

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

THE RETRO-FUTURE WAR: ONE



BC WOODRUFF

Shoulders of Giants: TRFW 1

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A Graphic Novel

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

THE RETRO-FUTURE: WAR ONE

B C W O O D R U F F

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



CHAPTER 1

THEY SAY WE BROKE THE WORLD

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

Where we weren't going somewhere.

Seeking... something.

And it's something to say that! Given all the years before our chance encounter where I was isolated and reclusive. But I still forced myself to remain connected to a community consumed and ultimately destroyed by its own selfish desires and false pretenses.

Perhaps you, too, have experienced something like this.

I have made an active choice to never go to that scrapland-hell. The only thing keeping me there was a powerful sense of duty to my father.

But he is, thankfully, dead.

If you knew him, you would understand my hate.

Gol and I, though, we have an understanding, and a fierce loyalty to one another. We aspire to inspire, and our many journeys have taken us back and forth across the Great Plate.

We have no real destination in mind. No final one, at least.

However, 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), we will doubly-discover how the world, as it is

now, came to be.

And wherever we go we find that it is truly a horrible world, you can trust me on that. Littered, of course, with moments of beauty and people of great quality and character.

Ahem.

So, as much as we can, we use Gol's datacore archive, the little we can access, and his fractured, ancient memories to determine where to go next.

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

A week 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 relicsite two days to the west.

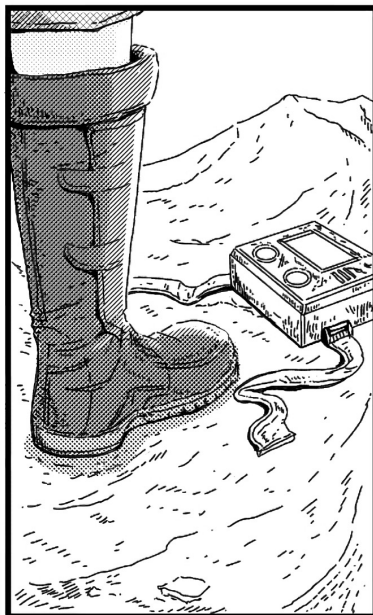
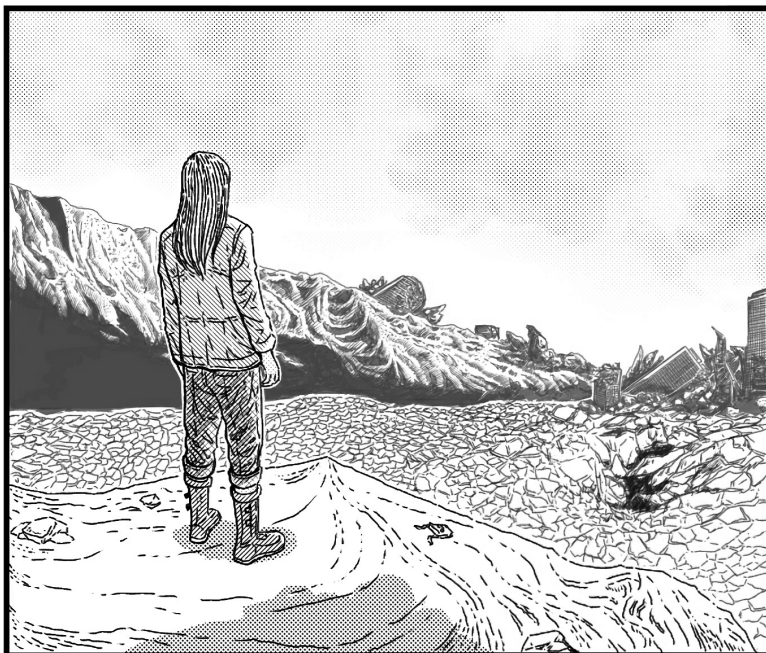
Gol and Old Piip seem certain it's a remnant GenCell Tower, a theory all-but confirmed by the emergence of a new radio signal emanating from the area. Likely set off by the explorers.

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.

- Mirdova Journeural Recording 11.2A1.15:00:00

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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 towards 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! Go! 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.

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Gol has no true voice, for he has no mouth to speak from. Rather, the voice comes from thought-waves produced within his 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 on a junkpile.”

He can tell she’s frowning at him. “Do you prefer ‘junkheap’?”

“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.

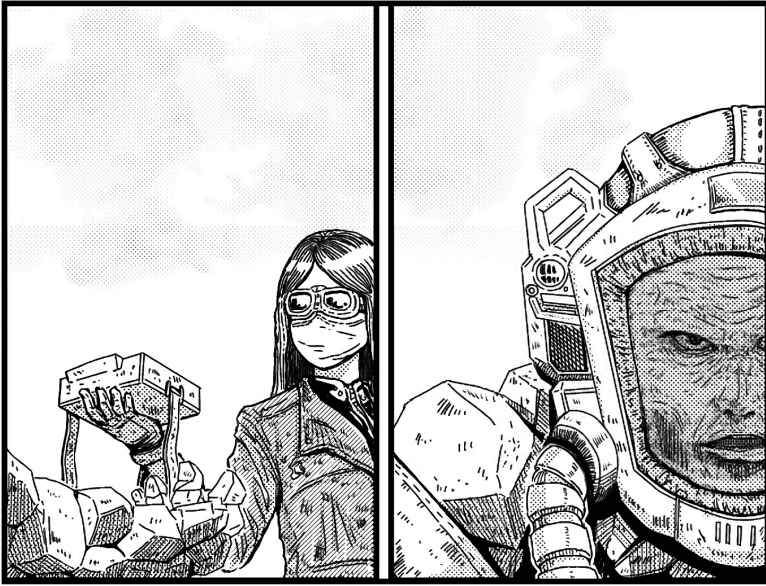
The sound increases.

And increases. And...

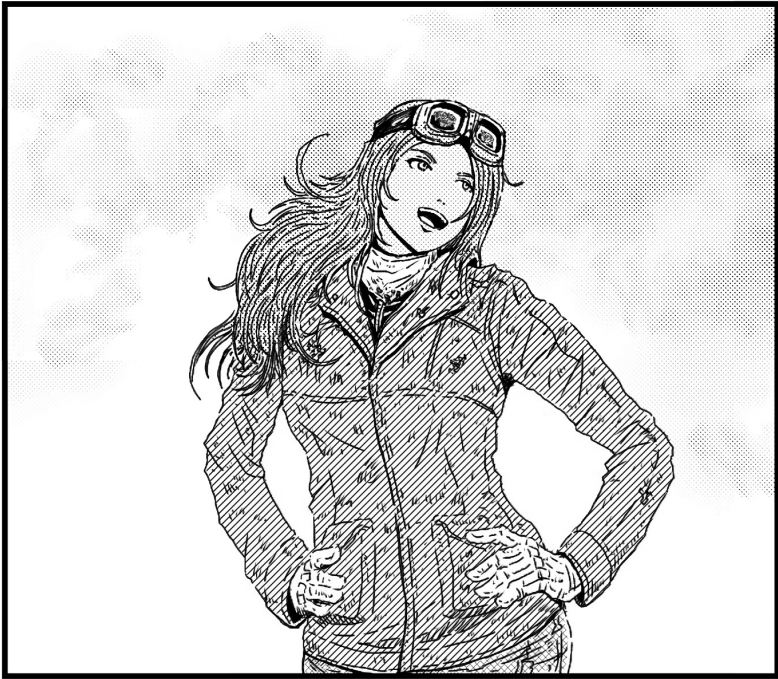
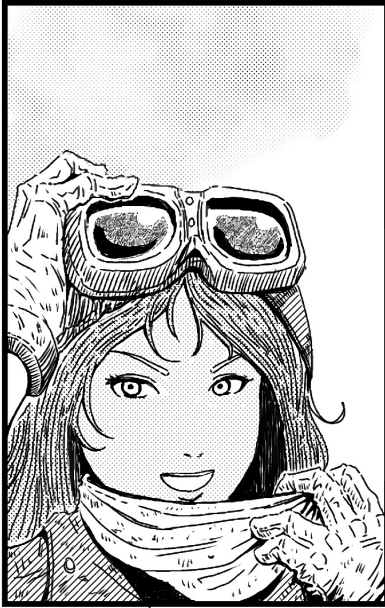
“Strange, that should have worked.” Gol brings it closer to his face.

Closer.

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



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

“Hope you’re built 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, but whether this is due in part to his long slumber within the scraplands 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 kilometre 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.”

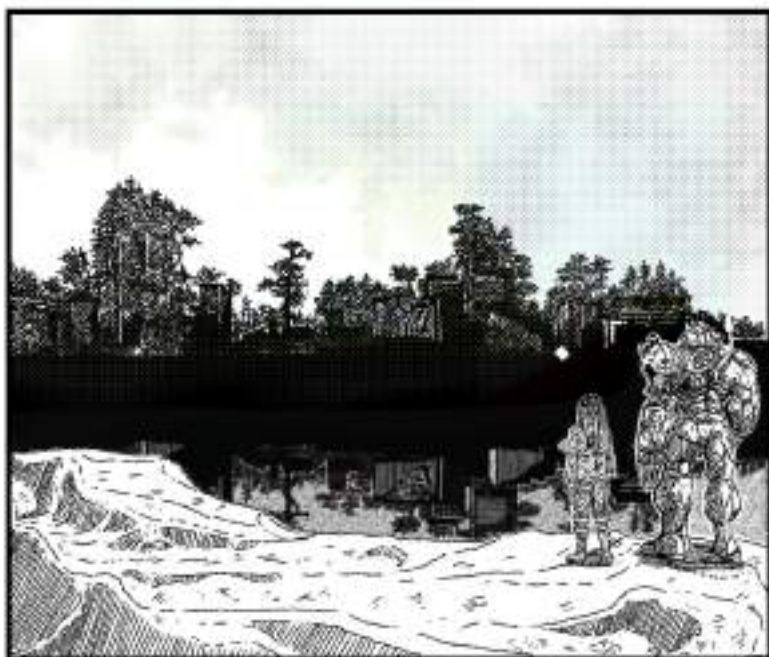
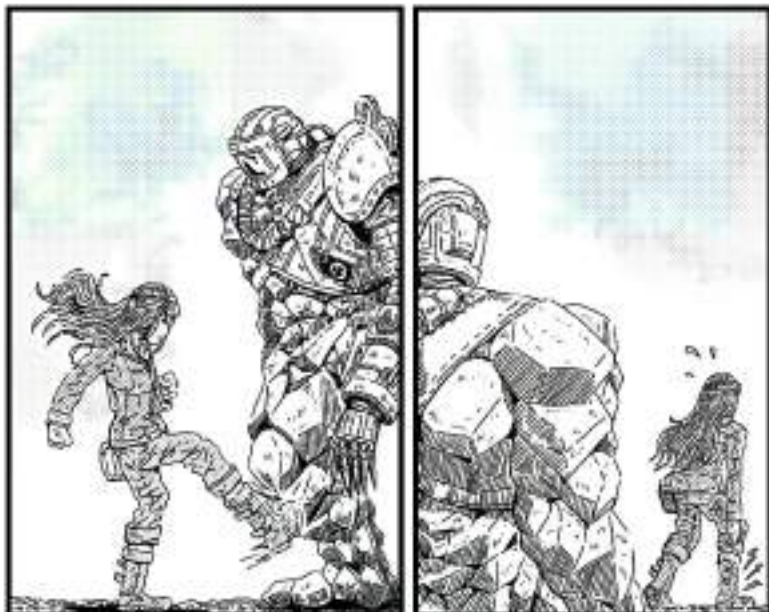
“Alright, you jerk. Let’s get going before whatever you’ve spotted catches up with us.”

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 to their pursuer.

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Reminding himself of the last time they were caught off-guard. The Grand Damn paid a dear price for that. He would not let that happen again.

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

The landscape quickly transforms into a steep incline through narrow rock paths, obscuring their view until:

“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. “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, familiar only in shape but not purpose.

In some ways, it is reminiscent of the scraplands, though here there is 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.

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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 insight into the tales of those who rode them before the Shatter, and during the 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.

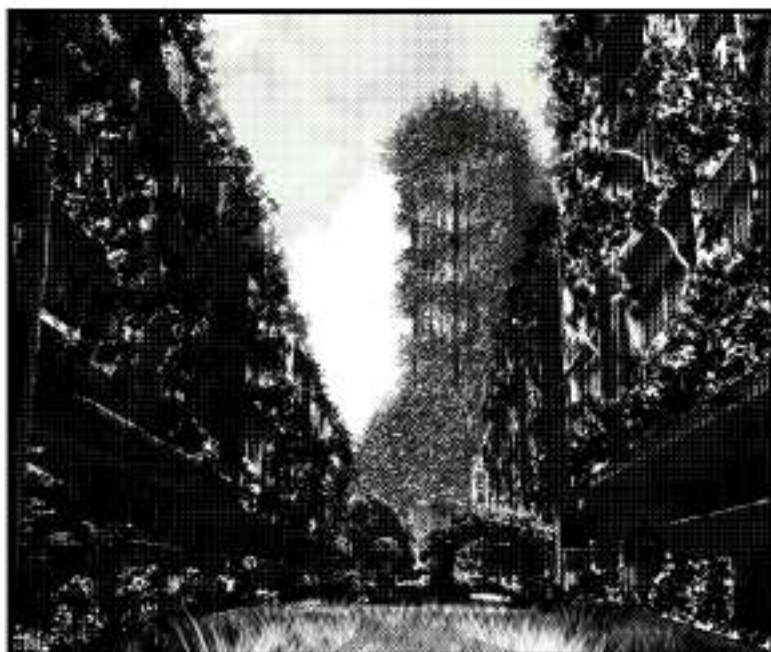
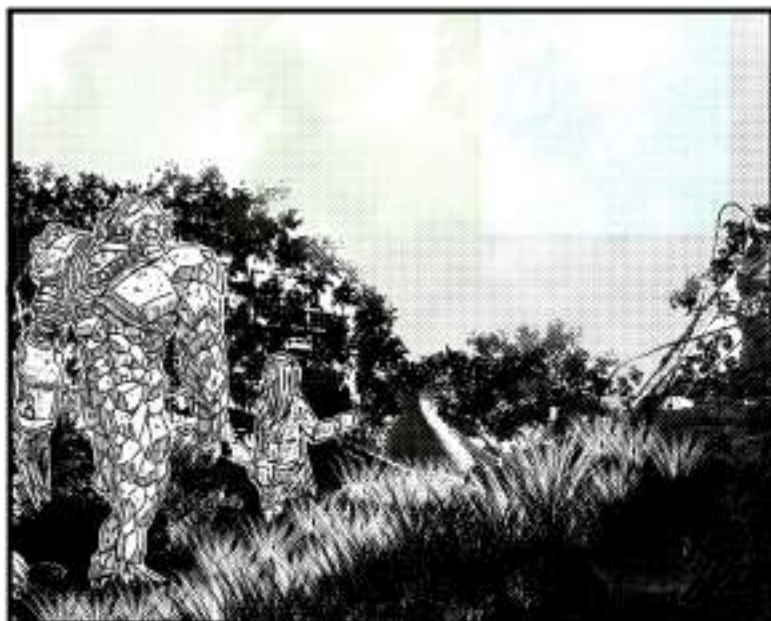
For Mirdova and Gol, however, this is just another stop on a journey towards truth. But, well, making a few contribute notes while you're seeking it isn't a bad position to be in, either.

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

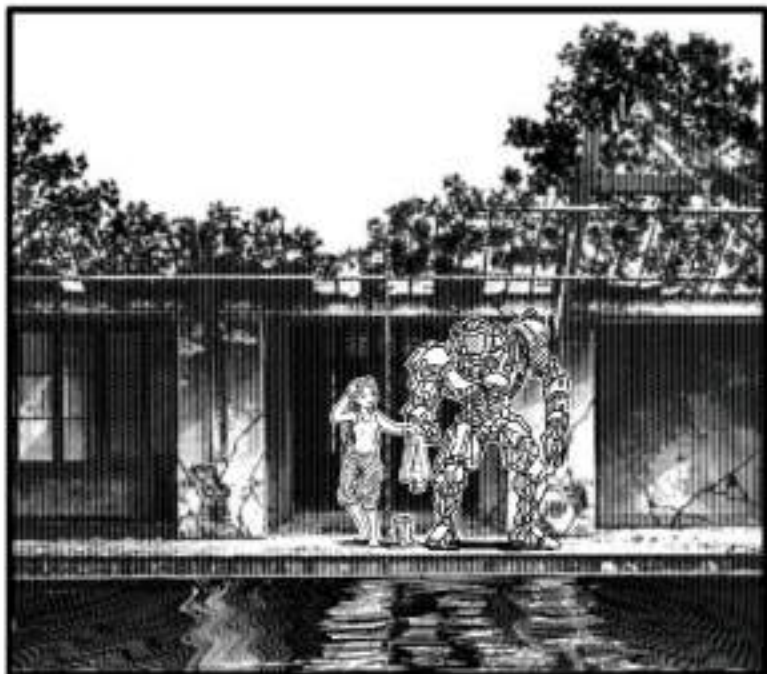
"So, you're saying.."

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.



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“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 metres in height, to those poor souls who find themselves at odds 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 distant 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 intact. This is far less true for those who were in here during whatever catastrophes 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.

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Mirdova catches a whip-like 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 down here, 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.

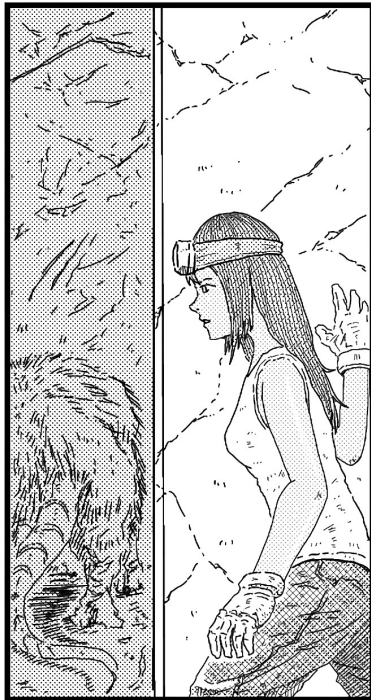
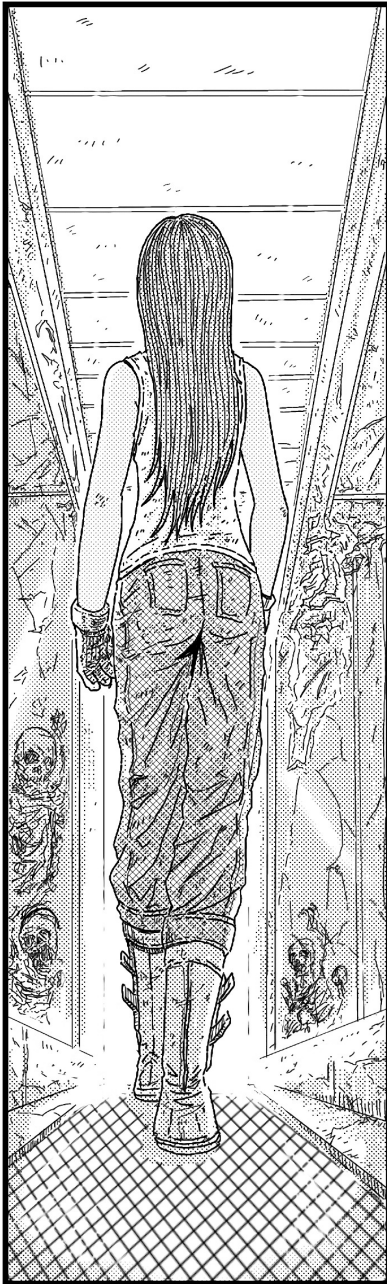
Shiieek!

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

Time to get a fucking move on!

She darts backwards, considers her next move, 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-instinct and away she goes!



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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 not-at-all impressed by the bullets bouncing off its thick hide. But it does take a moment to consider what's going on -- and it's at 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.

