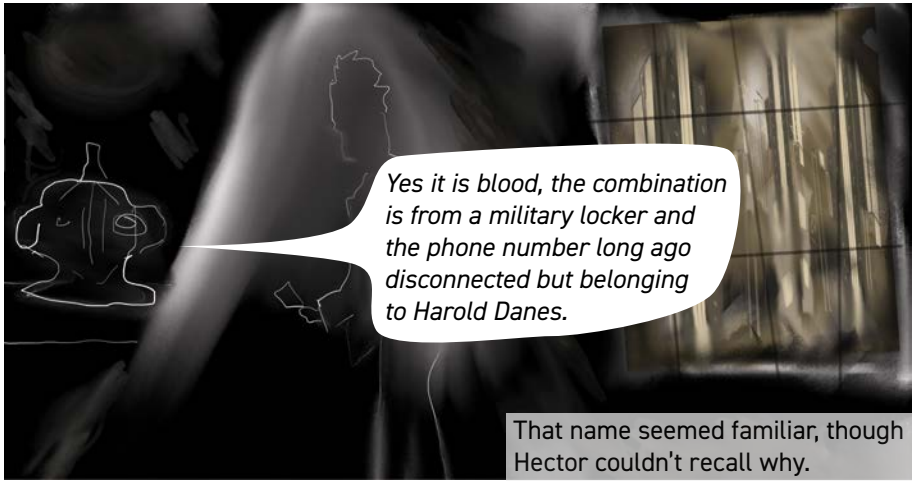


That name seemed familiar, though Hector couldn't recall why.

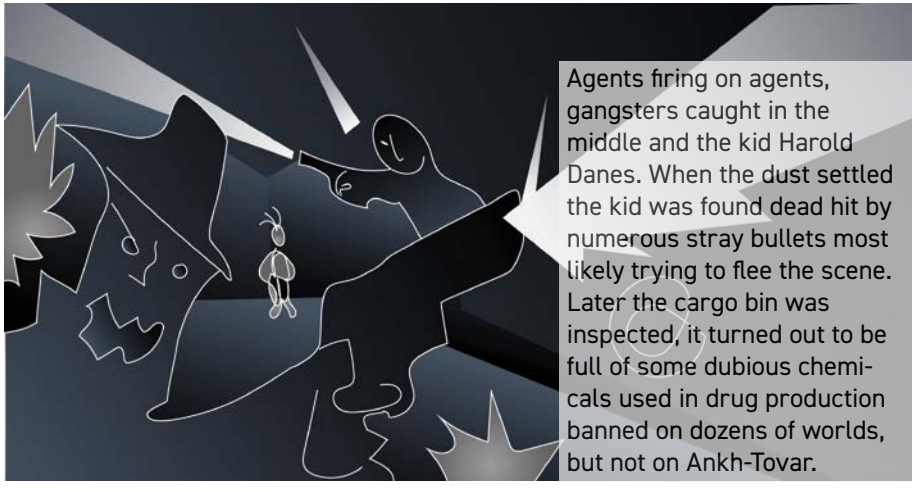
The kid, he thought suddenly, peering through an alcoholic haze into his ancient past. His first case all those years ago, the one his buddy Jake had hired him to solve.

There was a strange shipment hidden in a cargo bin the customs and vice folks had traced the kid to the mystery load.

Harold Danes had been tracked down and died in a police shootout. It was all a mistake really, Hector had tailed him to a warehouse at the southern spaceport.

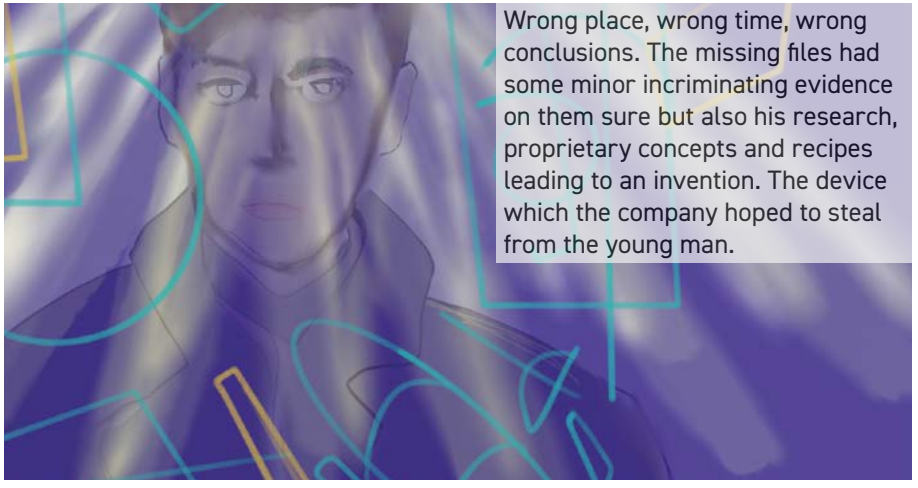
Calling for backup they notified the police, then got jumpy and called in a commando anti-terror unit, which led to another group of more heavily armed customs agents and pretty soon it looked like a war at the warehouse.

None of it was properly coordinated and a huge shipment of drugs arrived a little before the forces did. The pushers and smugglers had their security teams of rough trigger happy thugs. When customs agents were spotted a fire fight broke out.



