

BRIAN K. VAUGHAN

FIONA STAPLES



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WRITER

BRIAN K. VAUGHAN

ARTIST

FIONA STAPLES

LETTERING

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This is how an idea becomes real.



Am I
shitting?

It feels
like I'm
shitting!



Just keep pushing. We're so close.

Seriously, you'll never have sex with me again if I defecate all over you.

Unless you're secretly into that.

Please don't be into that.

But ideas are fragile things.



You have never been as beautiful as you are right now.

Most don't live long outside of the ether from which they were pulled, kicking and screaming.



It's a girl.

Anyway, this is the day I was born.





She's perfect.

Look, she's gonna have your horns.
And your wings.

But what's up with those eyes...?



They're not the same green as mine. Not quite your shade of brown either.

They kinda change depending how you...



Marko! What the hell are you doing?!

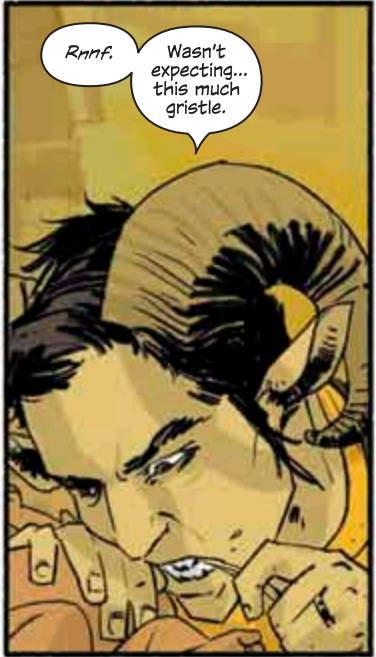
Cuhhing thu mbilical?

You have a sword! You are **wearing** a sword!



I made a vow, Alana.

I'm a father now, not a soldier, and that blade is never again leaving its scabbard.



Rmrf.

Wasn't expecting... this much gristle.



Well, Pico.

That's your daddy.



Pico?
What happened
to calling her
Beatrice?

Honey,
Beatrice is a
name for a
good girl. Does
this look like a
boring good girl
to you?

It's just,
Pico means
something kind
of... filthy
where I come
from.

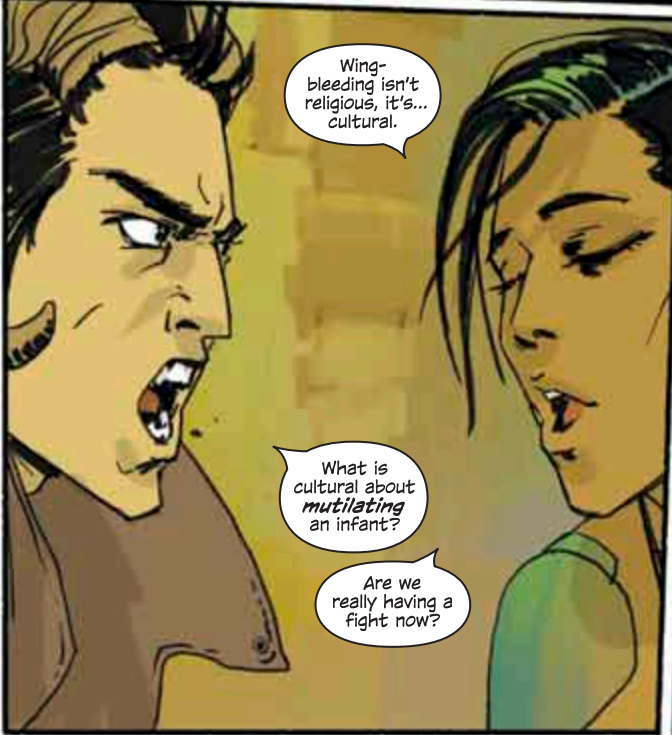


Well, we
don't have to
make a final
decision until
her wing-
bleeding.



What?!
No way!

You said
when we started
this--no politics,
no history, and no
more
barbaric religious
nonsense!



Wing-
bleeding isn't
religious, it's...
cultural.

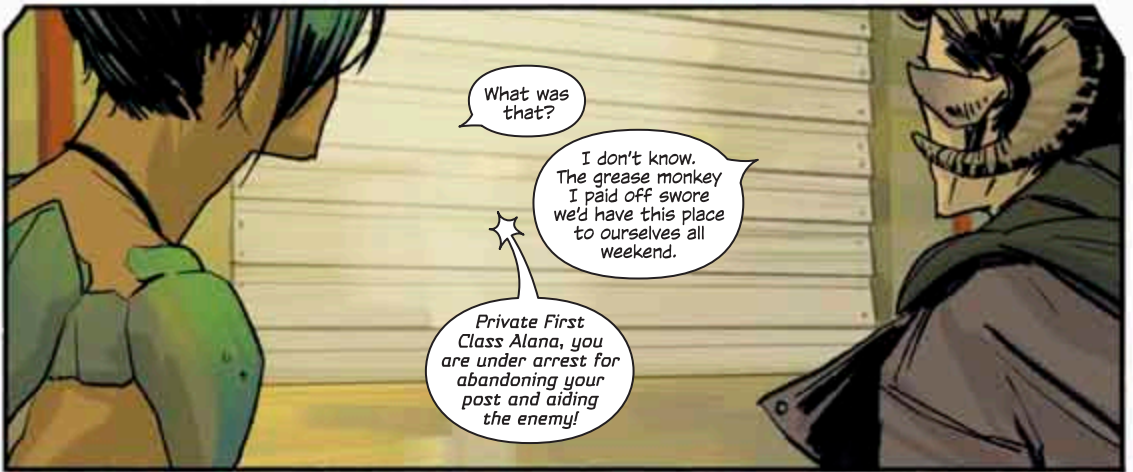
What is
cultural about
mutilating
an infant?

Are we
really having a
fight now?



Because
that's how
we ended up
making this
one.

BANG



What was that?

I don't know. The grease monkey I paid off swore we'd have this place to ourselves all weekend.

Private First Class Alana, you are under arrest for abandoning your post and aiding the enemy!



We're dead. We're dead.

Steady on. That door's made of dragon bone. How long will it take your people to get through?

Three minutes? Less if they have a blueblood with them.



This is Baron Robot XXIII of the Coalition Forces, commanding you to surrender at once!

Trust me, they're in there. I can leave now, yeah?



Go, I'll try to buy you two some time.

Go?
Go where?!



They never cover the roof.

Because they know my wings are useless!
I couldn't fly a kite, much less all this fucking baby weight!



Bullshit!
Please, you can do this! I know you can!

TSSSSSS



She needs a name.

I don't want my child to die without a--





Drop whatever you're holding and put your hands in the air.