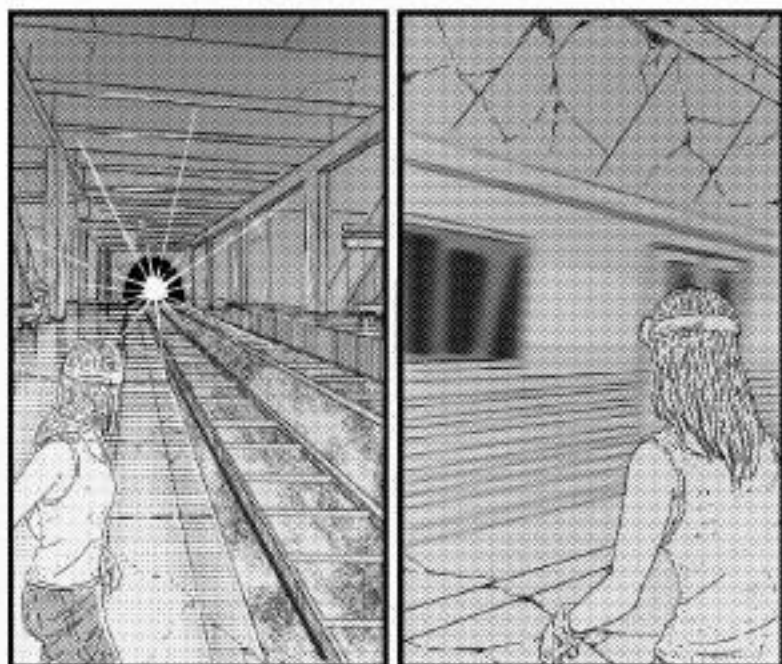
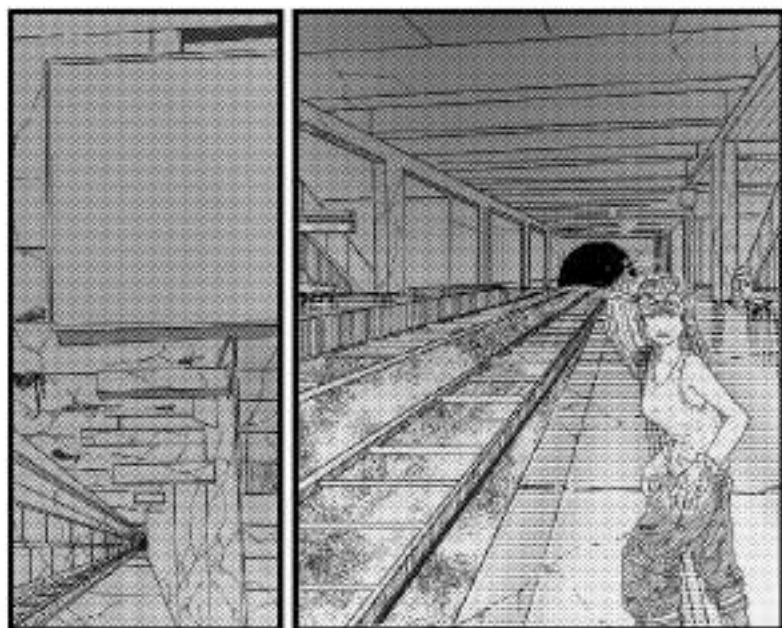
As the train arrives and its sliding doors open, she sees no other opportunity. That said, wasn't this where she was meant to go anyway? Seems awfully convenient, doesn't it?

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

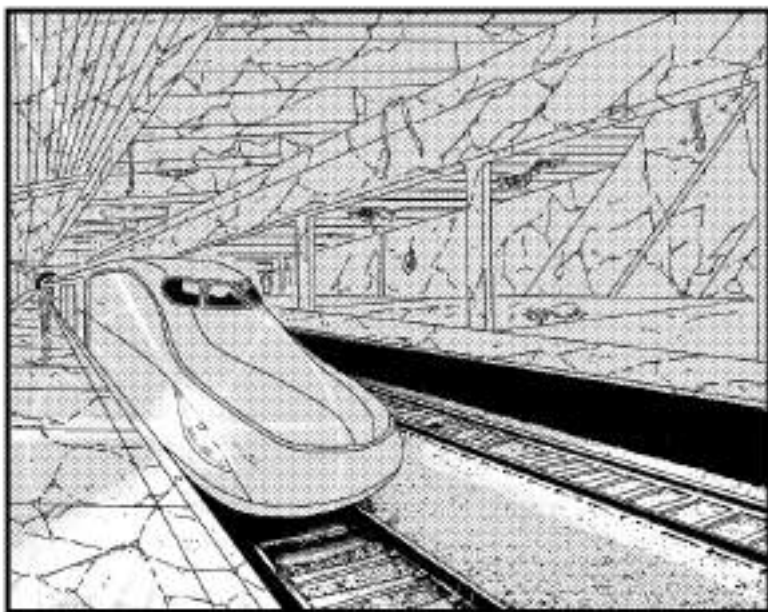
And enters.

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

The claws grip at the metal.



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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.

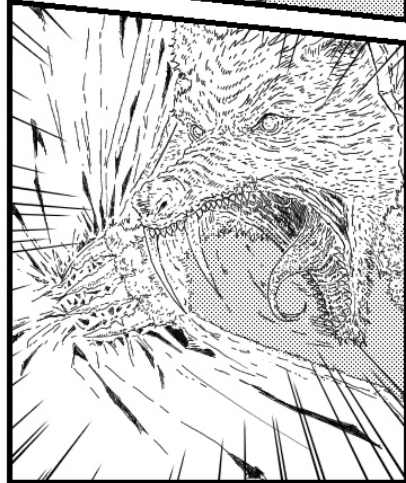
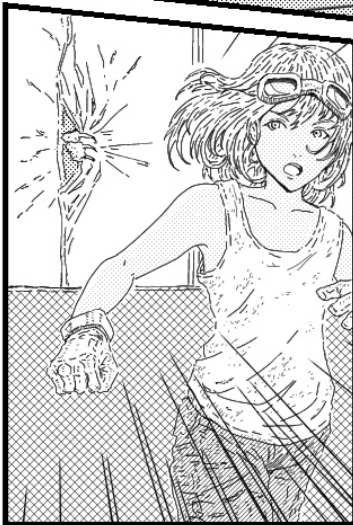
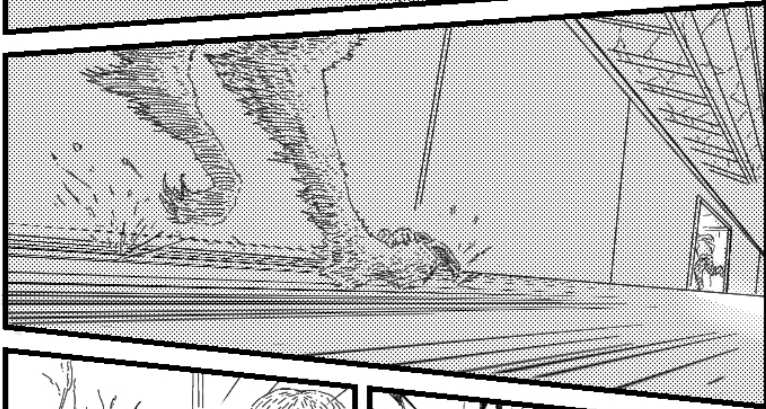
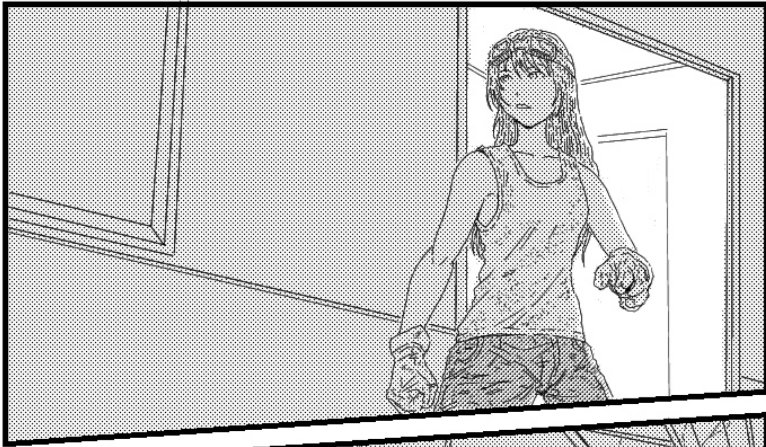
Shiieek!

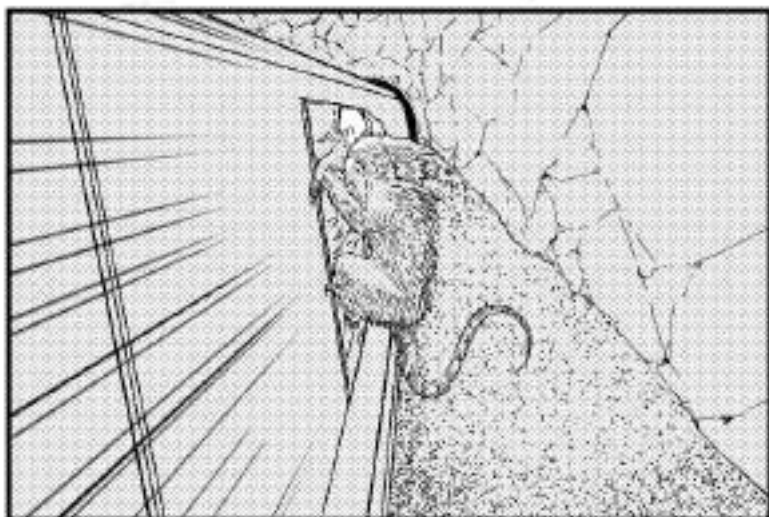
It calls out to her, one final time, as the tunnel narrows and the creature, half-inside the train, is separated into near-liquid and solid forms, spewing putrid black-red blood across the floor and through the first cabin.

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

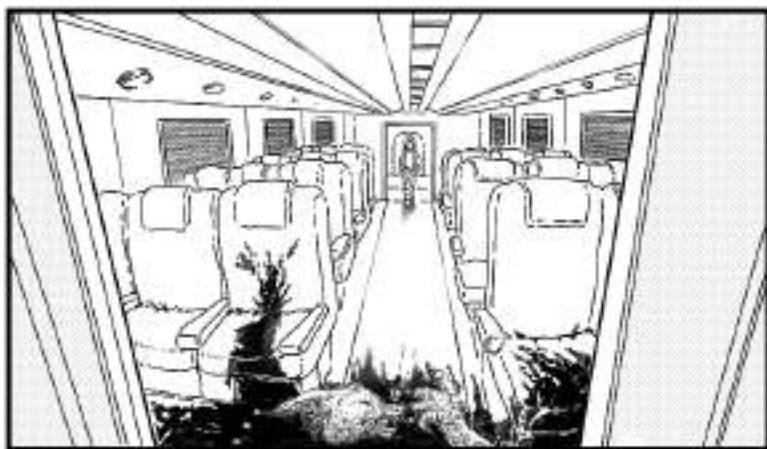
Satisfied it will not, she takes a seat, leans back, and catches her breath before figuring out the next step.

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CHAPTER 2

WHERE THE EARTH EATS THE SKY

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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.

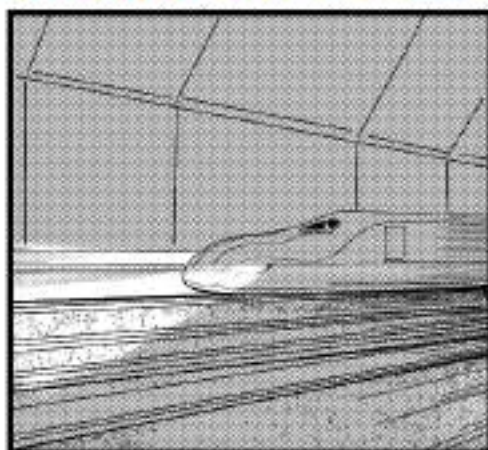
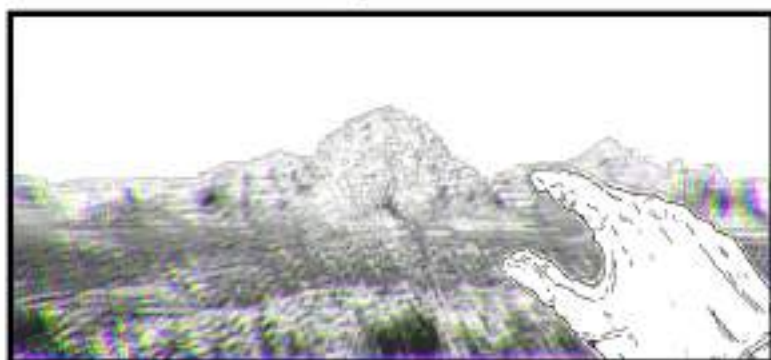
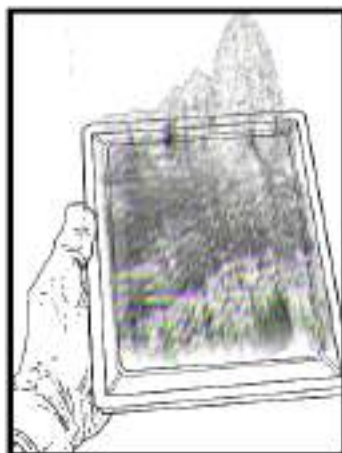
Tower Orange is a vertical city near Sprained Ankle. Its nuclear reactor remains stable and is maintained by the community calling themselves the Autumn Factory. They're pacifists themselves, but are quite prepared to offer weaponry to anyone willing to pay the extreme prices they demand. My father had 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. Driiiiingggg.” The satchel screeches and Mirdova, startled from her reverie, 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.



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“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 crack 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 life forms 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.

“Dringgg.” It begins the exploration of the immense database as she feels the train’s brakes 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 Brampton 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.

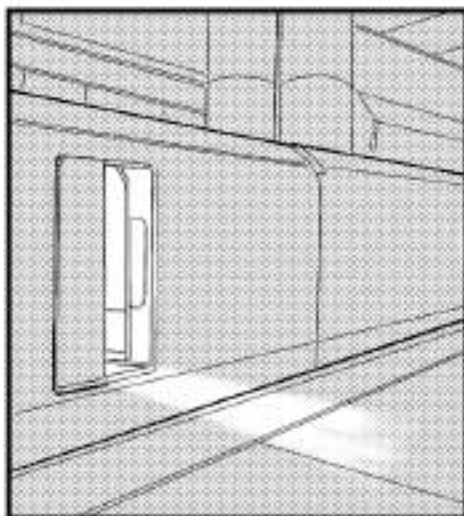
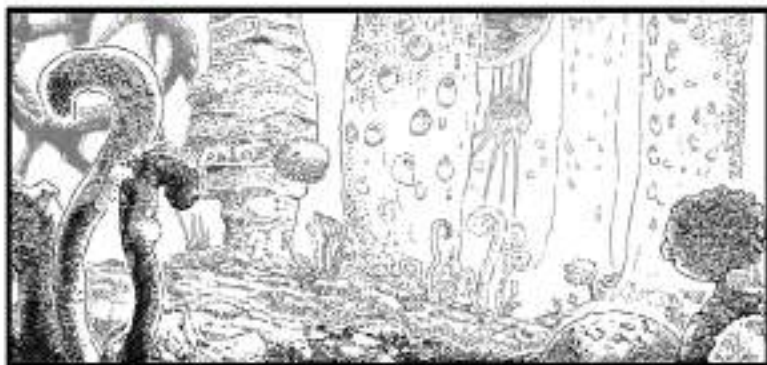
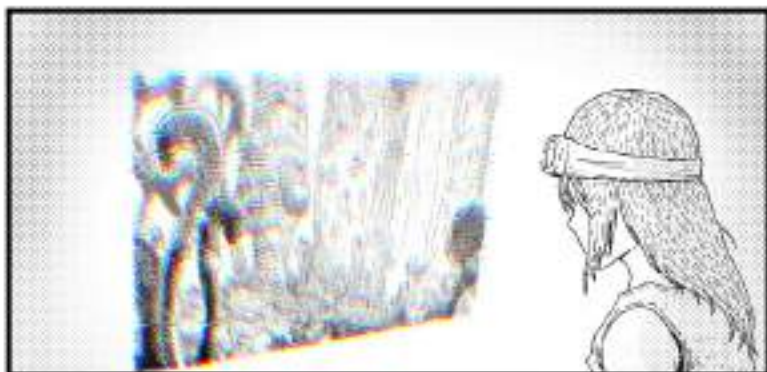
“At three-hundred hectares, the chamber is connected to its own hydrothermal dam power source, an aquifer, and day-night ceiling tiles. In theory, the chamber has no termination date and is intended to be self-sufficient within the first ten years of operation. As a complement to the various genetic 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.

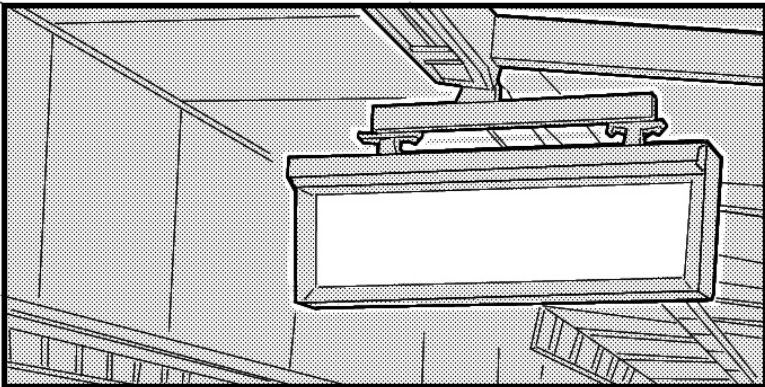
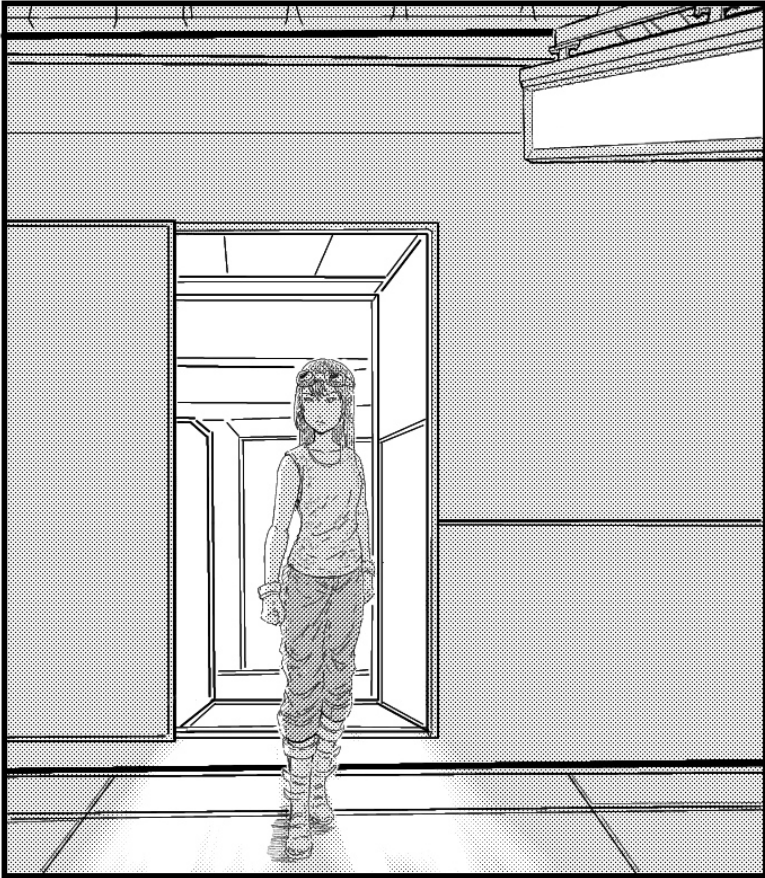
“Would you like more information?”

“I’d 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.”

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Mirdova gets up from her spot and wanders to the door, relieved in many ways, 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.”

