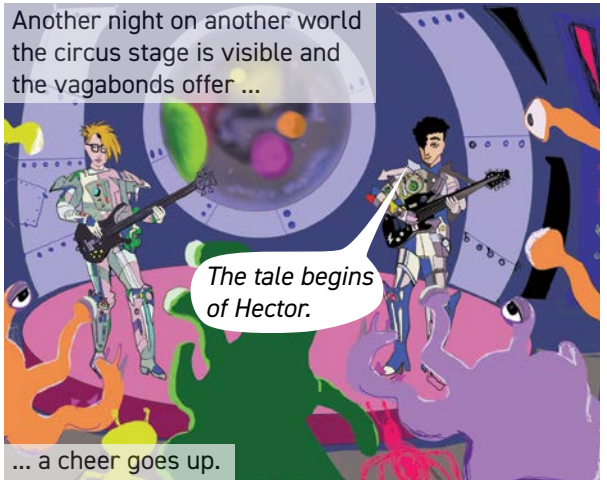
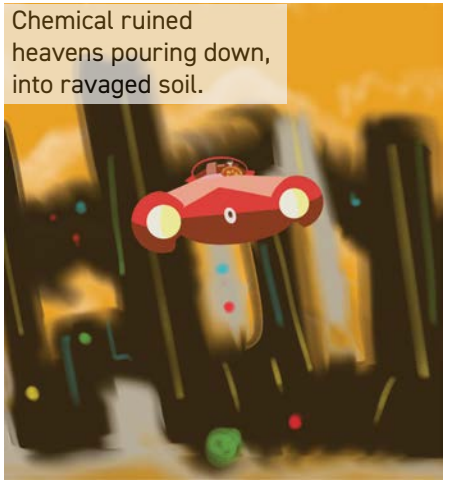

After cleaning up the droppings of the beasts of the menagerie a sullen figure shares a glance with the vagabonds.


Another night on another world the circus stage is visible and the vagabonds offer ...
The tale begins of Hector.
... a cheer goes up.

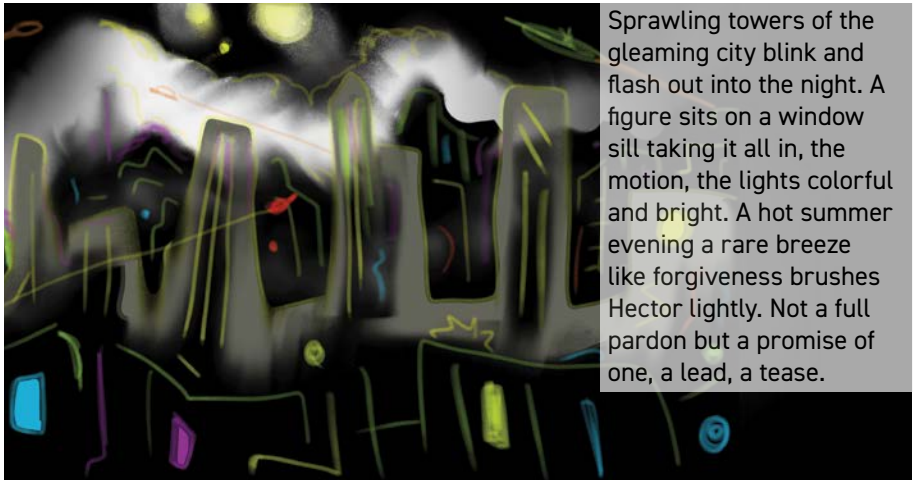

Hector detective in a sky car oft so reckless.

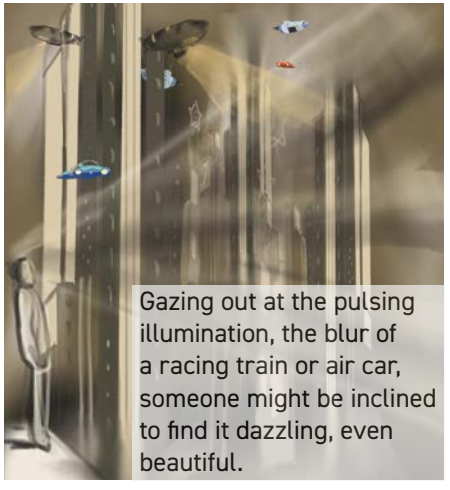

Over city lights and through gleaming towers high.


Chemical ruined heavens pouring down, into ravaged soil.


Sprawling, flashing, haze over it all.


Mystery and danger do enthrall.

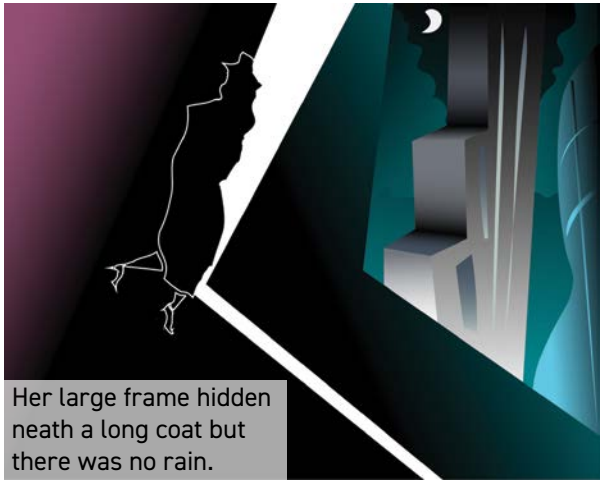

Sprawling towers of the gleaming city blink and flash out into the night. A figure sits on a window sill taking it all in, the motion, the lights colorful and bright. A hot summer evening a rare breeze like forgiveness brushes Hector lightly. Not a full pardon but a promise of one, a lead, a tease.