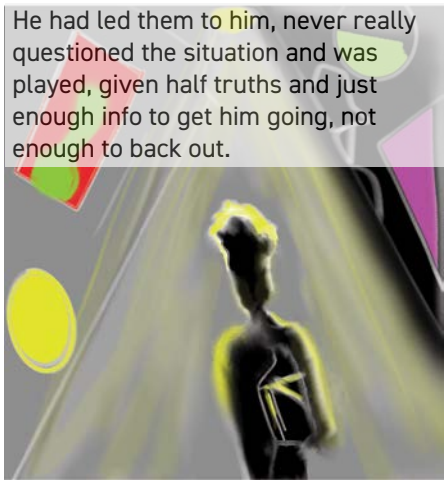
Agents firing on agents, gangsters caught in the middle and the kid Harold Danes. When the dust settled the kid was found dead hit by numerous stray bullets most likely trying to flee the scene. Later the cargo bin was inspected, it turned out to be full of some dubious chemicals used in drug production banned on dozens of worlds, but not on Ankh-Tovar.


Years later when Hector was clearing out old files he spotted Dane's file. Looking through Danes notes he was working on some science project and needed the chemicals it seemed for legitimate reasons.

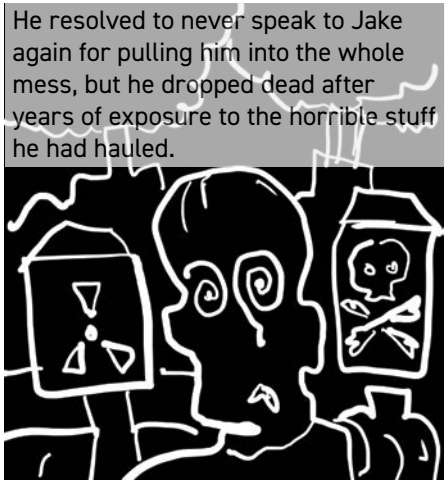

Wrong place, wrong time, wrong conclusions. The missing files had some minor incriminating evidence on them sure but also his research, proprietary concepts and recipes leading to an invention. The device which the company hoped to steal from the young man.


The youth died for his contraption, the blackmail idea was cooked up to justify the investigation and search, but the data that was really important had to do with the kid's project.

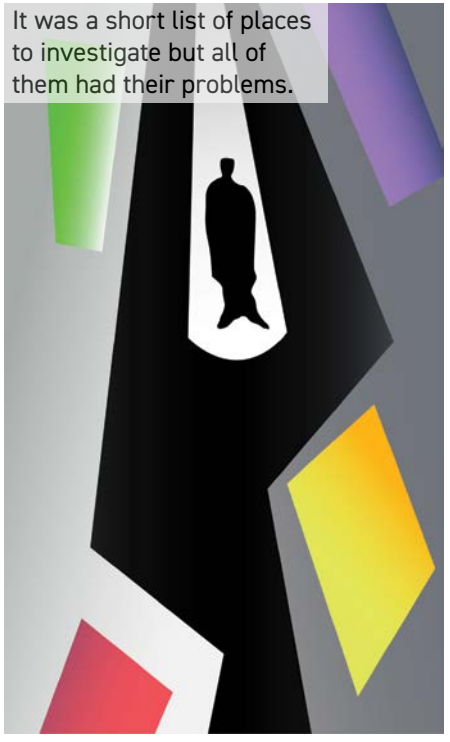

Hector always swallowed hard with a sense of regret when he thought of the boy.


He had led them to him, never really questioned the situation and was played, given half truths and just enough info to get him going, not enough to back out.


In the aftermath Tangential Corp, grew fabulously wealthy from the kid's stolen invention, the one that he ultimately had helped them steal.

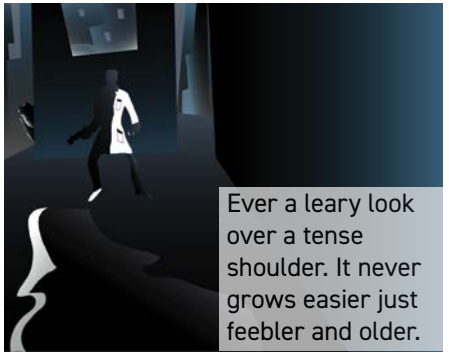

He resolved to never speak to Jake again for pulling him into the whole mess, but he dropped dead after years of exposure to the horrible stuff he had hauled.

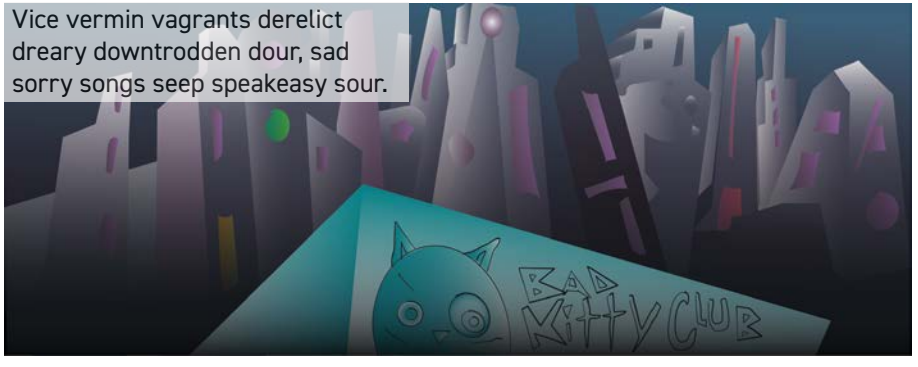

That was all along time ago why has my past decided to haunt me now and why on that side of town?
JADE BAR


It was a short list of places to investigate but all of them had their problems.

