

THE RETRO-FUTURE | WAR 1

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



B C W O O D R U F F

BC WOODRUFF

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

A GRAPHIC NOVEL

THE RETRO-FUTURE
WAR

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

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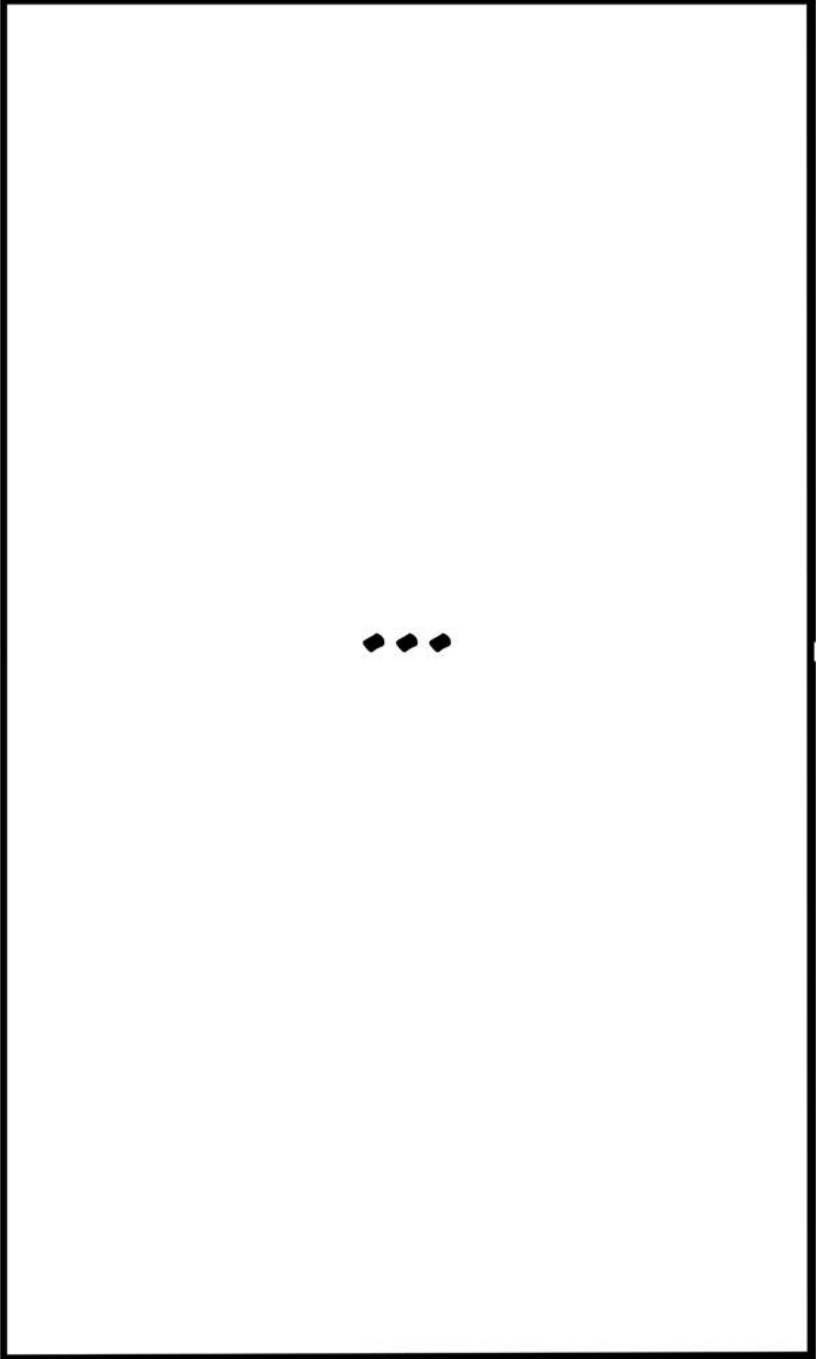
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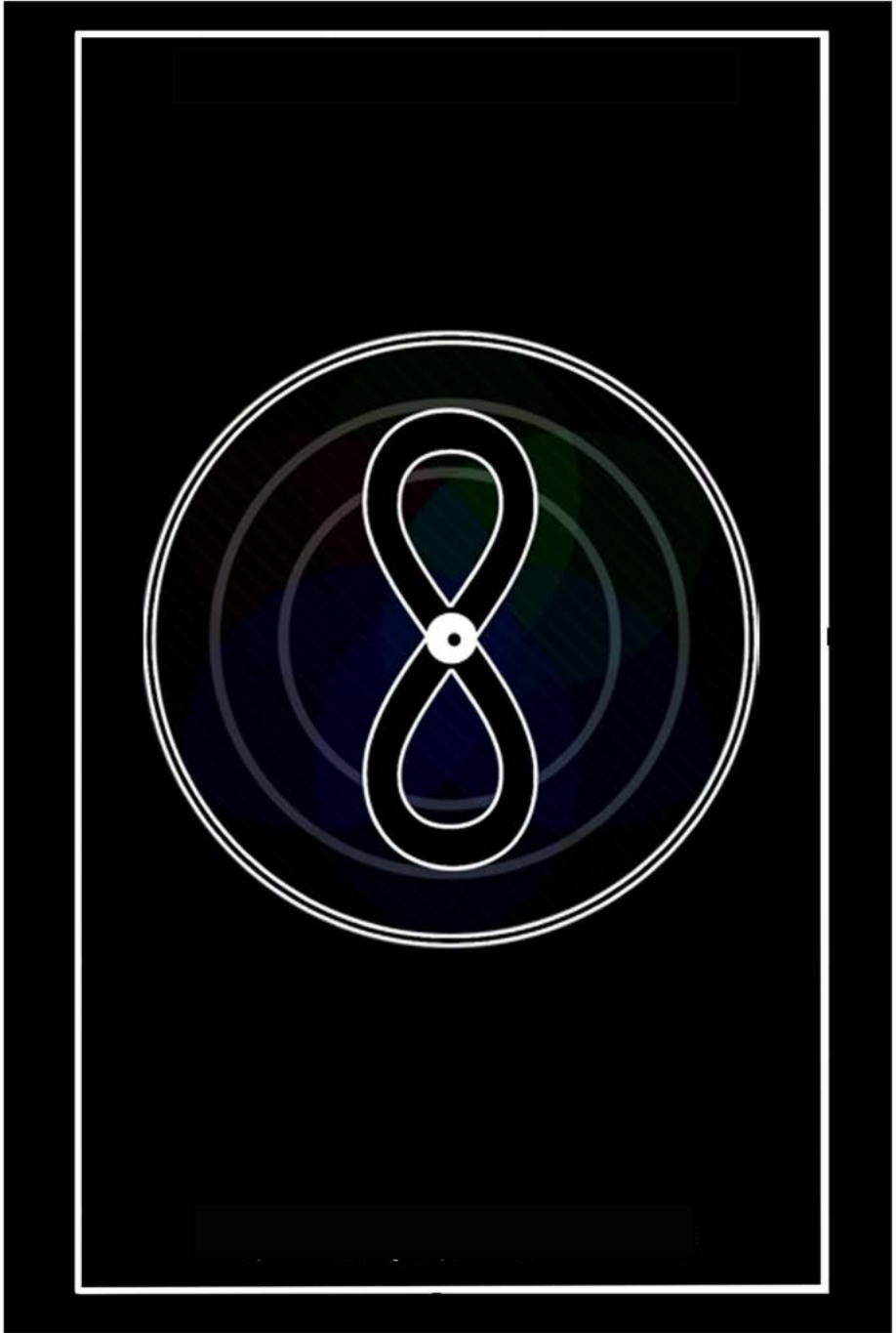


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THEY SAY WE BROKE THE WORLD

I can't remember a time since meeting Gol where I wasn't, for one reason or another, moving.

And it's something to say that, given all the years before our chance encounter I was isolated, reclusive, and connected to a community consumed by selfish desires and false pretenses.

I have not returned to the scraplands since leaving many, many years ago.

My father, the despicable old fool, died by his own vices.

He was the only family I knew.

And because of that, I have come to hate that term.

Gol and I, though, we have an understanding, and a fierce loyalty to one another. I like to imagine this is what people mean when they use the word.

Our journey has taken us across the Great Plate. We have no destination, truly.

Rather, it is the freedom and opportunity that has driven us this far.

But while we do not have a destination, we do have a purpose. Gol, built during the lost histories has enlightened me to it.

He refers to his creators, an organization called GenCell.

It is his theory that by finding out what they became (and what became of them) that we will doubly-discover how the world as it now is came to be.

We use, as much as we can, his personal experiences to determine where to go next.

And today, well, today we are in for quite the time.

Days ago, while stocking up on supplies in the Orange District, we stopped by Old Piip's to speak to a friendly face and see if any news had come his way.

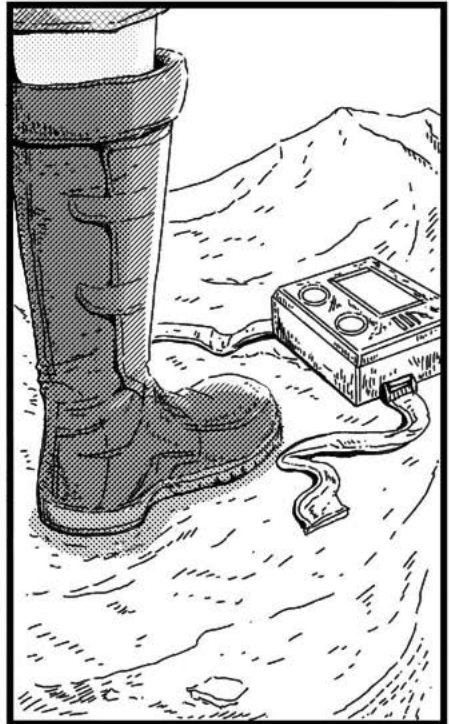
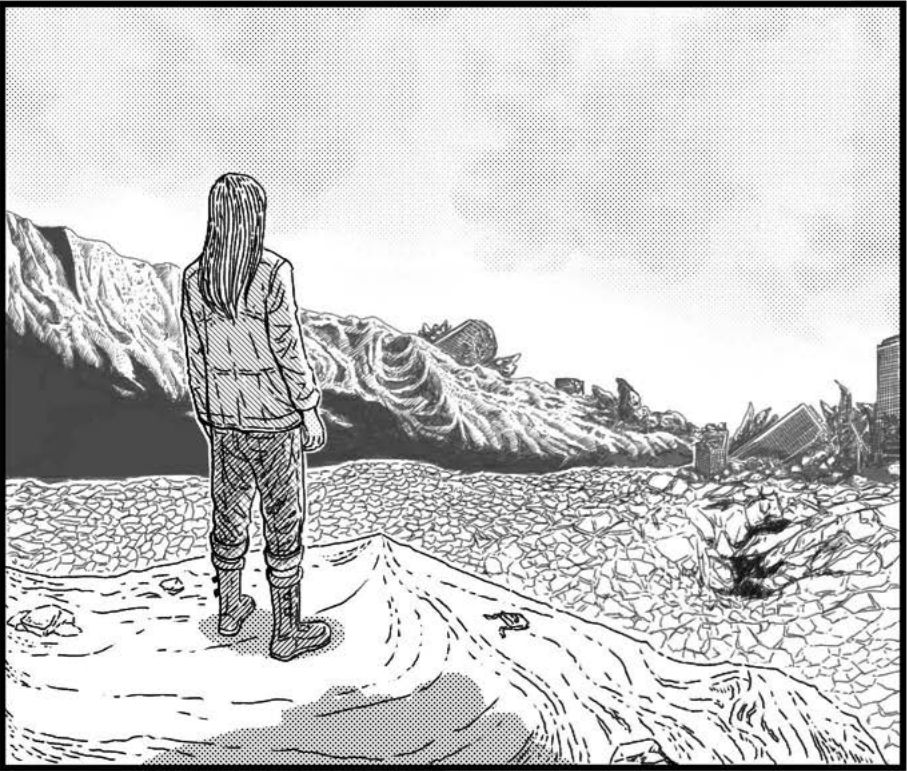
A surveyor, he informed us, had barely escaped from an relic-site two days to the west.