Gazing out at the pulsing illumination, the blur of a racing train or air car, someone might be inclined to find it dazzling, even beautiful.


The city Hector knew was a voracious beast that nightly seemed to feed. Beneath the electric facade was a world of vice and desperate types their victims found in the new day's light.


She burst through the door.

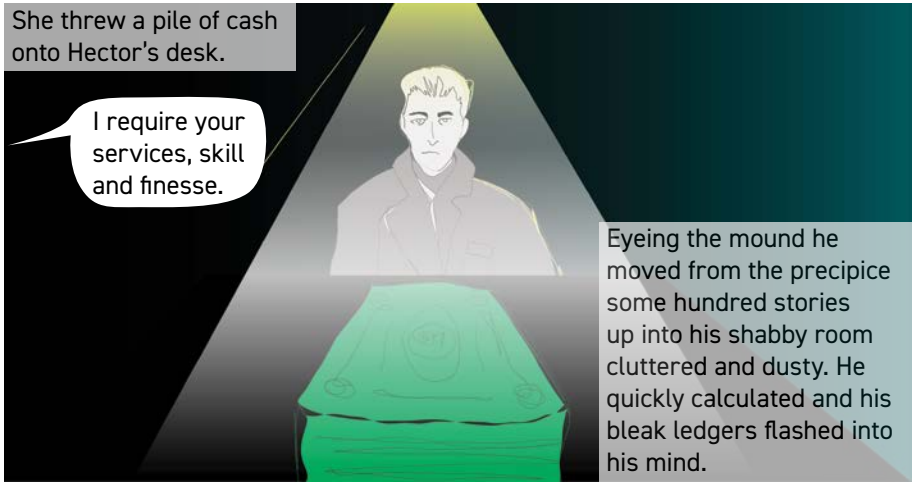

Her face veiled with lace hanging from a wide brimmed hat.


Her large frame hidden neath a long coat but there was no rain.

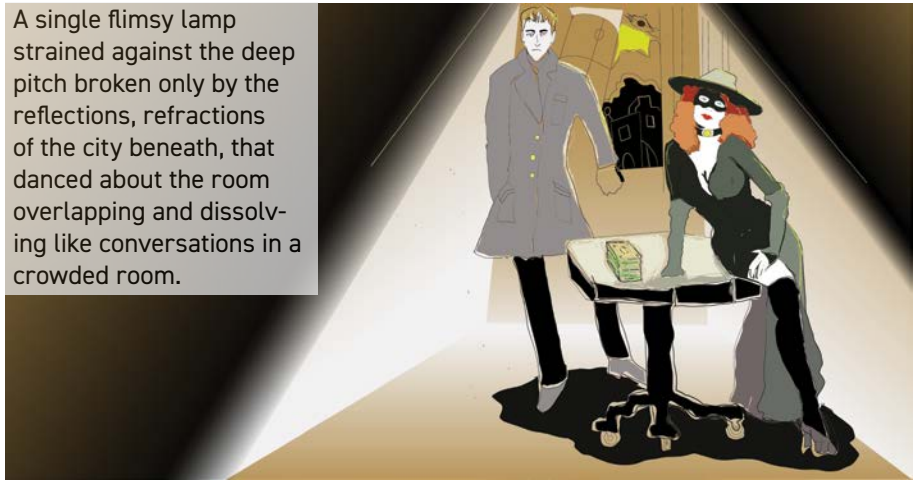

What is she concealing?


As she strode forward a flash of silk stocking peeked out and disappeared again. Just a long, shapely leg, no hint of a dress or skirt.

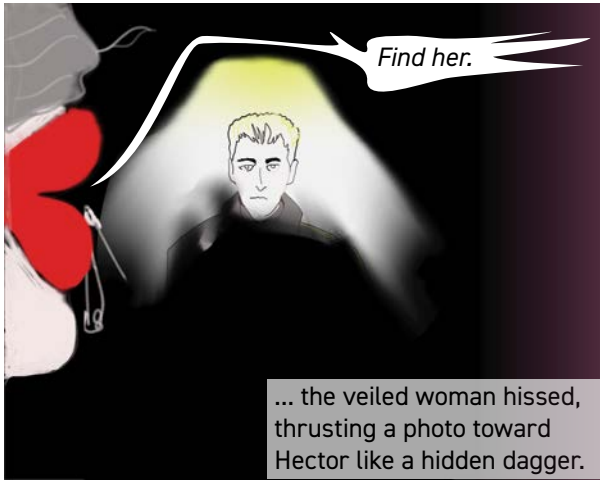

Is she wearing anything under that coat?


She threw a pile of cash onto Hector's desk.
I require your services, skill and finesse.
Eyeing the mound he moved from the precipice some hundred stories up into his shabby room cluttered and dusty. He quickly calculated and his bleak ledgers flashed into his mind.