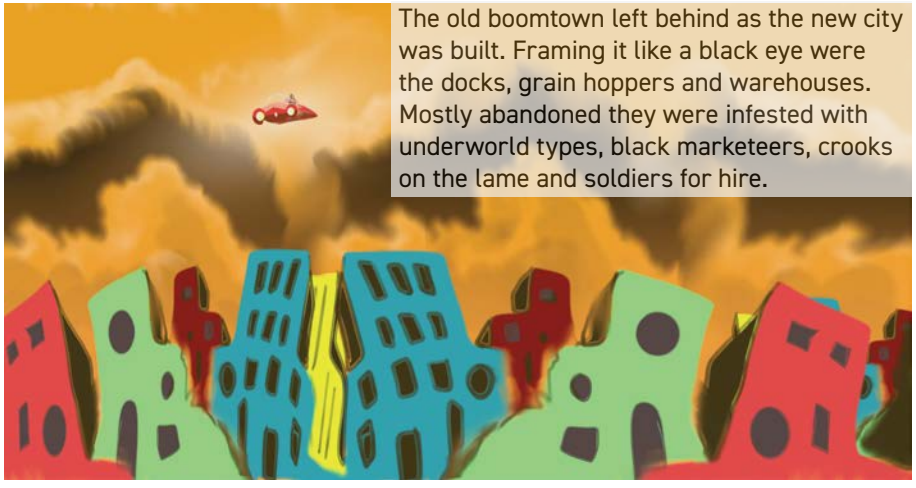

Careful if you find yourself, on that end of town, past the warehouses and the docks, with a poison rain coming down.


Places that even greed, has forgotten, abandoned locations crumbling putrid rotten.


Ever a leary look over a tense shoulder. It never grows easier just feebler and older.


Vice vermin vagrants derelict dreary downtrodden dour, sad sorry songs seep speakeasy sour.
BAD KITTY CLUB

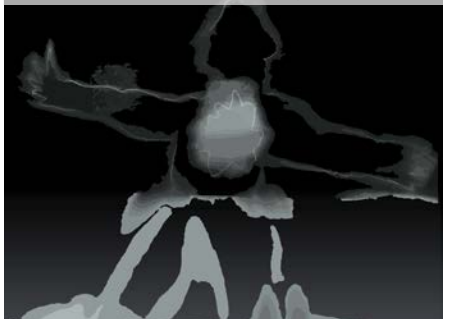

Last living loser languishing, lament dead dance drunk, in this witching hour. A gangster feels his fleeing fleeting power.


The old boomtown left behind as the new city was built. Framing it like a black eye were the docks, grain hoppers and warehouses. Mostly abandoned they were infested with underworld types, black marketeers, crooks on the lame and soldiers for hire.

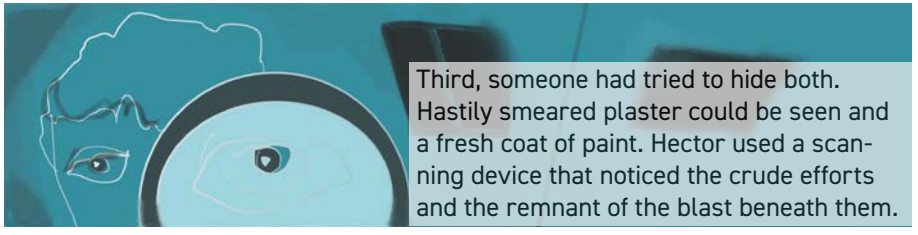

The cops didn't venture in there unless the port authority issued soldiers to accompany them.

There was a long list of people up there with an equally long list of grievances, grudges, some imagined, some warranted, all dangerous.

At the site of the crime he noticed three important things. First, particles around the body had been charged leaving residue a ghostly outline of the victim's body.

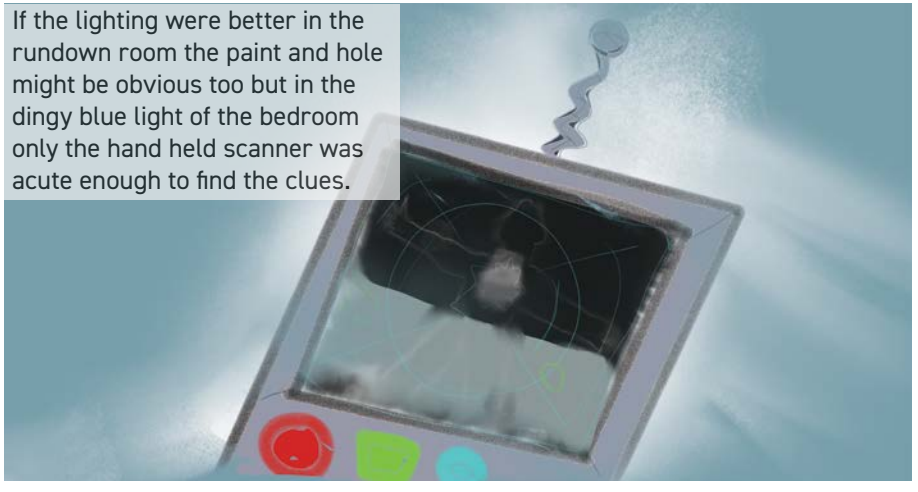


Second, the blast was enormous, went right through the victim leaving a chunk missing in the wall.



Third, someone had tried to hide both. Hastily smeared plaster could be seen and a fresh coat of paint. Hector used a scanning device that noticed the crude efforts and the remnant of the blast beneath them.

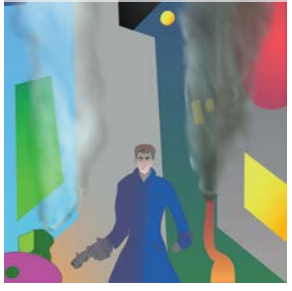
If the lighting were better in the rundown room the paint and hole might be obvious too but in the dingy blue light of the bedroom only the hand held scanner was acute enough to find the clues.