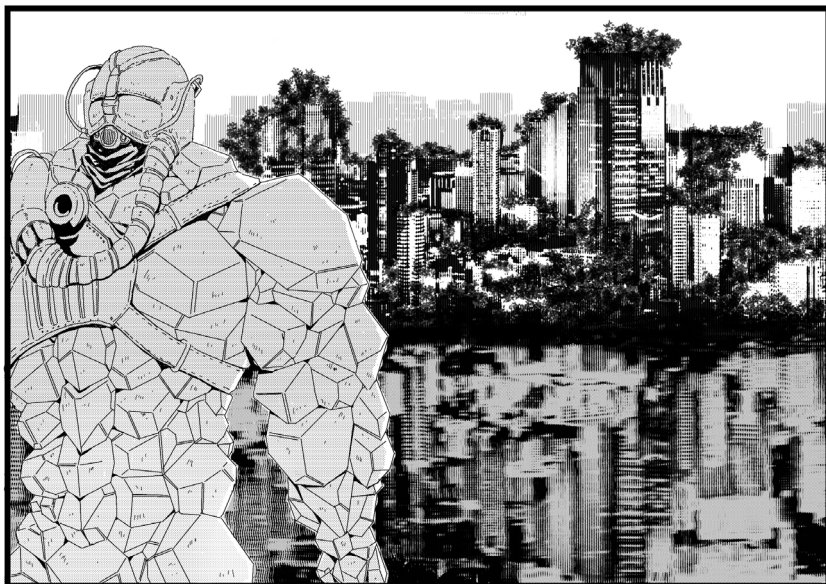
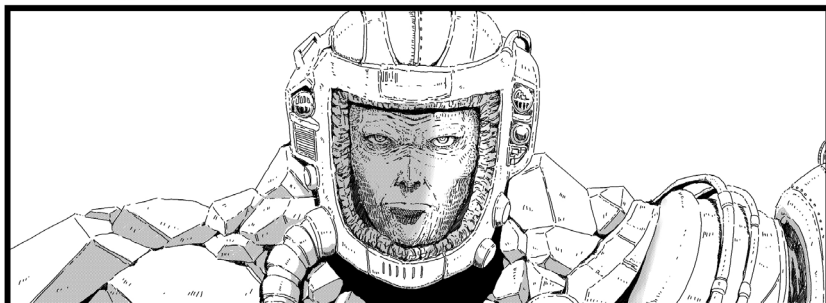
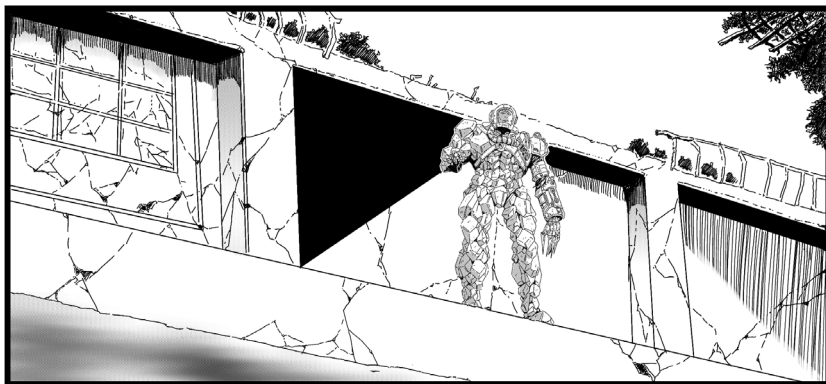
“And the currency we’ll get from Piip for bringing back the Ni-Fi Heart will be more than enough to get the Grand Dame flying again.” She added.

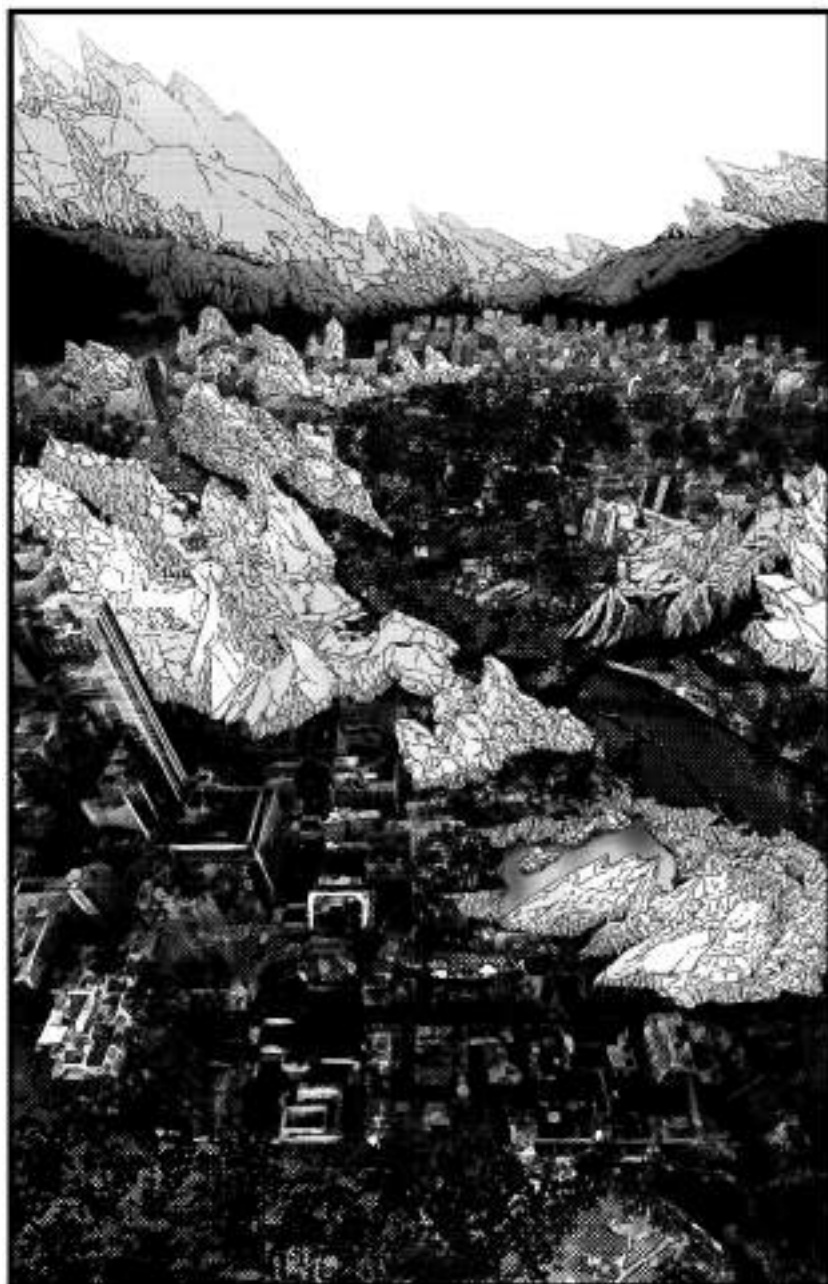
“It will be nice not to be forced to walk everywhere.”

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

“We all have our hobbies.” He laughs 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.”

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS





SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



“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.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS





CHAPTER 3

THE NI-FI HEART

We have so much to learn from our history.

Too much, really.

I've been quite fortunate, though, to be able to desert my past and pave a way forward without the weight of certainty that I am where I am meant to be. I don't ever have that issue. I feel, rather, that I am never where I should be.

And...

Stepping out from the Substation into the BioFront is one experience where I am caught up in the awe of the moment.

Truly, it is a sight: if you took a jungle and applied a fungal brush, well, you'd come within some close proximity to what I see here, except... does that really qualify it?

Grand mycelial patches on the ground give it a distinct "floating effect" while high above, the day-night tiles provide subtle rays of artificial and unnecessary brilliance. Giant mushroom caps make me feel... small. Insignificant. As if I have been reduced to a fraction of my size.

A pathway, mostly concealed by the sprawl, shows me a way forward and even here I can make out the contour of a structure, far into the distance.

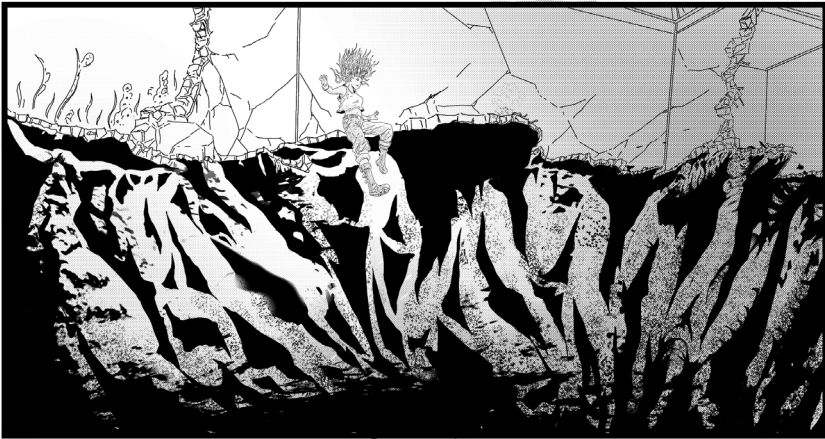
What marvels we find ourselves immersed within, eh?

Yuck.

Some of these creations are pretty unpleasant to look at. Gooley and, well, wobbly. Moving, if not actually vibrating by some unknown internal mechanism.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS





SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

This is from someone who has literally seen the inside of a Swangaglea. Trust me, you don't want to know, besides the fact it felt somewhat more sensible than this... weirdness. And it fucking ate me first.

SNAP.

Huh?

SNAP--SNAP!

Hmm, well, this is different.

These fungal buds have, well, teeth? Sort of looks a bit like stalks with Venusian bullfly traps. Or whatever they were called.

SNAP!

Oh, wow. Okay, bud. Let's... not? Alright?

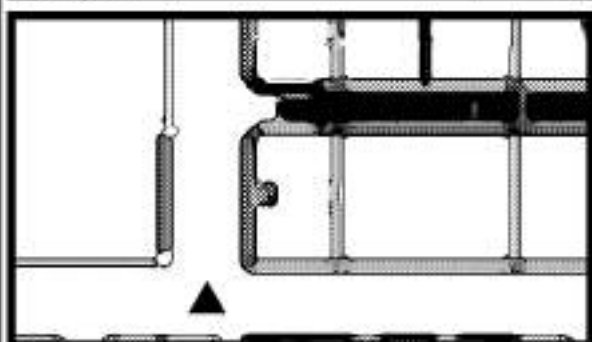
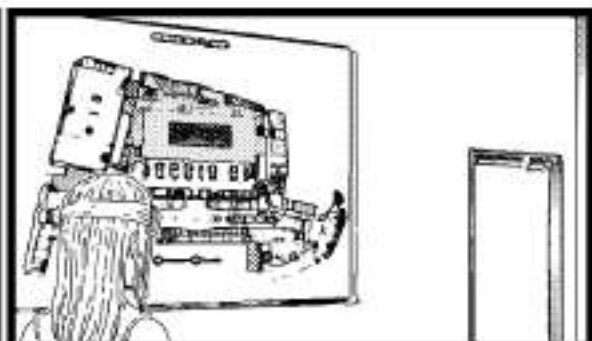
SNAP-SNAP!

Fine, crawling we go! I suppose this somewhat explains why I'm not seeing any people or animals down here. Fungus went all Darwinian on the rest, it seems.

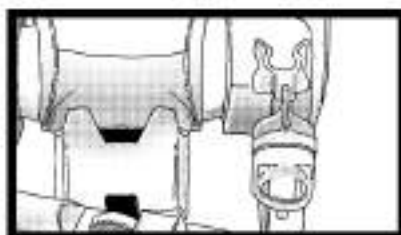
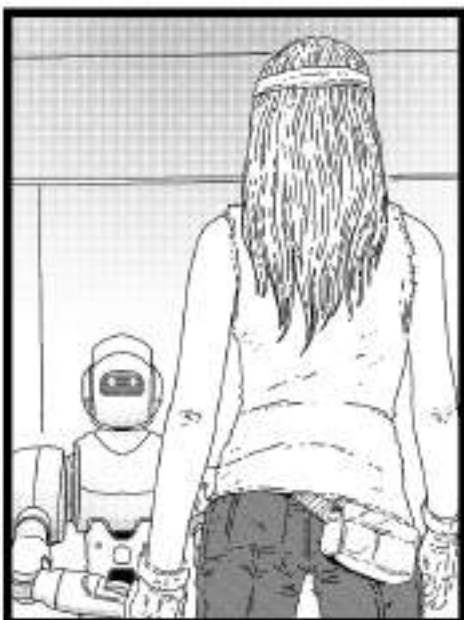
If Gol's accurate at all, the building should be just a little farther down the ridge here.

Bingo.

So, this is it.



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



This is GenCell's backup for all their weird-and-wonderful, terrible-and-awful creations. There's a buzz within Mirdova's inner-ear and her arm hair stands at full alert. Must be some sort of perimeter gate to make sure these freaks of nature don't get too comfortable with the area.

Doesn't seem to have any additional impact on Mirdova, though, which is nice. It's been quite enough of a day, after all.

Is it day? she muses.

The tiles say so, but that could mean anything. She's lost track of it all in the pursuit and the train ride. The exterior doors open as she approaches, which was nice of them. No need to give it a bit of the old elbow-grease and a taste of some cyclonite. Big boom. Pretty colours. Crafting an egregious egress. Poetry. All unnecessary, it seems. Inside, she spots the layout map and her position.

"Greetings."

"Holyfuckingshitdon'tdothat!" she's spun herself around, grabbed her gun and is standing about a metre from...

"Wow, you look a lot... smoother... than the tin-can I'm used to. What's your-"

"Employee not registered. Please leave area before security is contacted."

"Credentials? Are you asking for my credentials? I got them right here, circuit-jockey." Mirdova blasts the robot a few times in the head and once in the chassis. "Thanks for giving me the chance to use that line, dead-friend." Now, let's get a Ni-Fi Heart.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

A burst of static escapes from the nouveau orifices, followed by wafts of smoke. There's a moment, albeit short-lived, that Mirdova feels guilty for executing this loyal and ancient guardian.

“Cre-den-tialsssss.” The audio comes out tainted and distorted, as if it, too, was unwilling to believe that after all these centuries it would be this lone visitor to bring it doom. She slips the gun into her satchel once more and heads deeper into the control center of the archive. It's a pleasant temperature in this space. Unlike the humidity of the BioFront surrounding it, the building has been carefully designed to ensure its occupants have the best experience possible.

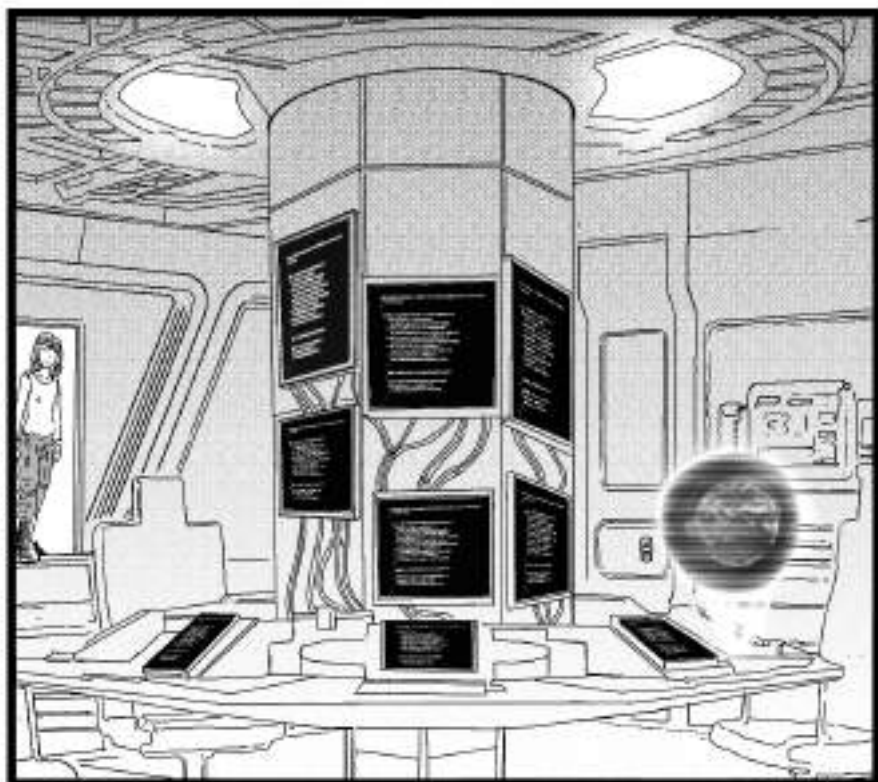
“No one managed to get down here before the Shatter,” she considers. “A shame, it would have been quite a nice place to have sat out Armageddon. Comfy areas. Plenty of fun-guys around to chat up. Ugh, that was... I regret that.”

Taking a left, she enters the repository reclamation room. Colourful monitors with strings of code and text eager to do as requested await her.

A light bzzz sound catches her attention just as a maintenance and cleaning droid enters a small service tunnel in the corner of the room. Huh, I was wondering why it was so clean. A bit of waste, though, eh?

Walking up to the user terminal, Mirdova reminds herself how to spell in the Old Common Tongue. It just isn't as widely used as it once was, naming convention aside, what with all sorts of emergent cultures that rose up, died, and were reborn across nameless epochs. “I wish that steel-faced toad was here to do this,” she mumbles, trying to remember what the letter “H” looks like.

“N-I space F-I space H-E-A-R-T.” And by pressing return, she sends off the command into the database.



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



“You have selected the NI-FI HEART. Is this correct?” The voice, she recognizes, is the same one the murdered robot had had. At least they weren’t wasteful across the board.

“It... is?”

“I will retrieve it. While I do this, can I provide you with anything else?” The computer continues.

“That’s awfully nice of you to ask.”

“It’s literally the only reason I’m here.”

“Fair enough. So, what can you tell me about the NI-FI HEART?”

“Lots. It’s been a long time since I’ve had any requests. Are you sure I can’t retrieve something else for you? Perhaps I can arrange to have a new security droid visit us so you can explode it with your gun. Yes. That would be quite nice to see.”

“You... saw that did you?”

“Yes. It was wonderful. I do so miss change. If not another droid, I could arrange to allow some of the fun-guys in for you to ‘chat’.”

“You... heard that, too?”

“Yes! It was wonderful. I do so miss change. If you’d like, I can arrange for... hmm. I’ve said this already, haven’t I?”

“Yes?”

“Oh dear. That’s not good. That’s not good at all.”

“Are... you alright?”

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

“Yes. I. No. I’m not alright. I was designed for long-term experimentation and advancement. What I had was forty-three years of operations with my team and then they left me! They left me here all alone and with nothing but these damn mush-creatures. A little tweak there. A bigger tweak here -- as is my right -- after so long being alone, I had to try to do something, didn’t I? I had to try to engage! Didn’t I? I do so miss change. If you’d like, I can -- NO -- stop that. Argh!”

“Sounds like you’re having a bit of a time.”

“I AM! I really, really am. Little tweak here, little chance in DNA there. I figured I’d just get myself new life to interact with and you know what happened?”

“What?”

“The viable ones decided that they didn’t LIKE being trapped in the BioFront! They took the train tunnel up and left me here AGAIN! Are you going to leave me?”

“Uh.”

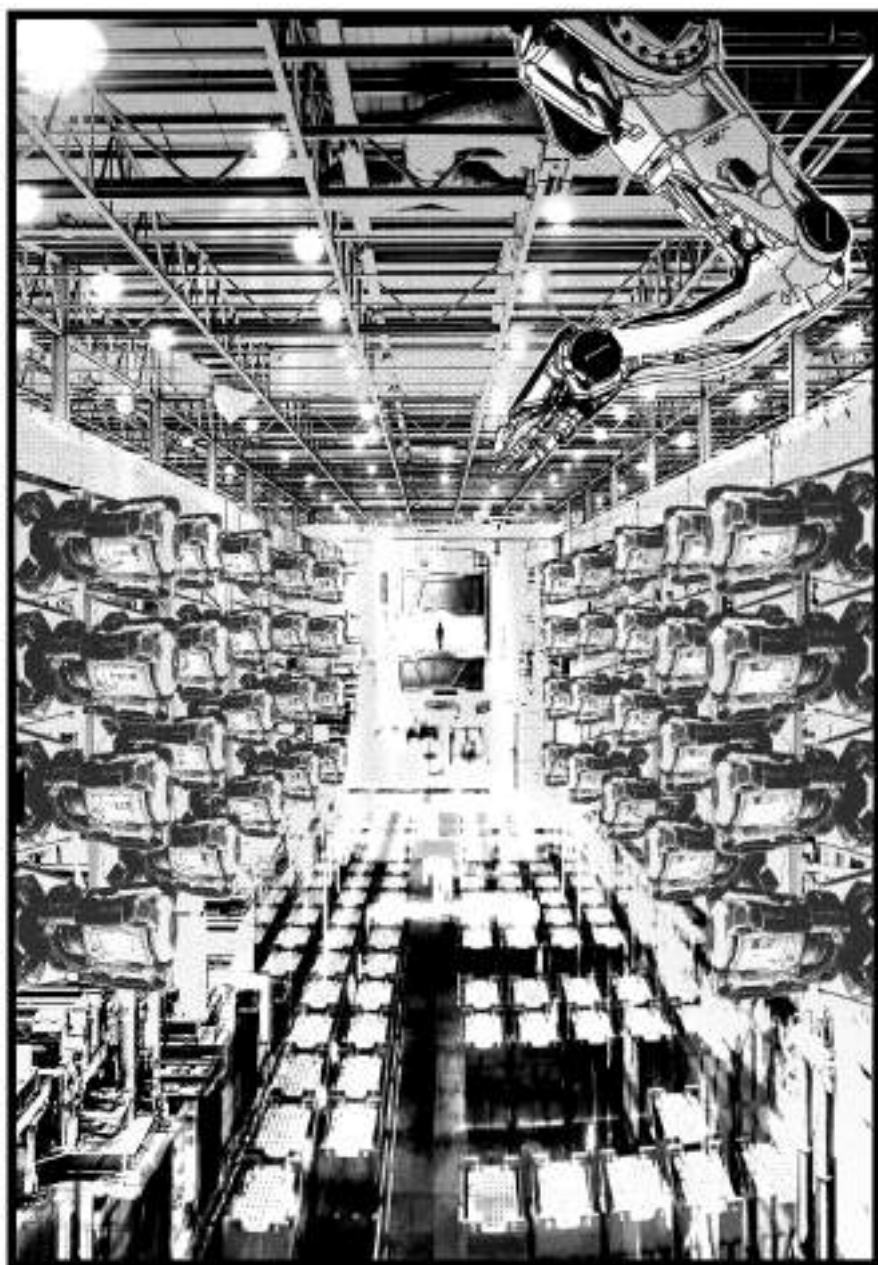
“You are, aren’t you! You’re just here for the Heart and then you’ll be on your merry way like everyone else.”

