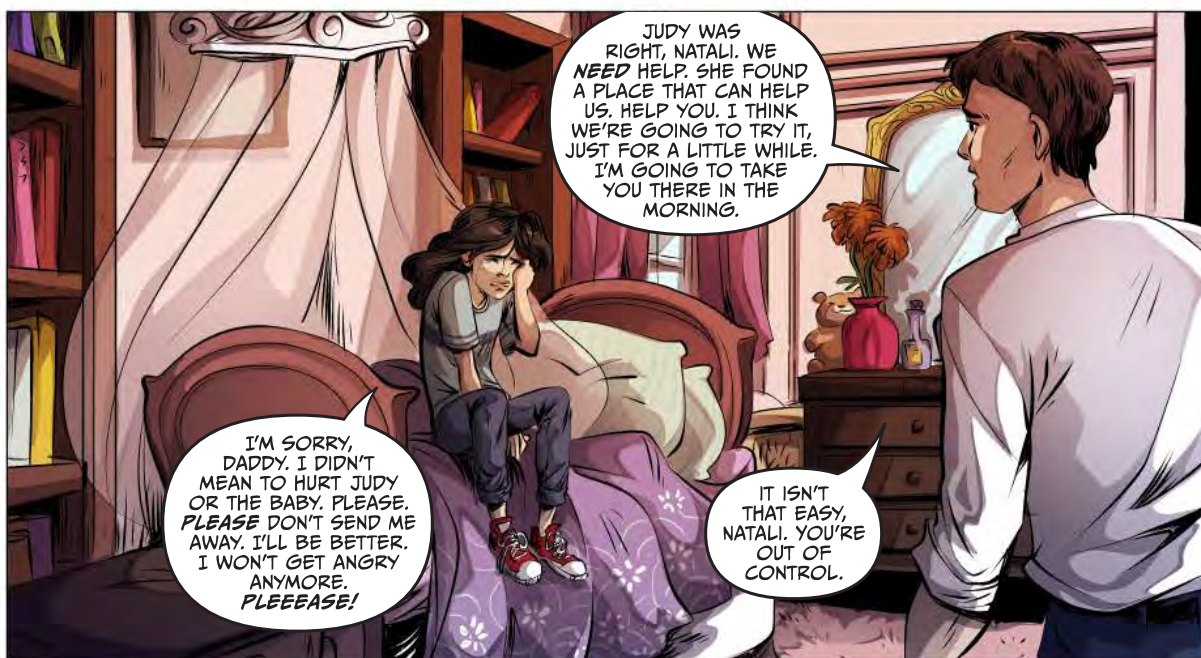


FIREB RAND



THE INITIATION OF NATALI PRESANO



JUDY WAS RIGHT, NATALI. WE NEED HELP. SHE FOUND A PLACE THAT CAN HELP US. HELP YOU. I THINK WE'RE GOING TO TRY IT, JUST FOR A LITTLE WHILE. I'M GOING TO TAKE YOU THERE IN THE MORNING.

I'M SORRY, DADDY. I DIDN'T MEAN TO HURT JUDY OR THE BABY. PLEASE. PLEASE DON'T SEND ME AWAY. I'LL BE BETTER. I WON'T GET ANGRY ANYMORE. PLEEEASE!

IT ISN'T THAT EASY, NATALI. YOU'RE OUT OF CONTROL.



YOU PROMISED MOM YOU'D TAKE CARE OF ME. YOU SAID WE'D ALWAYS BE TOGETHER.

I KNOW WHAT I PROMISED BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO.



I LOVE YOU, DADDY.