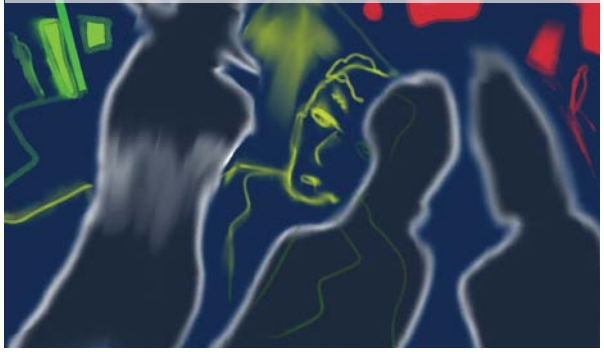
He photographed all of it with various wavelengths and bands of light.

A ping went off. It was the Old Lady...

He left the crime scene and moved out onto the streets. A foul air carried steam and smoke fogging up the whole neighborhood.



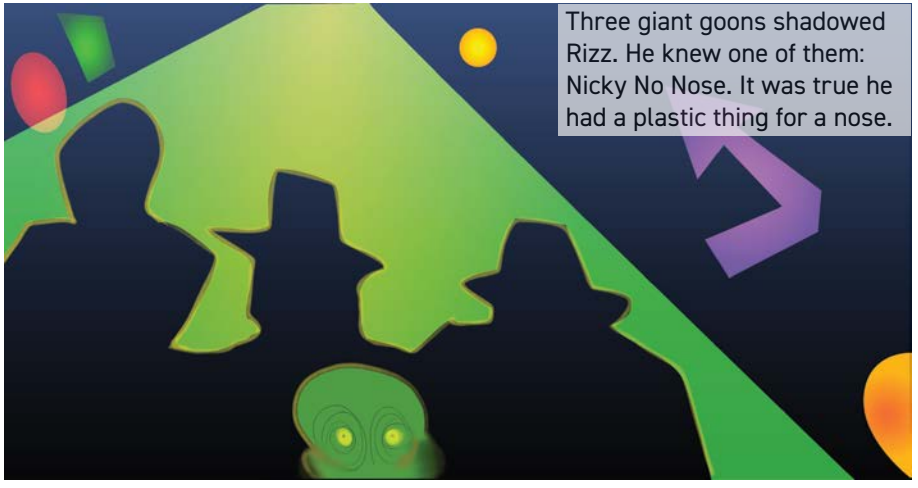
He made his way to his aircar parked within reach, but wasn't sure of his steps and stumbled into a lamppost. He gathered himself to move on as three shadows passed over him.



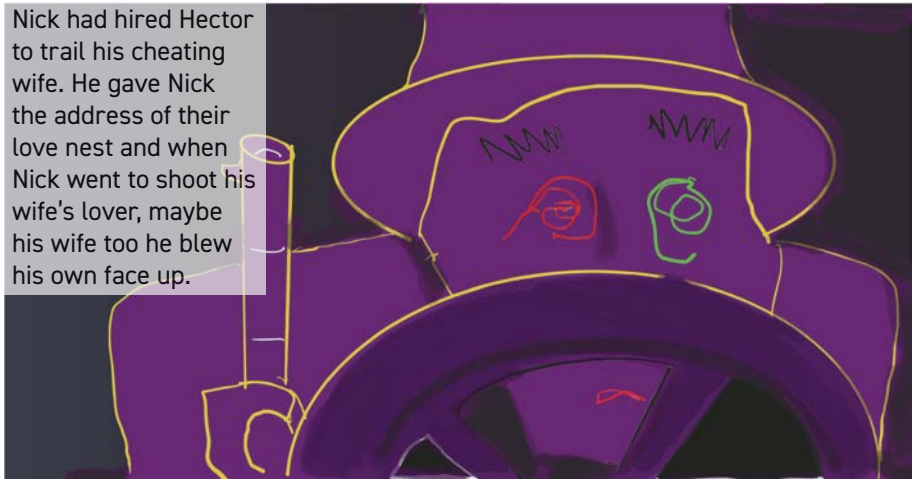
He knew the nasal whine of Rizz anywhere. Big eyed hard junky that ran the gambling and pleasure district a few blocks away. Hector had sent him and a few of his associates off to the penal colony to die.

Some technicality, misfiled paperwork and the whole group were suddenly free after several months of agony, humiliation and hard labor.

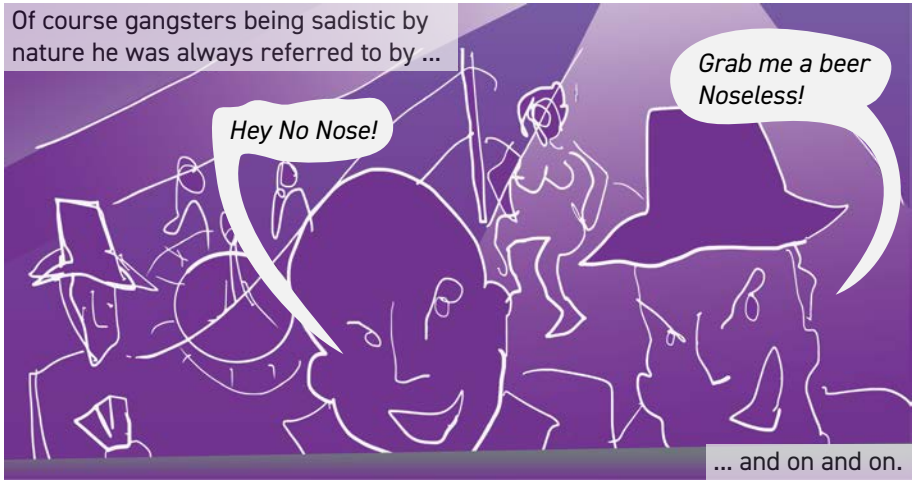
He was pretty sure the hard labor made Rizz the most sore, little whiff of a man. His eyes seemed to bulge out of his head as if someone were squeezing his melon and it was ready to explode.



