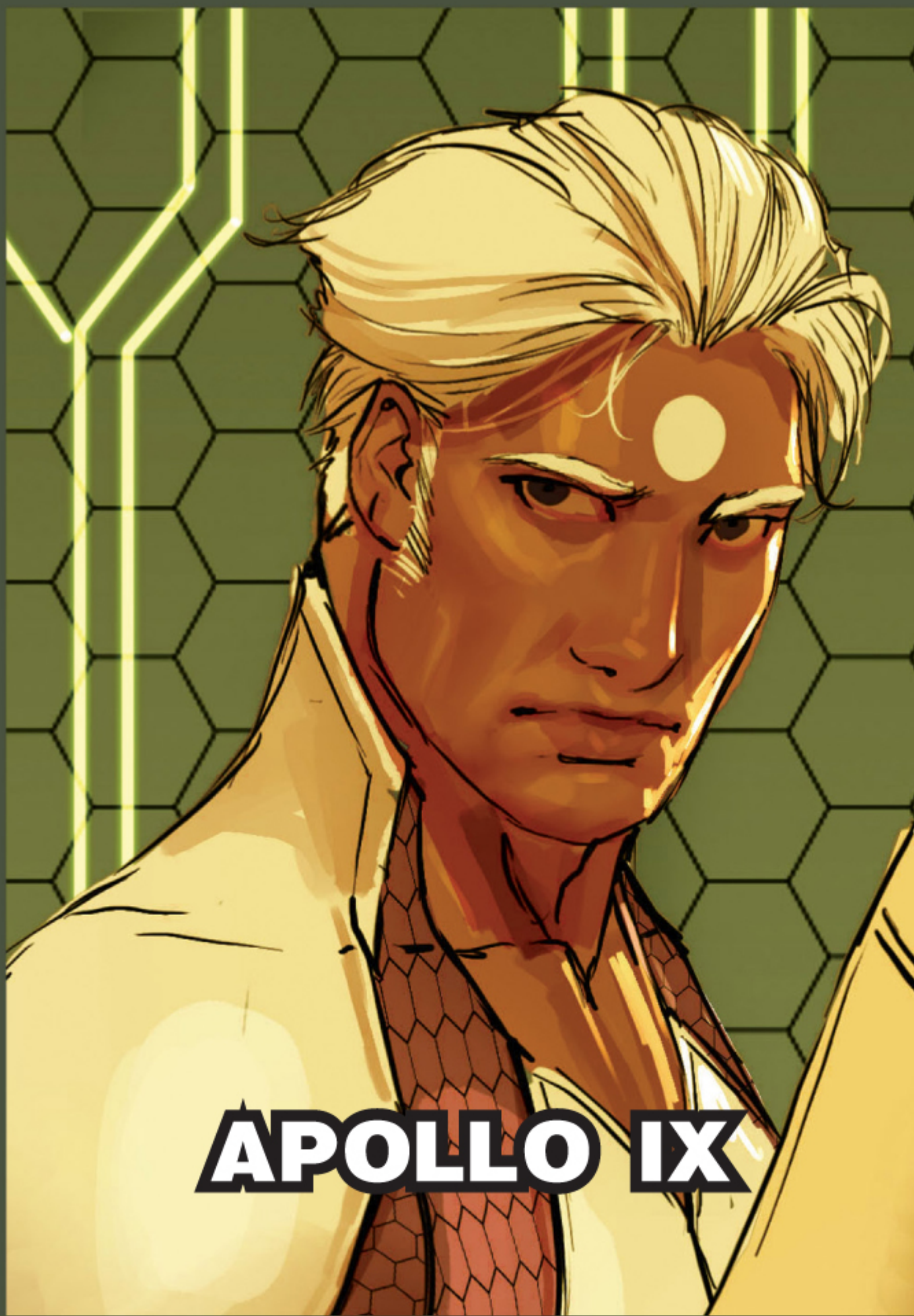




APHRODITE IX



APOLLO IX



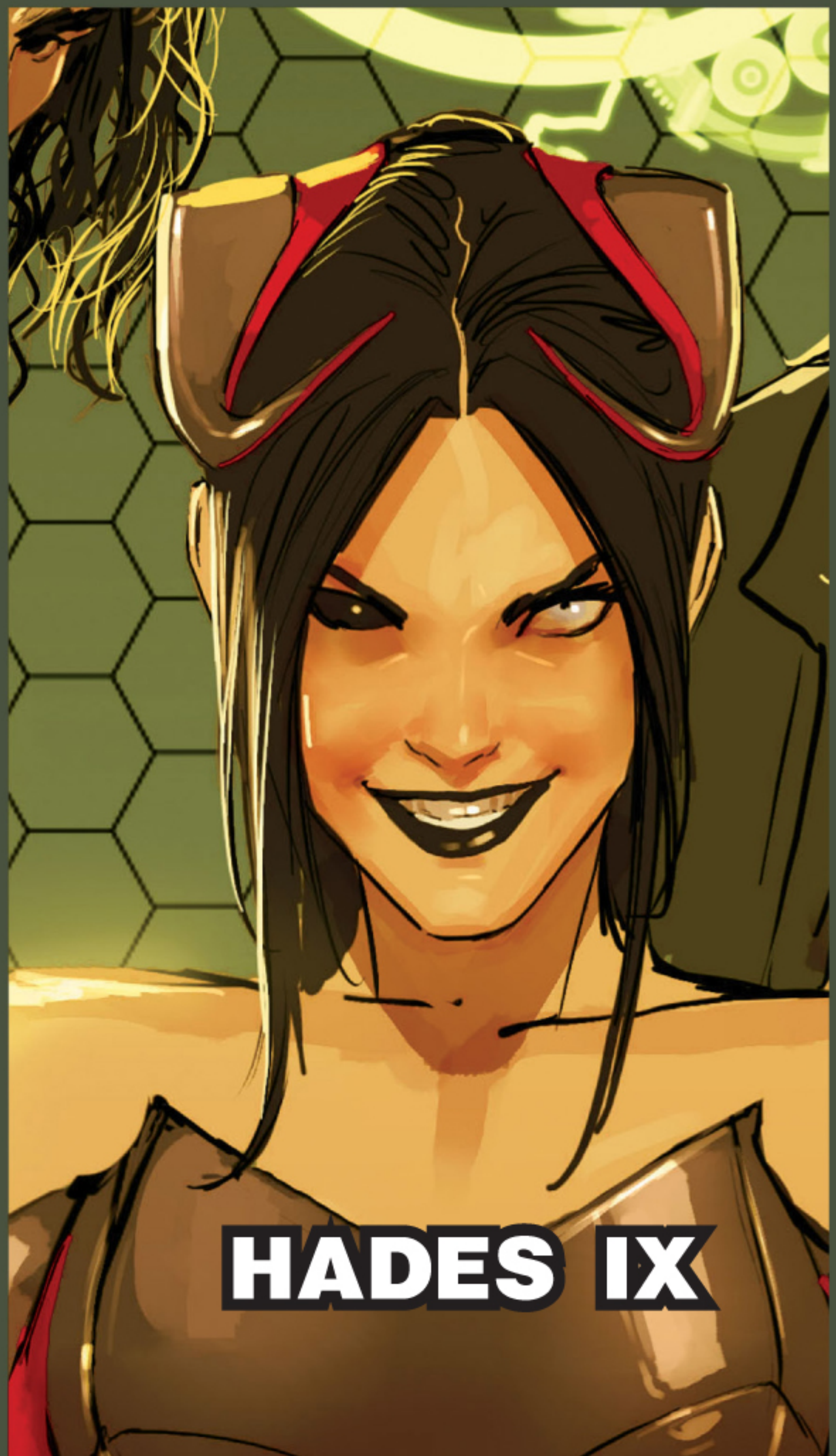
ARES IX



ARTEMIS IX



ATHENA IX



HADES IX



HEPHAESTUS IX



HERMES IX



POSEIDON IX

2827 AD
ARES CITY



TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO THIS WAS SPEROS CITY, THE CAPITAL CITY OF A CYBORG RACE, WHOSE POPULATION WAS REDISTRIBUTED INTO NINE UNIQUE CITY-STATES, RULED OVER BY THEIR NEW IXTH GENERATION OVERLORDS.