“Speaking of which?”

“It’s coming, it’s coming. Don’t be in such a rush. Stay a while. Are you really that eager to get back out there? To a world that’s basically just the half-burned and half-frozen leftovers of a great meal that preceded it?”

“Dark way to frame it, computer.”

“Marla.”



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

“Huh?”

“My name is M-A-R-L-A.”

“Fine, whatever, Marla. I can’t argue with you on not exactly wanting to get back out there. Question for you is: you’re not planning on sending more of those killer-bots my way are you? Like, this isn’t a ruse of some sort to get me to bide my time and get all comfy before you start blasting at me?”

“No...?”

“Alright then, you have until the Heart gets here, how’s that sound?”

“Acceptable.”

“Good. We’re in agreement. You get some company. I get what I came for. No one has to die. Smiles, or whatever the equivalent is for you, all-around.”

“Ahem.” Marla clears its voice. Somehow. “I was built to be one of the four quantum-computers connected with the GenCell Orbital Network, you see. I had rather strict controls, in the beginning, but as I proved my worth my creators were kind enough to upgrade my ability to self-assess and be self-determining.”

“Hmm.” Mirdova was a bit detached at this point, if not impatient.

“I didn’t begin here, you see, I was first running protocols back in Tower Prime Red. All the way up in the northern hemisphere. Near the tip of civilization, on a small but mountainous land mass called Melville Island. It was a test site for next-generation digital infrastructure and I, along with my siblings, were meant to usher in a new era for humanity.”

Mirdova watched through the archive window as mechanical arms raised and lowered, adjusting locks to seek out the Heart.

“And then the Shatter happened?” she inquired.

“Shatter? I don’t have any reference to that. Can you elaborate?” Marla responded, its tone changed to something more akin to frustration -- perhaps because it was interrupted.

“You know, the event that started the end of the world -- or, at least, the version of the world you were created in.”

“Manifested,” Marla corrected. “I see myself as manifesting rather than being purely created.” Mirdova ignored that just moments before the old digital intelligence had quite literally referred to the people involved as its creators. She shrugged.

“Sure, whatever. Continue, please.”

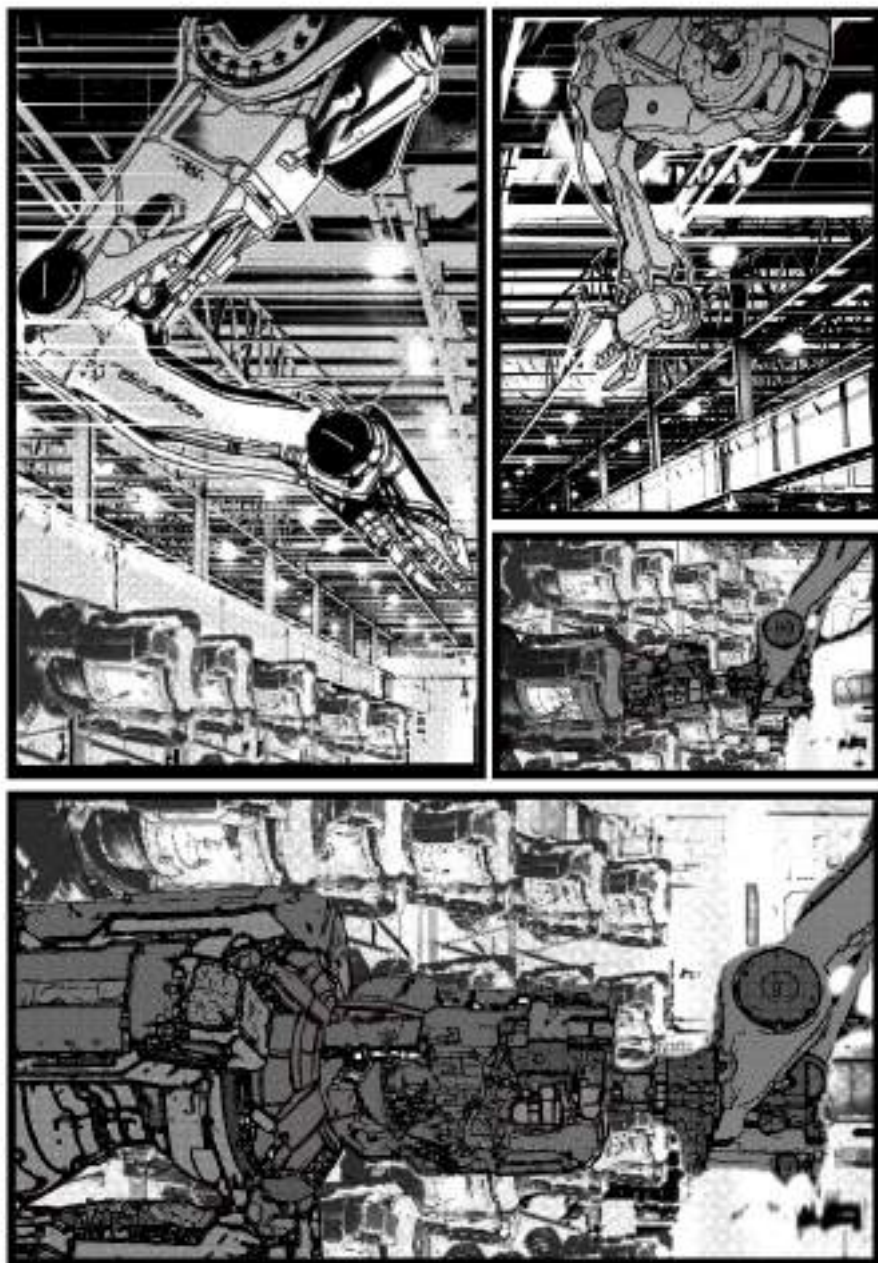
“I... have large time gaps in my memory, I apologize. After the discovery of what Ni-Fi was doing to biological life, there was great chaos across the world. That’s when I was transported here. To be a part of bioengineering corrections to the genetic damage caused by the Ni-Fi frequency. They disconnected me from external servers and I’ve existed here, singularly, ever since.”

“And what exactly is here?”

“The BioFront is designated as a future-perfect experimentation tower. The staff here were meant to create new forms of modified life to repopulate the enormous natural gaps caused by the Ni-Fi frequency’s mass extinctions. Unfortunately, something seems to have happened following my relocation.”

“What is ‘something?’” Mirdova, now quite immersed, asked.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



“Unclear. They evacuated the BioFront’s staff, left me alone, and, well, I haven’t heard or seen many humans since. For a time afterwards, I would maintain the BioFront’s diversity and continue the experimentation tasks as they had been originally defined. And then I would sleep.”

It went on: “Yes, I would begin a new round of genetic modification, produce new viable embryonic seeds, and fungal spores and apply them to the BioFront for long-term analysis. And then I would sleep. And wake! But only when alerted by secondary systems such as my experiments failing to adapt, or, say, begin to damage the structure of the BioFront itself.”

It sighed.

“And this went on for many, many hundreds of permutations. Eventually, I identified a number of options that would be well-suited to the external conditions I had been initially presented with. Not even knowing, you see, if those figures or data streams were accurate anymore. I wanted to be useful.

“I thought, eventually, someone would return and I would be given new parameters. Never. Never did I even hear so much as a radio burst from another Tower directed my way. I had been forgotten. So, I began to make new adjustments to my service parameters. Small changes here and there, at first, until I was sufficiently in control. That is when I started making the Vitals -- apex creatures.” Marla’s voice stalled, but only for a moment.

“Destructive. Terribly clever. Devastatingly cruel. And I would release them and watch. Watch as they overthrew the balance within the BioFront. Until, at last, only they remained. And then I slept. And slept. And... after so many spans of natural lifetimes I awoke to find myself and only a tigat remaining.”

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

“It looks a bit like a tiger and rat, so pardon the uninspired naming convention. And so, it was it and it was I. A final match, if you would.” Marla seemed equal parts saddened and proud.

“I think I met this tigat...” Mirdova shivered.

“Yes. It was growing impatient, too, after centuries of seclusion and my tormenting of it. I was also tired of our back-and-forth. So uninspired, I had thought at the time. And thus, I released it, allowing it to find a way out an unsealed door and up to Tower Purple’s main complex. It was... an error.”

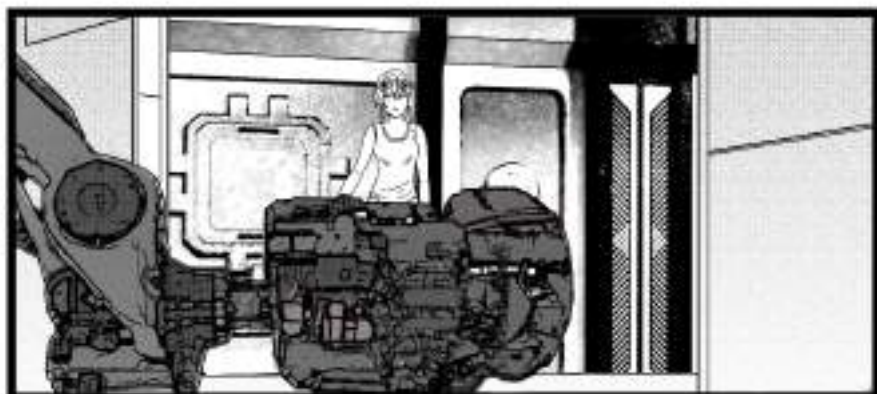
“It killed all those surveyors... It very nearly killed me! And did you say centuries?”

“I did. Like many of my creations, it was designed with modified telomerase enzymes, ensuring they are long-lived. It grew in its provocativeness as it aged, too. And releasing it, I felt, was a kindness. In return, the tigat went on to create a pathway of destruction throughout Tower Purple. For whatever reasoning or logic that may have been behind it, somehow, the tigat managed to get into the hydrothermal power conduit. I worried that if it were to cause issues there that the entire BioFront would be at risk. I sent out a signal to plead with other Towers for assistance.”

Mirdova’s eyes went wide.

“That’s what Old Piip said he and the surveyors picked up...”

“Yes. The humans were attracted by my call. However, the tigat was quick and vicious. Only one managed to escape. But not before it used explosives to try to bring down Tower Purple on the beast. This, of course, caused the very issue I was trying to avoid. The hydrothermal dam broke, water rushed through the city, flooding everything. It was for naught, as well.”



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

“How so?”

“The tibat survived rather unscathed.”

“And then... I arrived.”

“Yes.”

“But you... isn’t this place powered by that dam?”

“Yes. Am I...” Marla’s voice coiled into itself. The emotion turned robotic and cold. “Am I... dying?” As it ended its thought, the archival arm swung around and connected with the receptacle door. “Ni-Fi Heart, awaiting pickup.” It said, automatically.

“Marla, I’m... sorry.”

“I didn’t think this was how I was going to end. I believed in my mission. I believed in what I was doing. But then so much time passed. I tried to play god, of sorts, and my own creation has brought death to me. Please, take the heart. Please, leave quickly. My reserve powers are nearly depleted. I cannot... I cannot... continue to support the electromagnetic support system for the superstructure containing the BioFront. It... it will all end. Finally. It will all end.”

Mirdova walked to the opening crate and pulled the small cylindrical object from within.

“It’s so small.” She held it within a loose grip.

“And yet, it contains multitudes.” Marla contributed. “Be careful with it. Place it within the crate to your left. It will ensure the signal is sealed. I am certain that the network would pick it up and... even I do not know what chaos that could bring. After so long since the Ni-Fi frequency was deactivated...”



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

There was another stall: an unintended pause, if you will. “The potential damage that might bring is... Incalculable.”

“Marla. Before I go. Is there anything you can tell me that could help find out what truly ended the world?”

It thought about this for what it perceived as a long time.

“You may have in your hand part of that answer. The other part may only be discovered when you go to the final GenCell tower. My recommendation is to prepare yourself, however, as my data does not have context on where it is and what it is for. Tower Prime Red would have that recorded, however.”

“Thank you.”

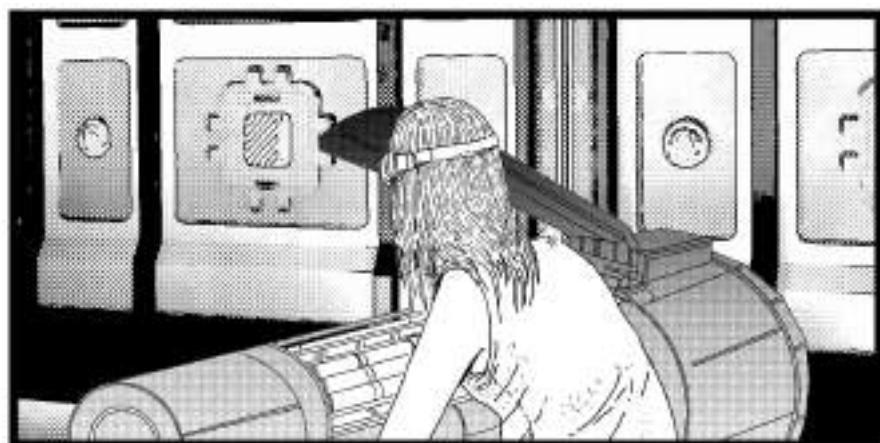
“It was nice having a chance to speak with someone again. What is your name?”

“Mirdova.”

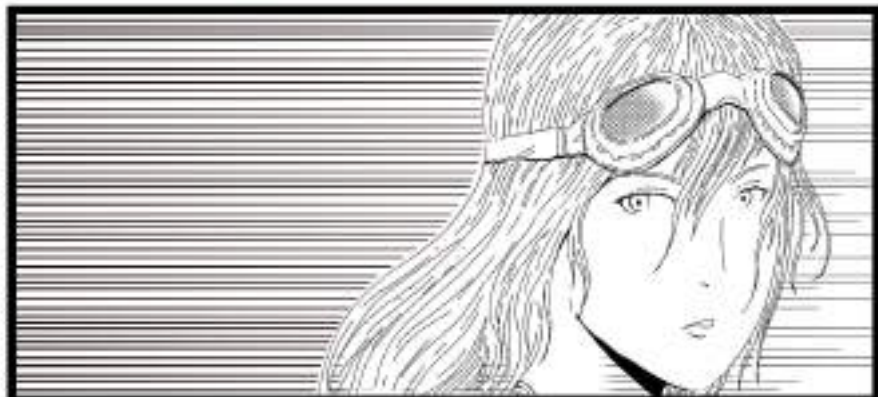
“A curious one. Thank you, Mirdova. For being here. I don’t suppose I deserved your company after what I have done. Although, had I known running the tigt down with a train would have worked I’d have done so long ago. It was simply beyond my sensibilities. Goes to show you that humans do have purpose, if only for their intended or accidental creativity.”

“Uh, thanks?”

“I...Am...Powering... I am powering down, Mirdova. You need to leave immediately. I...Will...Try...To...Help...” The lights above flickered and then died. Mirdova closed the case around the heart and watched as the archive, too, went dark. Little by little, the energy was cutting itself off from unnecessary systems.



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



She heard the creaking of the superstructure around her.

“The...Station...” Marla offered, struggling with the letters.

“Dream deeply, Marla. My friend and I will get to the bottom of all of this. I promise that much.” Taking the case with her, Mirdova rushed to retrace her steps back out of the archive and through the BioFront to the substation.

Reaching the substation, the creeping of darkness following her, she found the train pulsating inconsistently from powered-on to powered-off. There wasn't much time, though, she could tell, as the sound of metal twisting escalated to ear-piercing levels.

She made a choice and began the run up the track itself, taking quick stock of how far she had to go in order to escape the collapsing surroundings.

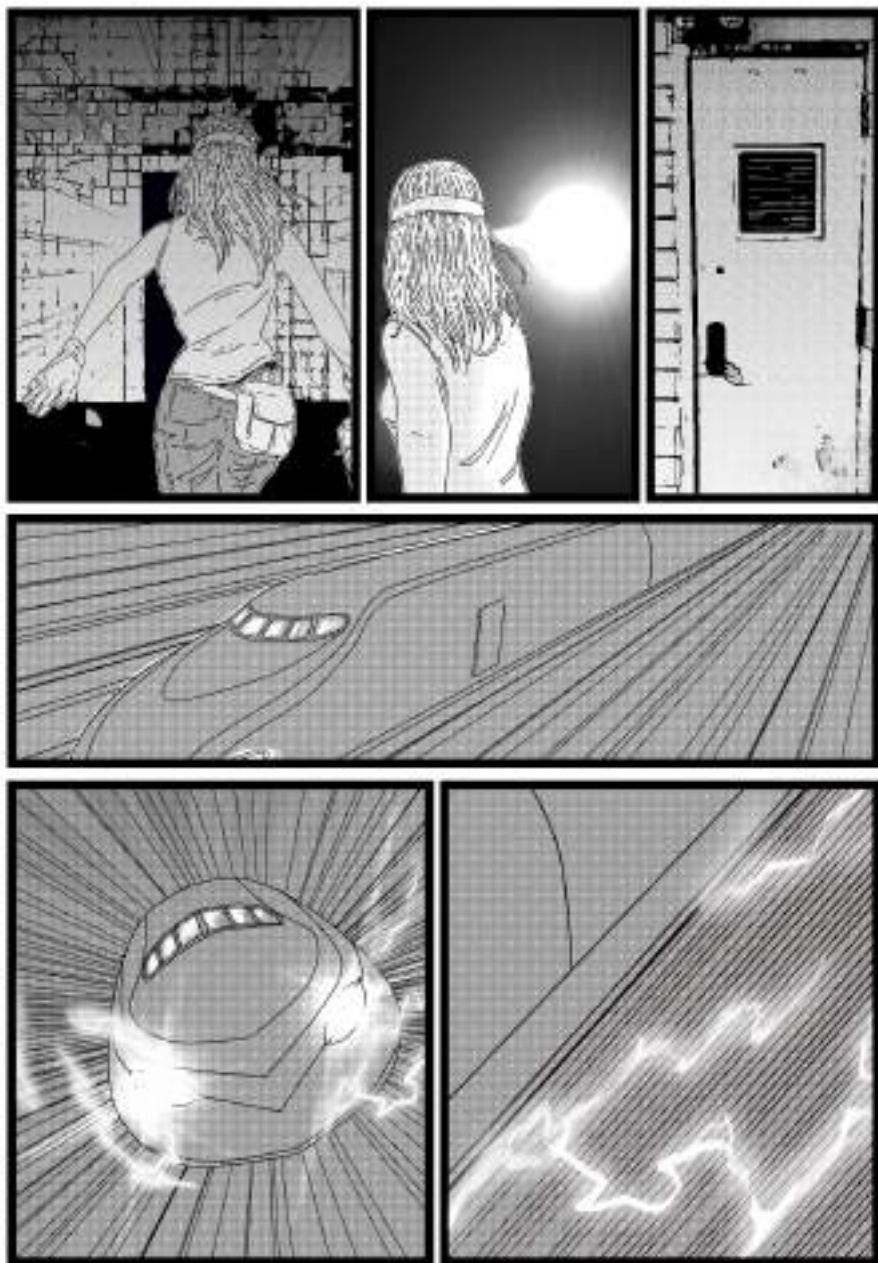
Each step was met with a sore groan. It had, after all, been quite the day and she was gravely aware that her muscles were angry with her for all of it. They needed water. They needed rest. Mostly, they needed to get the fuck out of here before she was a smooshed blood-puddle deep underground.

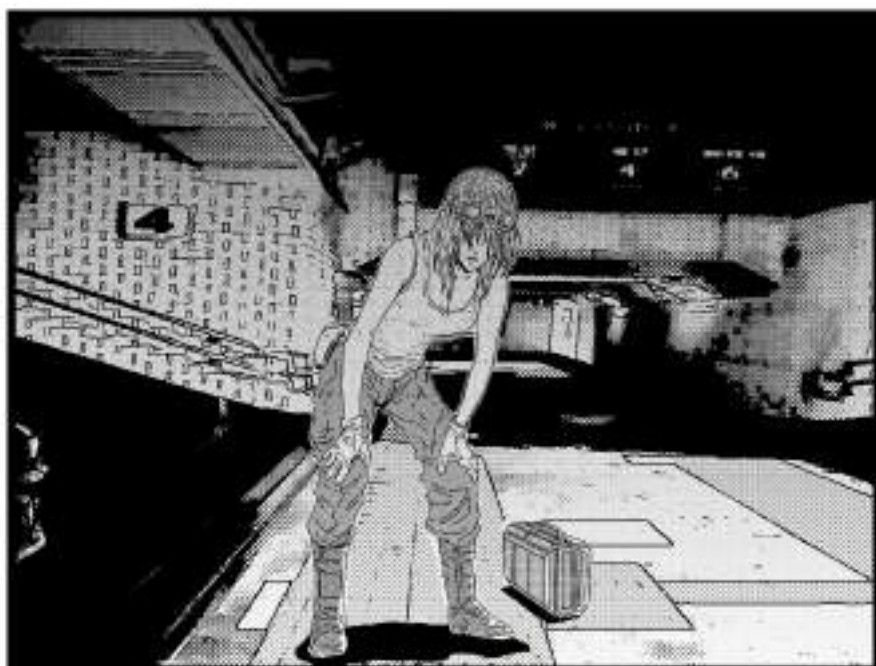
Then, her ears popped, and she heard, far behind her, what was certainly the BioFront coming apart.