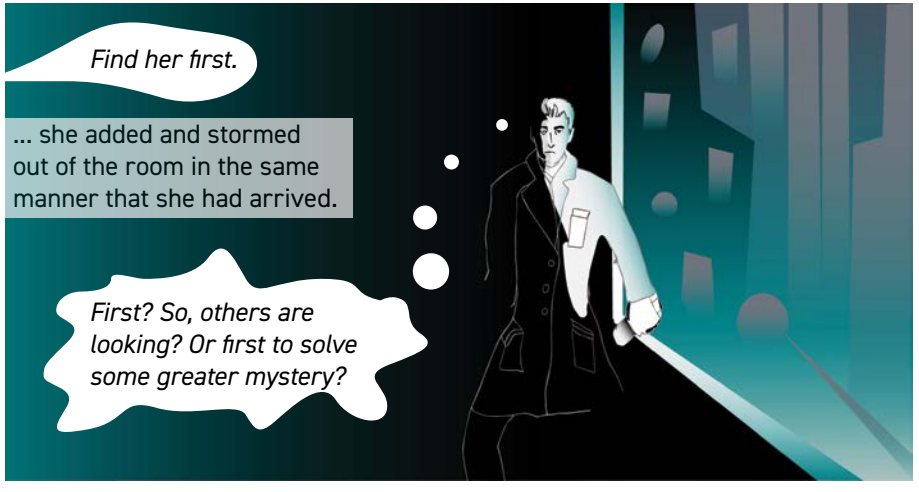
A single flimsy lamp strained against the deep pitch broken only by the reflections, refractions of the city beneath, that danced about the room overlapping and dissolving like conversations in a crowded room.



... Hector answered.

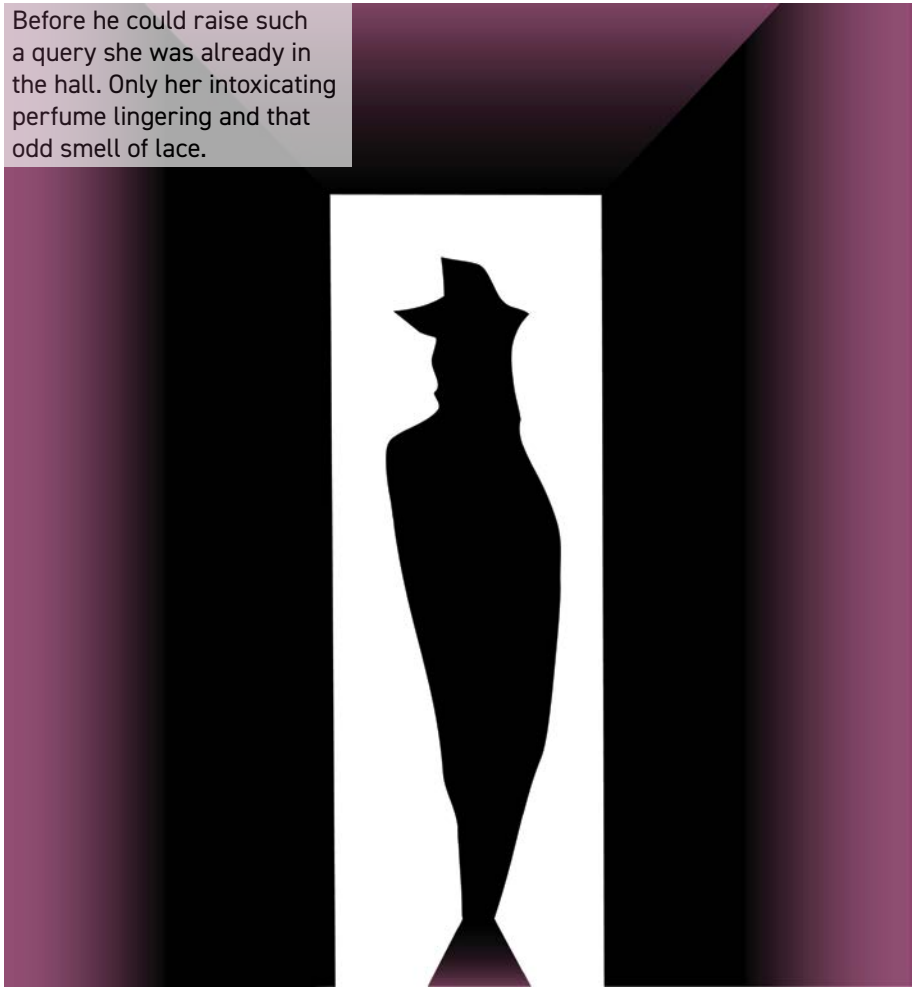


... the veiled woman hissed, thrusting a photo toward Hector like a hidden dagger.



... she added and stormed out of the room in the same manner that she had arrived.