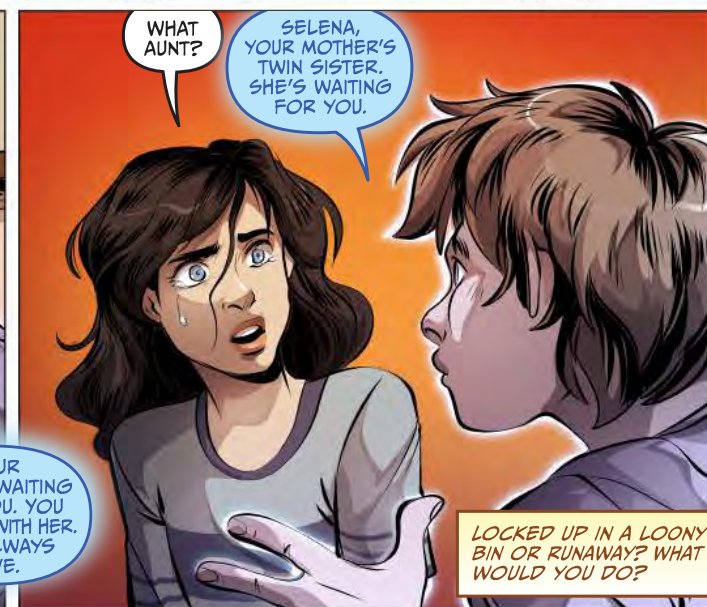


LUKEN, THEY'RE SENDING ME AWAY. I'M SO SCARED.

WHERE?

THEY CAN'T IF YOU'RE NOT HERE. COME WITH ME.

YOUR AUNT IS WAITING FOR YOU. YOU BELONG WITH HER. YOU ALWAYS HAVE.



WHAT AUNT?

SELENA, YOUR MOTHER'S TWIN SISTER. SHE'S WAITING FOR YOU.

LOCKED UP IN A LOONY BIN OR RUNAWAY? WHAT WOULD YOU DO?



AUNT SELENA. MOM'S TWIN. SORGIN. BENEFACTRESS. THE MISSING LINK.

AUNT SELENA, WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?

NOTHING IS WRONG WITH YOU, MY NATALI. IT'S WHAT IS WRONG WITH THEM.

THEM?

HUMANS. YOU ARE SORGIN. AND WE SHOULDN'T MIX WITH THEIR KIND.

BUT MOM HAD MIXED, ILLEGALLY IT TURNS OUT. AND I WAS THE UNINTENDED BYPRODUCT OF THEIR "MIXING."



BUT WHAT IF DAD IS LOOKING FOR ME?

GOOD RIDDANCE. THE OUTSIDE WORLD IS NOT FOR YOU.



LET THE FEATHER GO, NATALI, AND YOU WILL UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING.



HOLD ON.

I NEVER SAW MY FATHER OR LUKE AGAIN...NOT FOR A VERY LONG TIME...

8 YEARS LATER...

SO MANY EAGER FACES TURNING OUT TO COMPETE. OUR HEARTS STILL STAND TOGETHER AND TRUE.

THE WAR RAGES ON, AND THE FIGHT TO PROTECT OUR SOLIDARITY, AND THE HUMANS OUR ENEMY PREY ON, GROWS HARDER AND HARDER.

AS YOU ARE AWARE, I HAVE BEEN CLEARED TO TAKE ON AN APPRENTICE. TO PARTICIPATE IN THE BASA GERRA YOU MUST BE 16.

THE DAY MY AUNT BROUGHT ME TO THE BALD MOUNTAIN WAS THE DAY I REALIZED THAT NOTHING IN OUR WORLD IS WHAT IT SEEMS...

KIND OF LIKE WHEN ALICE FELL THROUGH THE RABBIT HOLE INTO WONDERLAND, BUT INSTEAD OF TALKING RABBITS, TEA PARTIES, CROQUET AND EVIL QUEENS, THERE WAS A BEAUTIFUL ANCIENT CITY, CALLED EDER, AND SOME SERIOUSLY BITCHY WITCHES...

NOW, A STERN WARNING. DO NOT ENTER ON A WHIM.

THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE ZURI FOREST TO LOREA'S LANDING WILL BE TREACHEROUS. MANY HAVE DIED TRYING, AND ONLY THE FIRST TWO TO REACH IT WILL ENGAGE THE BASAJAUN IN BATTLE. ONCE THE BATTLE BEGINS, THERE IS NO STOPPING IT...

THE GATES OPEN TOMORROW MORNING, AT DAWN.

WITCHES ON TV ALWAYS HAD REGULAR AUNTS, AND LED RELATIVELY NORMAL LIVES. TAKE SABRINA. AUNT ZELDA WAS STRICT AND HAD A THING FOR PHYSICS, AUNT HILDA PLAYED THE VIOLIN AND GAVE OUT BAD DATING ADVICE. THEY WERE SIMPLE. NORMAL.

IZEBA SELENA WAS AN IKUZI, PART OF AN ELITE TEAM SPREAD AROUND THE WORLD, ALL OF WHO LIVED AND BREATHED MAGIC. AND SHE WAS NEVER SATISFIED. ALWAYS PUSHING ME INTO THINGS I DIDN'T WANT TO DO. INCLUDING THE BASA GERRA.

THE NEXT MORNING...

BASA GERRA.

FIVE MINUTES.

YOU SCARED?

WHY DO THEY EVEN BOTHER COMPETING?

MEET JENNA. COUSIN. MEAN GIRL. SOMEONE JACKED A STICK UP HER BACKSIDE AT BIRTH.

CAREFUL GALIDUTO. ACCIDENTS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO HAPPEN DURING THE BASA GERRA.

YES, THEY HAVE...

YOU SHOULD BE. WHY THEY EVEN LET ANY OF YOU COMPETE, I WILL NEVER KNOW.

THEIR MAGIC IS SO WEAK.

NATALI NEVER USES MAGIC.

MY FATHER INSISTED. EVEN ASKED ME TO WATCH OVER HER. LIKE THAT WOULD EVER HAPPEN.

YOU KNOW I CAN HEAR YOU, RIGHT?

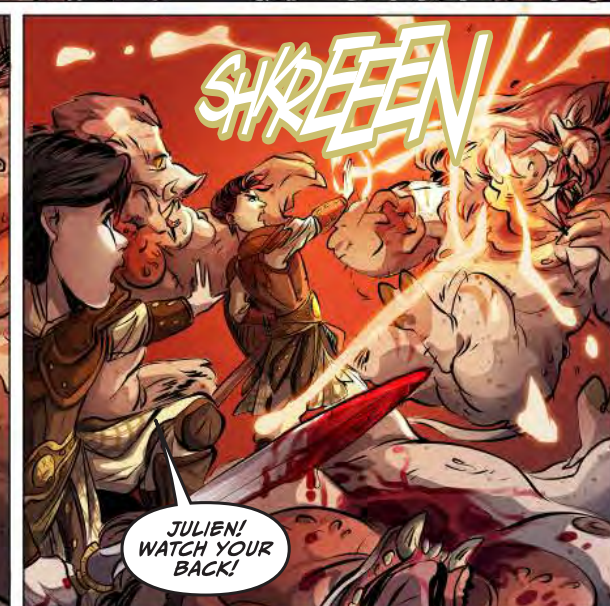
GALIDUTO. LOST. THAT'S WHAT THEY CALL THOSE OF US WHO HAVE PARENTS WHO "MIXED."

AND SO IT BEGINS...MAY THE GODDESS MARI RETURN YOU SAFELY TO THOSE WHO LOVE YOU...

YOU CAN'T HOLD BACK, NATALI. YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO LET GO OF THE PAST.

I CAN'T, JULIEN. I CAN'T RISK SOMEONE ELSE GETTING HURT. BESIDES, I WON'T NEED MY POWERS TO BEAT JENNA.

WHAT'S WRONG?







SABINE!

NATALI PRESANO, HELP AN OLD LADY UP.



NO! YOU HAVE TO LET US FIGHT! I WILL WIN!