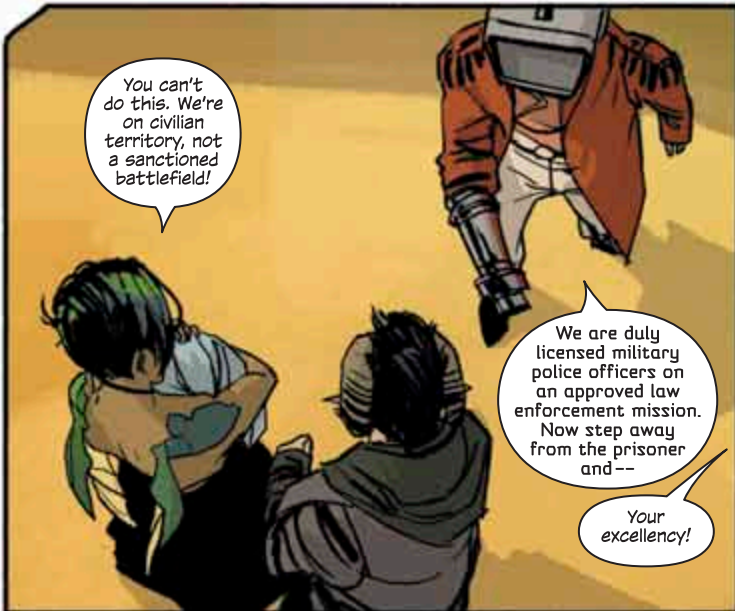
Suck my hemorrhoids!

You don't have to do this.
We just want to live our lives.



Is that moony speaking *Language*?

We should cut its fuckin' tongue out.



You can't do this. We're on civilian territory, not a sanctioned battlefield!

We are duly licensed military police officers on an approved law enforcement mission. Now step away from the prisoner and--

Your excellency!



D-meter's picking up exotic matter.

We've got *magic* incoming.



You greedy shit.

Who else did you tell about this?!

Alta Soldato Marko!



No.

Haltu!

Mi avertas vin, ne tuŝu min!



Vi estas kompatinda!

Wait, let's all just talk about this!

Their Chaplain's readying a spell!



My family.



Central, I need emergency clearance to engage Wreath contingent off-theater!



I loved you so much.









Stupid... kids.

Stop talking... and go.



I trusted you.

Like I said... stupid.

Now hurry... before the constables get here. That grate behind you... leads down to the sewers.



And here... for you, Pops.

It's what I bought... with the cash I got... for selling you out. I know it don't make us square... but... but...



It was a time of war.



Isn't it always.

I was born on a planet called CLEAVE,
an ancient ball of mud circling a
faded old star.



It never had much strategic value, but
the place still mattered. To me, anyway.



See, this is where
my parents met,
but it's not where
they were from.




They grew up way over here, back where the war began. ↗





This is LANDFALL, largest planet in the galaxy,
and also my mother's home.



Its one and only satellite is WREATH,
my father's native moon.

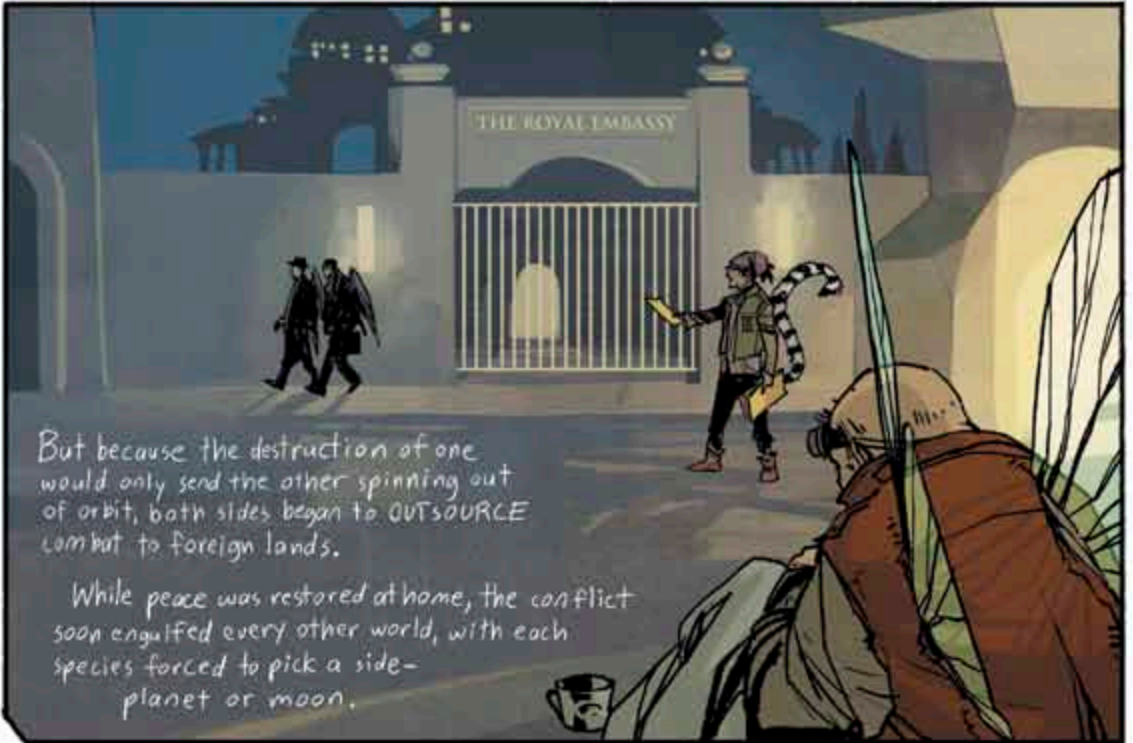
If there was ever a time
these two got along, nobody
remembers it.

When the war with Wreath started, it was fought amidst the general population, in cities like this one, Landfall's capital.



But because the destruction of one would only send the other spinning out of orbit, both sides began to OUTSOURCE combat to foreign lands.

While peace was restored at home, the conflict soon engulfed every other world, with each species forced to pick a side-planet or moon.