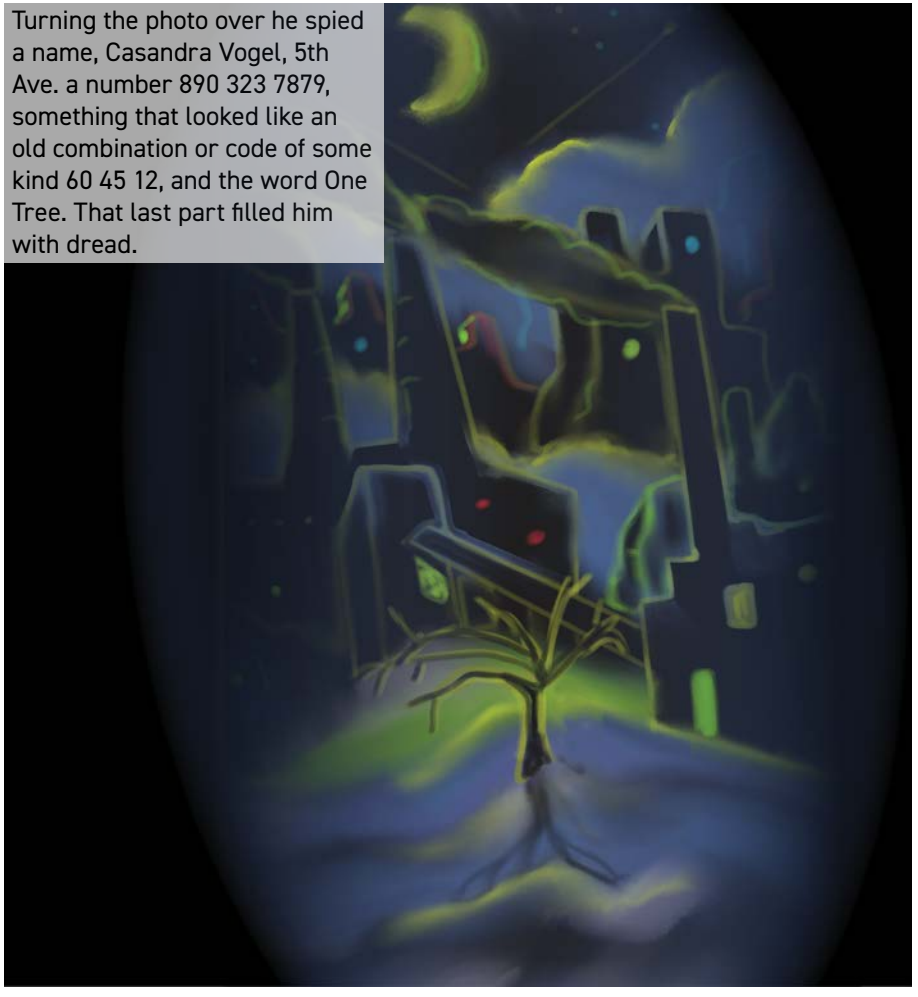
Before he could raise such a query she was already in the hall. Only her intoxicating perfume lingering and that odd smell of lace.



The pic was tiny but clear enough, a beautiful blonde smiled out from it. She wore a more modest hat than the unknown client and a tan suit or coat, maybe a lab coat?

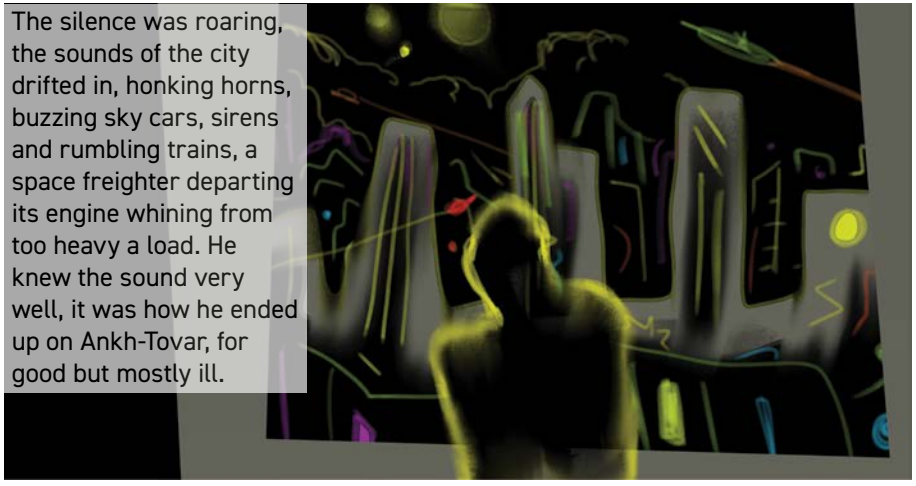
It was impossible to say how large the woman was as the pic only showed her from the chest up and nothing was visible in the background for reference, like an ID pic for a company.

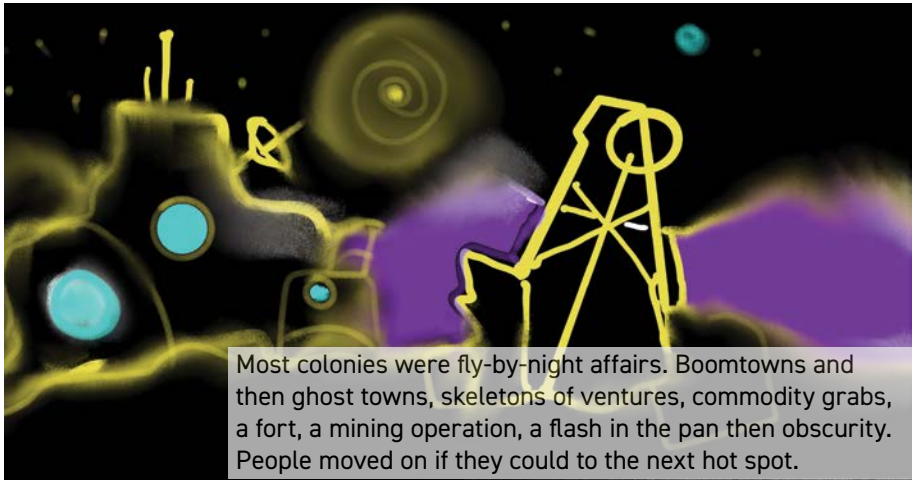
Turning the photo over he spied a name, Casandra Vogel, 5th Ave. a number 890 323 7879, something that looked like an old combination or code of some kind 60 45 12, and the word One Tree. That last part filled him with dread.