NO, JENNA PRESANO, YOU WILL NOT.



OW!



DO SOMETHING, FATHER! THIS IS MY DESTINY!

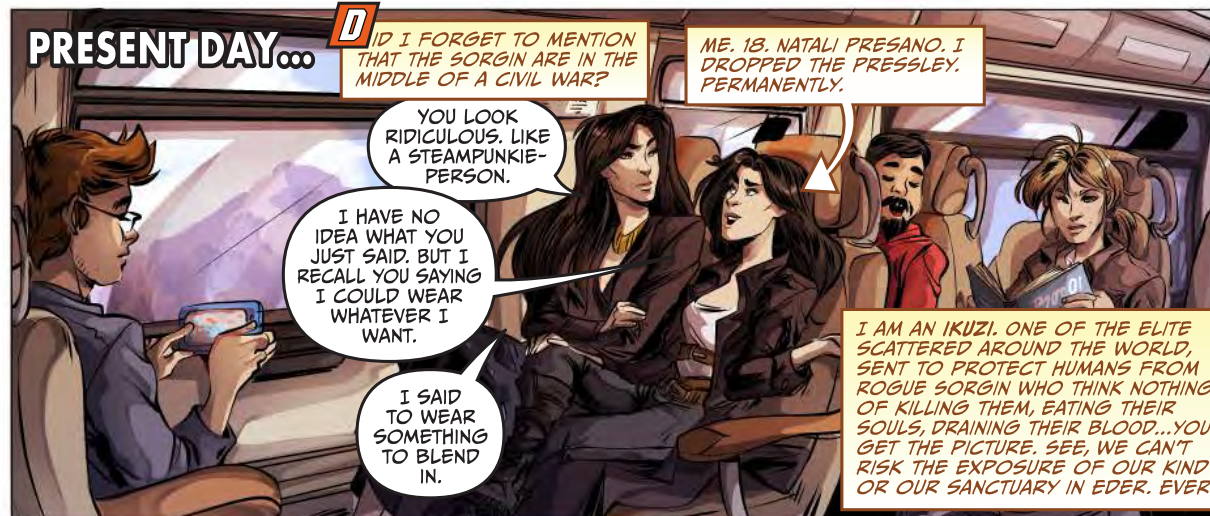
NO JENNA! IT'S NOT. GO HOME. TAKE A BATH.

THE FIREBRAND. ME? BUT--

YES, NATALI. YOU.



KILDARE. YOUR MOTHER'S SWORD. YOUR TRAINING BEGINS IMMEDIATELY.



PRESENT DAY...

DID I FORGET TO MENTION THAT THE SORGIN ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF A CIVIL WAR?

ME. 13. NATALI PRESANO. I DROPPED THE PRESSLEY. PERMANENTLY.

YOU LOOK RIDICULOUS. LIKE A STEAMPUNKIE-PERSON.

I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU JUST SAID. BUT I RECALL YOU SAYING I COULD WEAR WHATEVER I WANT.

I SAID TO WEAR SOMETHING TO BLEND IN.

I AM AN IKUZI. ONE OF THE ELITE SCATTERED AROUND THE WORLD, SENT TO PROTECT HUMANS FROM ROGUE SORGIN WHO THINK NOTHING OF KILLING THEM, EATING THEIR SOULS, DRAINING THEIR BLOOD...YOU GET THE PICTURE. SEE, WE CAN'T RISK THE EXPOSURE OF OUR KIND OR OUR SANCTUARY IN EDER. EVER.



¿QUÉ ES ESO?



SORRY. NOSE HABLER SPANISH.

ESPAÑOL. NO HABLO ESPAÑOL.



IT WAS WORTH A SHOT.

WHAT'S THAT?

YOU'VE NEVER SEEN A SMART-PHONE?

BILLETE, POR FAVOR.

SEÑOR, AGARRARSE.

¿QUE?