Gol and Old Piip seem certain it's a remnant GenCell Tower, a theory further and all-but confirmed by the emergence of a new radio signal emanating from the area. Likely set off from the explorers.

Of course, the surveyor in question did provide a rather dire warning: the entirety of his expeditionary group had been picked off by something lurking inside the building.

And that just about brings us to where we are.

- Recording 11.21.3 Archived



Mirdova stares off into the worn landscape and wonders at the scope of it all. How far she has come. How much farther she has to go in order to feel the freedom she was denied for so long.

And the lies.

She thinks deeply about the lies, and how they shaped her before she could even understand their insidious nature.

The scraplands she fled will be in their monsoon season, a joyous time which brings up, even now, a sense of happiness. She remembers Jo-Lang, a friend long gone, and how they would sneak through the barred gates of the old magistrate's compound and steal fresh food from the greenery within while the community came together to dig water-trenches to collect the rain for future uses.

Those experiences have softened in light of all she has seen in the years since.

She even, despite his horrendous nature, feels some empathy to her father.

How she has changed.

Here, on the hillside overlooking the relicsite, windless air hovering around her, there is some peace.

"Hmm?" She nearly steps upon a piece of auxtech on the ground.

"Hey! Gol! Check this out!" She urges him over from his own perch a few metres away.

“This look familiar to you at all? Kinda has your ‘distinguished bulky look.” She smirks beneath her mask.

Gol has no true voice, for he has no mouth to speak from, rather, the voice comes from thought-waves produced within his, ahem, bulky metallic suit and the projection of his face upon the helmet moves to match the audio pumped through speakers along its edge. Still, he seems amused and reaches out for it.

Sometimes, there is a visible delay, and sometimes his face does not change at all. This is one of those, and the sound comes from an emotionless, static image: “Ah, no. This is from a different culture. Something much later. I can see your confusion, though. All tech must look remarkably similar to someone who grew up effectively in a sewer.”

He can tell she’s frowning at him.

“Anyways. Let’s take a look, shall we?” Gol’s eyes go obsidian as internal machinations fire into position and an audible pitch increases along with his apparent concentration on the device.

“Like mosquitoes fucking, that sound, Gol.” She covers her ears and steps back.

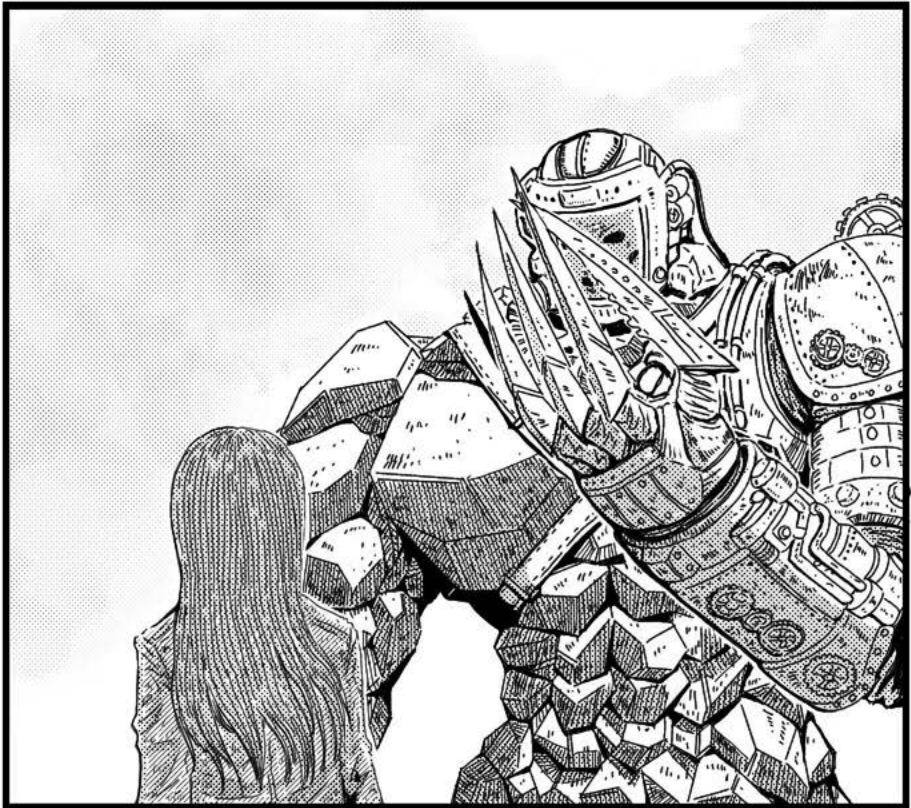
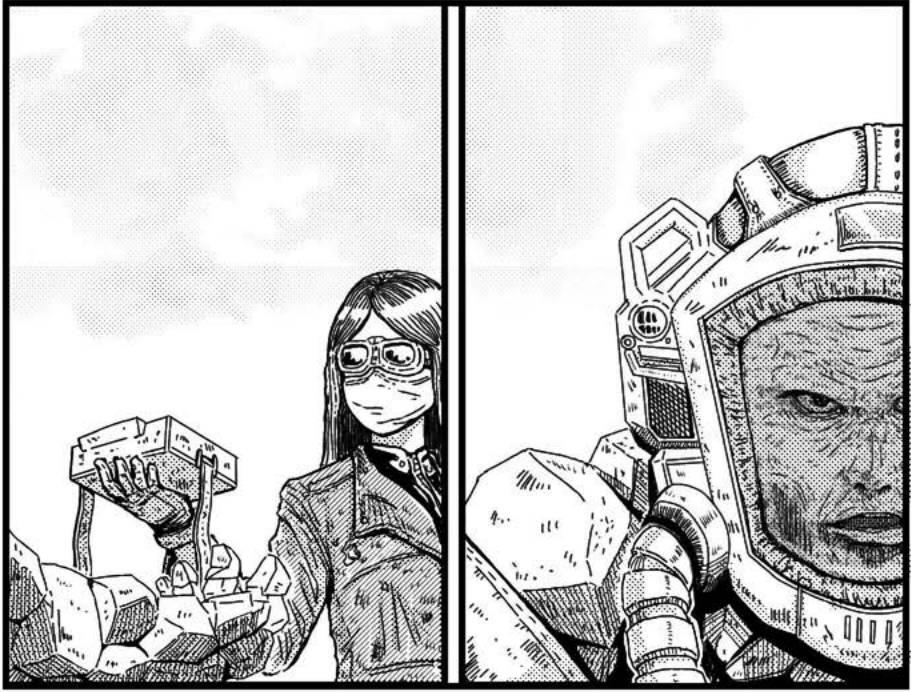
The sound increases.

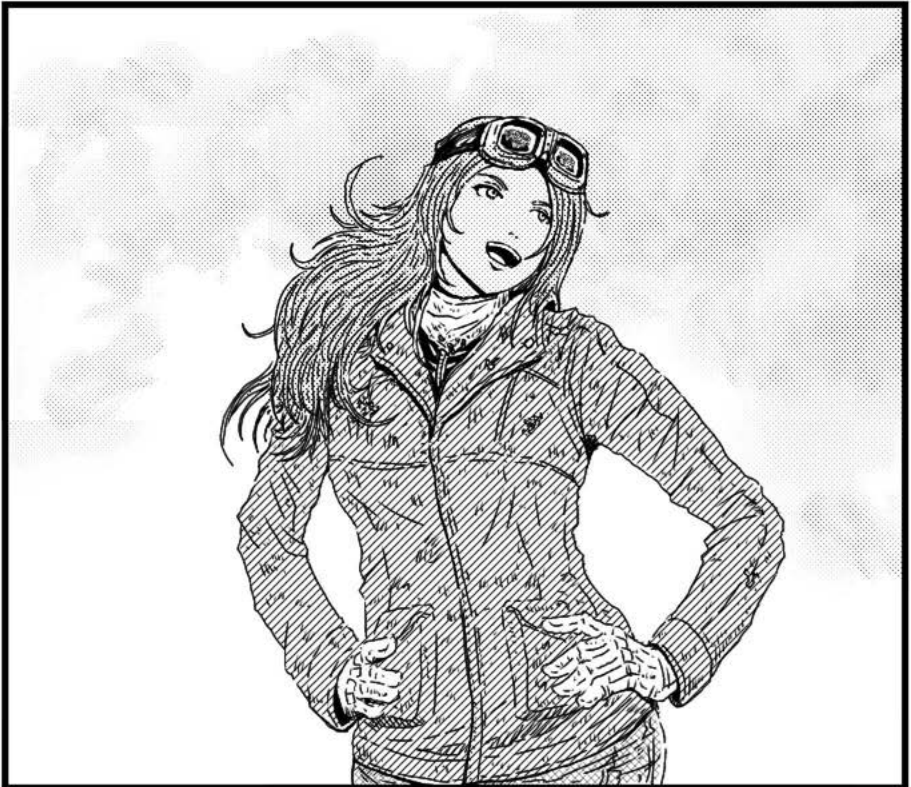
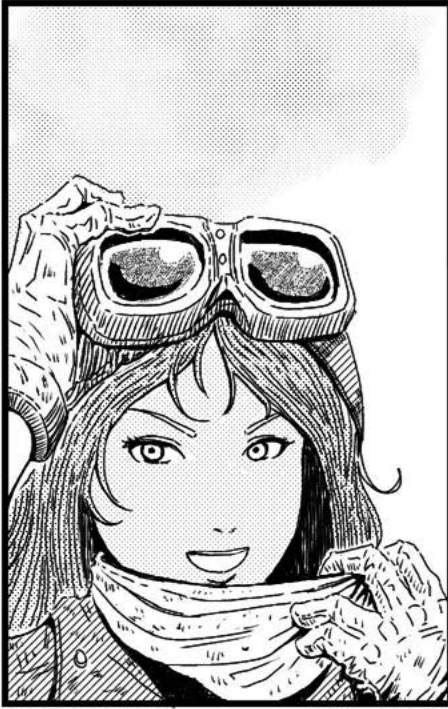
And increases. And...

“Strange, that should have worked.” Gol brings it closer to his face.

Closer.

“We haven’t all day, you big lug-nut!” Hands still pressed deeply against her pained, now-ringing ears. “Would you--”





The device comes alive -- but just for a moment -- and promptly, and unceremoniously, dies.

“Hope you’re build better than that, my friend.” Mirdova removes her face covering and glasses, giving Gol a mocking glance.