THE ONCE-PROUD CYBORGES HAD BEEN RELEGATED TO A *WORKER* CASTE KEPT IN LINE BY THE *WARRIOR* CASTE OF SYNTHETIC XVS, WHO CARRIED THE LIKENESS OF THEIR MASTERS.

THE NINE FIEFDOMS GREW AND DEVELOPED A PERSONALITY MODELED AND NAMED AFTER THEIR IX. I CHOSE THE NORTHERNMOST ONE FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, AND TRIED TO MAKE THE SOMEWHAT ISOLATED "*APHRODITE*" A HARMONIOUS, PEACEFUL LAND.

SHINK

THE FIRST DECADE WAS QUIET, AND I WAS HOPEFUL FOR OUR BURGEONING UTOPIA. ULTIMATELY IT WAS ONLY *IDEAL* FOR THE NINE OF US IN POWER.

DURING THE SECOND DECADE A FEW SKIRMISHES BROKE OUT, BUT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS IT'S BEEN ENDLESS WAR BETWEEN THEM ALL.

ALLIANCES SHIFTED BETWEEN THE VARIOUS IXs. ALWAYS FOUR-ON-FOUR, I WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO ABSTAINED FROM ALL THE NONSENSE. A LUXURY PERHAPS OF MY CHOOSING A SECLUDED REGION NO ONE ELSE DESIRED.

HAHAHAHAHA!

IT WAS ALL A GAME TO THEM. IF ONE OF THEM DIED, THEIR CONSCIOUSNESS AND MEMORIES WOULD BE DOWNLOADED INTO A CLONED BODY, AND THEY WOULD ENTER THE FRAY ANEW.

DEATH HAD LOST ITS STING.

HADES AND I WERE THE ONLY TWO WHO RETAINED OUR ORIGINAL BODIES, AND SHE TOOK GREAT PRIDE IN THAT.

THE OTHERS STILL LOOKED AND ACTED LIKE THE CHILDREN I WAS FOSTERED ALONGSIDE, BUT I WONDERED IF THEY WERE MERELY CRUEL FACSIMILES.

MY RECENT DECISION TO JOIN THE ACTION WAS AN ATTEMPT TO PUT A STOP TO ALL THE MEANINGLESS VIOLENCE.

HADES WAS THE STRONGEST OF THE OTHER EIGHT, AND I KNEW IF I COULD GET TO HER, THE OTHERS WOULD LISTEN.

PFFT

PFFT

THOK

THOK

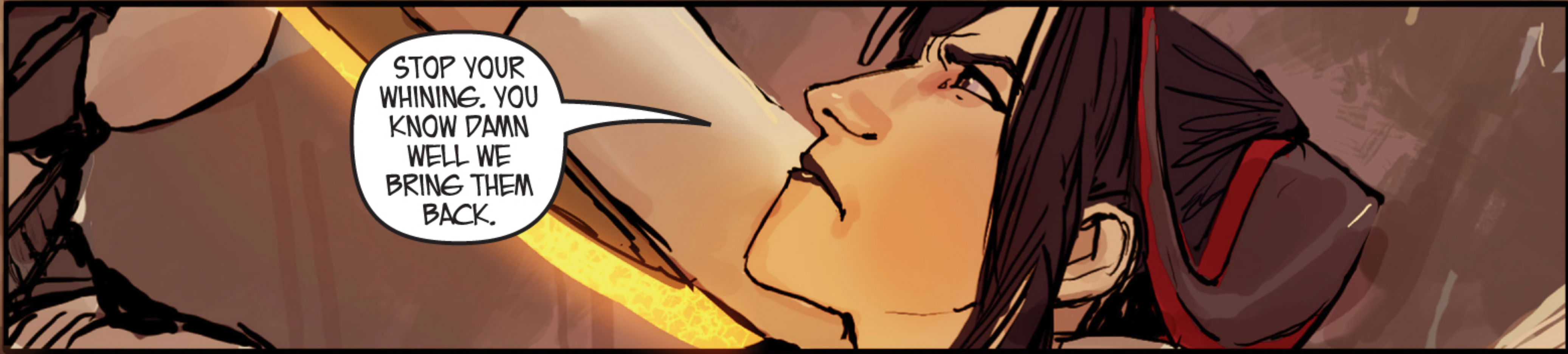
WTF? THOSE WERE MY BEST XVS!