Nick had hired Hector to trail his cheating wife. He gave Nick the address of their love nest and when Nick went to shoot his wife's lover, maybe his wife too he blew his own face up.



Of course gangsters being sadistic by nature he was always referred to by ...

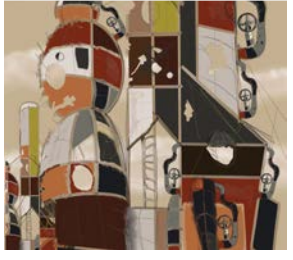


That Hector had only ever called him Nick or Mr. Hines might have helped him in that moment. Three large shapes drew closer menacing Hector.

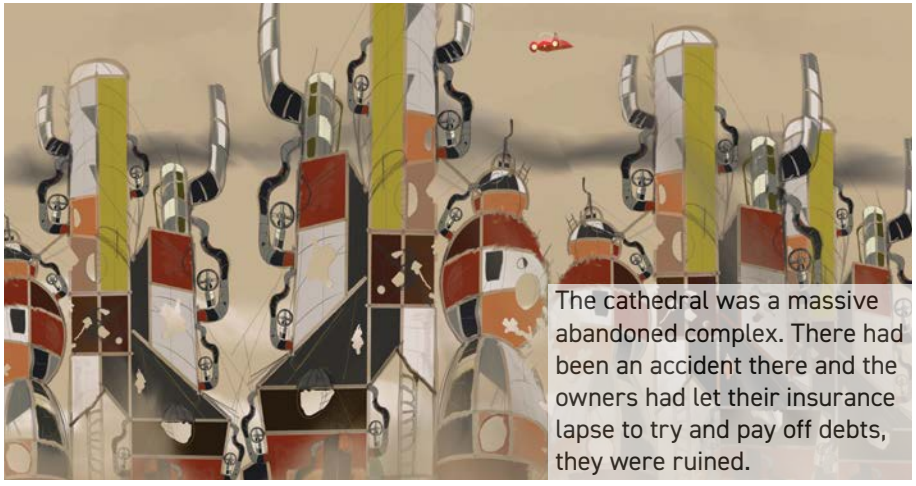
Beaten, delirious, and half crazed, Hector raced across town.

By the time Hector arrived at the cathedral the sun was rising.

Fifth Avenue was a nickname for the refining district. A seemingly endless skyline of huge refining towers, mills, chemical tanks and exhaust stacks.



A vast unwholesome haze ever hung in the air, flames of separators flickered or burst out in balls.

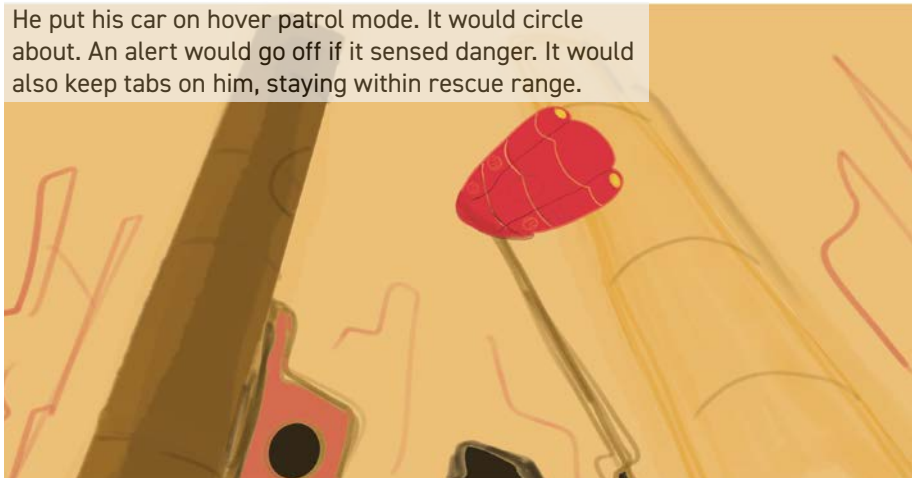


The cathedral was a massive abandoned complex. There had been an accident there and the owners had let their insurance lapse to try and pay off debts, they were ruined.

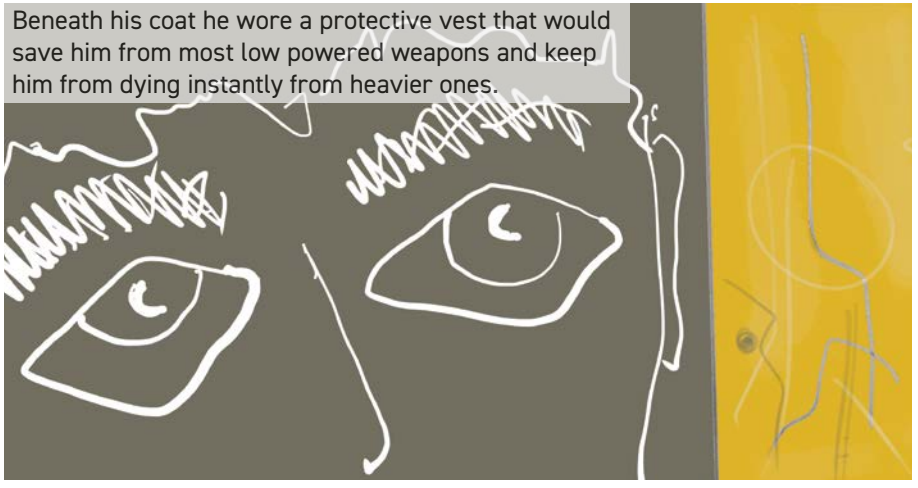
Flying into hell he mused, the roar of industry and the flash of exhaust meeting his view as he drew nearer to Fifth Avenue.