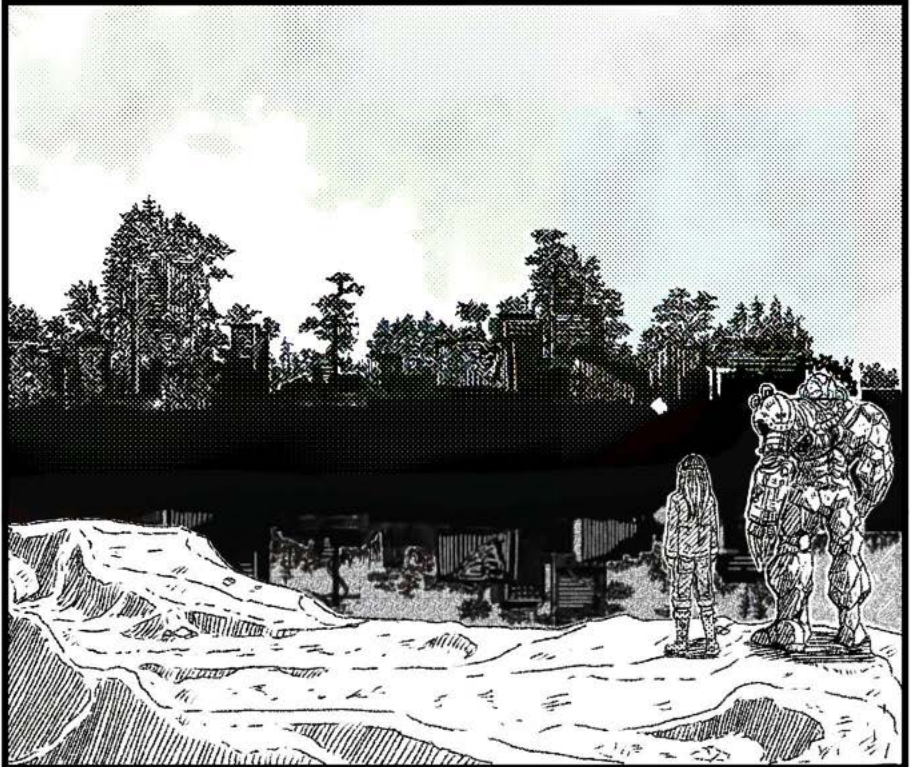
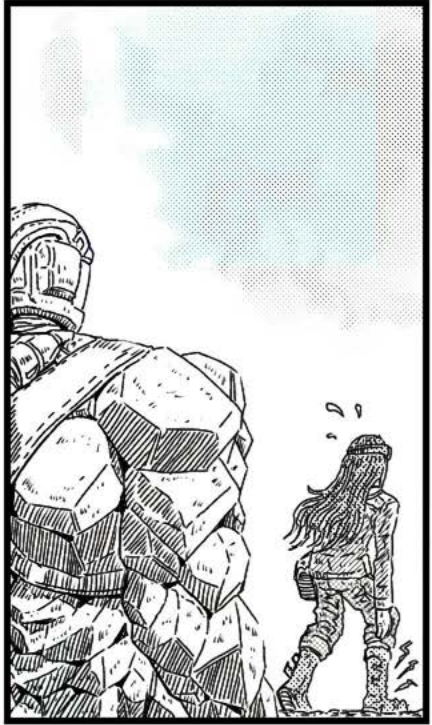
He doesn’t have the range of emotions a person would, you have to understand, however, whether this is due in part to his long slumber within the scraplands themselves before Mirdova discovered him, or if it is by design, one cannot quite say.

However, he does a fair job of staring blankly and making you feel quite silly about yourself.

“I don’t suppose this is a good time to inform you that there’s movement about a kilometer from here. Heading quickly in this direction.”

“Oh, always trying to get out of a good back-and-forth, eh?” Mirdova, feeling quite victorious, stands firm as the wind picks up again.

“I wouldn’t say that, Mir. I just naturally assume that your antics come from a place of great insecurity. If it makes you feel any better knowing that you’ve bested someone who is literally older than the hill we’re standing on, I won’t try to steal that from you.”



“Alright, you jerk. Let’s get going before whatever you’ve spotted catches up with us.”

Her foot, connects hard with his shin.

It hurts.

And in a huff, she storms onwards towards the reliccity ahead.

In the back of his remaining mind, Gol directs his attention in the direction of their pursuer.

It’s hardly the first time someone or some thing has been hunting them. But this one is quicker than the others, and that is reason to worry.

“Fuck me.”

They come to an abrupt stop.

Lots of water here, eh, Gol?

“Looks to be flooding--”

“You think?”

“I was going to say, looks like flooding caused by a break in a subterranean aquifer. Likely recent, given the shoreline and the trees still half-alive but drowning down there.” He points below the still liquid and is right. “We can expect this will interfere with our exploration.”

Onward, they go, choosing paths that are not quite as wet and unpleasant. Dodging and darting between old structures reclaimed by nature and familiar only in shape but not purpose.

In some ways, it is reminiscent of the scraplands, though, here there is that curious greenery coupled by vibrant colours. Even the sky, not so tarnished and painted by the fumes from deep-core fires reaching up from hidden furnaces below the earth, is touched by a calming blueness.

All around them, the reliccity's common features peek out:

An old building, now a vertical forest more supported by the living wood than the concrete and steel used to erect it to such great heights.

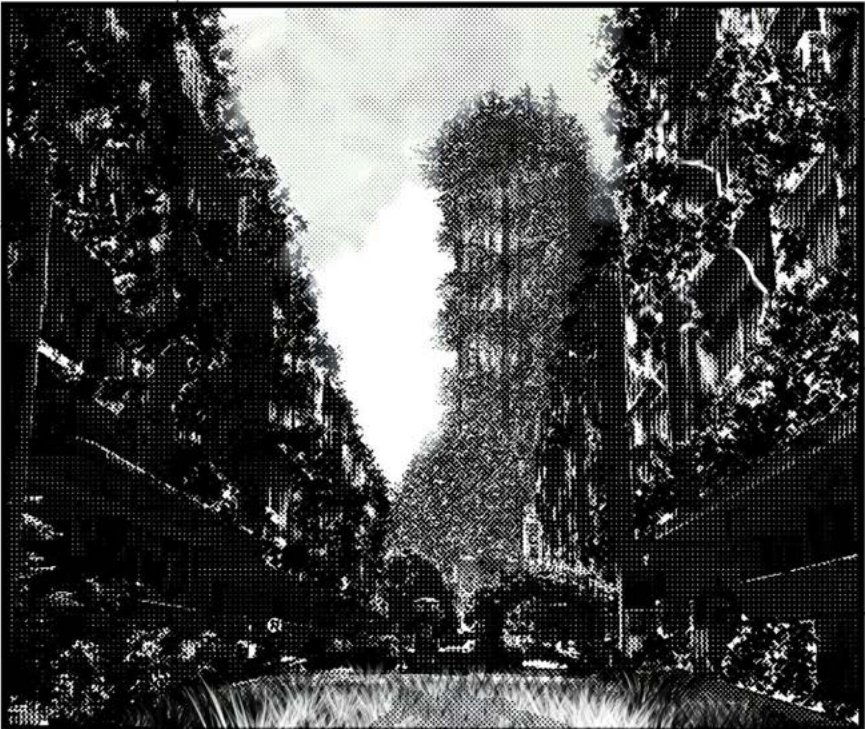
Ancient vehicles, rusted to near-oblivion, no longer capable of offering the tales of those who rode them before the Shatter, and during those lost years.

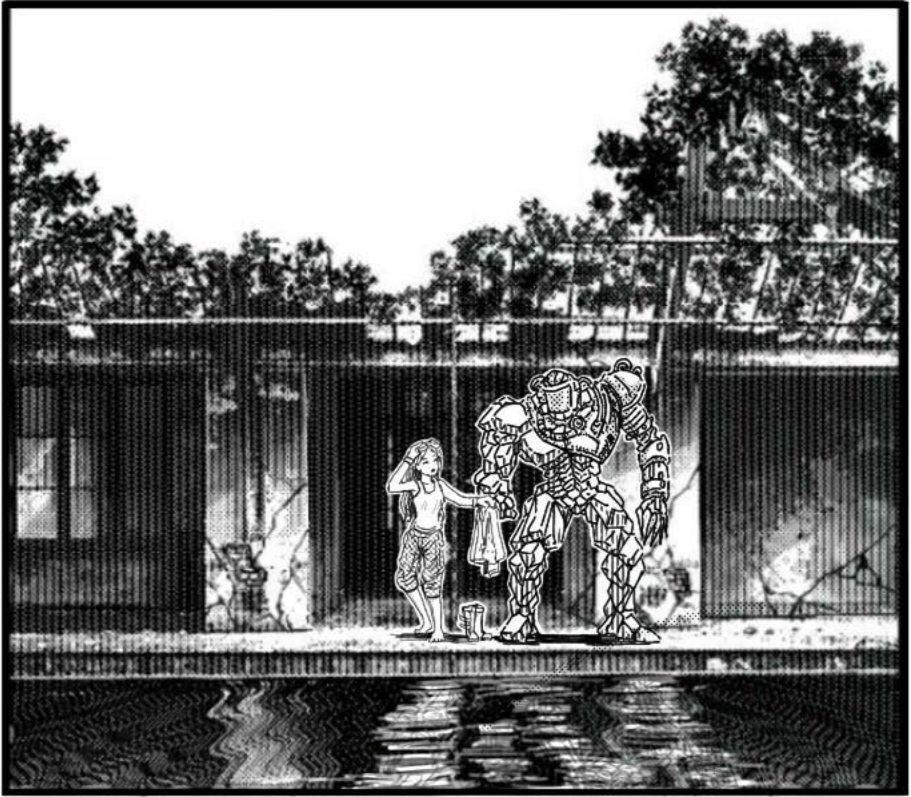
How far humanity -- and the world -- have come since the calamity that sealed the end of an era of technological advancement and environmental curation -- and disregard.

They would not know this, but this city is where GenCell created the first of many Ni-Fi Hearts. Old Piip has sent them here for that purpose, too. This friend of theirs is a man devoted to the past. Consumed, perhaps, by it.

And what he believes lies deep within the now-unsealed Tower has the potential to change the very course of the broken future.

For Mirdova and Gol, however, this is just another stop on a journey towards truth. But, well, making a few contribute notes while you're seeking it isn't a bad position to be in, either.





“According to Old Piip’s contact, we’re here.” Gol, somewhat uncertain and somewhat concerned stares at the pair’s reflections from what may have well been a penthouse apartment in days gone by.

“So, you’re saying...”

He points into the shimmering water.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you were saying.” Mirdova sighs, removes her nightline-armour and prepares to take the plunge into the temperate liquid.

“If someone is following us, Gol, would you mind making sure they are greeted with... Appropriateness.”

“If someone is following us, Mir, I’ll be sure to give them a proper welcome, one way, or the other.” He slaps his clawed hand into the far-less-menacing one. But, by all accounts, at nearly 250 kilograms and standing near-three-meters in height, truly, for those poor souls to find themselves at ends with him, everything would be taken as menacing.

She smirks, as she does, and leaps into the shallows, searching for the entrance to the GenCell Tower.

Spears of light follow her from high above, cutting through the surface tension and refracting as they edge deeper, like her, to the ground below.

Spotting the Tower’s foyer is not hard; the large doors, torn ajar, and the iconic symbol clinging to the building’s facade make it a simple matter.

With little left within her lungs she enters, and then surfaces.

The building, to her surprise, is fairly well intact. It is far less true for those who were in here during whatever catastrophe (and there were many) that occurred during the lost histories.

Bodies, hidden behind transparent metal, press themselves against the surface. They likely starved here. Or suffered worse fates.

Whatever may have come to pass, however, they share a common horror on their cured-meat faces. Grimaces and quiet screams that carry across the eons.

Shiieek.

Something... moves in the darkness.

Mirdova catches a whipping feature in the corner of her eye as she observes the inner-lobby's mission statement and directory.