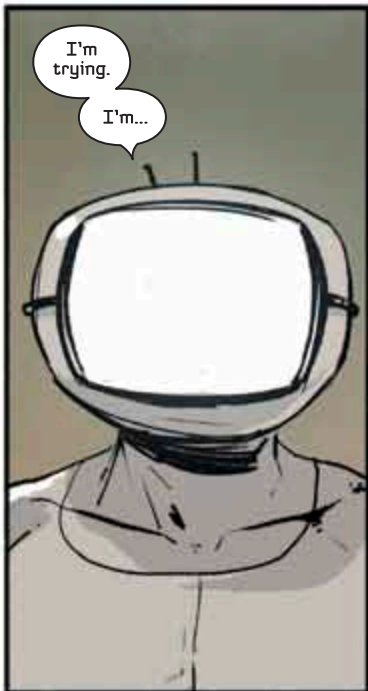
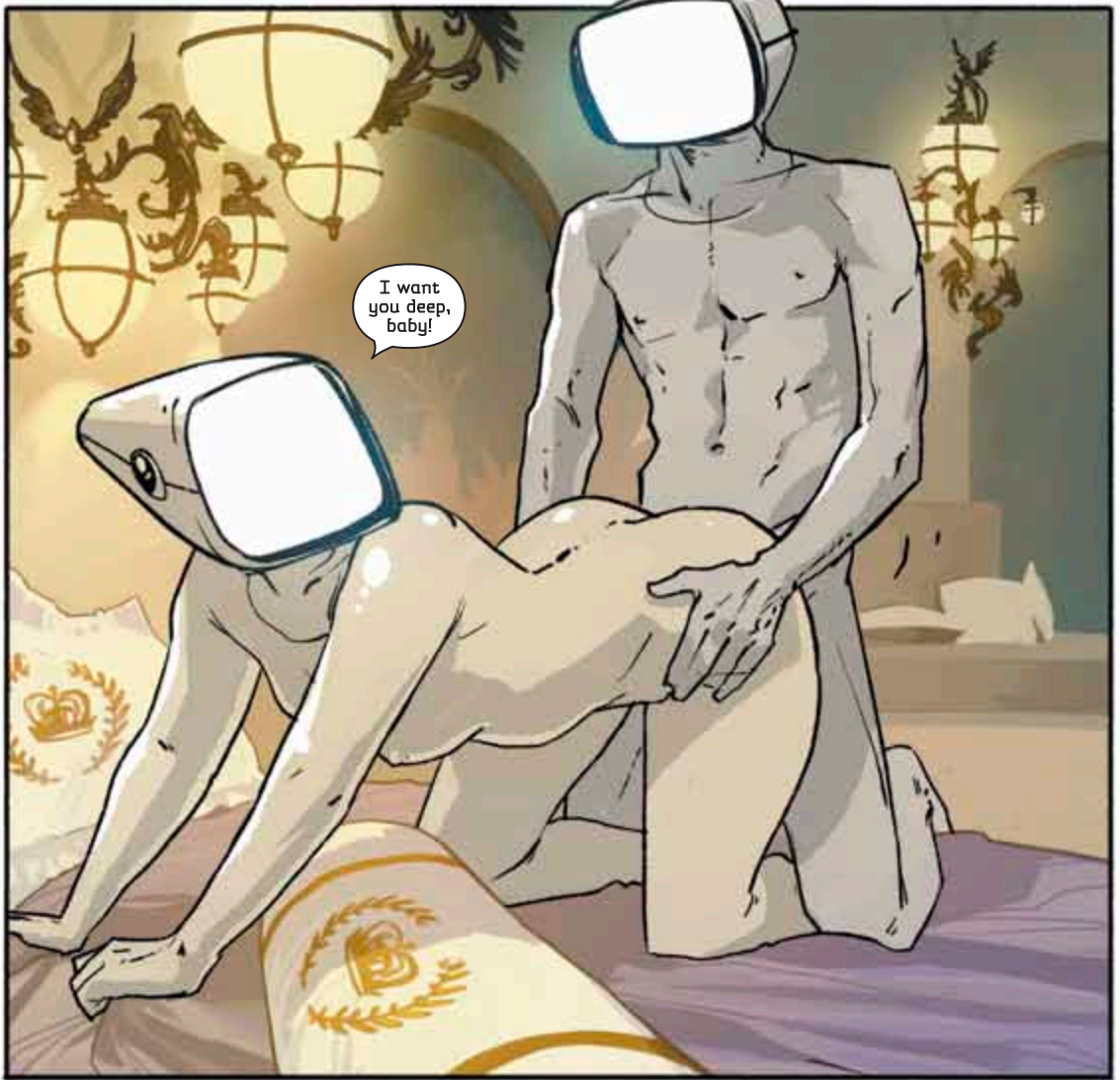
Some of the locals never stopped thinking about the battles being waged in their names on distant soil.

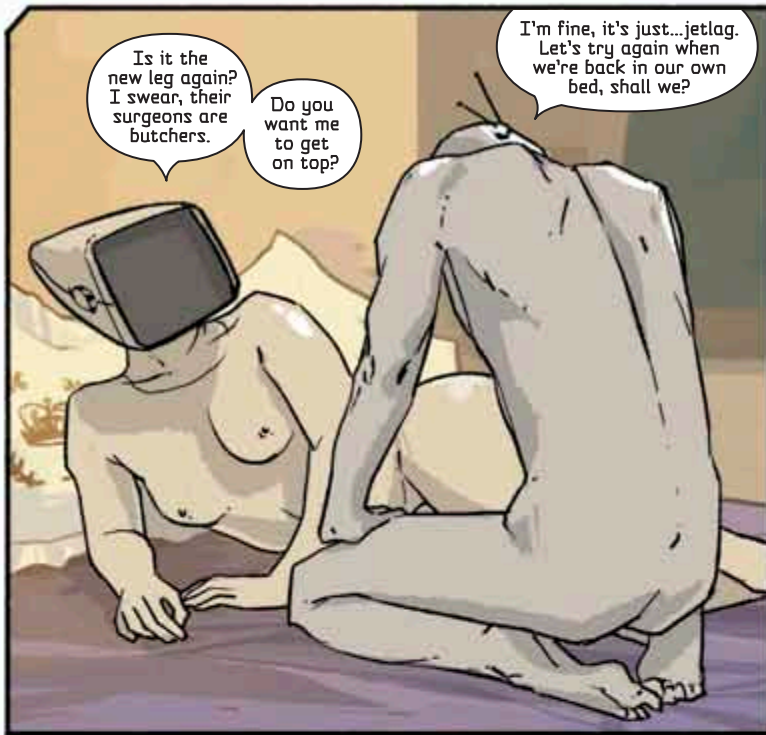


Most didn't really give a shit.

Deeper!







Is it the new leg again? I swear, their surgeons are butchers.

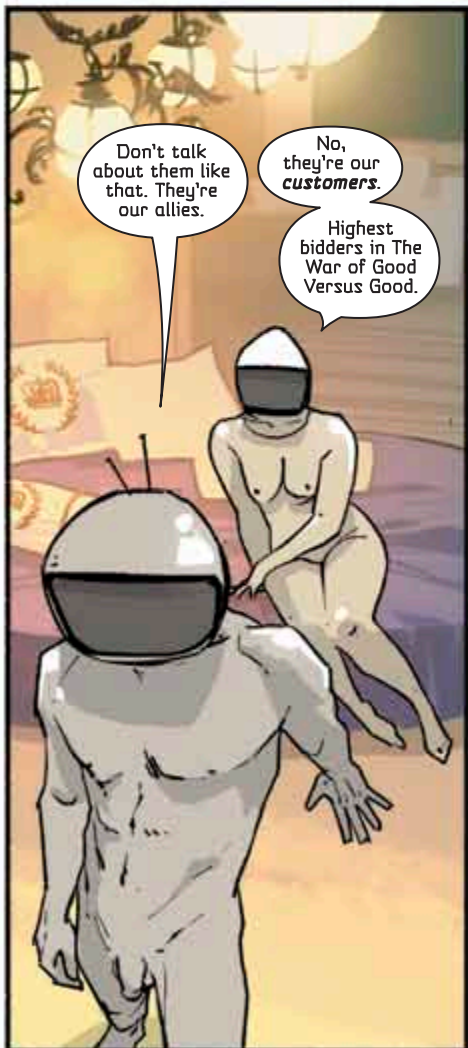
Do you want me to get on top?