GREEN?
WHAT GIVES?
THOUGHT YOU
LOOKED DOWN
ON OUR
GAMES.



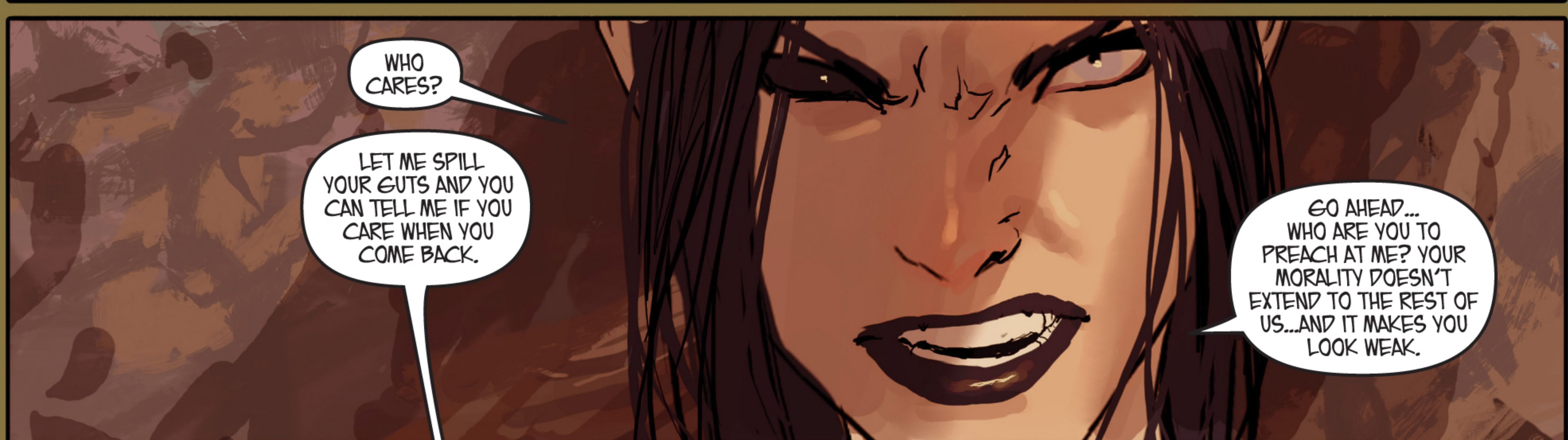
YOU CALL
THIS A GAME? HOW
MANY INNOCENT
CYBORGS HAVE BEEN
SLAUGHTERED HERE
TODAY ALONE?



STOP YOUR
WHINING. YOU
KNOW DAMN
WELL WE
BRING THEM
BACK.