He looked it over hoping he would not have to go up to One Tree. As he looked closer a fingerprint was also visible. It looked to be a thumb that had been pressed in blood, despite the heat of the room a chill passed over him.

The silence was roaring, the sounds of the city drifted in, honking horns, buzzing sky cars, sirens and rumbling trains, a space freighter departing its engine whining from too heavy a load. He knew the sound very well, it was how he ended up on Ankh-Tovar, for good but mostly ill.



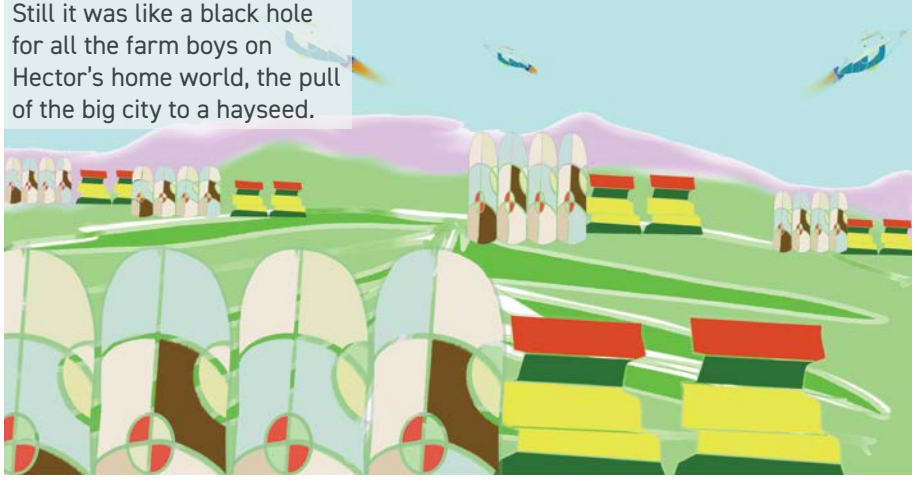


Most colonies were fly-by-night affairs. Boomtowns and then ghost towns, skeletons of ventures, commodity grabs, a fort, a mining operation, a flash in the pan then obscurity. People moved on if they could to the next hot spot.

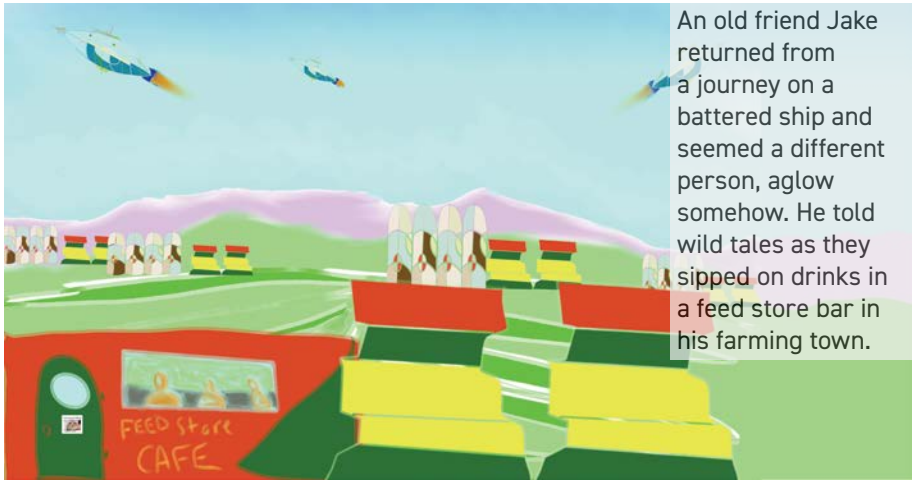
Ankh-Tovar was a planet of speculation, financial gamblers, carpetbaggers, get rich quick schemes, mineral rushes while the price rose. Sometimes a frenzy started when someone claimed it would climb though it wasn't always true and the ultimate aftermath, as plans were torn asunder might be dire.

Fortunes were made and lost on the rough rock in unequal measures. The desperate wrecks of lives left behind, victims of cons and grifts turned to such plays to survive. The stranded, ruined and petty marks soon populated the underworld of thieves, smugglers and gangsters. An economy of carcasses and vultures developed, those at the bottom and others that picked their bones.

Then there were the areas ravaged by the mining and industry or even war on occasion.



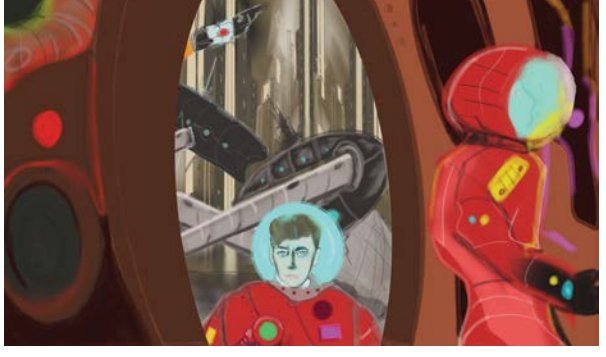
Still it was like a black hole for all the farm boys on Hector's home world, the pull of the big city to a hayseed.