I'm fine, it's just...jetlag. Let's try again when we're back in our own bed, shall we?



Of course, IV.

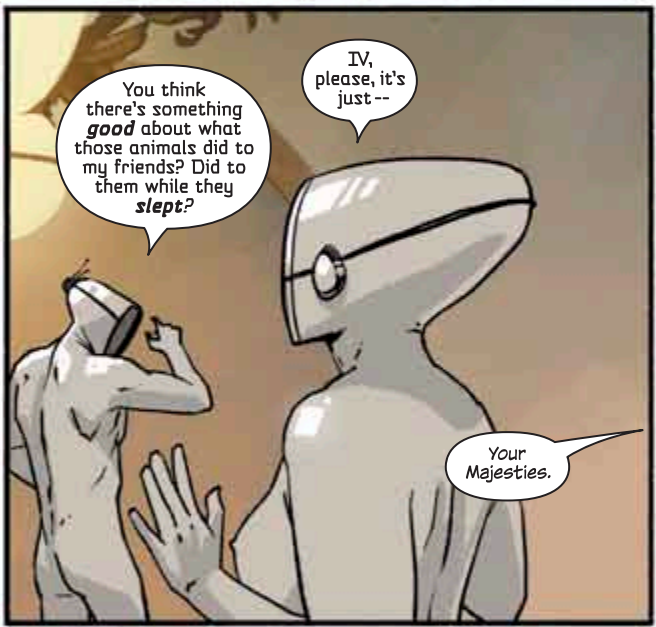
Things will be better once we're away from this godforsaken flock.



Don't talk about them like that. They're our allies.

No, they're our **customers**.

Highest bidders in The War of Good Versus Good.



You think there's something **good** about what those animals did to my friends? Did to them while they **slept**?

IV, please, it's just--

Your Majesties.

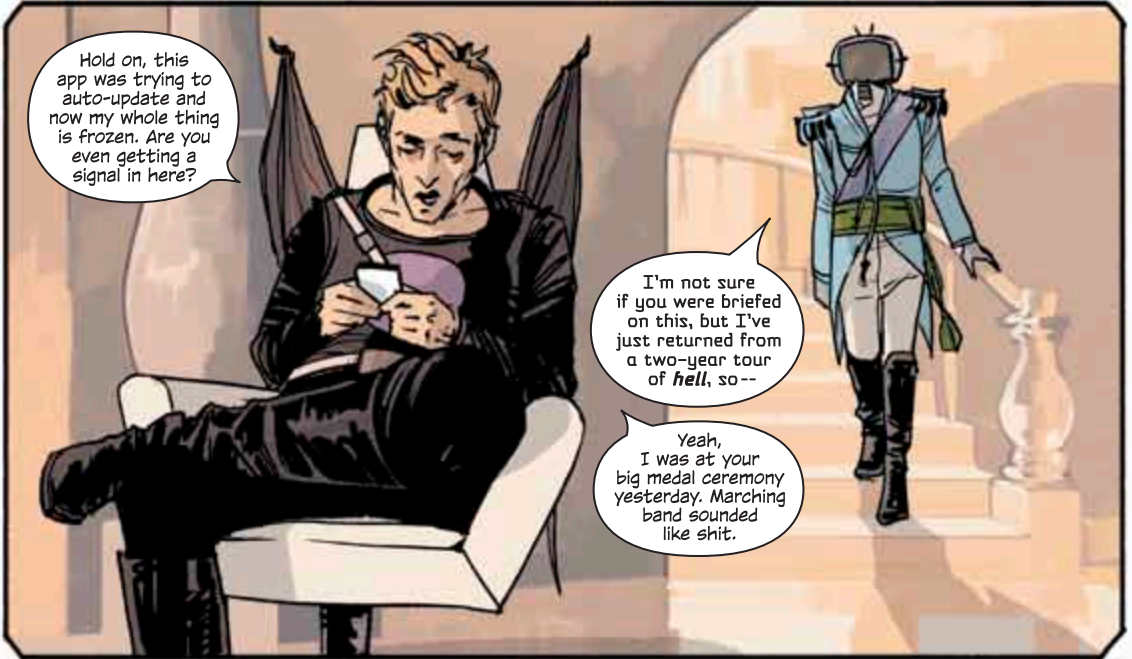


I'm so sorry to intrude, but Prince Robot IV has a gentleman caller.

He said his business was... **sensitive**.



May I help you?



Hold on, this app was trying to auto-update and now my whole thing is frozen. Are you even getting a signal in here?

I'm not sure if you were briefed on this, but I've just returned from a two-year tour of hell, so--

Yeah, I was at your big medal ceremony yesterday. Marching band sounded like shit.

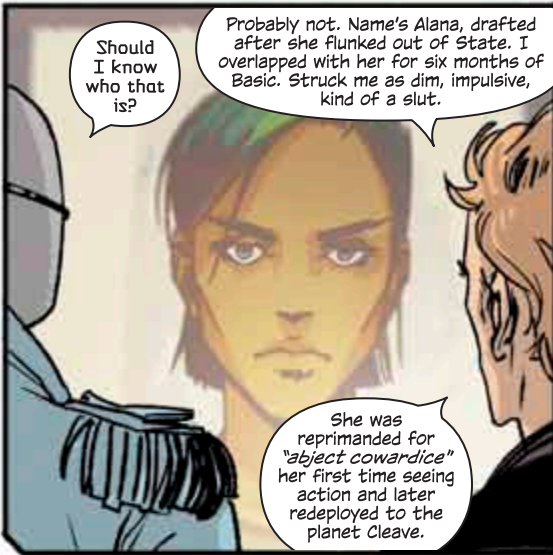
Special Agent Gale, Secret Intelligence.

Sorry, am I supposed to genuflect or something? I'm not up on my royalist protocols.

Look, what is this all about?



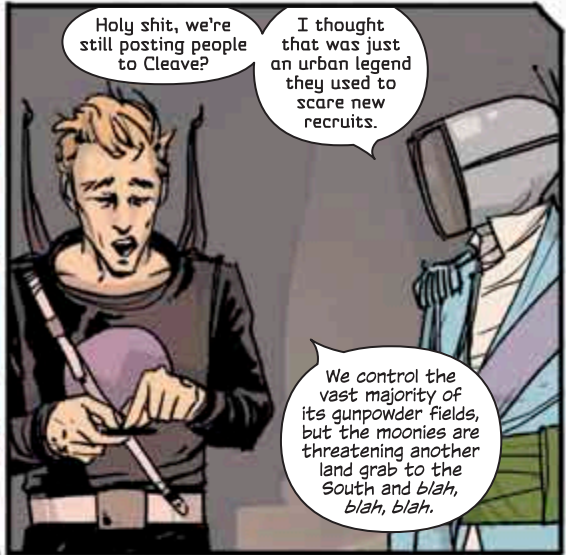
Her.



Should I know who that is?