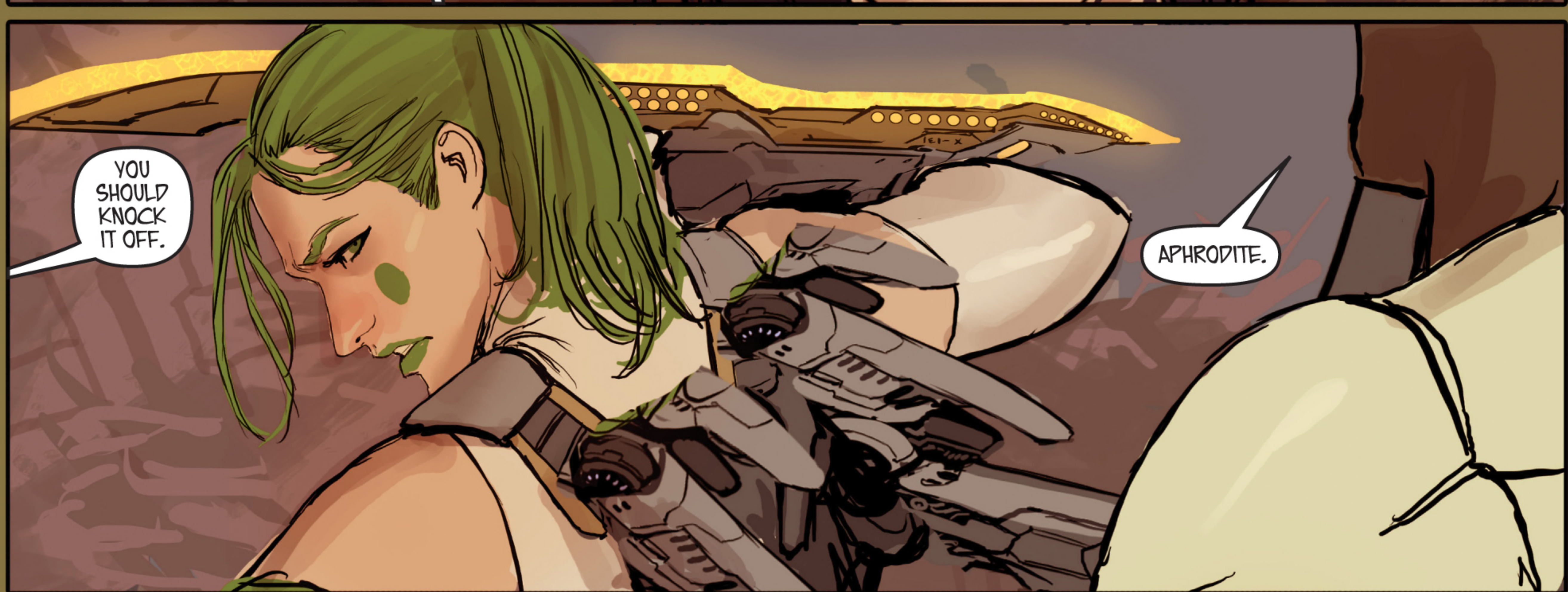
THIS
RESURRECTION...
HOW DO YOU KNOW
IT'S THE SAME BEING
THAT WAKES UP AND
NOT A COPY?



WHO
CARES?

LET ME SPILL
YOUR GUTS AND YOU
CAN TELL ME IF YOU
CARE WHEN YOU
COME BACK.

GO AHEAD...
WHO ARE YOU TO
PREACH AT ME? YOUR
MORALITY DOESN'T
EXTEND TO THE REST OF
US...AND IT MAKES YOU
LOOK WEAK.