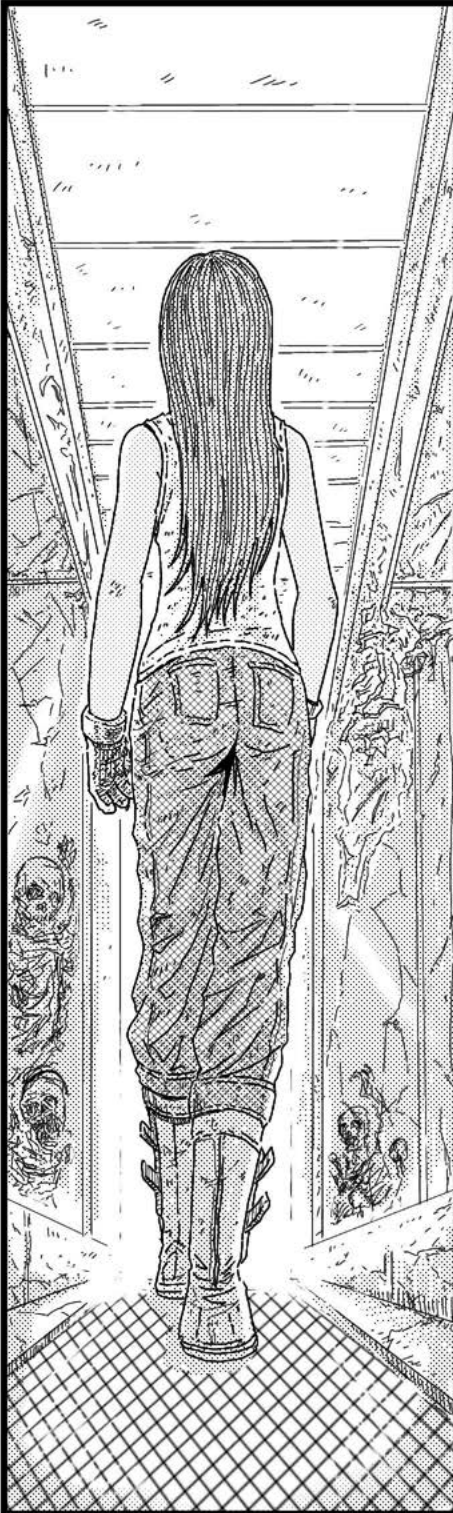
'Old Piip said that we'd need to use the substation train to get into the core of the Tower. Down there is where all the good stuff gets...'

Shiieek.

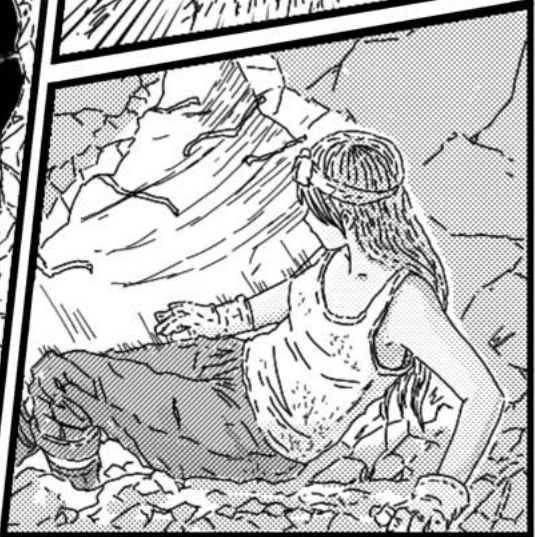
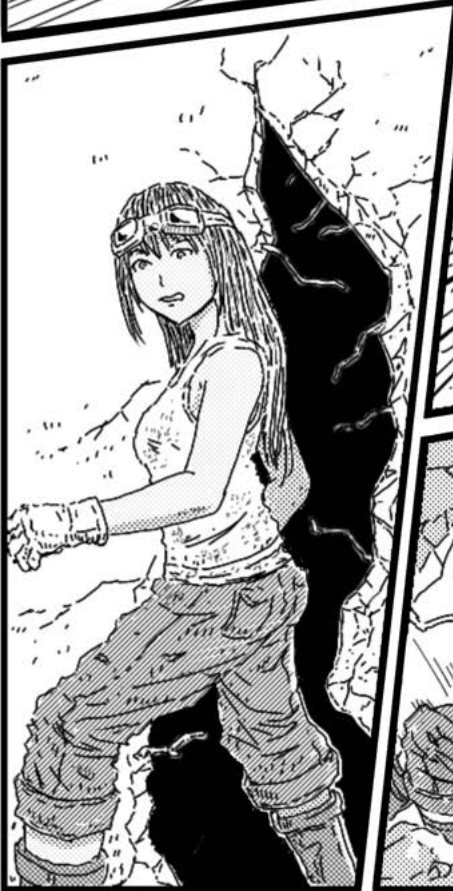
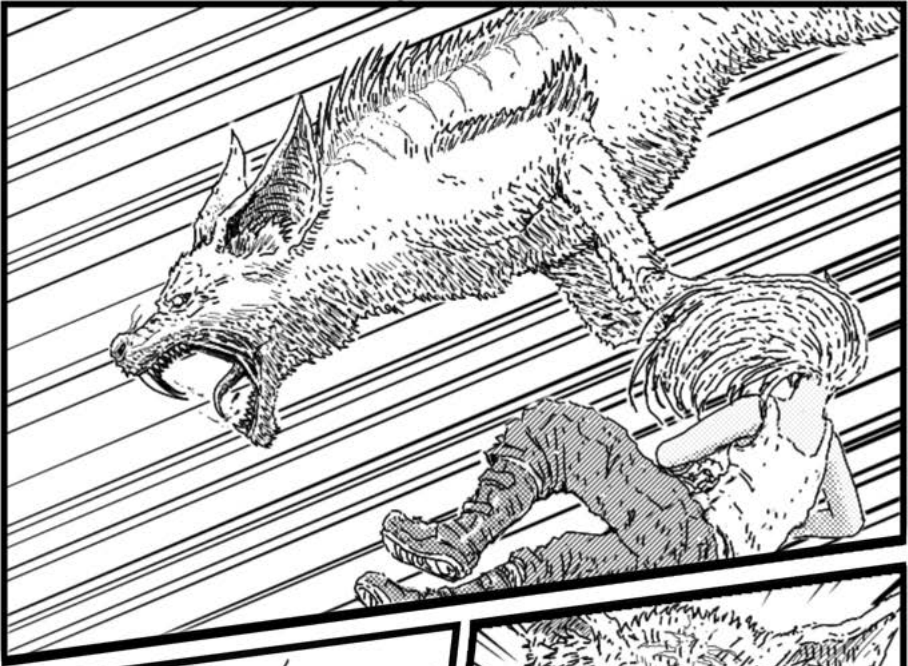
Her companion, whomever or whatever it may be, makes itself known again.

But closer this time. Even without seeing it, Mirdova can sense its size. Living with Gol has made her quite aware of what something hulking and obnoxious sounds like.

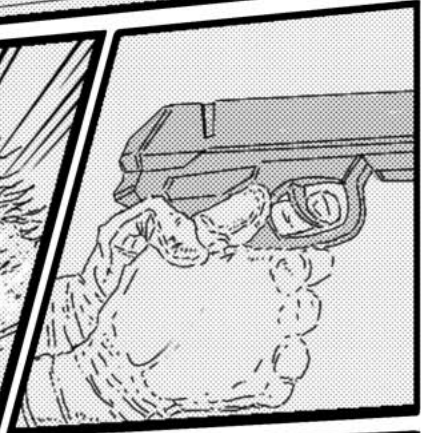
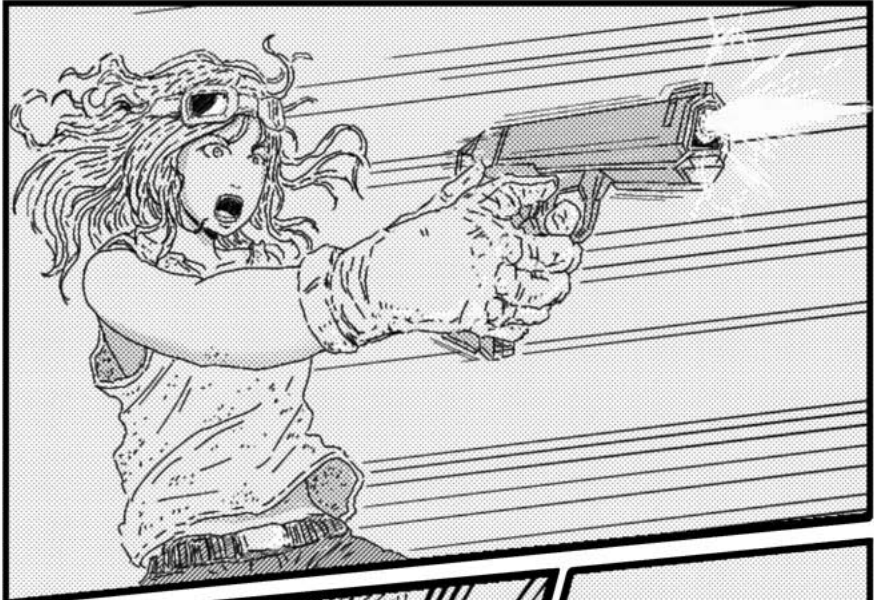
Not for the first time in her life, she feels regret leaving him at arm's length. She spots the train line on the directory and makes the turn towards it.











Shiieek!

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck!!!’ Mirdova comes face-to-face with... well, she doesn’t quite know what it is, does she? Doesn’t matter! Big teeth. Corpses in the halls.

Time to get a fucking move on!

She darts backwards, considers her moves, and then sets out in an all-out-run down the flickering hallways.

‘Wait, when did the lights come on?’ There’s no time to focus on that -- her hindmind pushes forward her animalistic flight-in-stinct and away she goes!

One foot ahead of the other, again and again, until it’s all a blur of adrenaline-fear-fuel.

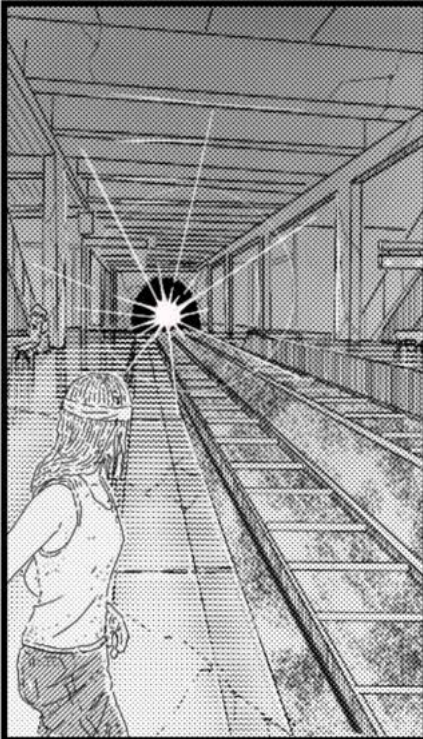
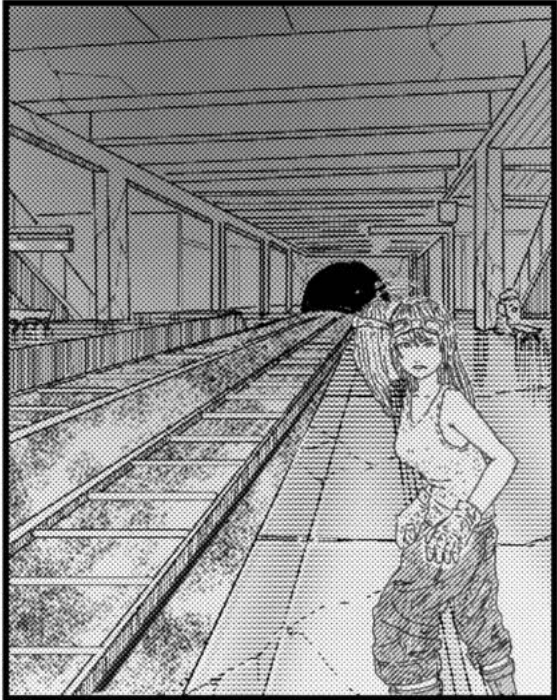
‘What’s this?’ The same inner-voice alerts her, spotting a handgun next to someone in a similar outfit to the one at Old Piip’s shop.