Probably not. Name's Alana, drafted after she flunked out of State. I overlapped with her for six months of Basic. Struck me as dim, impulsive, kind of a slut.

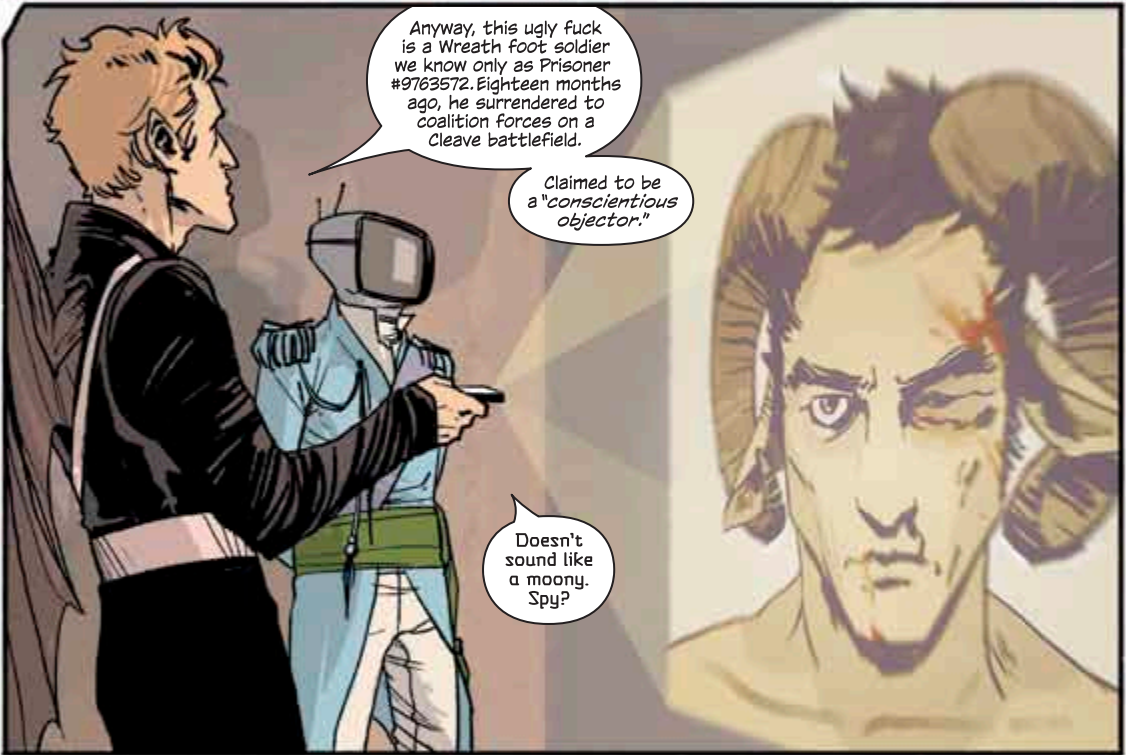
She was reprimanded for "abject cowardice" her first time seeing action and later redeployed to the planet Cleave.



Holy shit, we're still posting people to Cleave?

I thought that was just an urban legend they used to scare new recruits.

We control the vast majority of its gunpowder fields, but the moonies are threatening another land grab to the south and blah, blah, blah.



Anyway, this ugly fuck is a Wrath foot soldier we know only as Prisoner #9763572. Eighteen months ago, he surrendered to coalition forces on a Cleave battlefield.

Claimed to be a "conscientious objector."

Doesn't sound like a moony. Spy?



That was our thinking, so we transferred him to a detention facility... where he was guarded by none other than Private First Class Alana.

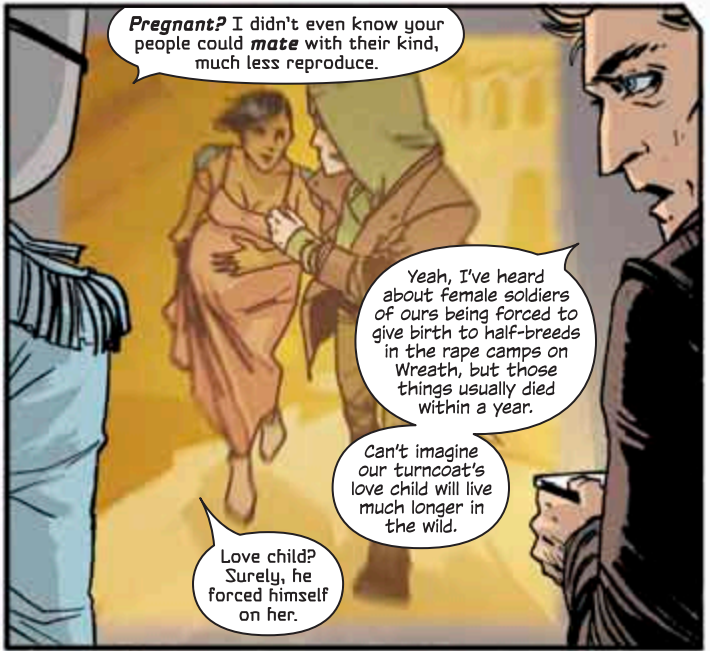
Twelve hours later, they had both *disappeared*.



So the moony kidnapped her?

We hoped.

But then three months ago, an ATM camera on civilian turf caught this image.



Pregnant? I didn't even know your people could *mate* with their kind, much less reproduce.

Yeah, I've heard about female soldiers of ours being forced to give birth to half-breeds in the rape camps on Wreath, but those things usually died within a year.

Can't imagine our turncoat's love child will live much longer in the wild.

Love child? Surely, he forced himself on her.



Take a look at their hands. Matching rings. Apparently, it's a tradition on Wreath.

A wedding tradition.



You're saying she *willingly* laid down with one of those monsters?

Why?



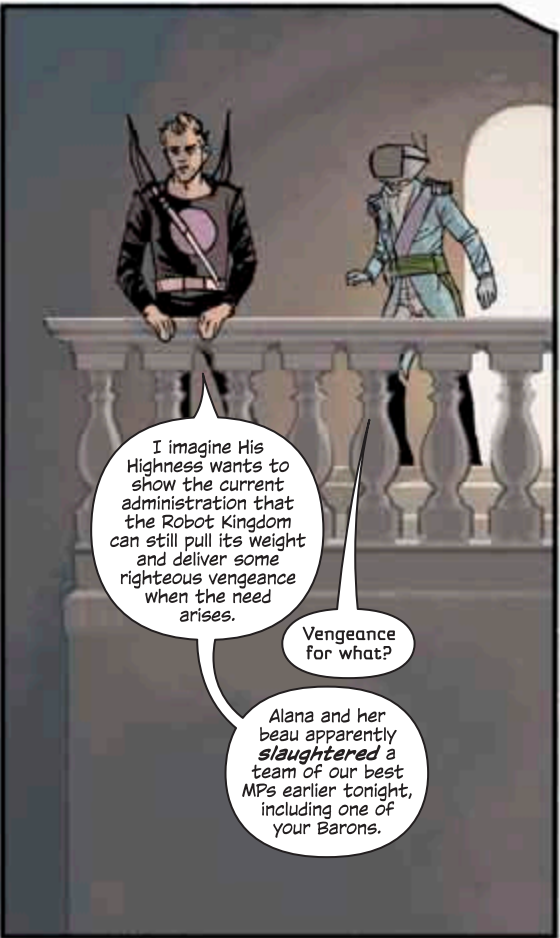
We don't know, but your father would like *you* to deal with the situation before anyone finds out.