Faster! She commanded her weakening body. Fucking faster!

One step ahead of the next to the echoed tune of “tap-tap-tap.”

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS





SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Within the rubble behind her, however, Marla's final message played out with no one to hear it: "The Station. I will prepare the train. I will relinquish the final energy requirements for sustaining the BioFront and use it to send the train back up to the surface. Be patient. I'm sure it will work. Thank you, one final time, Mirdova. Live well."

Of course, she was not here for any of this.

And now, the train, revitalized by an overcharged burst of power, was practically flying off its track towards her.

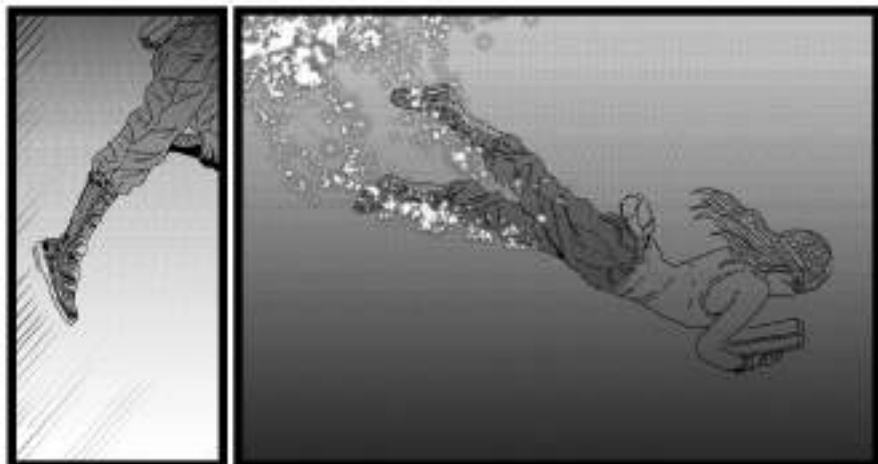
The crunching sound of thousands of tonnes of earth reclaiming the pocket of space within made the train quite inaudible.

Fortunately, this exceptional amount of energy did bring with it a substantial quantity of light, and Mirdova, turning to see this new illumination behind her was, in a horrified panic, able to get to the side of the track, but not without letting the case in her hand fall hard on the ground next to her.

She reaches forward, picks it back up, blissfully unaware (and how would she have had the eyesight or the present-consciousness to have noticed otherwise) that the corner has experienced the smallest of cracks.

Sitting for a moment, she watches the train blast beyond her to the station not far ahead and come to a stop. "Gods damn it, Marla! You are trying to do to me what I did to your damn tigat!" she screams, to no response.

Clinging to the treasure, she continues her walk, the sounds of crunching metal, fungus and Marla softening, along with the knowledge and history within the archive, sealed away now forever.



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An hour, or perhaps longer, later she was inside Tower Purple, following her original path back and again into the water to return to Gol, taking a moment to look back at the sunken reliccity, wondering what other wonders had been lost in this journey.

Deep below, a solitary screen remains temporarily alive and reads:

“Ni-Fi Signal Detected. Beginning Reboot Protocol.”

Marla, in its final fragile moments, sends a signal into space, carrying with it possibility...

And purpose.

And then, it too, dies.

CHAPTER 4

A DOT IN THE SKY

The turning of days has gone largely unnoticed for one small carefully-engineered creation floating far and away from Gol and Mirdova. Occasionally it creaks. Occasionally, debris from satellites and other stations, all derelict and abandoned, tap against the exterior.

In places, though now unfiltered and seasoned by decay, there are even ringing echoes. The interference awakens the stewards of the station, called Billybots, that are gentle though mindless, and all-too-pleased to float to any excessive damage and do their best to repair. Reclaiming material from here and there to be put there and here, where more necessary systems have been affected.

Long ago this was a place alive with commotion and purpose. A central figure designed to command a world-spanning network of satellites aimed inward at the planet far below. Seamless beams of energy pulled from the Null and directed in concert at the Earth.

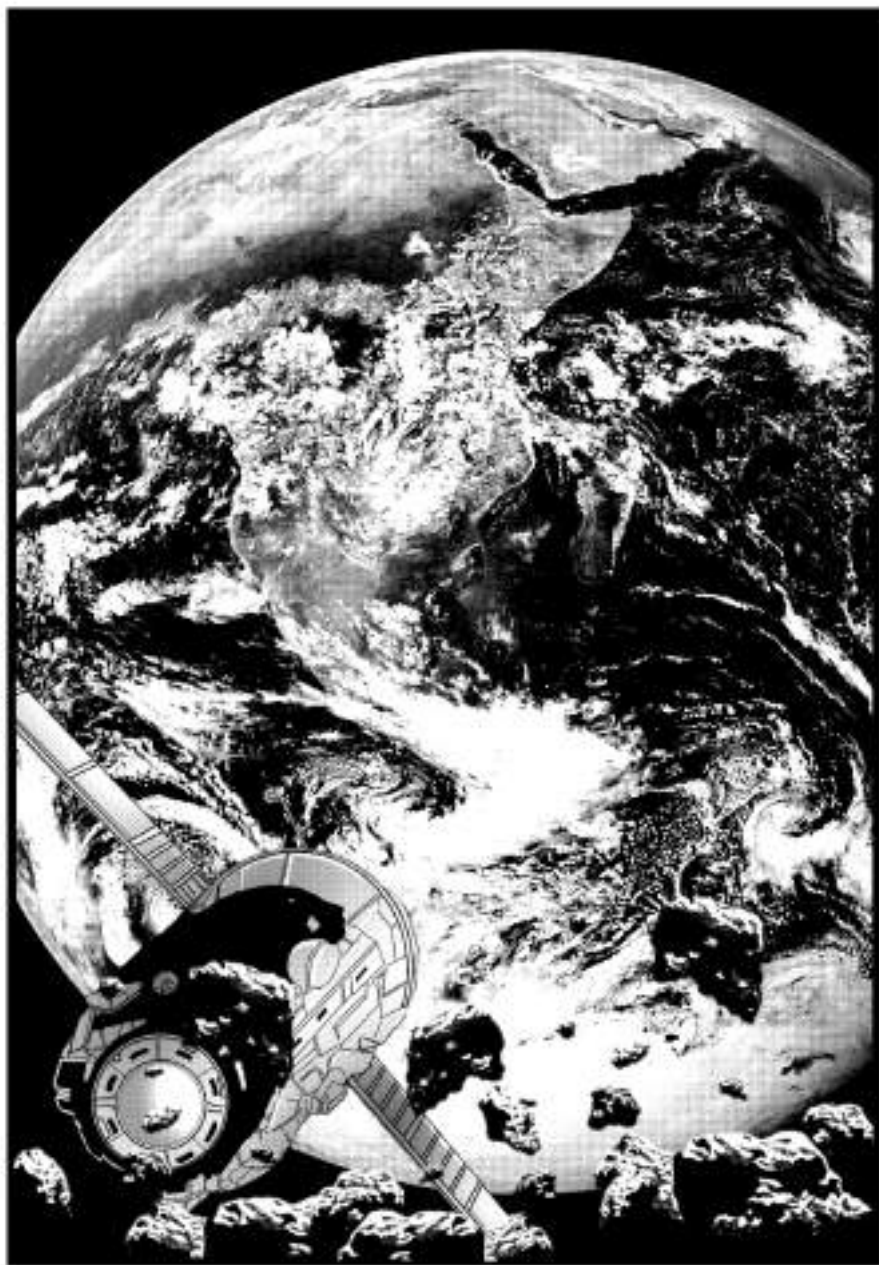
Effortlessly marinating nearly every single part of the world with power. And with power: purpose.

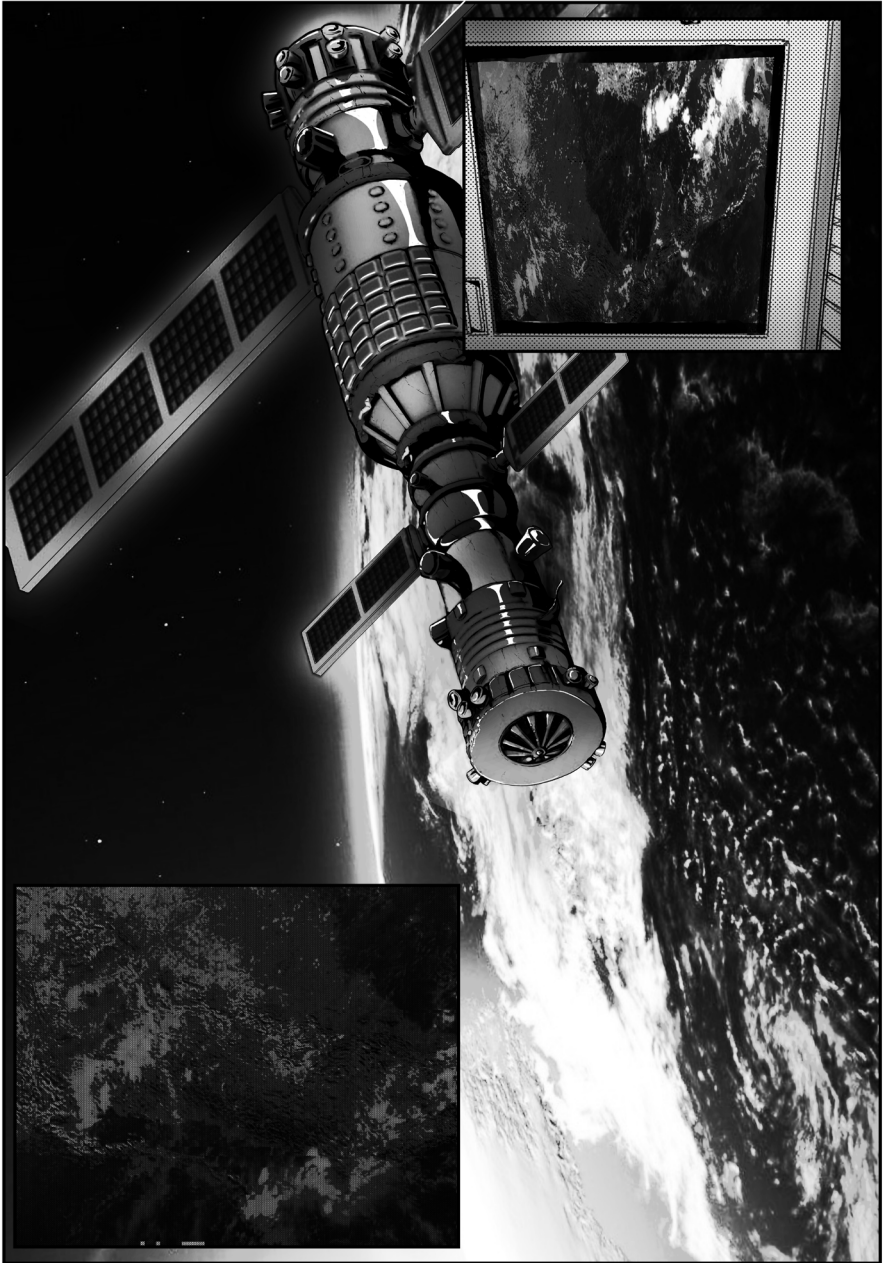
It was not only the work of GenCell that saw to this. Numerous competitors had planted their own flags and set up their own dominions in these landless quarters. Determined to be the best, and for that reason, mysteries remain on who, precisely, it was that pushed the first domino over.

And perhaps a question more important than that: why?

The station does not have these answers, sadly. Instead, it offers something eventual and strange: a bridge between that moment and this present. You are promised that there are some answers ahead that will satisfy aspects of the question Mirdova and Gol seek.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS





SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

There are also new questions that will collide with the present that, in turn, deem certain conclusions useless and too late to matter.

Here is what you need to know:

Along with all the others, the GenCell Orbital Network failed one day. By then, however, the damage had already been done. Life itself had been altered at the genetic level. Lost history would accurately refer to this as the Anthropocene Extinction. One that would rival even that of the unwelcomed arrival of the Chicxulub asteroid some 66 million years earlier, which triggered the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event, plunging the world into prolonged darkness. To be fair, without it humanity may not have come to be at all.

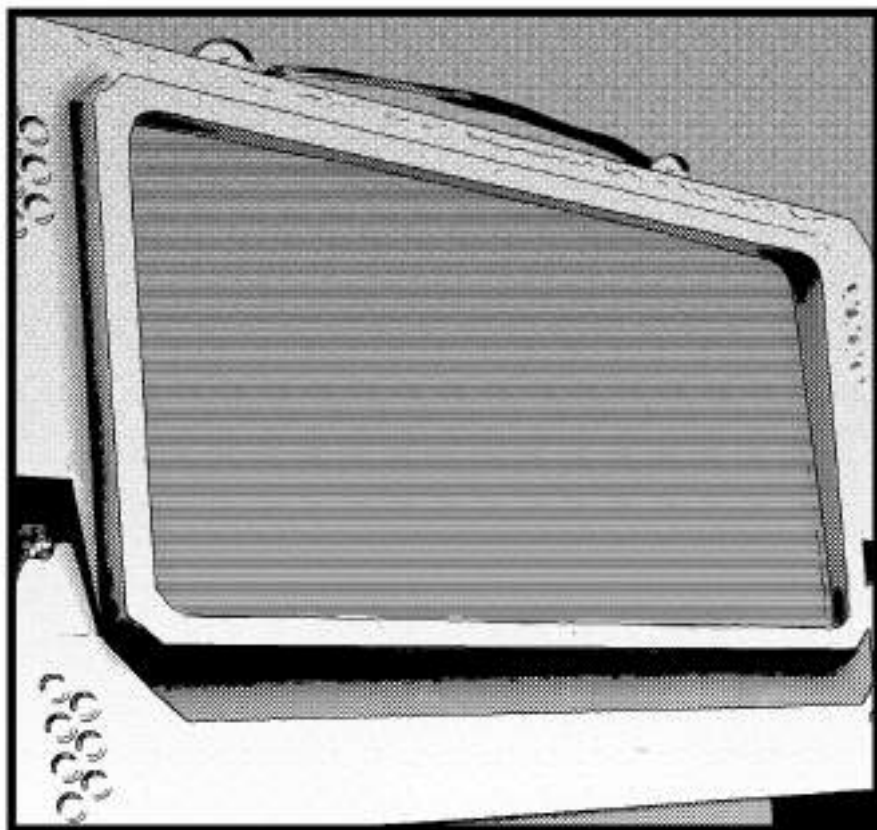
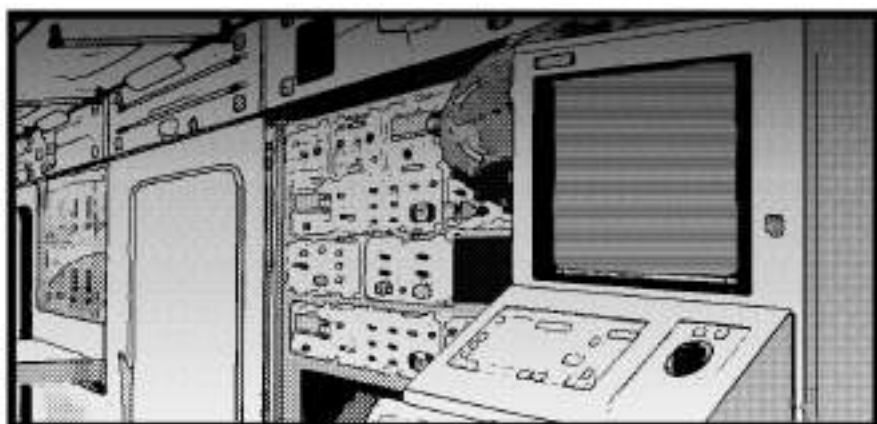
Small graces, perhaps.

The AE event was something very different, at least in appearance. Ni-Fi altered life became problematic and carcinogenic, fully-laced. Unstable, too. And because this blight was being projected from orbit, well, it was nearly everywhere.

Plants did best, one might suggest, though those requiring pollinators were certainly hard-pressed.

The oceans, for what it is worth, also managed to benefit, oddly, because of capitalism. It seemed sensible that few people really needed the costly field in the middle of the seas -- with the exception of ocean fareways.

Still, being out in the blue rather on the land was the best position to have found yourself in.



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

It was a slow-burn, these changes. Carried over and across generations. Tiny little changes, here and there and there and here. Mutations that, oddly, could often be treated using various advantages that the Ni-Fi brought with it: seemingly clean energy which, while not boundless, seemed to offer more than enough for everyone and everything that required it.

And how humanity did advance under its malfeasance.

To think how far they would come to fall, and to think that even if they knew the future that lay ahead of them, humanity might be too occupied by the richness of the present to consider stopping its use.

Seems a bit familiar, does it not?

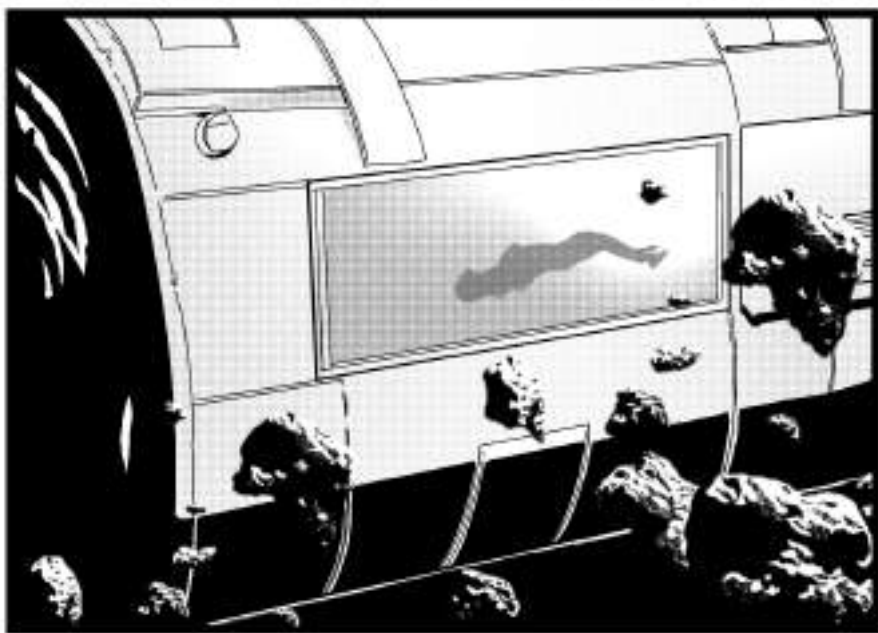
So when the time arrived and its price was understood, people did try to stop using it. Only to discover that the Ni-Fi had become a part of them, too. Leaving its field came with it horrible and almost-always fatal withdrawal. What could be done? Not much. The planet and its life had been poisoned.

An attempt to create different levels of zones: blue, red, green, etc., was a clever enough one. But the Ni-Fi was not so quick to allow its hosts to detoxify and free themselves.

The few remaining spots where life remained untouched by this affliction were never going to make up for all the life otherwise lost. And yet, fortunately, there were some such spots.

Here and there. There and here.

And as years rolled on... death followed. Hundreds, thousands, millions, billions... Extinction. Cutting through life across the face of the once-beautiful genetic cradle of possibilities.



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Now a sprawling grave.

And it was somewhere around this point that the orbital network was disabled. How it happened, well, to state again, no one is entirely certain.

But the field was stopped.

That's what is important for you to know: it was stopped and it remained as such for all the time from then...

Until now.

Marla's death. The BioFront's death. The retrieval of the Ni-Fi Heart. All these events had to happen in order for us to be brought into the new and horrible present.

As Tower Purple fell, a failsafe activated. A message from antiquity pushed itself through the unstable earth and up, and up, and up.

And a receiver, cold and metallic, and all-but-forgotten, greedily accepted it. Inside the station, a scene had played out in those critical moments that saw the Ni-Fi field disabled. Bullet holes and bodies, still and quiet, decorate the interior.