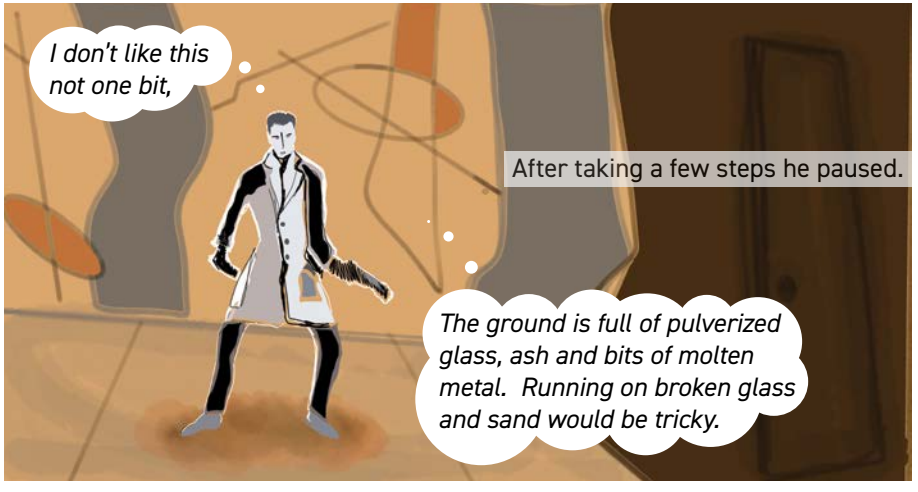
Landing his air car in the shadow of the cathedral he pulled his gun out of its holster, charged it, then scanned the area.

He put his car on hover patrol mode. It would circle about. An alert would go off if it sensed danger. It would also keep tabs on him, staying within rescue range.

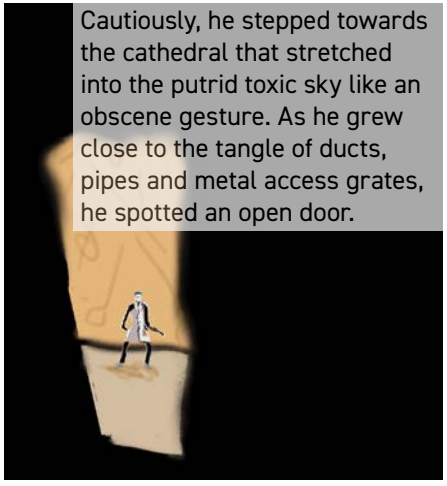


Beneath his coat he wore a protective vest that would save him from most low powered weapons and keep him from dying instantly from heavier ones.



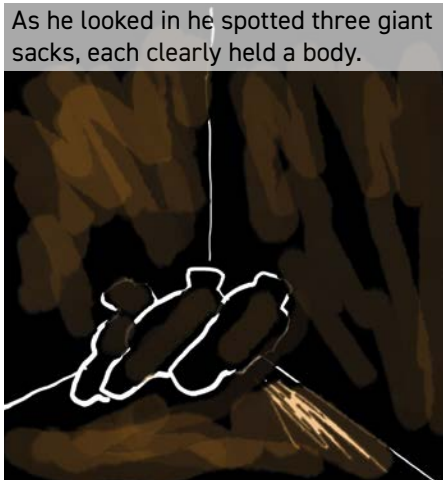


Cautiously, he stepped towards the cathedral that stretched into the putrid toxic sky like an obscene gesture. As he grew close to the tangle of ducts, pipes and metal access grates, he spotted an open door.

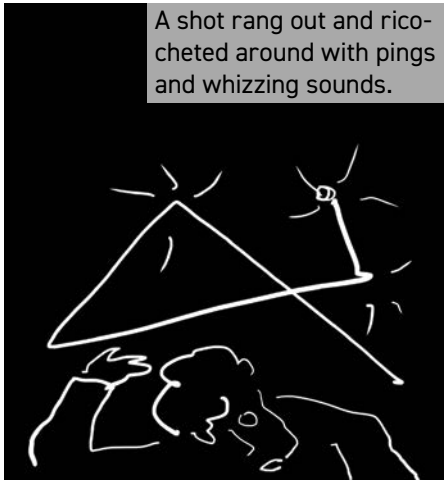


Everything else was tarnished covered in soot and grime but the handle of the open door was polished clean.

As he looked in he spotted three giant sacks, each clearly held a body.

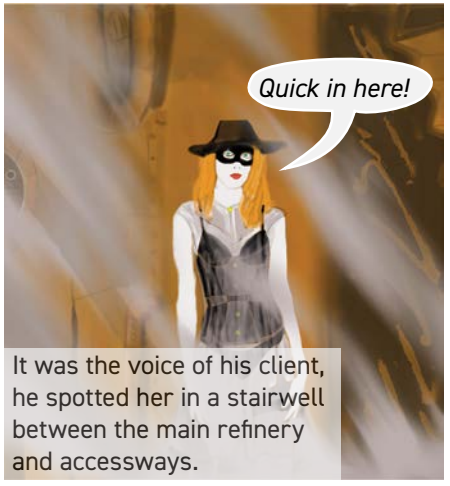


A shot rang out and rico-cheted around with pings and whizzing sounds.