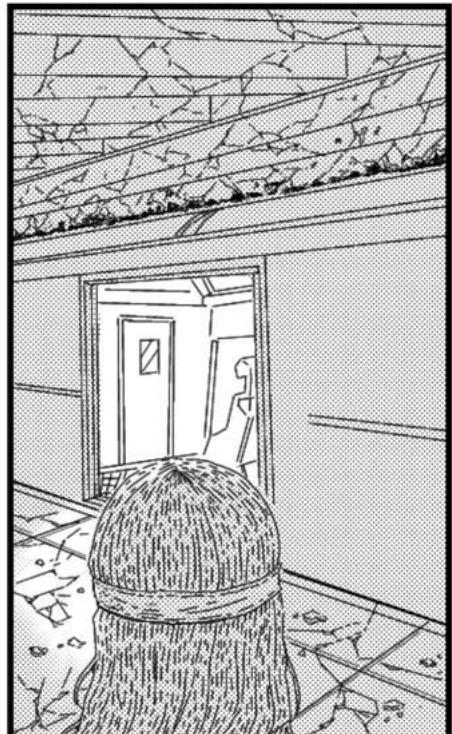
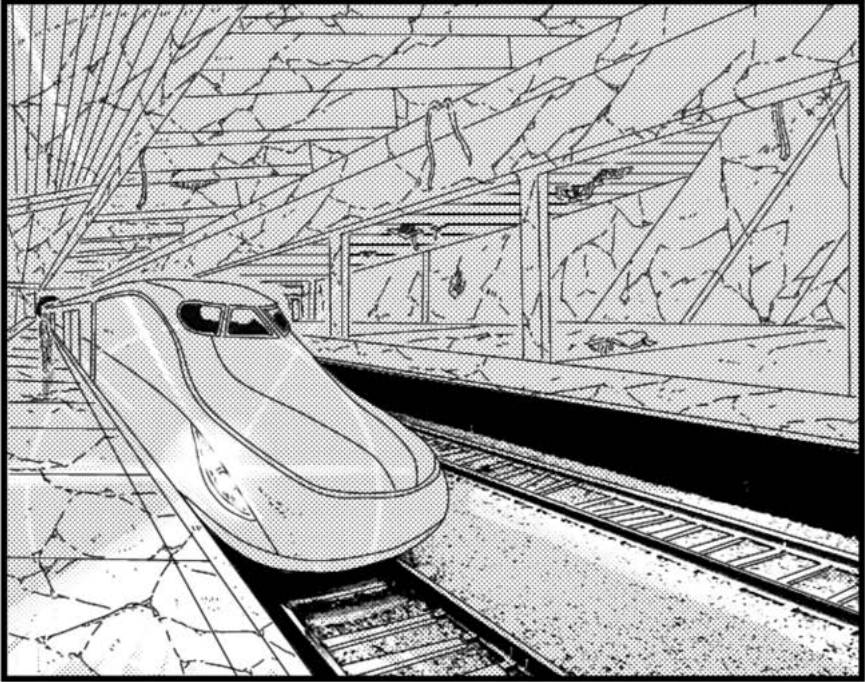
She dips down as she passes, grabs the weapon, and, still moving, turns around to fire at her pursuer as she doubles-down on making it to the train station.

Shiieek!!!

The beast seems none-at-all impressed by the bullets bouncing off its thick hide. Not impressed, sure, but it does take a moment to consider what’s going on -- and it’s this moment that Mirdova passes through a doorway with an unfamiliar automated voice declaring:

‘Train arriving at station 12. Please mind the gap.’





Shiieek!

It calls out to her, closer again.

As the train arrives and its sliding doors open, she sees no other opportunity. That said, wasn't this where she was meant to go anyway? Seems awfully convenient, doesn't it?

Still, herded or not, she chooses the warm light of the surprisingly robust-looking vehicle.

And enters.

Just as the creature arrives, too, and launches itself as the doors come inches from closing.

The claws grip at the metal.

It calls out in protest.

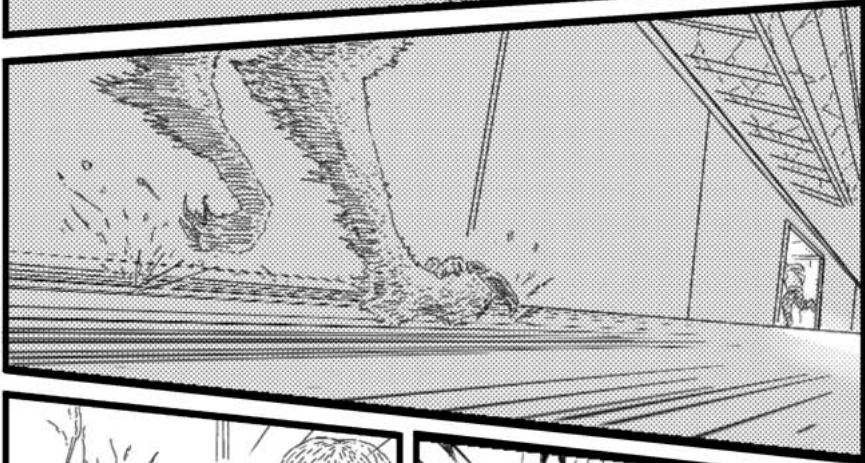
And then, that same damn automated lady-voice comes back on:

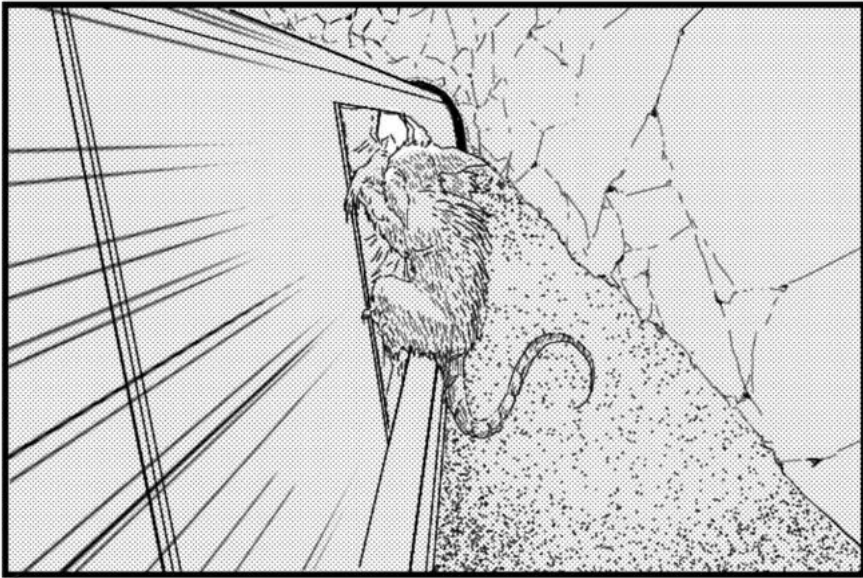
“We are now leaving Station 12. Next stop is Substation 12. Please have a seat and enjoy your time on the Tower Purple micro-express. A serving droid will be passing through the cabins to offer snacks and drinks once we have entered the spiral track.

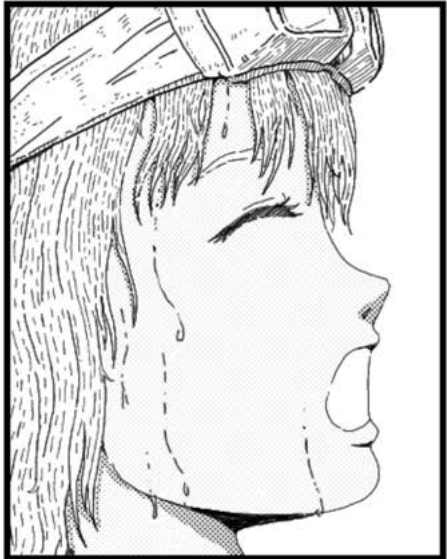
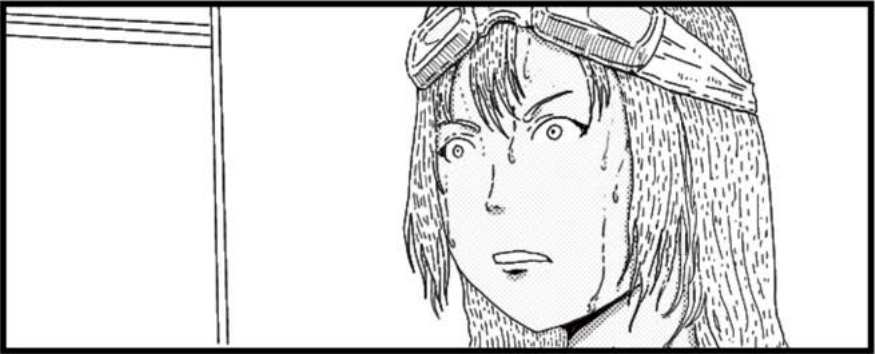
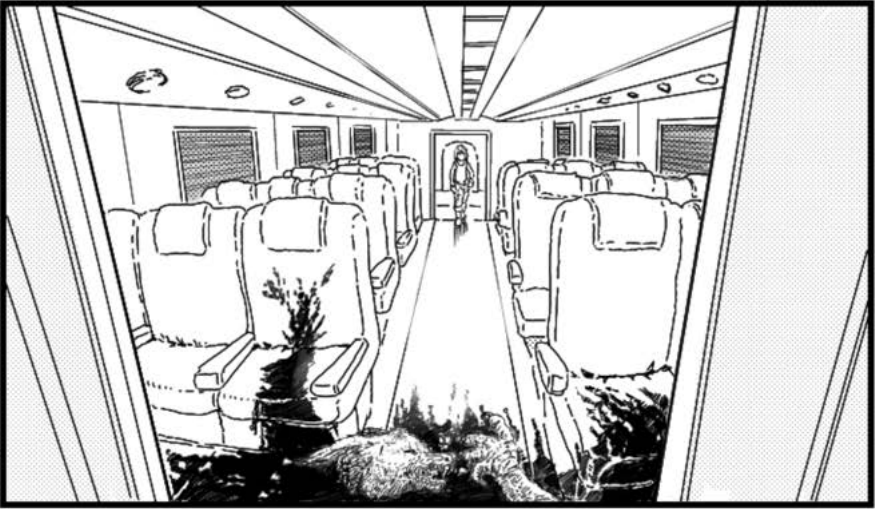
Substation 12's unique biofront requires us to reduce speed upon entry. Approximate travel time is 12 minutes.

Have a great day!”

Mirdova didn't hear any of this, of course. She's staring deeply at the monster at her door, preparing to enter and devour her.







Shiieek!

It calls out to her, one final time, as the tunnel narrows and the creature, half-inside the train, is separated into near-liquid and solid forms, spewing putrid black-red blood across the floor and through the first cabin.

Mirdova, more shocked than relieved, at first, takes one last moment to ensure it doesn't, somehow, regenerate from this event.

Satisfied it will not, she takes a seat, leans back, and catches her breath before figuring out the next step.

CHAPTER 2

WHERE THE EARTH EATS THE SKY

The train descends and on more than one occasion I feel my ears painfully pop. It seems such a strange thing, the very existence of this place. That it has survived relatively intact across countable but unknown centuries.