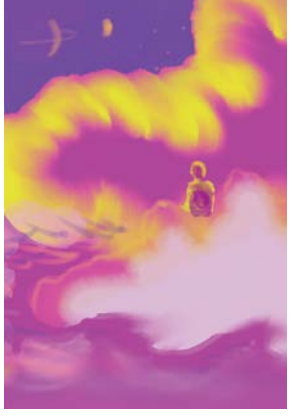
An old friend Jake returned from a journey on a battered ship and seemed a different person, aglow somehow. He told wild tales as they sipped on drinks in a feed store bar in his farming town.

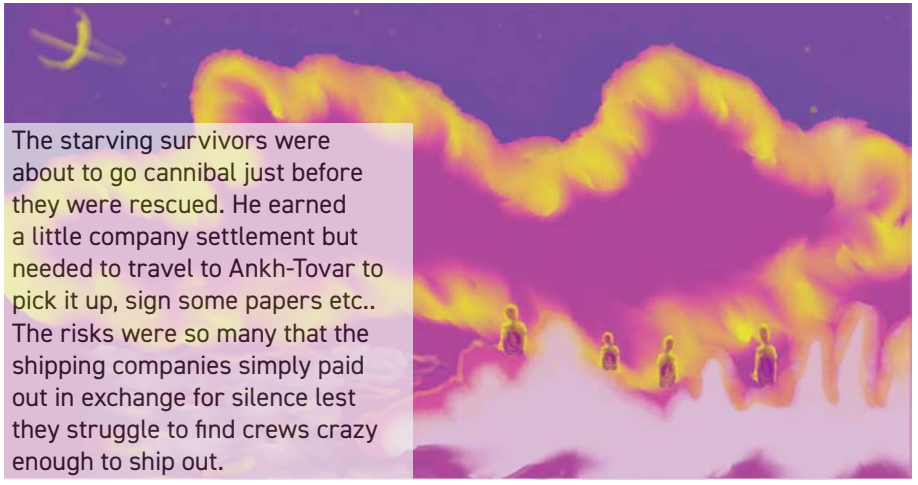
His sunny skin and flowing mane of blonde hair made him look the picture of a sailor of old, just in from some whaling adventure to the far side of the world. A long ways from Hector's world of farms, hoppers, silos, shipping containers, a constant stream of things exiting his bland sphere, no one willingly arriving, not to stay at least.

Hector hitched a ride on a freighter to Ankh-Tovar and signed up on the first ship that would take him but solar flares destroyed their merchant fleet and they crash landed on Tuller.

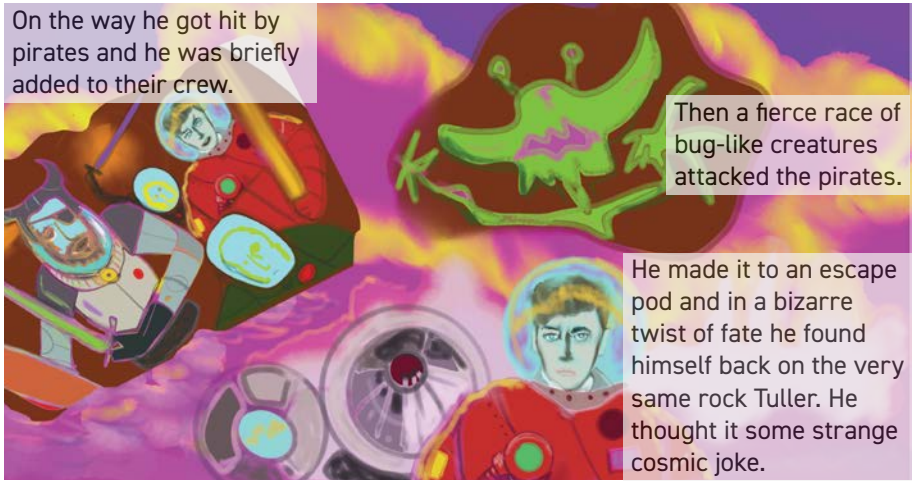


Tuller a place that often filled his nightmares.





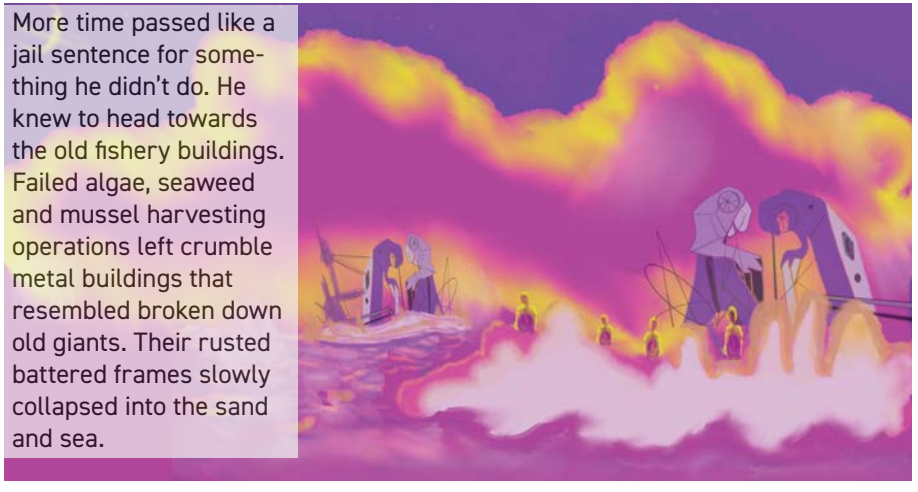
The starving survivors were about to go cannibal just before they were rescued. He earned a little company settlement but needed to travel to Ankh-Tovar to pick it up, sign some papers etc.. The risks were so many that the shipping companies simply paid out in exchange for silence lest they struggle to find crews crazy enough to ship out.