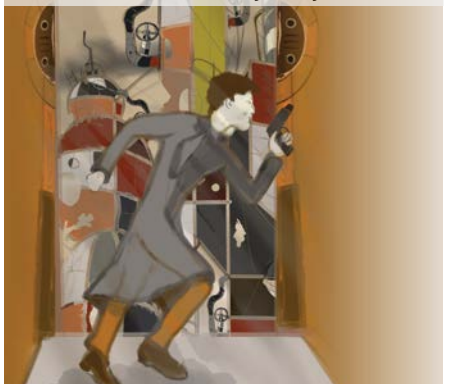
Hector instinctively grabbed the open door and hid behind it for protection.

Another blast sent sand and glass up into the air. He couldn't make out from where the shots were coming.

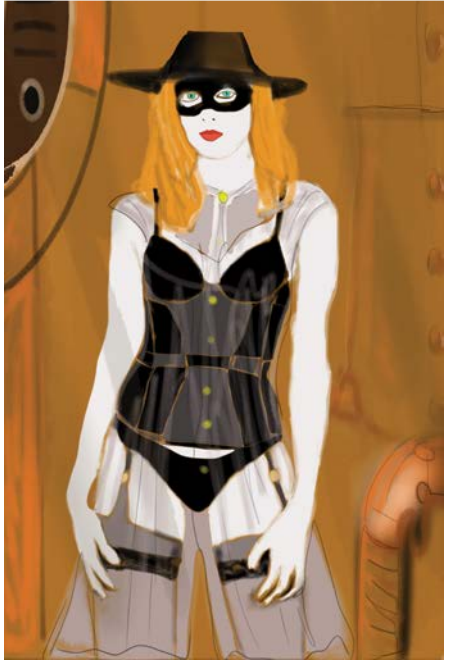


It was the voice of his client, he spotted her in a stairwell between the main refinery and accessways.

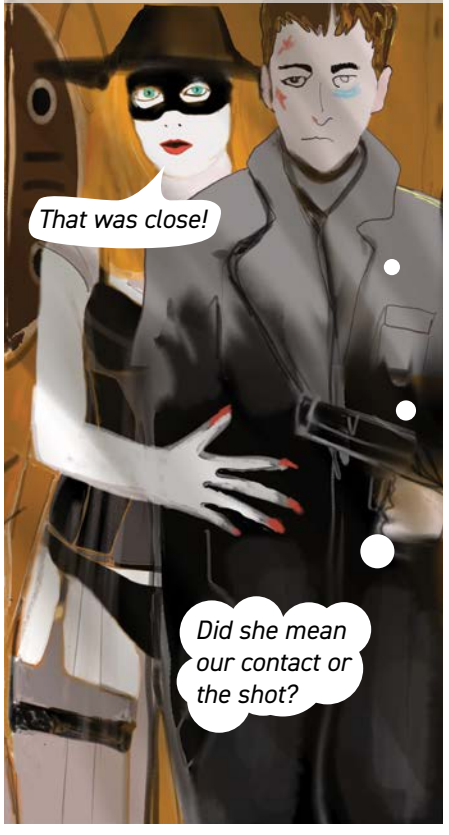
There was a concrete wall that would provide a little more cover so he darted towards the mystery woman.



She wore a sheer dress that revealed an elaborate corset that must have been straining from the weight of curves. Her large thighs were taunt as she leaned against the wall and the refinery. Her panting made her huge bosom rise and fall steadily. Still her face was concealed beneath a lace mask though her red hair flowed down freely.

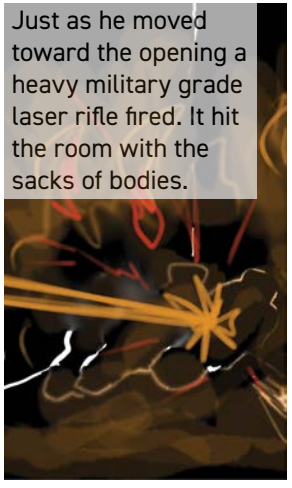


She pulled Hector towards her as a shot buzzed past. Her bright red lips were very close, nearly touching. He felt her warm body pressed to his and hot breath on his face.

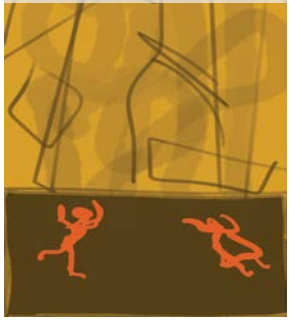


Spinning around he fired a few shots out of the alcove shrugging off the brief thrill moments before. He didn't hear anymore shots.

Just as he moved toward the opening a heavy military grade laser rifle fired. It hit the room with the sacks of bodies.

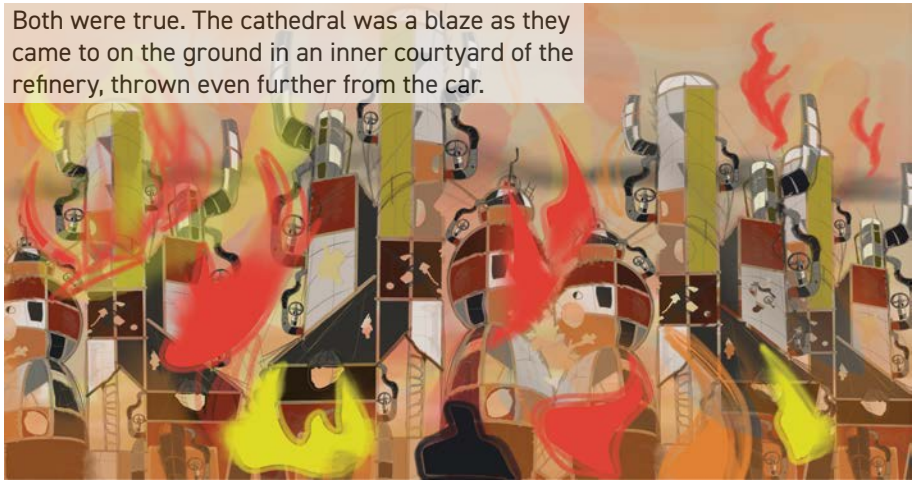


The explosion threw the client and Hector back into the refinery, out of range for a sprint to the car.