The King sent you?

But... I've already served my time! I just survived one of the worst sneak attacks in military history!

And yet, surviving isn't exactly winning.



I imagine His Highness wants to show the current administration that the Robot Kingdom can still pull its weight and deliver some righteous vengeance when the need arises.

Vengeance for what?

Alana and her beau apparently *slaughtered* a team of our best MPs earlier tonight, including one of your Barons.



I don't understand.

I told my parents I wanted to start a family this year.



Yes, well. None of my business, of course.

The HMS Skyscraper departs for Cleave in the morning. Happy hunting.



From my very first day, I was pursued by men. All of them tried to hurt me, but only one managed to break my heart.



Sorry, getting ahead of myself.



I thought she'd never quit crying.

Can you blame her?

So far, her life has been comprised primarily of firefights.



Well, mama will be ready for the next one.



You took a firearm?! Are you insane?! Do you have any idea what the statistics are for parents who keep one of those in--

Easy, it's just a Heartbreaker. They're nonlethal.

Have you ever been shot with one? Because I have, and it hurt like the day my dog died...



Wait, you had a dog?

I didn't know you had a dog!

Rumfer. He was run over by my school bus when I was twelve.



You called your dog Rumfer?

We're never gonna agree on a name for this kid, are we?



Let's just keep moving.

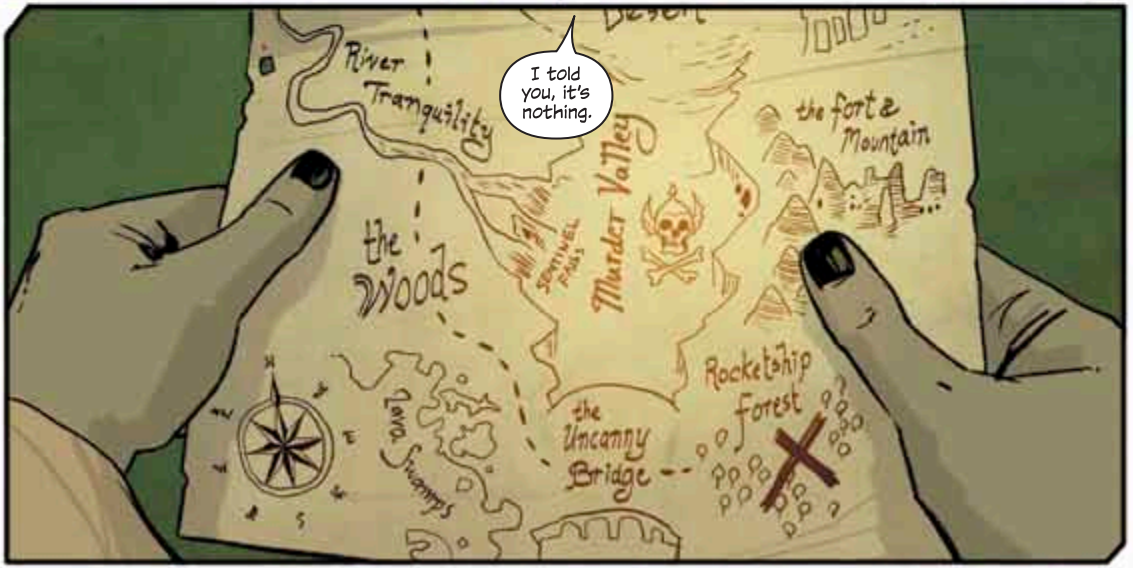
To where, exactly? That mechanic didn't leave us a deed to a new safehouse, did he? A safehouse with a soaking tub?



Surprising no one, he died for nothing.

It's just a worthless old map.

Wait, a map? Like, to *treasure*?



I told you, it's nothing.

River Tranquility

the Woods

Murder Valley

Rocketship Forest

the Uncanny Bridge

the fort & Mountain

Love Swamps





"The Rocketship Forest?"

Are you kidding me?



This is exactly what we've been waiting for!

Alana, it's not real.

Says who? Most of this planet is still uncharted, even by the natives. And we've both seen weirder shit out here!



Even if spaceships *did* grow on trees, where would we take one?

There's no escaping this war. It's poisoned every last inch of the galaxy.



Then we find *another* galaxy. I've heard about draft dodgers getting offered sanctuary...

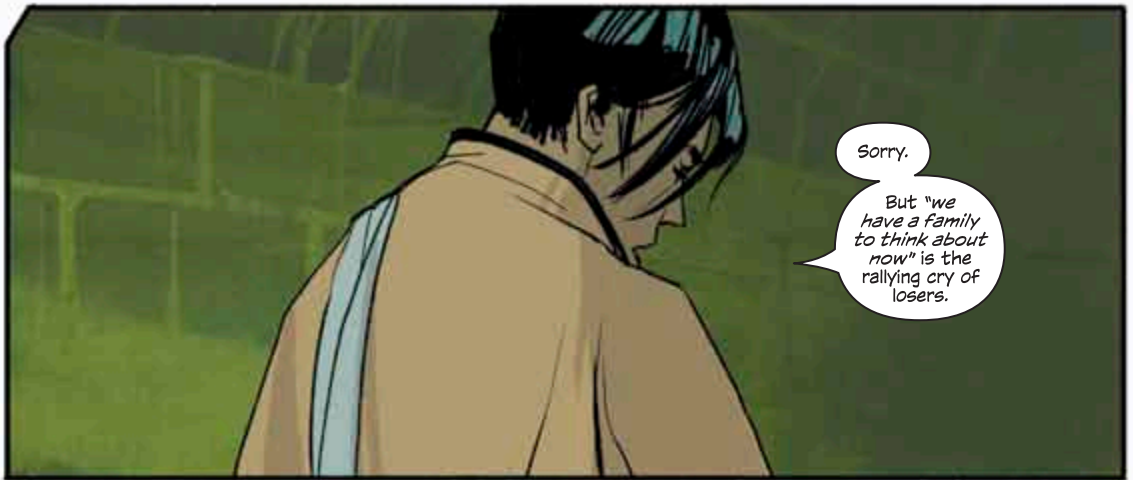
We're not draft dodgers, we're *deserters*. There's a difference.

Face it, our only choice is to lay low and stay out of trouble. We have a family to think about n--



Don't!

Don't you ever say those words to me!



Sorry.

But "we have a family to think about now" is the rallying cry of losers.



My old man threw his life away working a job he hated so he could "take care of his family."

In the end, it just turned him into a monster who treated us like crap the few times he was actually around.