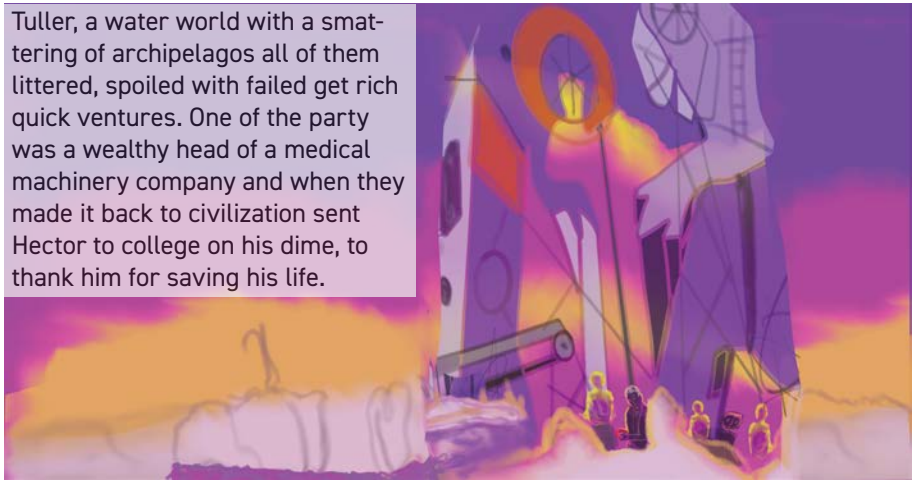
On the way he got hit by pirates and he was briefly added to their crew.

Then a fierce race of bug-like creatures attacked the pirates.

He made it to an escape pod and in a bizarre twist of fate he found himself back on the very same rock Tuller. He thought it some strange cosmic joke.

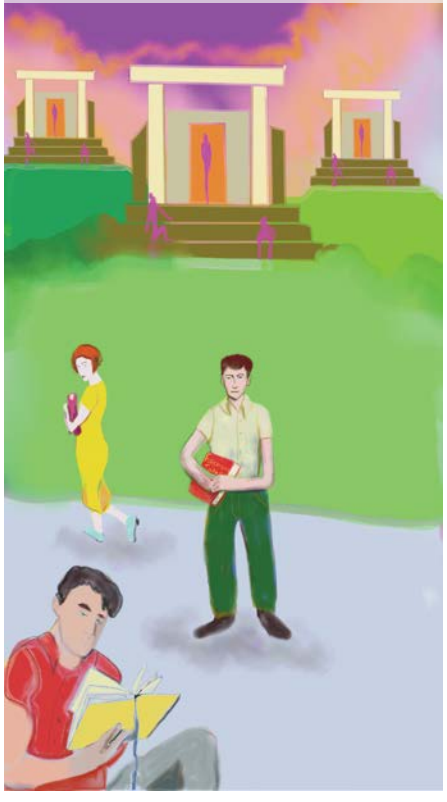


More time passed like a jail sentence for something he didn't do. He knew to head towards the old fishery buildings. Failed algae, seaweed and mussel harvesting operations left crumble metal buildings that resembled broken down old giants. Their rusted battered frames slowly collapsed into the sand and sea.



Tuller, a water world with a smattering of archipelagos all of them littered, spoiled with failed get rich quick ventures. One of the party was a wealthy head of a medical machinery company and when they made it back to civilization sent Hector to college on his dime, to thank him for saving his life.

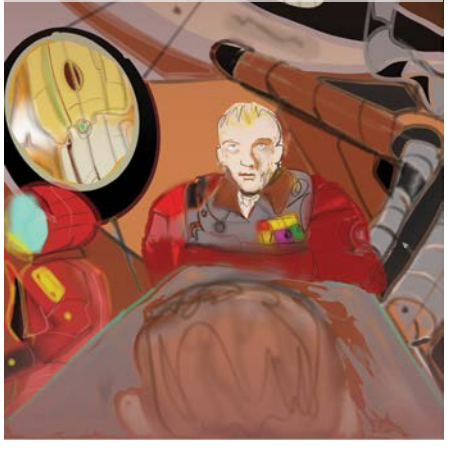
Hector thought it an exaggeration but shell-shocked and adrift he took the gift. He excelled at his studies and after graduating once again tried to travel to Ank-Tovar to pick up his settlement dough.



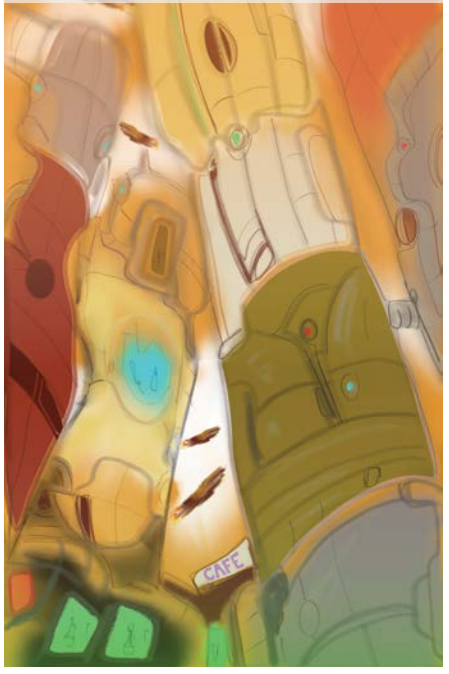
When he finally arrived the clerk at the office looked at him like a ghost, maybe he was he thought. Maybe he was still on that miserable planet and someone was gnawing on his legs. Another week and his cash would have been forfeit.