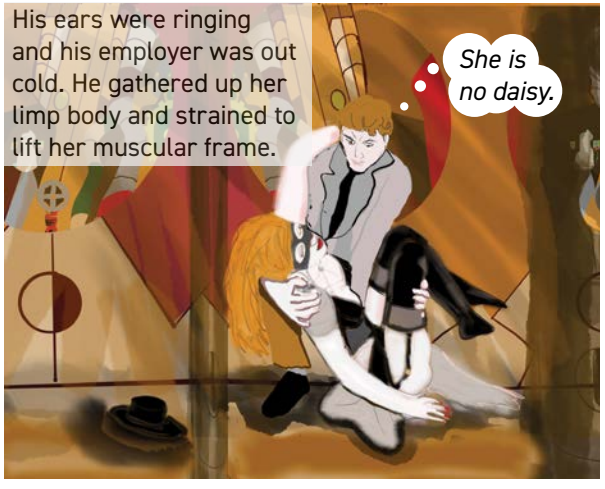


A hissing sound could suddenly be heard, the explosion had opened a dormant valve, something was leaking out.

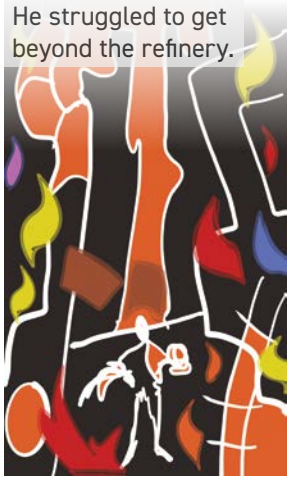
Both were true. The cathedral was a blaze as they came to on the ground in an inner courtyard of the refinery, thrown even further from the car.



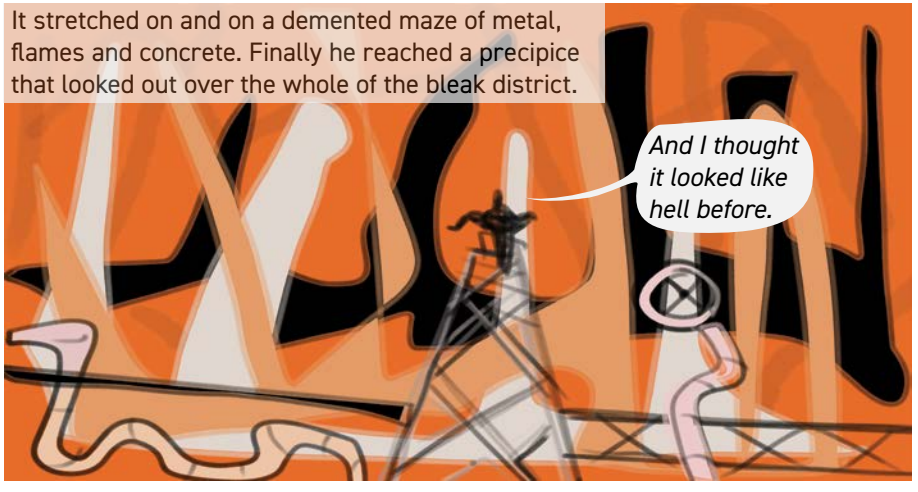
His ears were ringing and his employer was out cold. He gathered up her limp body and strained to lift her muscular frame.



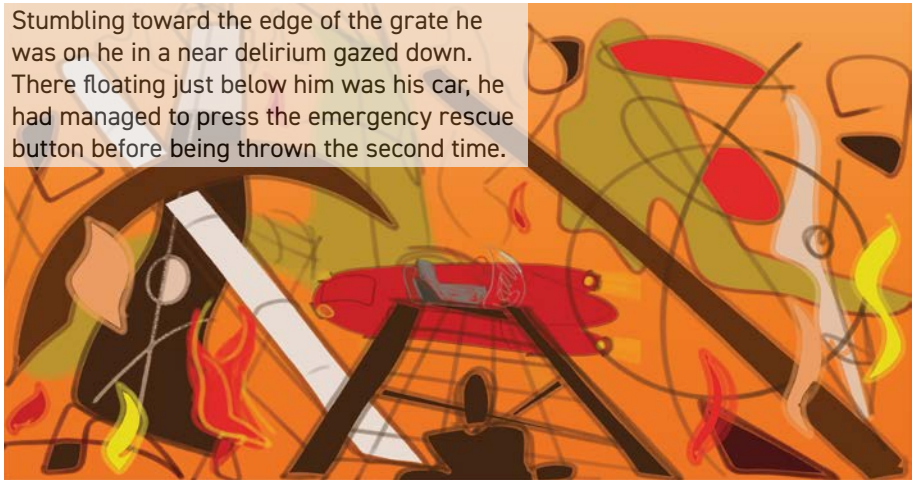
He struggled to get beyond the refinery.



It stretched on and on a demented maze of metal, flames and concrete. Finally he reached a precipice that looked out over the whole of the bleak district.



Stumbling toward the edge of the grate he was on he in a near delirium gazed down. There floating just below him was his car, he had managed to press the emergency rescue button before being thrown the second time.



He sped away he could feel the heat of the blast on him. The woman came around.

A black aircar appeared out of the clouds of smoke.

After a quick kiss on Hector's mouth, she leapt from his vehicle to hers like a paratrooper.

The car lifted off and vanished into the confusion.