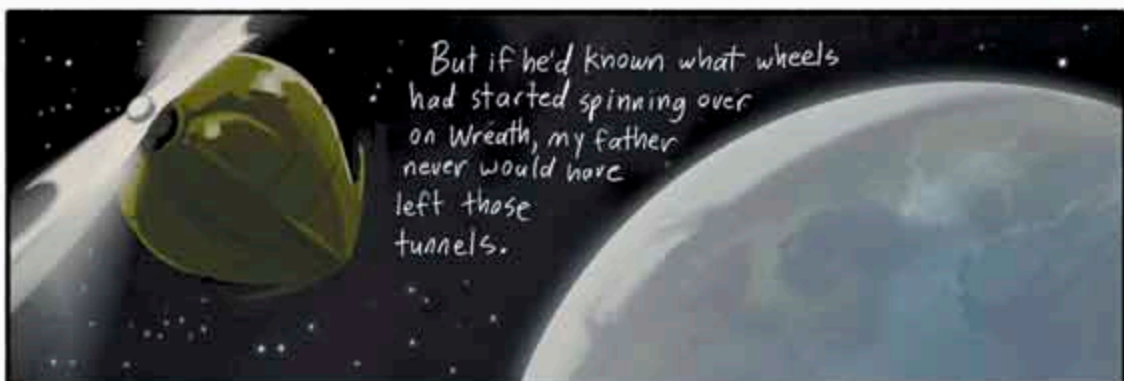
So what is it that you want, Alana?



I want to show our girl the universe.



He just couldn't say no to her.



But if he'd known what wheels
had started spinning over
on Wreath, my father
never would have
left those
tunnels.





RAAAAR

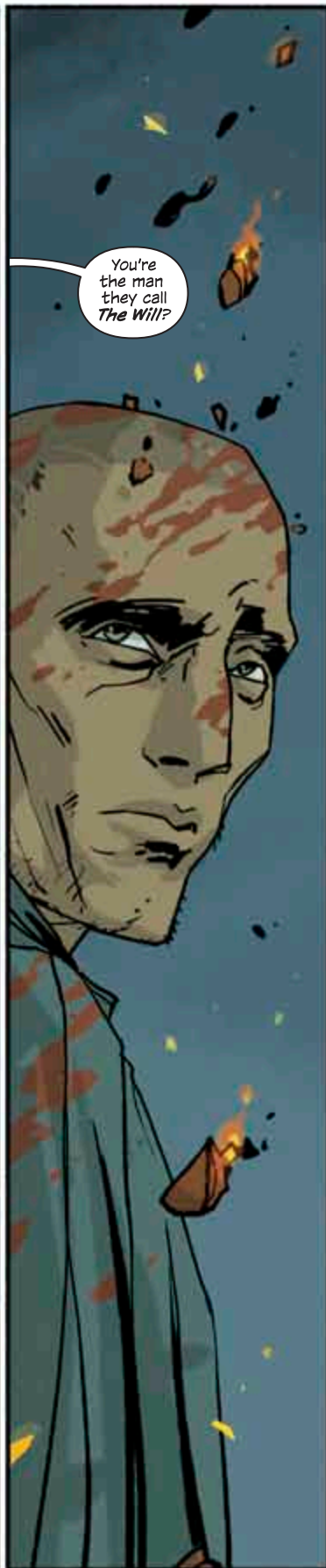


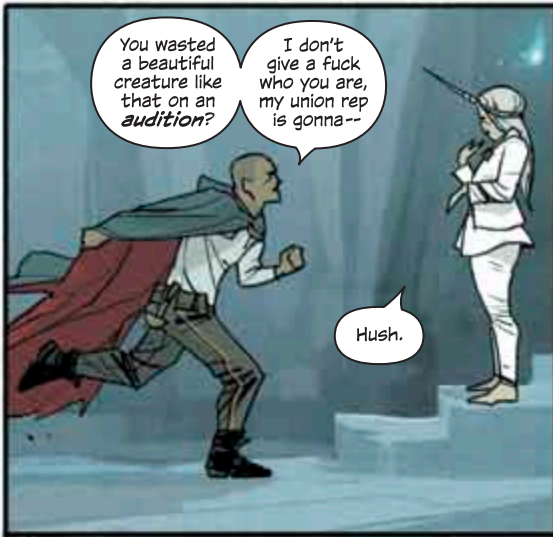
I'm here to see somebody named Vez.

I have an appointment.





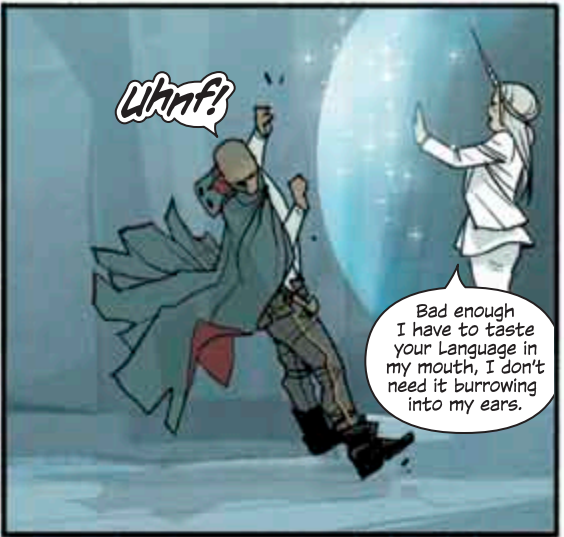




You wasted a beautiful creature like that on an *audition*?

I don't give a fuck who you are, my union rep is gonna--

Hush.



Uhnf!

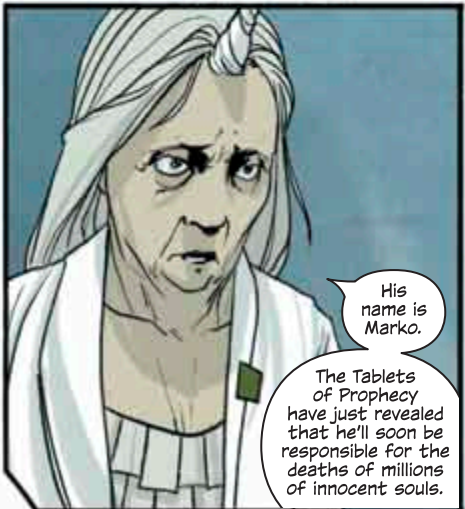
Bad enough I have to taste your language in my mouth, I don't need it burrowing into my ears.



For the record, I detest Freelancers.

Then why the hell did you call one?

Because the man I want you to find shares your appalling sense of moral relativism.



His name is Marko.

The Tablets of Prophecy have just revealed that he'll soon be responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent souls.