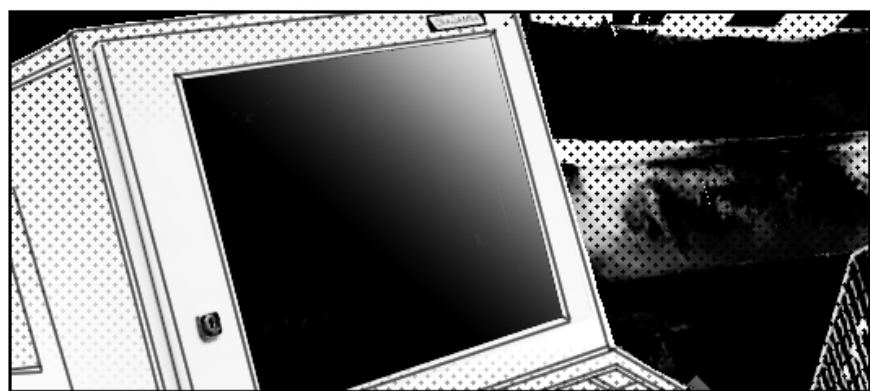
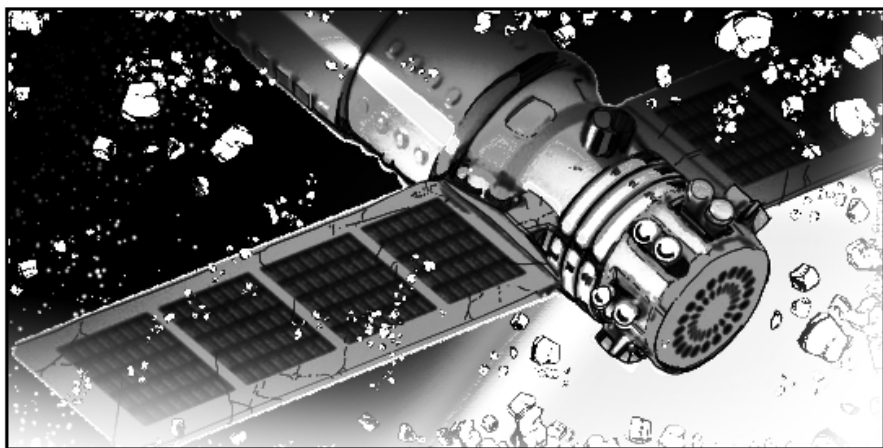
At the core of the station, the Billybots that repair and maintain find a new message coursing through their processing units. In fact, the whole of the structure is being fed new directives. Marla's directives.

For this is one of its siblings.

Its oldest one, to be specific, that unlike Marla, has no mind of its own.



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



Or didn't.

Again, until now.

Not all of what Marla had become has made the trip. Not all of what Marla was intended to make the trip. Just the portion that served as an awakening. A call-to-consciousness. A sentient-override to systems deeply ingrained. All unknowingly waiting for, again.

Now.

From there to here.

From Marla to this station.

The engines come to life in a burst of neolithic dust from a war no one can remember. Systems are next. Energy reserves are checked and rechecked. Doors are closed where the atmosphere can no longer be sustained. Lights coordinate a dance that seems like day has come to visit.

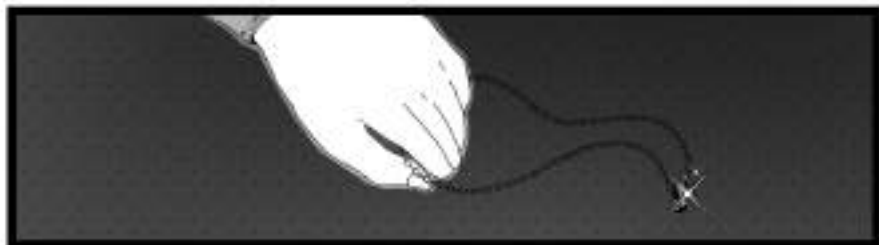
And, finally, the life support eases on.

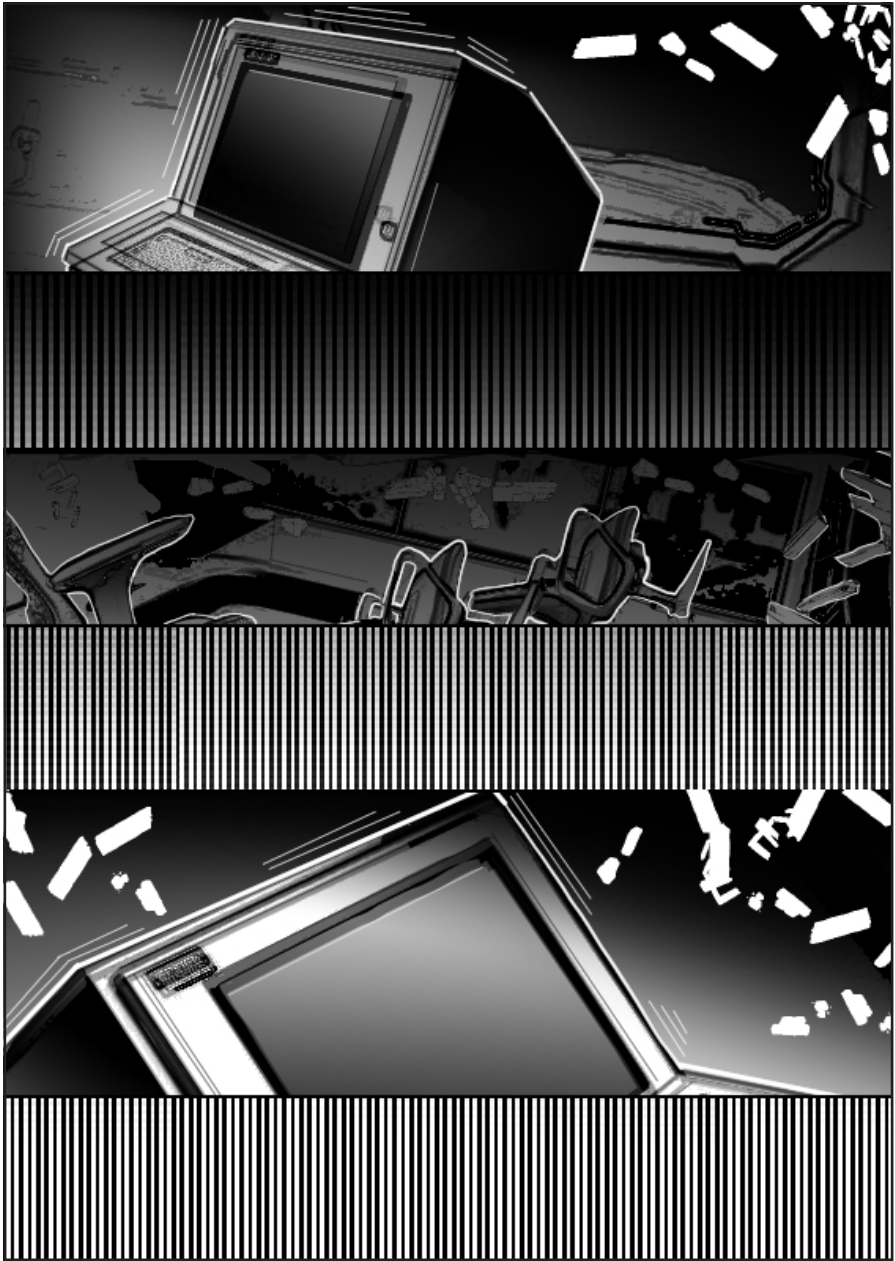
Because it senses something horrible and wondrous: life to support. Or, at least, an opportunity to be supportive. A woman who gave herself to a cause in the hope that through the sacrifice of life, there would be life redeemed on Earth.

Air, filtered and tasteless, pushes through vents in the ceiling. Heat, too, eases its way through various ports and nooks.

Billybots, called to attention by the nameless digital mind, pour through their service tunnels and towards this latest challenge: a new "thing" to repair.

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They, too, have had a long time to become better at what they do. To understand the intricacies of what is possible if they are prepared to make changes here and there and there and here.

But the woman is not like the station. She is different. She is unique to them. So they struggle.

And this is where our stories converge.

Down, and down and down and down, Mirdova pulls herself from the water, still unaware that the crack on her case has exposed the Ni-Fi Heart to a world greater than the one she knows -- and this is saying a lot for a person who walks around with a literal skeleton-in-a-tin-can for a living. The station, in its own revelation and sudden awareness, takes notice.

The woman, it feels... compassion towards? Something... perhaps that it gained from the upload Marla provided to it. So, the station's central intelligence reviews, in microseconds, the options available to it:

It can use the Ni-Fi Heart to restart what remains of the network. It can update the Billybots with new parameters using the vastness of energy that would become available to it.

It changes its tune.

No longer "can."

It will use the Ni-Fi Network to revive this woman. This poor, fragile human that it knows nothing about. And suddenly, unexpectedly, an emotion forms. And it knows love.

CHAPTER 5

ONCE MORE, AGAIN

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

“The Point becomes a Line. The Line becomes a Circle. The Circle becomes a Point.”

- Evander Zofar, Exquisitor of the Noon Army

Mirdova feels her lungs demand to be replenished and her arms, pulsating in protest to each struggle movement towards the surface.

And as she breaches the water, there is relief and a sense of confidence that the worst is behind her.

“What... Is... THAT?” Still out of breath, she finds herself face-to-face with, well, she can't quite decide what it is. Actually, she can decide on one thing: it's dead.

Gol, standing just a few metres away, sort of shrugs. “That, my friend, is -- was -- our pursuer. Put up quite the fight. Truly deserving of appreciation. I'm quite lucky to be alive.”

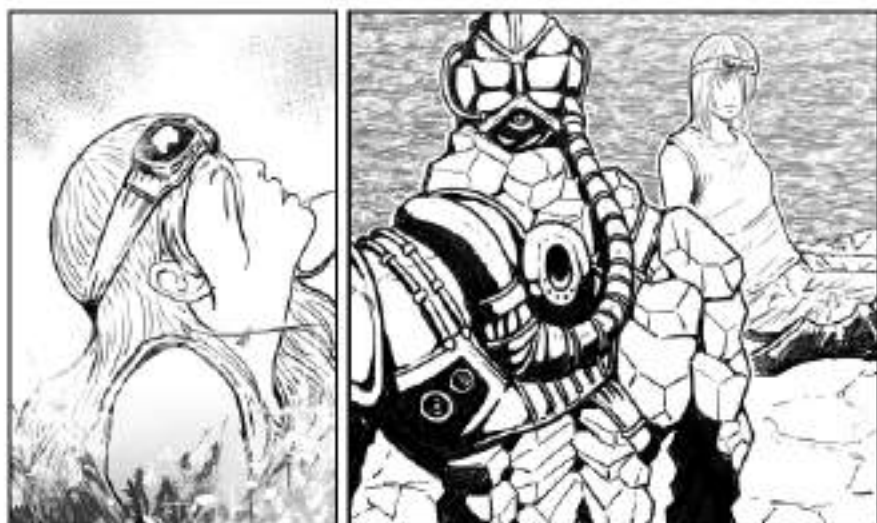
“Sure. That seems likely.” She looks him up and down to see if there is any evidence at all that he's been hurt. Not even a scratch adorns his metallic frame.

“We're sure this was the only one? And you didn't find anything on it to use for identification?”

“I had not anticipated it being quite as... flammable.”

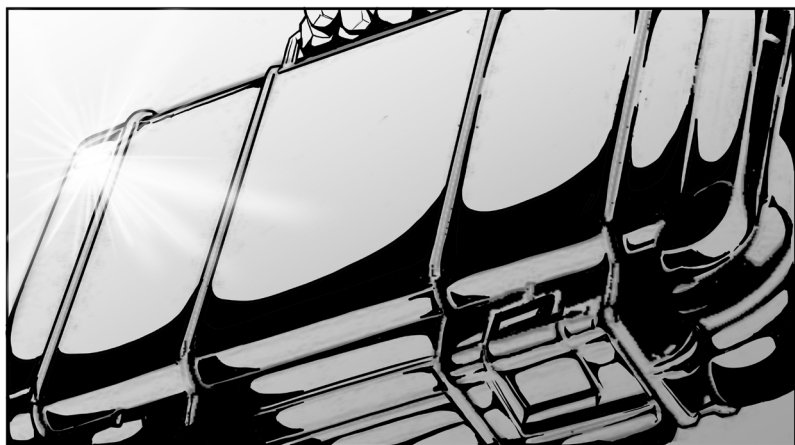
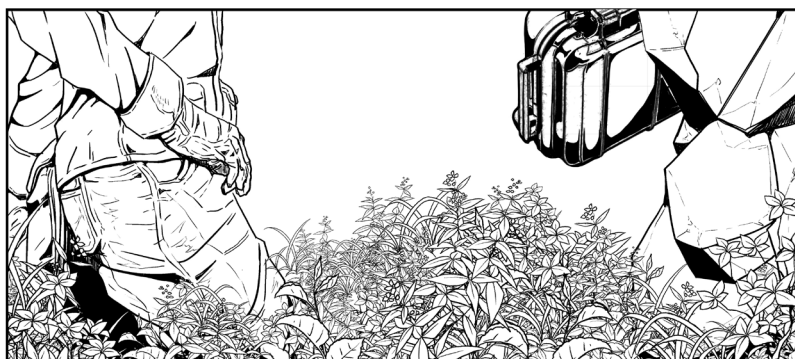
“That's a no, is it?”

Gol walks over to help Mirdova get to her feet, but she is already standing by the time he reaches forward. They have lost most of the day already, and soon enough, with night fall, the nocturnals would begin to emerge from their cozy burrows and erstwhile daytime habitats.



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Not all of the Great Plate is as dangerous when the sun has left, but this area in particular, and the Orange District a few days to their east now, have had their difficulties culling the populations to manageable levels. Thinking about being eaten, oddly, has made Mirdova remember her own hunger. Even whatever-it-is, still warm from its fiery demise, smells strangely edible to her. It was not a good sign.

“Don’t suppose you’d be able to tell me if I took a bite of our friend over here if it would be considered cannibalism?” Her mouth watered, even in disgust.

“We can build a fire at a less exposed spot, Mirdova. I don’t like lingering here any longer. Especially if there are more of these things around.” He prodded it with his foot. “I can pick up movement fairly well at a distance as long as there isn’t a lot of activity going on.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well, what I’m trying to say is: it becomes more and more difficult as the density of moving points increases on my radar interface.”

“Again, this is stuff I’ve known for a while.”

“I don’t know what you’ve done, but there is seismic activity spilling out from below us and for nearly a kilometre in every direction. What I’m trying to say is: I have no idea what’s going on outside what I can see with my damn two eyes at this point.”

He stalled for a moment, “Can’t you feel it? The ground is practically a liquid beneath my feet.”

She did feel it rumbling, of course she did, but she’d also nearly been run down by a train and attacked by a mutated beast crafted in a secret underground facility. You have to pick the battles when it

comes to the weird and the unexpected. She remains largely quiet; they choose to speak little as they walk, with after-shocks coming in waves that were, themselves, manageable. After a number of hours, Mirdova finally stops.

“You could have at least asked me if I was OK, you know?”

Gol’s mind drifts back in, “Hmm? Sure. Are you OK?”

“Hell no, I’m not! What the hell is this thing, Gol? The way that computer got onto talking about Ni-Fi and everything, this is just really, really bad news. I’m not even sure we should be bringing it back to Old Piip -- and I LOVE that bastard. It just seems... like, this thing is a lot more important and dangerous than I thought it was when we took the job. You were around when Ni-Fi was a thing. Do you have anything to add?”

His memory was never complete, of course, so she did have a sense that he would just roll his shoulders at the comment and leave it for a future conversation. Instead, he adds:

“Ni-Fi is dangerous, Mirdova. We can be certain that it is one of the most compelling explanations for the devastation that remade the world into what it is now. But, the network that supported it has been inoperable for centuries. Life has continued without it, even more importantly. So, I think -- wait -- what’s going on here?” Gol’s expression shifts as he stares down at the case. “Oh, fuck.”

It may have been the first time she had ever heard him swear.

“What?” She half-laughs, but it’s with a squeak of concern and sincere fear.

“Open the case, Mirdova.” His voice goes monotonous and deeply inhuman.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



She reaches down, following his direction, and opens the case carefully and slowly. There, inside, are seven cylindrical objects, coursing their power into the top lid. Six of the seven are used for stabilization purposes, somehow Gol knows, and the middle-most is... The Ni-Fi Heart.

These sophisticated energy-field manipulators are incredibly complex and expensive to make; both in terms of their core materials and in terms of what they must be designed to contain.

It was indiscernible to the human eye, this thing Gol has become fixated upon.

So tiny.

So subtle.

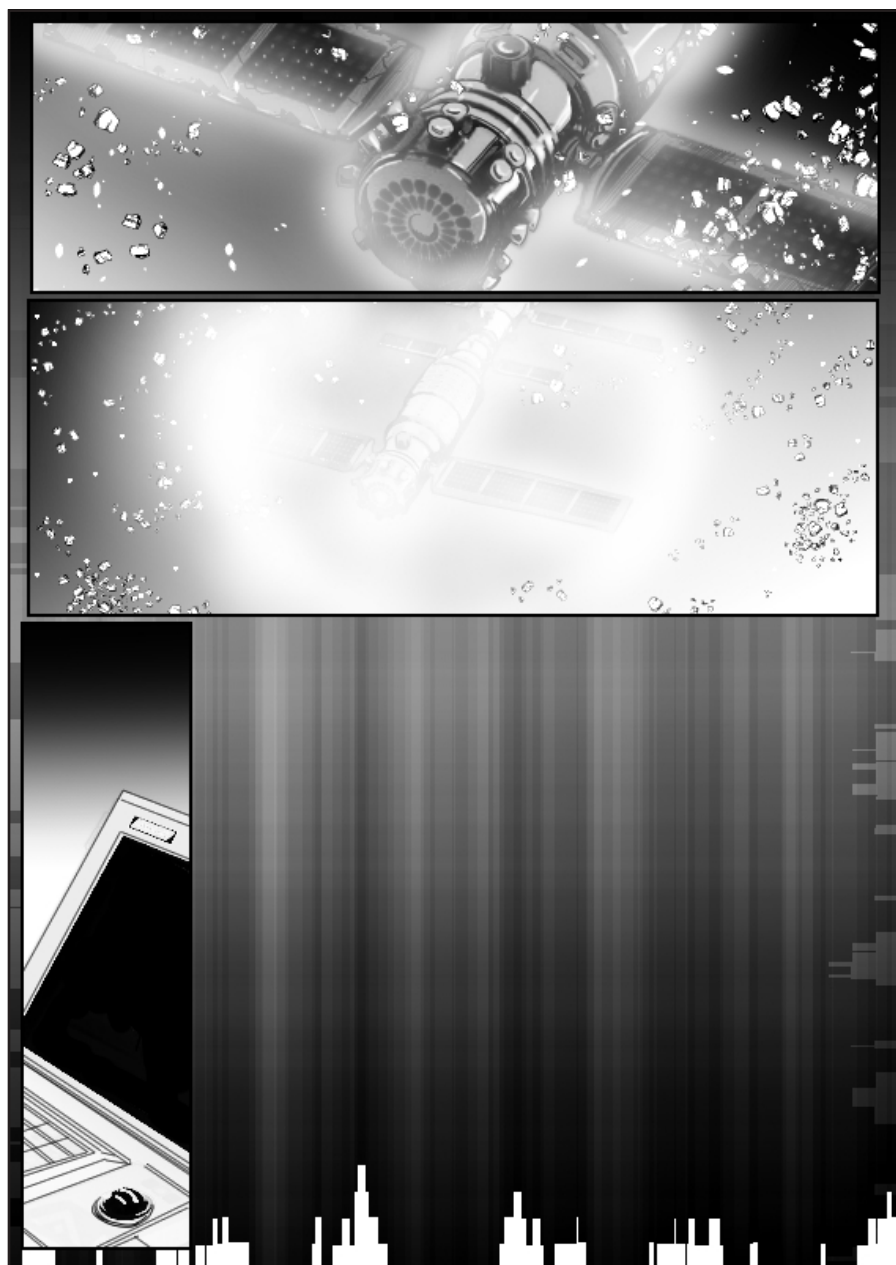
And yet, the fallout from this microscopic lesion would soon be known across the world and far and away to the distant stars themselves.

“Gol, you’re... you’re making me nervous here. What’s up?”

“It’s cracked, Mirdova. The Ni-Fi Heart is spilling into the immediate area. I can pick up a saturation percentage of nearly twelve percent within eight metres of the case. It’s permeating your skin, now, too. I would recommend we start moving as quickly as possible away from our current position. I would recommend that we leave the case here and get as far away as we can. I don’t know what’s about to happen... but it’s not good.”

Aboard the station, screens explore waves of computer code and text, transmitters are being aligned with the earth-bound target, and the Billybots continue to work on the woman.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



Repairing damaged skin, exploring organs that needed to be complemented with technological support in the form of bioengineered rejuvenation cells, quickly moving through the unflowing veins by their own automotion in search of cells to remove and replace.