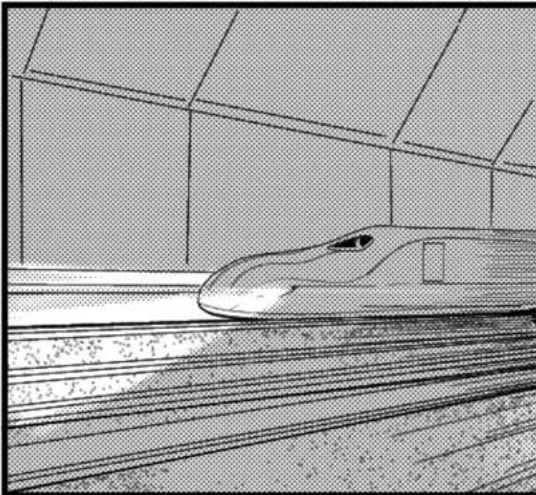
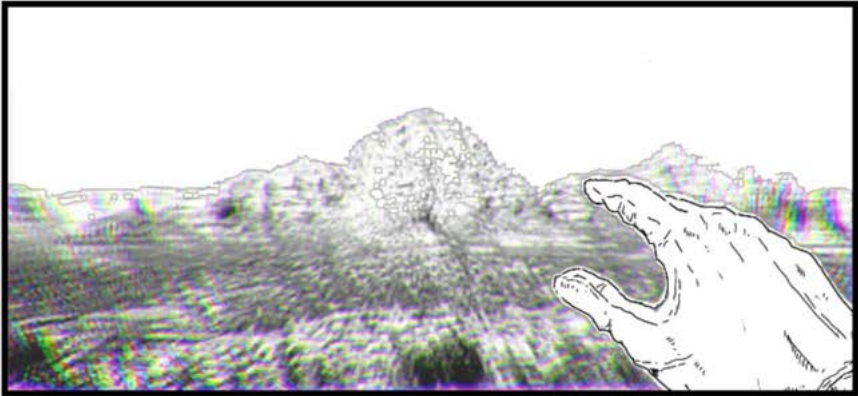
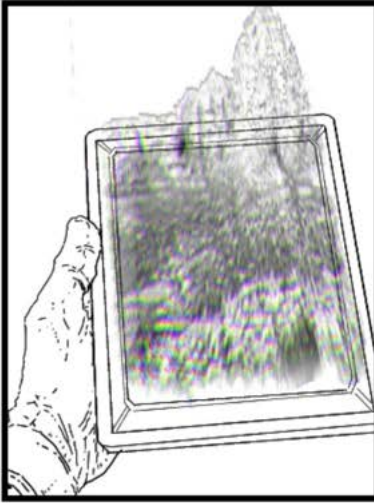
Old Piip has theorized that there are dozens of such locations across the Great Plate alone. Gol and I have been to three of them.

Tower Orange is a vertical city near Sprained Ankle and its nuclear reactor remains stable and maintained by the community calling themselves the Autumn Factory. They're pacifists themselves, but are quite prepared to offer weaponry to anyone willing to pay the extreme prices they demand. My father had considered contacting them when I first unearthed Gol, but went with the local magistrate instead. Back then Gol's memory was still refreshing and he was practically a newborn in terms of his ability to understand -- but all-too-willing to act out the part of brutish enforcer if so-commanded.

That's another story, though.

Back to my predicament: the train continues downward, spiraling, it feels, towards somewhere nested deep inside the earth.

Old Piip could not have predicted all of what has come to pass, so I can't fault him for what's happened. However, to be honest, I'm quite disappointed that the in-train service has failed to present itself. I could really use a drink.



“Dringgg. Driiiingggg.” The satchel screeches and Mirdova reaches in to find her VOL-Tome. The screen flickers to life as the ringing stops, it’s picked up a local directory and is updating the archive details accordingly.

‘The hell is this?’ She mumbles, taking note that the rendering image is showing the hillside near where she entered. ‘Is this where I am?’ She wonders, zooming into the new point-of-interest that has made itself accessible.

Meanwhile, the train picks up speed and the internal speakers cracks back on:

“We are nearing substation 12. Please take note of all your belongings and prepare for decontamination protocol. As a reminder to all new employees of GenCell, Tower Purple’s BioFront has been carefully populated with a variety of specialized and highly-unique specimens. While our policies extend to each employee’s well-being we will prioritize the lifeforms within the BioFront. As such, please take care to remain on the designated paths and report any unusual growths or behaviours to your local wildlife curator. Thank you and have a great day.”

‘BioFront?’ Mirdova shifts the VOL-Tome to open the new local data and pings the query to find anything about her destination.

It begins the dring-sounded exploration of the immense database as she feels the train’s breaks slowing their descent.

‘We must be getting close to... wherever the hell we’re going.’ The smell of the dead creature crawls, unpleasantly, into her mouth, but, well, better a smell than having become its meal, she supposes.

“Search Parameter Complete. BioFront data access granted.” It projects scenery of a glowing fungal-forest, beautiful in a way she had not expected, but equally foreign and disturbing.

“Define BioFront.” She requests.

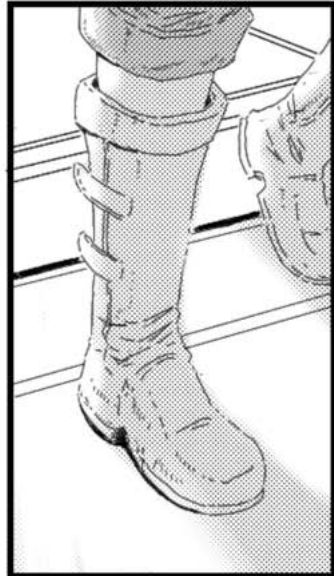
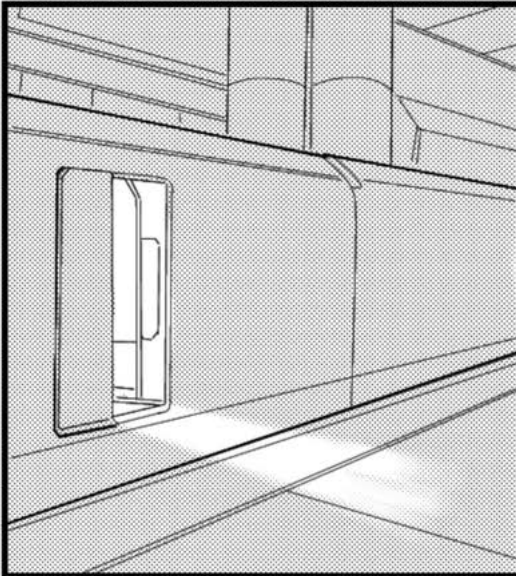
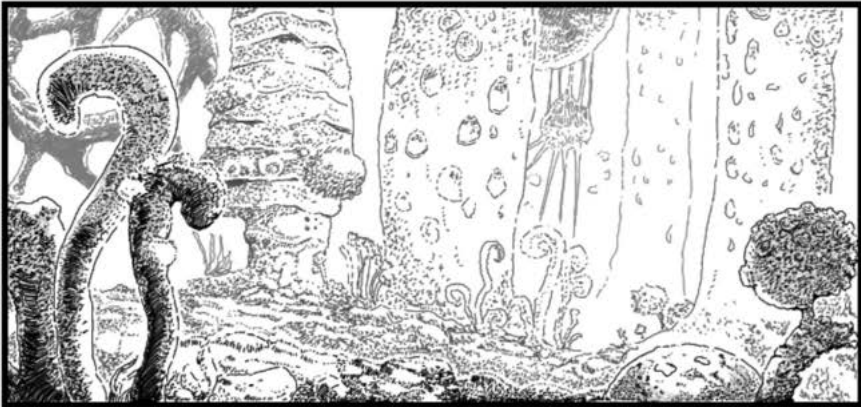
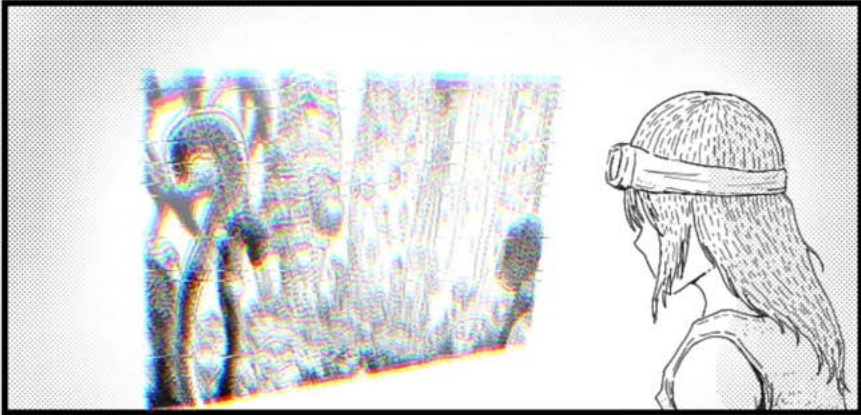
“Established as a sister to Tower Mauve, the BioFront, headed by Director L. Abram-Gauchier, is GenCell’s most advanced genetic-modification and extra-planetary sustainability project. While Tower Mauve has taken a more in situ approach to solving the human element of post-Earth colonization, Tower Purple intends to utilize panspermia techniques to seed prospective colony sites in-advance of human involvement. Scientific Advisor Wholsome Wong has chosen a variety of base-material to test out in the subterranean chamber: the BioFront.

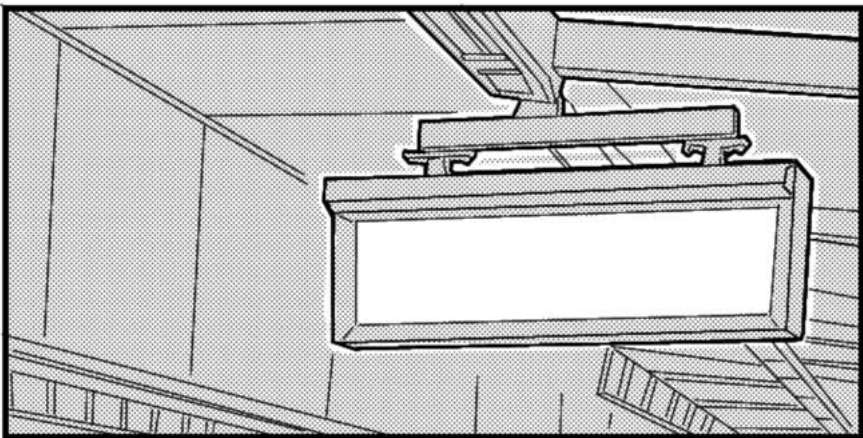
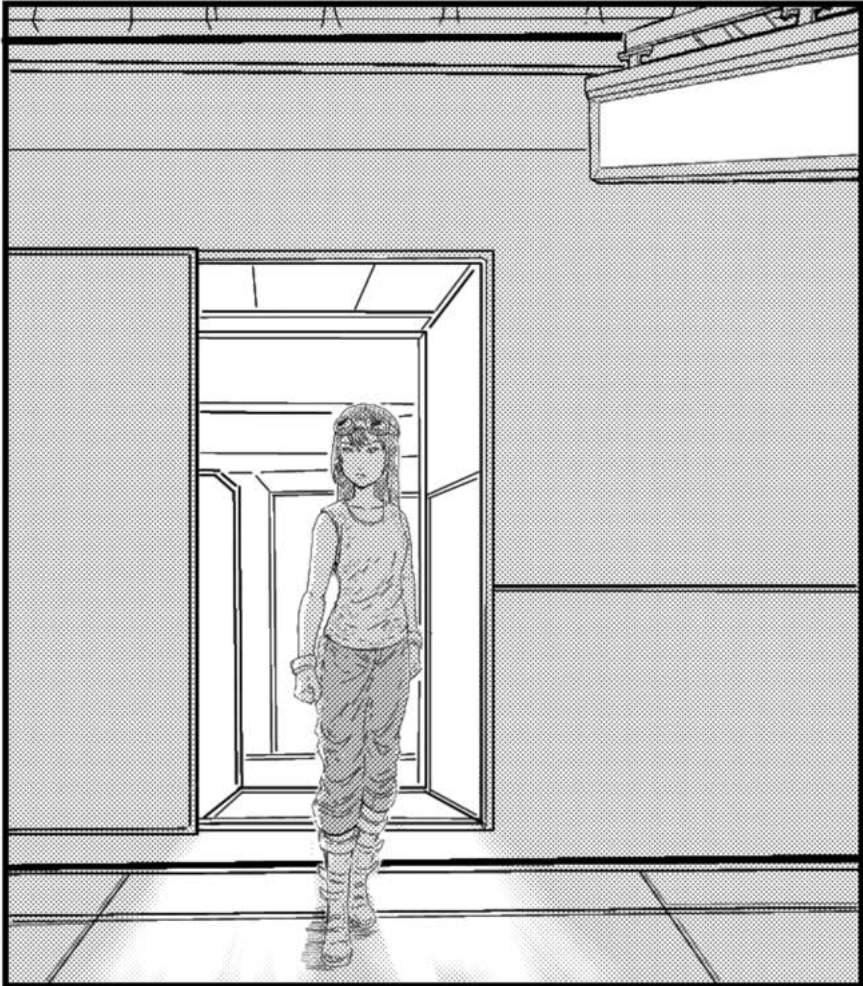
“One of the most expensive initial build costs, Tower Purple’s entrance at 233 Colbert Street in Bramptom City ensures that only high-ranking and preferred personnel are aware of the BioFront’s existence. Moreover, its underground location further ensures that should errors arise the entire complex can be sealed without concern to the public.