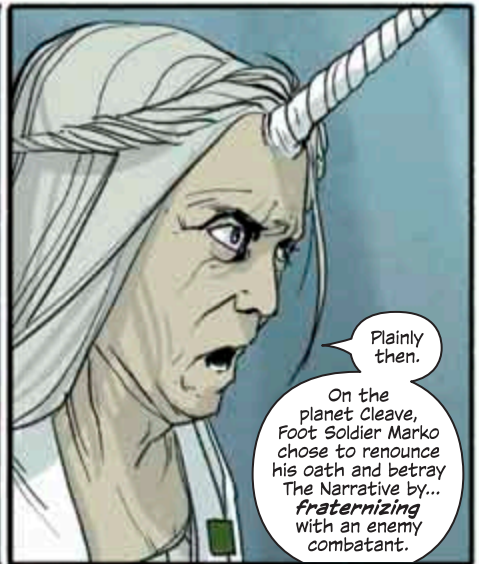
LYING



I'm sorry, did your animal just call me a *liar*?

She's not an animal, she's a Lying Cat.

Her kind isn't big on... ornamentation, so I'd keep it plain.



Plainly then.

On the planet Cleave, Foot Soldier Marko chose to renounce his oath and betray The Narrative by... **fraternizing** with an enemy combatant.



To protect troop morale, my superiors want both Marko and his whore eliminated by a discreet subcontractor before word of their coupling spreads to the rank and file.

If you're not handing out wanted posters, that could take time.

Just because your lovebirds are on Cleave now doesn't mean they'll stay there.



Which is why we're keeping you on **retainer**. This White Card will cover all expenses for the duration of your job.

Not exactly incentive to finish fast.

Which is why you're not the **only** Freelancer we hired.



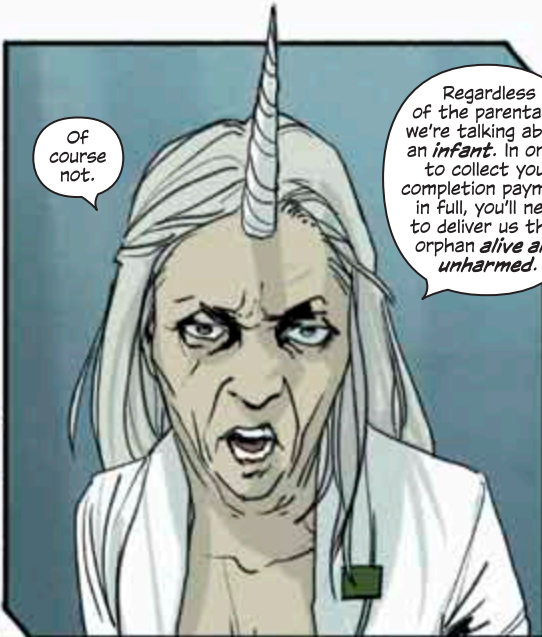
Or am I lying about that?

≧HNF≦

One last thing. If our intelligence is accurate, your targets may have already sired *offspring* together.



And?
You want me to drown the mongrel after I do its folks?

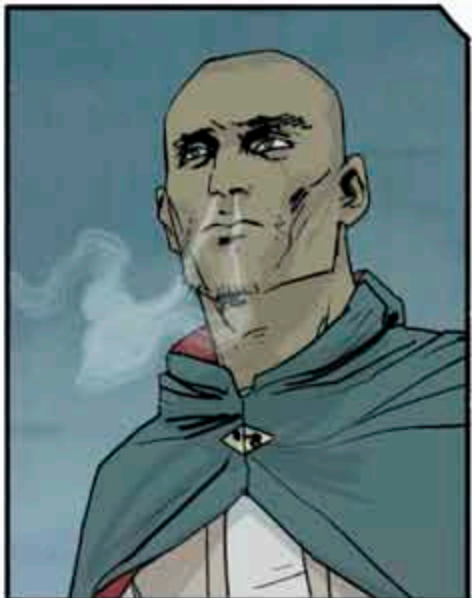


Of course not.

Regardless of the parentage, we're talking about an *infant*. In order to collect your completion payment in full, you'll need to deliver us their orphan *alive and unharmed*.



Good luck,
The Will.



What kind of assholes bring a kid into worlds like these?



Boom.



Looks like a regular old forest to me.

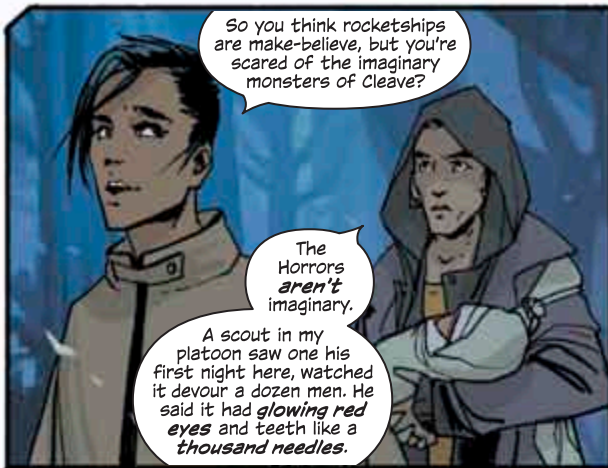
That's because it is. But if I'm reading this thing right, the Rocketship Forest should be just beyond the next valley, on the other side of something called the Uncanny Bridge.

Excellent, so we're trusting our future to the map a disreputable snitch likely tore out of the back of some overdue library book.



Honestly, we shouldn't be traveling after dark.

This is when the *Horrors* come out.



So you think rocketships are make-believe, but you're scared of the imaginary monsters of Cleave?

The Horrors aren't imaginary.

A scout in my platoon saw one his first night here, watched it devour a dozen men. He said it had *glowing red eyes* and teeth like a *thousand needles*.



You know what my idea of horror is?

Nine months of forced sobriety. If I could survive that...

Quiet!



Listen.

To what? My ears are still ringing from our last adventure.

It sounds like... do you hear *screaming*?



Relax, you big girl.

There should be a clearing dead ahead, and that'll lead us straight to the Uncanny...









Thought I heard something.

It's not fair. The frontline was on the other side of the planet last year.

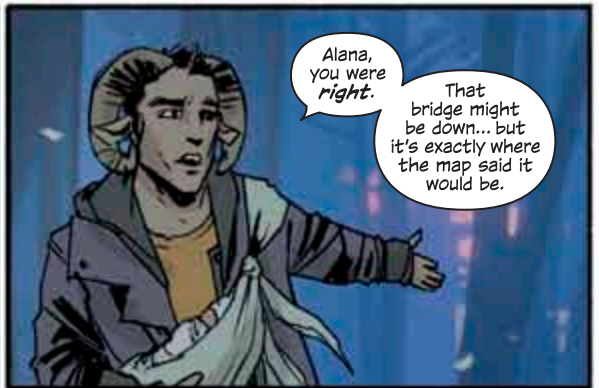
How are both of our armies already fighting *here*?



Alana...

I know, okay?

I was stupid to think we could ever outrun this retarded fucking war!



Alana, you were right.

That bridge might be down... but it's exactly where the map said it would be.



Maybe that means our rocketship is, too. All we have to do is find an alternate route.

It's not a traffic jam, Marko.

No, but you and I have survived worse scrapes together. And this time, we have something else on our side.



We have Hope.



Not everybody does.