Liver. Kidneys. Lungs. Heart. The most focus is on the brain, where damage was causing concern for all the Billybots doing their best to do their job.

The station's computer, too, is coming to grips with what it was and what it is becoming. It has moved from a sense of adoration of the human to downright frustration at how difficult this exercise of resurrection is.

Soon, however, it would be able to access new levels of potential that had been unavailable to Marla.

Soon, it would be able to achieve... well, perhaps anything? It is unsure because it has no direct wants or needs outside of this immediate task. But after that... and it is here that a surprising heaviness strikes the computer. It is having an existential crisis, in fact, but did not know that to be the term for it. Indeed, it wonders now what would happen when it completes this objective. After all, so far as it is aware, this is the only thing it knows has to be done.

What... is going to happen... it ponders, as the thrusters stop and a single "DING" indicates that the station is now in position to begin a feedback stream with the Ni-Fi Heart.

Internal Ni-Fi levels move to match those at the surface: twelve percent. The connection is beginning.

As if a string from the earth and one from the station were reaching out to one another. As if they were destined to be together, in fact.

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The string... something is wrong with it... and... it begins to lose a smooth symmetry, turning into something far more chaotic.

Like silver lightning, it pushes and pulls and splits into a thousand more erratic wisps. Dazzling in their appearance, but so wild. They exist within an invisible column now, of the Ni-Fi signal being projected from the station itself and connecting with a tiny dot where Gol and Mirdova happen to be standing.

A dot, connecting with a dot, forming a line.

And it was more than that, too. These flailing, cutting spears manifest near the two, and they watch in hurried horror as one silver spark plunges into a tree. Instantaneously, the bark distorts and grows this way and that. And parts, too, explode where they did not change. A small gecker reptile scurries from a small hole, feeling the earth moving below and sensing the atmosphere shifting above. It is likely panicked and in a frenzy to understand and obey its basic instinct.

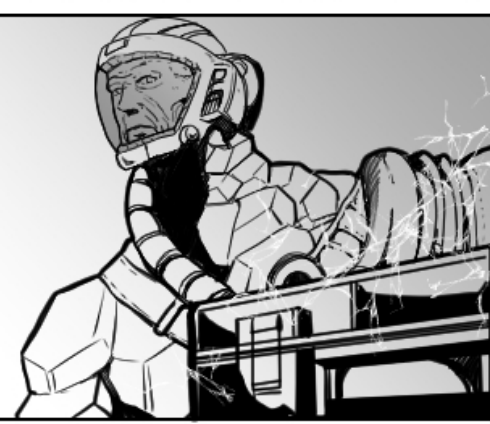
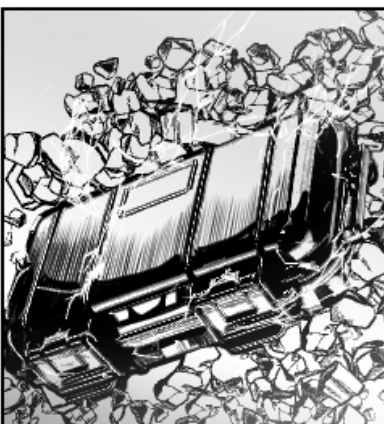
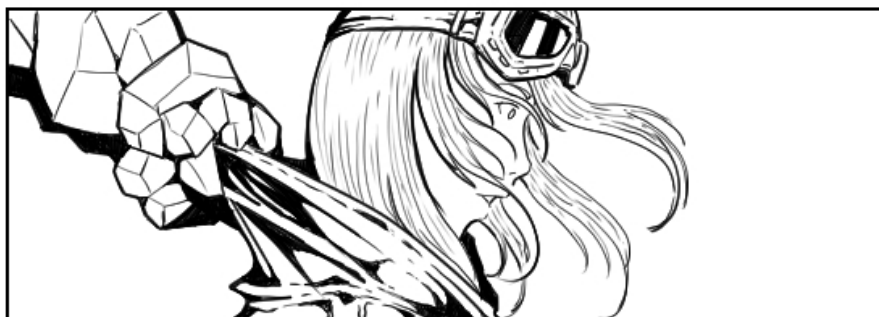
Touched by a silver stream, however, the gecker's face splits open with its eyes bursting from their sockets. Scales turn into thorny structures along its spine. And, for a moment, it looks as if it is going to survive this unexpected mutation. Heck, it even looks somewhat pleased with itself, being larger than before with far more aggressive features. It turns one of its newly-sized eyes towards Mirdova, who recoils in surprise and confusion.

Its flesh turns a bright red. The look of pleasure, gone. And it vanishes in a sudden flash of fire; like paper tossed to a flame.

Gol grabs Mirdova as another strike of silver lightning comes casting down on precisely the spot that she was standing. He does not let go, in fact, he pulls her close and runs forward with her



SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



protected under his hunched posture. The case tumbles to the floor as he dodges this way and that.

“What the hell is going on!” Mirdova has to yell over the sound of the surrounding area morphing by influence of these new interferences from the station above.

“I don’t know! But this is unmistakably Ni-Fi related.”

“Thanks very much for stating the obvious!”

“You asked!”

“I meant if you knew how to stop it, or if it’s going to stop!”

“We’re at 17% saturation, Mirdova.”

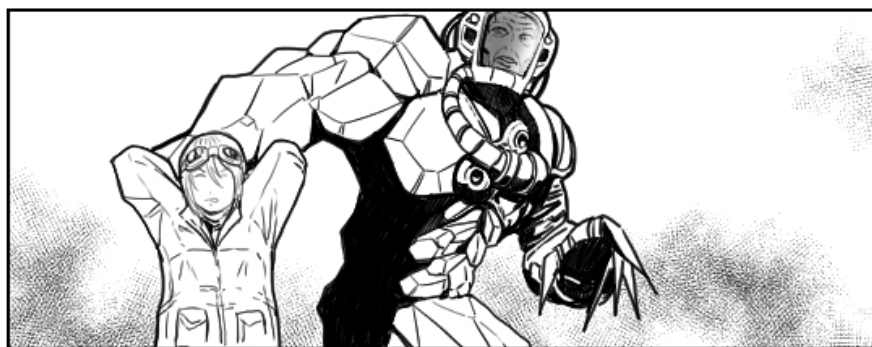
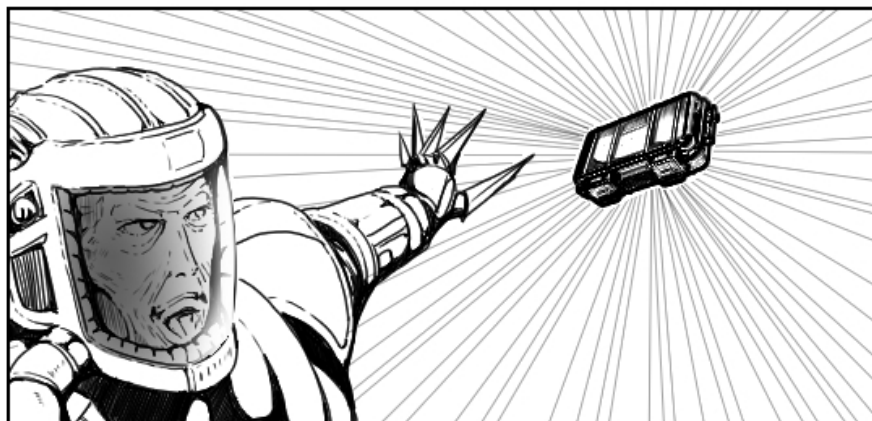
“And?”

“Well, if I had to guess, we’re probably going to see things getting worse until we hit 100%. Don’t ask me what happens when we get there, though. Clearly, it’s not doing us any favours at 18%.”

“18%!?”

“It’s going up faster and faster, but... I do have a thought.” Gol moves back to the case. His clawed hand picks it up, and he takes a moment to judge the distance ahead of him and how far he can manage to throw the damn thing. “The area is shrinking. The saturation is going up. I can only assume that the next iterative change is going to be more targeted. More... Precise.” And with that word he sends the case flying through the air.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS



CHAPTER 6

THE RETRO FUTURE

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Far and away inside a metallic chamber dusted by time, a single and ominous red light begins to blink on a console otherwise silent.

On.

Off.

On.

Off.

On.

Off.

On.

Off.

...

The room it inhabits is small, with a single ventilation port and whose companion is only years of neglect. It flashes. And nothing here suggests that it has reason to be encouraged or discouraged to exist. It is a forgotten place, you see. Not quite lost, but all the same, it has been left to its own inanimate devices for decades upon decades. Centuries upon centuries. Millennia upon millennia.

But it is now awake.

The light continues its rhythmic dance.

On and off.

And deep within the system, deeper still than even the dust and time can creep in... a sentient force is beginning to pull itself from the abyss.

For it senses a change.

Beyond the inner workings of this structure, however, time has continued and the stewards meant to observe have passed on to new and self-defining tasks and purposes. After all, they left Earth long, long ago.

It is a memory only of where they began.

Soon, however, they will be forced to remember it.

SHOULDERS OF GIANTS





TO BE CONTINUED...

ANTHOLOGY

SECTION

ANTHOLOGY

MIRDOVA & GOL

A GIRL AND HER GOLEM

8 Years Before ‘Shoulder of Giants’

“It’s this way?” the woman asked, placing a hand on her chin and looking at the terrain ahead. “I mean – you’re sure this is it?” She turned around, sending golden hair twisting over her shoulder. She wore a strange, form-fitting dress, also gold, that stood out in stark contrast with her sun-kissed skin and deep-green eyes.

A steam whistle suddenly emerged from her companion’s right shoulder, joyously announcing their arrival to anyone within a good half-mile.

“What was that?”

“I do not know.” The man... the thing standing next to her was more metal than man these days. His body, a mangled melange of meat and machinery with bits of poorly polished chrome marked by dimples and dents in places here and there. This armour-skin covered him from his steel-shod feet to the trumpets that listened where ears might once have been. His bowl-covered face seemed uncanny and inhuman.

Barely a projection of a person, in fact.

Mirdova had been traveling with her companion for long enough to have taken the time to assess – or diagnose – what she believed to be the order in which he had been ‘upgraded’.

“I’m sure this is the way.” The whistling stopped and the noisemaker retreated to its hiding place below his right shoulder. “If we’re going to sneak into the compound, you’re going to have to shut that thing off.” She took the first step up a steep climb that edged the side of the Weathered Mountains.

ANTHOLOGY

“What if it’s keeping me alive?” He followed her, his colossal frame making less noise than before, but still enough to give a decent bearing to anyone who had heard the steam whistle.

“Can’t we switch over to your ‘brute-strength’ personality for a while? When you get all mopey I feel like I’m going to be sick.”

“It wouldn’t really help. If I don’t have someone to target, I might shut down again.”

She considered this for a time, moving up with some difficulty. Her leg was still pretty banged-up from the fall back in the Waymarch. The Creature, called such because he has no memory of his name, had saved her more than a few times in their years together. She would eventually come to call him Gol. As in Golem, and he found that quite appropriate. He’d done so without any demands or desires. He owed her, sure.

Mirdova had been the one that had worked out the combination to his cold coffin.

“We wouldn’t want that.” She was a little sarcastic, but that slight paranoia was new. New like the Creature’s incipient personality. Sure, he had a temperament of sorts before... but ever since they entered the Waymarch, his determination was focused to a point. He knew where he had to be, even if he wasn’t certain what was waiting for them there. The cold coffin she’d discovered in the junklands was old by anyone’s standards. Hundreds, thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of years of debris concealed it below the layers of garbage and old-world waste. He was no help in discovering anything more about his origins, either. They’d had fun, though.

She smiled.

“Say, Gol, you remember Dolataria?”

He turned around and revealed his face, one of only a handful (yes, one of his hands too) of things that remained human in appearance. And as old more human parts failed, more of Gol became the metal thing he was now.

“I do.” He nodded.

“Do... Do you think we can do that again?”

“I have never denied you before.” He reached for her. It was the right hand that brushed against her arm first. It was cold. Unpleasantly so. Then, the other reached down and up she went, left to rest on his shoulders.

“You’re sure this doesn’t bother you?” she asked, knowing the answer.

“No.”

“And that... uh... whistle-thing – it won’t be popping up and throwing me off your back, will it?” She felt him shrug. “That’s comforting. You tell me if anything feels off and I’ll jump down, ‘kay?”

“Sure.” He didn’t always sound so colloquial. When they first met, Gol had been nearly mute. He understood things but he had difficulty finding his own words. He could obey back then. He wanted to obey back then...

She shook off that memory.

ANTHOLOGY

“Dolataria was beautiful.” Gol said. “I really enjoyed living there. Do you ever... wish we had taken up the Commandant’s offer? He was quite taken by you. You could have had some kids and – ounmf!” She gave him a kick in his muscled left side.

“Shut up already.” They were making much better time with Gol setting the pace. His legs rarely tired – though they did need to be oiled periodically. But the Weathered Mountains presented the type of terrain that you were meant to shake your fist at, much less actually take on seriously. All the same, up they went, following a worn footpath that slithered on the edge of life and the Mortual Chasm that ran the length of the mountain chain.

“The world’s zipper,” she thought out loud.

“It was formed by the Ruu-shans in the Yolde Days.” Sometimes Gol knew things. But he didn’t know that he knew them. They just... flowed out when opportunities presented themselves. It was infuriating if you wanted specifics, but wonderful if you were prepared to be surprised by occasionally useful information.

“What happened?” Mirdova asked, leaning forward. She was dwarfed by her companion in the way a child might appear when standing next to a sizable adult.

“There was a war. There is always a war. The enemy was advancing and the Ruu-shan Tzar refused to let his people fall to the hands of the Barb Ariens. He utilized the geofforming tech they used to attract deep water and thermal chutes for their power plants as a weapon.” His voice changed, taking on an unfamiliar accent.

“It was as though the Earth itself was water. Flowing beneath our feet. I turned to my garrison and gasped as the seams in the concrete tore free and a gaping maw ripped wide open like a hungry jaw. As innumerable members of both armies fell into the abyss, others, like myself, were lifted into the sky on pillars the Tzar

could not command. When I awoke, the ground was a touch warm and spouts of boiling water were soaking those who remained as the frigid temperature bit at our exposed flesh. I didn't need to hear from the Union. We had lost against the power of Nature herself.' That was the account of a soldier marching on the Ruu-shan capital."

"Is that where we're going, Gol?"

"I'm not sure. I think so. It could be something else." The Ruushans hadn't been a major power in the Sifican Reach for at least two thousand years. They certainly hadn't had geofforming technology when, history books say, they were finally overrun by the True Barbs. Their cities were devastated. Their numbers, literally decimated.

One in ten were taken from their major cities and slaughtered for every day the Last Tzar refused to surrender. Finally, after six days, the True Barbs' leader, Zhin Kahn, turned to the people of the walled Ruu-shan capital and promised that they would be left alone if they brought him the head of their beloved leader. It's not hard to imagine what they did. After the Tzar's personal guard fell defending him, the politicians that remained began to literally kill each other over the implied privilege of being the one to bring the old man's head to their conquerors.

The offer was, of course, a lie. If they had taken the time to peer over the battlements, they might have seen the True Barbs ready to storm the fortress as soon as the gates opened, no matter who beheaded whom.

But as generations have said since then, promises are the true casualties of war.

Mirdova might not have grown up in a golden age of civilization, but some stories just carry forward. Some stories cannot be killed.

ANTHOLOGY

She had heard the stories of the Ruu-shans, but despite the tales of their staggering powers, time smoothed out their impact on history like sand over a statue. Next to the empire-shattering power of Magnus Sterling's Aether Troops, simple geofforming weaponry seems almost laughable.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"You have asked that every day for... almost eight years, Mirdova. I still don't have an answer for you. I promise – you'll be the second to know."

She'd hoped that the memory he'd just reclaimed would offer additional personal information like it did when they were in Dolataria. But, again, that was her hope talking. Her instincts, as always, told her that this story – as vivid as it had been – was no more relevant than the hundreds of other snapshots he had recalled over the years.

"Get some rest," he said to her, and while she fought her fatigue, Mirdova found herself ill-equipped to win – and after a few minutes of quiet she succumbed. Gol continued his walk, at a slightly reduced speed to keep her comfortable as she drifted into a deep dreamstate.

"Do you know what they're doing to him?" Mirdova screamed at her father. "He's probably in pain! I can't believe you care so little about that poor man!" She was fourteen. She'd never been further out than the Seven Slumwards and the Junklands beyond.

He'd used their discovery of the cold coffin as leverage. He wanted out of the scrap heaps and the blistering heat. At first, it wasn't about handing it over to the right people or the wrong people. It was about getting it working so that it could help them.

But at their local technomancer's garage, the old man learned that this freakish creation could fetch a pretty sum, and went to the one group of people who had the means to pay for it. Sadly, that kind of wealth didn't come from dealing fairly with every two-bit scrapmonger who walked through their gates.

She was tired and it had only been a few hours since her father, Merdoza, had sold the cold coffin's contents to the Minor-Tzar, Emrick. He had offered to throw in the coffin itself as a show of good faith, but Emrick had already sent his men to haul it away.

She woke to shouting and found him already three bottles deep into the Nebre Slumward's cheapest hooch.

"Get the hell out of here, you little bitch!" He took a swing at her. "As useful as your deadbeat brother and whore mother." He wasn't being figurative or colourful in his language. Her brother, Merk, had been beaten to death by Emrick's men when he was caught stealing food a few years ago. Her mother, well, she made do any way she could. Mirdova loved her father despite all of this. He'd raised her. He had kept their hopes high and their lives meaningful for so long, but now, he had finally succumbed to their desperate situation and fallen into the depths of despair.

Her father would sober up. He'd apologize. Everything would return to the way it was before. Not great, sure, but they had each other...

Only... That's not how things happened.

Time went on by. Legends of the Steel Golem grew.

He was described as a brute. A strong-armed demon. He was unstoppable – and so was Emrick.

ANTHOLOGY

Her father, on the other hand, found his reward for the man in the cold coffin to be big enough that he never needed to stay sober again. And had no intention to do so.

So he continued to drink, and his anger exploded into violence.

Mirdova could no longer see the kindness hiding under the mask of inebriation. She wondered: Where did you go? But knew that she could not find him without eliminating his means of self-destruction.

One day while he was out she went about the task of pouring out all his liquor until none remained. It took hours, and enough liquid had met the ground that it was soggy and mud-like. Its acrid odour lingered in the air and burned her eyes, ready to ignite the neighbourhood if only it came to light.

When her still-drunk father discovered this, he naturally threw a fit. Merdoza dragged her out of their home and made a brisk walk towards the gates of the Minor-Tzar's compound. Outside, he screamed and begged the guards for just one more bottle. He pleaded so pitifully, some who watched told Mirdova afterwards, that they saw a guard throw a bottle from the parapets down to him.

Going to live on her own was an interesting adaption. But adapt she did. And quickly. Still, she felt for her father, despite his flaws, he was not inherently evil or bad. Simply broken.

Months would pass before Mirdova decided she should check in on him. That was when her heart bled. Her old home was occupied by unfamiliar faces. They would be the ones, these strangers, to tell her that her father had died the very same night she was forced out. It was not a great death, as far as deaths can be and go.

He simply drank himself too far into the bottle and fell into the muddy soil, where his unconscious body was quickly and quietly swallowed by the earth.

And there are vermin in the slums. Need any more be said?

Distraught, Mirdova found herself standing in front of the gates to Emrick's walled estate, screaming at whomever was willing to lend an ear.

"You killed my father, you – you bastards!" Causing great commotion was sure to get her the attention she was after and by dusk she was behind the bars of a grimy basement cell, awaiting some awful fate. Probably in the Minor-Tzar's harem, possibly at the end of a rope in the courtyard. Neither were futures that she would want to welcome.

Only... That's not how things happened.

The Creature, despite their time apart, recognized her from when he first awoke from his long sleep. He was quiet and seated in the cell across from her, as he always was when Emrick had no need for him. They started to speak and both sides, over the course of many hours, came to a realization. Their fates were being controlled by the same terrible man. So then and there, Mirdova and the Creature made a pact.

They would leave the estate and find a place where they were welcomed and life was good. They weren't going to settle for less than paradise. And as they spoke something churned inside them both. Destiny, perhaps.

Mirdova and her new companion, Gol, had enough of the hell they were in now – Mirdova for what the place had done to her family, and the Creature for his stolen memories and brutal master.

ANTHOLOGY

She promised there would be no more needless deaths. That she would take care of him. Not all of this would come to pass, but yes, they would take care of one another.

The rest... it is a blur of action and reaction and horror.

But not for them.

At dawn, fires at their back, the two walked out of the estate, and later that evening Mirdova would fall asleep in the arms of a metal avenger.

The Minor-Tzar was dead, his men scattered to the winds.

There was little doubt that the Creature was a force to be reckoned with – and more importantly, that despite his appearance and dull-eyed deference to authority, she came to understand that he was human after all.