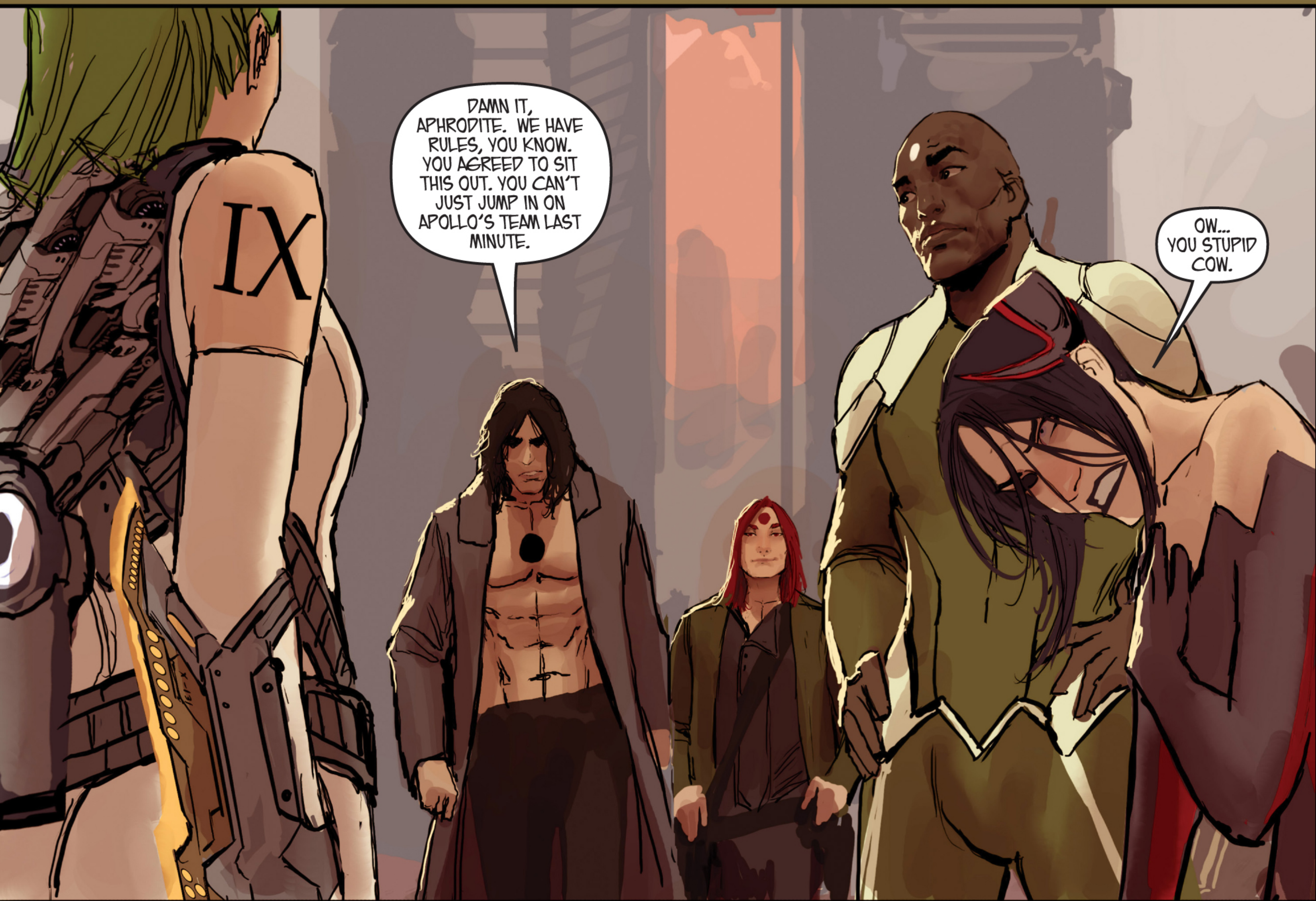
YOU
SHOULD
KNOCK
IT OFF.

APHRODITE.



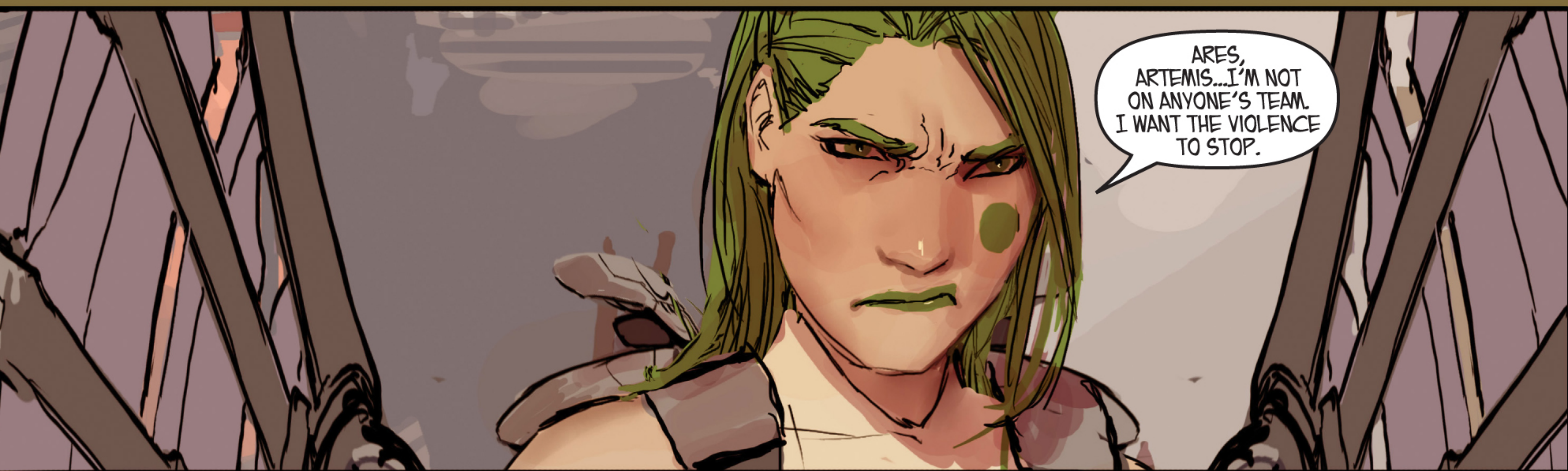
HEPHAESTUS?