“At three-hundred hectares, the chamber is connected to its own geothermal power source, an aquifer, and day-night ceiling tiles. In theory, the chamber has no termination date and is intended to be self-sufficient within the first ten years of operation. As a complement to the various genetic equipment, Tower Purple is equipped with GenCell’s backup archive for all current-generation technologies, including the only Ni-Fi Heart outside of the Primary Towers.

“Would you like more information?”

‘Td like to know more about--’ but she’s cut off as the train comes to a stop.





“Welcome to Substation 12: Biofront Entrance. Please make sure you have all your belongings.”

Mirdova gets up from her spot and wanders to the door, relieved, in many ways, sure, but certainly to get away from the wretched odour of death that, she notes, does seem to follow her in life more than she would like.

Unlike the starting station, this one is clean and undamaged. It looks practically new. The lights come to life as she steps out onto the platform and behind her the door to the train slides closed.

Had it been running all these years, she muses, or is this all a result of that previous group who did not get anywhere near as far as she has managed.

The curiosity is short-lived, however, as she taps on the VOL-Tome to connect with Gol’s internal communication channel. A momentary concern that she may be too deep for the connection to work is relieved by his grumbly, tired voice.

“You’ve made it to the BioFront?” He asks.

“Yes? How did you--”

“The VOL-Tome is uploading the new database, I’ve been keeping close track of you and any interesting elements it may reveal. The BioFront is quite the engineering feat, eh?”

“Not quite there yet. So, is it safe to say that the thing Piip wanted me to get is that Ni-Fi Heart referenced in the intro?”

“Yes.”

“What the hell is Ni-Fi anyway?”

“From before the lost years, Mir, GenCell and various other organizations aimed to create novel energy sources. Ni-Fi was one of the results. In fact, let me correct myself. They didn’t create it at all; they discovered it and exploited it. The efficacy of it led to the Great Leap Forward.

“Then, well, not a lot of people are sure what happened. Most of the orbital network went offline one day. People had become so accustomed to using Ni-Fi for their energy and economic needs that without it, well, some say that the event resulted in the Shatter. Again, all of these are speculations.”

Mirdova, walking towards a new series of doors thought about this with deep concern.

“Could this be what we’ve been looking for too, Gol? Is this what ended the world?”

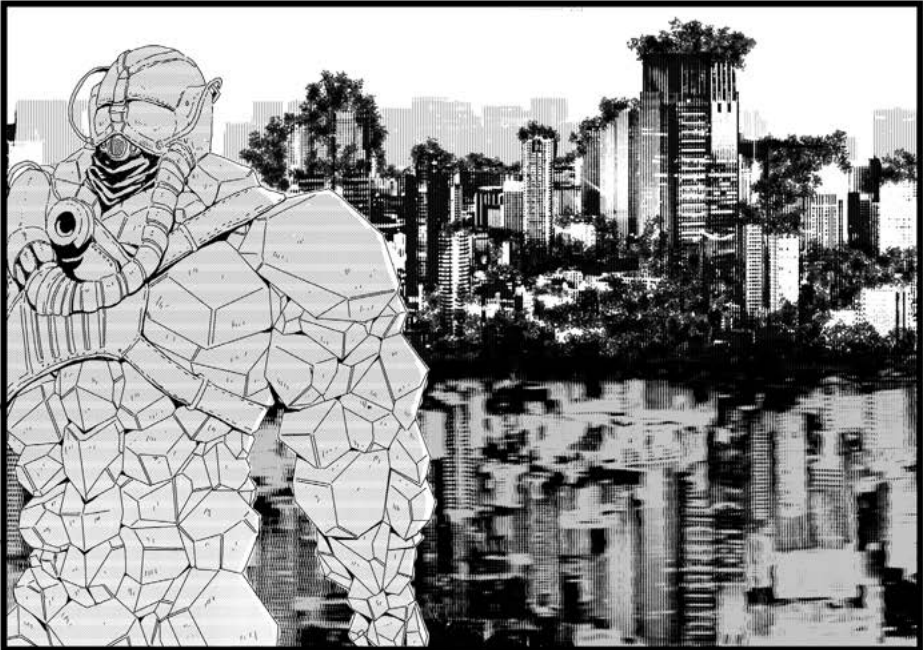
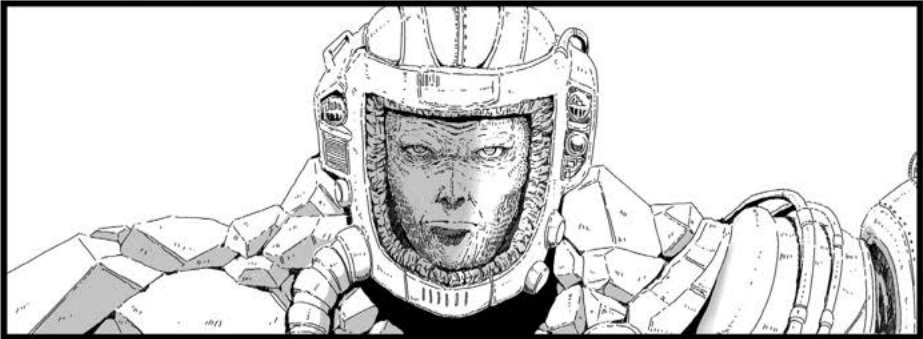
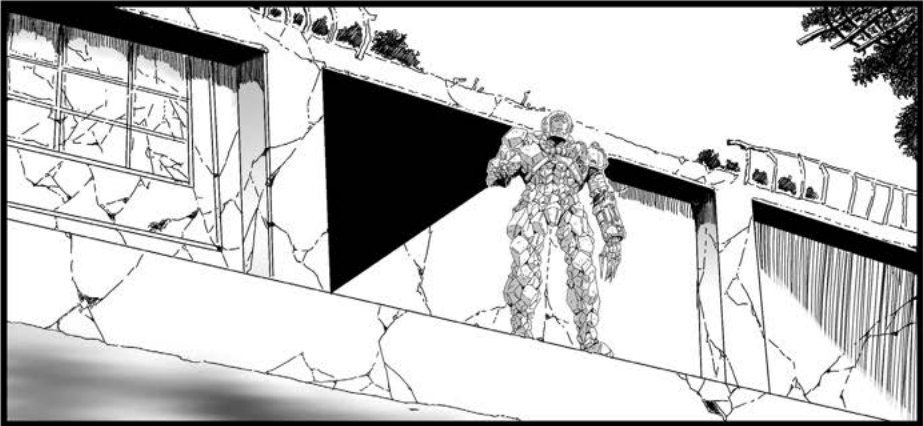
“Perhaps. But it is hard to be certain if it alone can be considered. Likely, it was one of many catalysts. We can say with some certainty that the data we’ve received from the VOL-Tome connecting to Tower Purple’s network will serve us incredibly well in our search.”

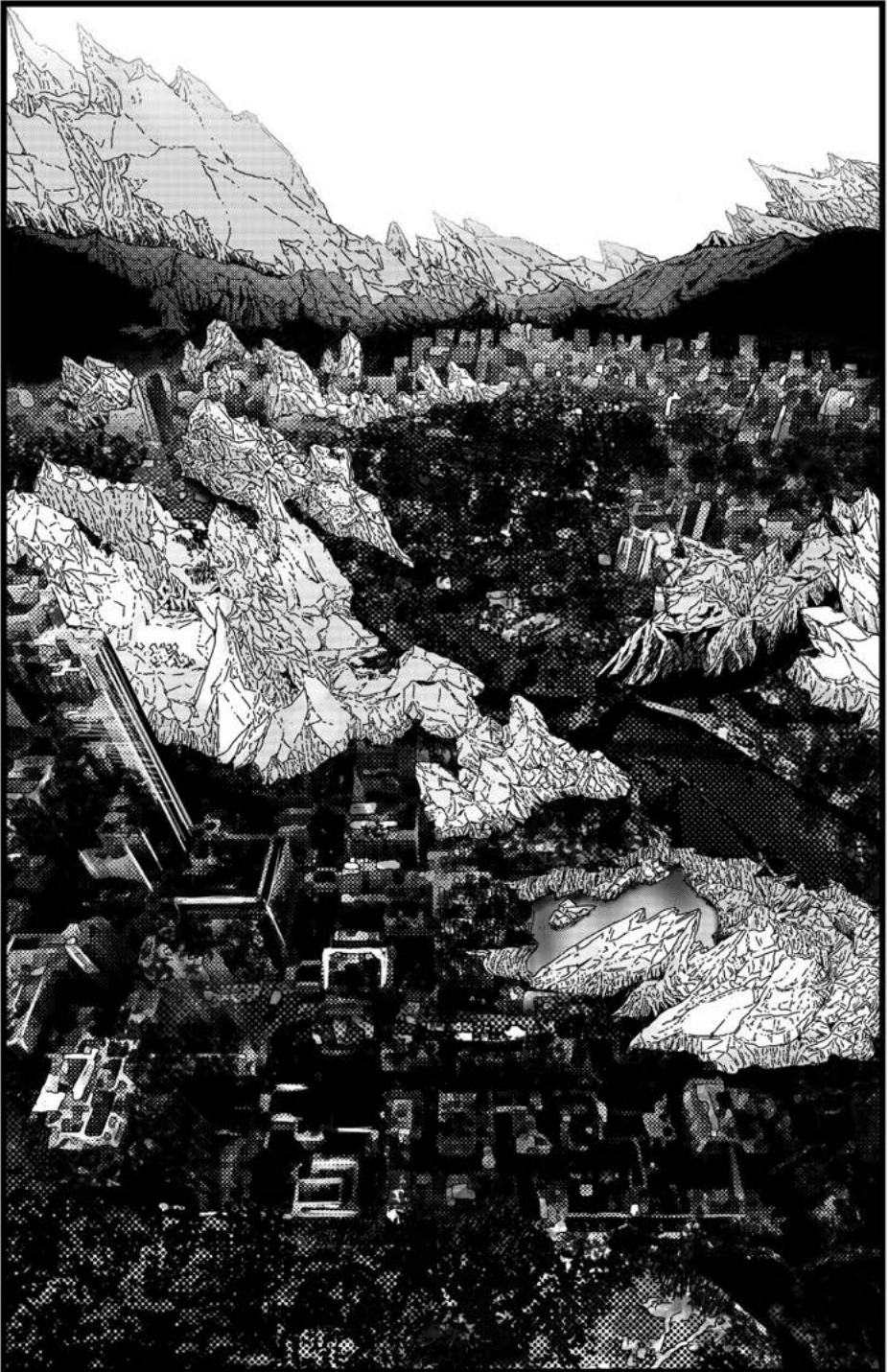
“And the currency we’ll get from Piip for bringing back the Ni-Fi Heart will be more than enough to get the Grand Dame flying again.” She added.