It was a decent little chunk of change that he didn't quite know what to do with. So he ended up on that side of town at the Jade Bar a little too often.

When he arrived he barely recognized him gone was the golden sailor. Patting down the last strands of his once glorious mane of hair he smeared sweat about, cold sweat, over his giant bald head. It hadn't been that many years but he looked far older than he should have for the time.



His old friend Jake seemed desperate to meet, in some sort of trouble.



They met at his insistence for lunch at a shipping company canteen. It was all battered metal and nondescript chairs and tables, some made from scraps of old ships or containers. The food too seemed to be avoiding description defying notions of flavor.

Jake ate his meal frantically as if he might devour the problem with his haste. Hector was amazed he didn't think he could eat with such gusto even if he were marooned again.

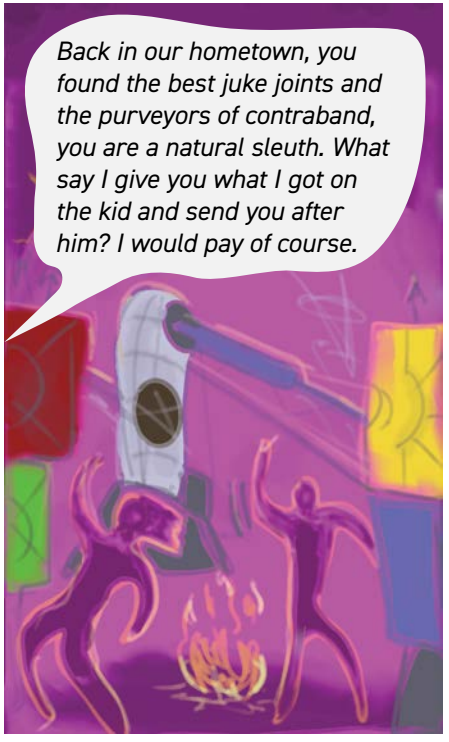
His hands were shaking, he looked about nervously, as if he feared someone listening in on the chat.

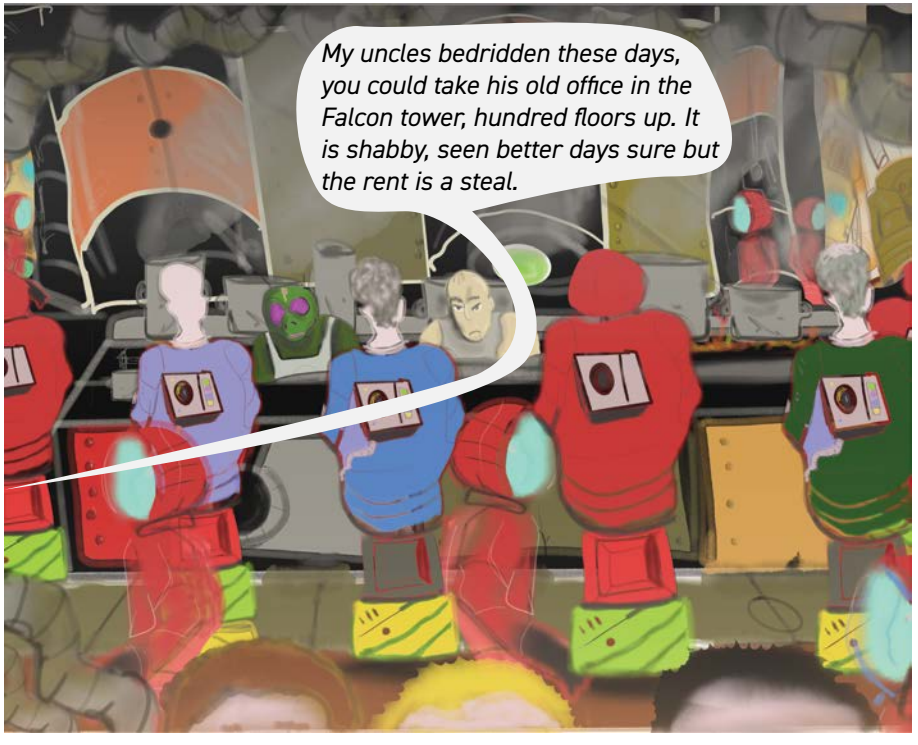
There had been a less than legal deal that went south, the planetary authorities were on the trail of them and suddenly the very files that might prove Tangential Corp's guilt disappeared.

Seeing this sweaty, bald, bloated version of Jake it further diminished Hector's appetite.

Jake spat between furious bites.

Roaring engines, air processors, loaders, cranes, lifters and crews made a constant cacophonous racket, no technology existed that could clearly make out their conservation, it dawned on him that perhaps he had picked the location for that reason.





So it began, Hector found Jake's uncle's office in the half empty Falcon tower that had faded from the limelight and the rents had plummeted accordingly, put together some tools of the trade and went into business. In college he had learned how to use some of the devices he needed for work, accidentally really but useful none-the-less. Years passed and like his rocky prison planet he began to feel stuck on Ankh-Tovar. Every time he thought seriously of leaving a new case walked in and he never made a getaway.