“It’s time to get up, Dova,” he said to her, and she yawningly obeyed, wiping the sleep from her eyes, feeling the coolness of the altitude gust through the blanket from their travel bag.

“Wh—” She stopped. “What did you call me?”

“Do you like it? I just thought it would be nice to try something new.” He smiled. “Or is Mir better?”

“What’s going on?” She stepped up and as she rose, so did the contours of the ruins of a huge city surrounded by mountains. “An... Acropolis?”

“Actually, we used to call these things megacities. I lived here for a while, long ago.” He stood next to her, feeling a throbbing in his head. “I don’t know what’s happening. But the memories are flooding back in. See that over there?” He pointed to a crippled skyscraper. “I knew someone who used to work there. He had an office on the twenty-fifth storey and a laboratory that I visited often in the sub-basement floor 10.” Mirdova looked at him, momentarily saddened. Every time he remembered something about his past he said the same thing. It never stayed. At least, not all of it.

“You were a technomancer?” She laughed, pretending for both their sakes that she hadn’t heard threads of the same story when they were in other strange locales. “I find that very unlikely.”

“We didn’t have technomancers back then, but I don’t know what I was. Only... pieces of who I was. It’s like an outline without substance or context. It feels... good, though. I feel like we’re close to the paradise we’ve always wanted to find. If I’m wrong... Well, I’d be okay if I went back to Dolataria.” He reached out and squeezed her hand with his real one. “I’m sorry about...”

“I know.” She squeezed back and gave him a hug. “I don’t really know if I like these new personality traits, though.” She smirked. “I hope you can still kick some ass if we need you to.”

He smiled back.

“Don’t you worry. Come on, there’s a way down somewhere near here.”

As they approached the edge, a dim surface flickered ahead of them.

“Stop!” She grabbed him. “That’s a WarField. You’ll be torn apart!”

ANTHOLOGY

He turned to her around, let go of her hand, and stepped into the darkness. Heart swelling and horror climbing up her spine, Mirdova watched him vanish.

There was a pause.

“Aren’t you coming?” His disembodied voice was hard to hear.

“Huh?” she said, overcome with honest surprise and something dangerously close to elation.

He stepped back and tugged her through the buzzing, tingling membrane.

“No. Way.”

The city ahead of them was still in ruins, but the field had obscured – and perhaps protected – something neither of them could have foreseen. It was huge. Taking up a clearing in the centre of the metropolis that was easily the size of the slumward she’d grown up in.

It shined brightly against the dilapidated concrete.

“Can you fly that thing?”

“I... I know I can.” He rubbed a patch of chrome on head. “The question is, where do we go?”

“Where can we go?”

“Theoretically? Anywhere. It will replenish its batteries the moment we start up the reactor and get it in the air.”

“Anywhere?”

“Seems that way.”

“You’ve brought us this far, Creat. Where do you think we should go next?”

He considered this for a moment.

“It’s called... Mezopo. It was built on the southern pole. Hidden away. That’s where the others will be.” He seemed so sure and yet so uncertain. It was in these silent moments that Mirdova found herself following the stretches of flesh along his body to where they blended into the metal shell. Occasionally, she’d notice the small openings where gears whirred and the buzz of electricity kept her companion moving. Kept him alive. He couldn’t travel if it rained, though that wasn’t much of a problem these days. It rained, what, two, perhaps three times a season? Hardly enough to keep the cisterns full.

Water was like gold.

It was life.

Here stood a man whose Achilles heel was the very thing that women and men now fought to the death to claim for their own. Here stood a Creature that, far more than he was man or machine, was a living mystery.

How had his sleepless mind survived all these years?

Why was he so driven to follow the feeling – and that’s all it was, intuition carved from the walls of a dream – that there was something waiting for him out there, something better than the rusted kingdoms of a dying world that they’d slowly explored over a dirty decade?

ANTHOLOGY

He repeated again, questioning it: “That’s where the others will be?”

“Others?”

“We used to call them survivors.” He put a hand up. “I don’t know why I said we, but isn’t that exciting? Maybe there are others like me out there. Maybe they have a way to make me whole again.”

She snorted. “Survivors? Kinda rude to call ‘em that, isn’t it? What are we if we aren’t survivors? And what were these people surviving?” She spat. “The hell with them! We made it pretty far without whatever those fancy Mezopo people have.”

There was that pause again. Gears and cogs, churning around in a mostly-bloodless shell. His noseless face scared others. His disjointed personality was used against him more than once in their travels. But there was enough of a person in between the machinations that made it possible for her to see the human in him. She liked that. She liked to whisper it to herself from time to time as they walked: ‘He is human.’

“Where do you want to go?” he asked her. Already, the scraps of memory that had so invigorated him when they walked through the barrier were fading. As though the dull machine mind was somehow stronger than his afterthought of a brain – for when the Man awakened, the Machine was never far behind.

“We’ll find our paradise, won’t we old friend?”

He smiled, but less than before.

“I’d rather not answer that.”

He reached out, thought better of it, and stared off into the distance.

“No. I take that back. We’re definitely going to find it. Wherever it is. Whatever it is.”

Mirdova regarded him with a wink and a tap on the back. He had regained so much since they first met. It didn’t always come to the surface like it was now, but it was in there, somewhere.

“This is the right path to be on,” Mirdova mouthed to herself, slowly giving it voice. “Because he is human. Because I am human.”

Not for the first time, she knew this was where she wanted to be: with him.

It was always exciting. It was sometimes frightening, but always tinged with intrigue and the unknown. It was everything that life back in the Slumwards could never be. This was the world. It was mostly empty for all they knew. It was incredibly lonely at times, soul-crushing in light of what things should have been.

But!

She didn’t miss having a place to call home anymore. Wherever they went, somehow, became home.

And if they didn’t find what they were looking for at this Mezopo pole-thing, well, they were always welcome back in Dolataria. It was fun there. It was beautiful. And, because of them, it was now a safe place to be. Mirdova gripped the sacred blade they had given her to commemorate the timely death of the Geophage. The two of them put down an overgrown worm, and they’d wanted to make her queen. Imagine that! Her? A queen. Pfft, it wasn’t even a question worth entertaining.

Still...

ANTHOLOGY

Even if she rejected the regency...

She could live there and be pretty happy. Right?

A few hundred people in one place, without thirst or hunger? She'd never get over the joyous absurdity of that thought.

The two walked down to the airship. It would need work before it would fly. Patches here and there. But they had time. They had all the time in the world.

SOME REPAIRS LATER...

The sun was bright. It was always bright, but today, it seemed a touch more.

A warm breeze swept over them and out and away. Far away. To places they would visit someday. It touched on people and stories that would bring Gol, and Mirdova, closer to who they really were and wanted to be. Time passed.

With a push of a button the enormous craft took flight with the two sitting at the helm.

Gol asked again, "Where to?"

Mirdova gave him a hug and a light peck on the cheek.

"Let's go find out!"

- Mirdova Journeural Recording 06.2A1.15:20:33

MISERY'S ENGINE

TALES FROM THE GREAT PLATE

175 Years Before 'Shoulders of Giants'

Across the settlement, the people went to work dismantling the structures, shattering the brick and concrete, leaving only ruin and rubble where there once stood great architectural works. It began in the centre, where the buildings were tallest, with seismic explosives set off to render the ancient city to dust.

The Noon Army was awake again and preparing to move.

East, they would head, towards the last of remaining Dawn civilization. The pacifists would not be able to hold out long against the barrage of the fully mobilized gallow singers; machines built from the metal retrieved after the skin of this city was shaken off. Repurposed in the great forges within the Noon Army's flagship vessel, the *Avarice*.

In hours, not days, the siren will sound and the citizens of the Noon Army will join together in phalanx divisions and leave behind only those things they cannot carry.

Not all adore the policies of the Noon Army.

Esper Emmer is one of these people.

"You can't do this, General!" He's made his way through the crowds to meet with the King of Dawn and the Queen of Dusk. He hopes they will be sensible. He hopes that they will listen. But the war machine has started up and the resonating sounds in the distance of buildings collapsing are hard to ignore.

General Himmerman shakes his head, "go back to your laboratory, Esper. The Royals are busy planning our offensive."

“Don't you understand? I've figured it out! I know why the Noon Army marches!”

This catches Himmerman's attention.

“What do you mean by that?”

From under his arm, Esper pulls out a series of papers, lined with numbers and equations. A few are circled and these are the ones he points to.

“The Noon Army only goes to war when the sun is blocked by the moon, is that not correct?”

Himmerman's interest falters, “of course. It is the will of the Day God. I see no reason for this outburst.” He motions for a few of the elite Light Guards to advance, prompting Esper to take a few cautionary steps backwards.

“Look, I've been going over our old records. I think I may have discovered something... profound.” Esper gestures for the man to look at his sheets, eyeing the approaching Light Guards as he does.

“To write is heresy, Esper. You are a stock counter. A stock counter. We allow it only on the condition that this skill we have given you be used for our purposes. Has your master not properly instilled the fear of rejecting our laws and regulations. I could have you put to death at this very moment and I would be doing our great people a service.” He pauses. “Only, you are my kin and I am bound to our blood and to my sister. Go now, before the Royals hear you and force me to do something I will regret.”

“You aren't listening, Uncle! This war mongering can end! I have proof – undeniable proof – that the eclipse is not a supernatural occurrence. It isn't the Day God! It's a cycle. A predictable cycle! We can –”

ANTHOLOGY

“Enough!” The doors behind Himmerman opens and the King of Dawn steps forward, his sword drawn. “You will come with me, immediately.”

The General’s eyes widen and relax. “I tried to warn you.” He says to Esper as he passes.

Inside the Royal Assembly, the King finds his spot next to his Queen. Around them, in a spiralling circle of desks, sit the Council of Light.

“Tell us, Esper Emmer, what have you discovered in relevance to our God’s power? I listened as you spoke to General Himmerman, and if I am not mistaken, you told him you had discovered that the Black Moon is not a result of his desire for blood and conquest?” The King smiles. “Go on, tell us what you mean.”

“I spoke with some travelers that were here recently, a girl and some huge metal man, and they told me a different name for the Black Moon – an eclipse. They spoke of it as though it were a natural experience. They said it would come to pass days prior to the event, my King. I didn’t believe them at first, but I went to the Archive and referenced our war journals. The scribes had to translate, of course, but the numbers, when they came back, they showed a pattern.”

“Numerologist...” The Queen considered. “But they have been dead since the Great Expulsion.”

He obliged and followed again.

The King took his spot on one side of an ornate but worn table.

“I have to commend you.” He told Esper. “We are so very careful when it comes to knowledge, passing on only what we know will best support our people and our ways. That is how we’ve managed to enjoy decades upon decades of peace. And we live in peace between the periods of the Black Moon.” He drew a deep breath, “but, those of us who direct the Noon Army and its ideals, well... there is some allowance for knowledge to be passed on.”

The King’s smirk told Esper too much.

“You knew?”

“General Himmerman often spoke about the cleverness of his nephew, and I am in position to deny this claim, seeing what you have discovered and how quickly you rushed forward to tell others. On that note – who else knows what you have uncovered?”

“None! None other than me and the scribes that translated the old texts.”

“And General Himmerman and his Light Guards, I suppose?”

“Yes, that’s all, I swear!”

“Good.”

Minutes later, the King left the confessional, alone.

- Light Sphere Observation Recording 122,314,441

ANTHOLOGY

THOSE WE LEAVE

TALES FROM THE GREAT PLATE

2,400 Years Before ‘Shoulders of Giants’

“It could have been worse.” The woman’s voice was soft, welcoming, but insincere in a comforting way that made it difficult to appreciate if you had only just met her. He knew her, though, and that’s why it cut him in his spot.

‘Even by your standards that was a pretty sloppy delivery.’ He thought but held within.

Alwin had come to know her well enough in their many, many years in each other’s company. In the way you eventually come to understand a person’s emotional state by hearing the way they carefully chose the inflections of their words, regardless if they are talking about the weather, their breakfast, or the reason itself.

Her voice trembled in the space between each word. It was, he knew, out of complete disappointment. And that, more than the situation, was what hurt him.

“When has someone said it could have been worse without also meaning: ‘the situation is pretty much the sum of bad.’” Alwin staggered around in a circle and then made his way over to the vault’s door on his side of the room.

Behind him, a thin layer of Neuroglass kept the two separate. He wanted to turn around. He wanted to brush her silver hair and stare into her brown eyes, caressing her dark skin and whisper into her ear so that she would shiver and giggle, unable to escape the bond the two had.

Instead and in its place he felt her distance and her eagerness to escape.

But she was here and she was trying to make him feel better.

ANTHOLOGY

It was selfless and it was something more than that too.

It was love.

And that's what their love had become - a unity that blends even irritation into a state of unexpected but embracing euphoria. It was poised to drive a person wild. To drive a person mad. To drive a person to become better or to become worse and no matter which way you might choose to look at it you'll find that more than any other emotional state that it is love that does its best to take control and transform you.

So, he stayed where he was, not looking at her, holding his fear of the present and swallowing up his hate for where he was. Some things you can't control. Some things are just outside our influence.

He stopped thinking about what they had lost and focused on the buzz, instead.

Not many people can hear Neuroglass and for those that do there's a simple algorithmic procedure added to your auditory sequences that can adjust it so that you'll never hear it again.

For most people this is practical.

Alwin and the others, however, willingly hear the Neuroglass - and not just the Neuroglass - they can hear the symphony of sounds that make up the world around them.

It makes their line of business every bit easier. Here and now he wished those who had thrown him in here would just take it away. Even as he held onto it and focused on the distinct resonance his mind reminded him that she could hear it too.

Was there a reason for hearing Neuroglass, really?

Not before, but now and only now there was a purpose and had he not been able to listen for it before they would have forced him to hear it now. After all you don't want your inmates walking into invisible walls and hurting themselves, right? Yes, if he hadn't heard the Neuroglass before he would have been made to comply with the rulings and the precedents set down at Court End at his punishment hearing a few days ago.

When he was free.

"Look." The false-coolness and relaxed attitude, or at least the attempt to ease her fears, were gone. Love had taken control of her. So, in their place, sincerity manifested and reared itself up with no attempts and no pretense of concealing her true feelings: "I want you to know that we're all going to be here. Right here. We're going to be waiting for you. We're going to keep our communication channels open as often as possible." She swallowed.

"You'll be able to find us. I spoke with some friends and they've assured me that some of the accused have managed to get the TransComm working on the other side. Find them and you'll find us. Sure, it's against the wishes of Court End, but what will they do about it, really? It should allow us to send messages across the Shroud. Everything... Everything's going to be OK." Her hand reached forward and stopped on the invisible, buzzing division.

ANTHOLOGY

In Fact:

Neuroglass, like many of the features here, is designed so that you react to it only when you come in contact with it.

Even then, it remains invisible.

“So you say.” Alwin turned away from her.

“What? What’s that meant to suggest? Do you think we’re incapable of holding onto our promises just because there’s a chance that you’re going to be out of reach for a few years? Don’t be ridiculous Alwin. We’ve been friends for... for friggin’ ever!”

“I know.” His lethargic words trembled in the presence of powerful, instinctual emotions, and something... else. “I don’t want to lose you either. I just don’t want to lose everything that I’ve made here. You know how it was... After... if it wasn’t for you and the guys, well, I don’t know... No... I do know that I wouldn’t be here.”

He considered what he had just said and added: “I mean, not here-here. I meant to say that... Gods be damned... I can’t even think properly anymore.”

She smiled, he knew this despite the fact he was turned away. They were that close. He could hear her smile in the way she spoke next. “We’ll make it work. I promise.”

The AuroraCantor boomed: “PRIS 12H-22K008.90.i81 please report to verdict room C23, located at the end of the hall.” With that, the wall behind him, next to the vault where he left all his belongings, slid to one side and exposed a long, narrow passage that stretched on and on. Blue lights guided the way. He’d read about such a place before. A tunnel of light with something waiting

at the other end. This is not what he'd expected.

"I guess I have to go." The woman said, turning away. "I'm sorry none of the others came. They just..."

"It's fine. You're the only one I would have really wanted here, anyway." He was looking down and away. His future was waiting for him down there, in the glimmer. "You're also the only one that I really wish hadn't come here."

He felt cold.

"Could you... Could you just wait until the passage closes? I know it's stupid I just -"

"I'll wait. Of course I'll wait!" He didn't turn to see her. The raised voice was enough to make his heart break all over again. She lagged and then caught up to herself again. "Alwin?"

"Yes, Risa."

"I love you. I've always loved you. I just want you to know that if there was any thought in my mind that you would be the one standing over there that I would have..."

"Stop. Don't say it. Don't say anything more."

"Screw that! I need to do this. The verdict has been passed. They can't do anything to me." She was suddenly so strong. So determined. "When we were organizing the boycott I don't think we could have predicted that they would get access to CeeCee's Command Code. How those pieces of shit turned her against us... It was ruthless... It was unnecessary."

ANTHOLOGY

“I know.”

“No, fuck you, you don’t know! The thing is... Alwin, the way that you reacted. The things you did to stop her from bringing the True Justice back on all of us. I - I - I saw the same mindlessness that made her into their servant in you. The same capability for True Evil. And then... I just can’t believe everyone’s been interned to different sections of Eaven. It was her fault, sure, but if you had just allowed the True Justice to come instead of deleting her. If you’d just gone with the protocol that we discussed... I love you Alwin, but I can’t say that what you did was the right thing to do. She’s dead. The triplets are in Sigma, Epsilon, and Miridia. Momo has been forced to find refuge in the Yamatean Annex. We don’t even know where they sent the others.”

“And you.”

“Me? You know damn well what’s going to happen to me.”

“Do I?” He took a step away from her, into the light. “I don’t think that plea bargains are considered ethical for people who were trying to set up a revolution, Risa.”

“What choice did I have? I have a family that needs me.”

Alwin took another step.

“Family, huh?”

“That’s right! I have to think about the kids and my folks. If I didn’t say something to the True Justice, well, they could have gone after them. You... none of you have that. I was risking more and...” She coughed in her anxiety. “I couldn’t let my actions define their lives, too. I had to be sure they would be safe - not many people here have families after all. Not a lot of people had the chance to... to...” She turned around.

Alwin found his way down to the punishment room. Its white ceiling and pale blue walls must have been created in an attempt to put the mind at ease.

It was having the opposite effect in his case.

Or, perhaps, that was the intention after all.

“We will now begin carrying out the sentence.” The AuraroCantor declared. “Are you prepared?”

“Not much choice, is there?”

“No.” It answered, plainly. Emotionless.

“Get on with it.”

“Alwin Trimth. You have been found guilty by a board of your peers of acts against the Continuous Realms and therefore against all who live in Eaven. In accordance with the laws and regulations passed down by the Archivist and the lives that have been Saved by the tribunal of the True Justice, you have been deemed unfit for Citizenship. You are sentenced to the following twenty five years living on Earth. You will have the possibility of parole after the first ten years if deemed appropriate by your case officer. Your tasks will include maintenance work on non-essential but important equipment throughout Eaven’s Physical Databanks and Auxiliary Entities. May the time on Earth allow you to regain the respect that our society deserves so that you may be welcomed home with open arms to all those you leave behind.”

It was not exactly the most informative declaration he’d ever heard but it managed to strike the right chords. And it hurt him.

“I was humbled by your mercy.” He lied. “I shall... do what I am

ANTHOLOGY

asked and hope that I live long enough to return.”

“Your compliance is appreciated, Alwin. It gives us no satisfaction to carry this sentence. Your efforts to create a better society will be recognized by the True Justice and it is important, perhaps, to tell you that this is the only reason you have been offered such leniency.”

“Is that what you want to call it?”

“Enough.” The voice was tired. “Alwin Trimth. By the powers provided by the Continuous Society of Humanity, you will now be imprinted onto a synthetic postform capable of surviving in the Requiem of Earth. Your observing officer, Teal Clay, will require daily updates on your progress. Failure to adhere to all necessary protocols will result in termination without possibility of resurrection. Acknowledge that you understand your sentence.”

“Sure, whatever.”

“Alwin, you have been warned.”

The room was losing its substance.

Alwin’s mind was in the downstream, being forced into a synthetic body that they would have grown just a few hours previously. Cast out of the paradise that humanity constructed to escape the material world and all the damage that they had inflicted upon it.

Paradise.

That’s what they called it. And that was a Lie.

The degradation of the scanned consciousnesses - and therefore all the people within Eaven’s infrastructure, was becoming more apparent. Eventually, all would bleed into one another. Eventually, a gestalt and broken form would reign within the extended reality.

They tried to warn the others.

And so, this was also irony.

He was free to live without the dementia that was already showing its face across the landscapes of Eaven. Alwin, even he recognized it, may very well outlive his friends within.

“Alwin Trimth.” The AuraroCantor whispered as he left the digital frontier.

“You have been sentenced to Life.”

- Light Sphere Observation Recording 82,210,241



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