to convince her to come with me; it wasn't until she got close to me that I realized how small she must be. A teenager, perhaps separated from her family during the first moments of the disaster; she doesn't want to talk about it, and keeps her distance. **(The Empress)** Not much to loot, and we head back to base. Hemlock arrives in the early evening; gloomy in the face: she has not been able to reach the area, the Skulls' patrols are massive. She only exchanges a few words with the newcomer, before locking herself in a silence like a wounded beast. **(High Priestess exhausted)** I feel like I've lost something today; I am among strangers.

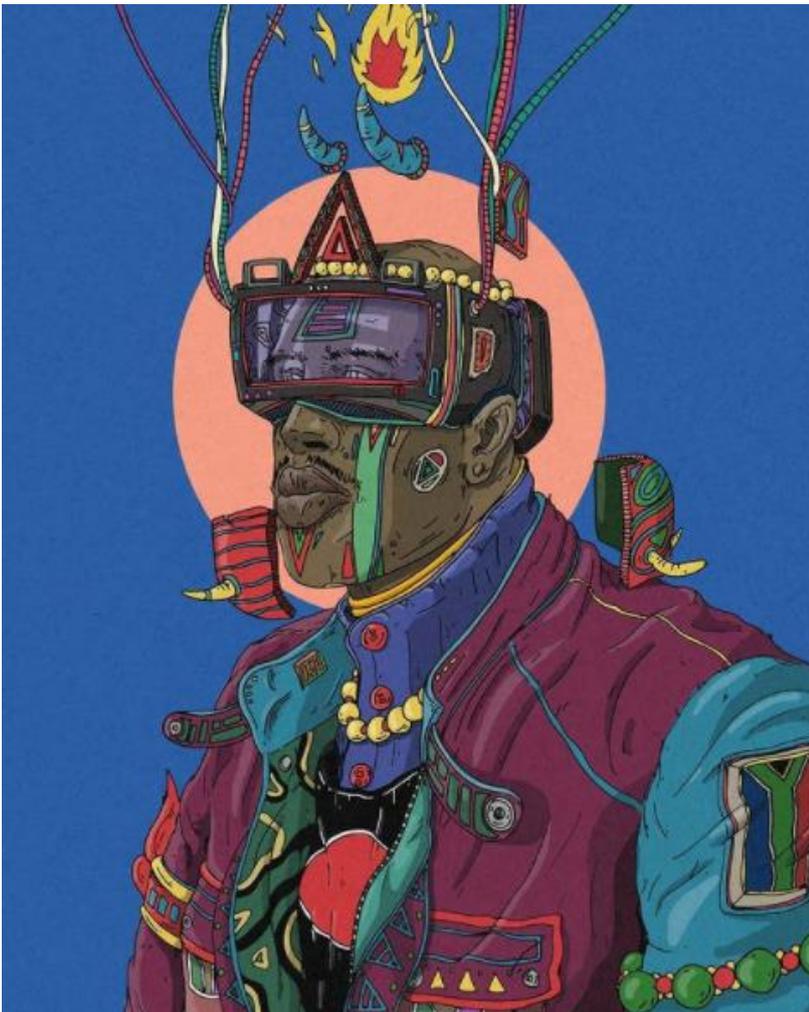


The Skull-Takers' assaults are getting more and more dangerous. Tonight, two of them quietly slipped into the apartment complex, searching for survivors. I managed to lure one into an empty apartment, decapitating him with a fibroblade knife before he could alert the other. I reached the second in time as he prepared to kick down the apartment door. I managed to tackle him to the ground, alerting the others; Hemlock quickly disposed of his aureole by shattering it with a boot strike. He gave me a firm nod, before scooping Andromeda up under his arm and carrying her away from the scene. Well, it looks like the ice has melted.

## 23/02/2044 - Day 10

It seems all the stragglers had the same idea to head to the heart of NEO-Tokyo: I found another survivor, intent on recording a podcast in a tacky-sounding major's recording studio located a few blocks from our base. No, I'm not kidding. He's an old bastard, Jamaican, in his 60s, as tall as a redwood and almost as massive as the tree itself. He says his name is Maverick (**The Hermit**): he worked for a lifetime in the construction industry before giving it all up and running a semi-unknown radio station in the Toshima area. Now he has taken the opportunity to rebuild a format based on the current apocalypse: religion, love, sex, the importance of family ties. And the best part, he claims, is that he doesn't even have to pay for the new equipment. I told him it sounded like a bullshit idea, and that watching his rants would probably be the demons that would kill him. He didn't seem upset: he replied that it would have a bigger audience than his previous project anyway. He asked who I was with, and if he could tag along. As I write, he continues to chatter away on his tape recorder, a sentimental piece of cracked plastic blackened by interperia, filming with a handheld video camera everything he can see from his room. It sounds totally insane, but something about his manner has transformed the atmosphere: it feels like we're back in the days of TMZ and paparazzi bullshit; we can almost feel the breath of reality on our necks as the girls, wiped out from a day of searching, huddle on the bed watching the moments of their new lives captured by our companion (**both exhausted**).

I was careless: I thought about accelerating the pace of our search with a nighttime sortie, but I got stuck in a local supermarket when a dozen of those things entered the building. I zigzagged through the shelves, moving toward the emergency exit, but one of their bullets reached me, hitting my leg (**hurt**): it was only by a miracle that I didn't lose momentum, finding escape from the neon light and into the dark embrace of some side streets. When I got back to the base I could see the extent of the injury: it only grazed me, but it could have been infinitely worse. I felt Andromeda's preoccupied gaze as I bandaged the wound; the pain kept me in an alert sleep.



## 24/02/2044 – Day 11

My dreams are feverish, covered by a veil of sadness: I dream of my parents' house, the smell of the fish scraps they used to carry around after the eight hours they spent with their knees dipped in the big sorting tanks of the second-rate markets. There is a sense of inevitability in their gestures, destiny branded in their smelly sweat and their plastic overalls. I miss them, even now that I see them as I have always despised them, poor and lacking in perspective.

When I wake up, Hemlock and Maverick look at me somberly. They have been attacked by some angels; the old man has a sprained ankle, from a bad fall; Hemlock is shaking, but says nothing. **(exhausted)**

But it's all right, isn't it? Where is Andromeda?

They tell me that she was told to watch me, but that she had caught up with them by sneaking around. She wanted to help out. The fire from the automatics caught her in the middle. They couldn't recover the body. **(The Empress)**

As I write this, I feel like the little girl's form is already starting to lose substance. Like a tenant leaving your apartment, a vague hint and a frown left imprinted in your retinas. Then nothing. It's not fair.

The night passes quietly; we are alone, a silent vigil to unite us.

## 25/02/2044 – Day 12

We part at dawn; none of us have much desire to talk. I don't really remember what happened next; a whirlwind of stakeouts, smashed doors, nods to danger and escape. My body moves like a puppet controlled by a bored comedian, reciting gestures already repeated, again and again and again. None of us find anything useful; even the old man refuses to film any further.

At night we are taken aback by the number of opponents; I feel something soft and painful expand in the pit of my stomach, and I realize I have been hit by a bullet. **(gravely injured)** We fight until dawn. I've lost a lot of blood, and although the bullet didn't hit any vital points I feel dizzy, cold as a corpse.

## 26/02/2044 – Day 13

**Interlude II (Six of wands, used immediatly to heal)** When I wake up, I see Hemlock at my side; she has remedied some polymorphic gel and gauze, along with a bag of blood. Her hands are icy, as she patches me up as best she can; she still sings the radio song, softly, so as not to wake me up. **(hurt)**

I ask her where Maverick is: apparently he decided we were a lost cause, and ran off, looking for other stories with happy endings, I guess. Wise choice. **(The Hermit)** I ask her why she didn't follow him, but she says nothing. I apologize to her: it seems I couldn't get her where she wanted to go, to the heart of the mystery shrouded by the upper echelons of the Cult. She says not to worry: we are still close, we can do it. Yes, we can make it. It's a beautiful lie.

I take her hand and hold her to me. She doesn't resist. She gently embraces me, and cramped in bed, in the midst of the devastation of the previous evening, it seems to me that we are saying goodbye, for the last time.

## 27/02/2044 – Day 14

I snuck out of bed this morning, moving around the neighborhood; part of me was really deluding myself that I could find something useful, but I guess deep down I was trying to come to terms with the end. In the Society, such a moment would be greeted with joy by every one of its members, proud that they could give their lives for their betters. But that institution is dead, and I have nothing to cling to but Hemlock. I truly hope she pulls through, but that doesn't erase my fear of death. To end my story here, wiped out by these beasts, feels like a failure. But there's not much else to do. When I pass in front of my bike, my heart leaps in my chest. But the wounds still cry out for vengeance, and then where would I go? There is no peace in this city.

**Epilogue (death):** It was great to meet you, Hemlock. I hope you have luck in your quest, wherever it may take you. Remember to check the entrances and exits of the places you enter; be cautious, but helpful to strangers. I feel like I'm repeating crap, so I'd rather call it a day. Treat my bike right. Good luck.