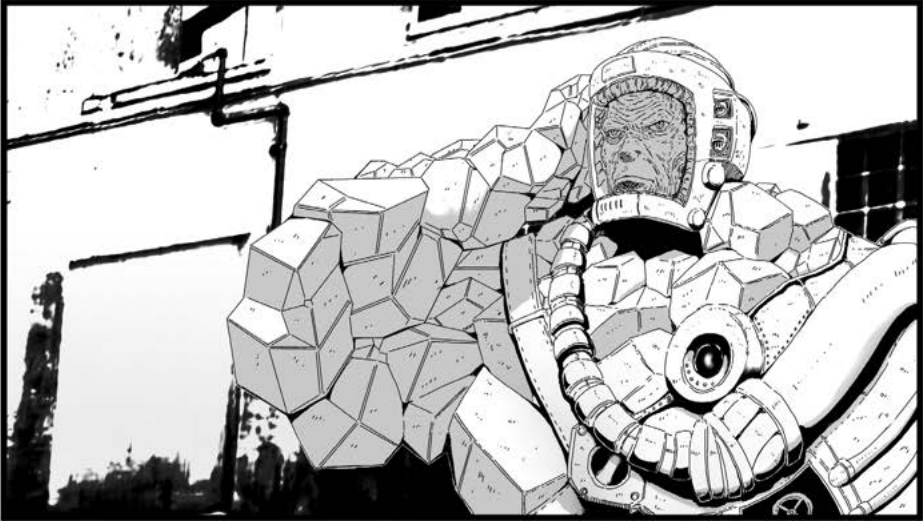
“It will be nice not to be forced to walk everywhere.”

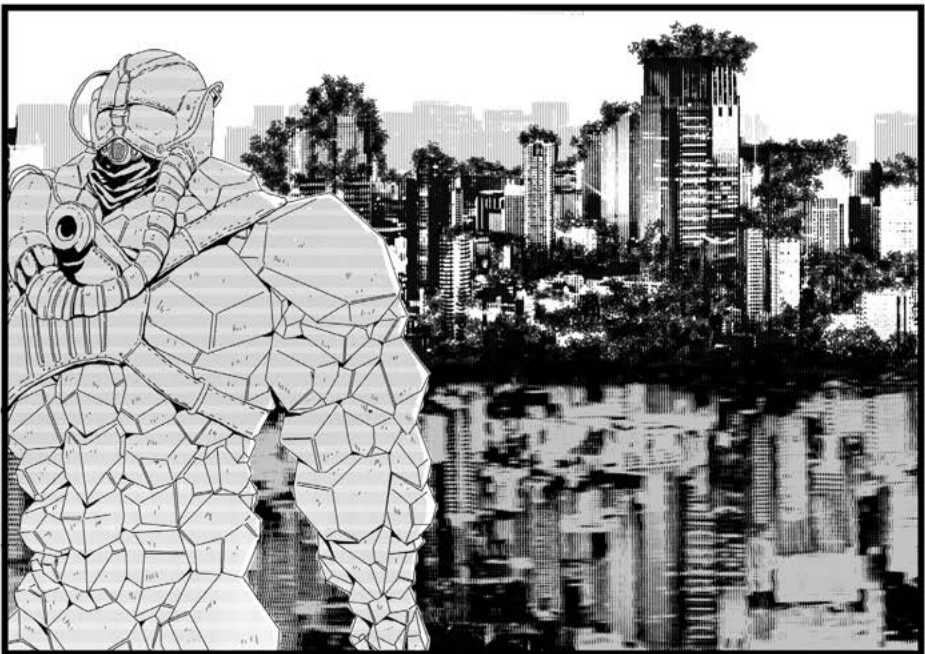
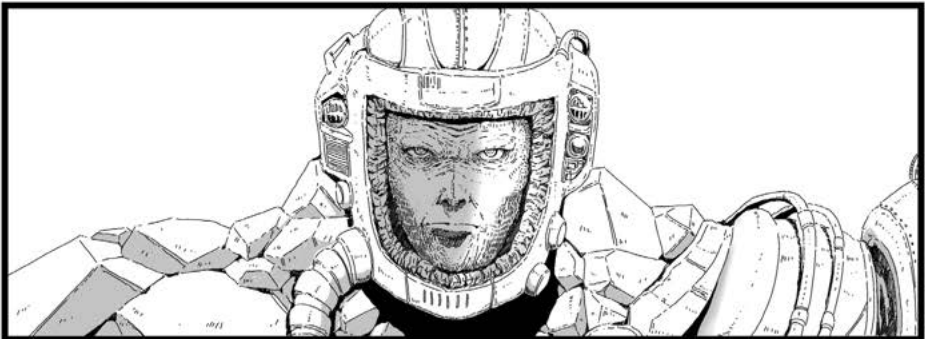
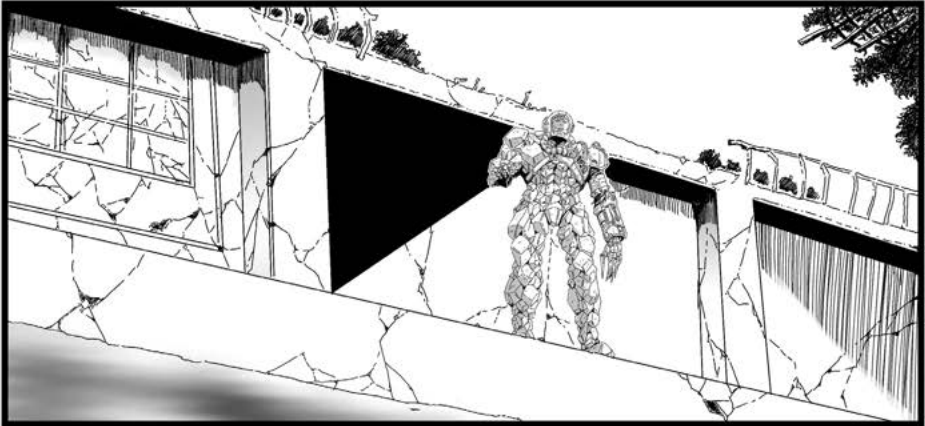
“For someone who can’t feel their feel, you sure do like to complain about walking.”

“We all have our hobbies.” He laughed his cold, mechanical laugh. “Be careful in there. The BioFront has been effectively sealed for... for...” unable to find a specific answer: “a long time.”









“Hmm.” Gol reviews the local area map and sends out a radar-pulse. “Mir, I’ve got to go. Our pursuer is nearby. I recommend we go silent unless absolutely necessary. Moreover, I’ve sent you the directions from the substation to Tower Purple’s archive. It may be a bit dated.”

“Take care.”

“You too.”

“I’m hungry.” Mirdova ends the call with her usual useless commentary.

“At least you can eat.” He tries to sneak in, but is met with the lost-connection sound instead. “She’s going to get me killed one of these days.”

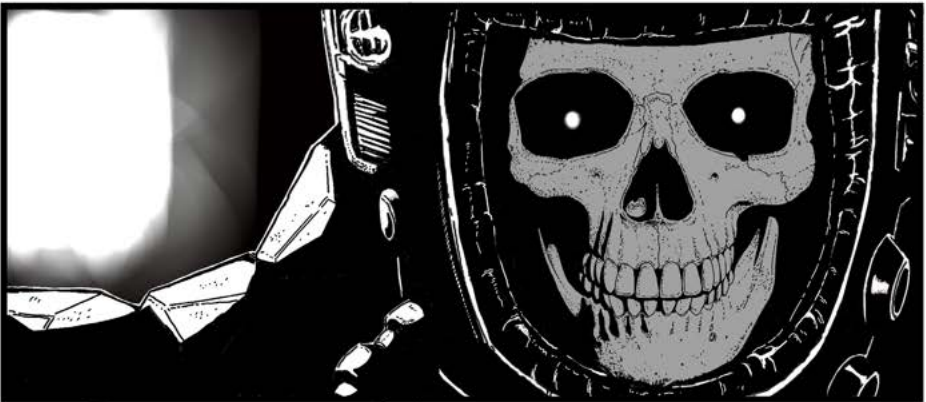
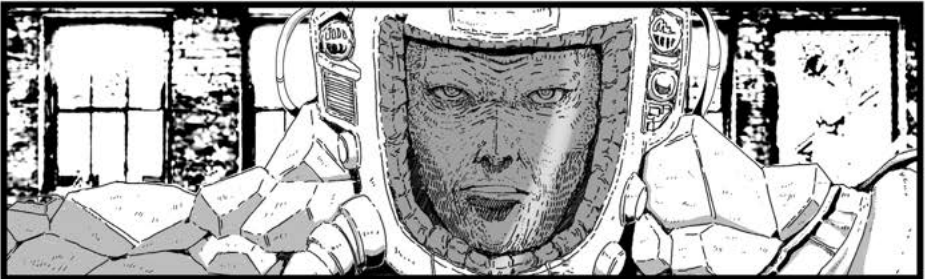
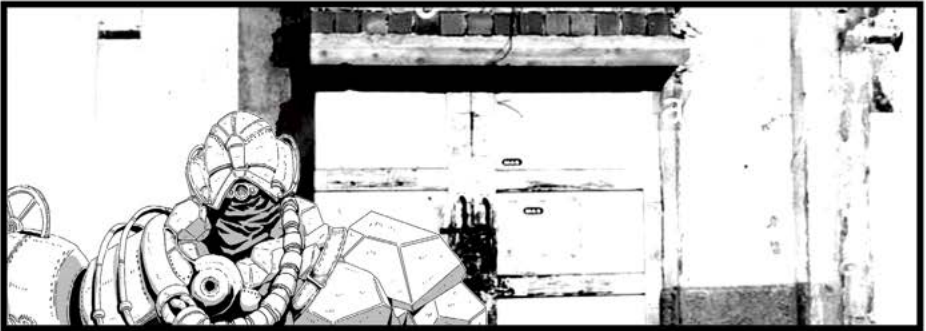
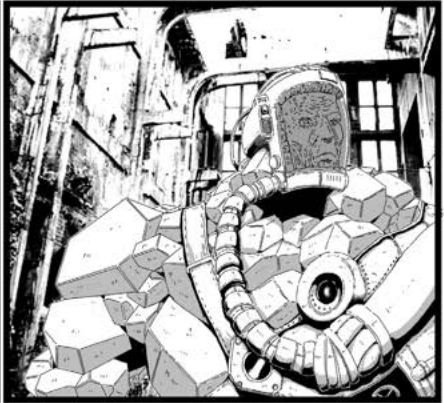
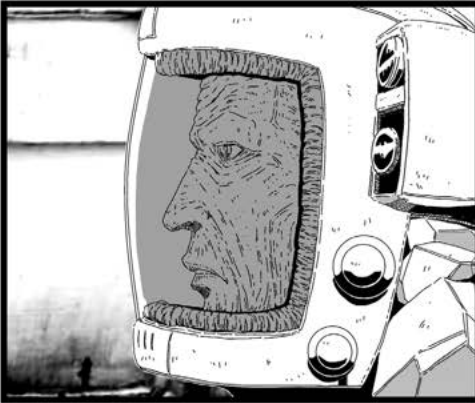
Sending out another radar-pulse, Gol notes the new location of whatever is following them and calculates where it will be and when. There’s not much time before their inevitable encounter.

With the data-stream closed between himself and the VOL-Tome the information he had access to is beginning to leave him, like a shadow at noon.

He imprints as much of it as he can, overwriting corrupted memories he can no longer access. Erasing any chance that he may regain them in the future in favour of information that is more pressing to his present.

The creature nears. He steps into a dark corridor and enters a low-power state, his holographic face vanishing and revealing what remains beneath.





TO BE CONTINUED



B C Woodruff is a proud Montréaler who now lives in Vancouver, Canada, with his wife, son, and their cat-daughter, Bethany-Chan. He enjoys writing, designing, and creating, and is always up for an adventure. When he is not filling the world with his imagination, Brian likes to travel and immerse himself in world cultures, history, and speculations of the future.

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www.infinityWonders.com and www.bcwoodruff.com