YES,
IT'S GOOD TO
SEE YOU. IT'S
BEEN A FEW
YEARS.



DAMN IT, APHRODITE. WE HAVE RULES, YOU KNOW. YOU AGREED TO SIT THIS OUT. YOU CAN'T JUST JUMP IN ON APOLLO'S TEAM LAST MINUTE.

OW... YOU STUPID COW.

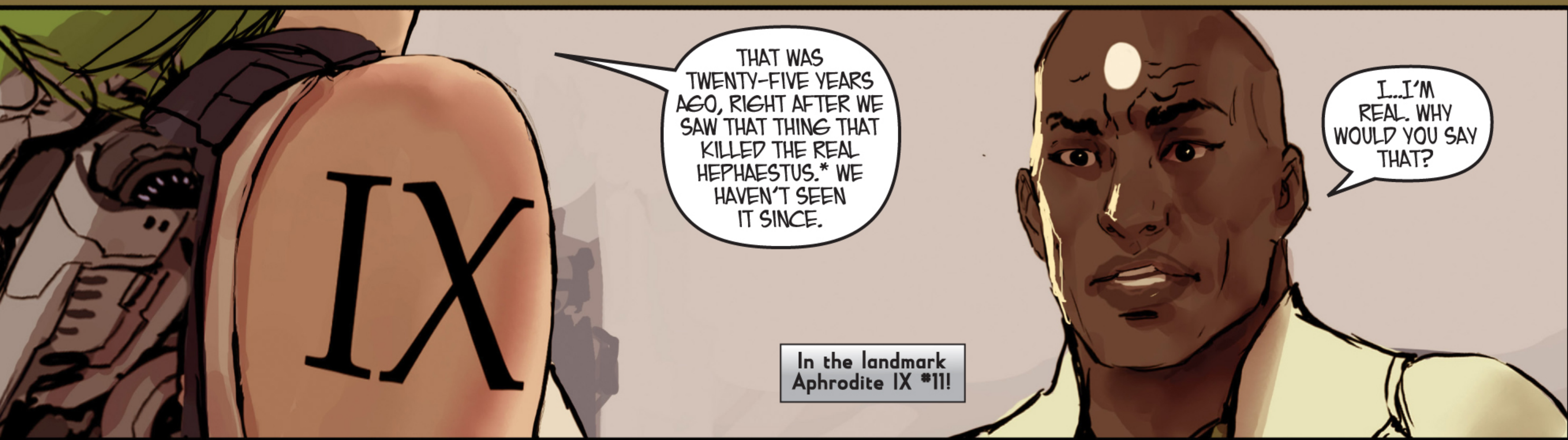


ARES, ARTEMIS... I'M NOT ON ANYONE'S TEAM. I WANT THE VIOLENCE TO STOP.



WHY? WHAT ELSE ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO?

YEAH, SWEETHEART, COME ON. YOU WERE THE ONE WHO SAID WE NEEDED TO MAINTAIN OUR SKILLS.



THAT WAS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, RIGHT AFTER WE SAW THAT THING THAT KILLED THE REAL HEPHAESTUS.* WE HAVEN'T SEEN IT SINCE.

I... I'M REAL. WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT?