

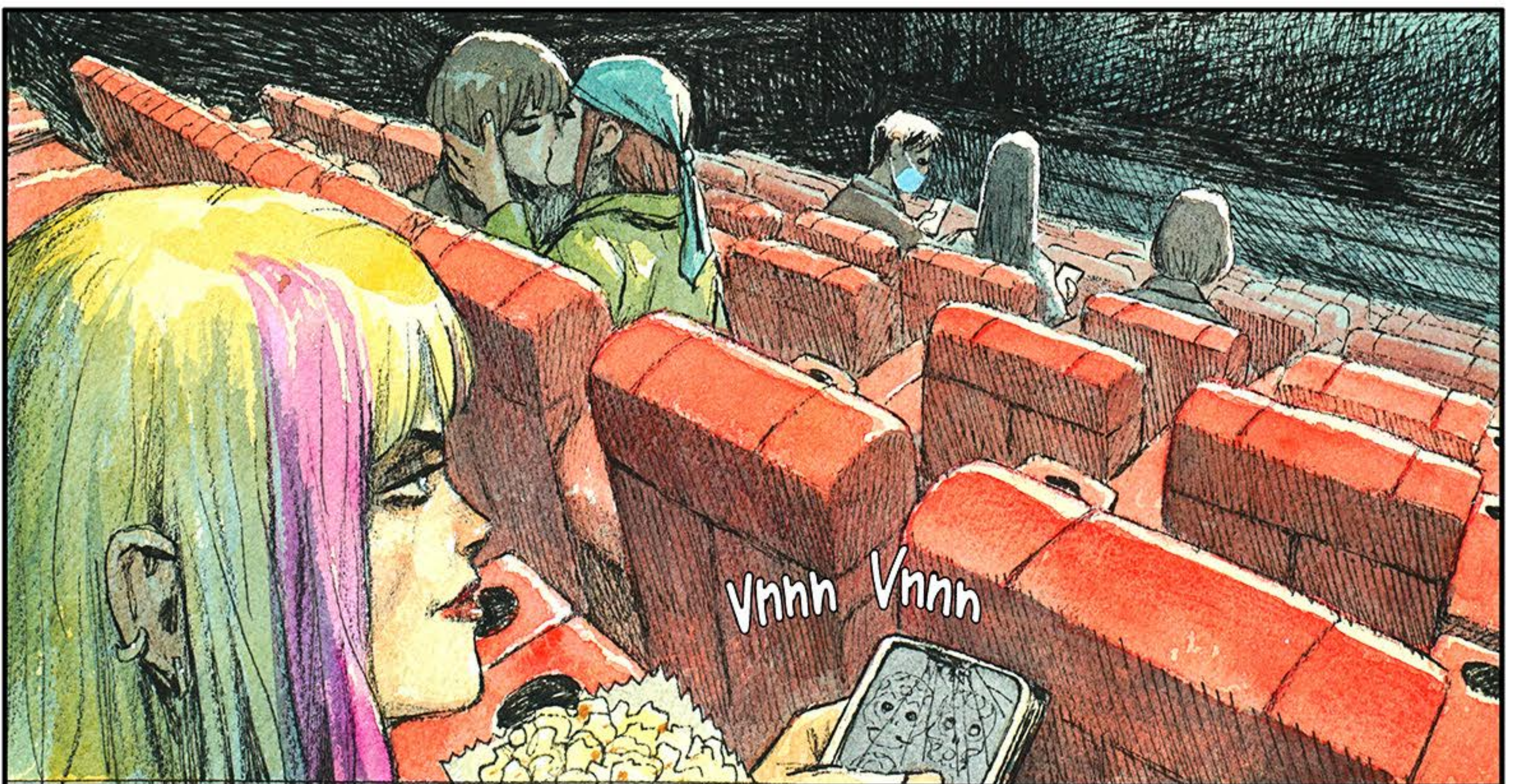
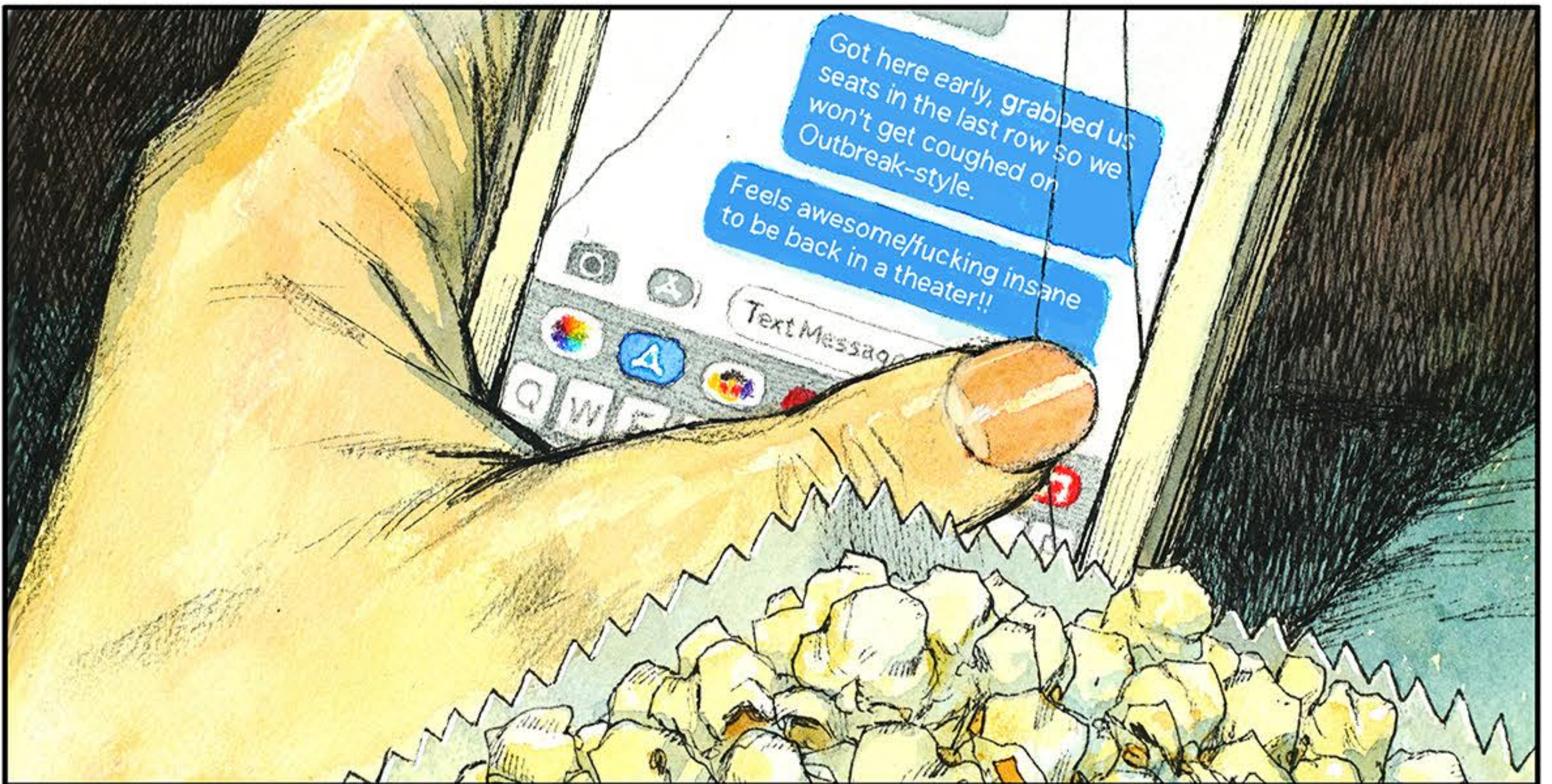
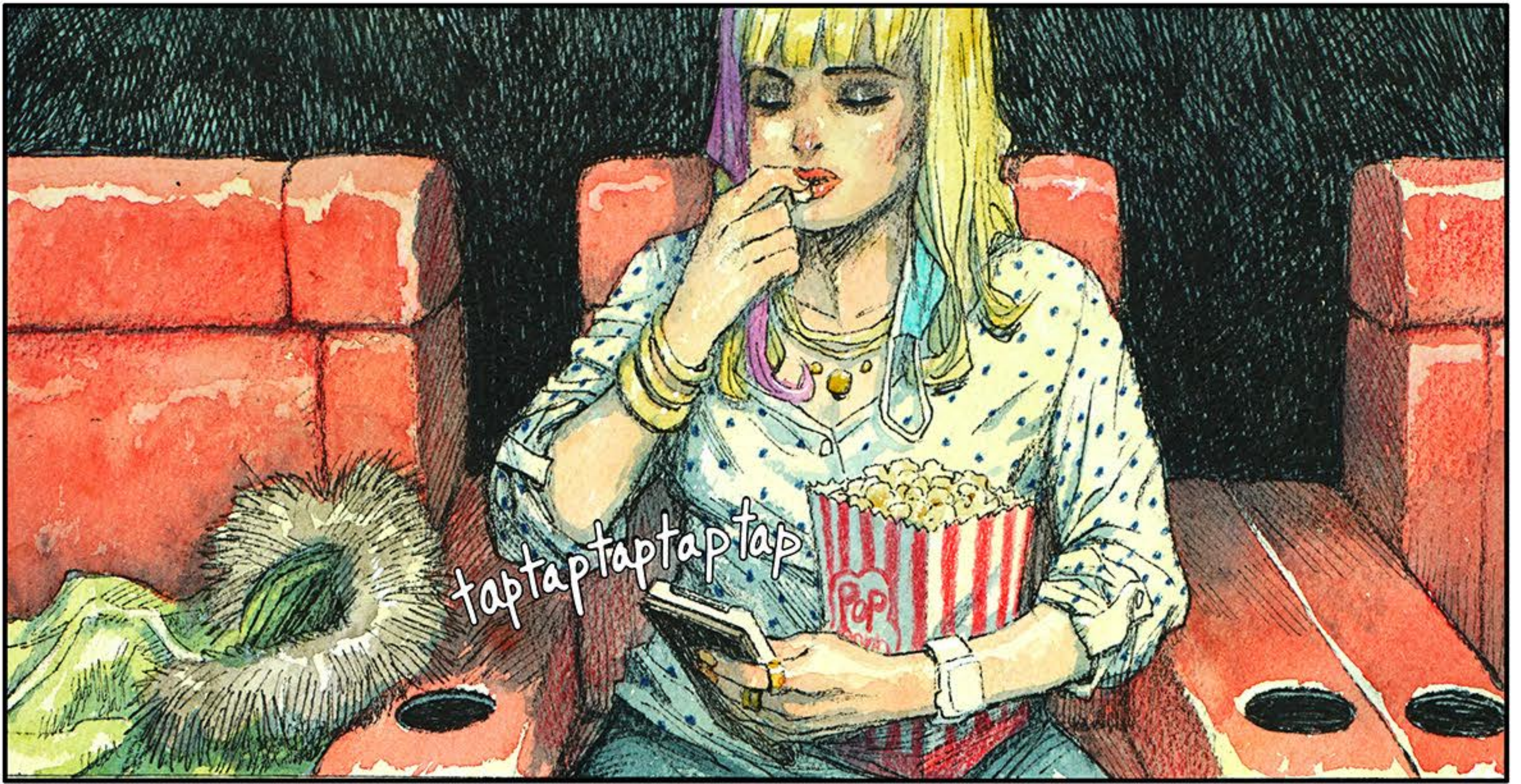


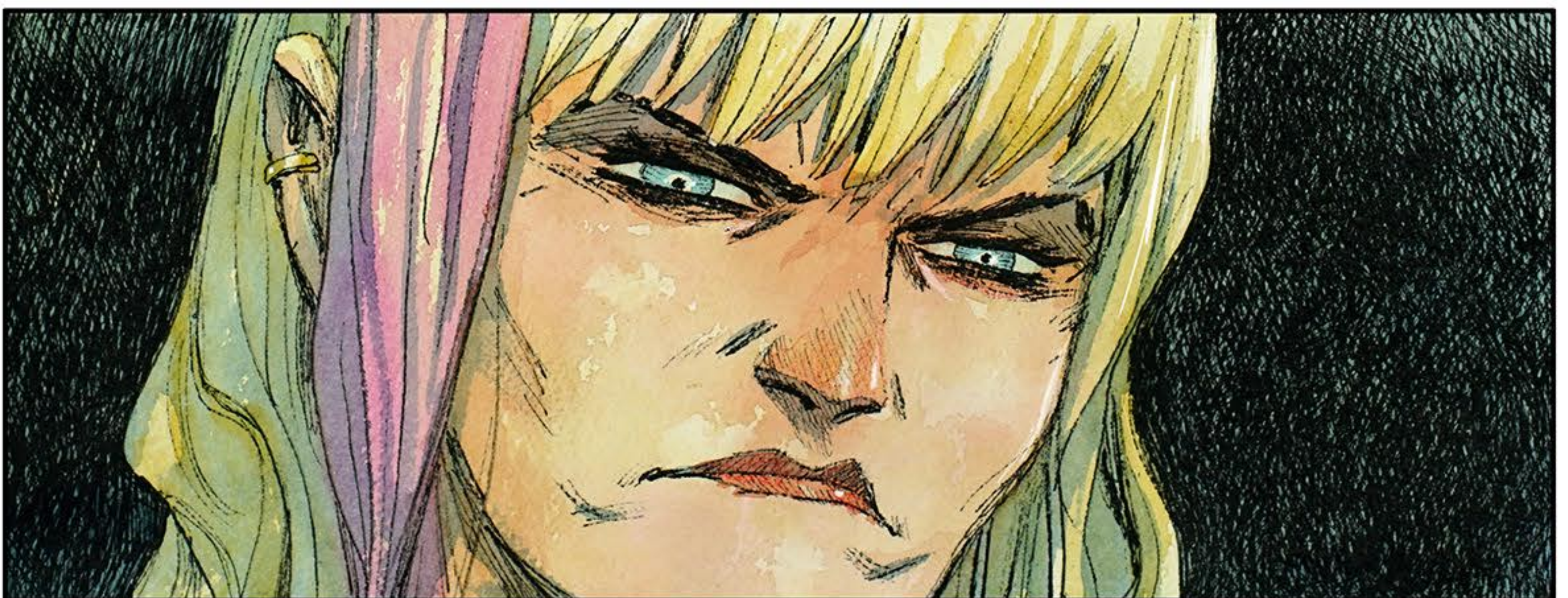
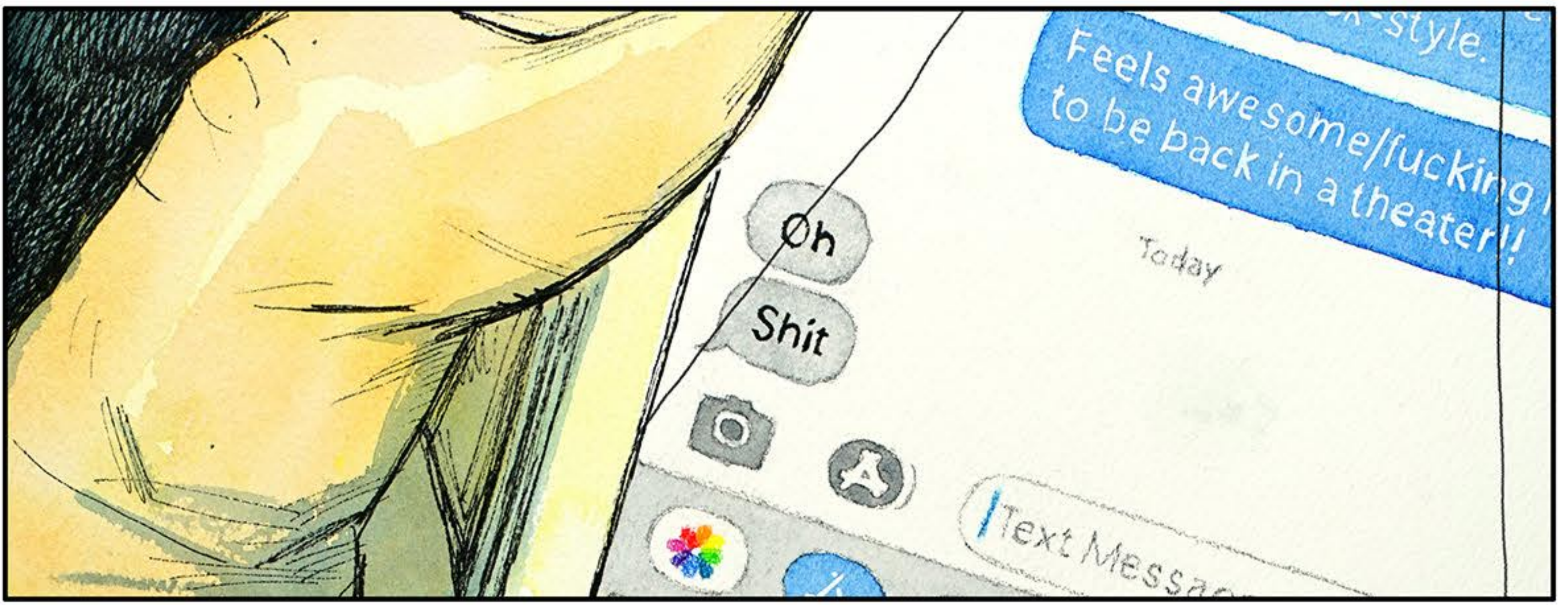
BRIAN K. VAUGHAN
NIKO HENRICHON

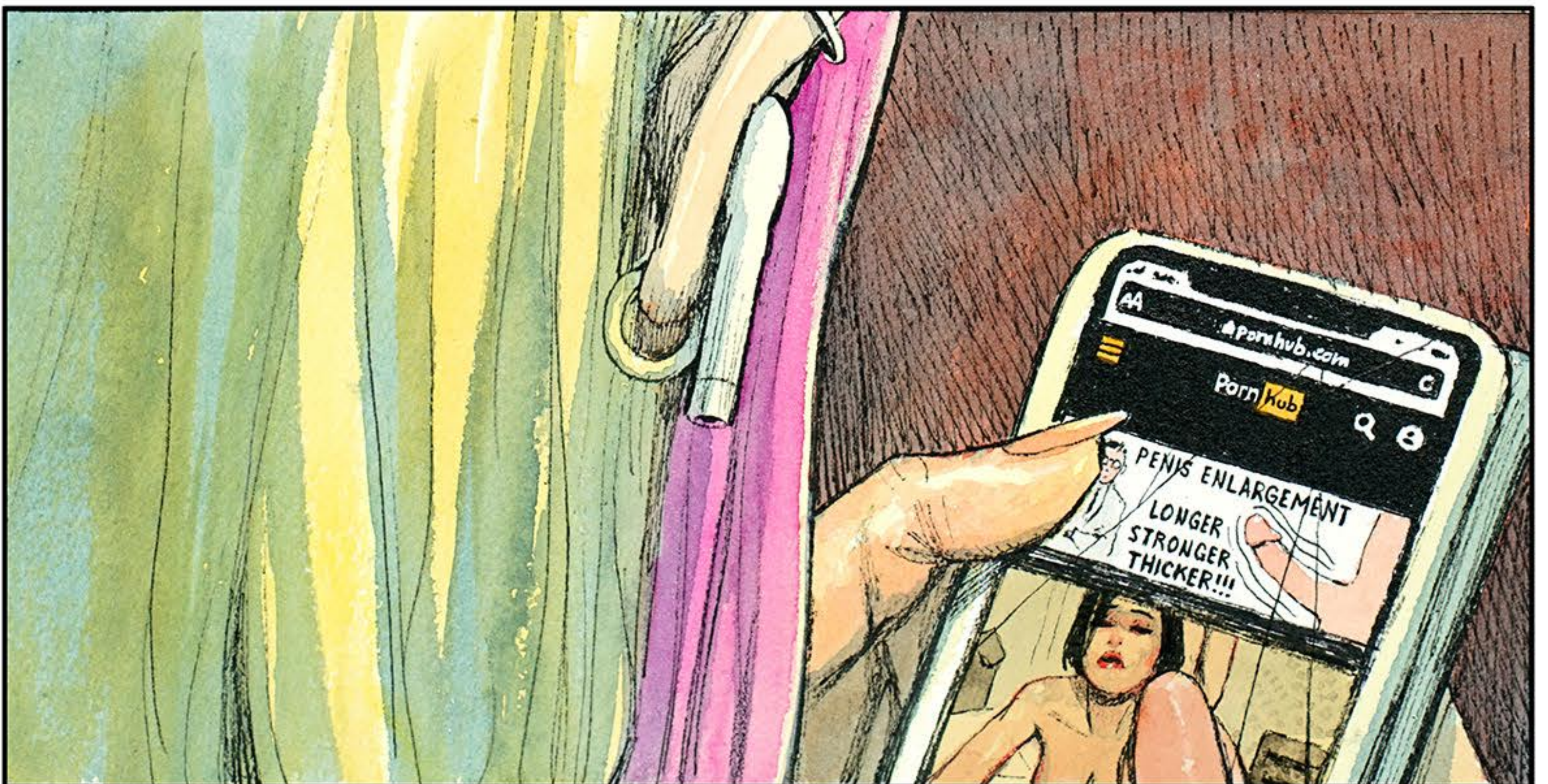
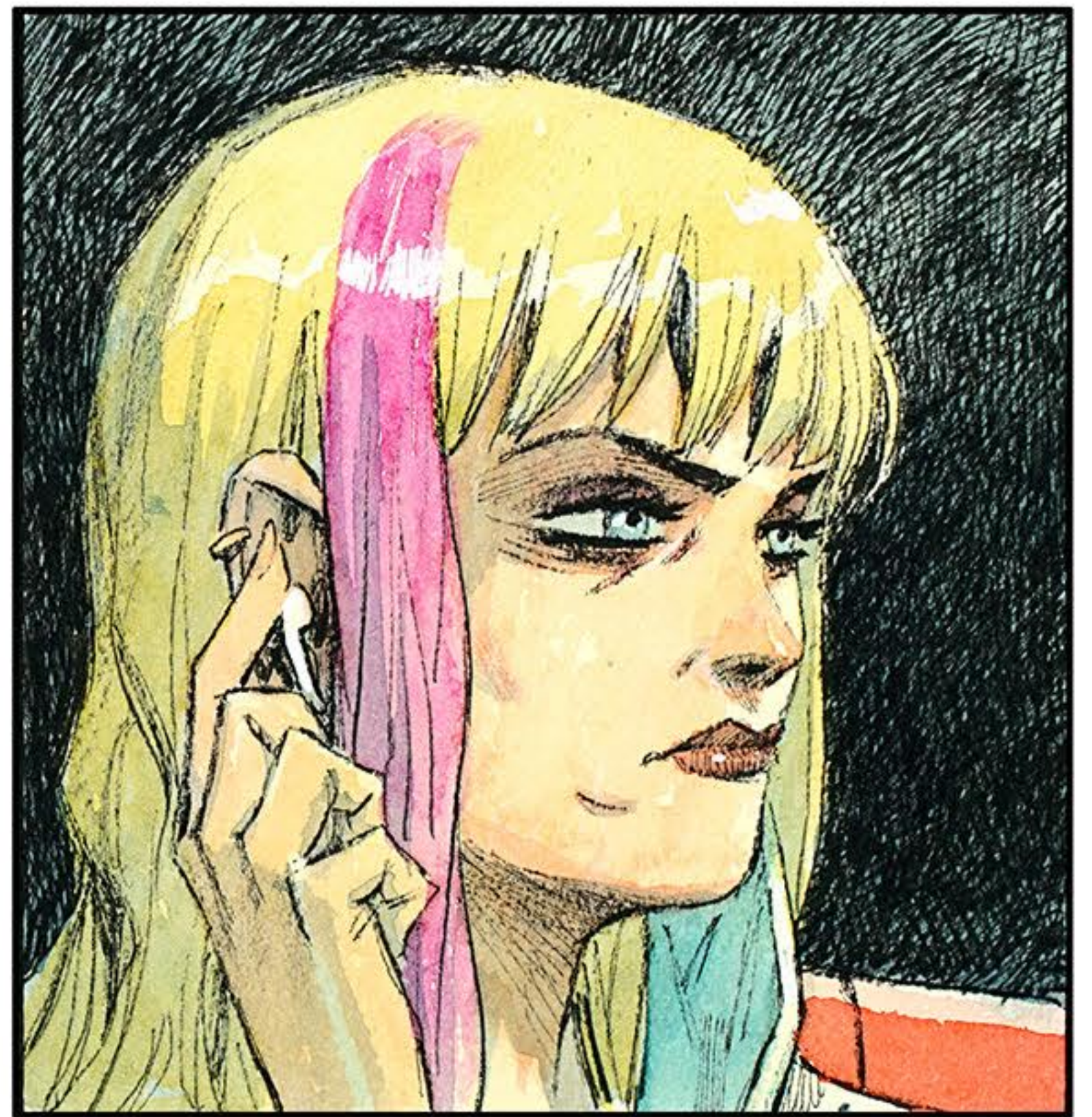
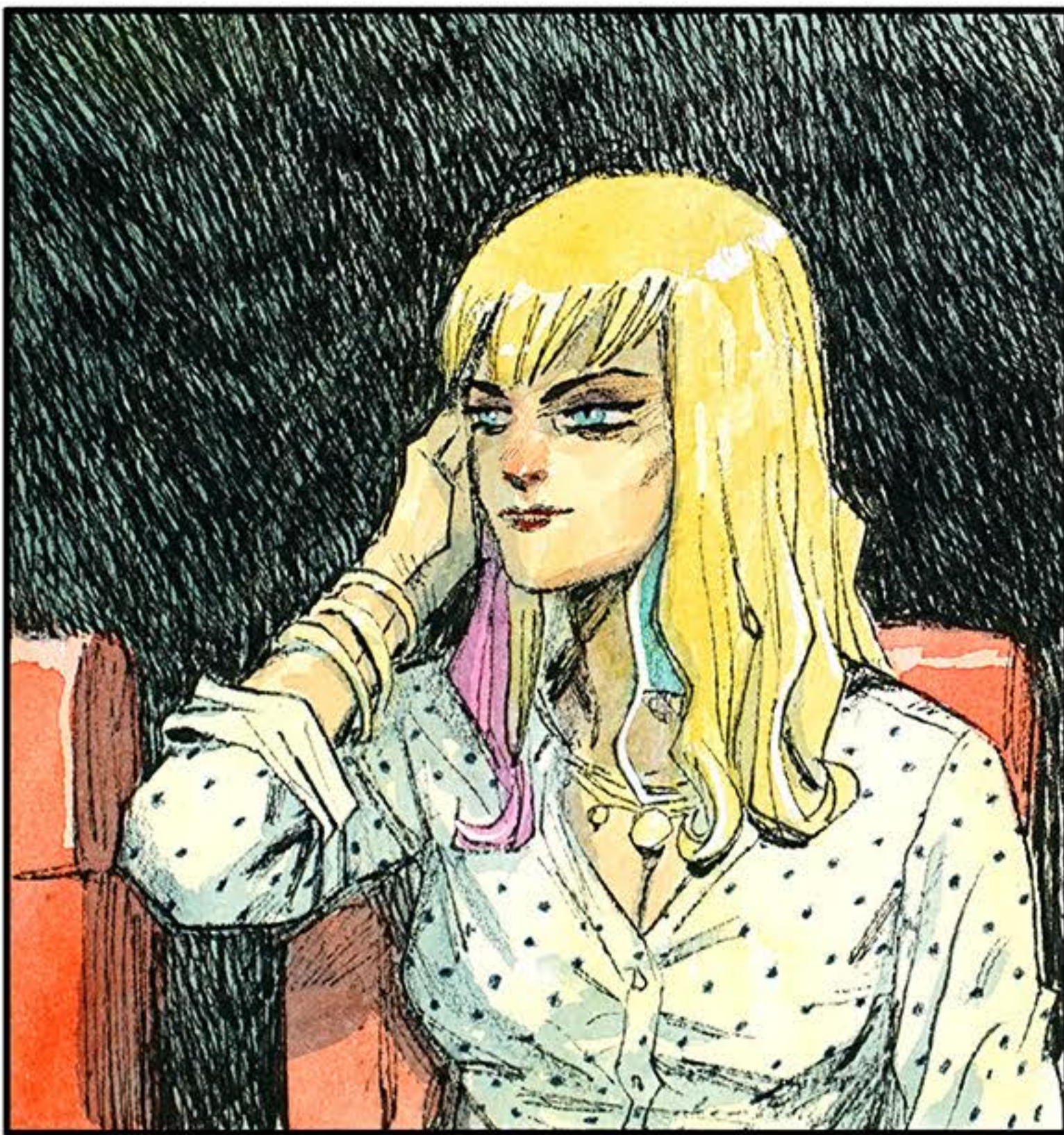
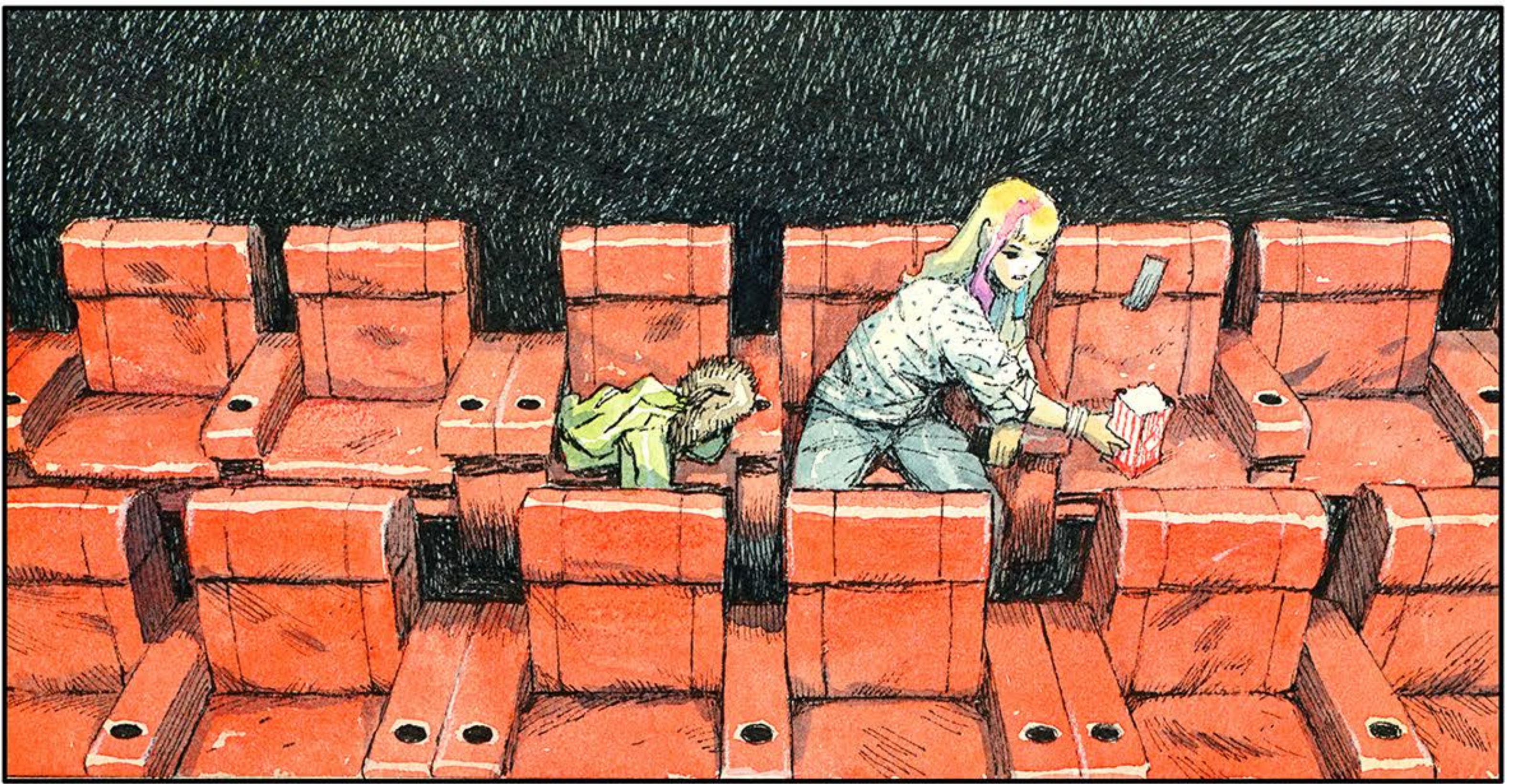
Spectators™



**NYC'S VILLAGE VIII
WELCOMES YOU BACK
TO THE MOVIES!**







AA

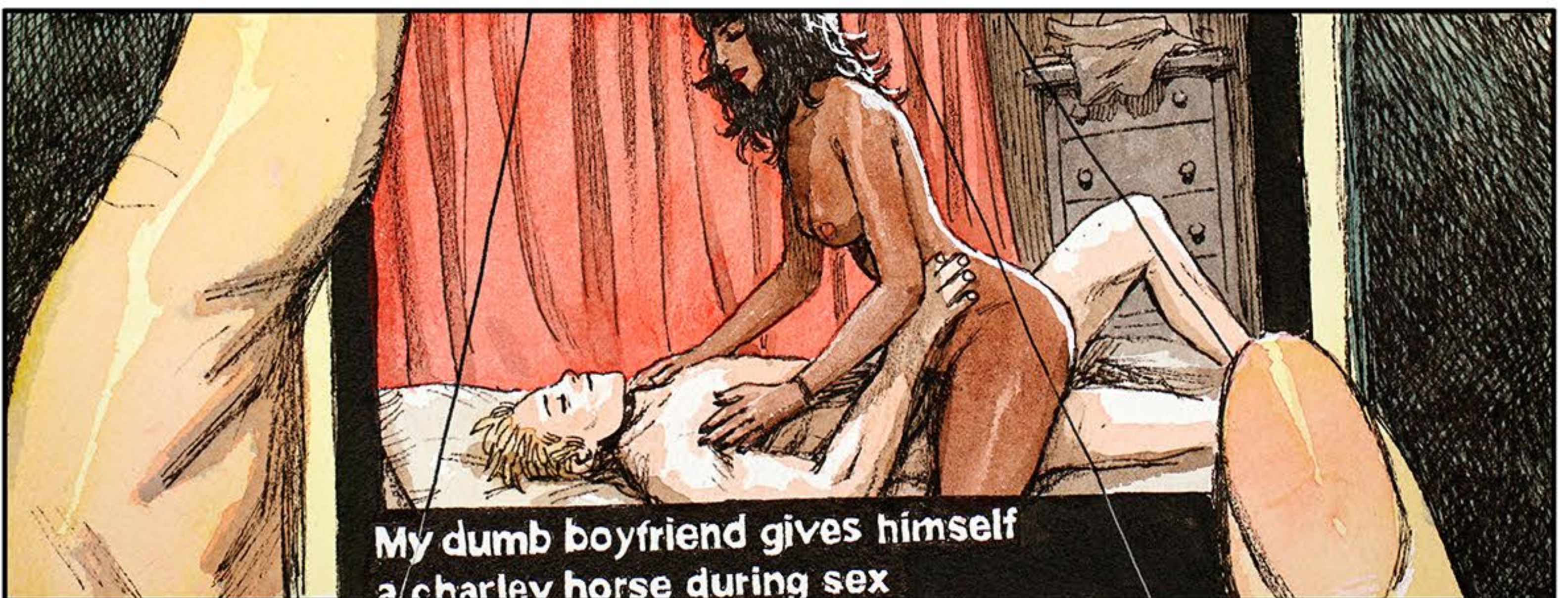
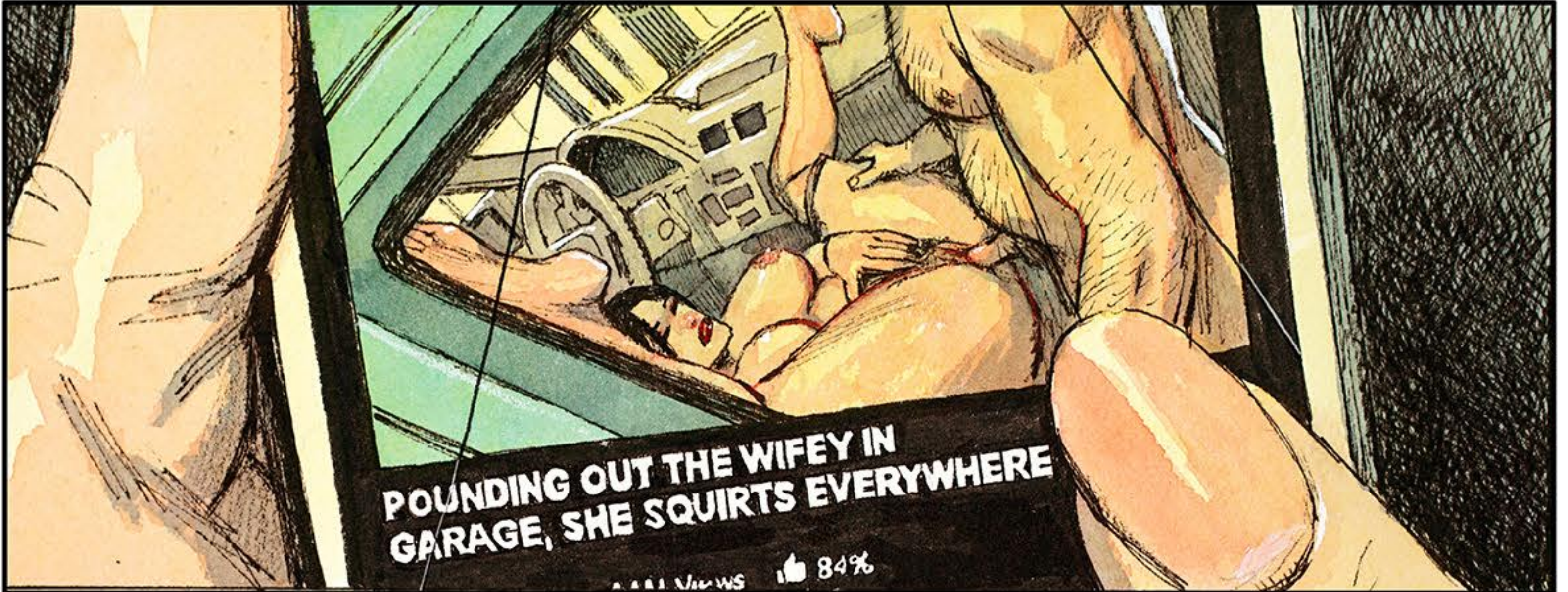
pornhub.com

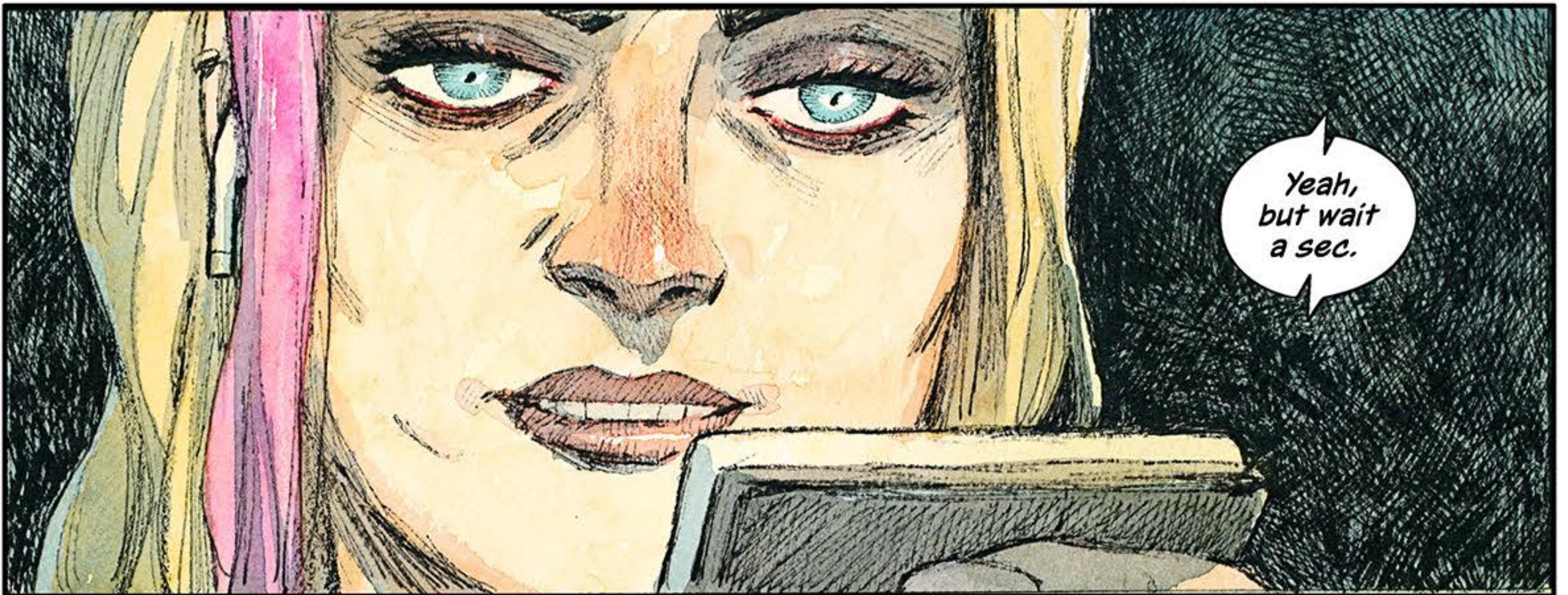
tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap

amateur couples real



Video results







Come on,
show me your
pretty smile,
cumslave.

My dumb boyfriend gives himself
a charley horse during sex



Jesus
Christ...



...you are
so fuckin'
weird.

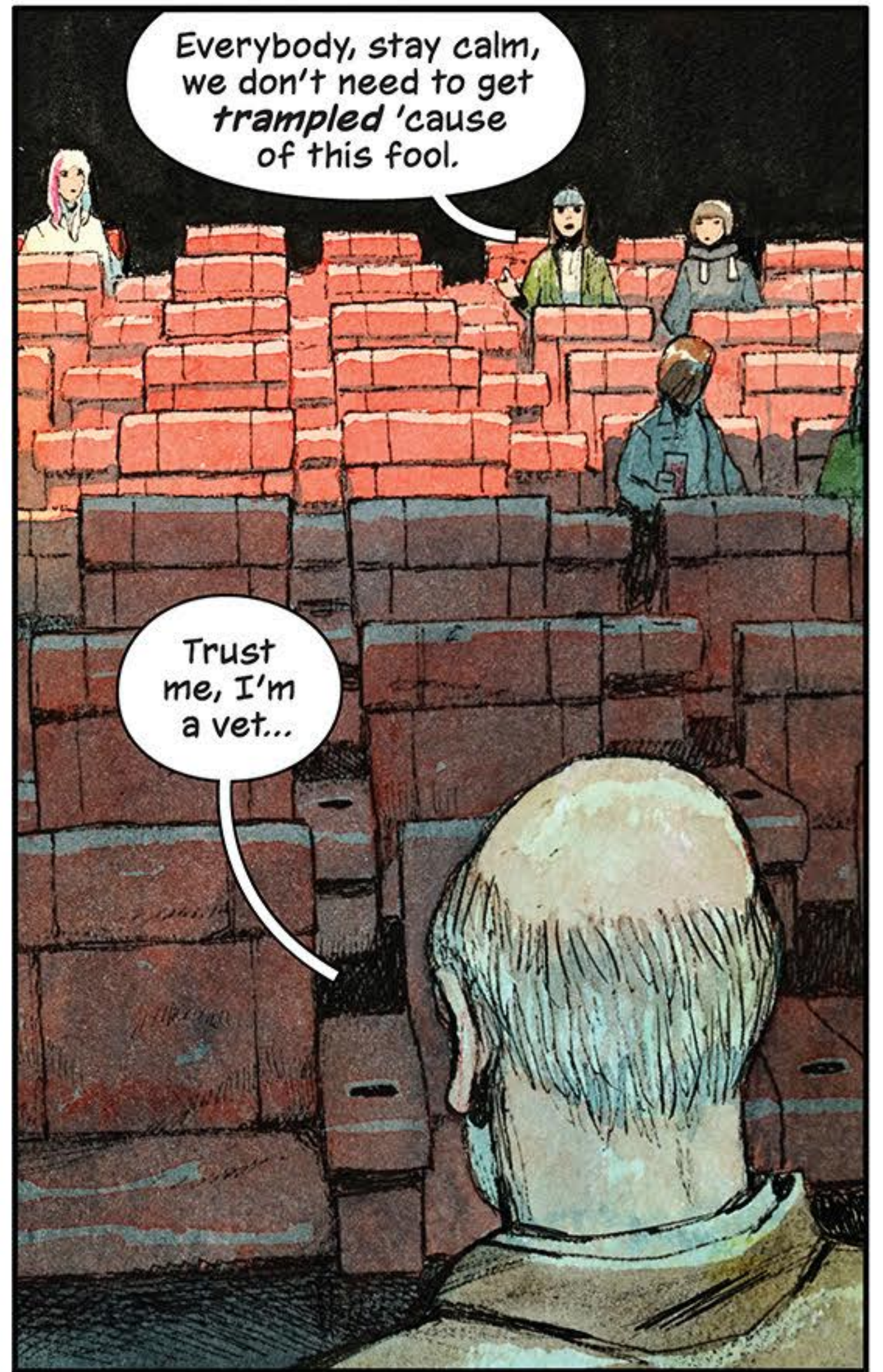
My dumb boyfriend gives himself
a charley horse during sex



BOOM



BOOM BOOM BOOM





So this might be, like, gang activity?!

We gotta call--

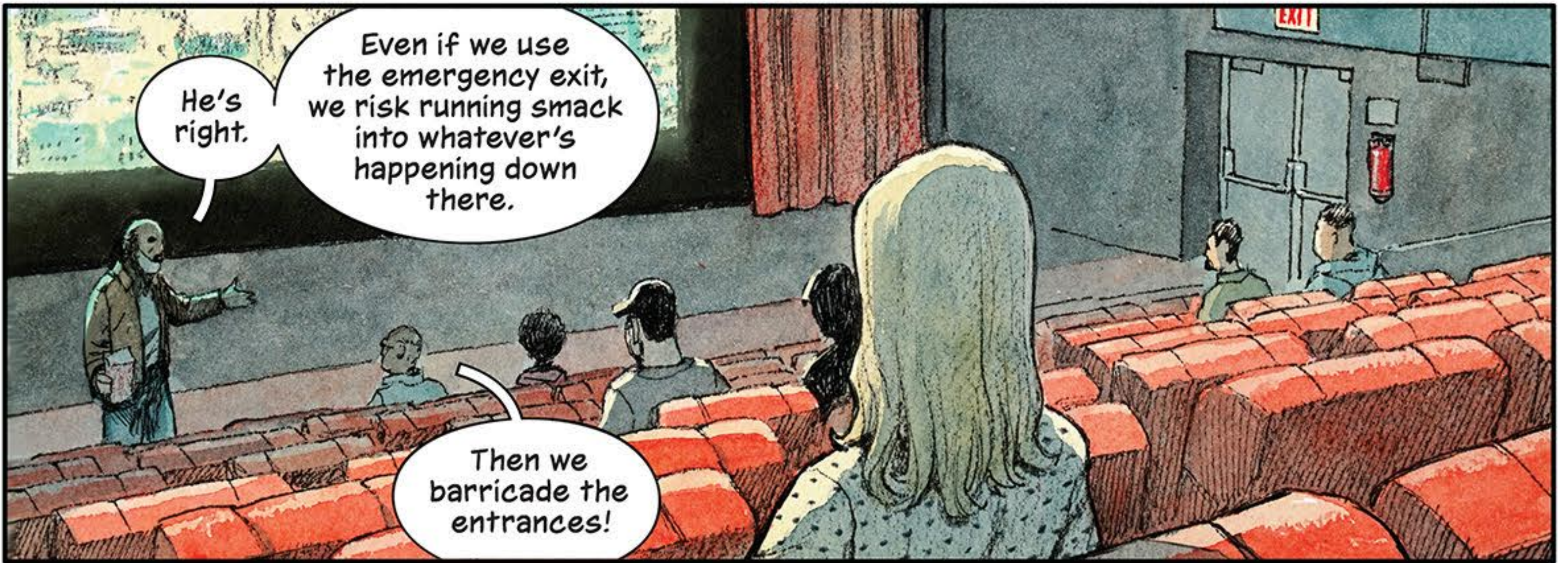
Yeah, 911 has me on hold.



Screw that, let's get out of here!

And go where?

We're on the top floor!



He's right.

Even if we use the emergency exit, we risk running smack into whatever's happening down there.

Then we barricade the entrances!



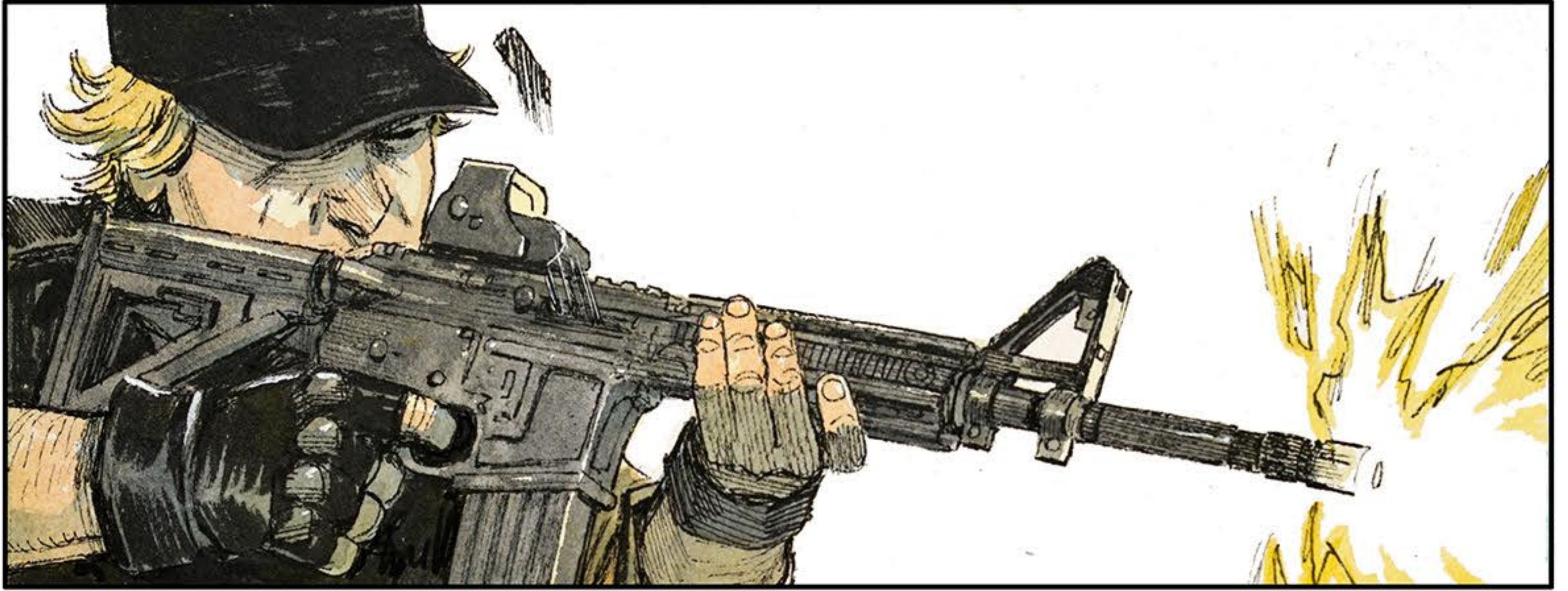
How? All theater doors open *outward*. It's a law.

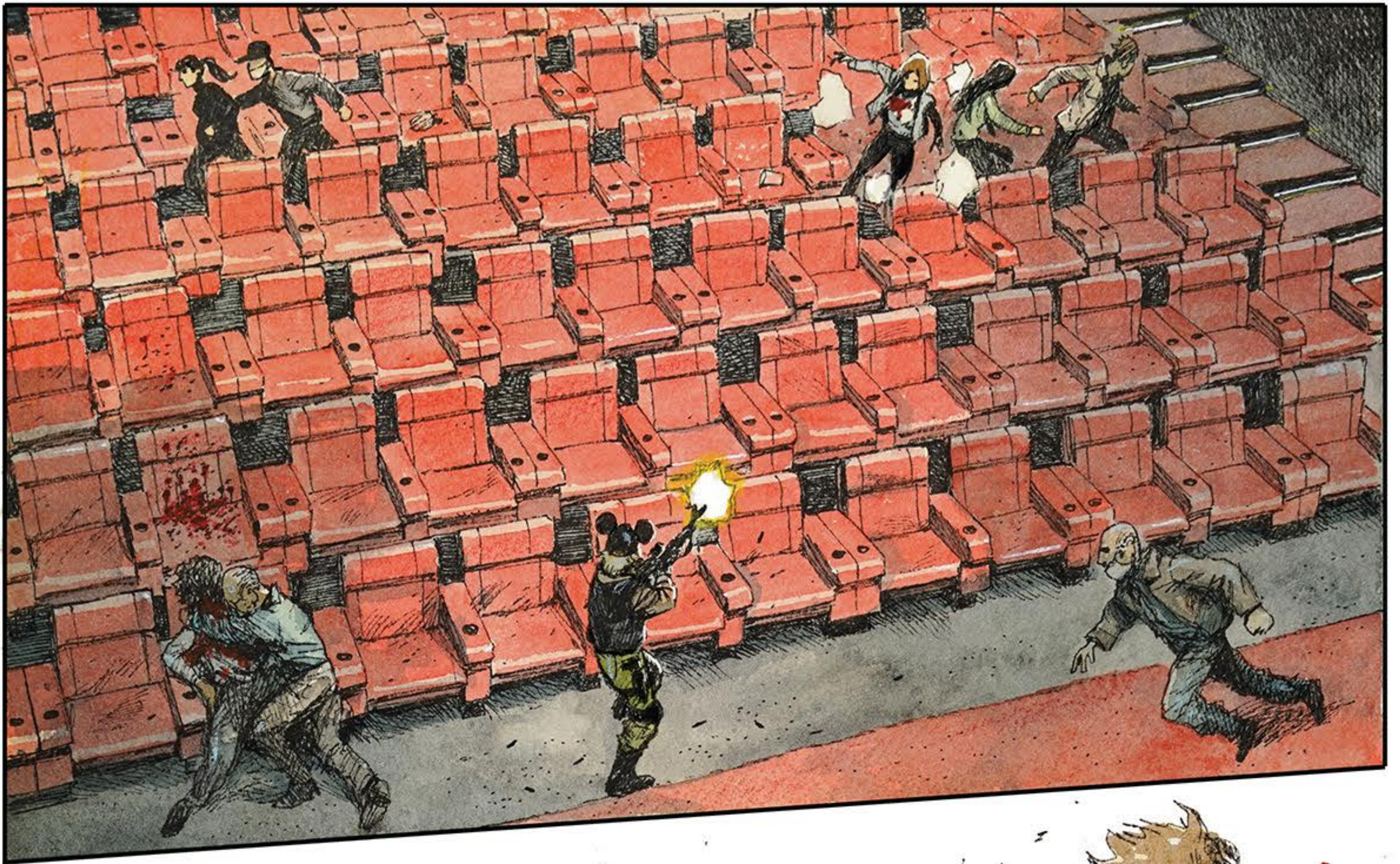
What are you, the goddamn fire marshal all of a sudden?

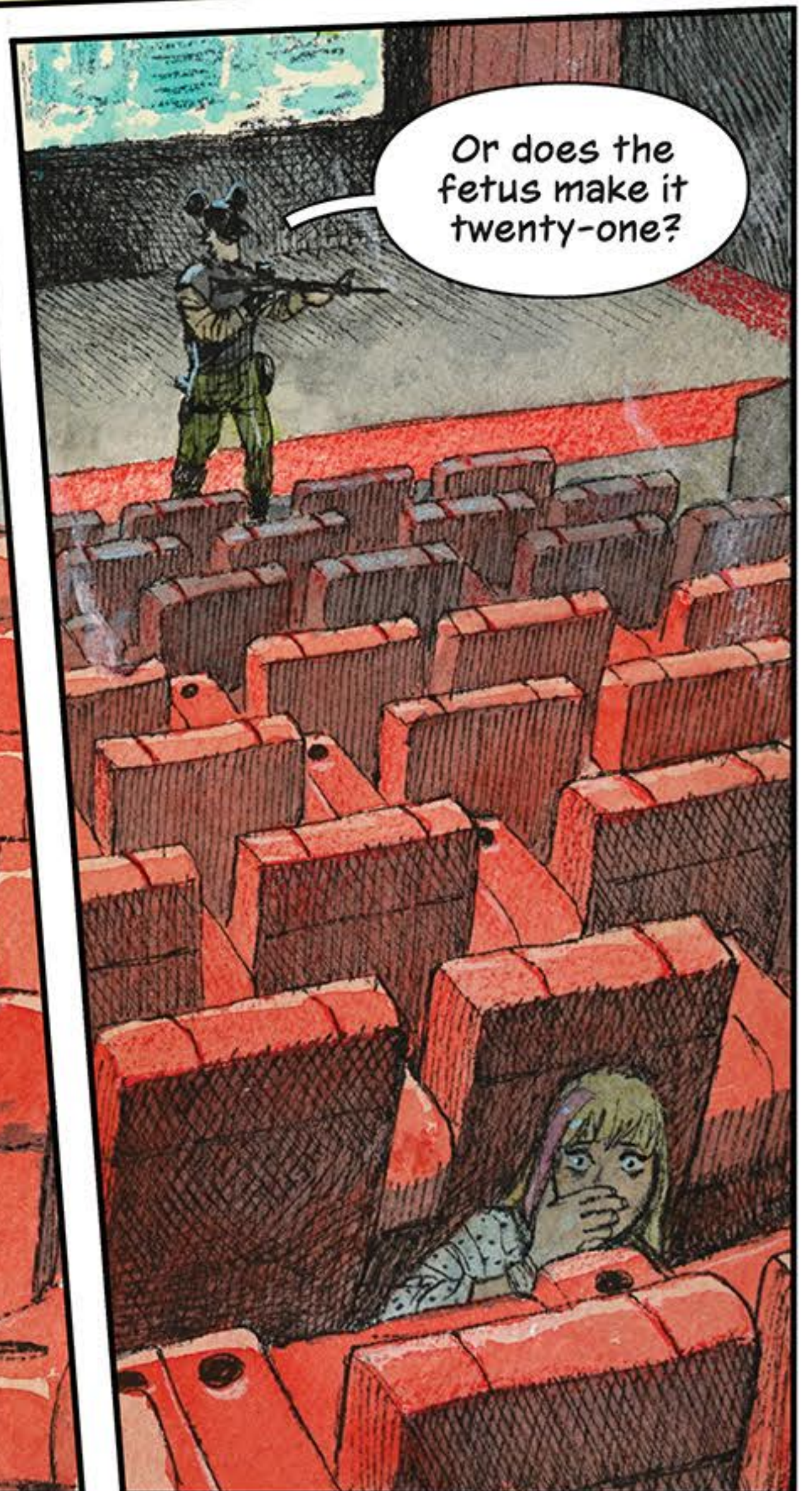
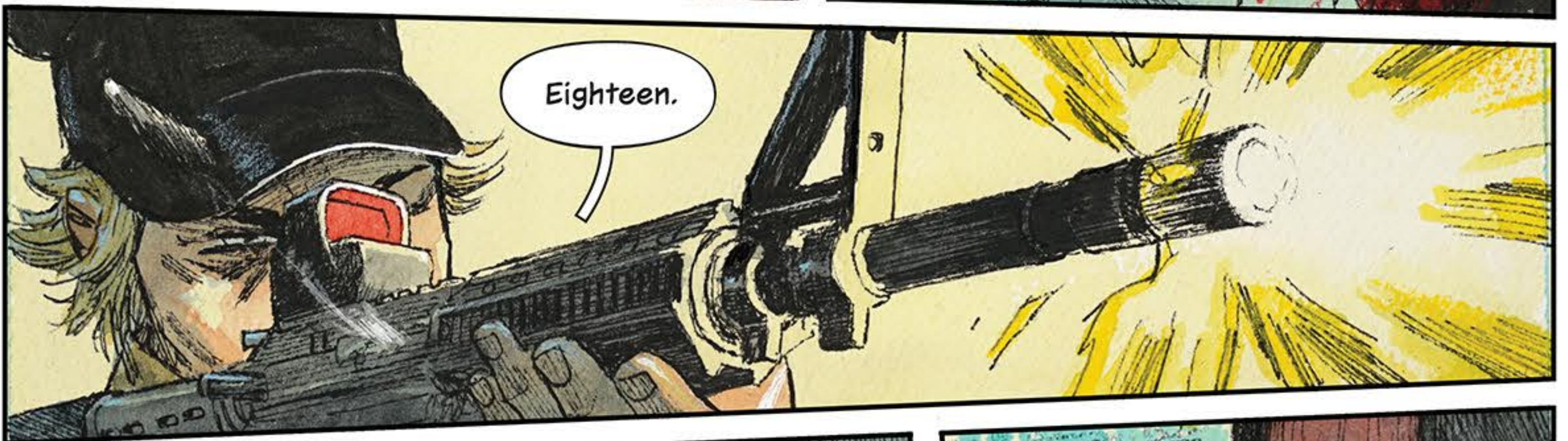
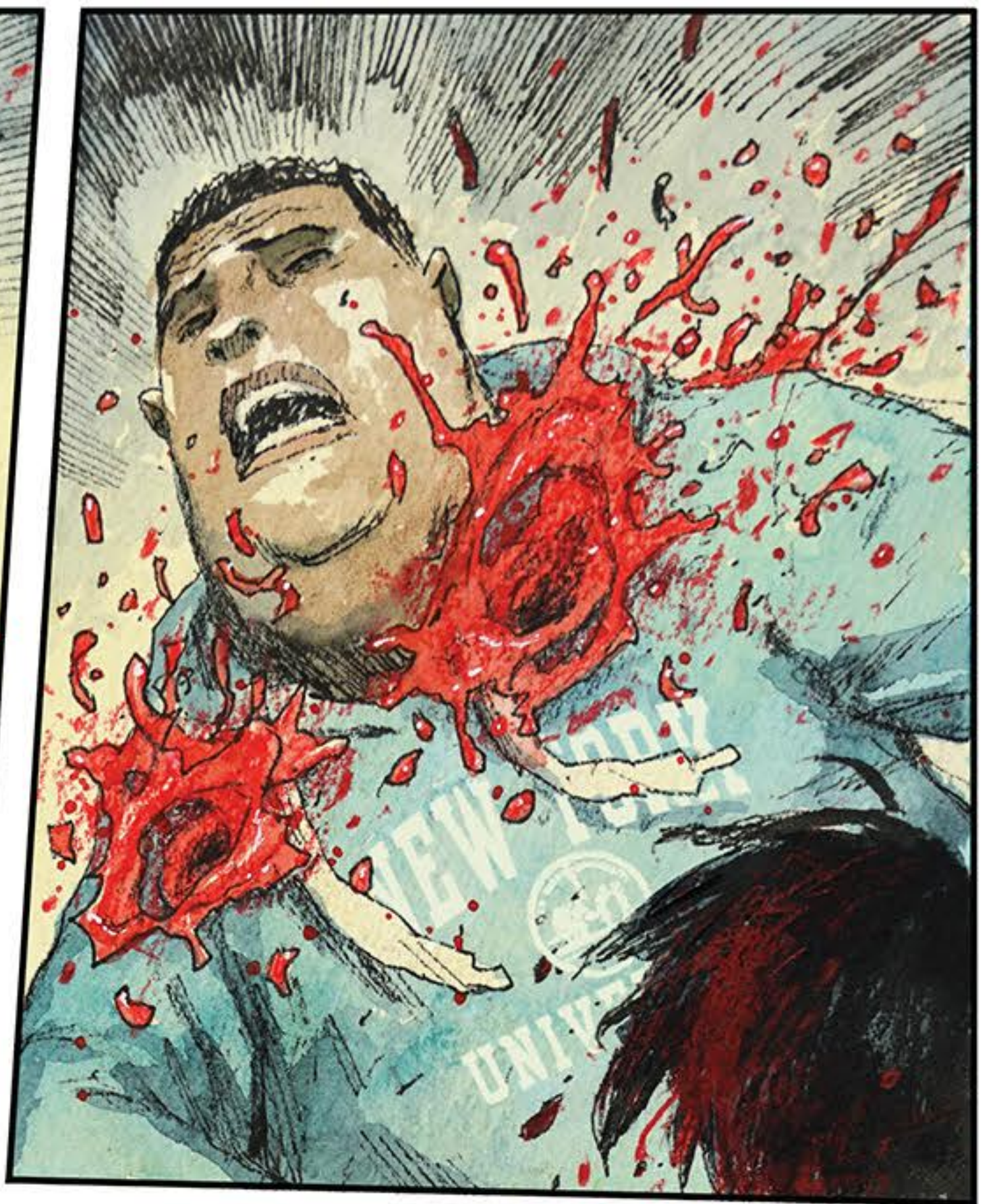
Hey.

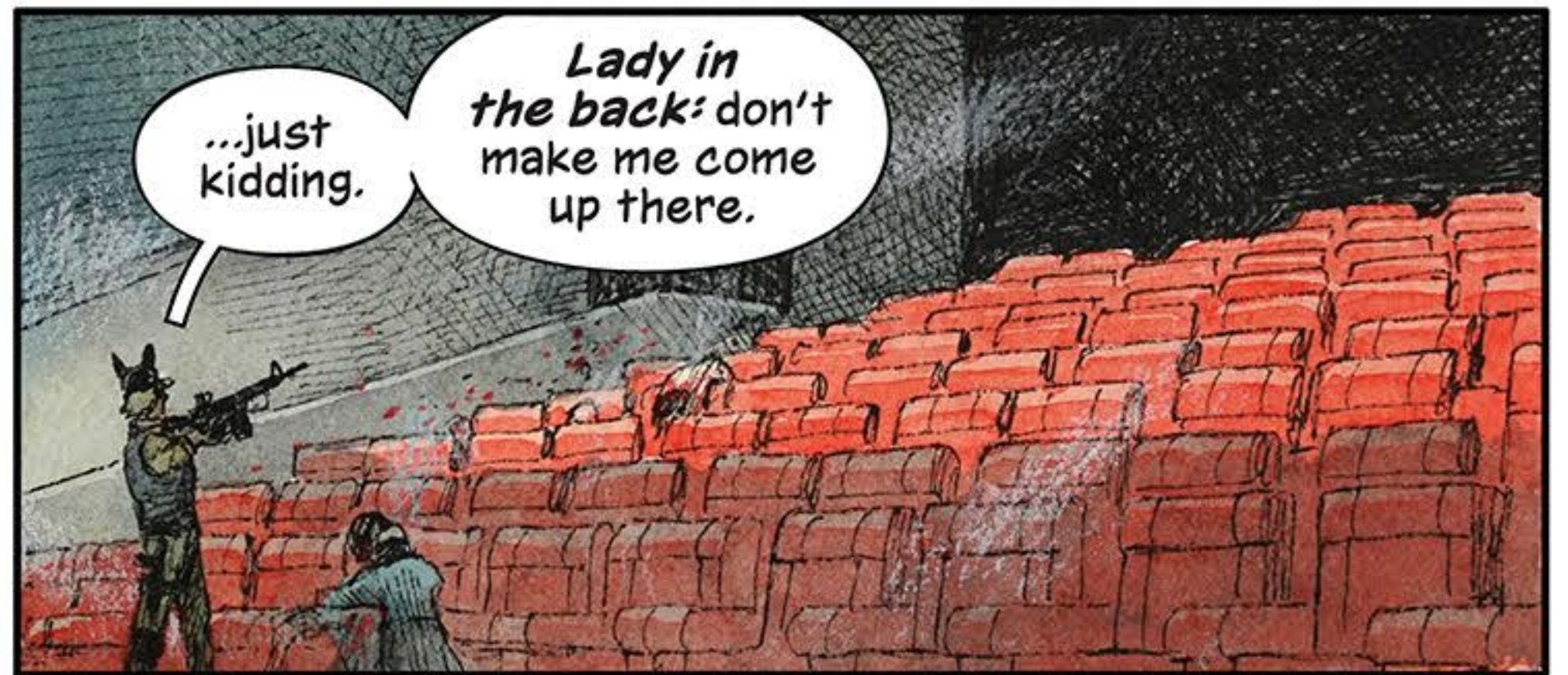
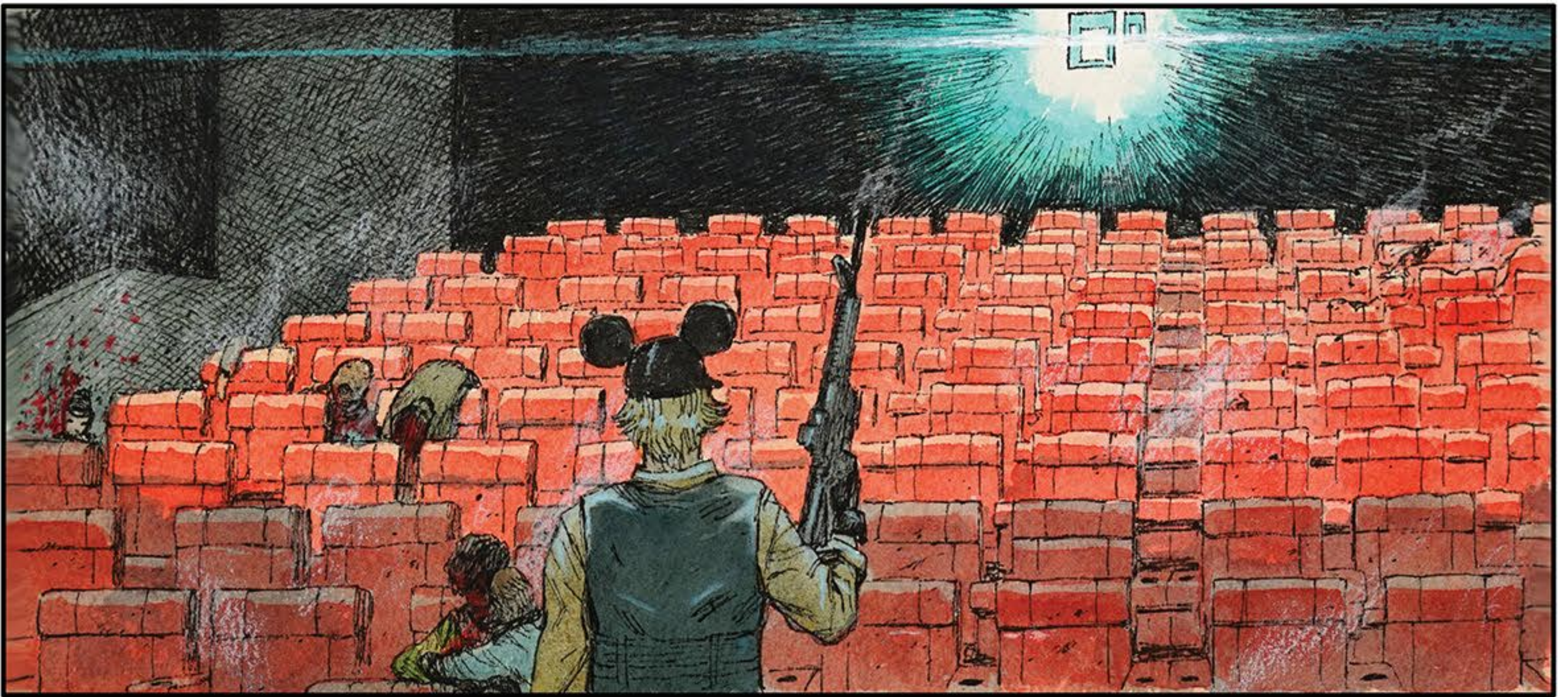
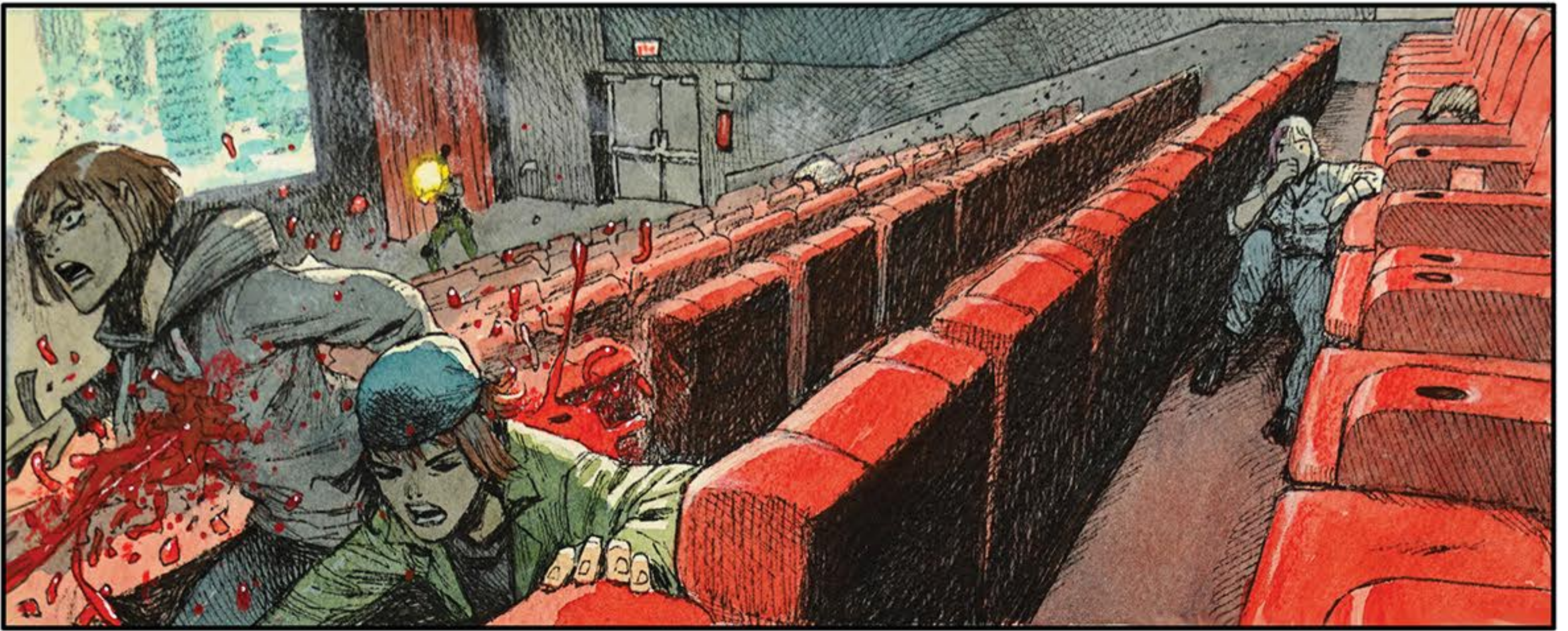
Don't talk to her like that.

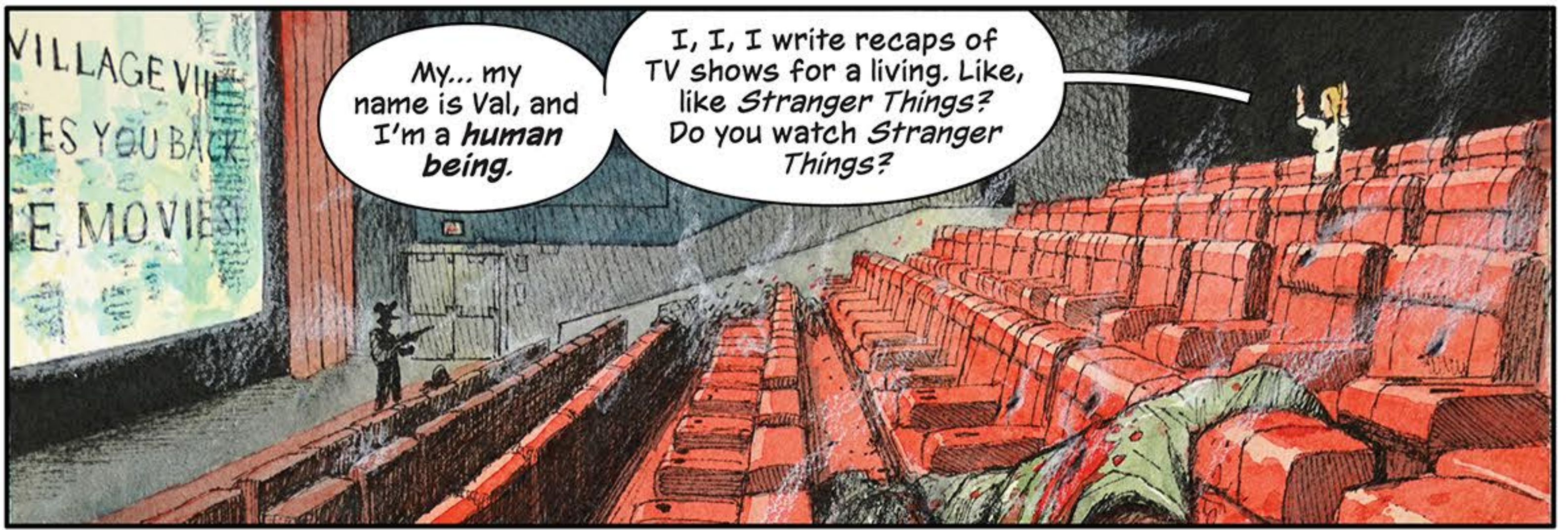






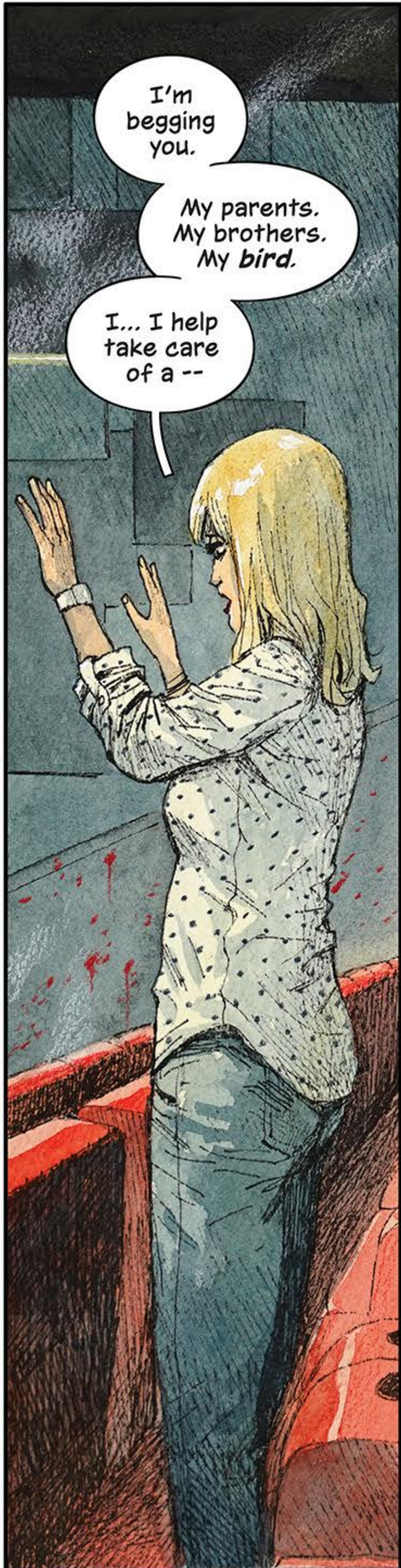






My... my name is Val, and I'm a *human being*.

I, I, I write recaps of TV shows for a living. Like, like *Stranger Things*? Do you watch *Stranger Things*?



I'm begging you.

My parents. My brothers. My *bird*.

I... I help take care of a --



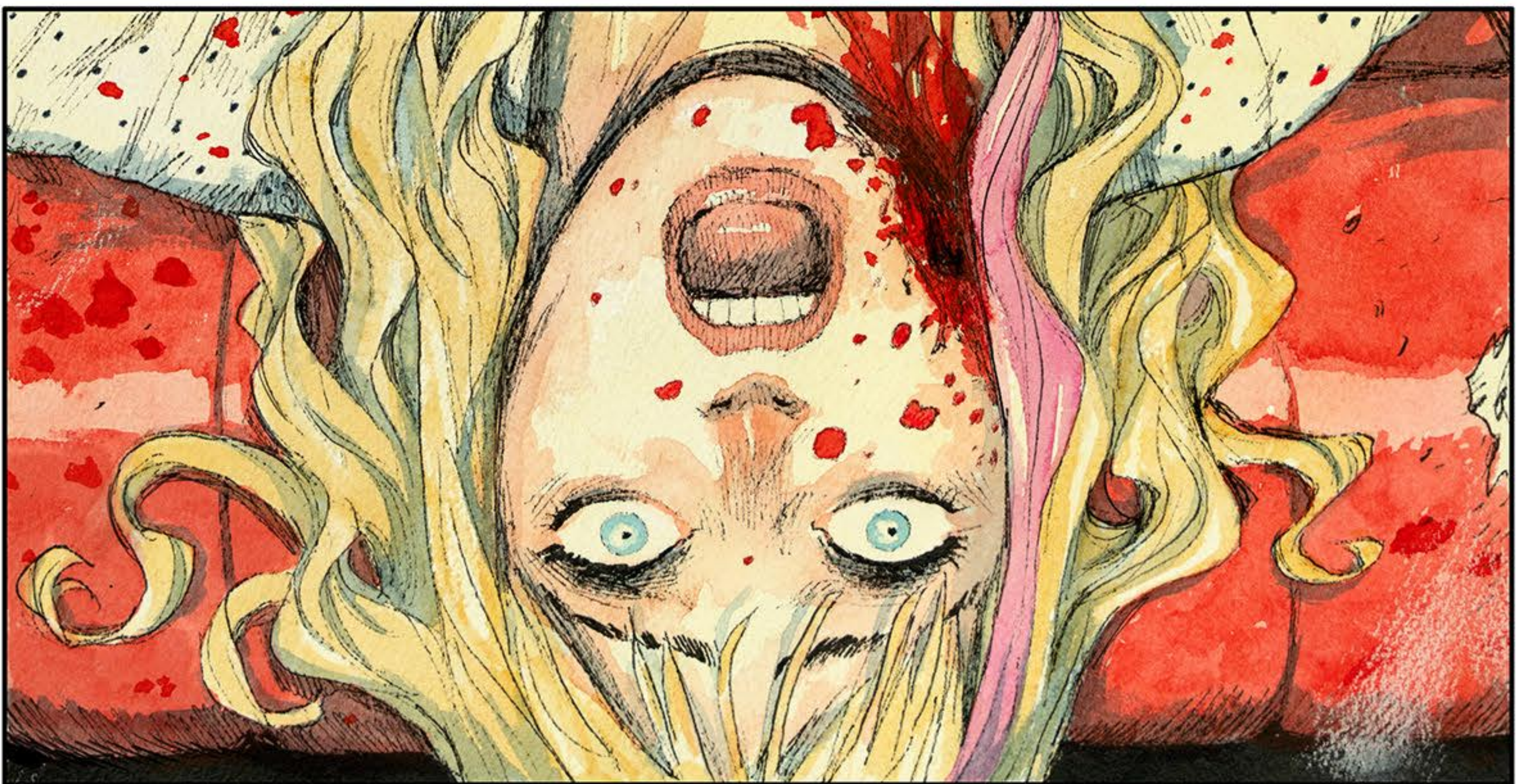
How the hell did Paddock rack up sixty-one?

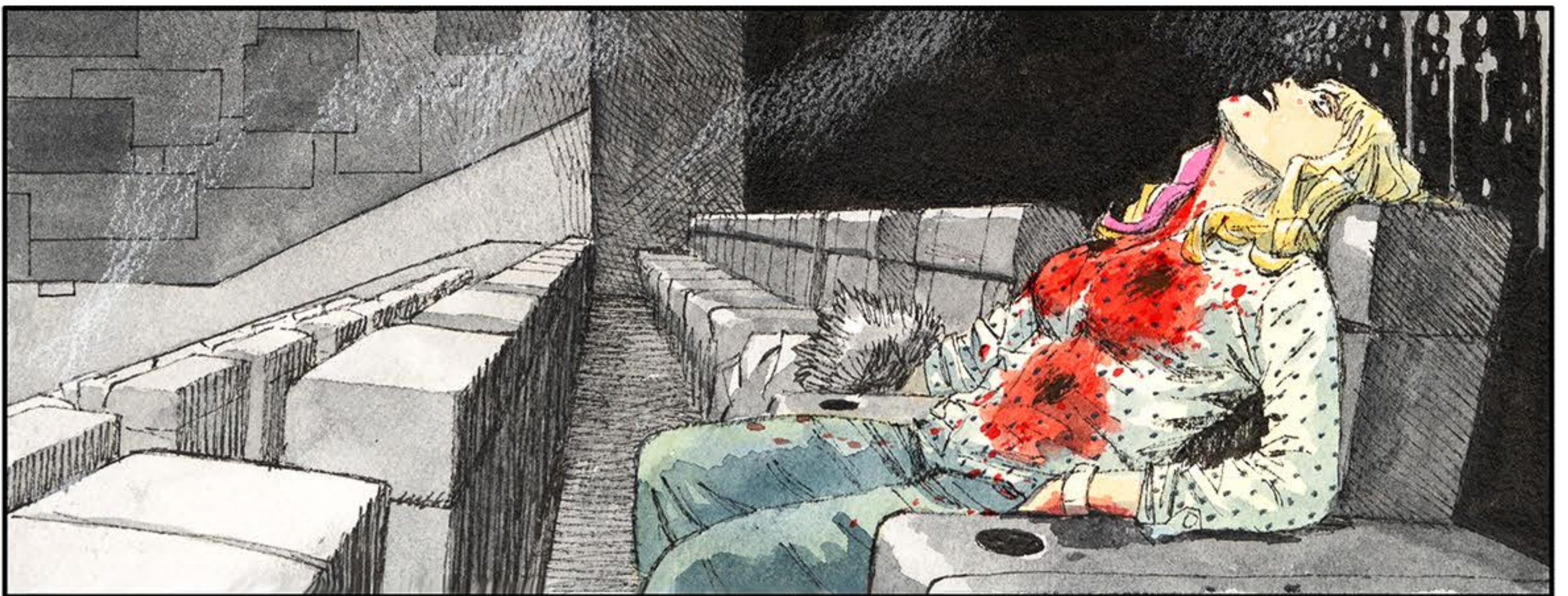
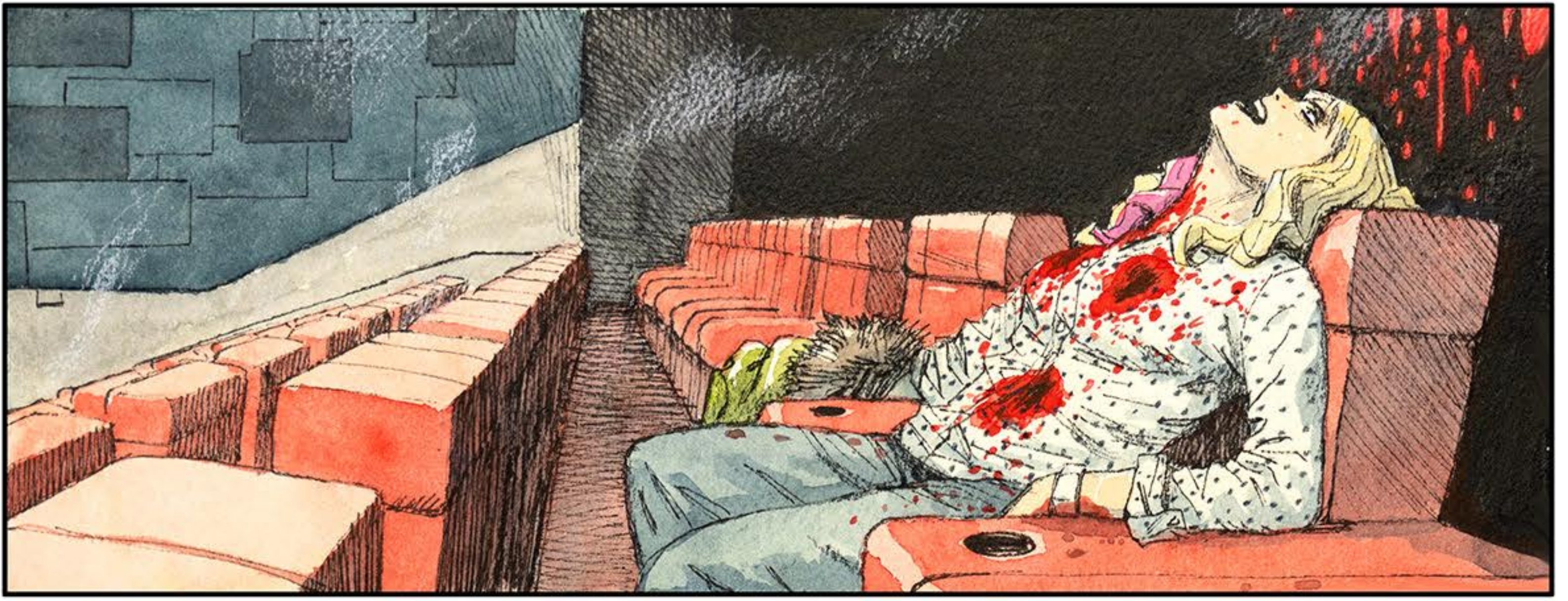
Pimp's high score is crazy.

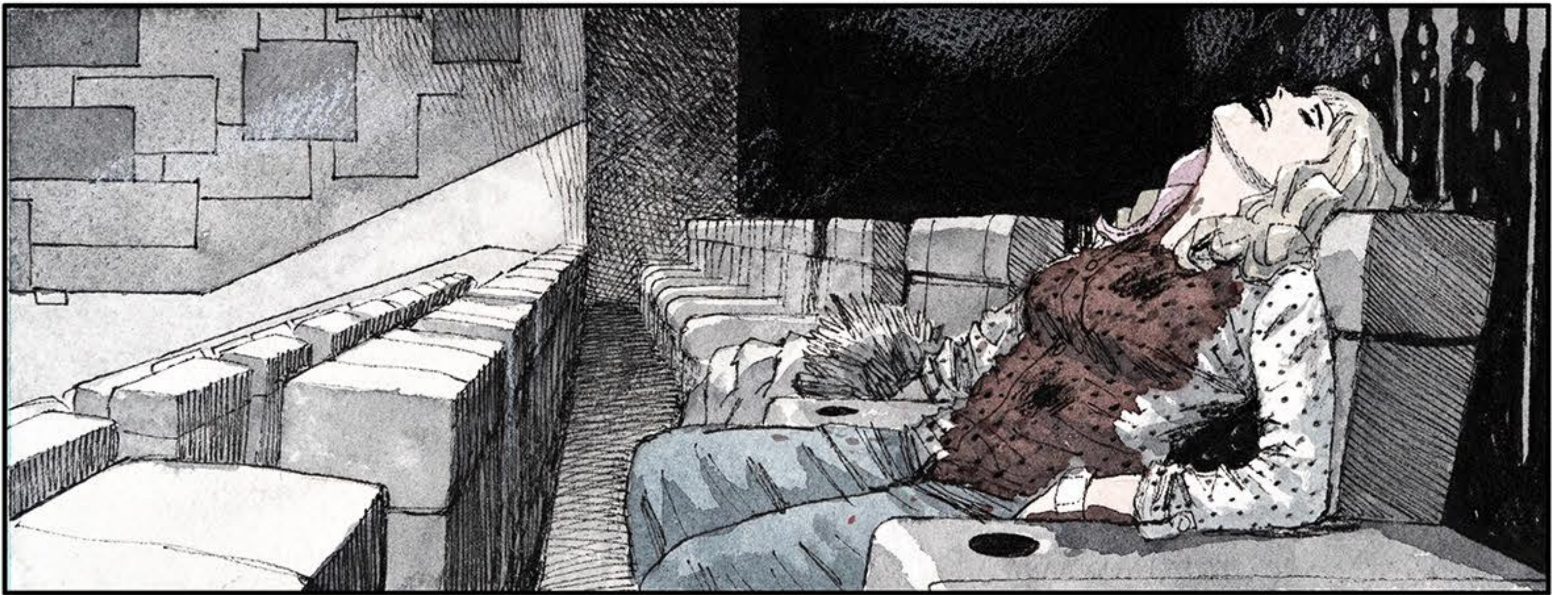


Sorry?

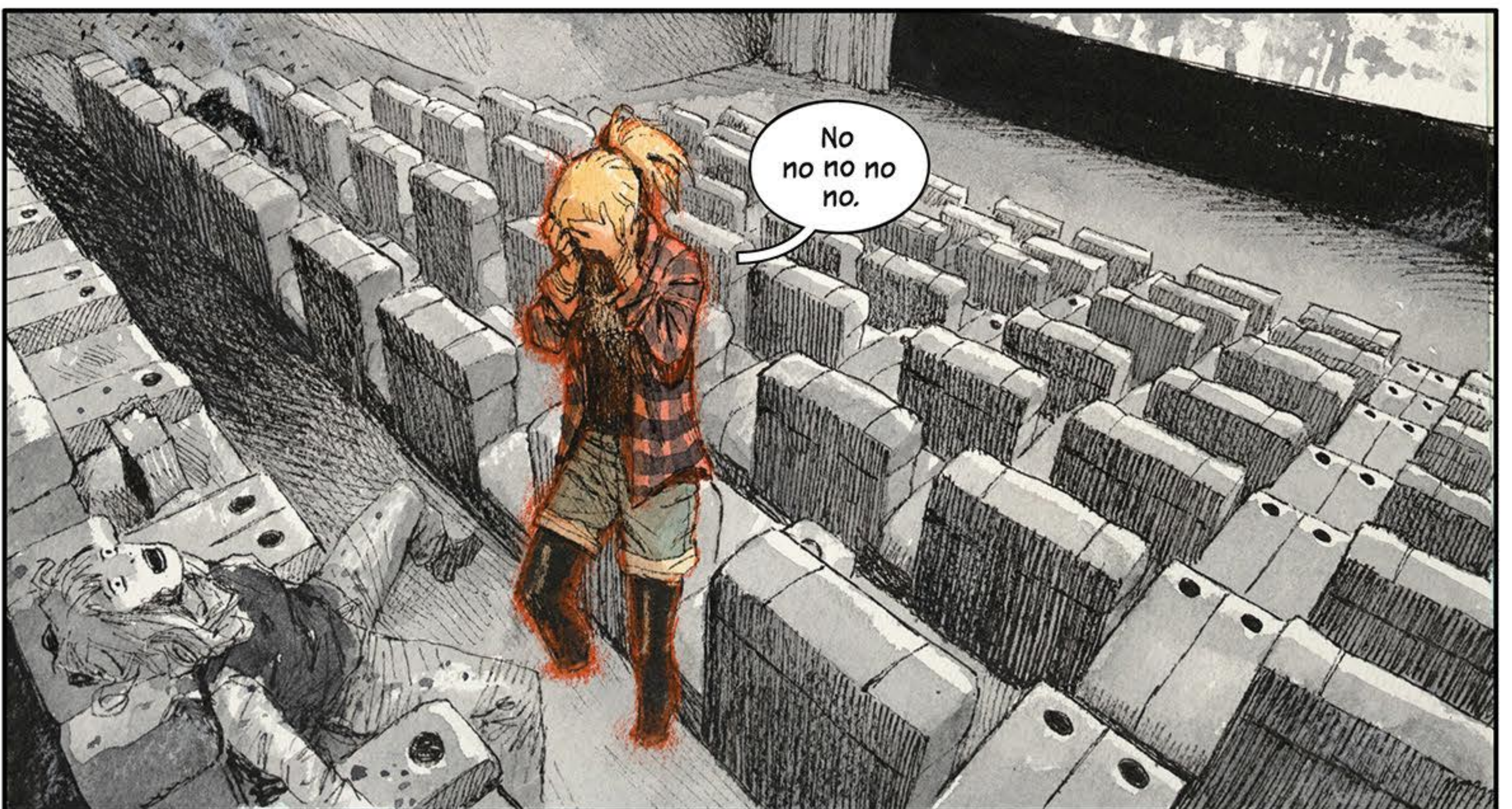
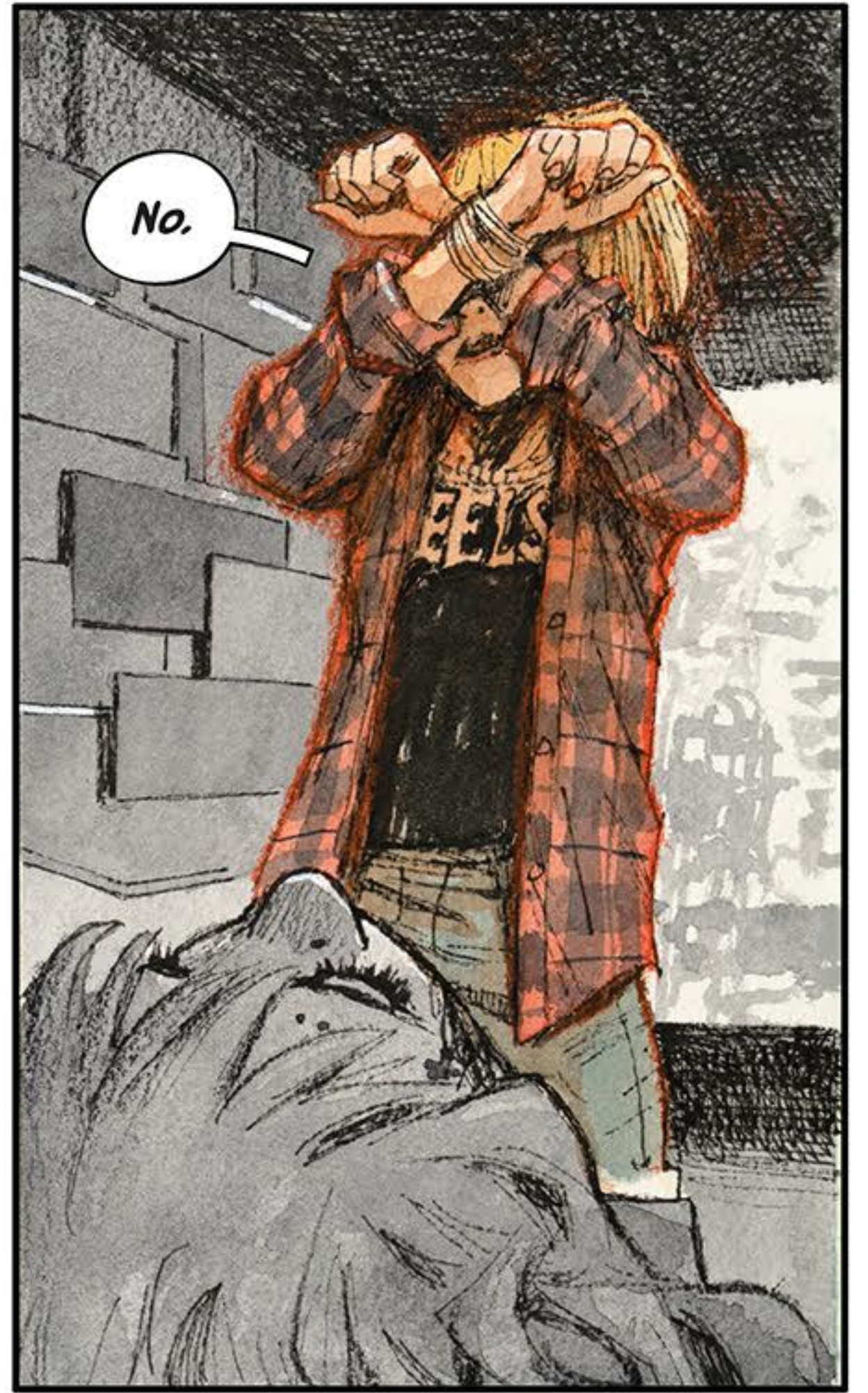
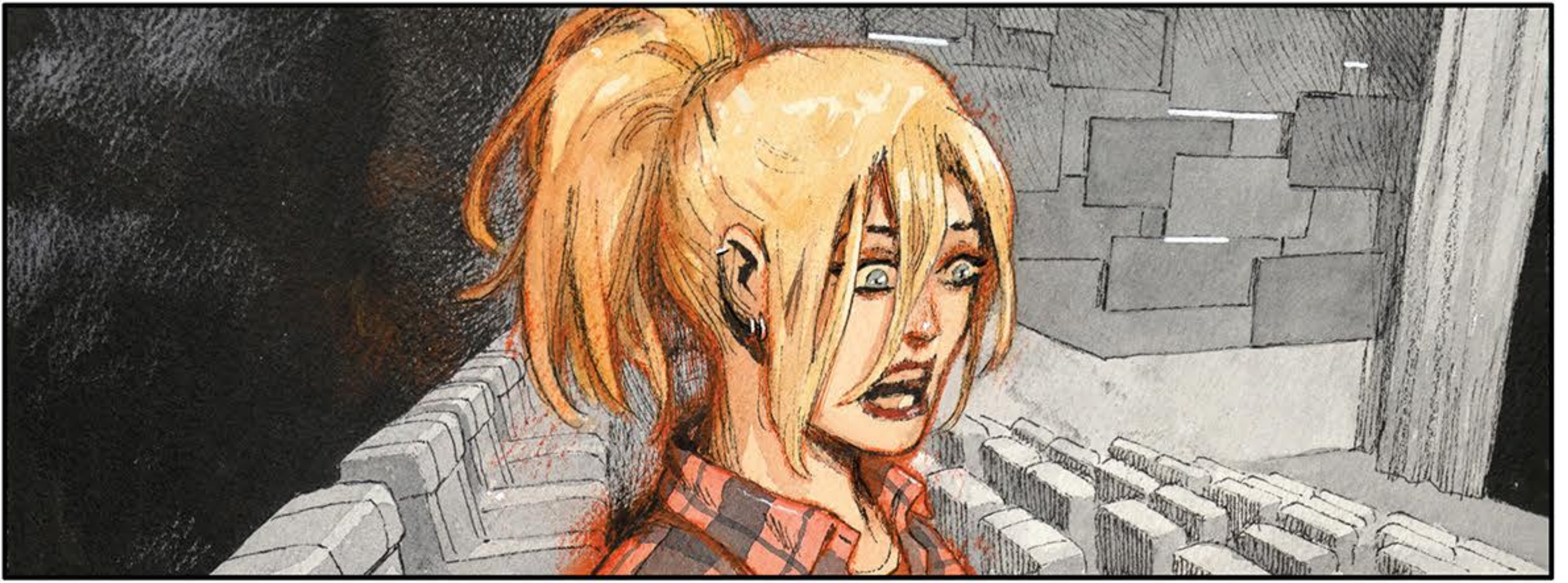


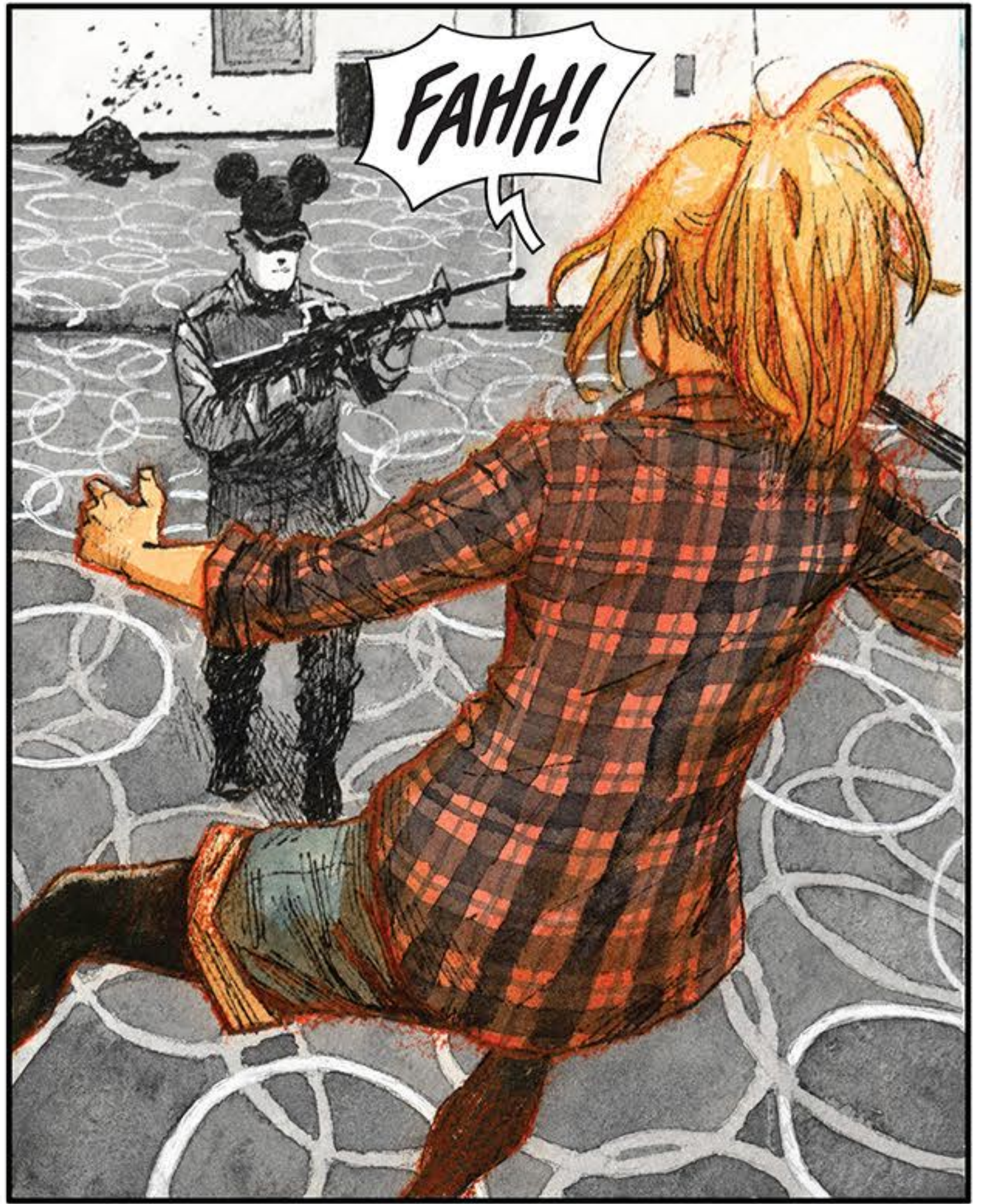
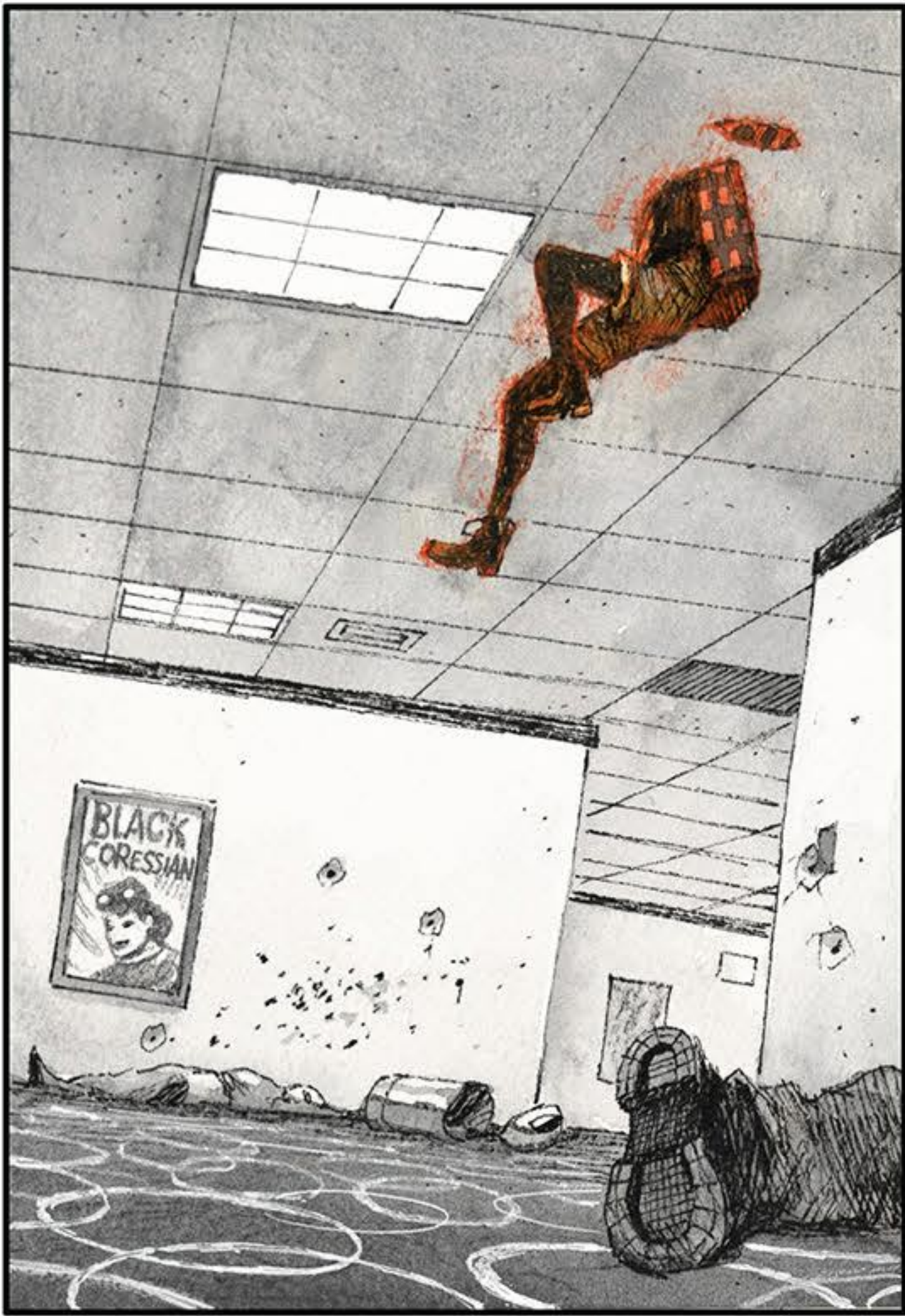




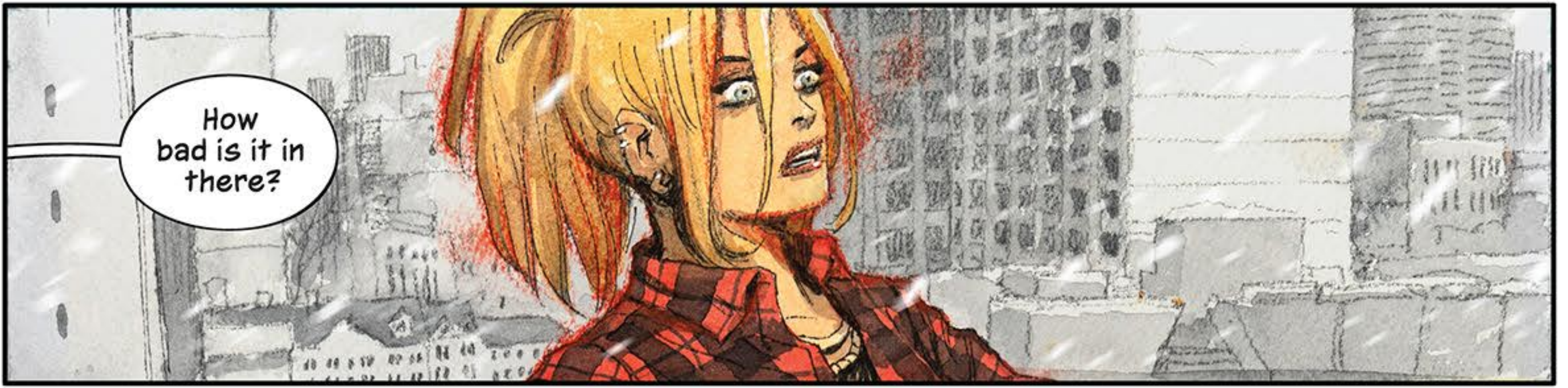












How bad is it in there?



I don't have the stomach to watch.

Not when it involves kids, you know?



Who...?

Cody Cooper
Hentwood.

Evil *pedazo*
de mierda,
pardon my
language.



Knew he was
trouble the first
time I laid eyes on
him. At a gun show
over in Jersey?

My true-crime gal pals
and I have been following
him ever since, waiting
for something just
like this.



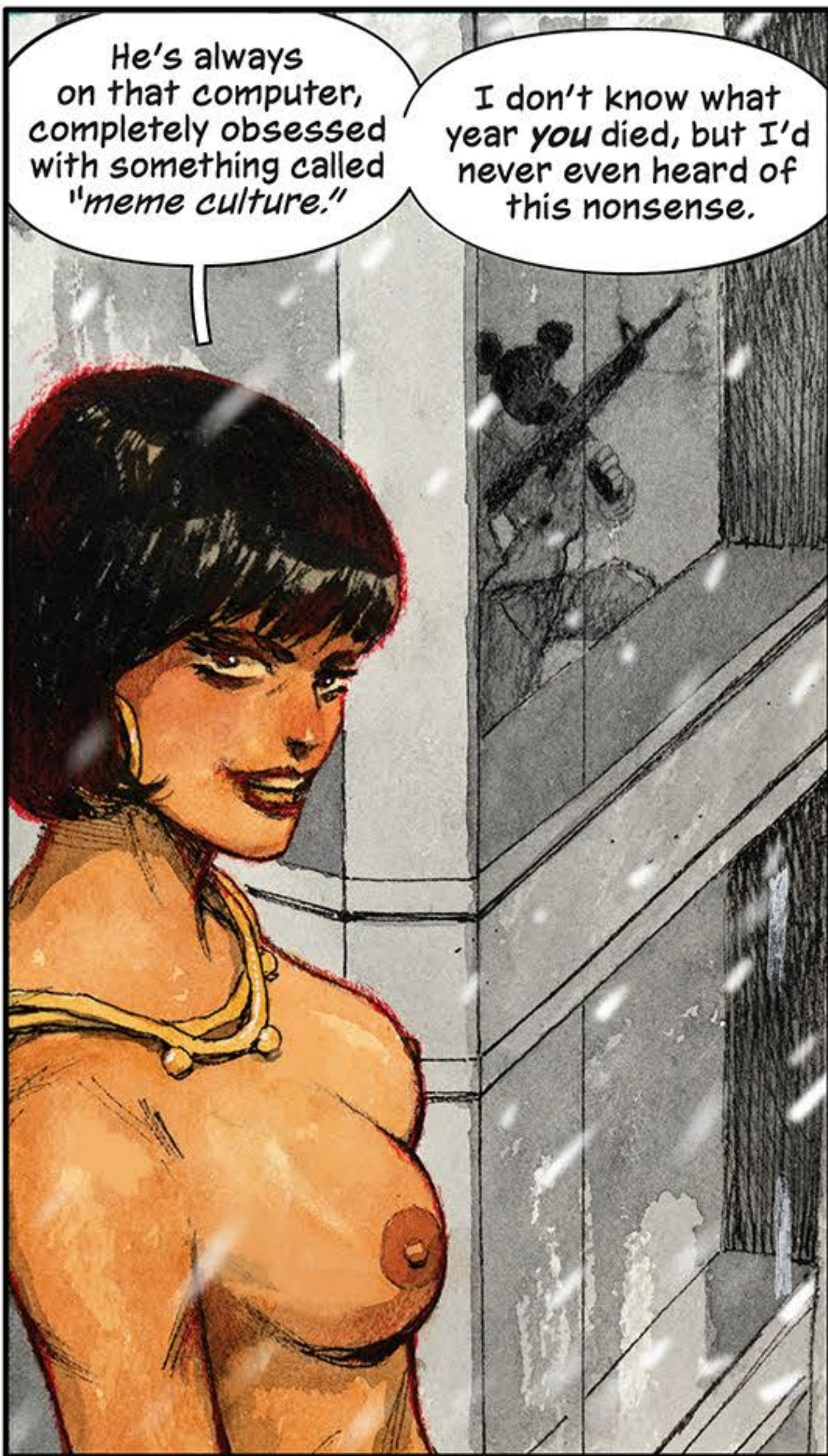
He wrote some
cockamamie excuse
for a manifesto
this morning.

Wants all the other virgin
broken toys out there to
follow his lead, try to beat
his "high score."



Psycho's
obsessed with
that guy who shot
up Vegas a couple
years back.

No political agenda
or anything, just zero
regard for human life,
you know?









I lost it back in *grad school*, to a guy who dumped me.

Right, well, near as the scientists on this side I've chatted up can figure, each of us is basically a snapshot of our own exact *midpoints*.

Something about the half-lives of massless particles and whatnot.



No.

Obviously, the results aren't always ideal, but I'd say it usually works out better for us than the boys.

No, I... I just turned 43, and for the first time in my life, I finally *like* the way I look.



Looked.

Trust me, you have nothing to worry about.

Nobody over here cares about appearances.



We're too busy watching what's going on over there.

But, how are we supposed to help?

What do you mean?

There must be some *reason* we're still here. Like, what are the *rules*?

Oh, the rules. Well, you know that Demi Moore movie?

Indecent Proposal?

What? No, the one with the ghosts.

Ghost?

That's the one.

Okay, I've seen *Ghost*.

Terrific.

Because this is pretty much the opposite.







Not Franklin.

Theodore.



He used to be our Police Commissioner, you know. Still kind of is.

We met right after 9/11, and Teddy said I was the most natural investigator he had ever --

Lita, how long?



Sorry?

Let's say someone's not ready to "move on."

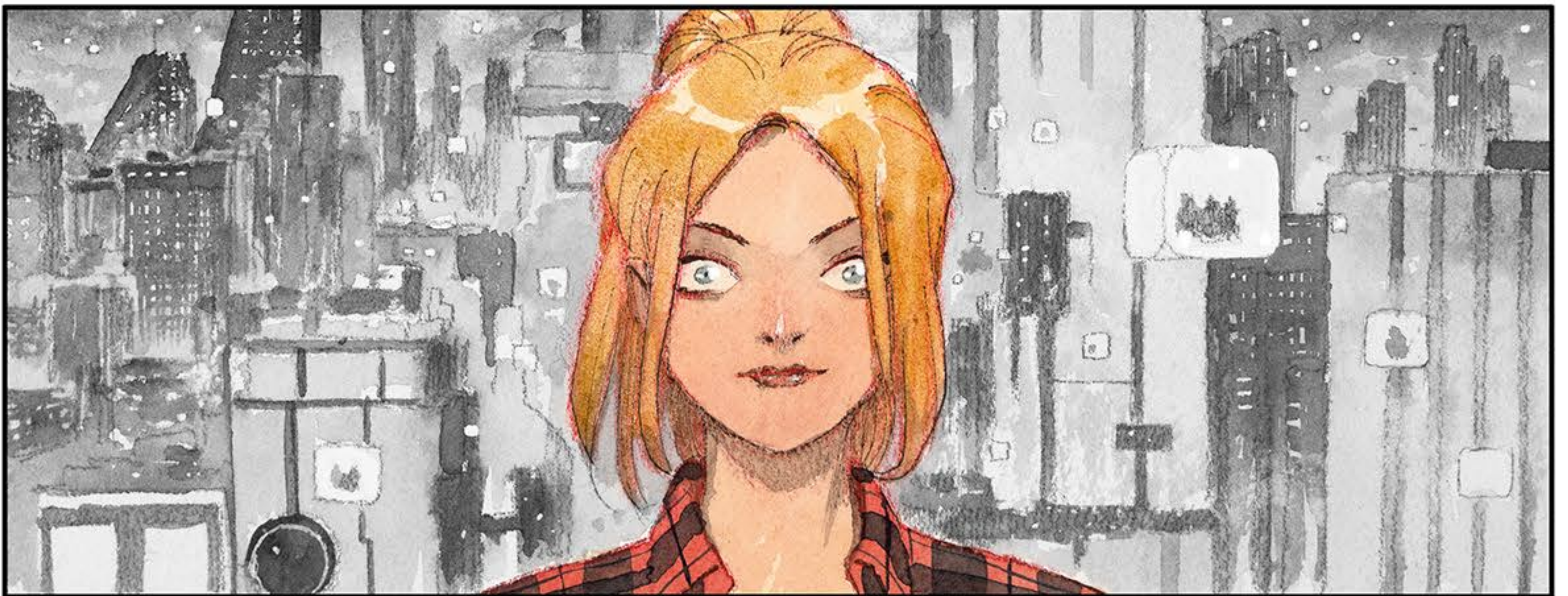
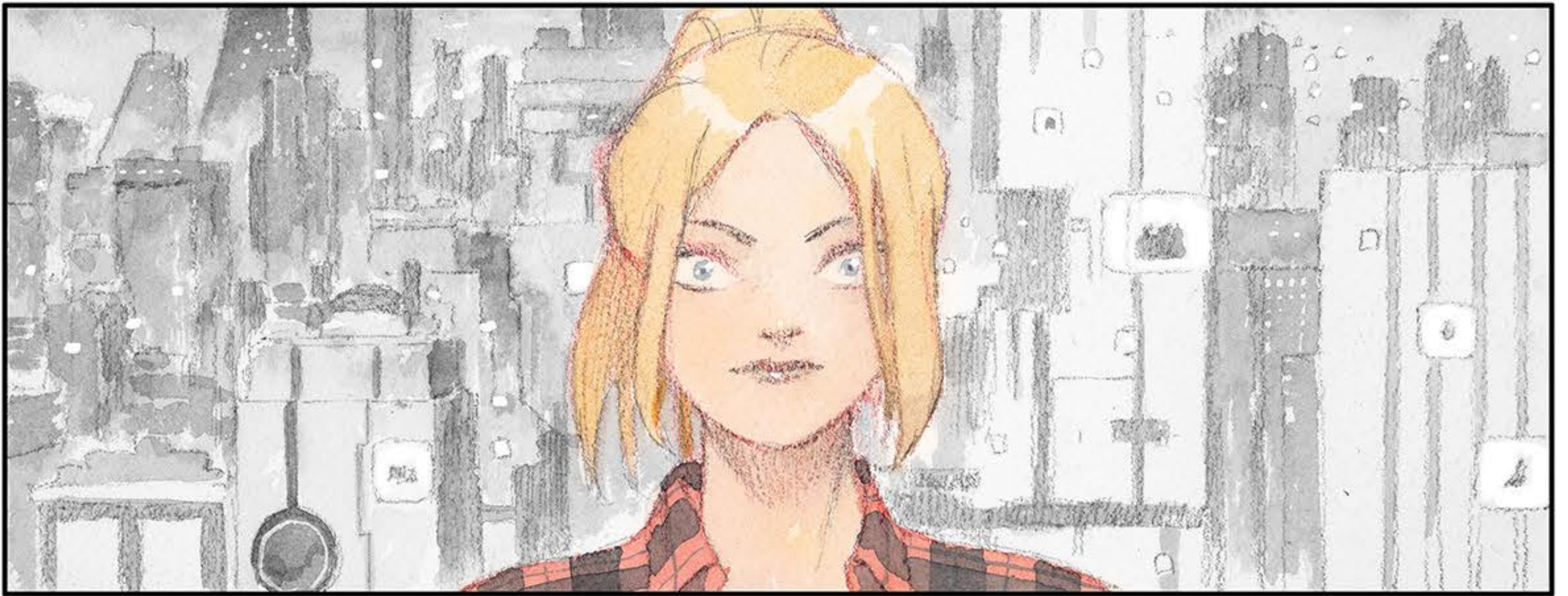
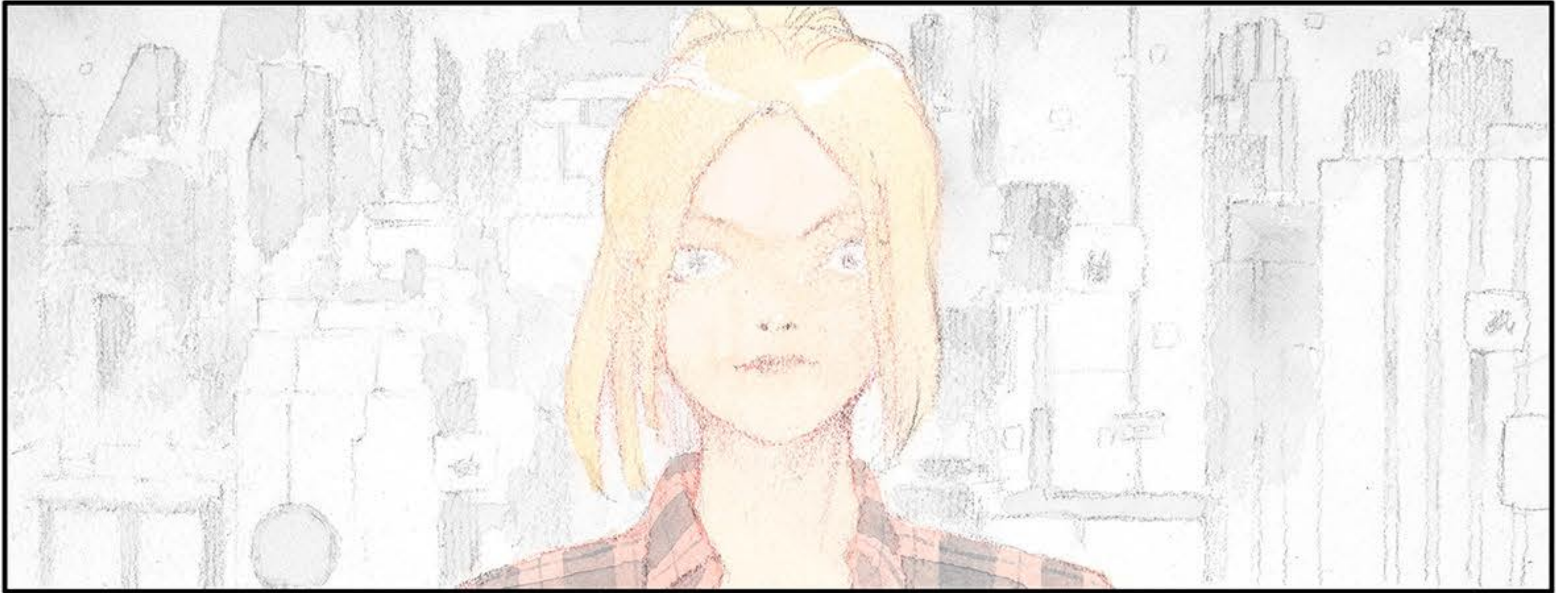
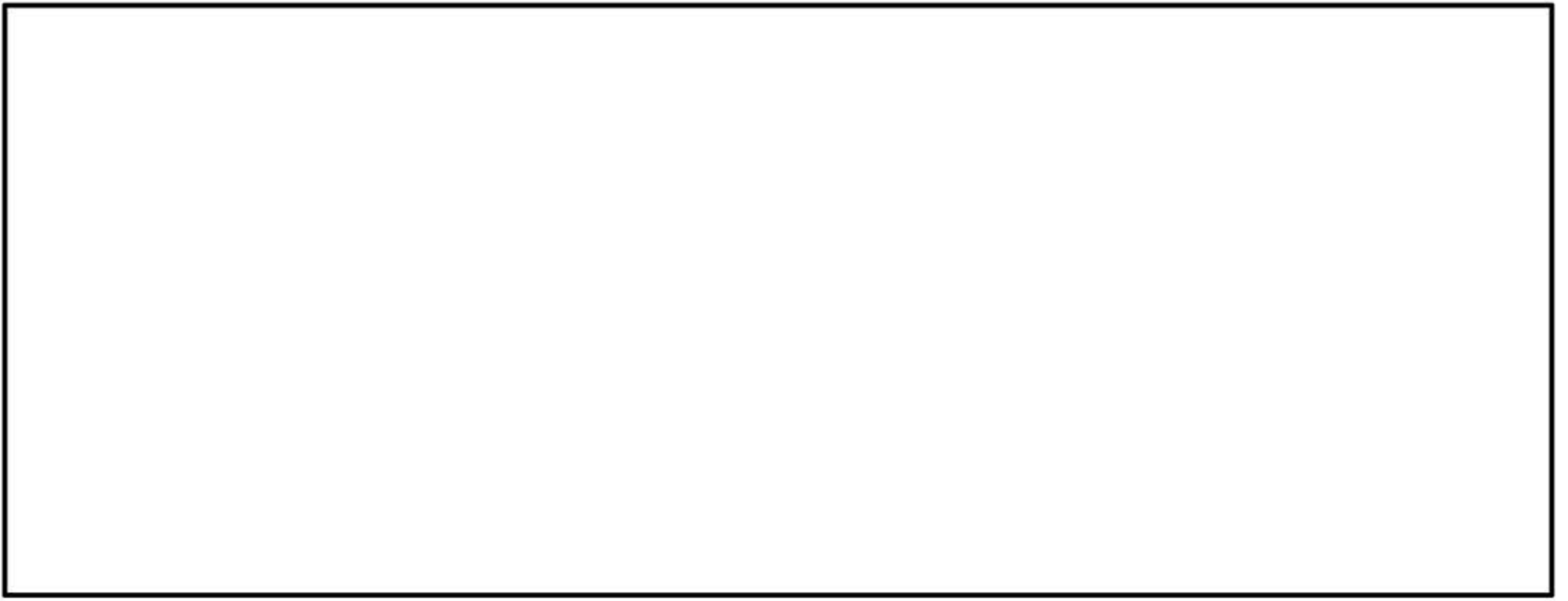
How long could they...?



...keep watching?

Why don't you hang around a while and see?





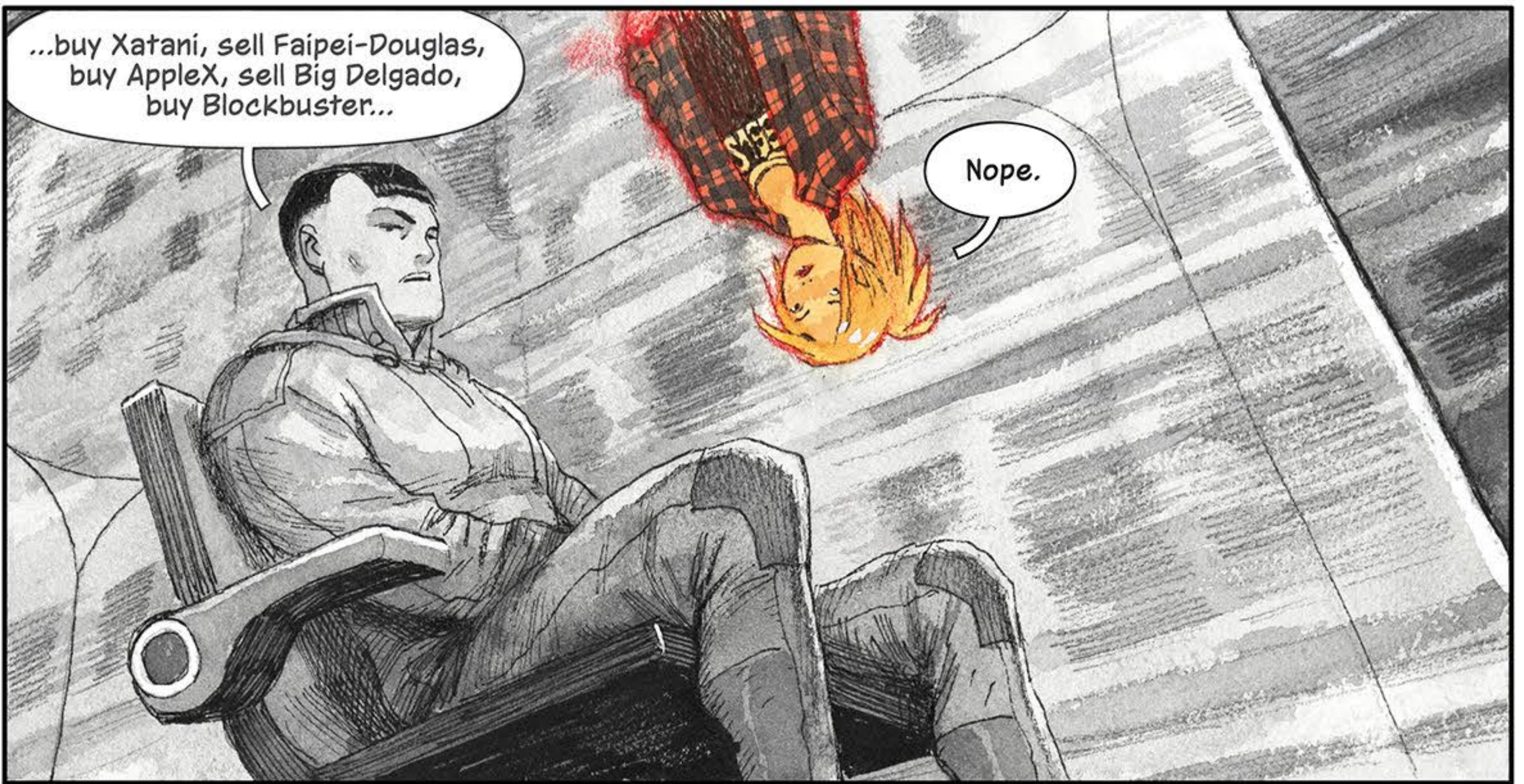




Another evening, another ten million new episodes.



How's a girl to choose...?



...buy Xatani, sell Faipei-Douglas,
buy AppleX, sell Big Delgado,
buy Blockbuster...

Nope.

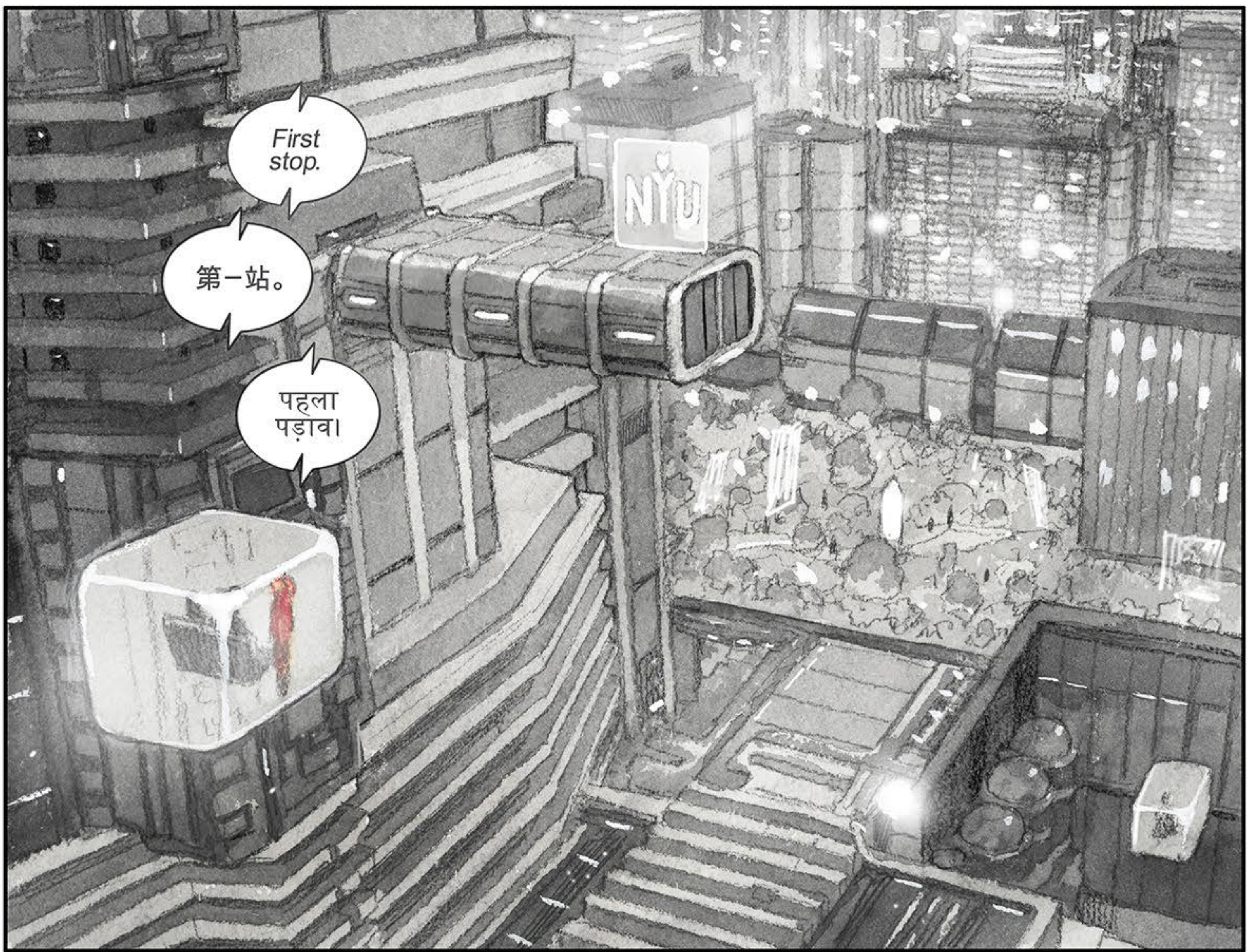
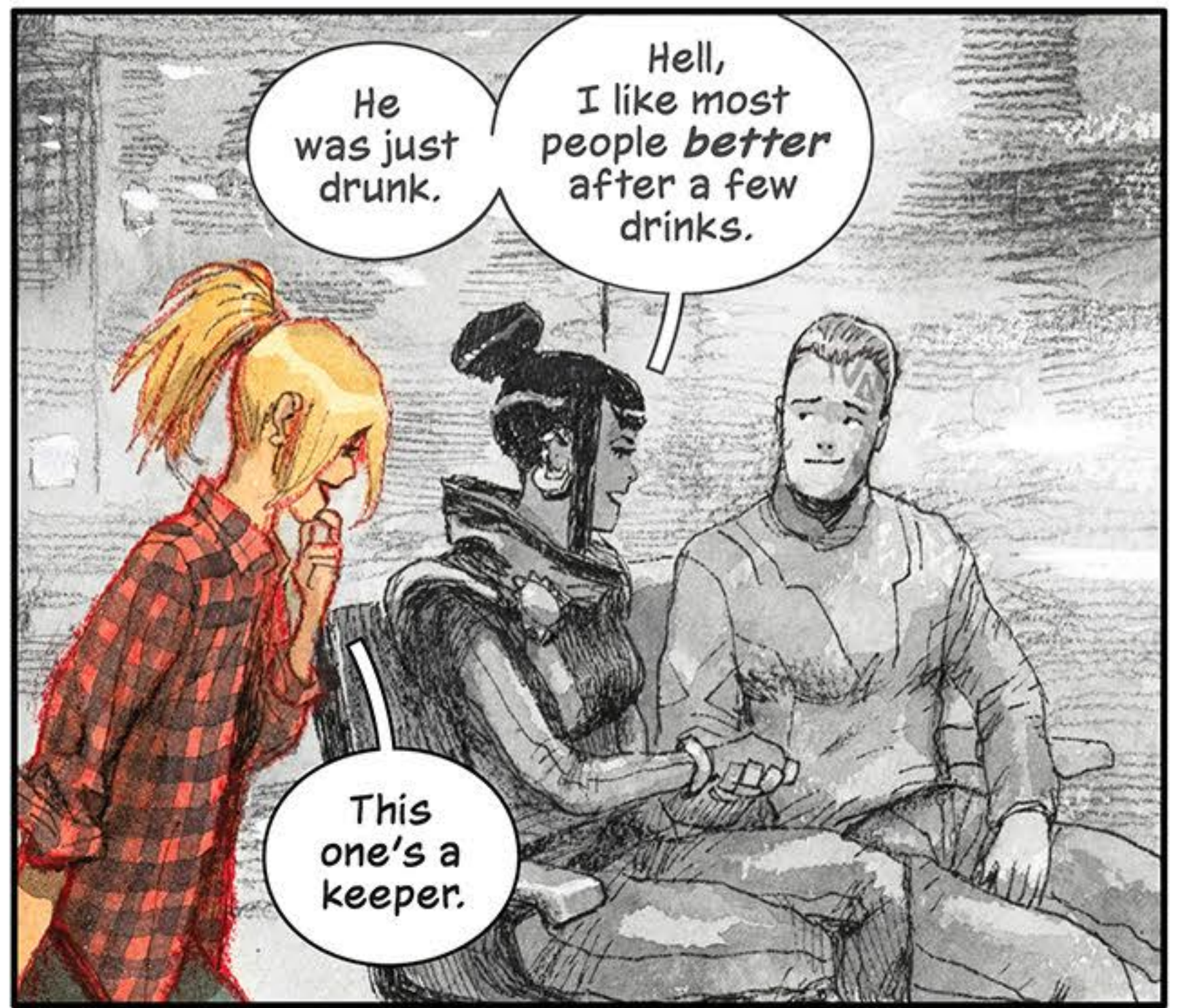


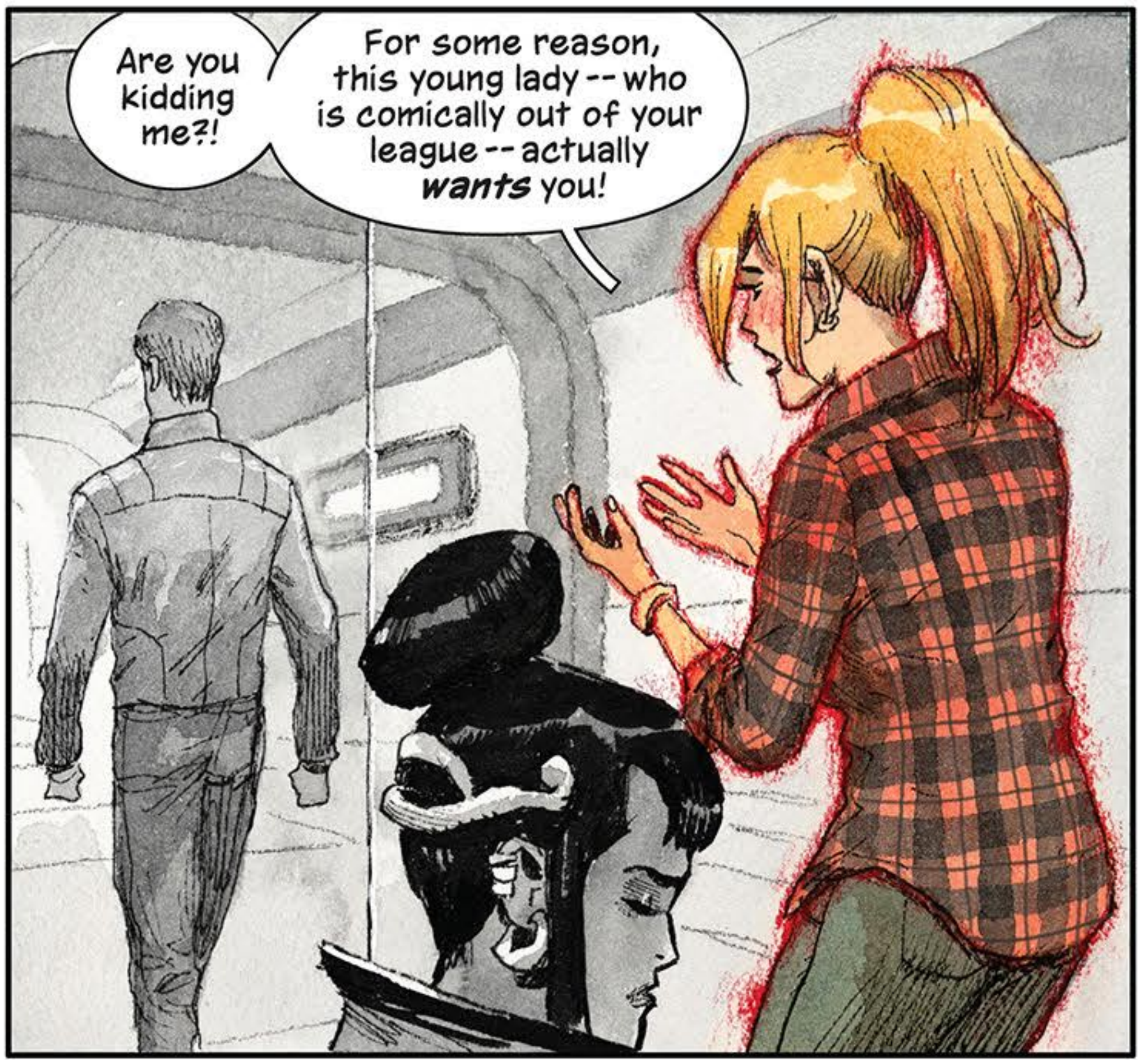
Warmer.



Huh.

Potential.





BA-BING-DING

WELCOME
BACK!



Sorry,
but I'm going
to need some
closure with
this one.

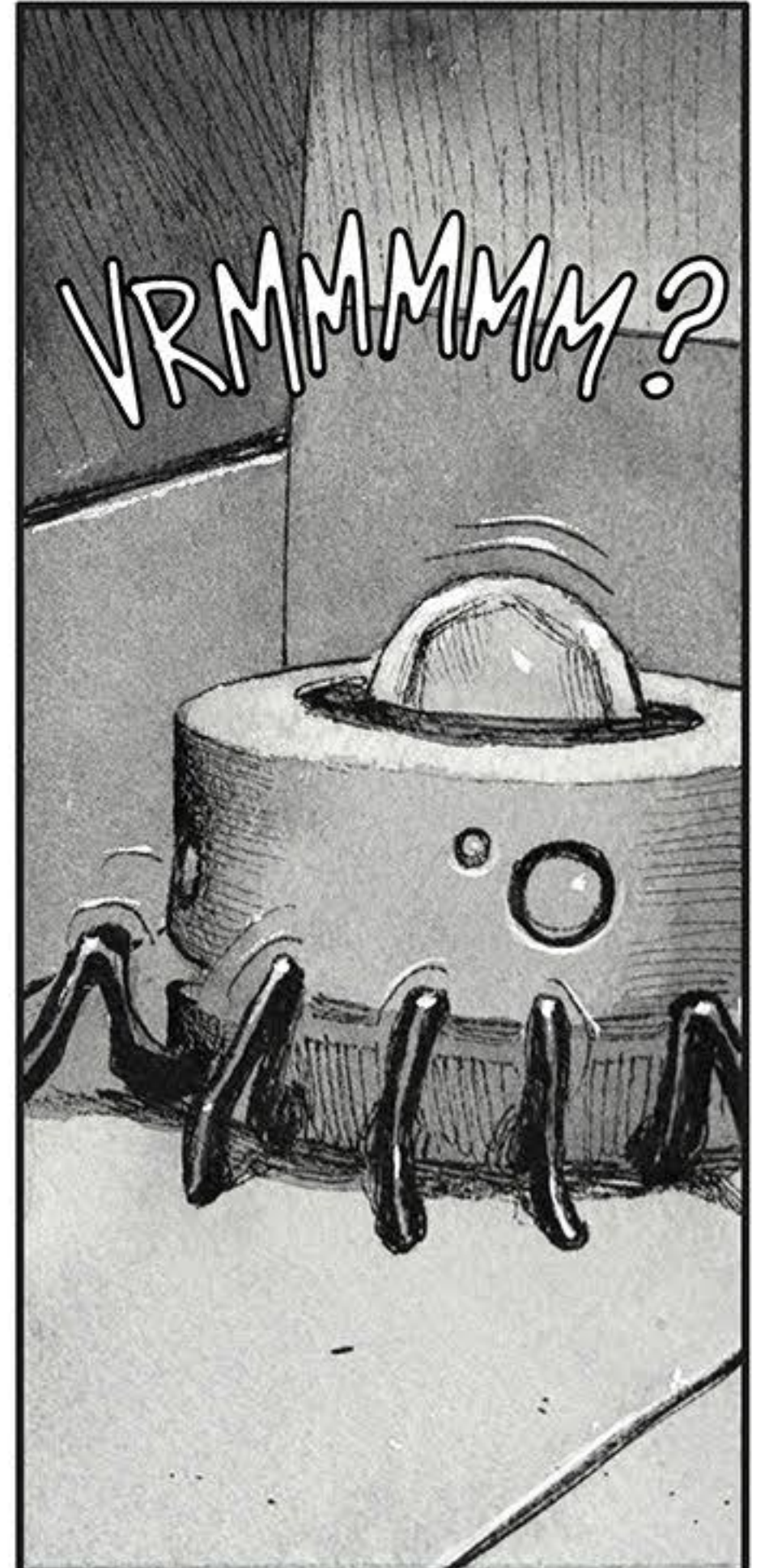


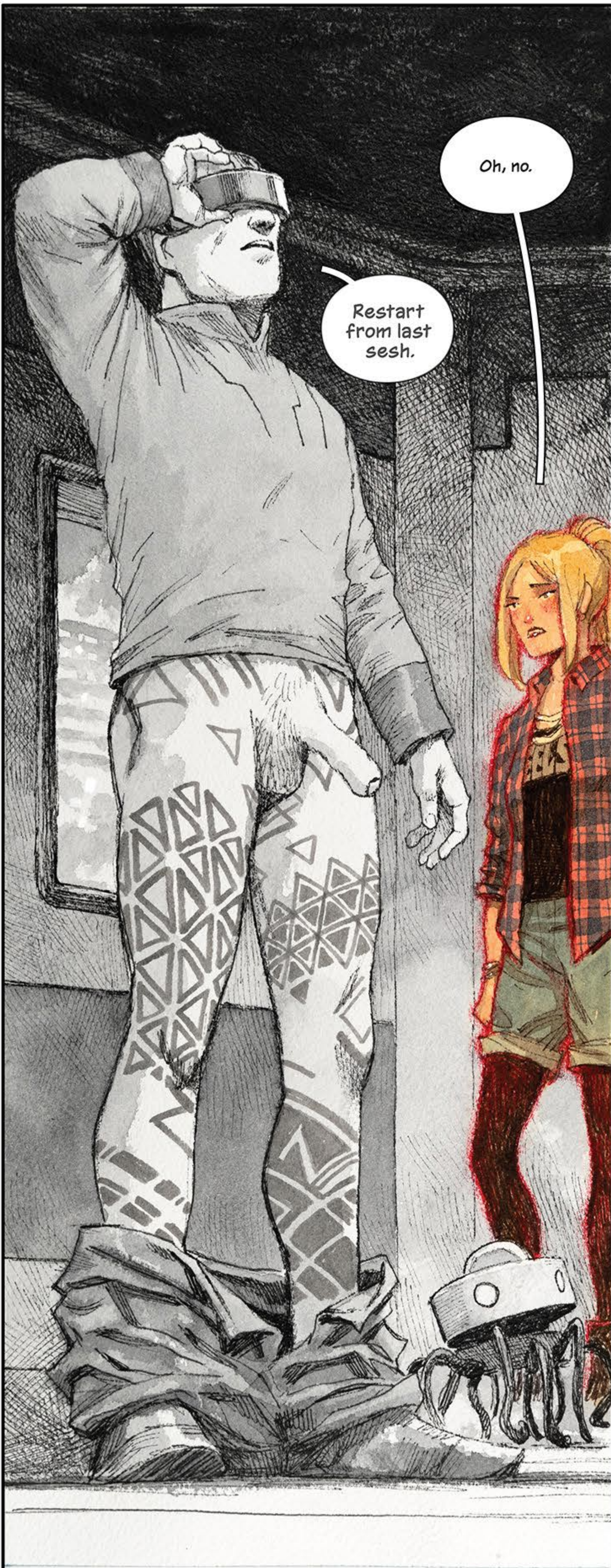
I fully support my
friends in the asexual
community, but I'm
not getting that vibe
from you *at all*, so
what's really --

Come,
Herky.



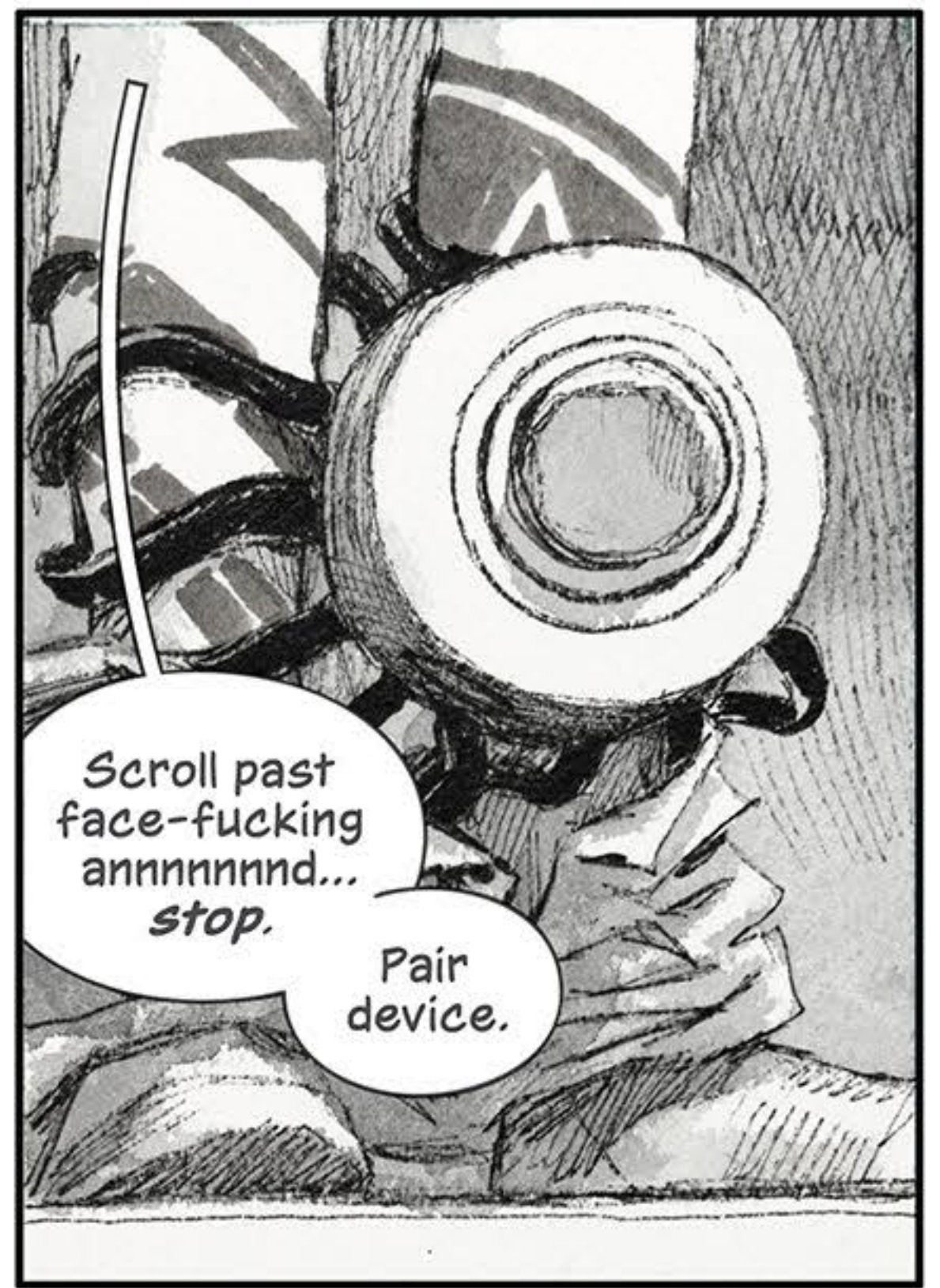
VRMMMMM??





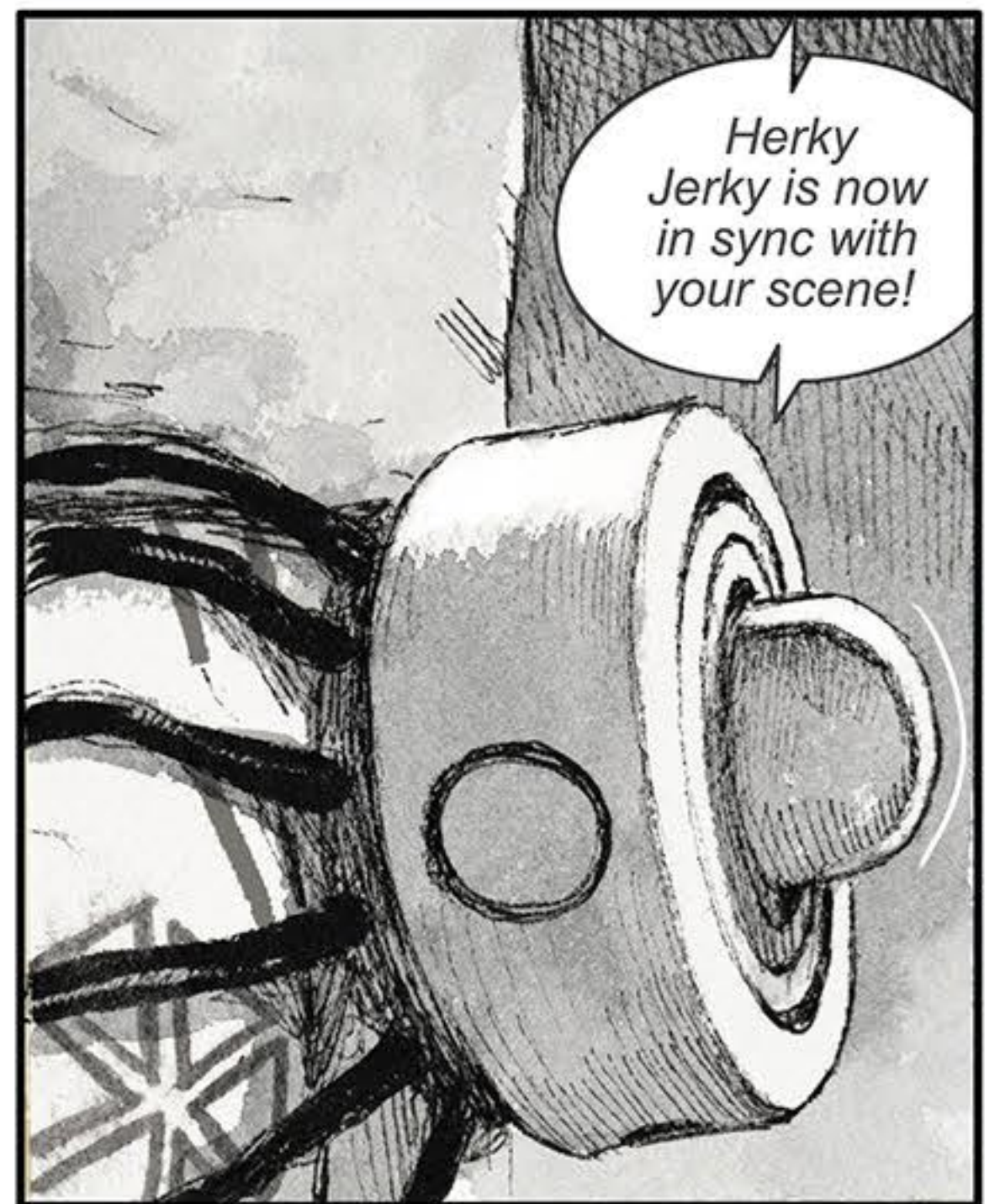
Oh, no.

Restart from last sesh.



Scroll past face-fucking annnnnnd... stop.

Pair device.



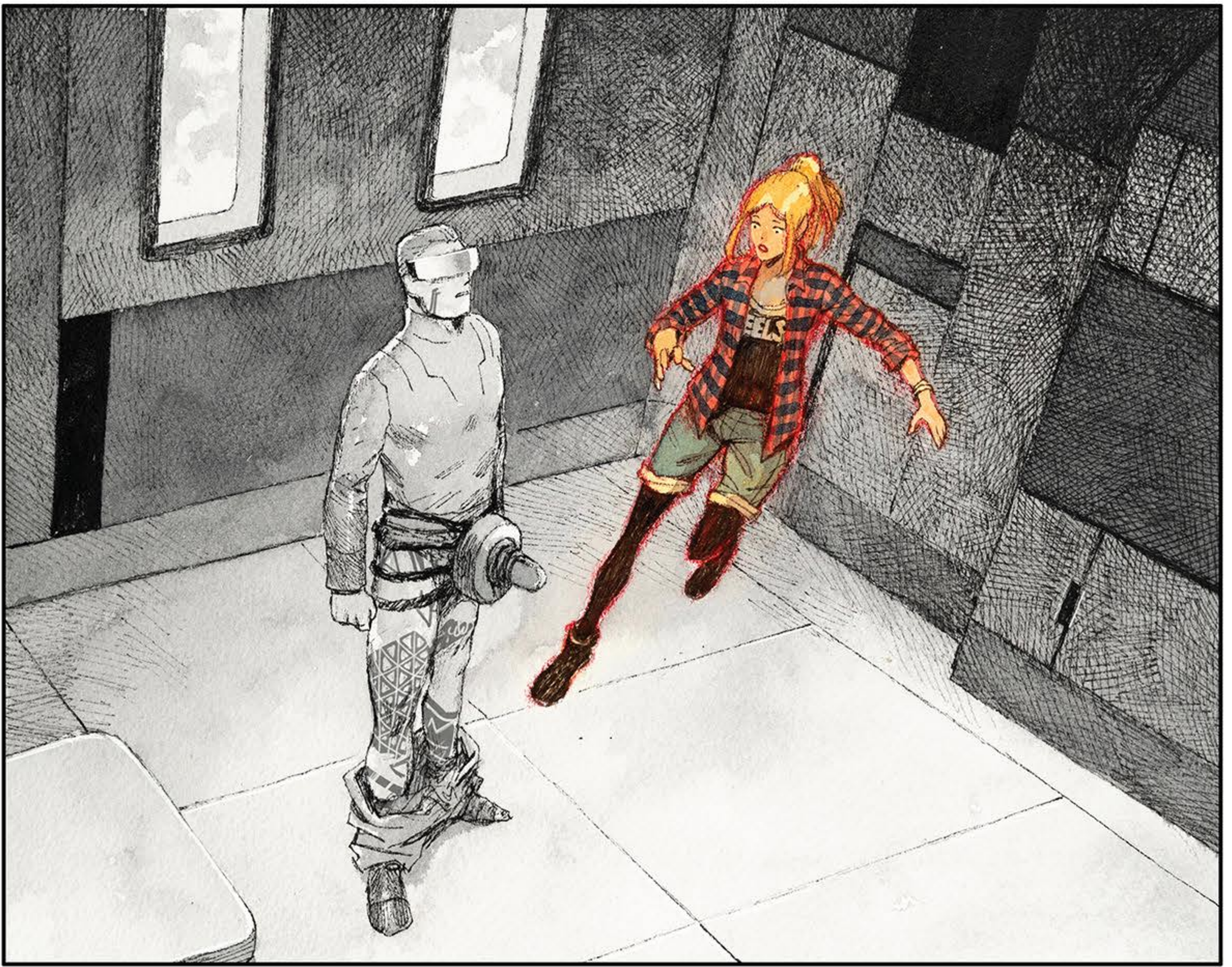
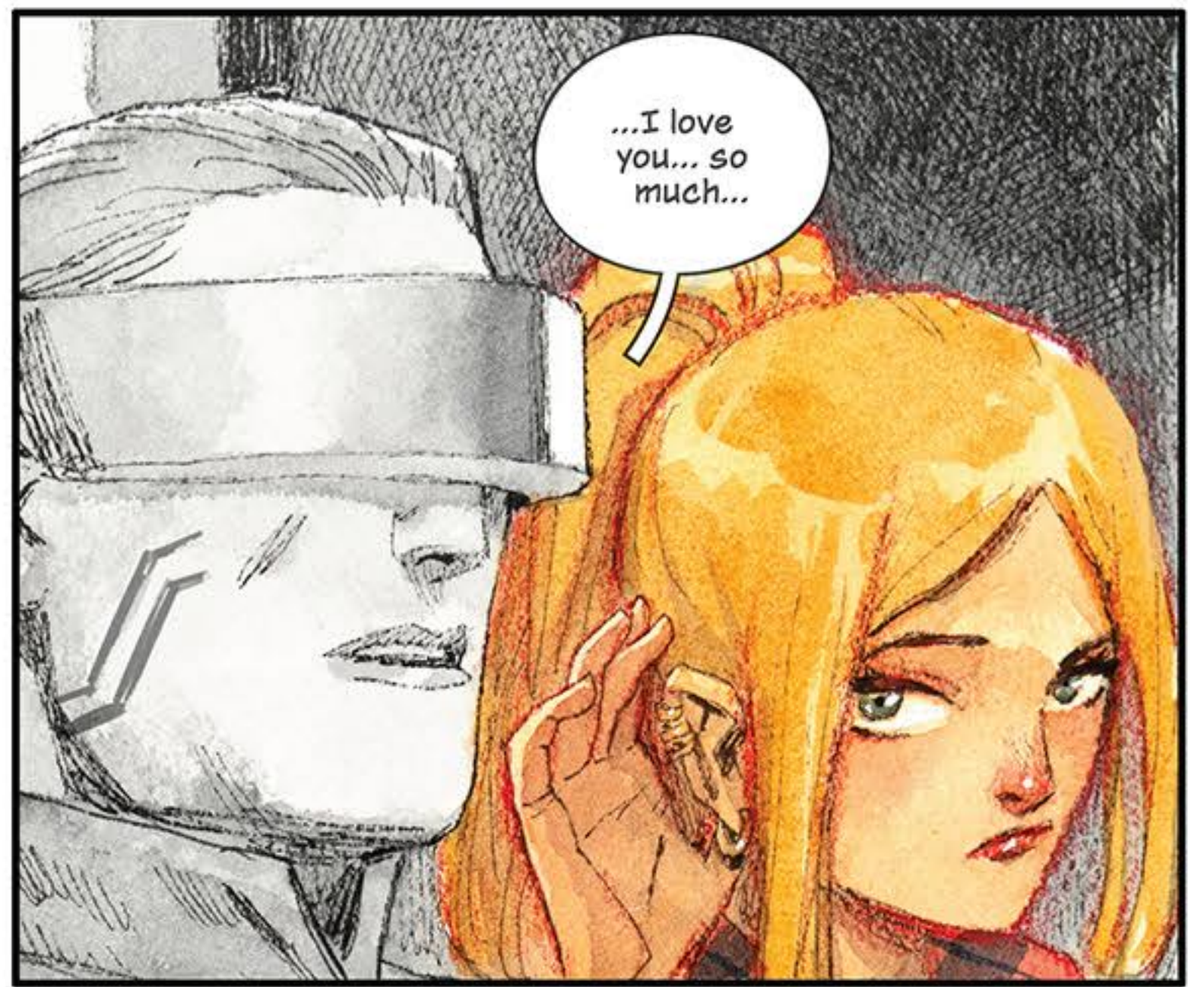
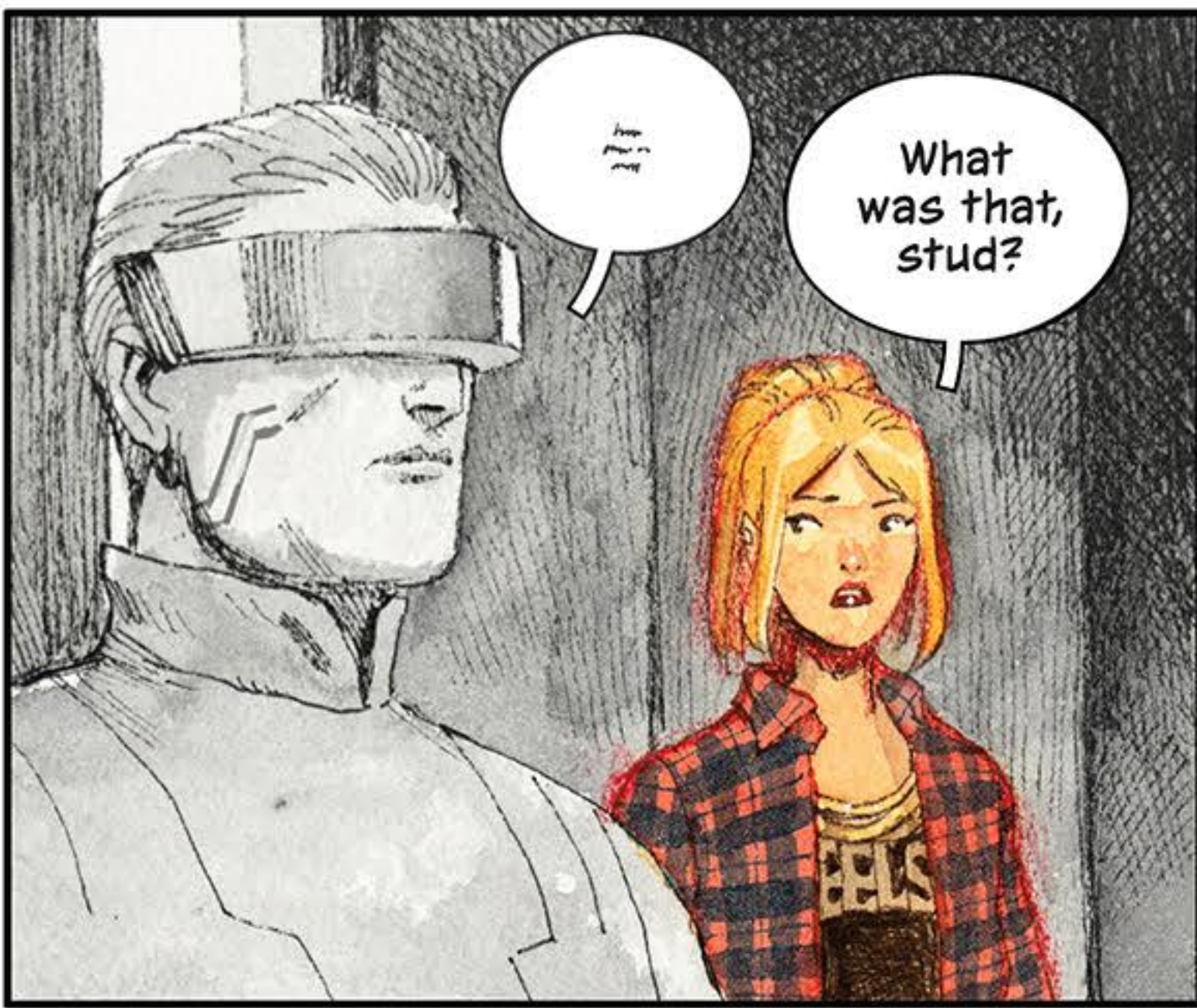
Herky Jerky is now in sync with your scene!



Nggh

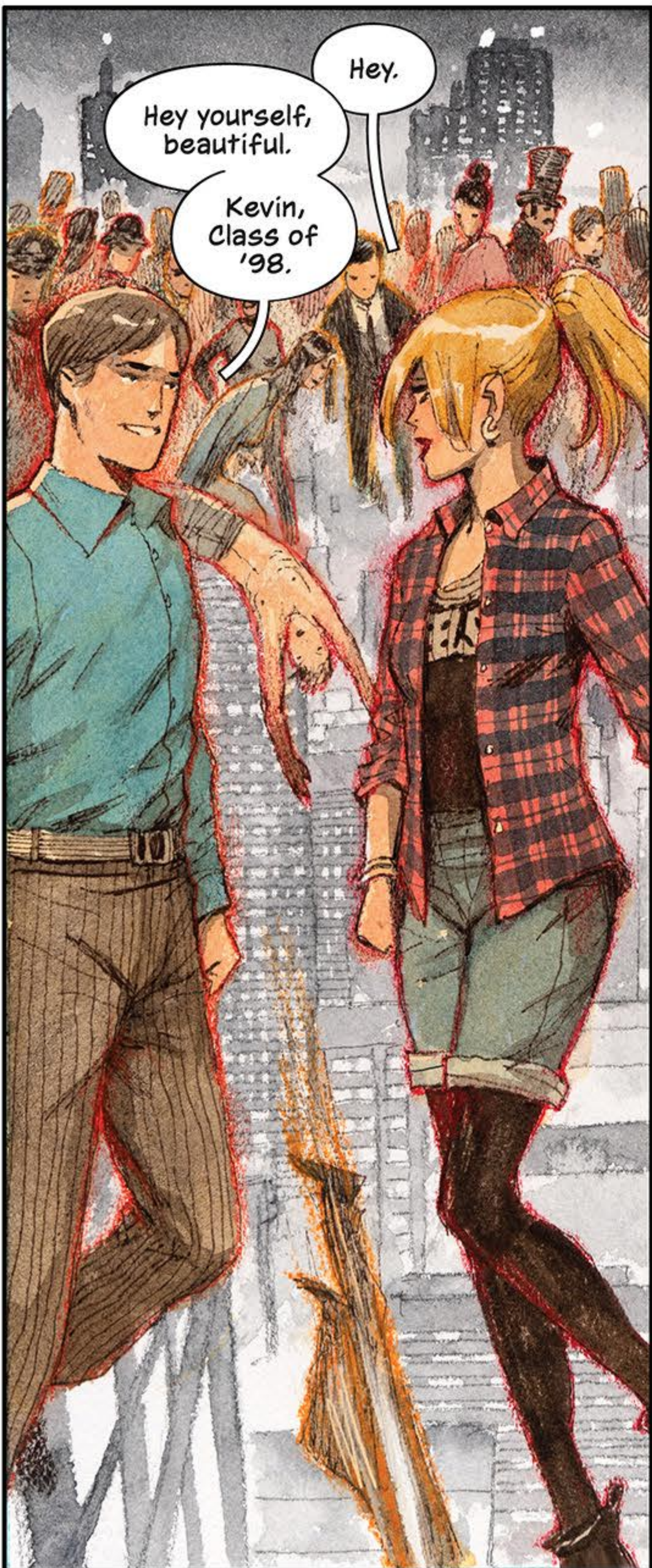
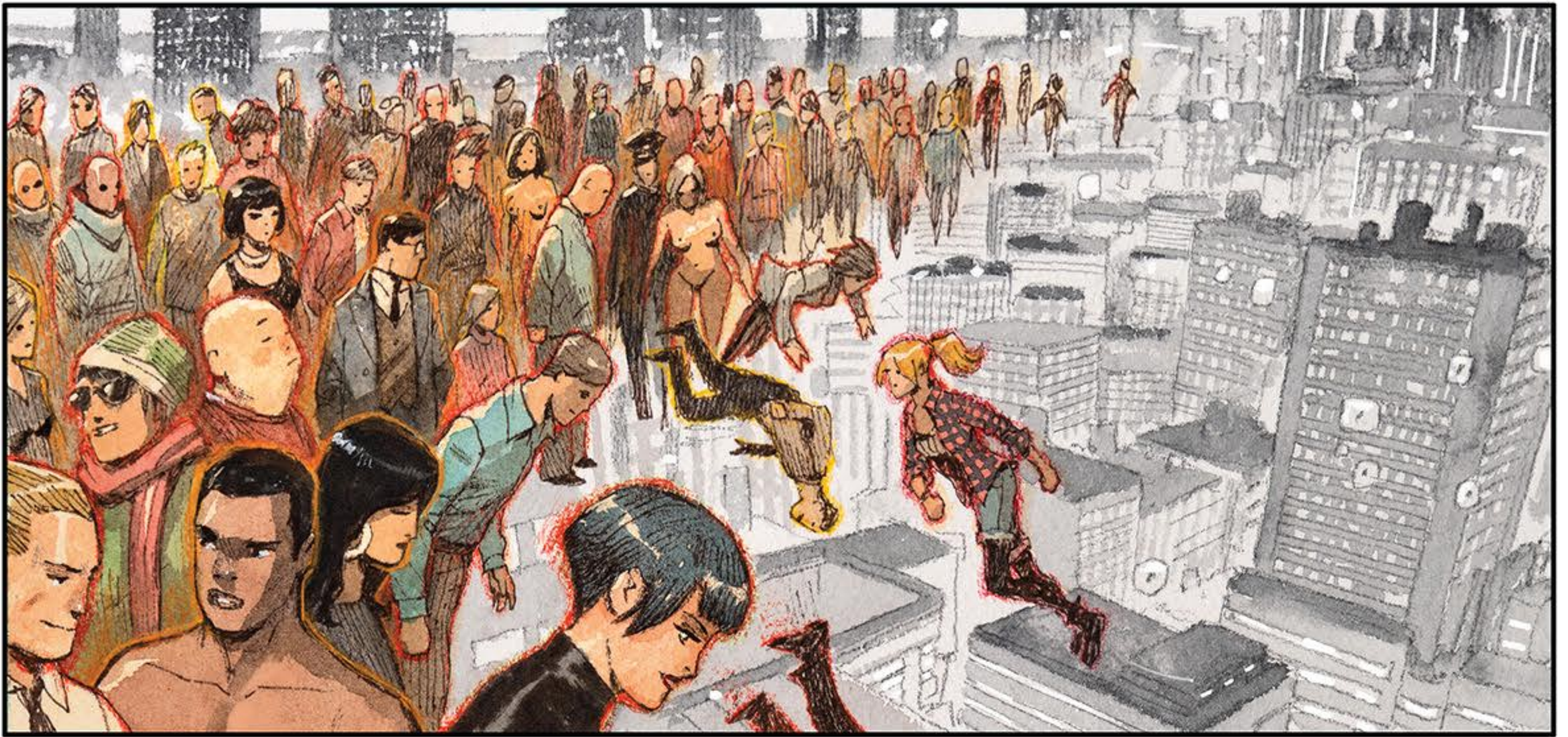
God, I miss Tinder.

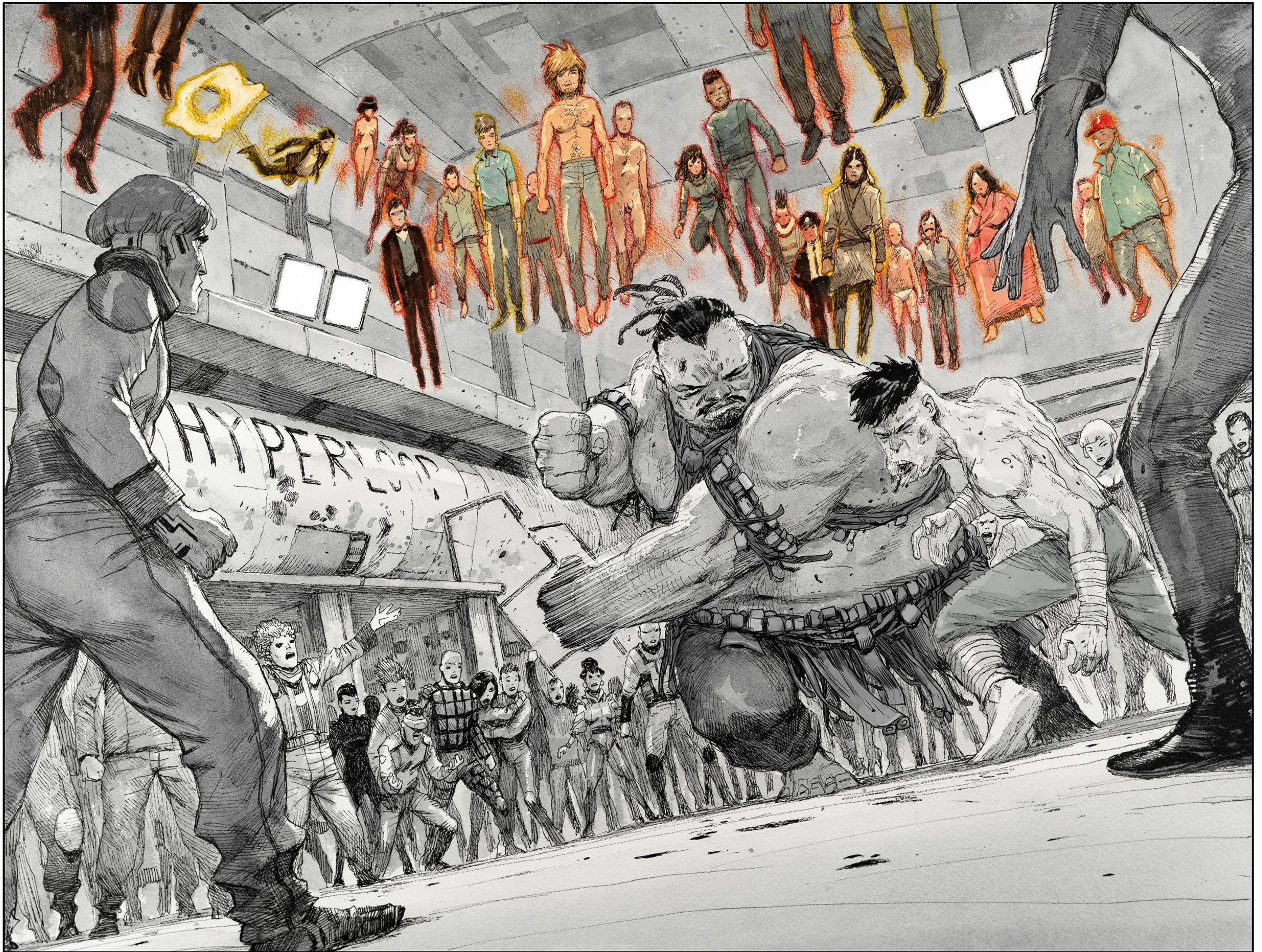
VSSK
VSSK
VSSK

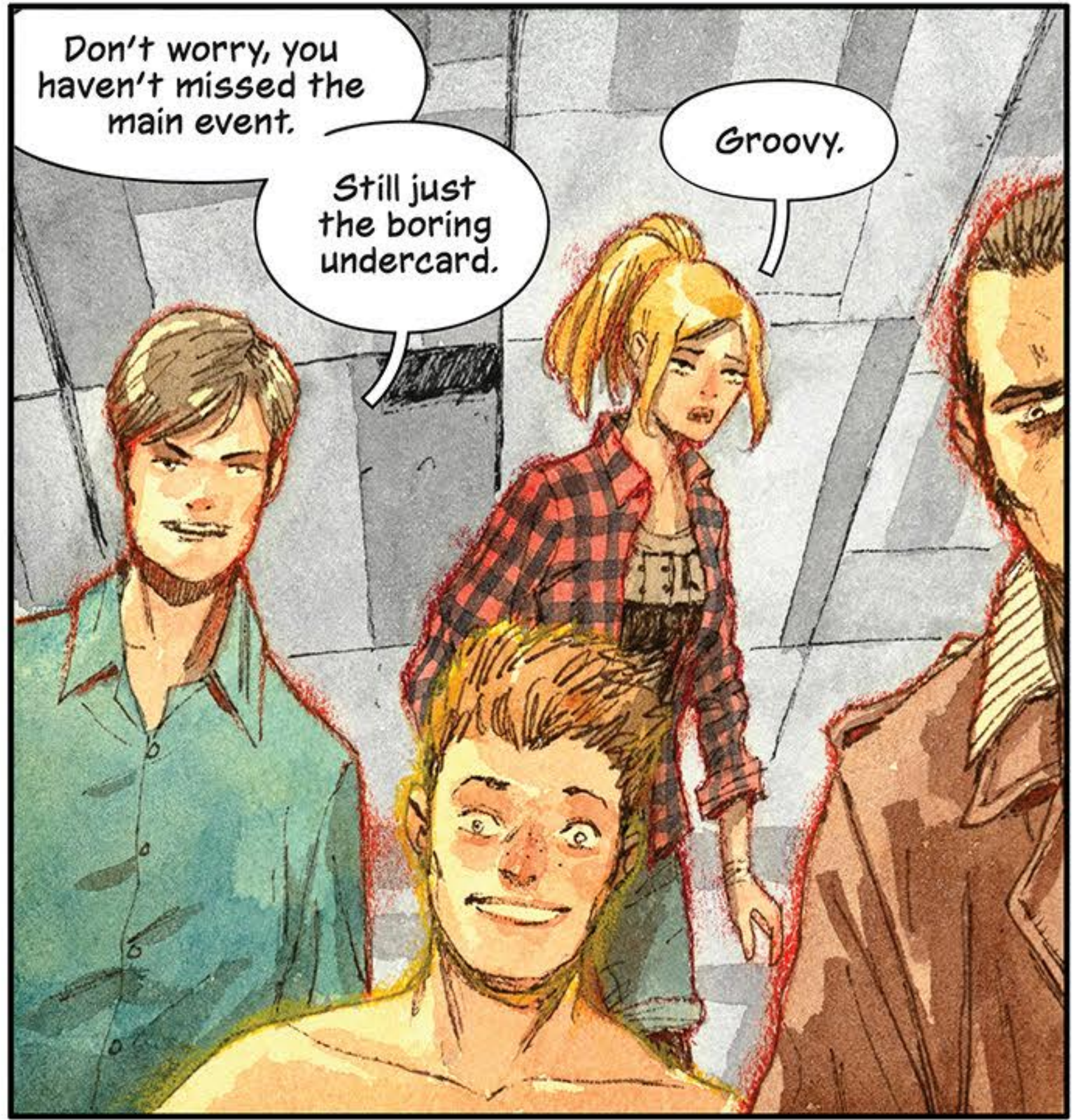


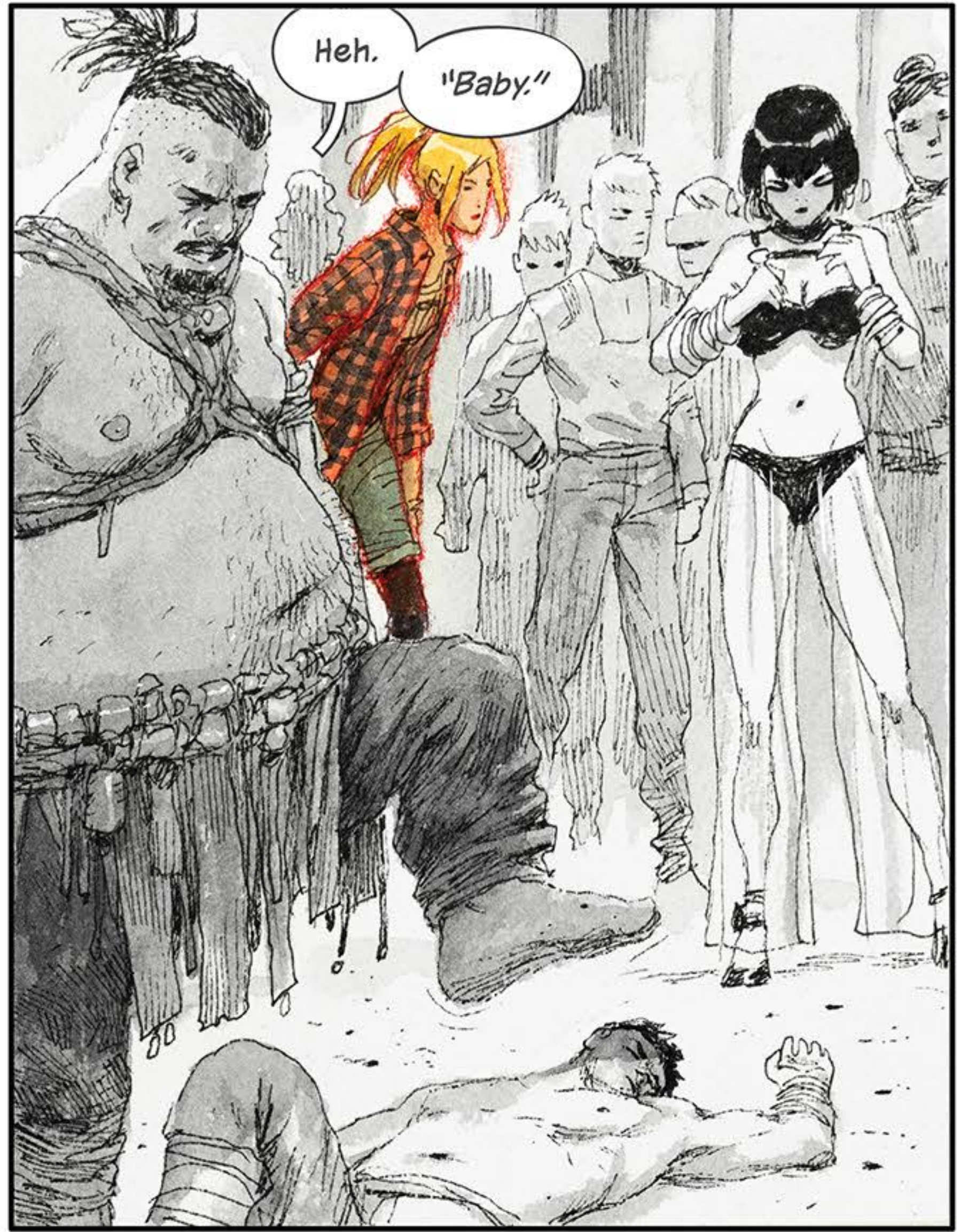
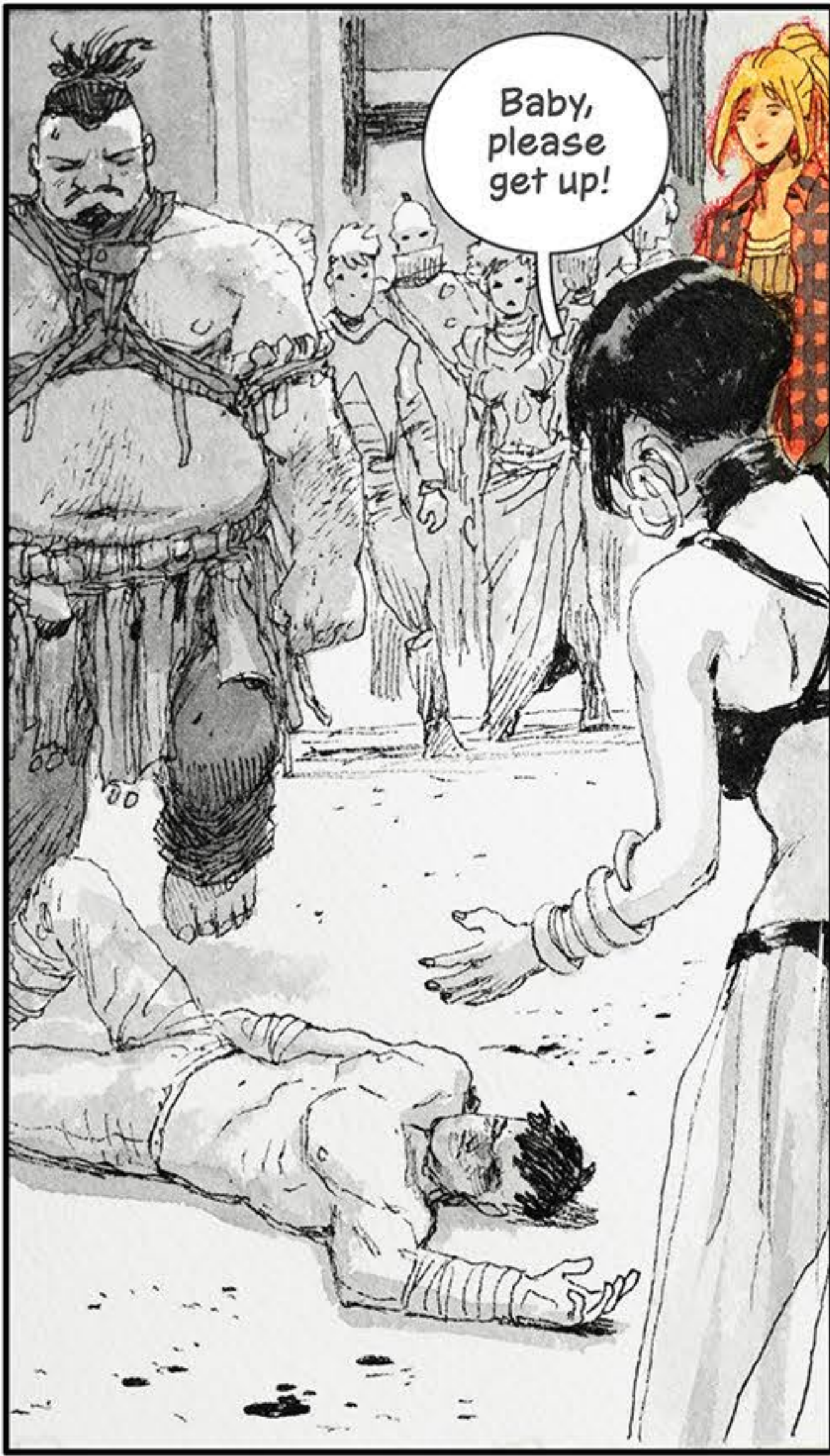


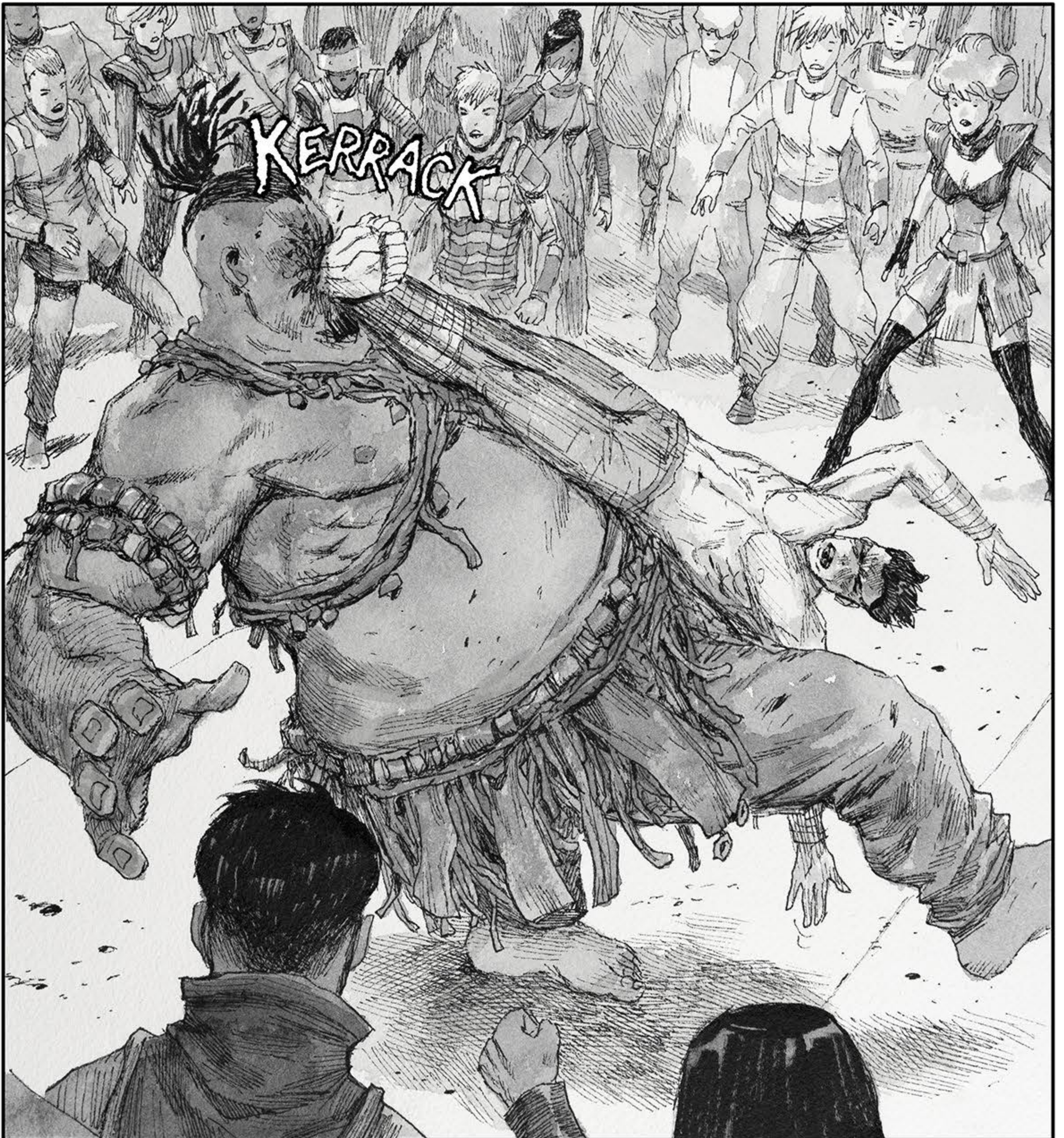


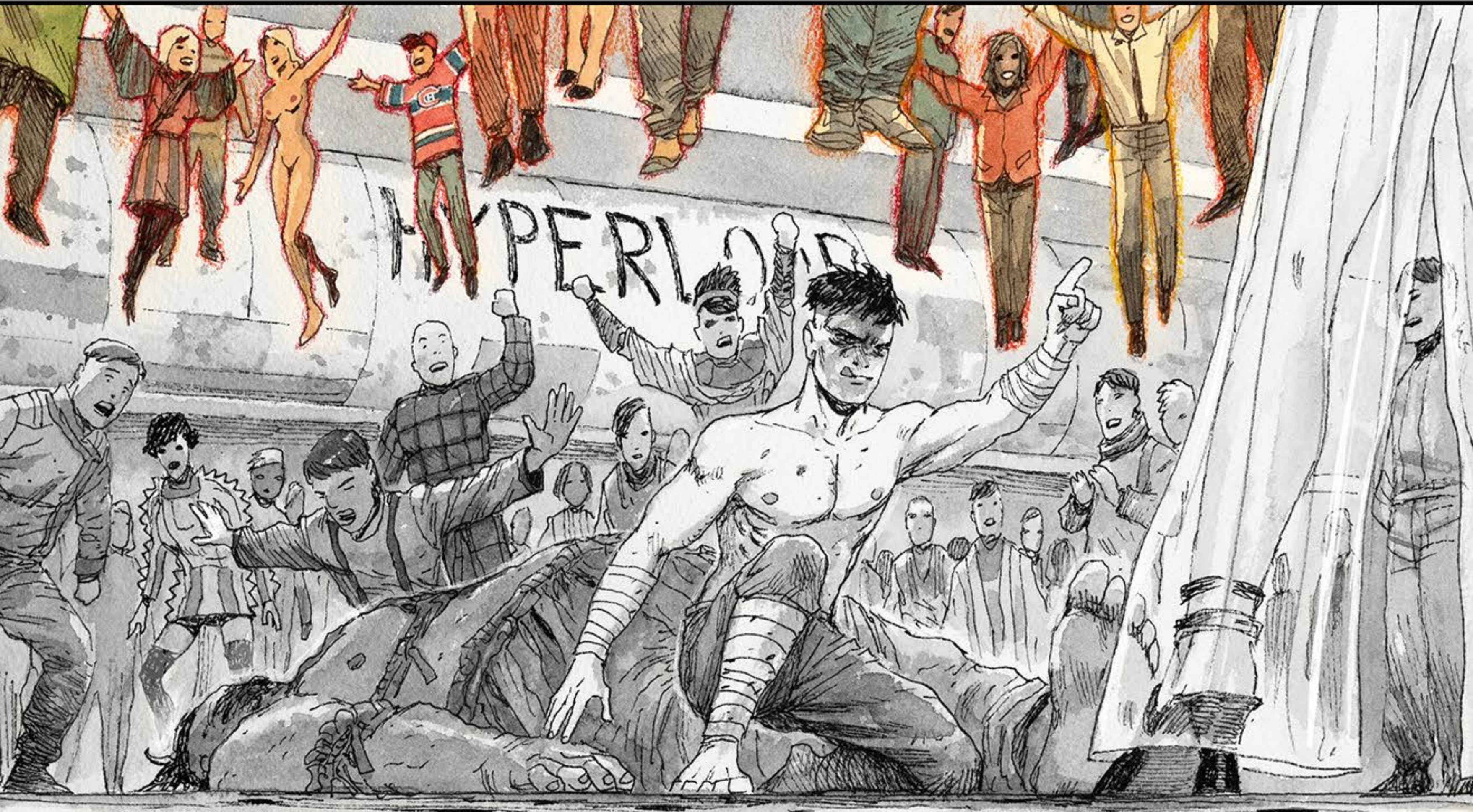
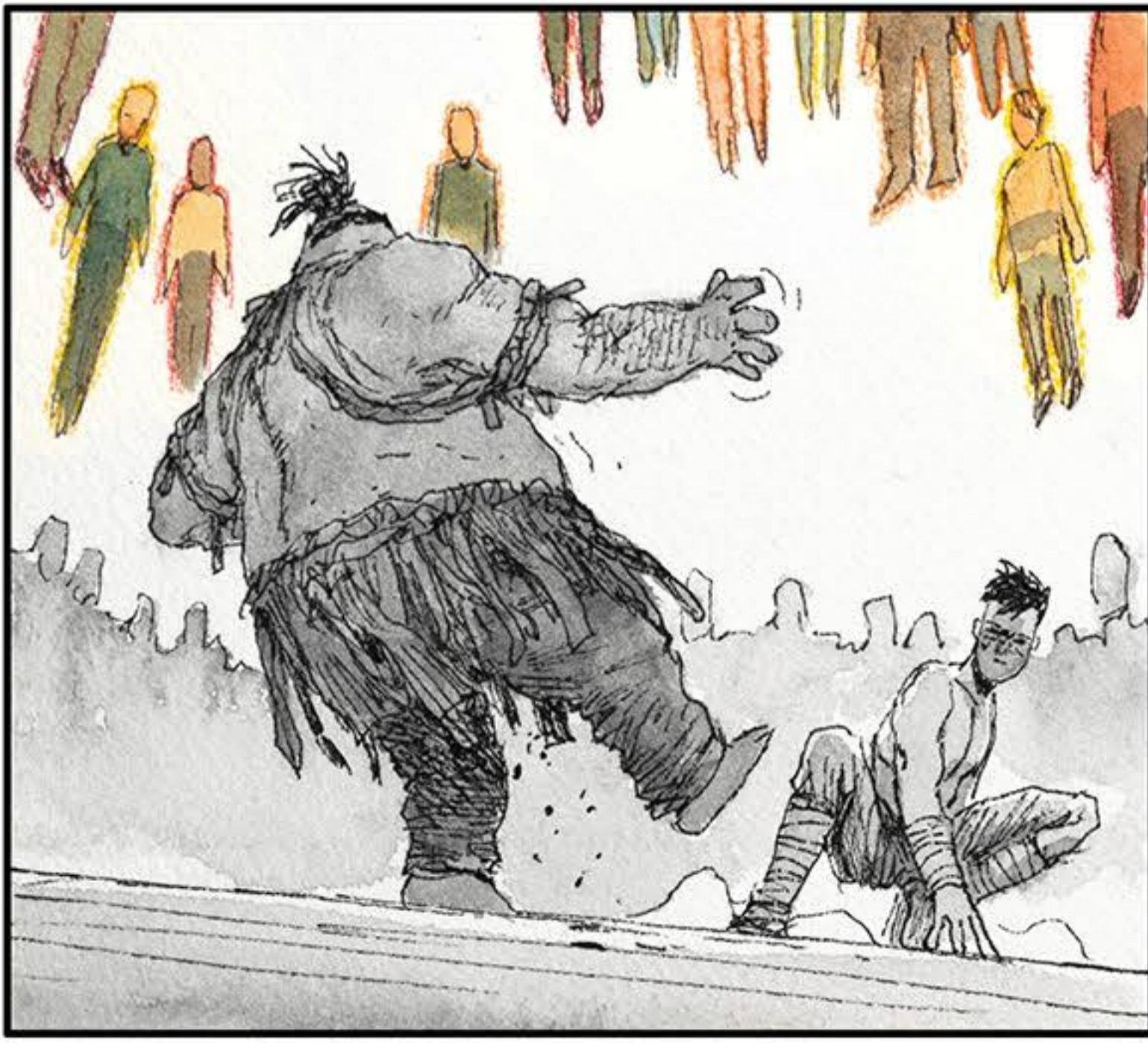






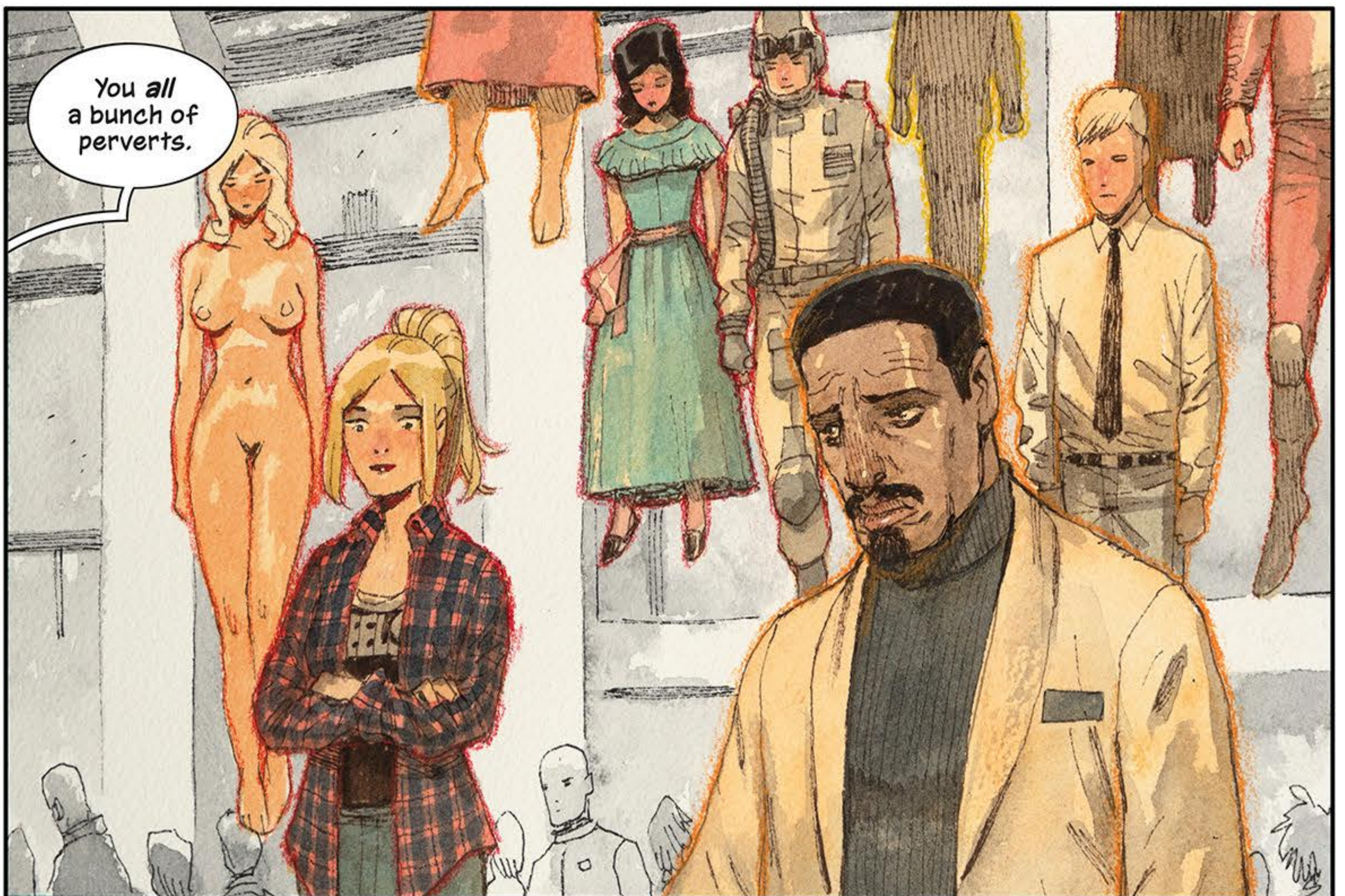








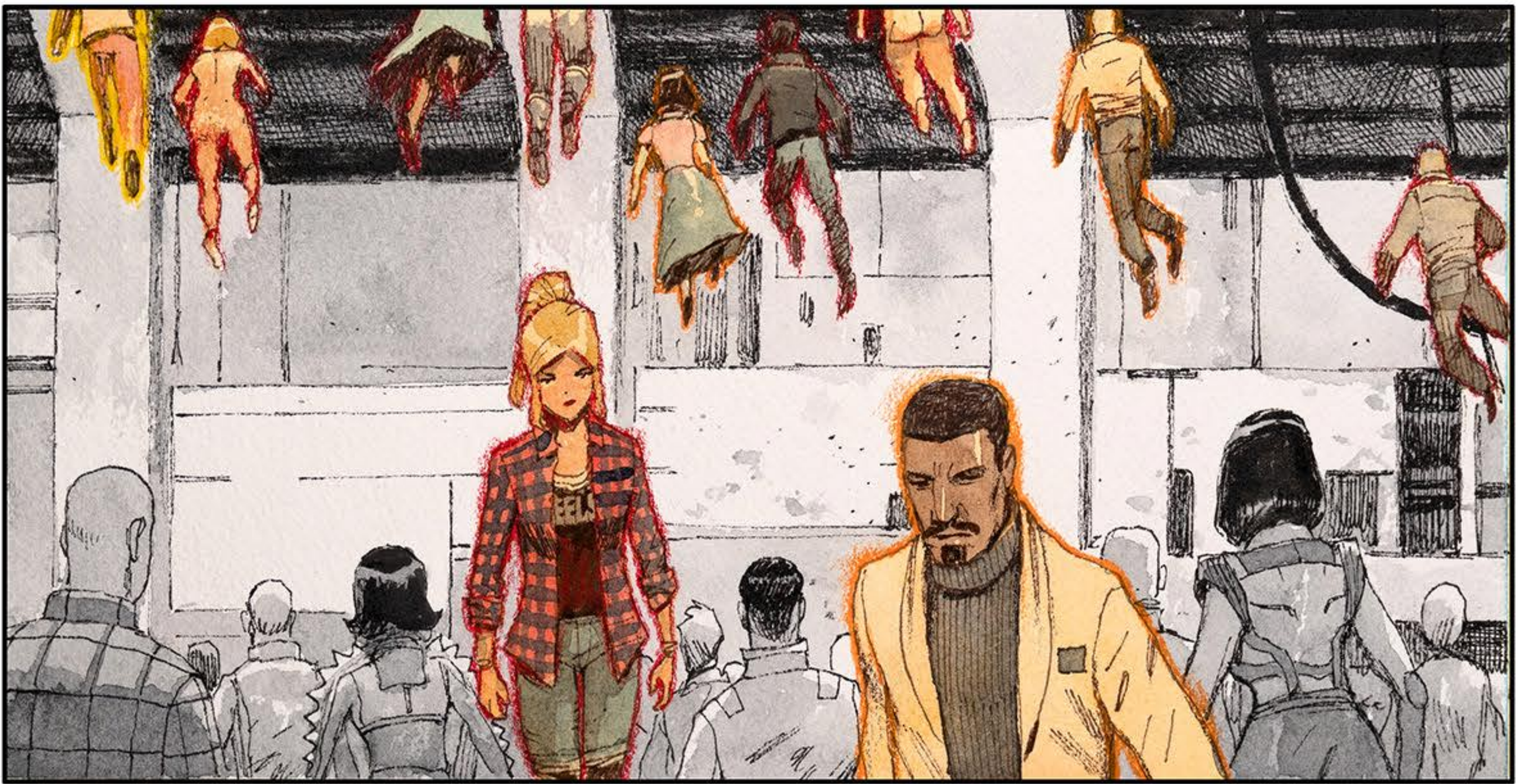
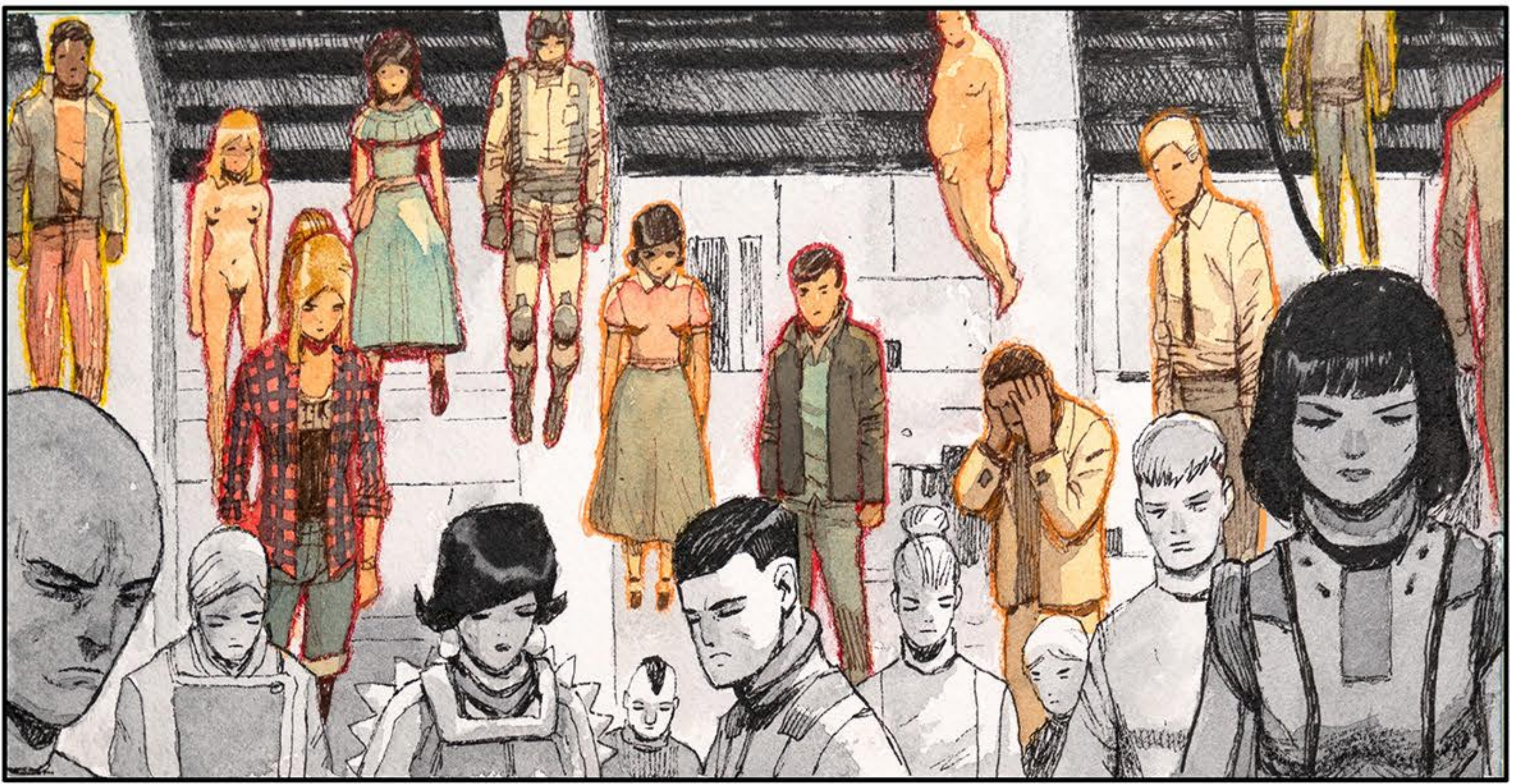


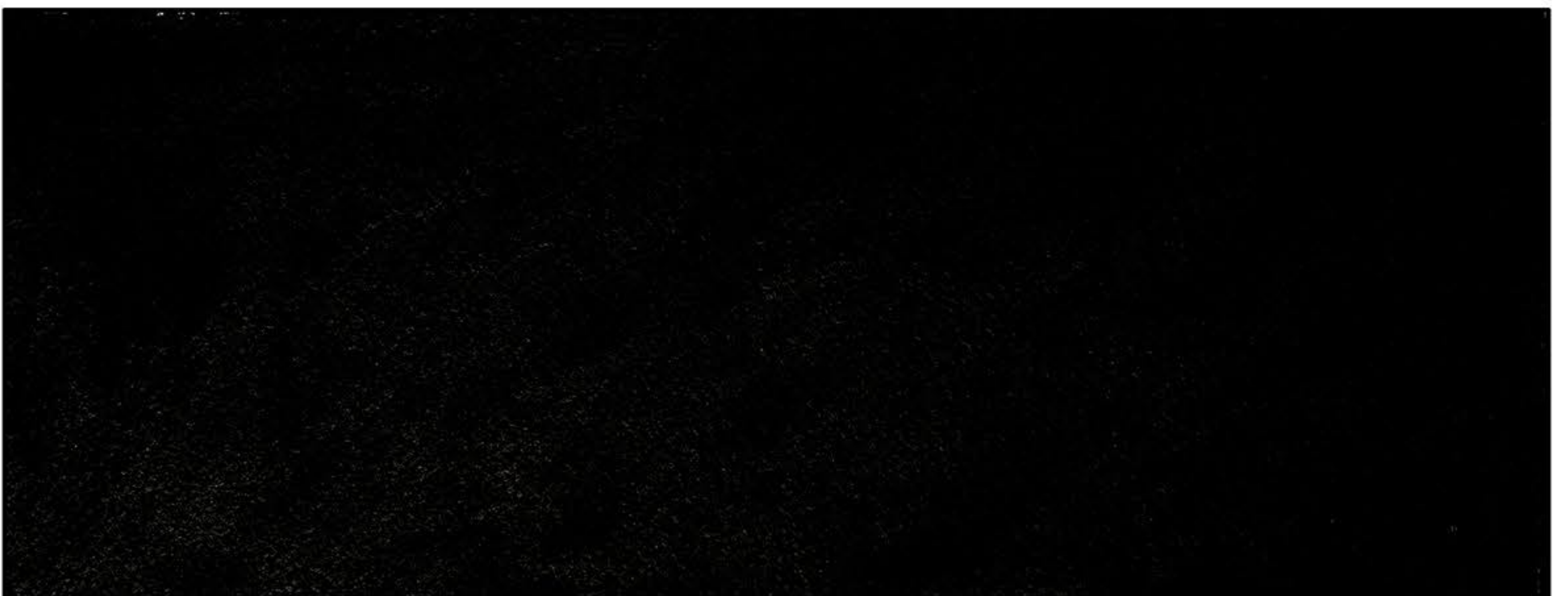
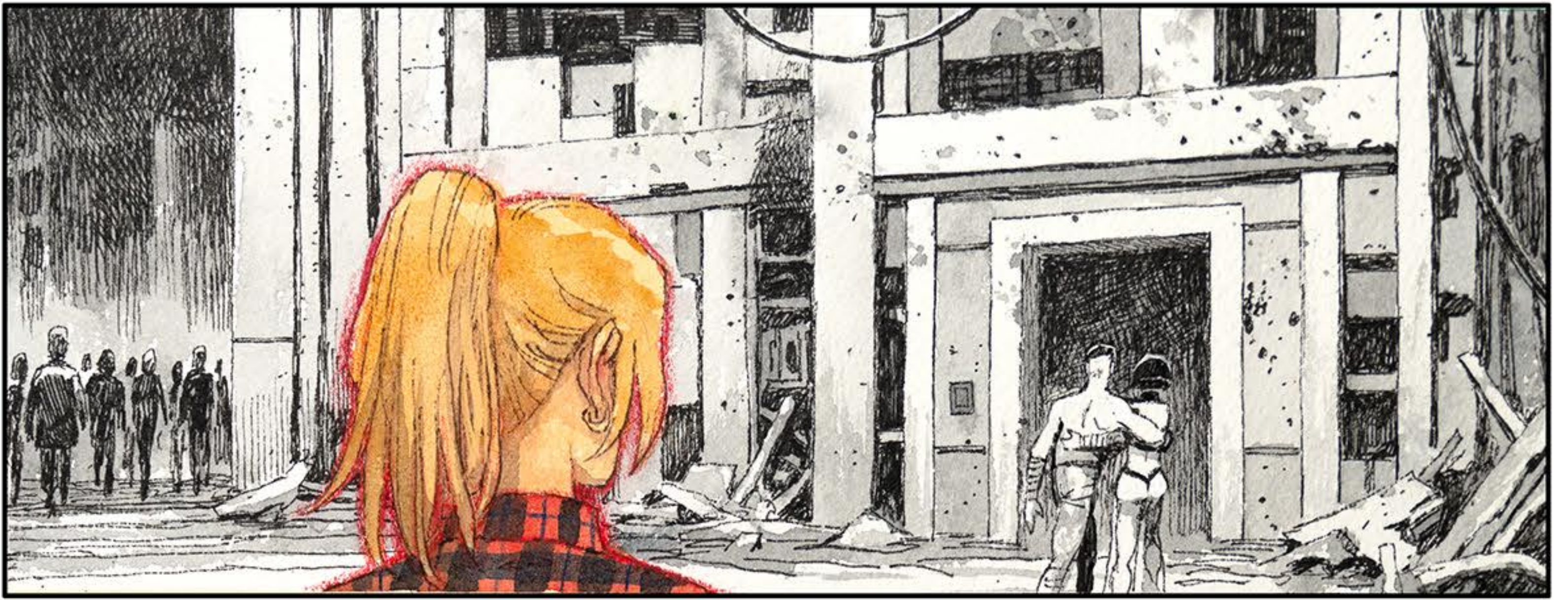


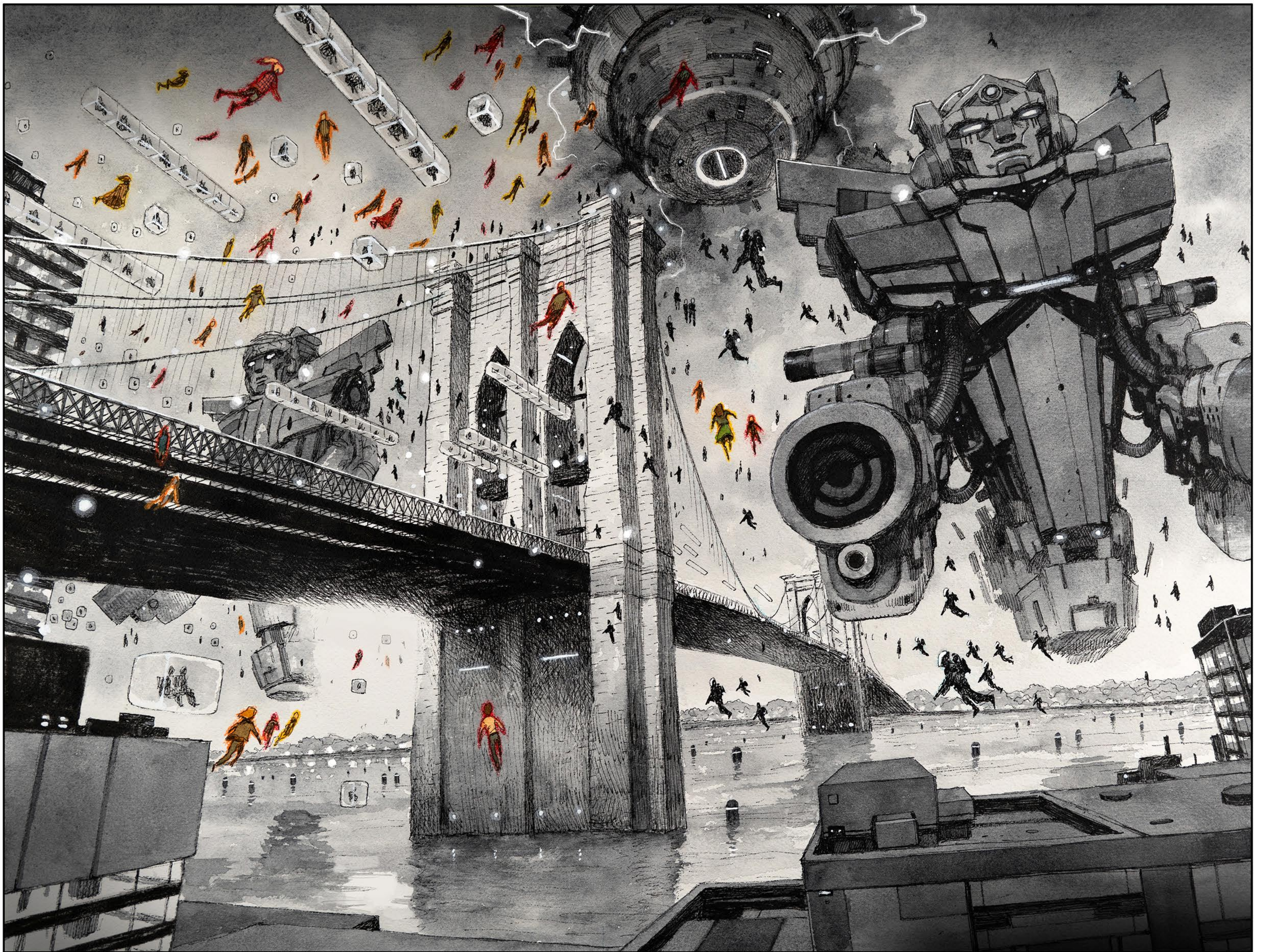


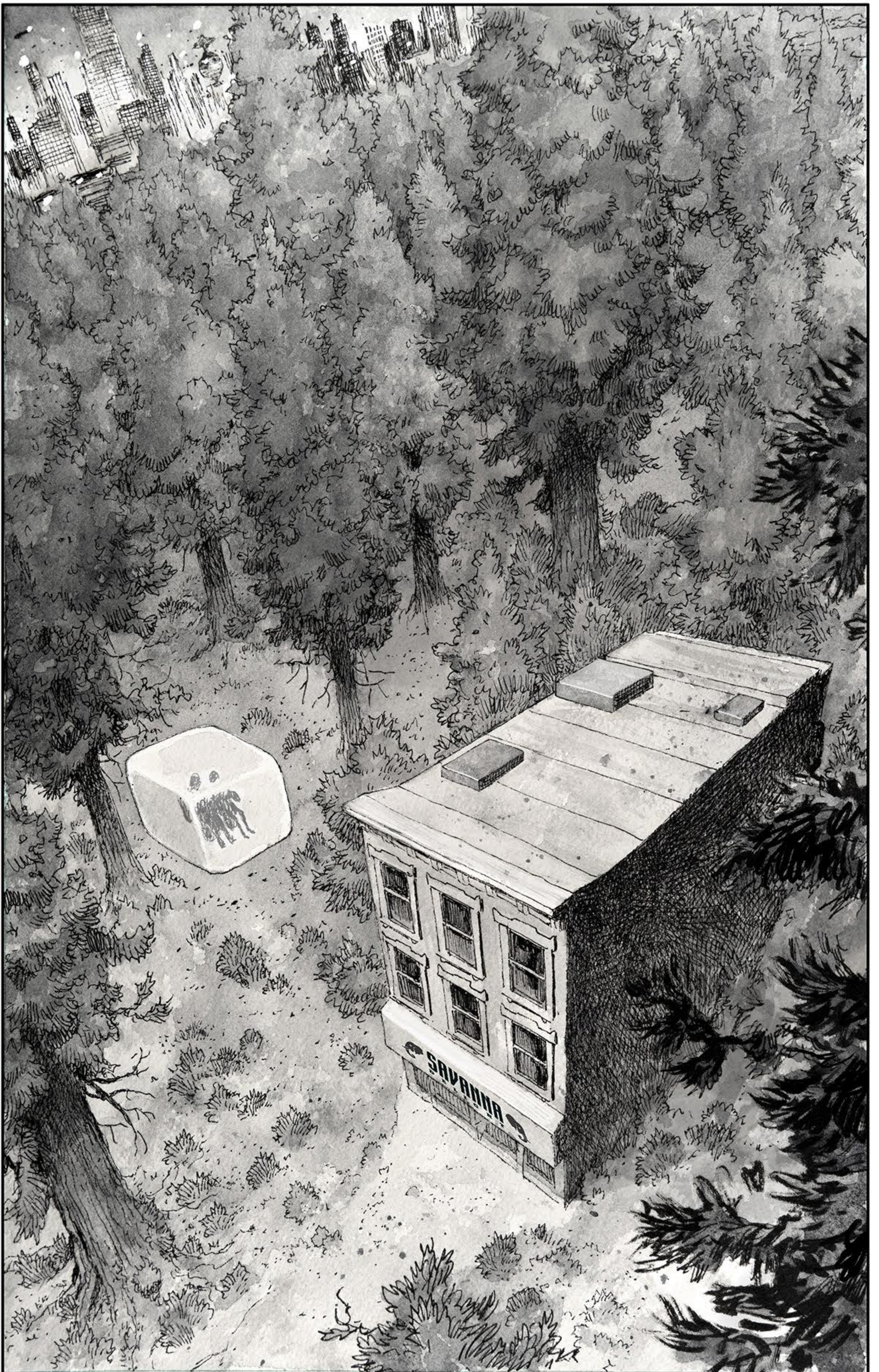


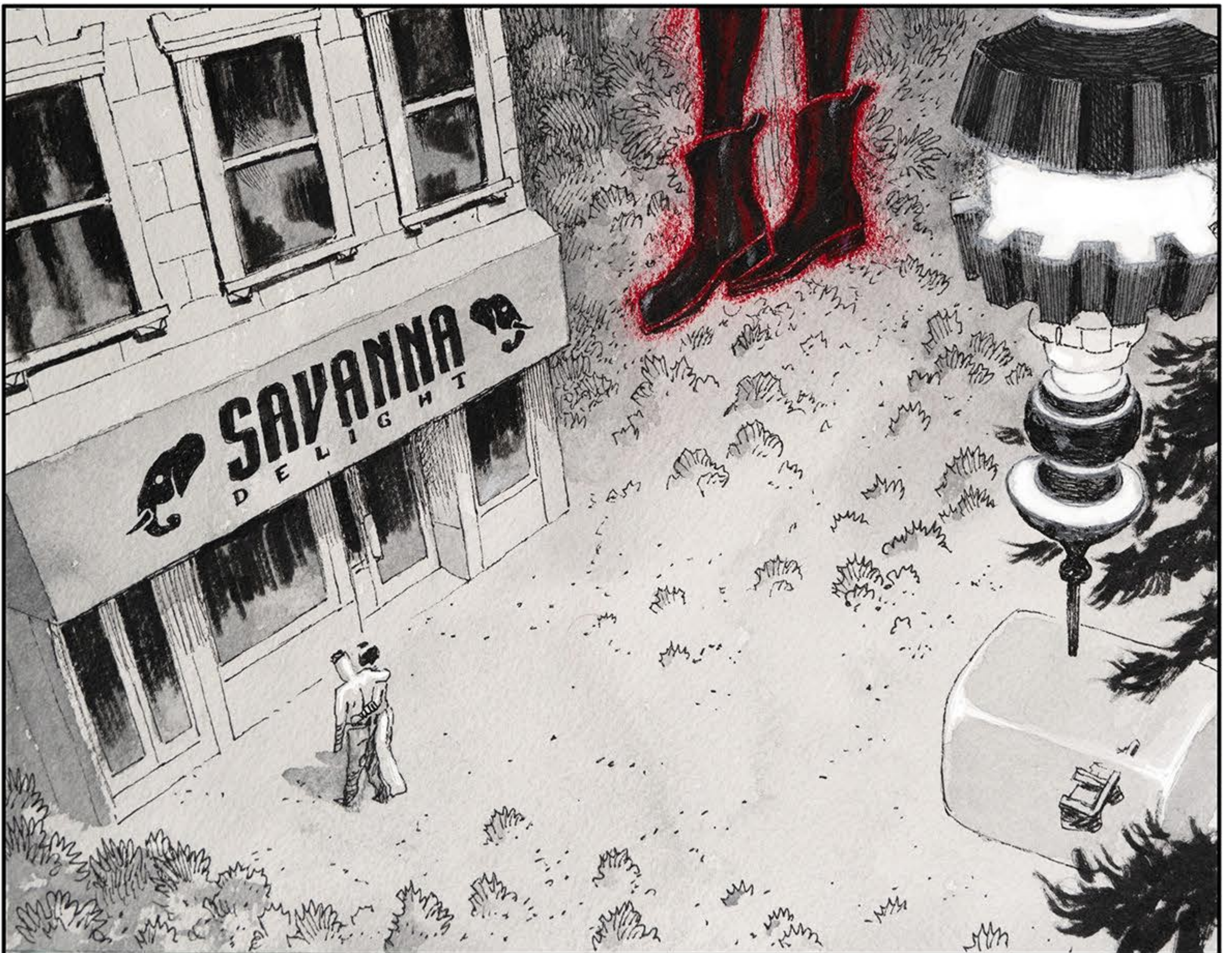
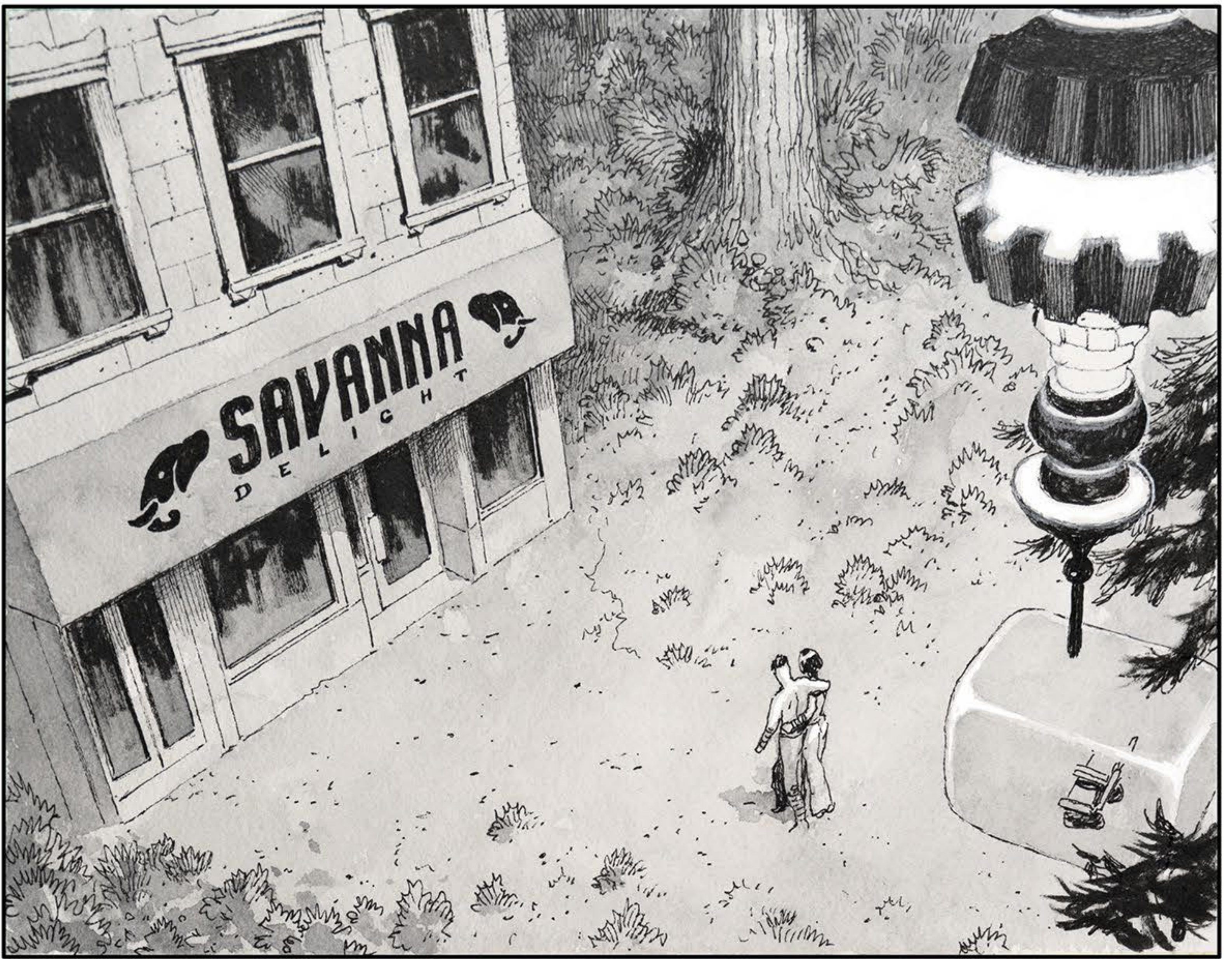


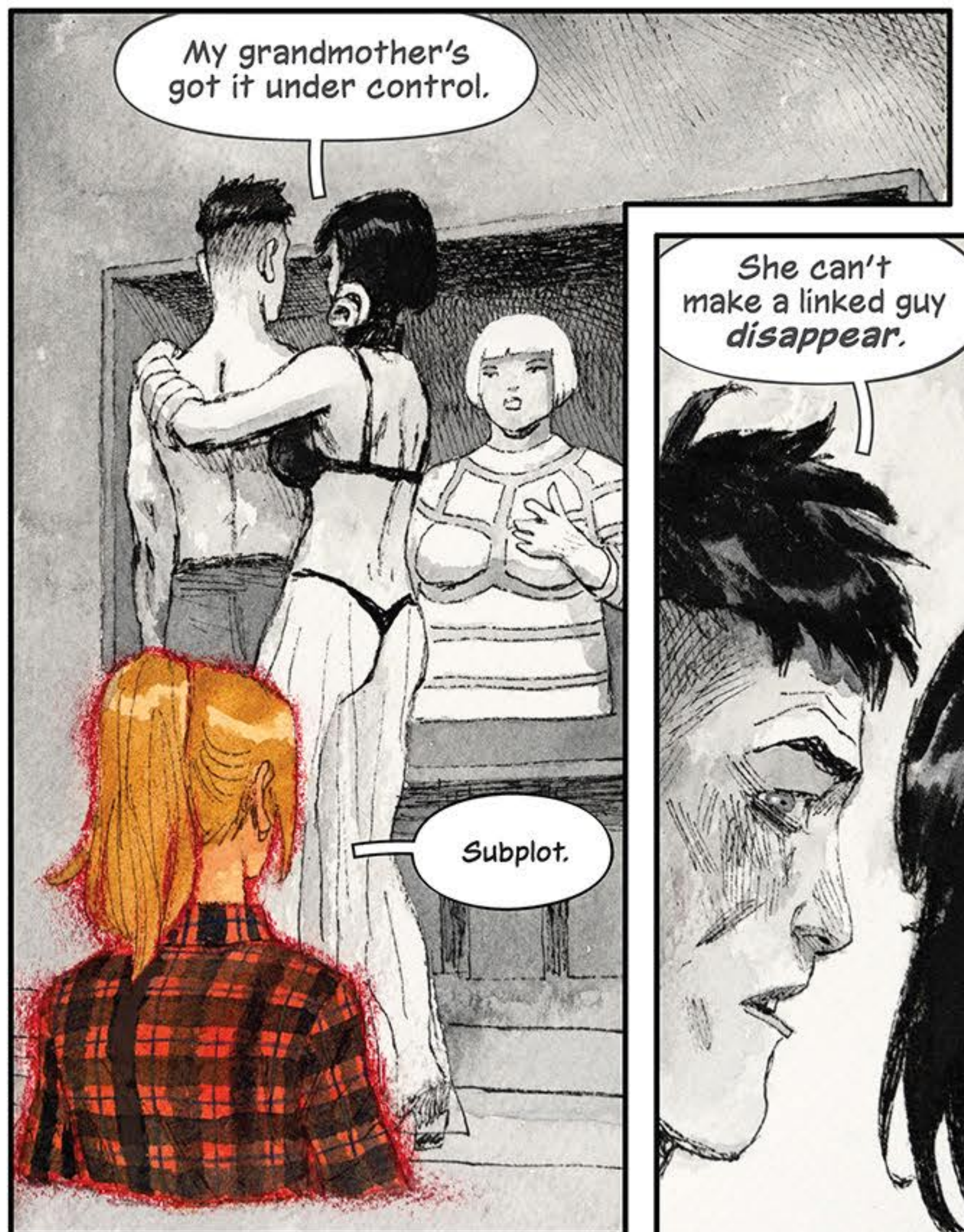
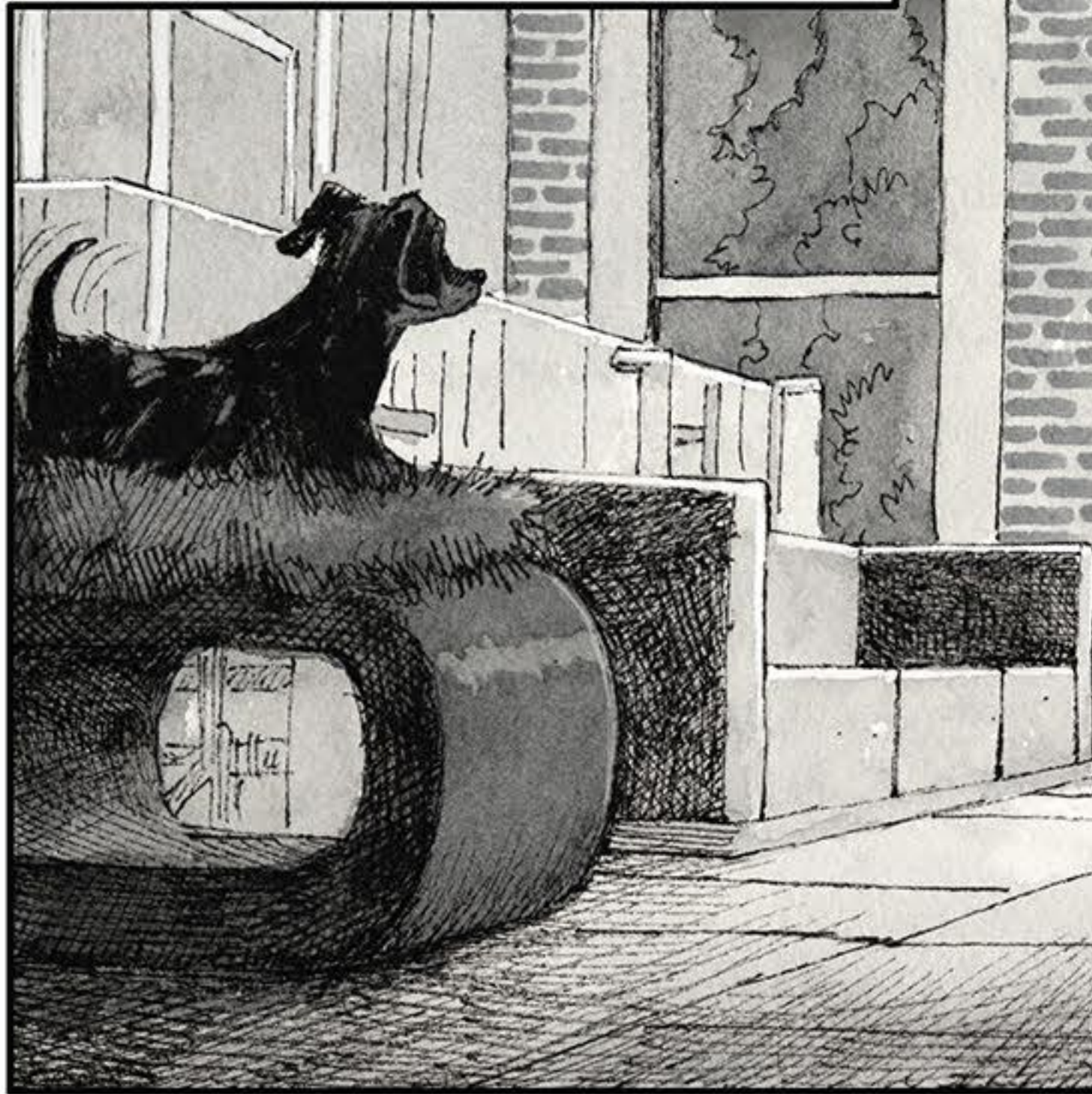


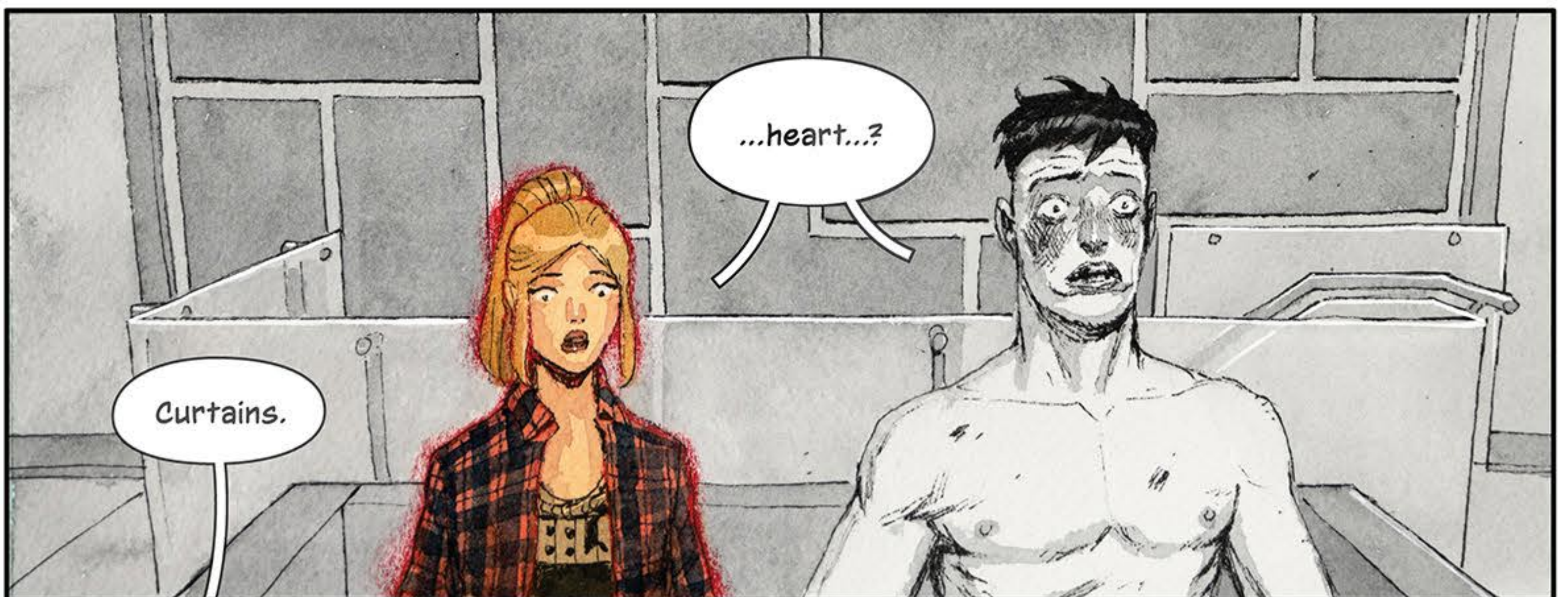
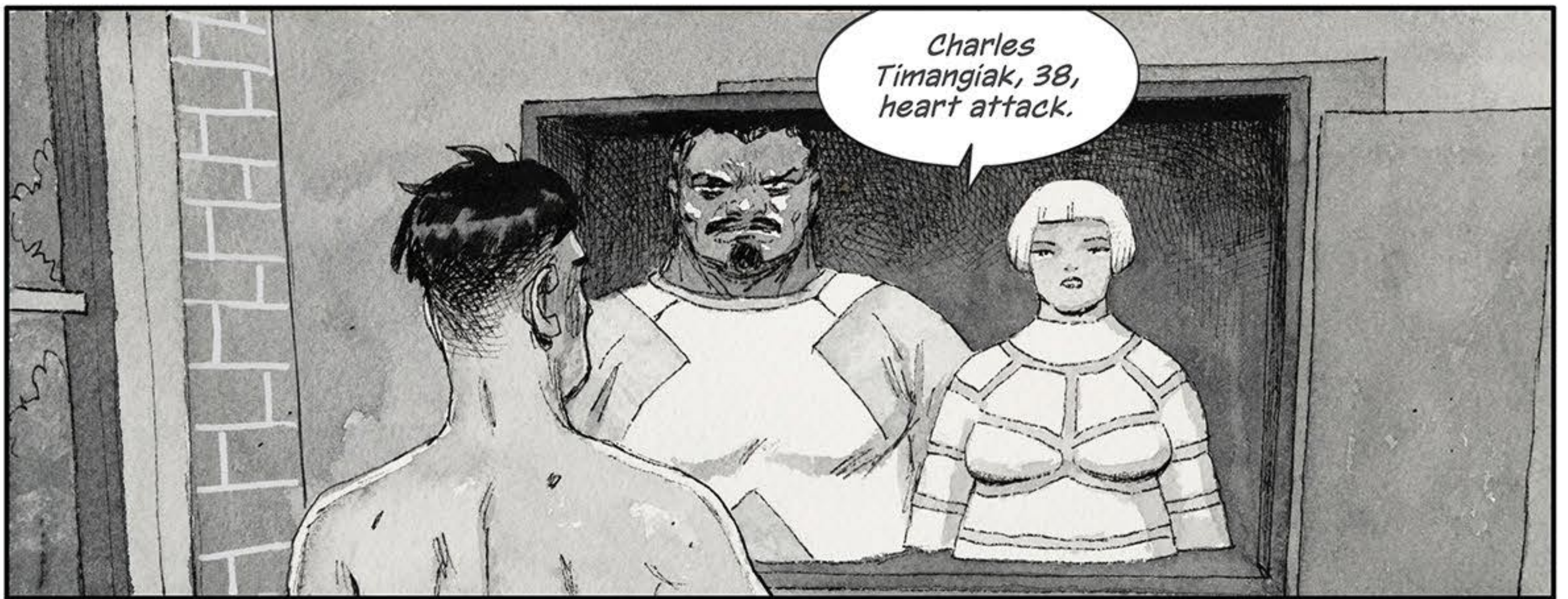
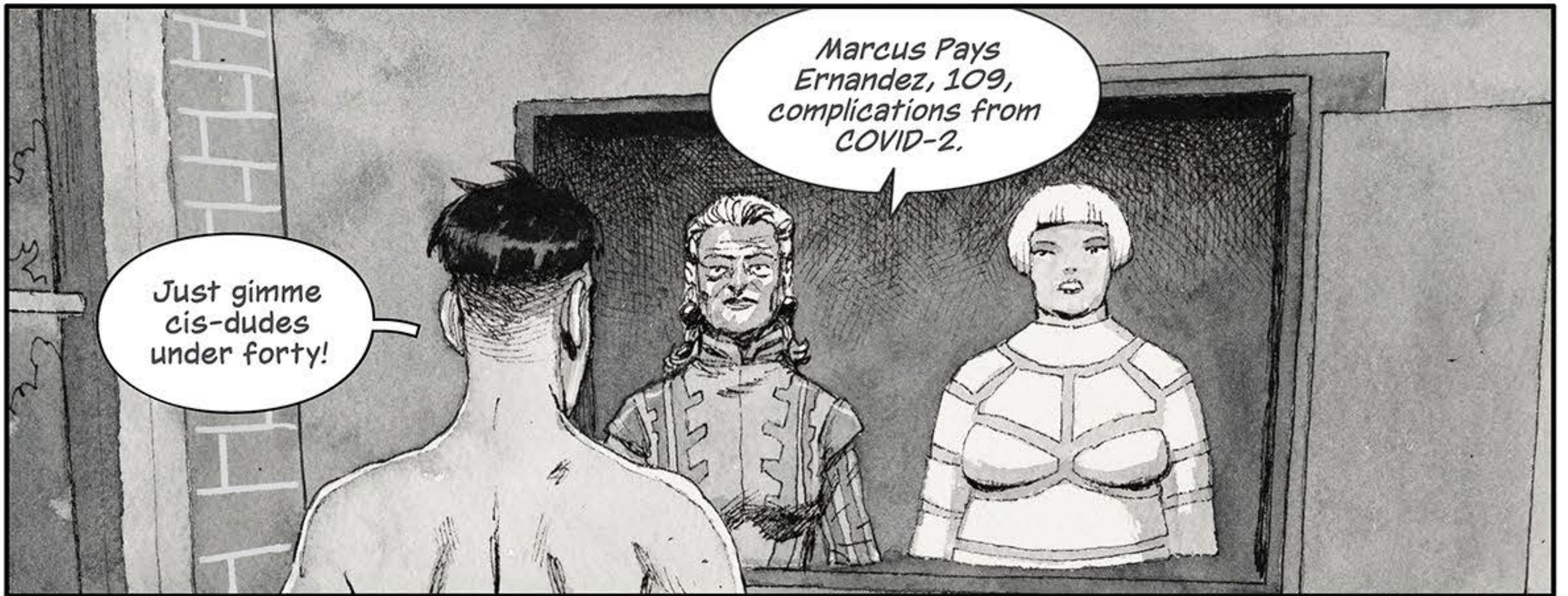
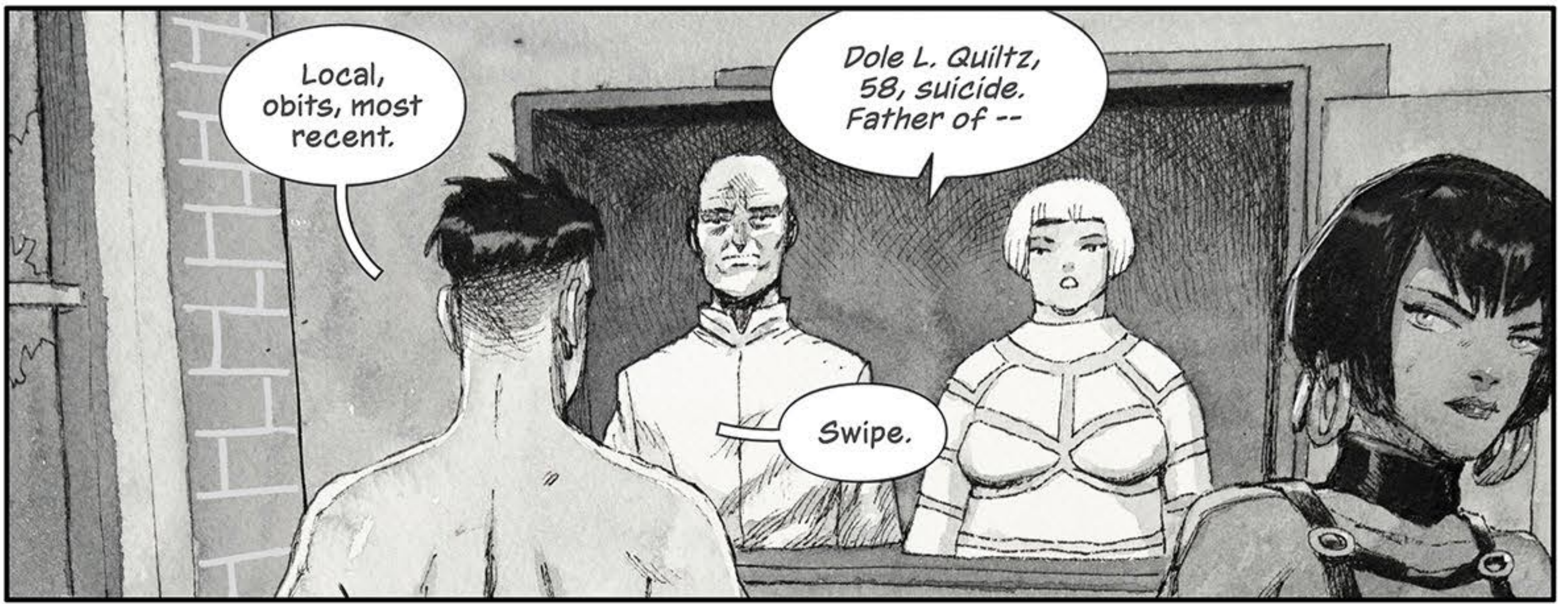










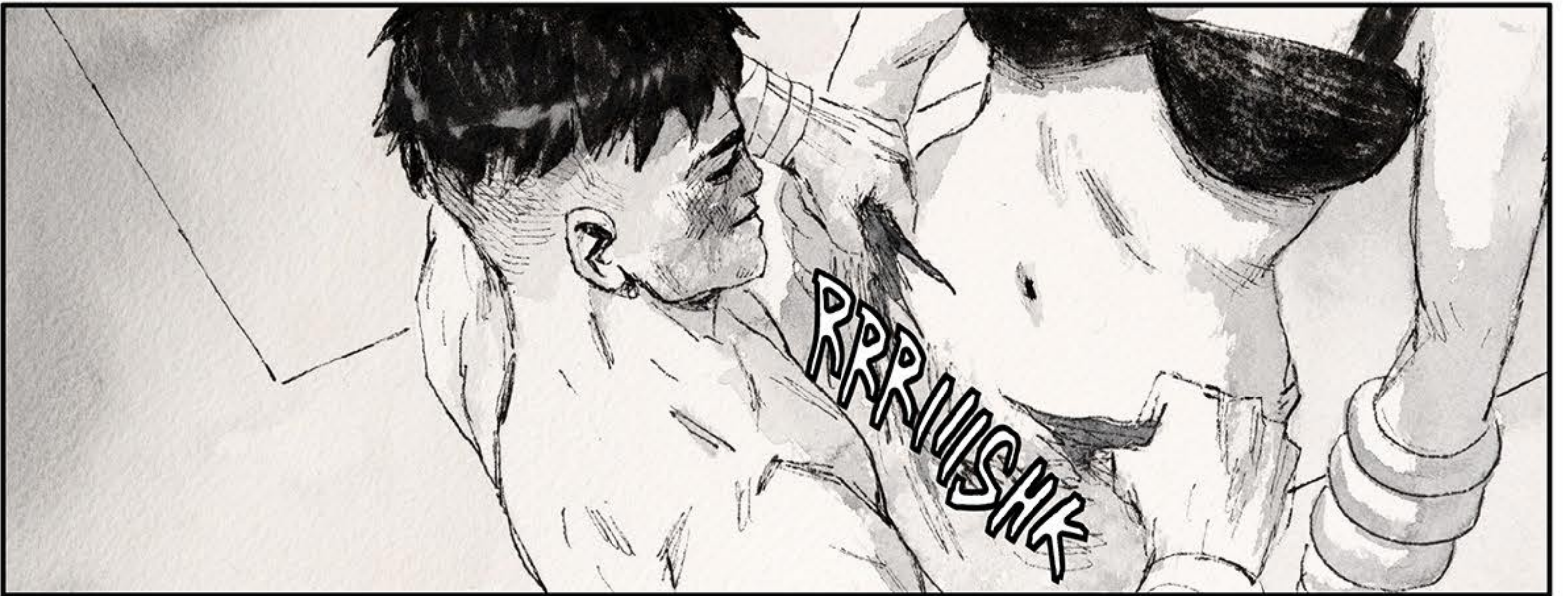


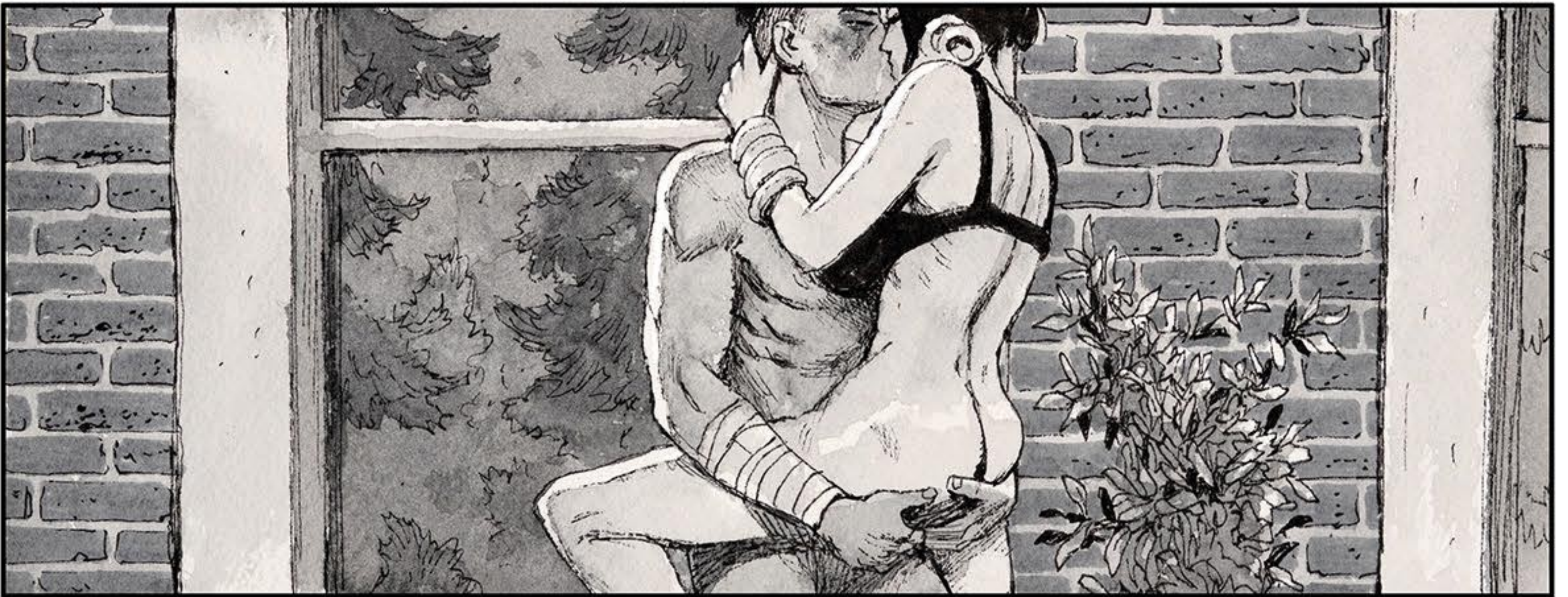


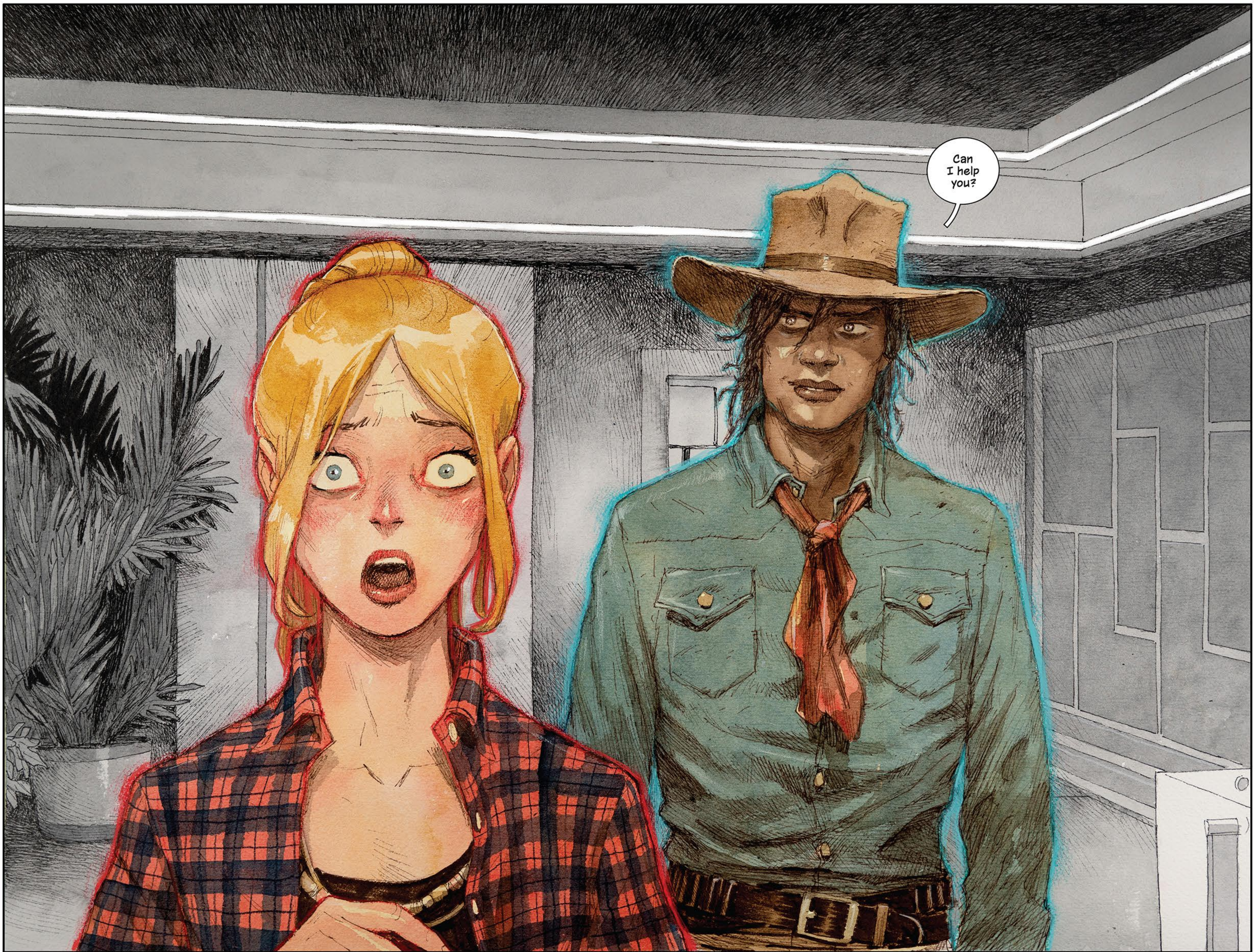


Yes,
ma'am.

Then shut
your mouth and
make me cum
already.

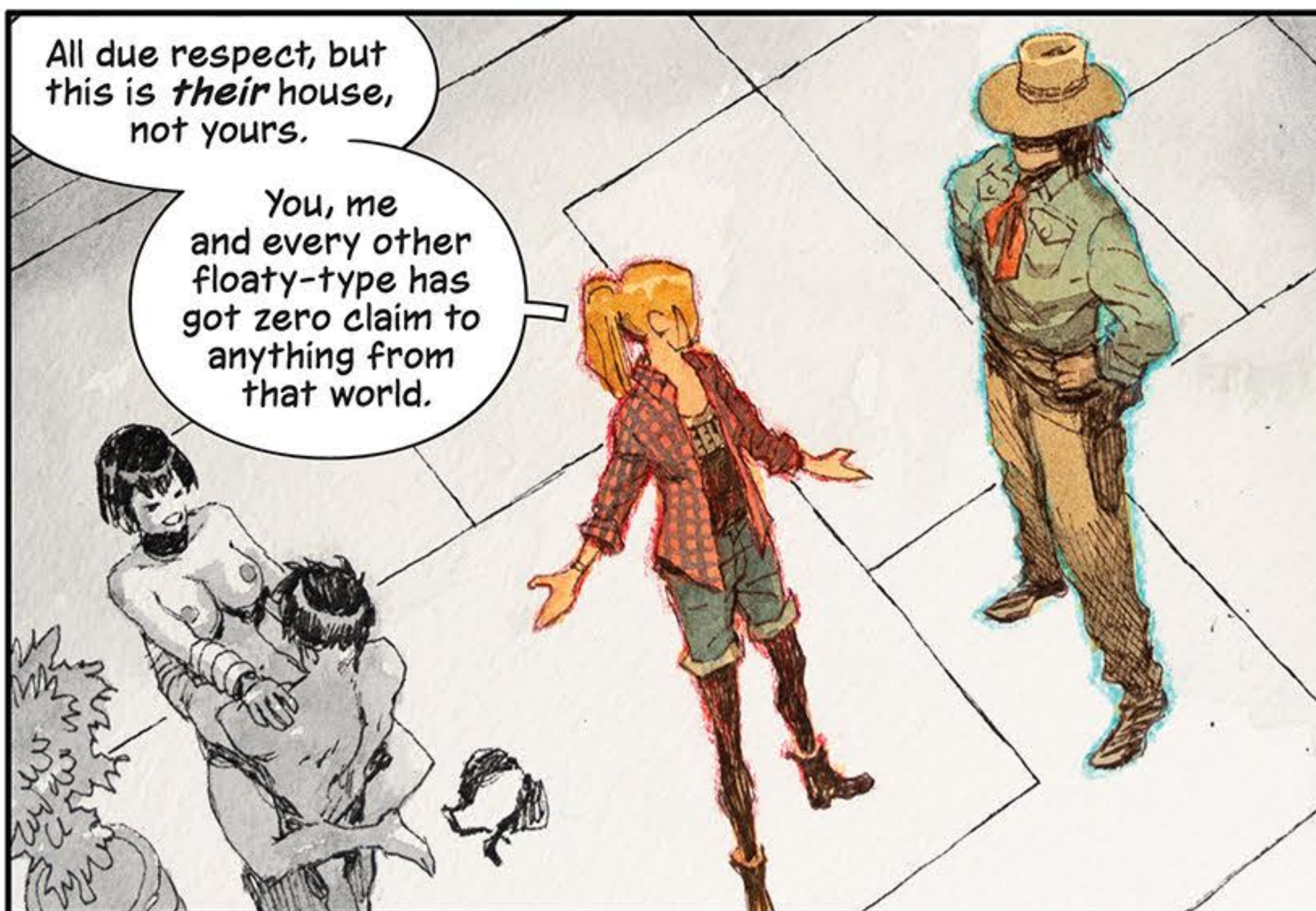
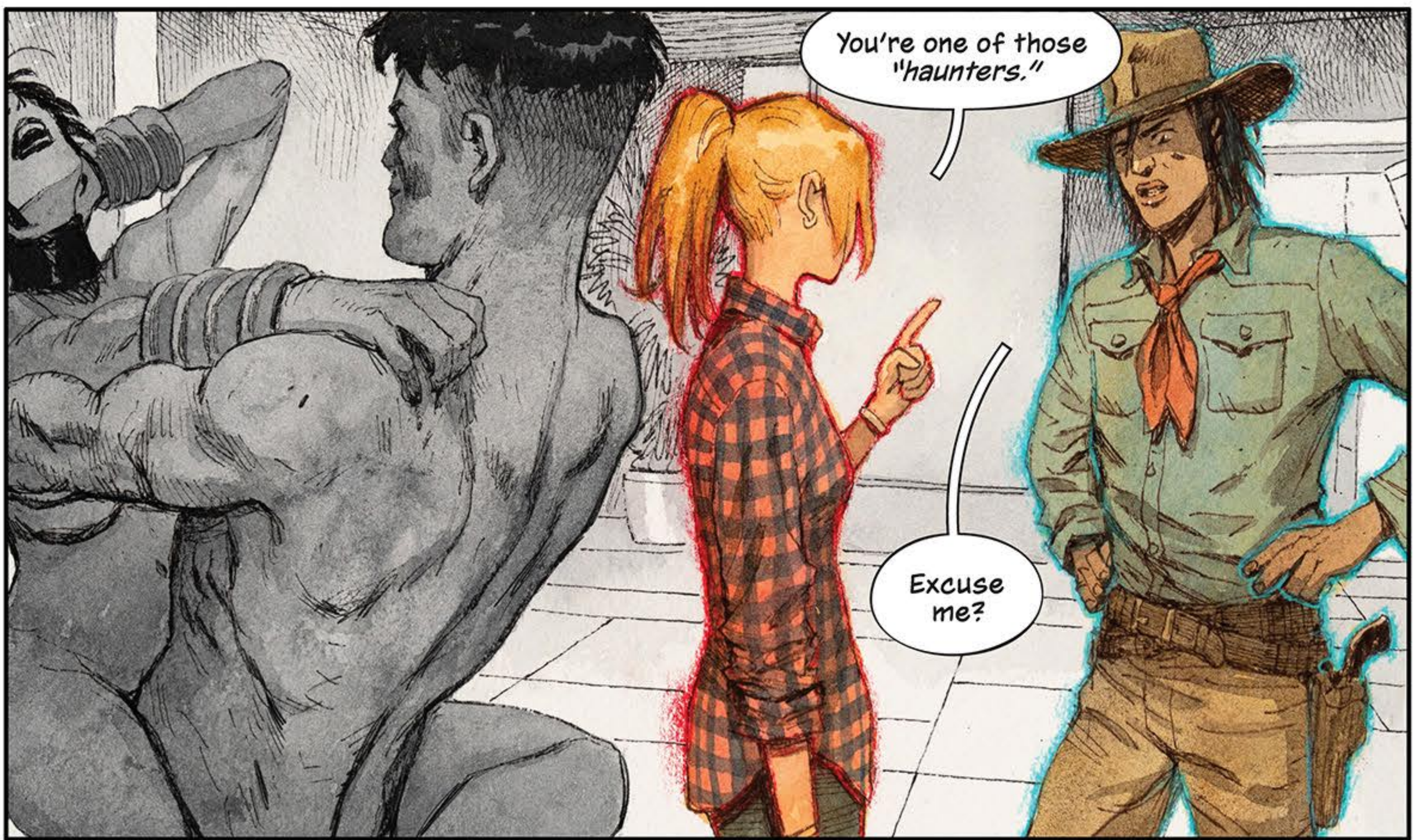


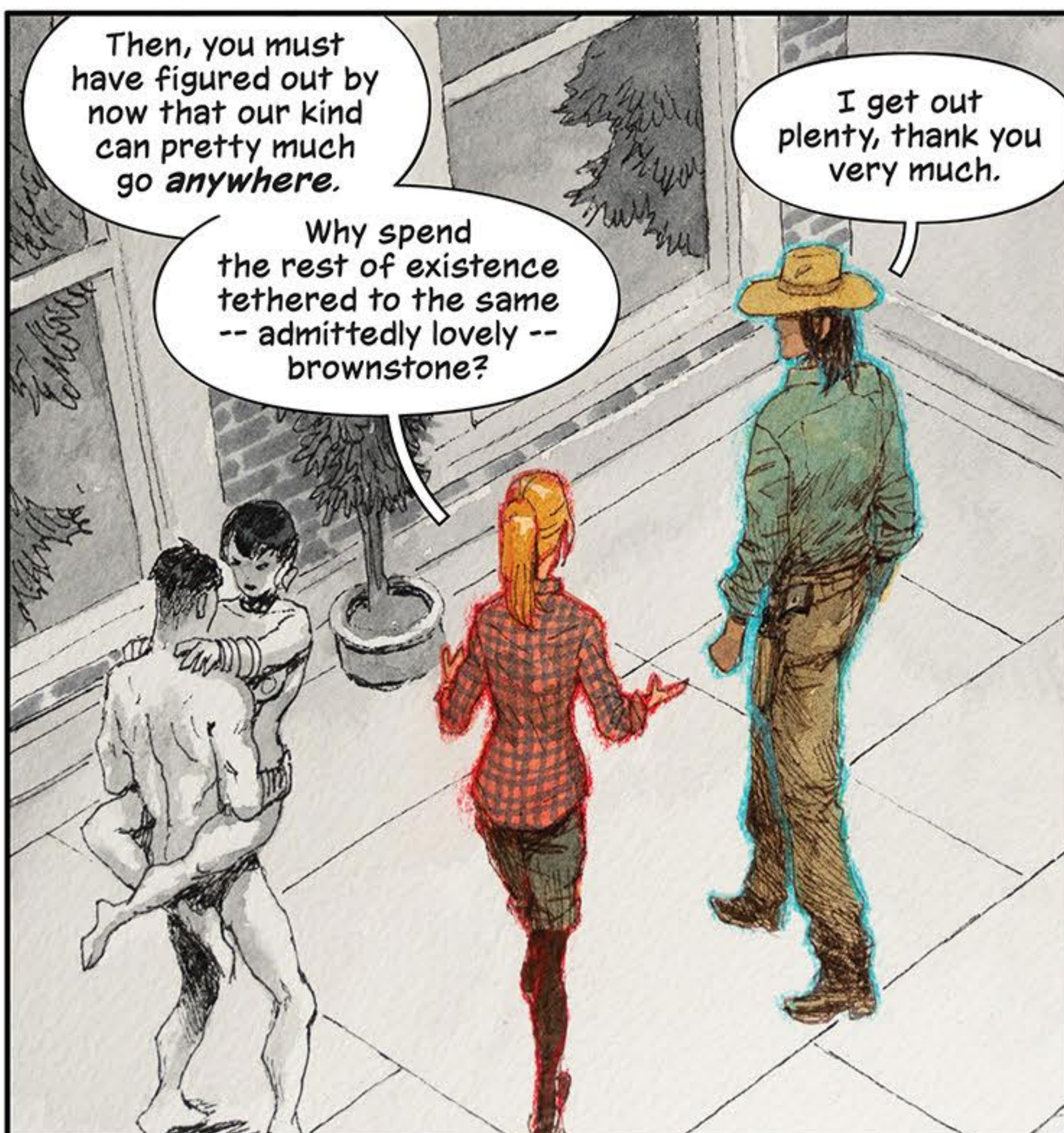


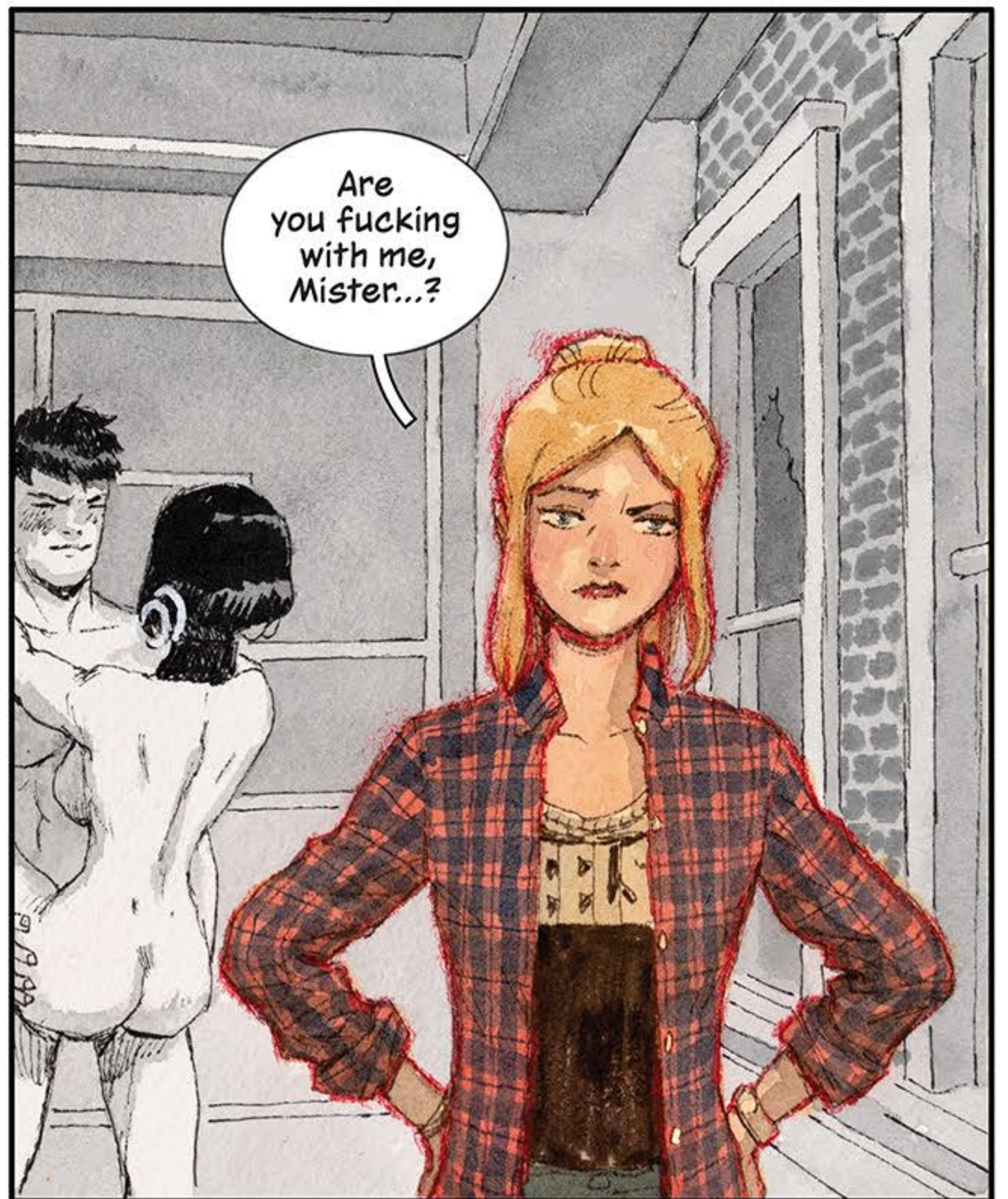
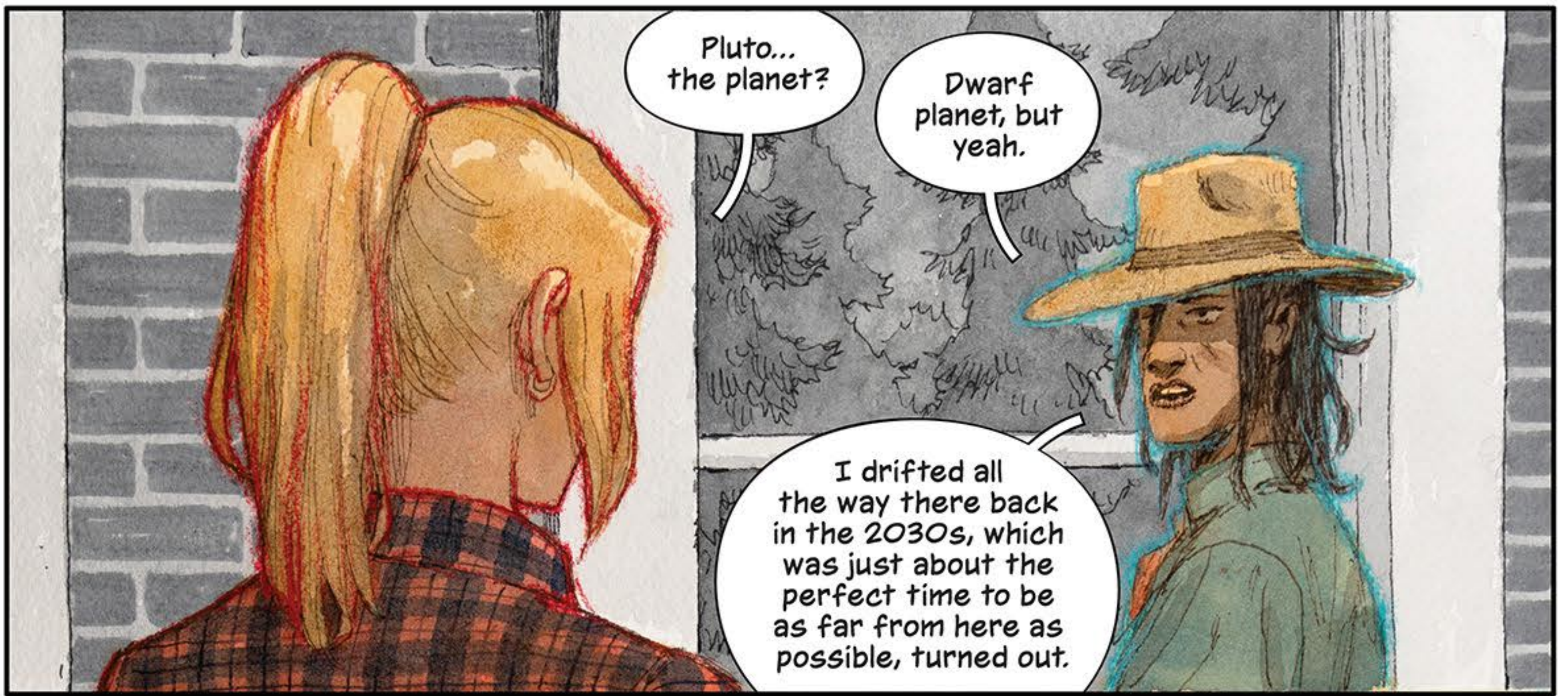


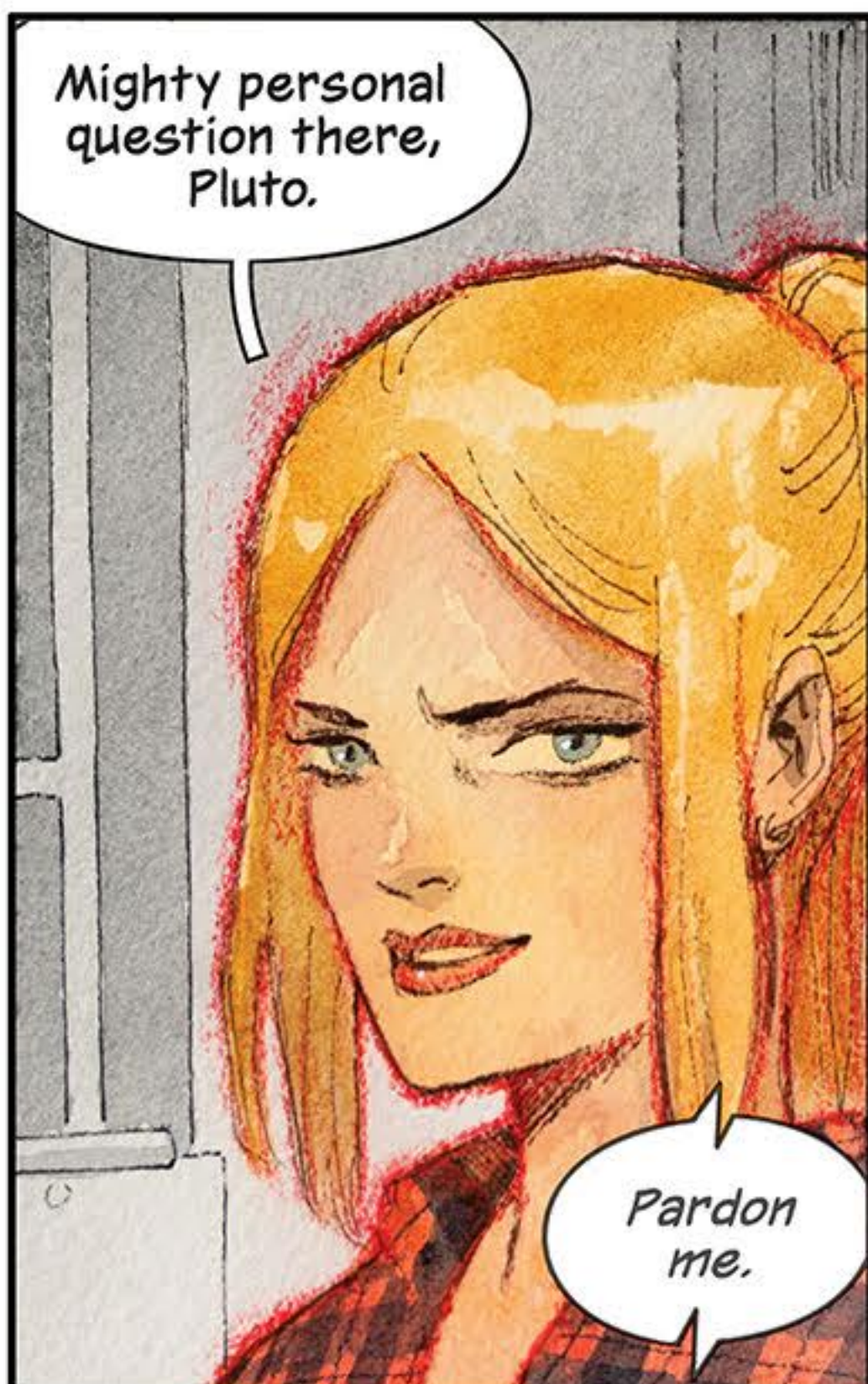
Can I help you?



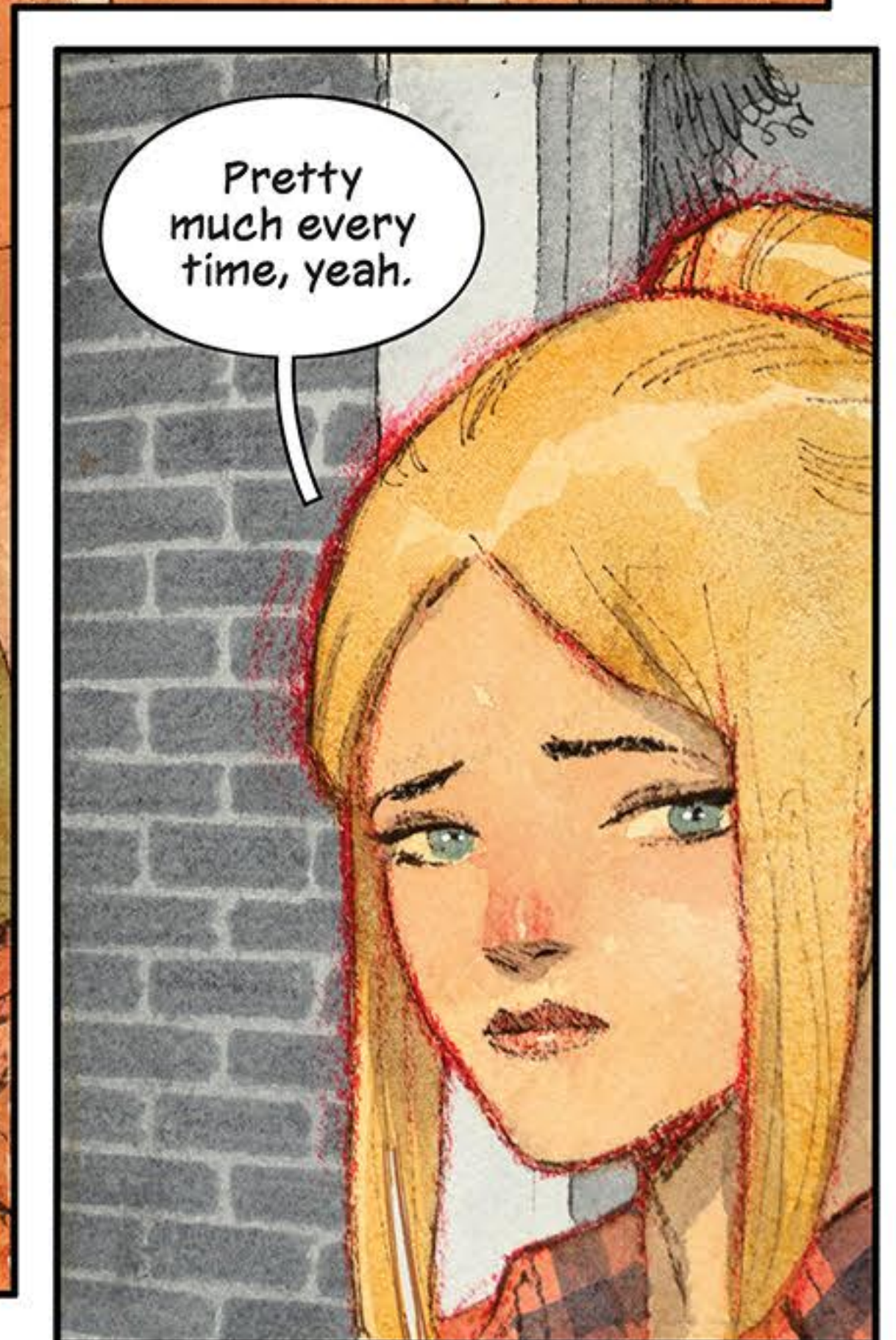
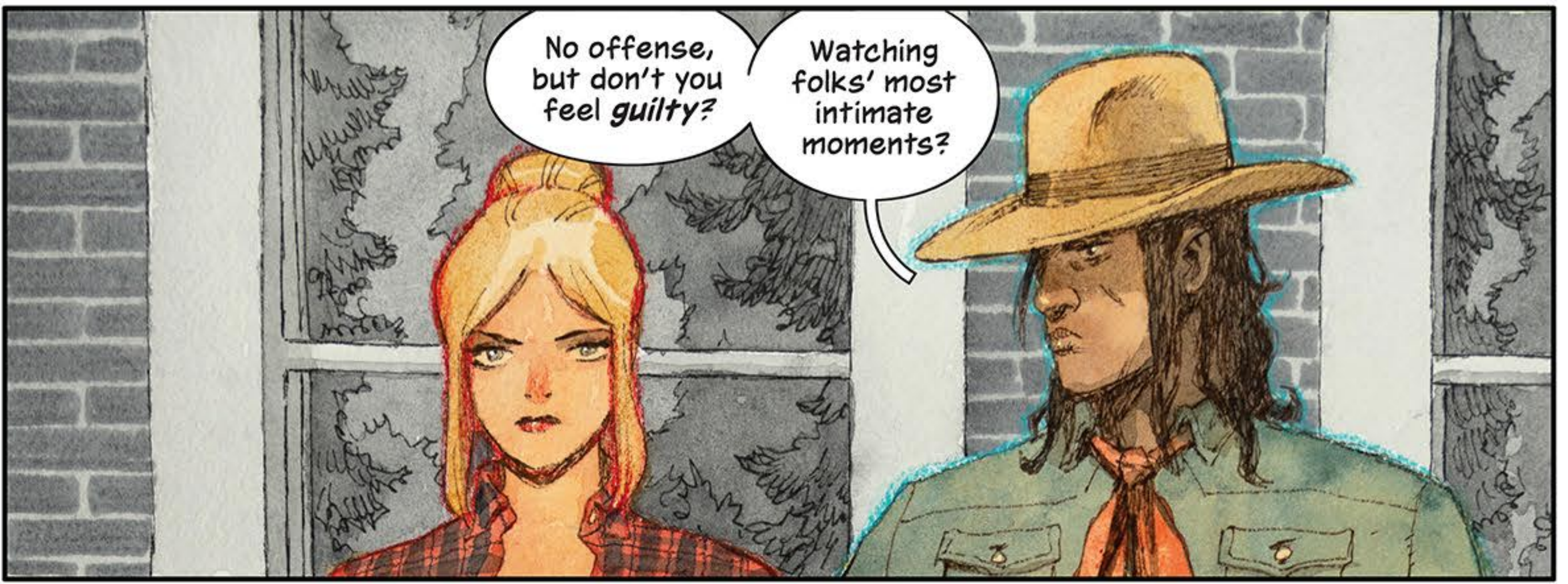




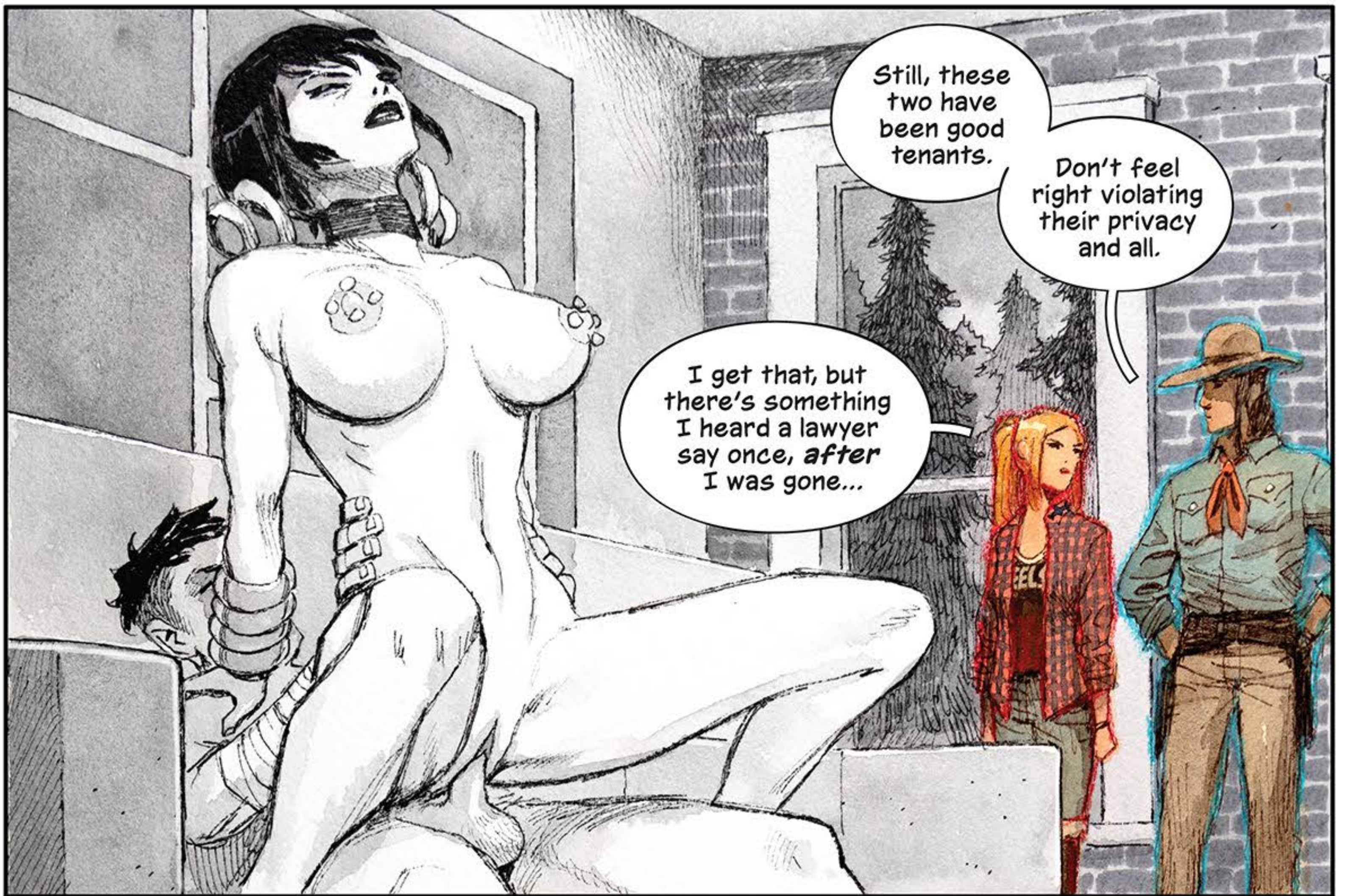












Still, these two have been good tenants.

Don't feel right violating their privacy and all.

I get that, but there's something I heard a lawyer say once, *after* I was gone...

The FBI wanted to go through my embarrassing online dating history, just in case I'd ever maybe rejected the deranged loser who ended up... you know.

Anyway, my parents hired an attorney, and she told them something I never forgot: *"At the end of the day, the dead have no right to privacy."*

Huh.

And you figure turnabout's fair play?

Something like that.

For what it's worth, I never drew down on nobody.

Ooooookay.

Sorry, is that cowboy-slang for jerking off?



These old things.

I fired them more than once in my younger days, but never at another living soul, not one I hit, anyway.



Taking a guess at how you may have met your demise, I just... wanted you to know.

Oh.

Well, thank you, Sam.



Obviously, our kind doesn't get to pick which accessories we're saddled with.

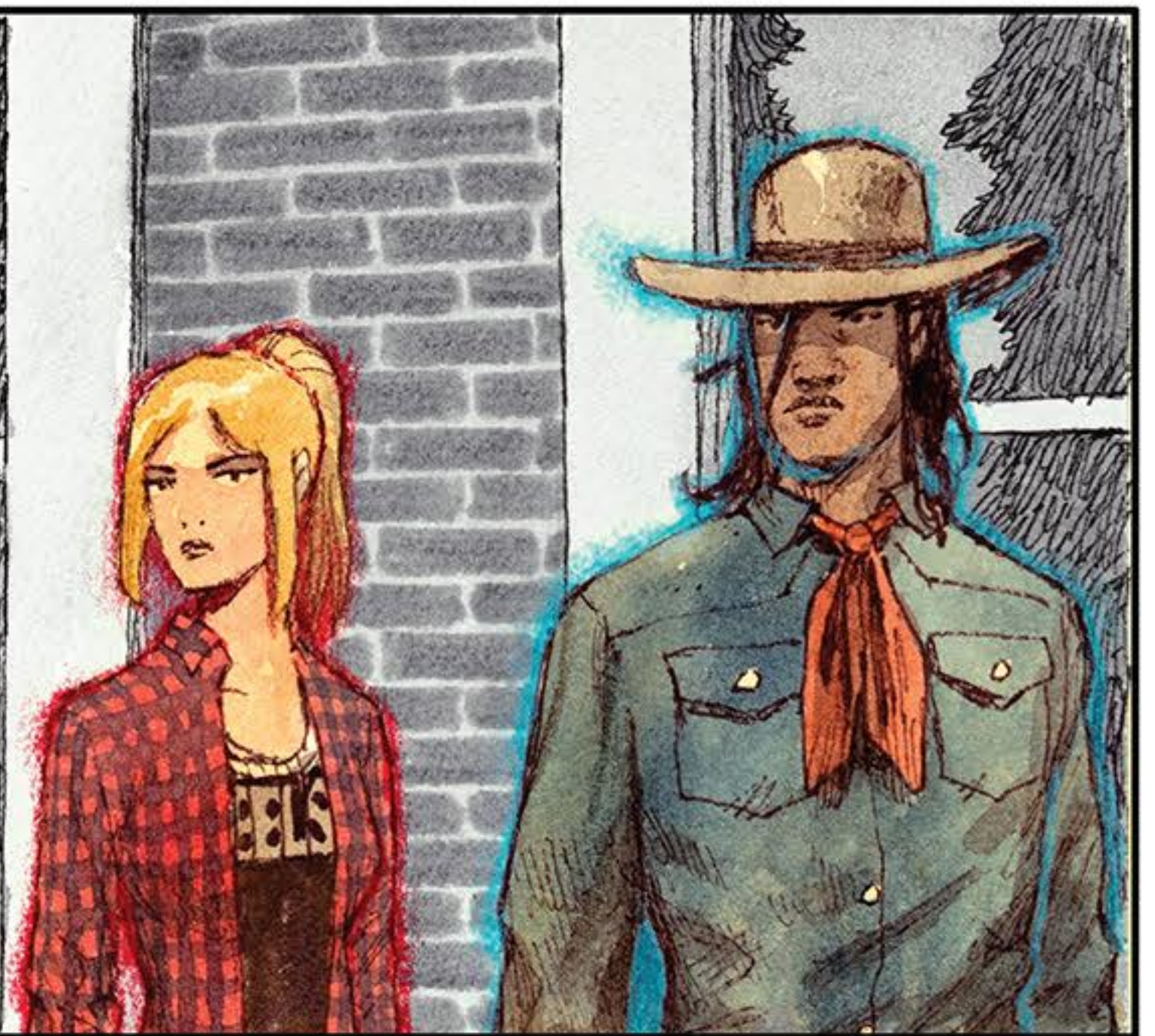
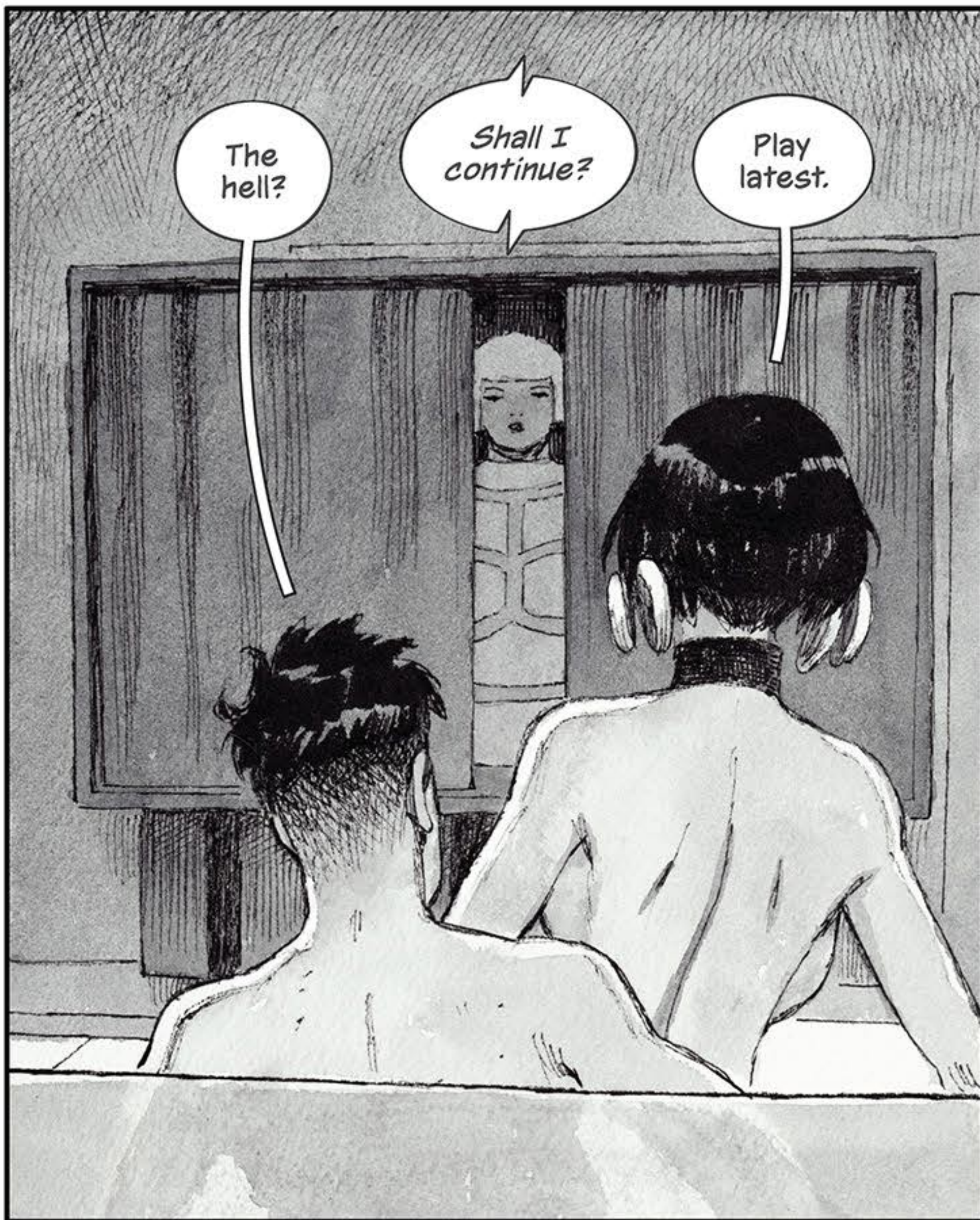
Don't have to remind you.



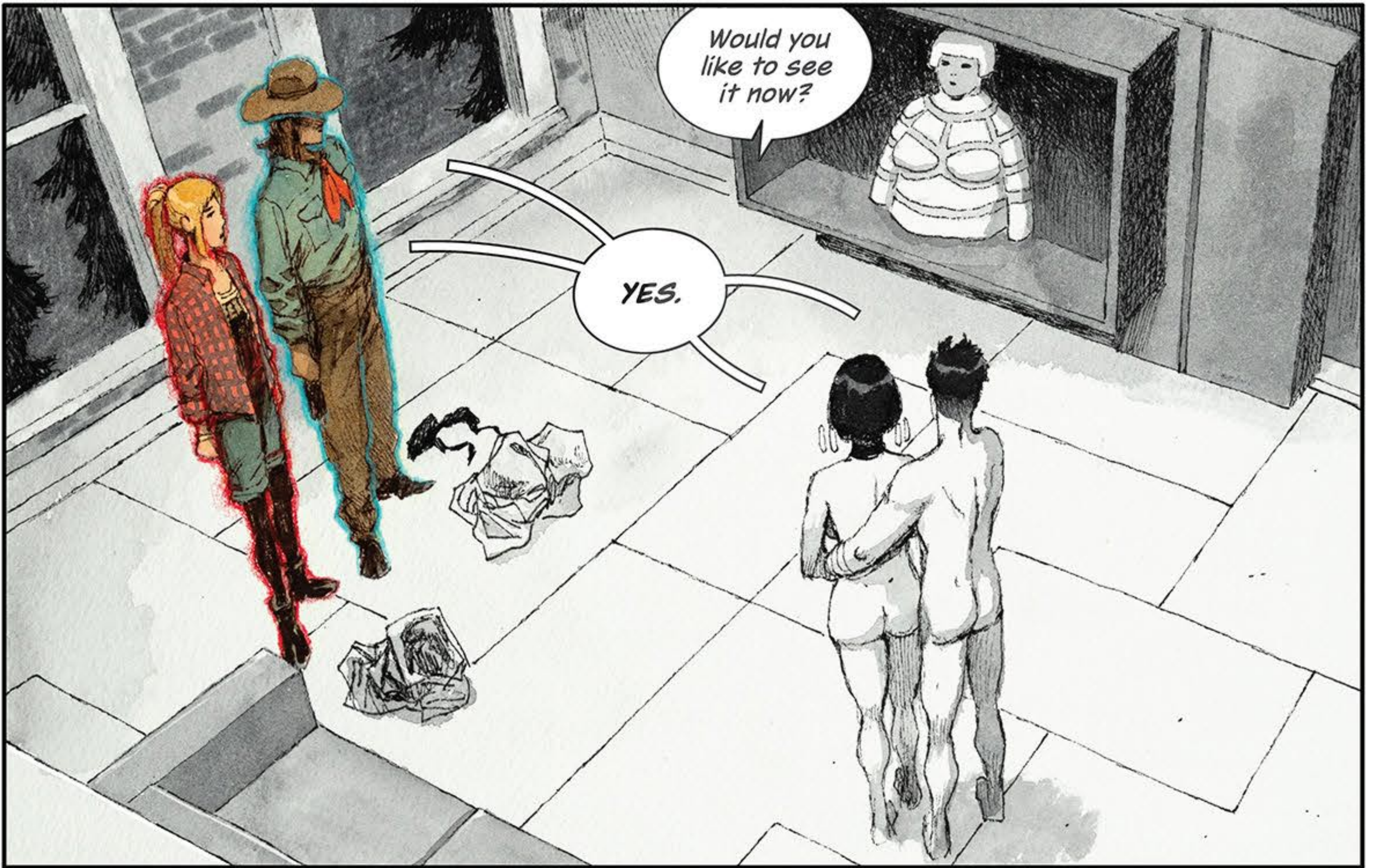
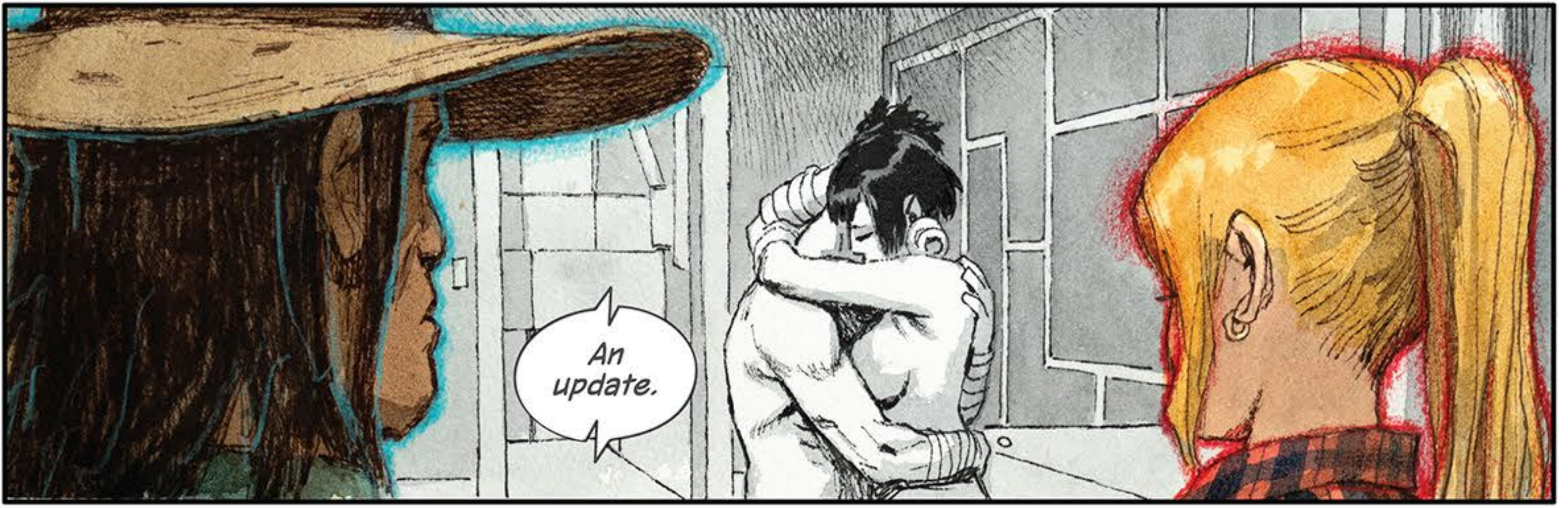
Wait, are you making fun of my outfit?

Pardon me.

You have *eighty-nine* breaking news alerts.

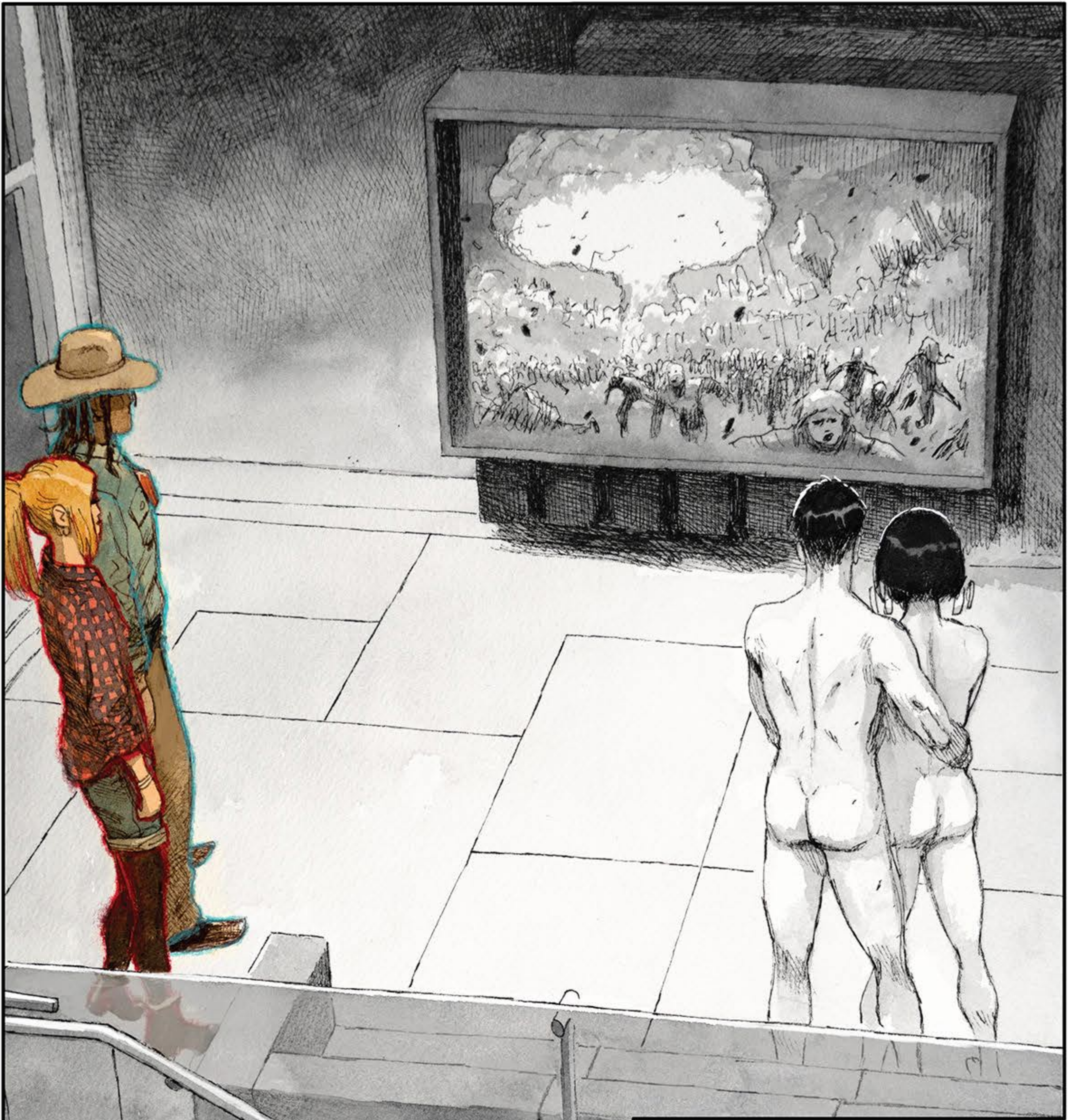


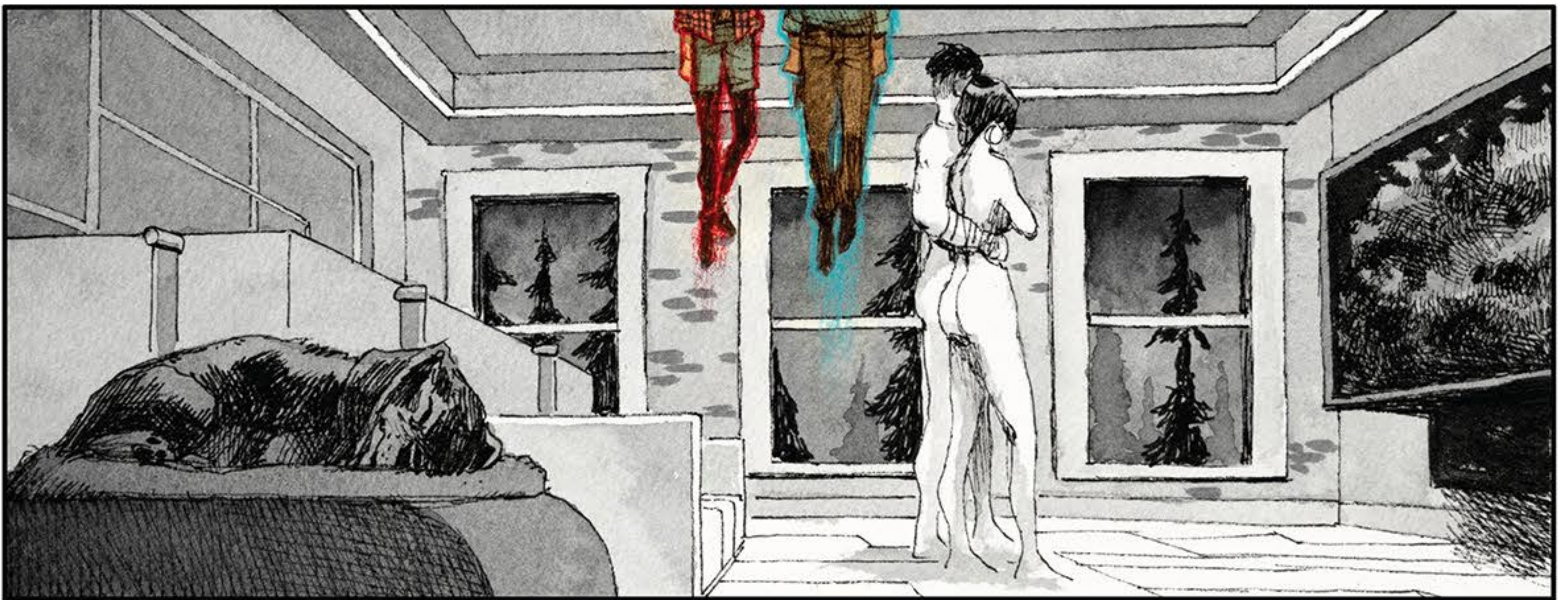
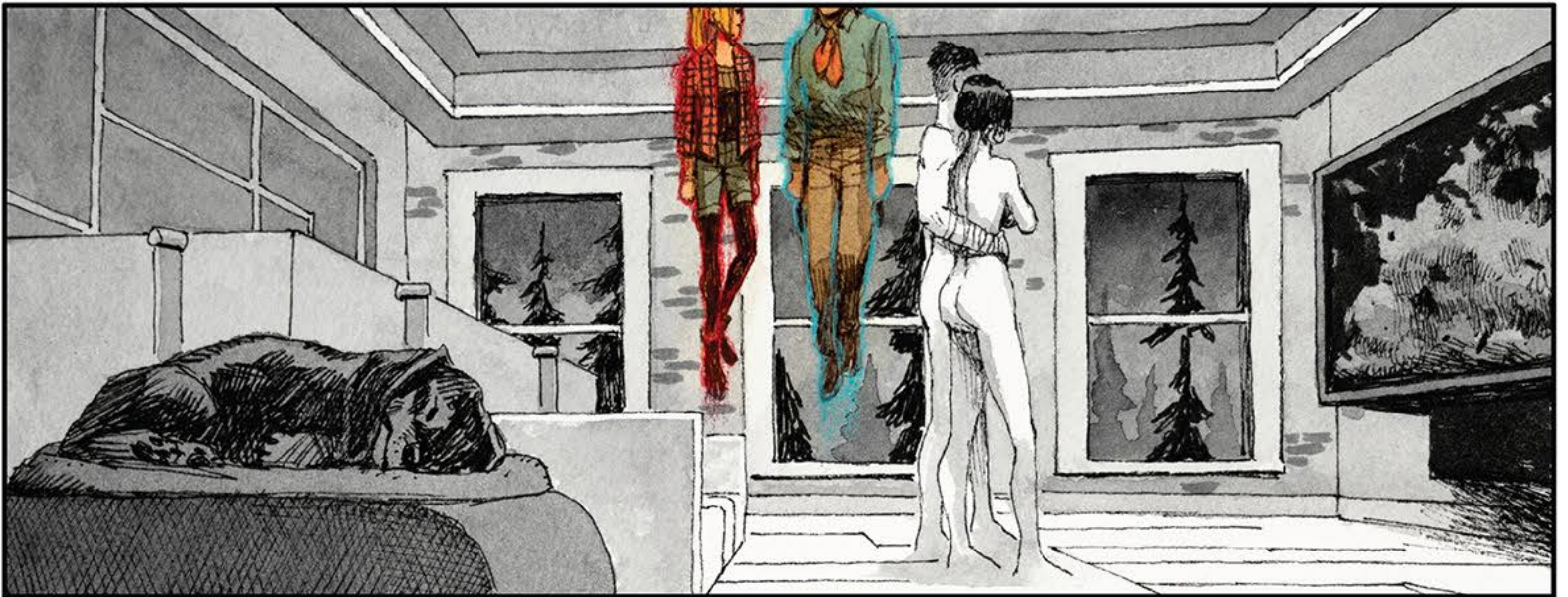












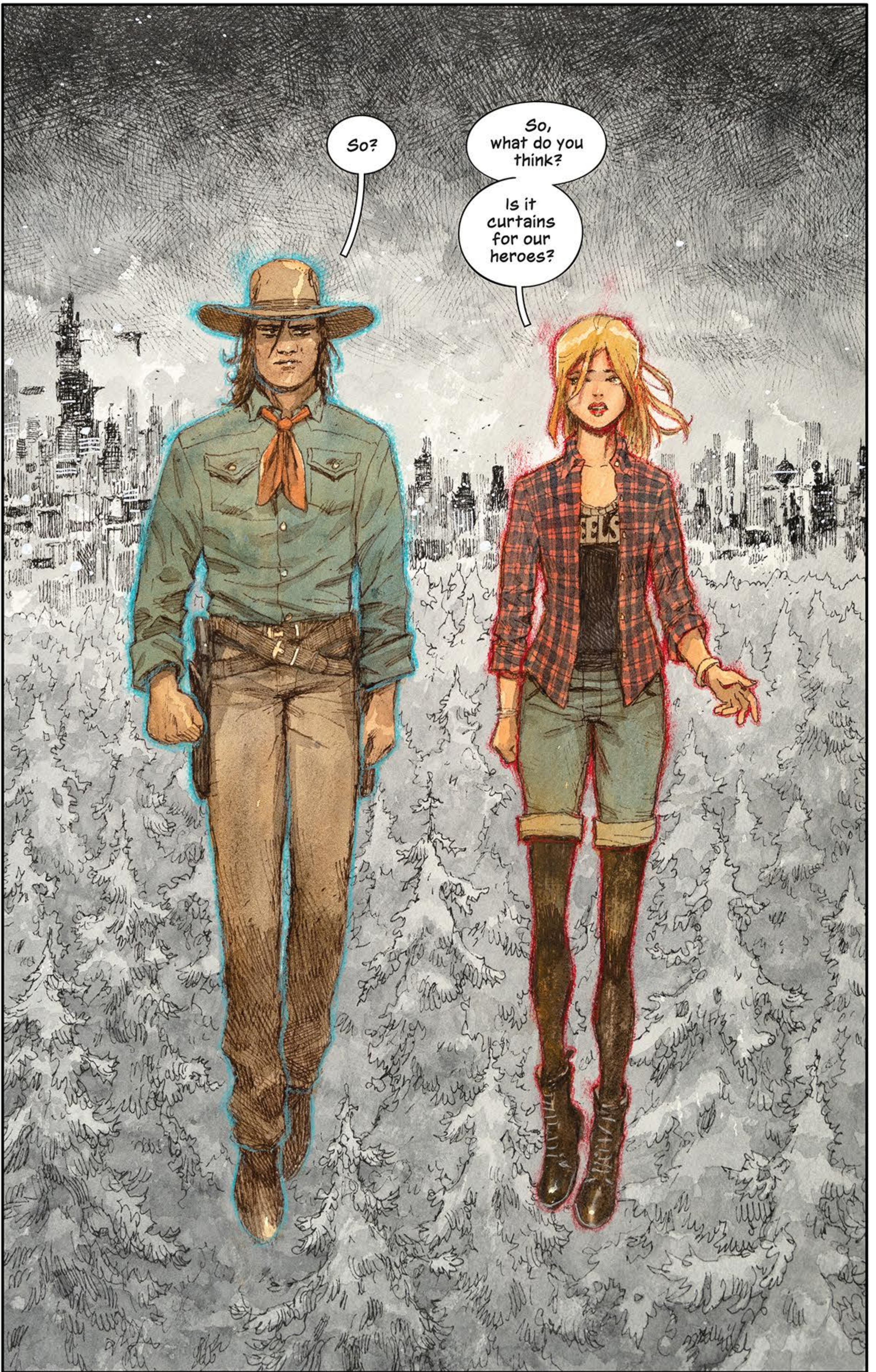


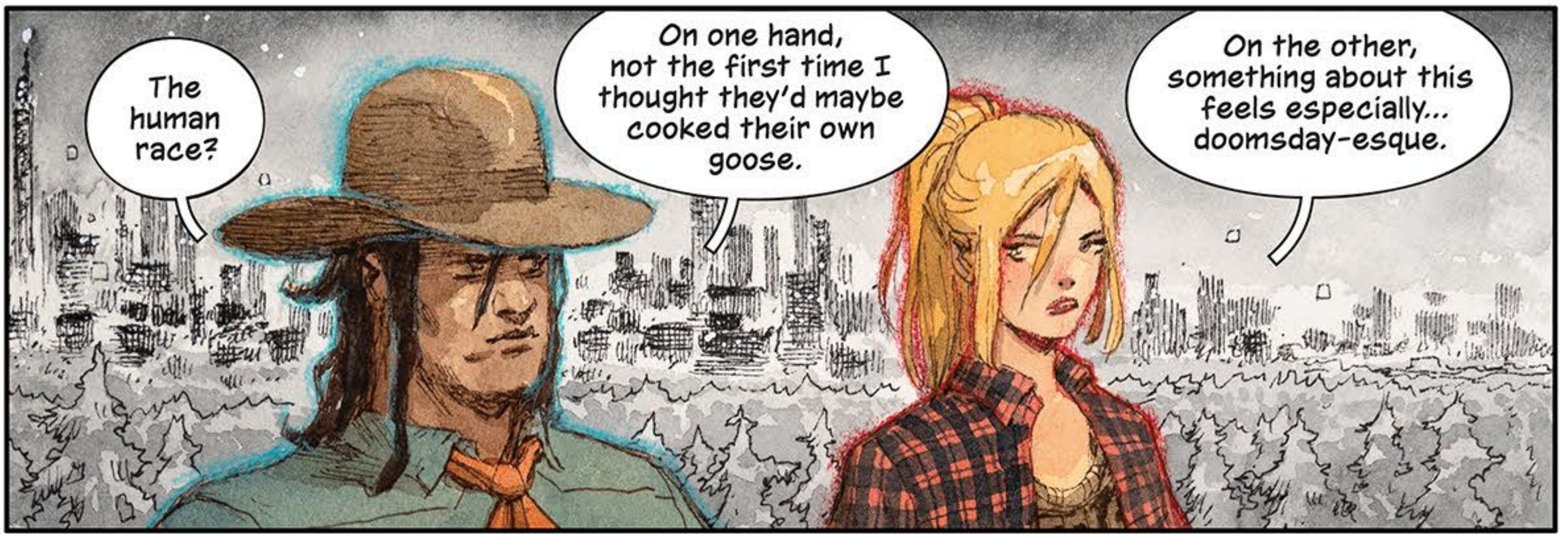
So.

So?

So,
what do you
think?

Is it
curtains
for our
heroes?





The human race?

On one hand, not the first time I thought they'd maybe cooked their own goose.

On the other, something about this feels especially... doomsday-esque.



Well, if more blasts are coming, they'll be coming quick.

We should keep moving just in case.

Umm, actually, I get a little nauseous whenever I go higher than the scrubbers.



Trust me, if the sky starts falling, you don't want to be down there.

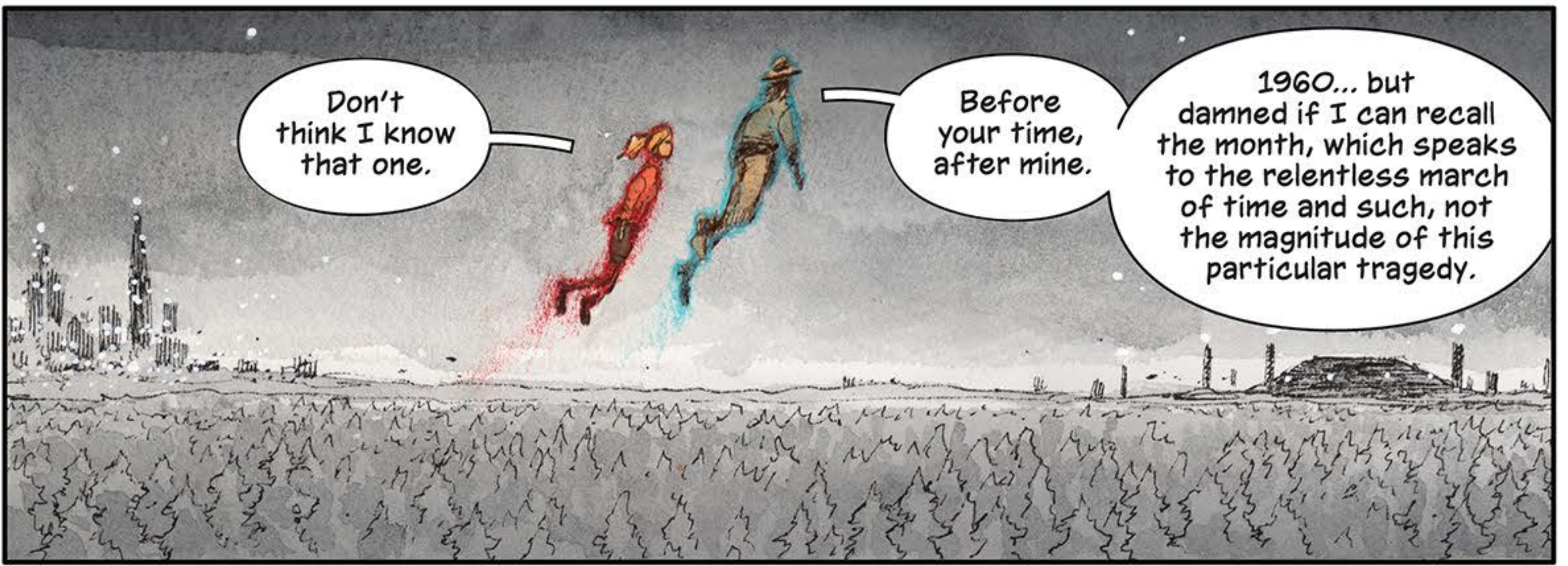
Spoken like a guy who's seen some armageddon?

Don't tell me you're one of those war junkies who followed the Enola Gay over to Hiroshima or whatever.



Nah, this was much closer to home.

United 826.



Don't think I know that one.

Before your time, after mine.

1960... but damned if I can recall the month, which speaks to the relentless march of time and such, not the magnitude of this particular tragedy.



Terrorism?

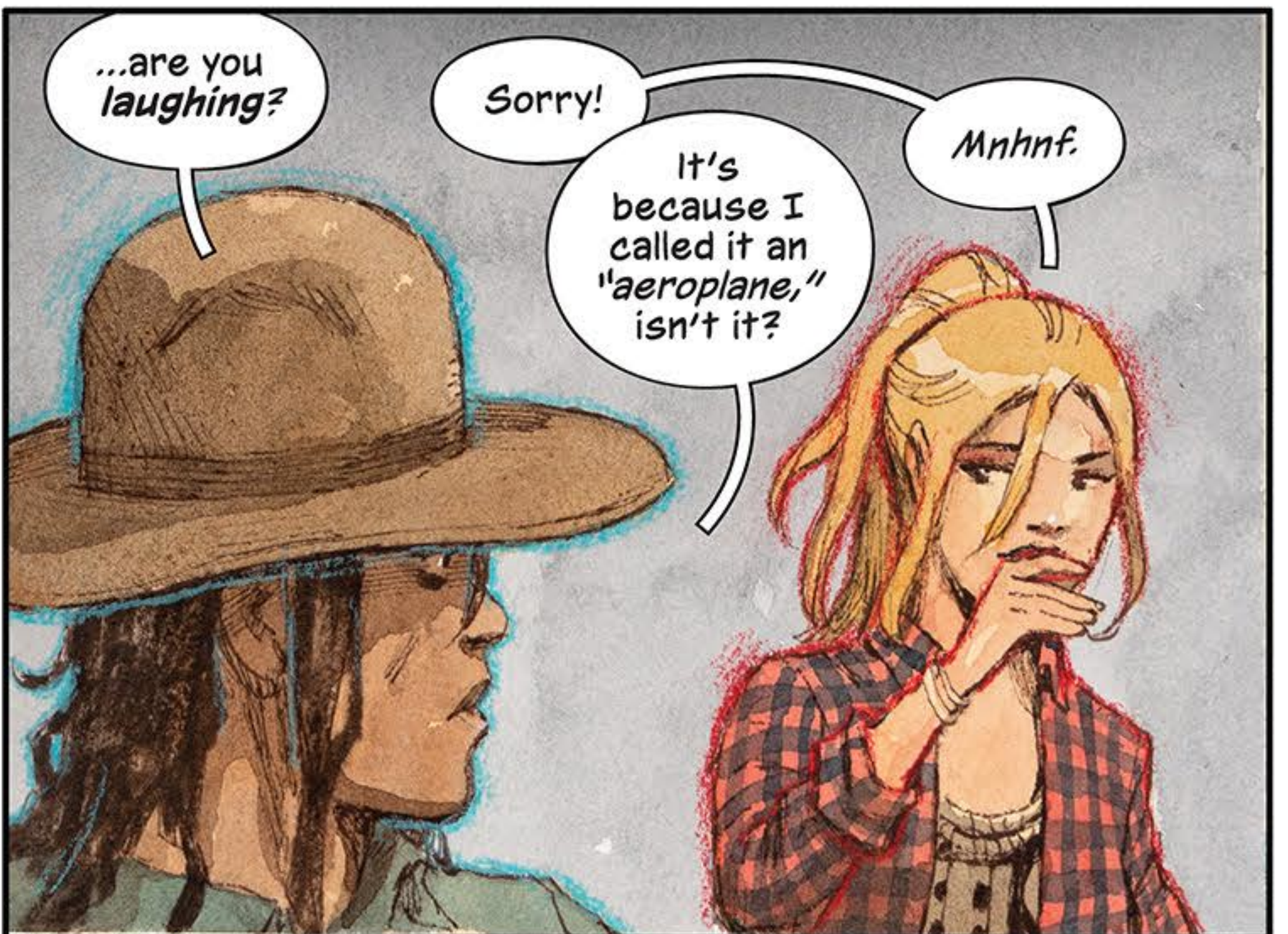
Accident, midair collision with *another* aeroplane.

Most of the first one landed right here in Park Slope, killed every soul on board and a mess of folks just going about their lives below.



Tried to be of service to whatever terrified spirits emerged from that crater, but they kept rushing back into the flames for loved ones, most of whom had already moved on.

In all my years, I've never heard wailing like...



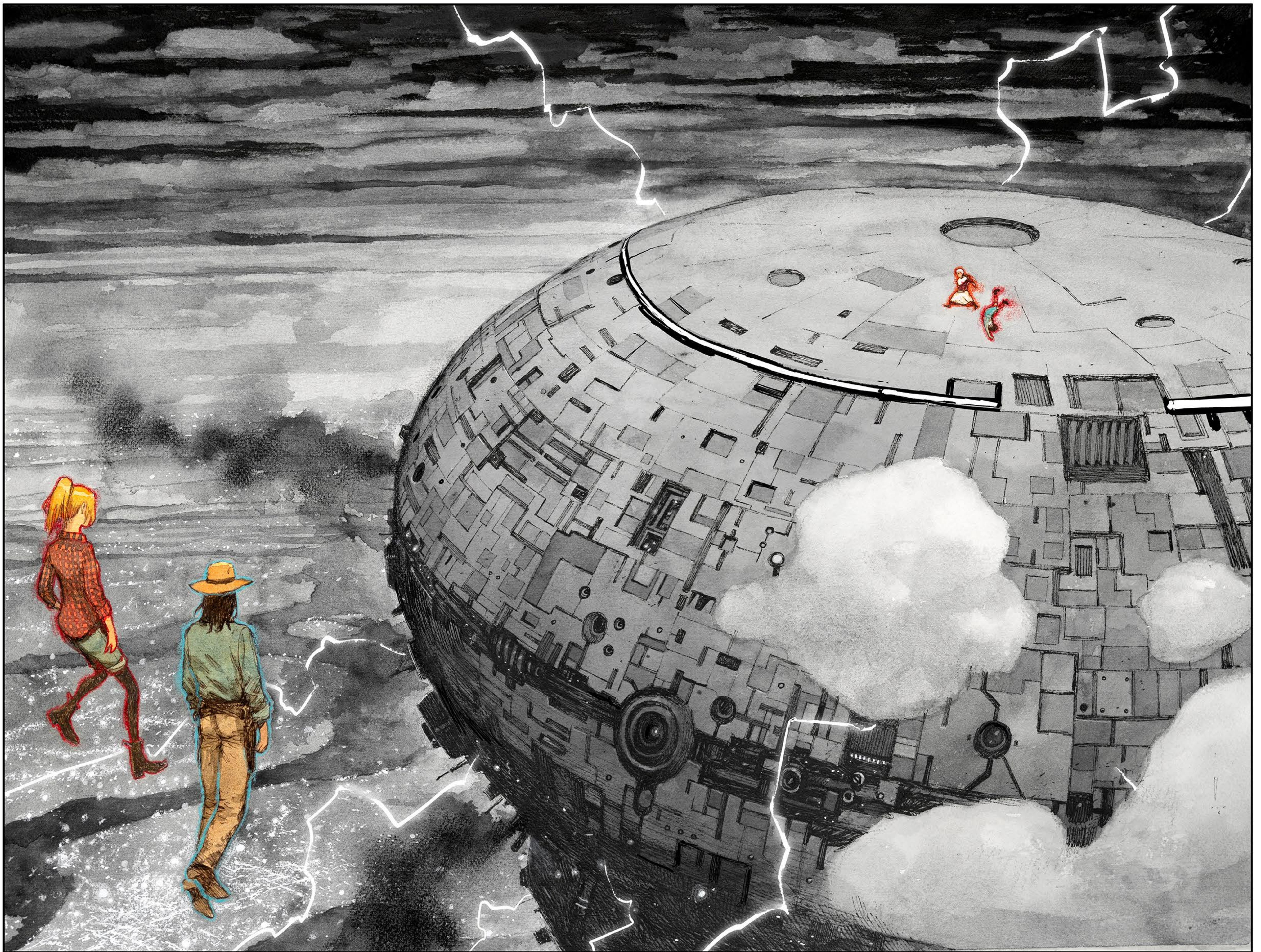
...are you laughing?

Sorry!

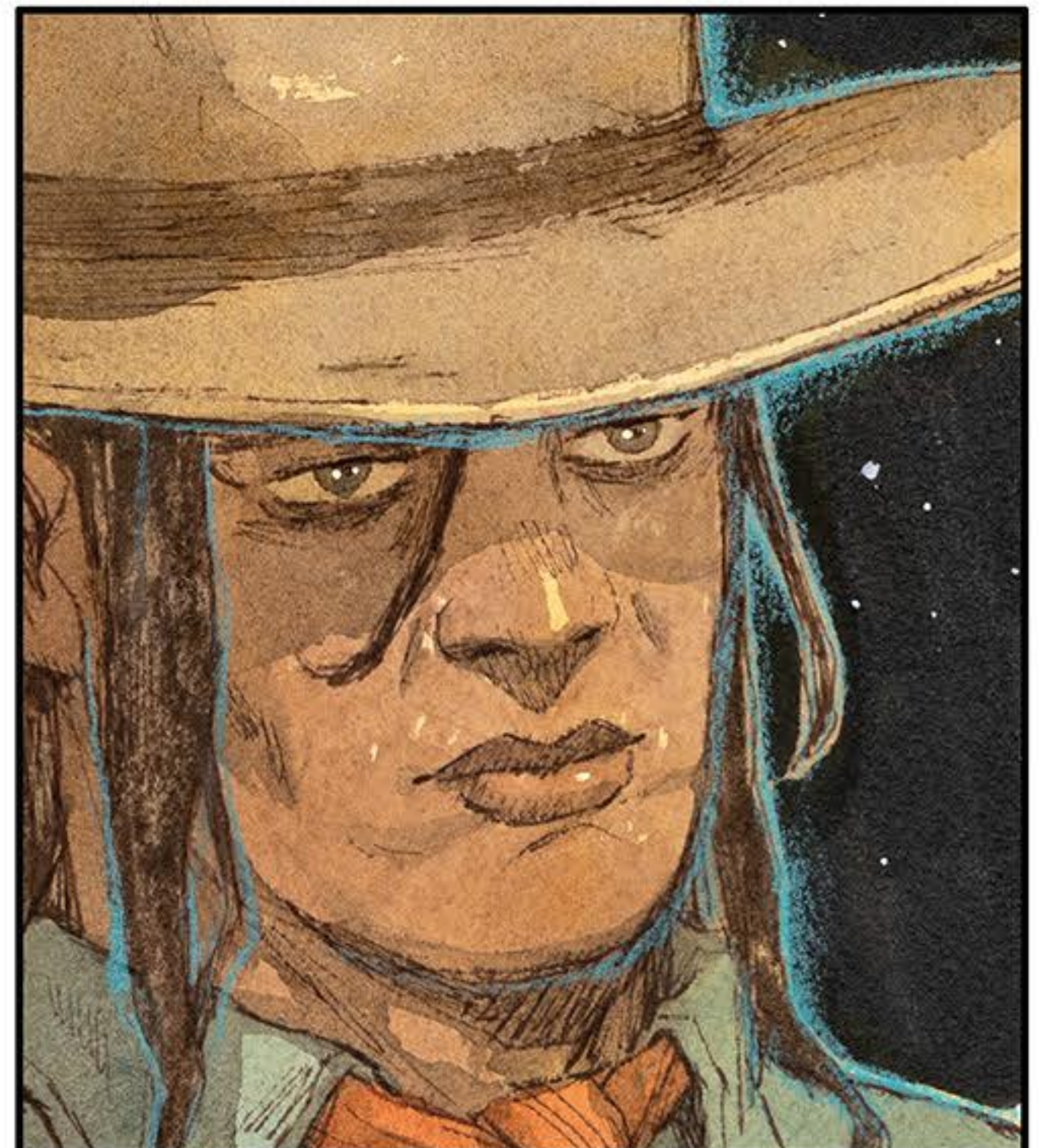
It's because I called it an "aeroplane," isn't it?

Mnhnf.





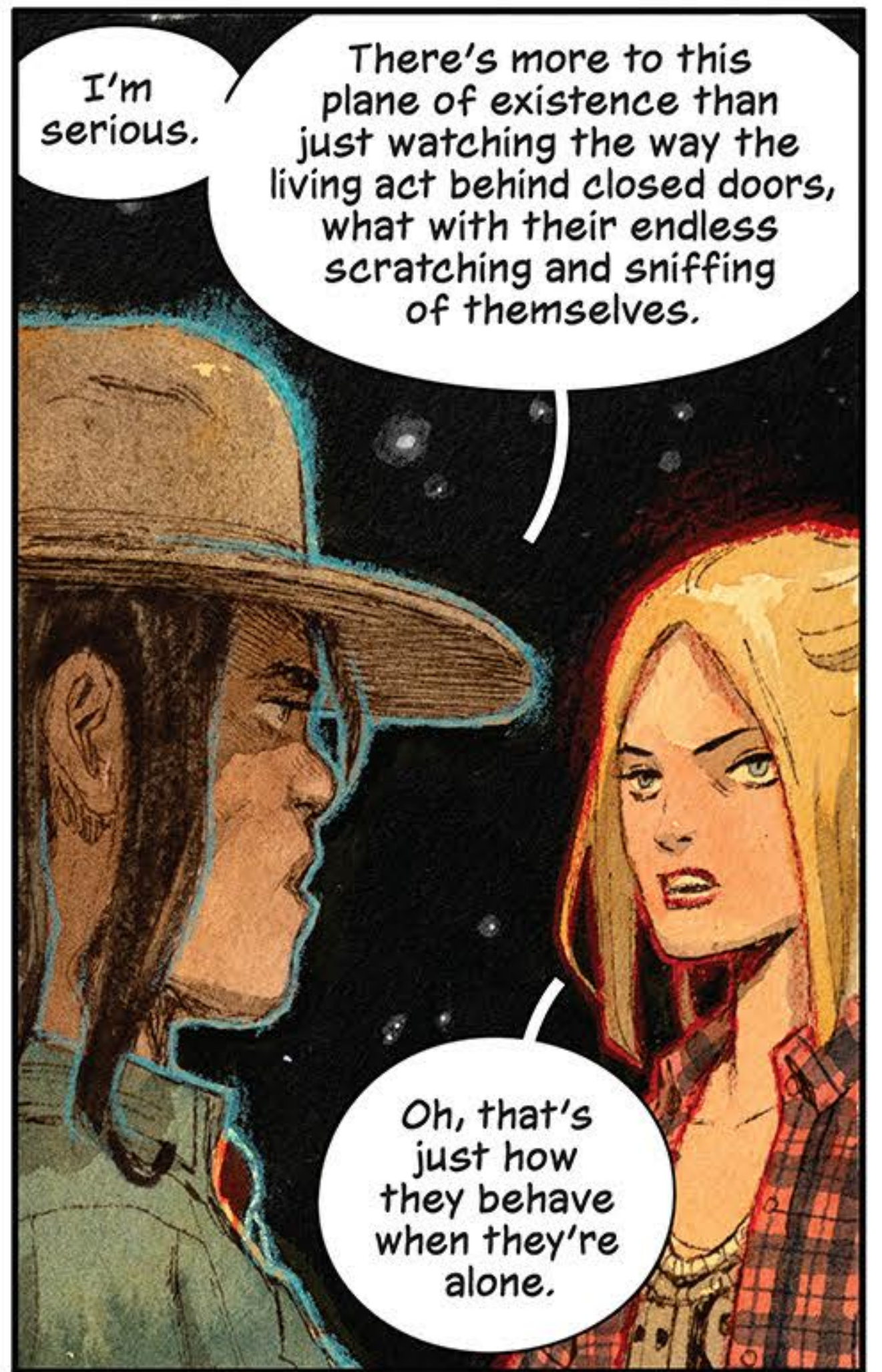






The sterling conversations?

Hardee-har.



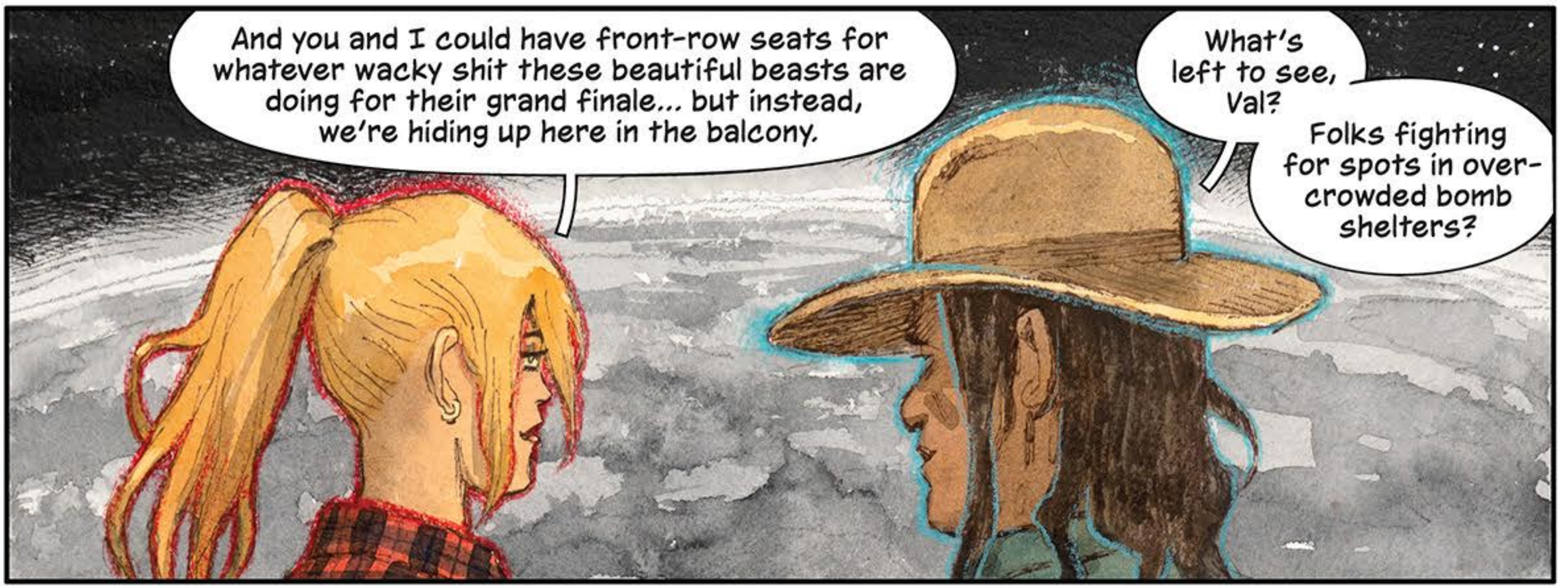
I'm serious.

There's more to this plane of existence than just watching the way the living act behind closed doors, what with their endless scratching and sniffing of themselves.

Oh, that's just how they behave when they're alone.



I'll miss watching them act like animals when they're together.



And you and I could have front-row seats for whatever wacky shit these beautiful beasts are doing for their grand finale... but instead, we're hiding up here in the balcony.

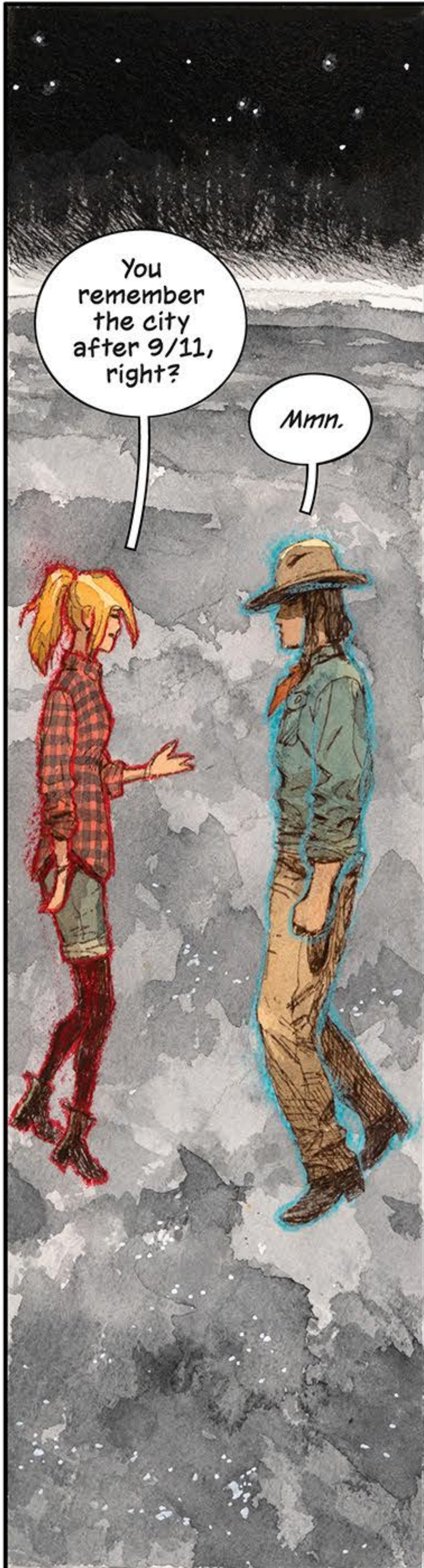
What's left to see, Val?

Folks fighting for spots in overcrowded bomb shelters?



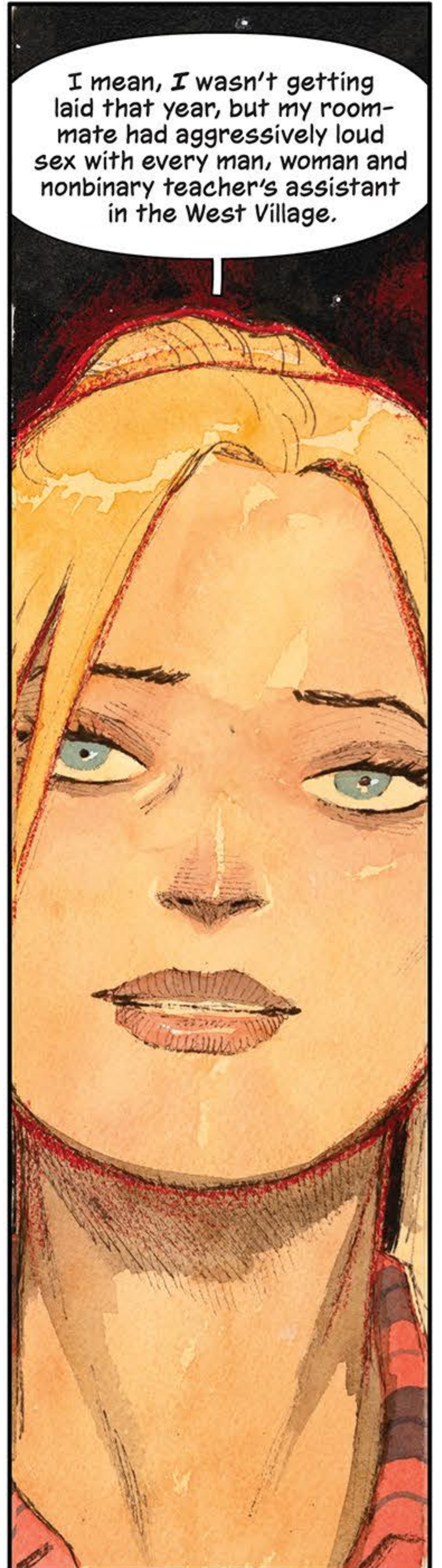
Maybe a few, but civilization is on the brink of extinction!

Most of the sane people down there are probably busy fucking each other's brains out!

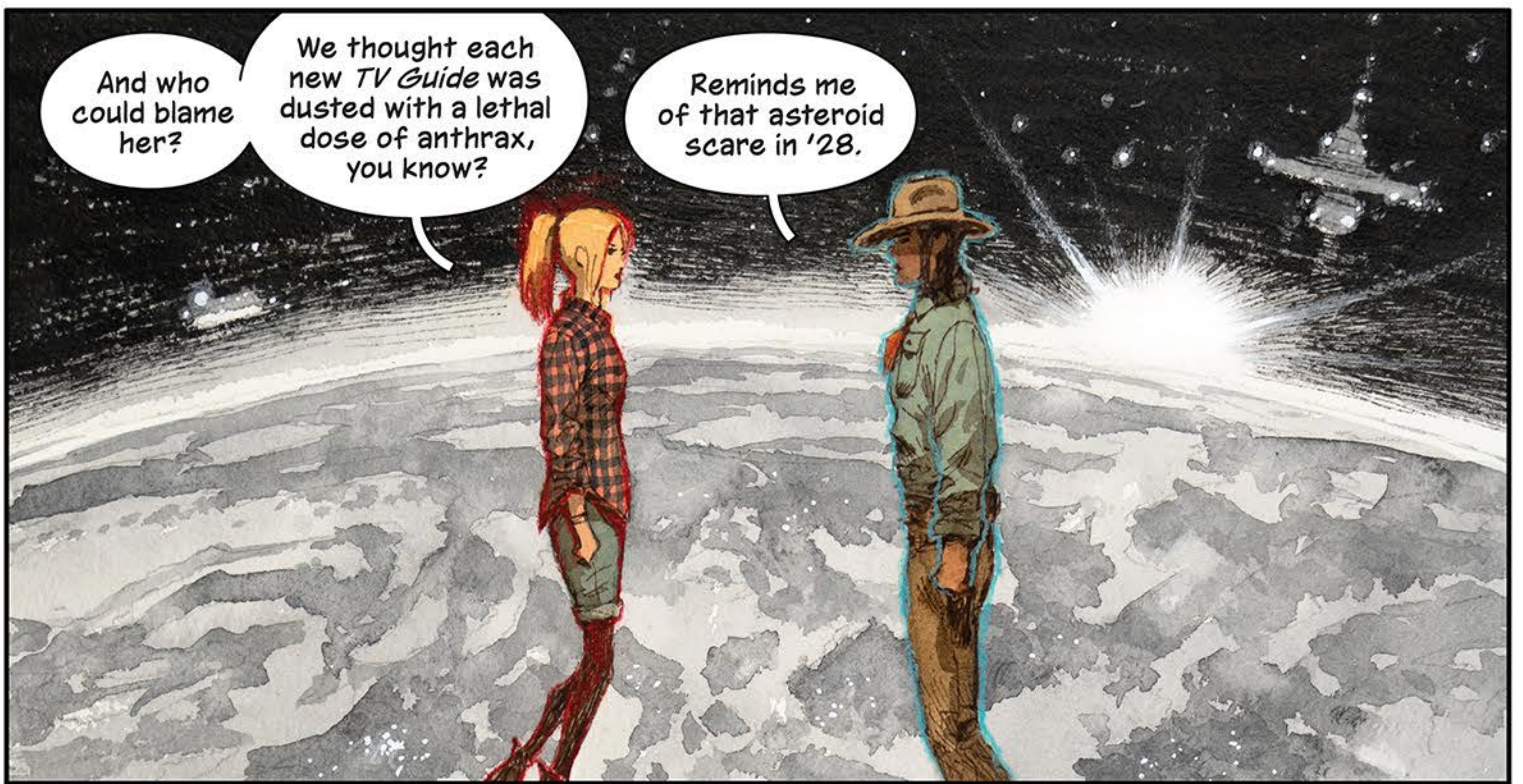


You remember the city after 9/11, right?

Mmm.



I mean, I wasn't getting laid that year, but my roommate had aggressively loud sex with every man, woman and nonbinary teacher's assistant in the West Village.



And who could blame her?

We thought each new *TV Guide* was dusted with a lethal dose of anthrax, you know?

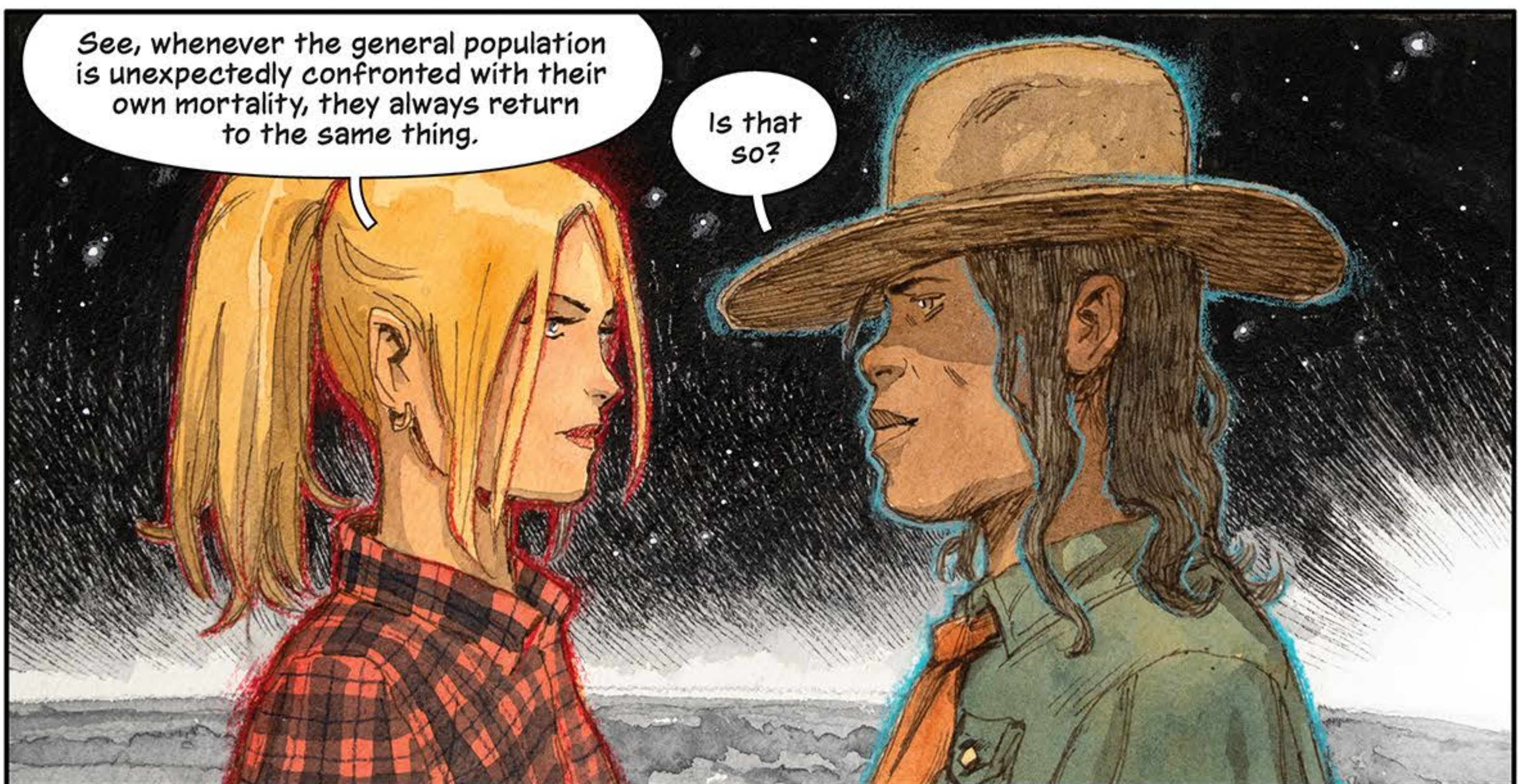
Reminds me of that asteroid scare in '28.



The rounding error?

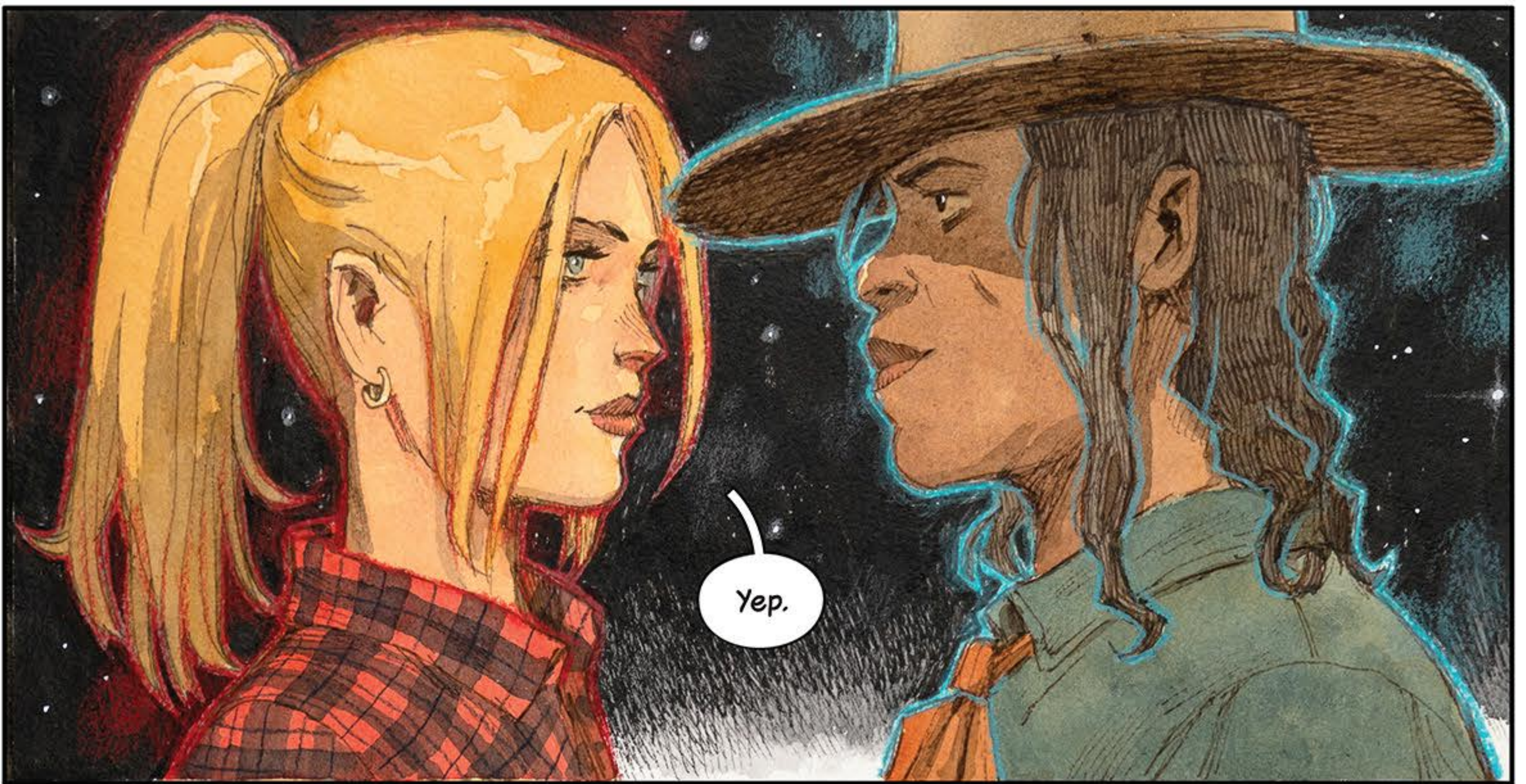
That's the one.

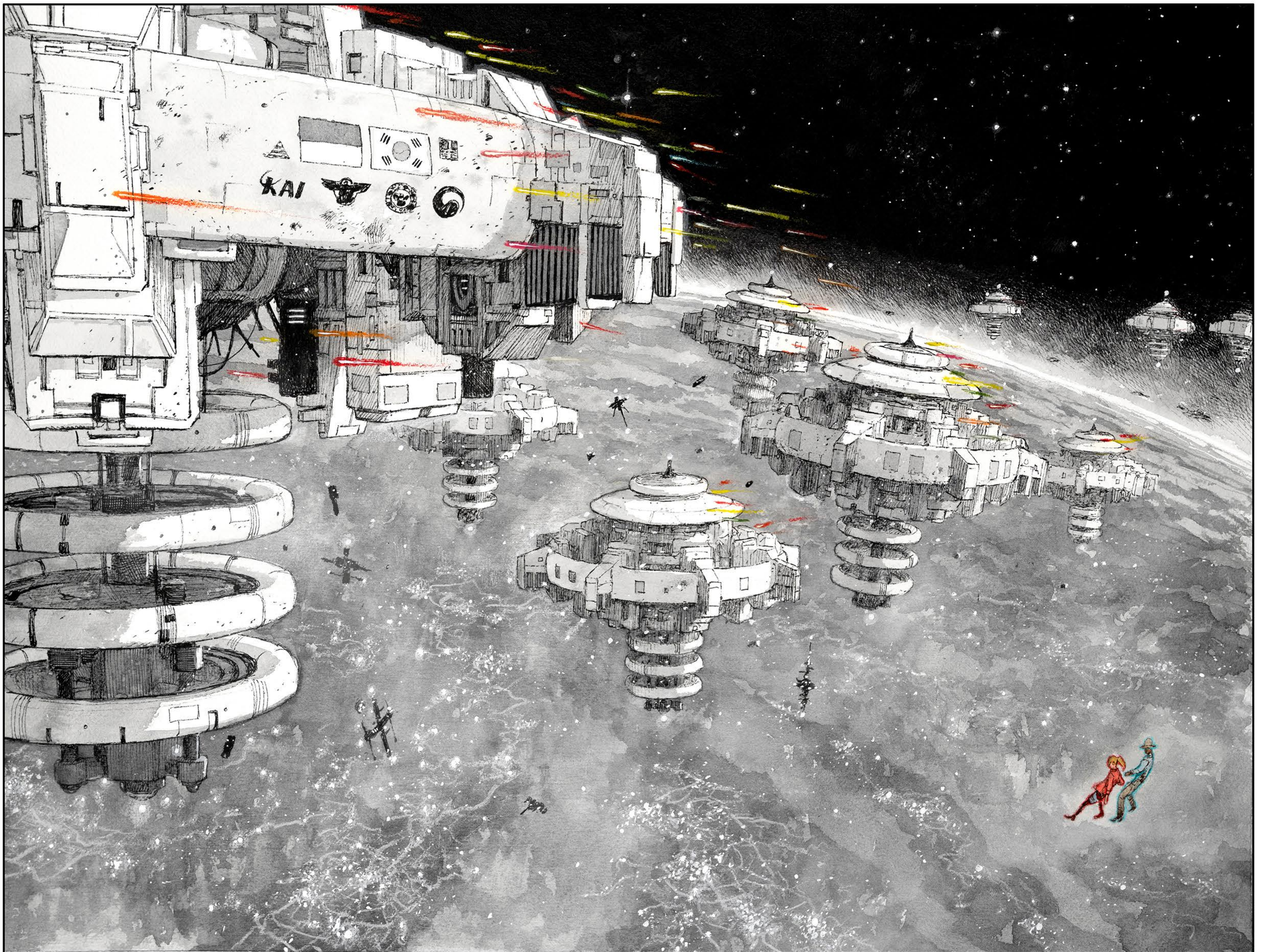
When it looked as if Judgment Day was imminent, Brooklyn damn near became an open-air brothel.

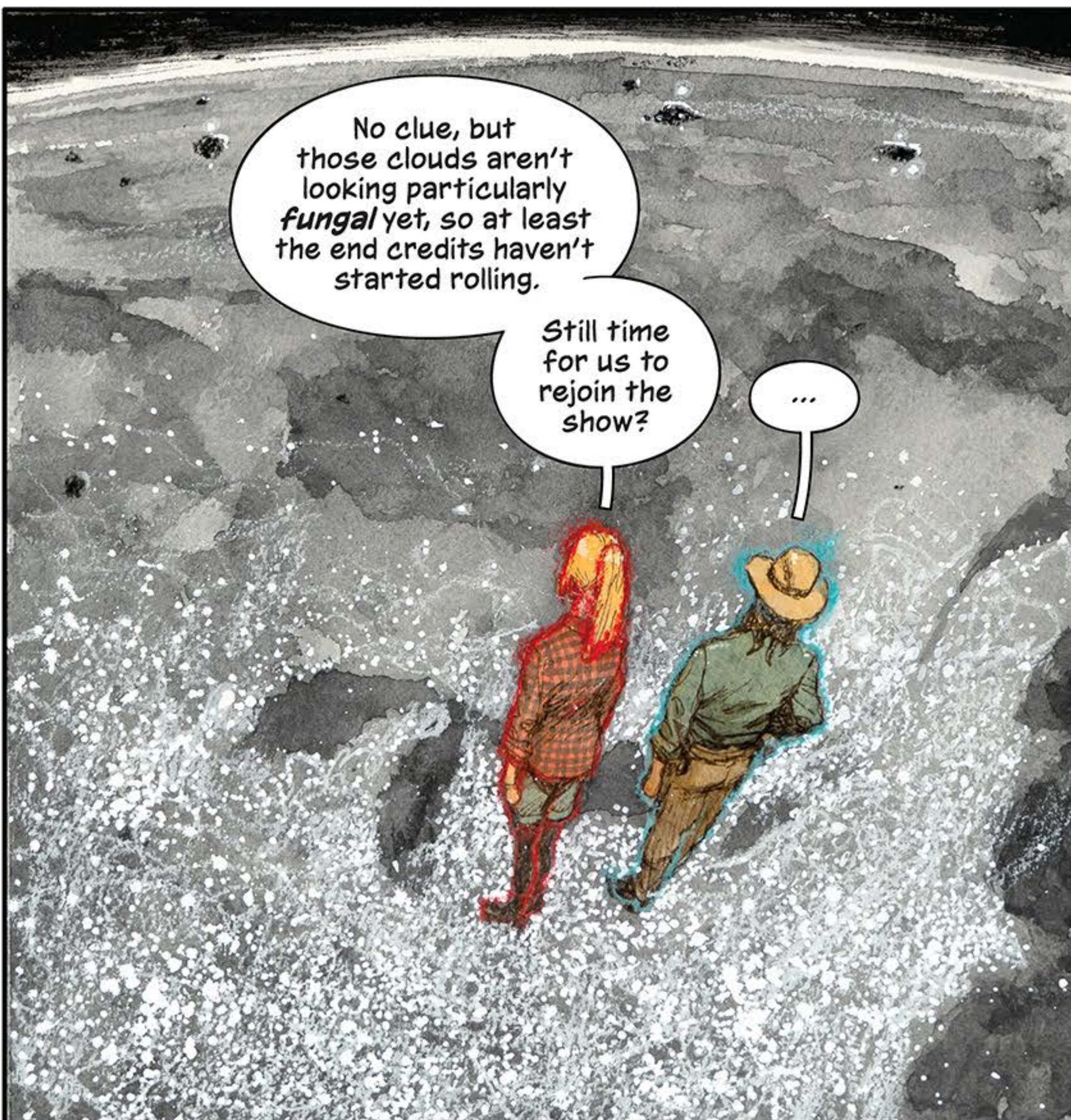
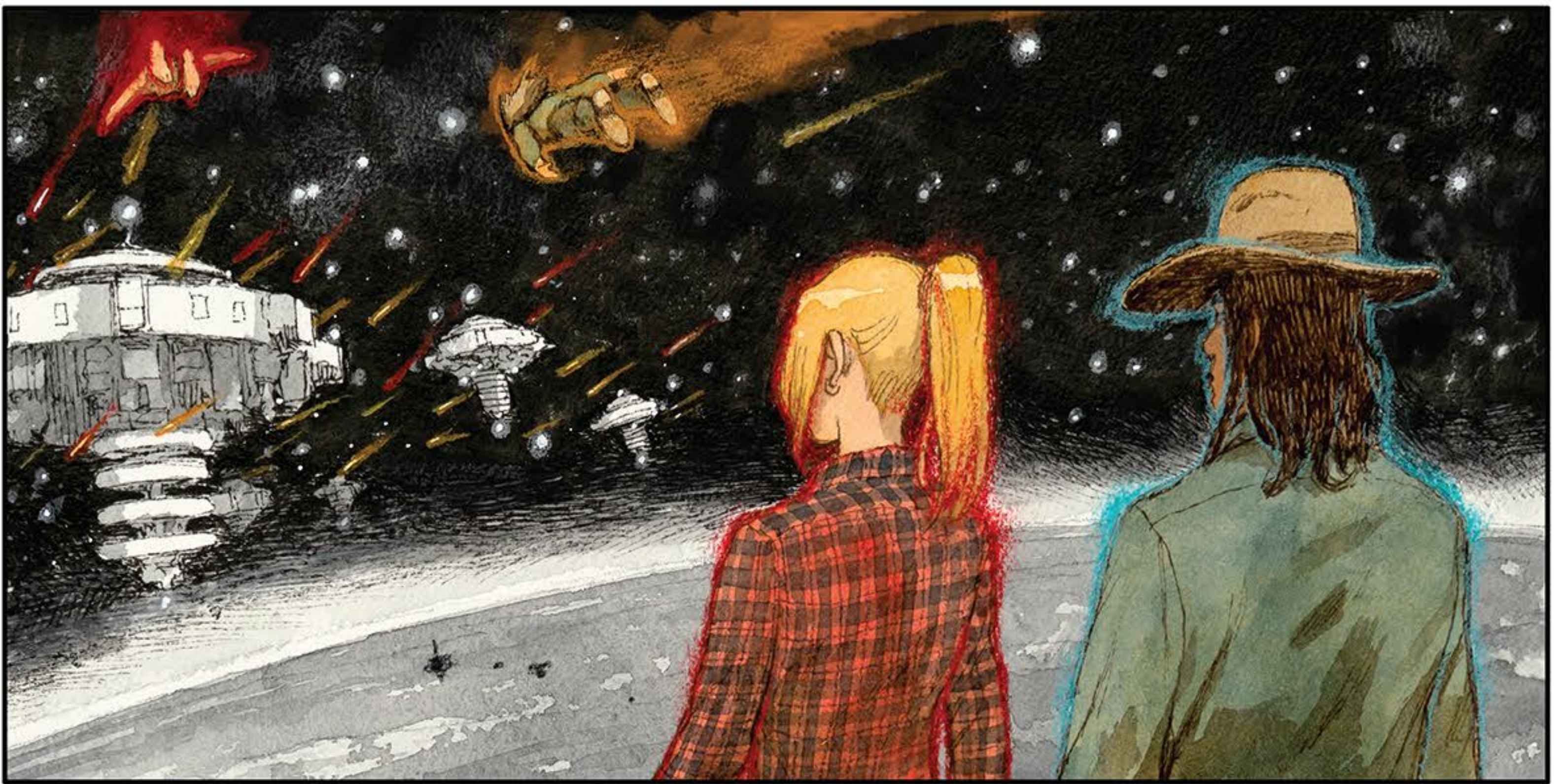


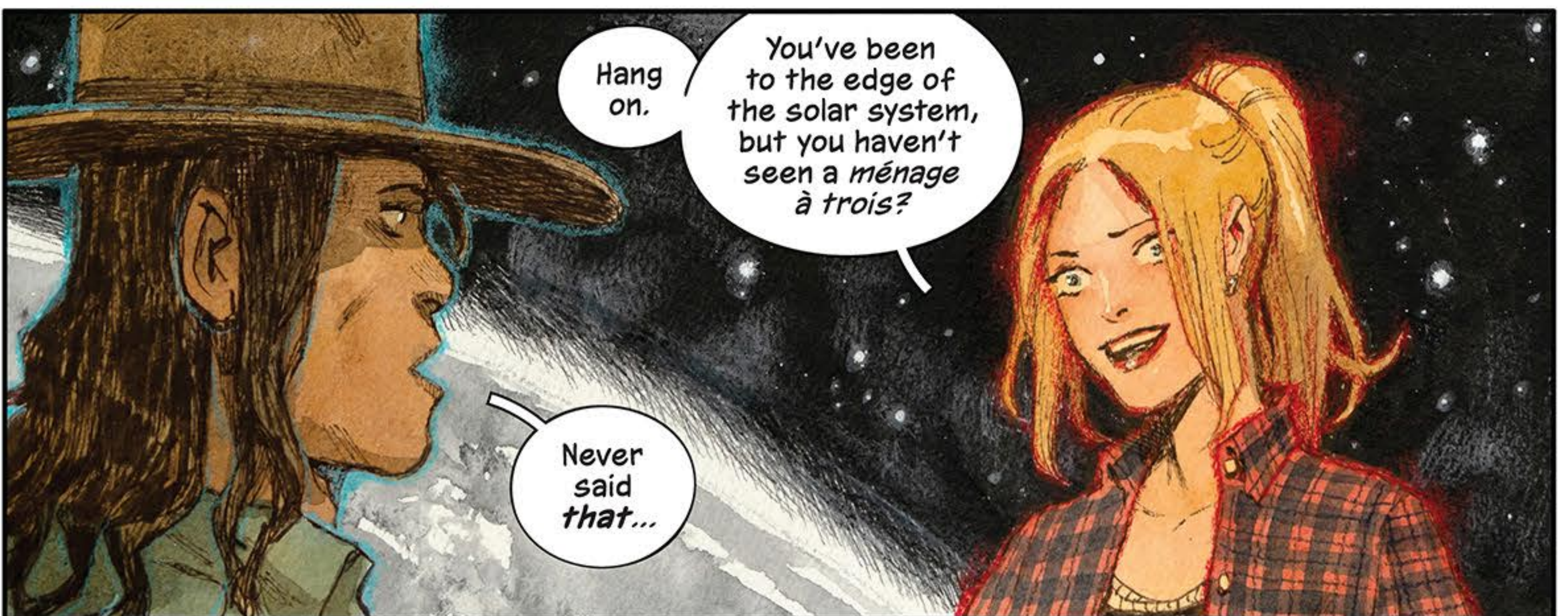
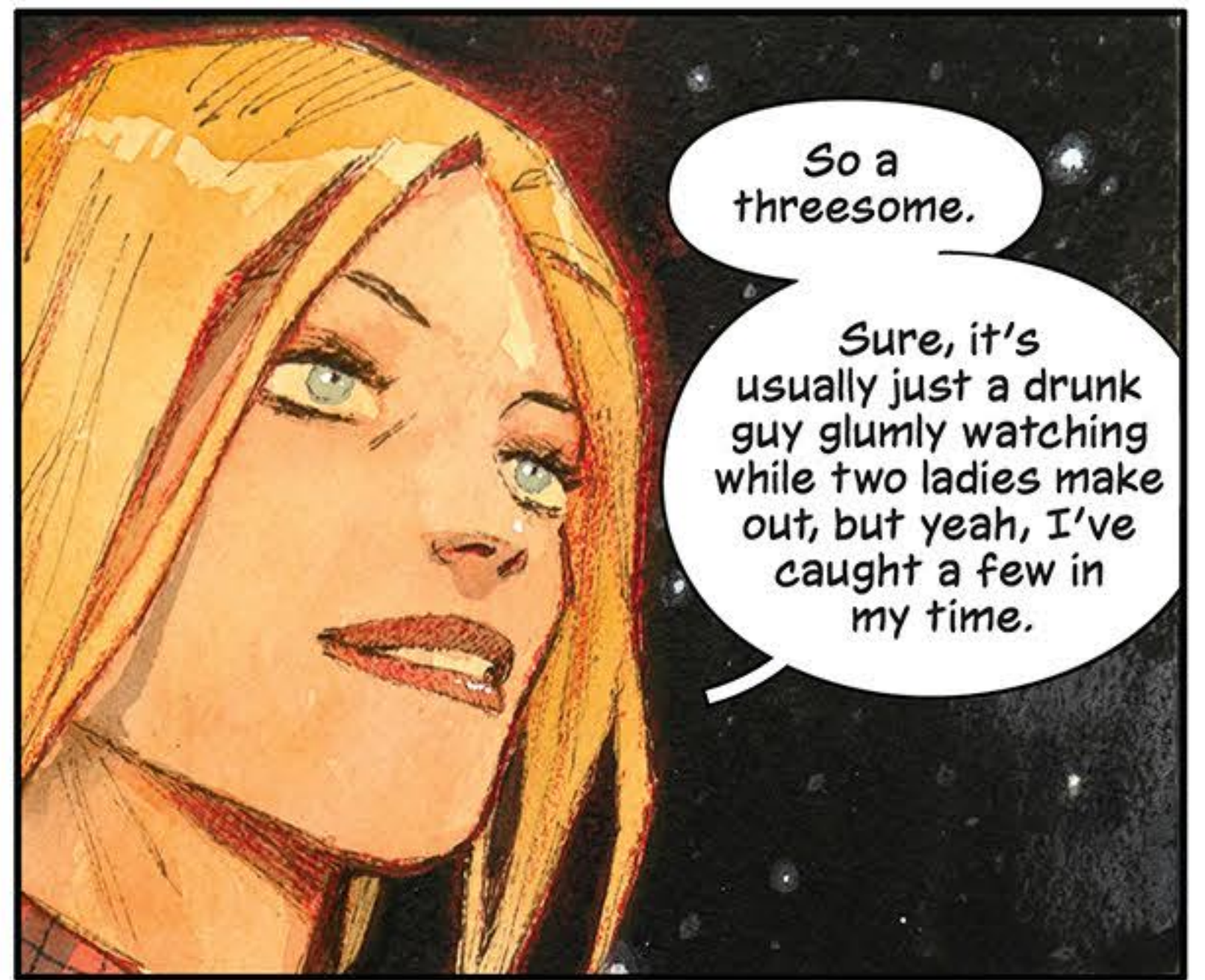
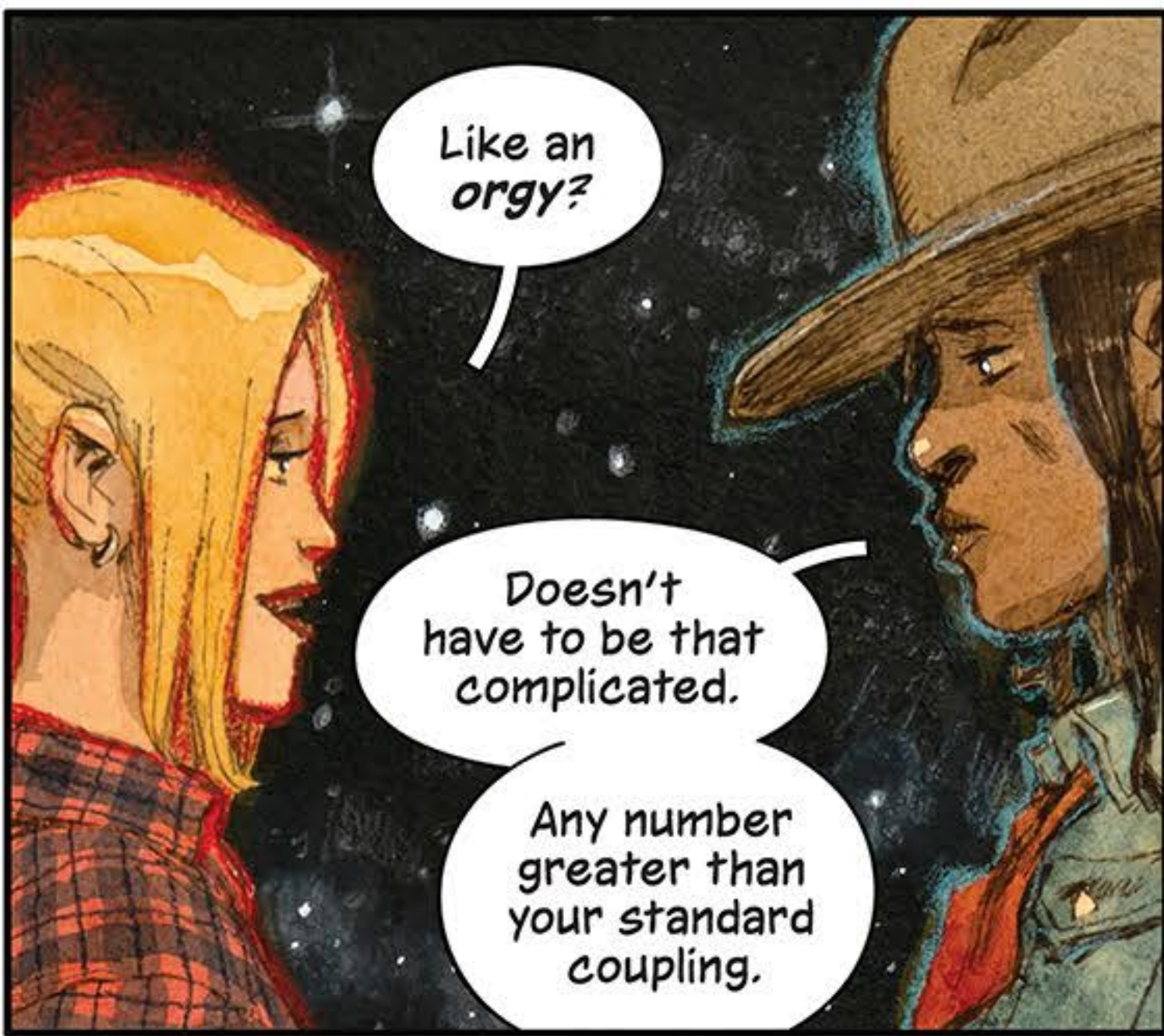
See, whenever the general population is unexpectedly confronted with their own mortality, they always return to the same thing.

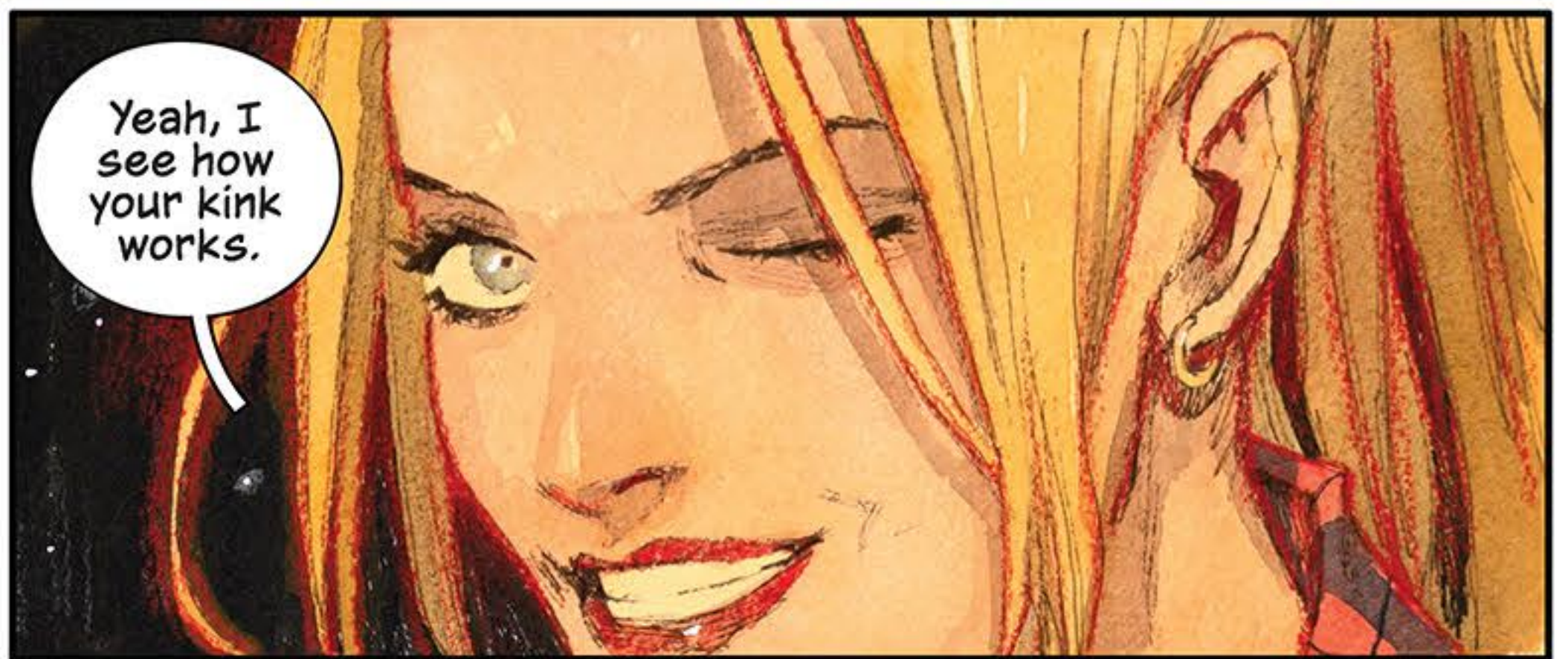
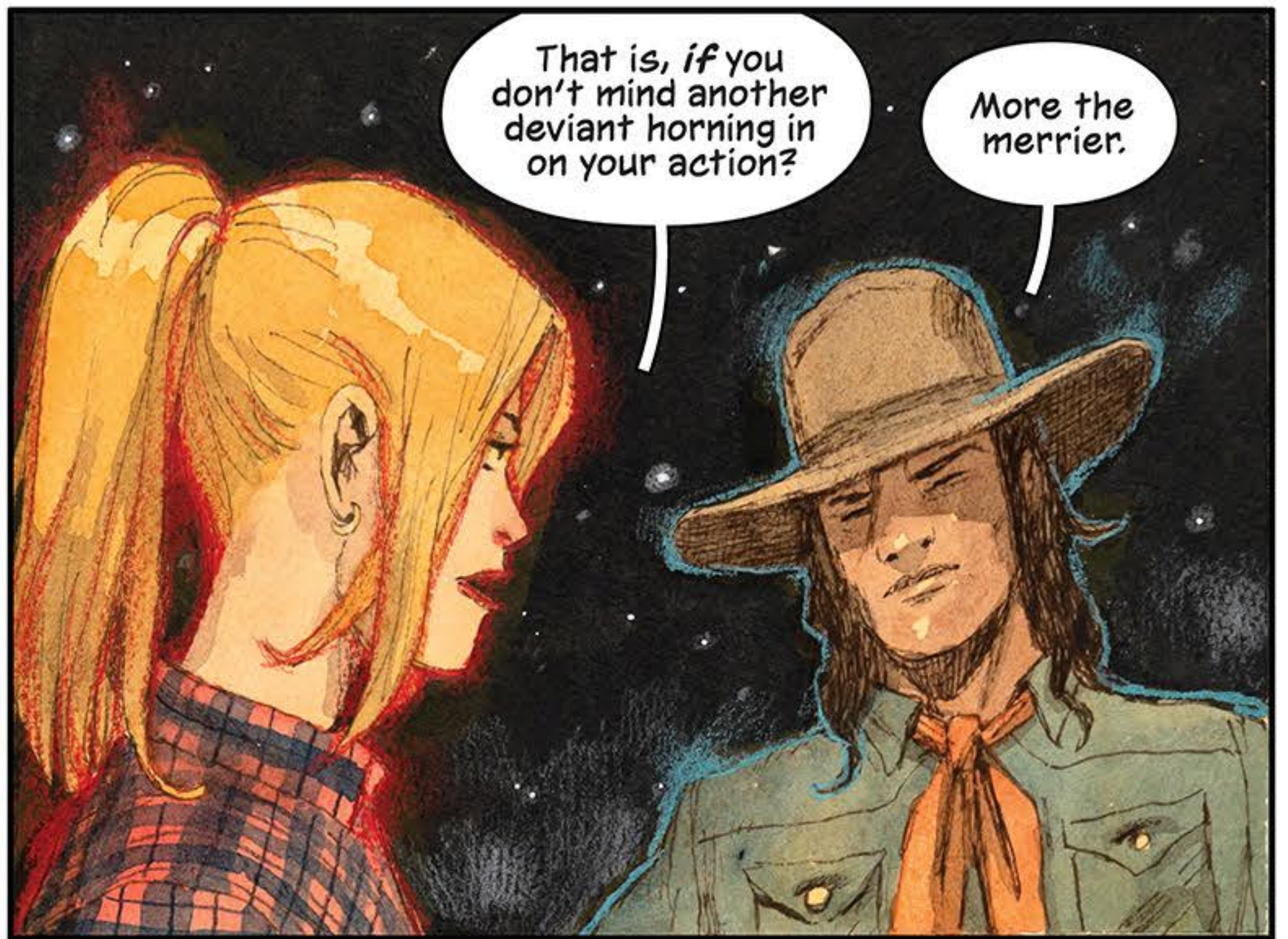
Is that so?













With the proverbial clock ticking, probably best to avoid unfamiliar terrain.

So stick to my usual hunting grounds?

Wasn't going to make it sound as predatory as all that, but...



Manhattan it is.

Though I might lose you in this gathering storm of annoying lookie-loos.

They must all think New York'll be hit next.



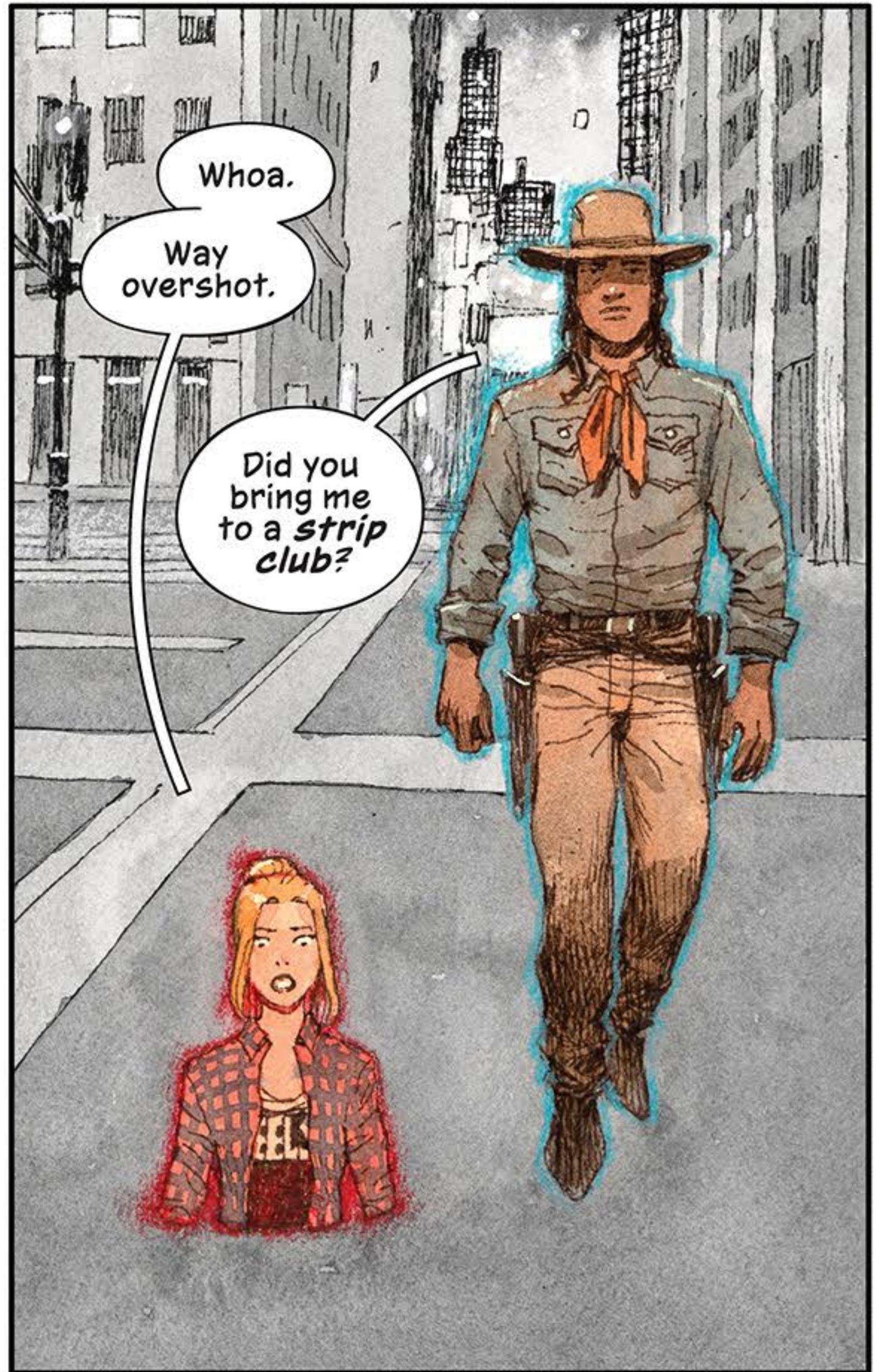
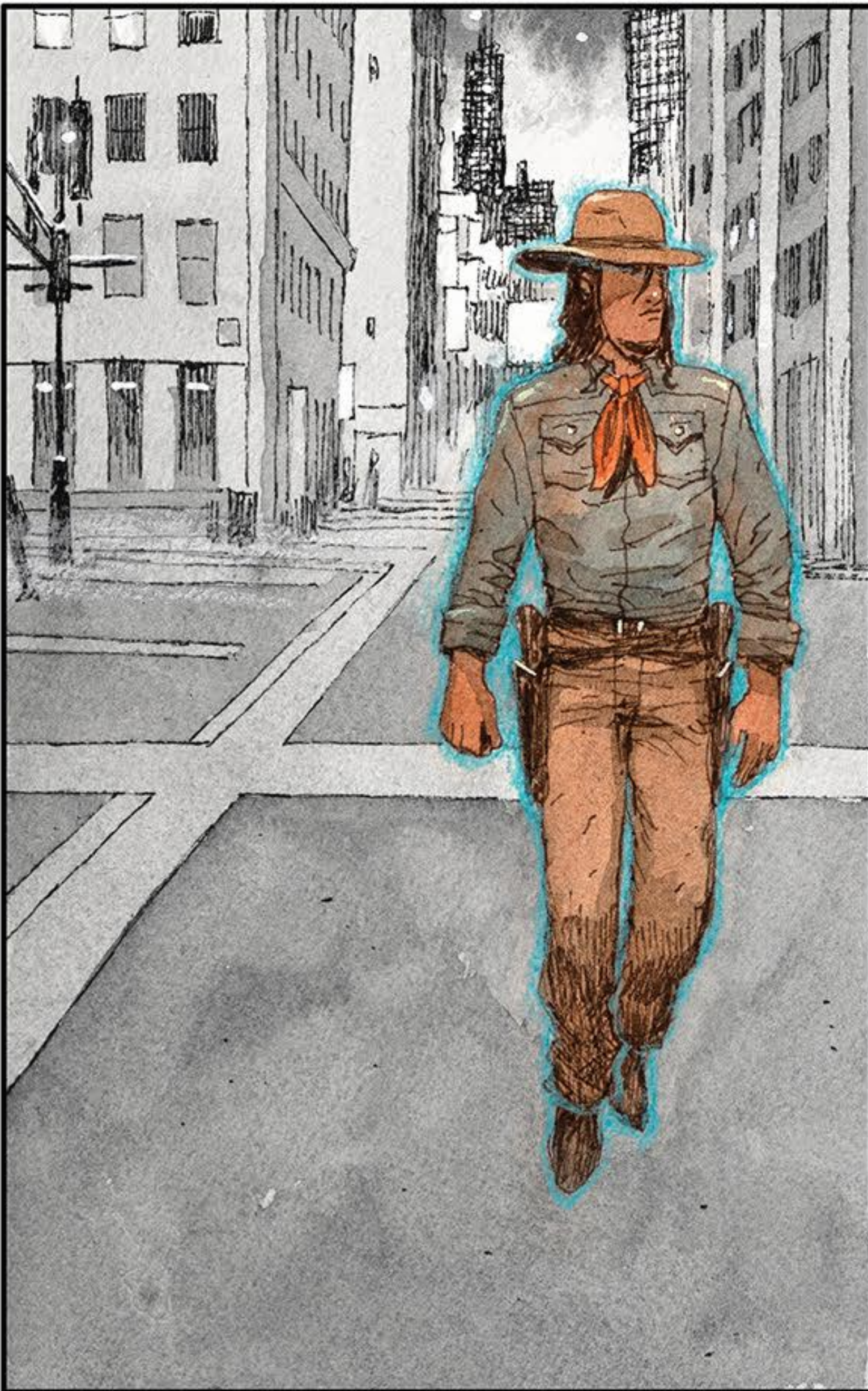
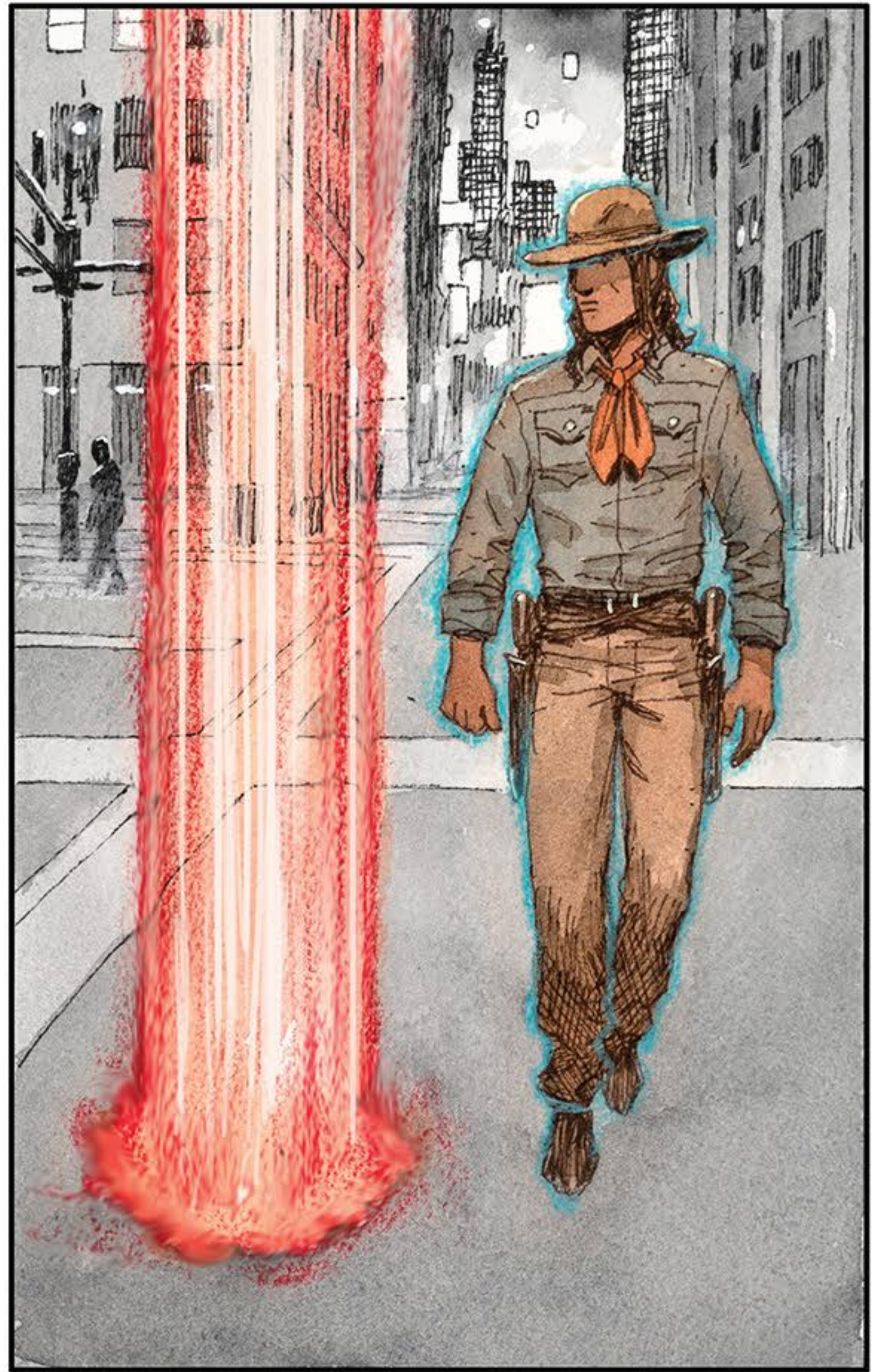
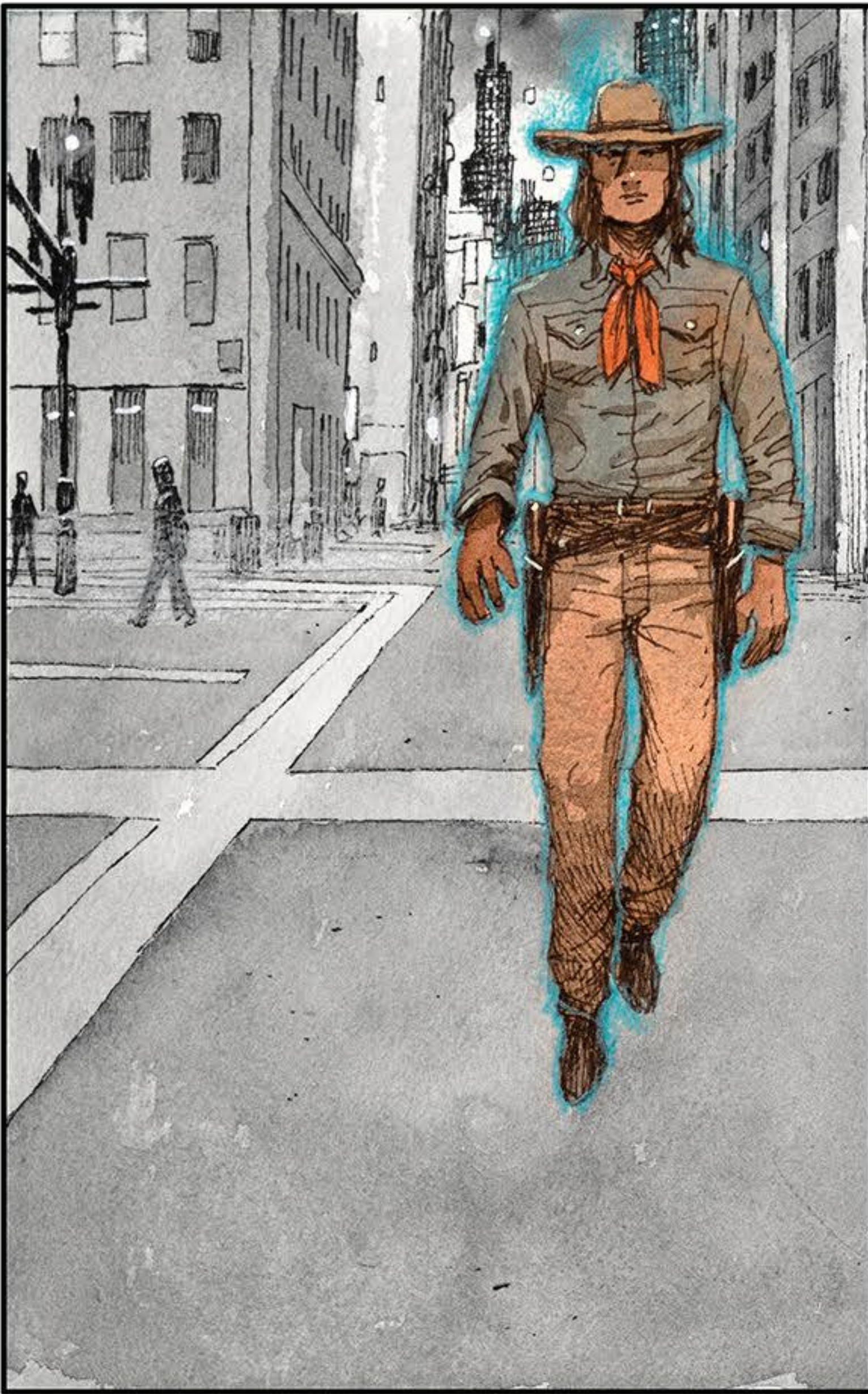
Then they can suck my dick.

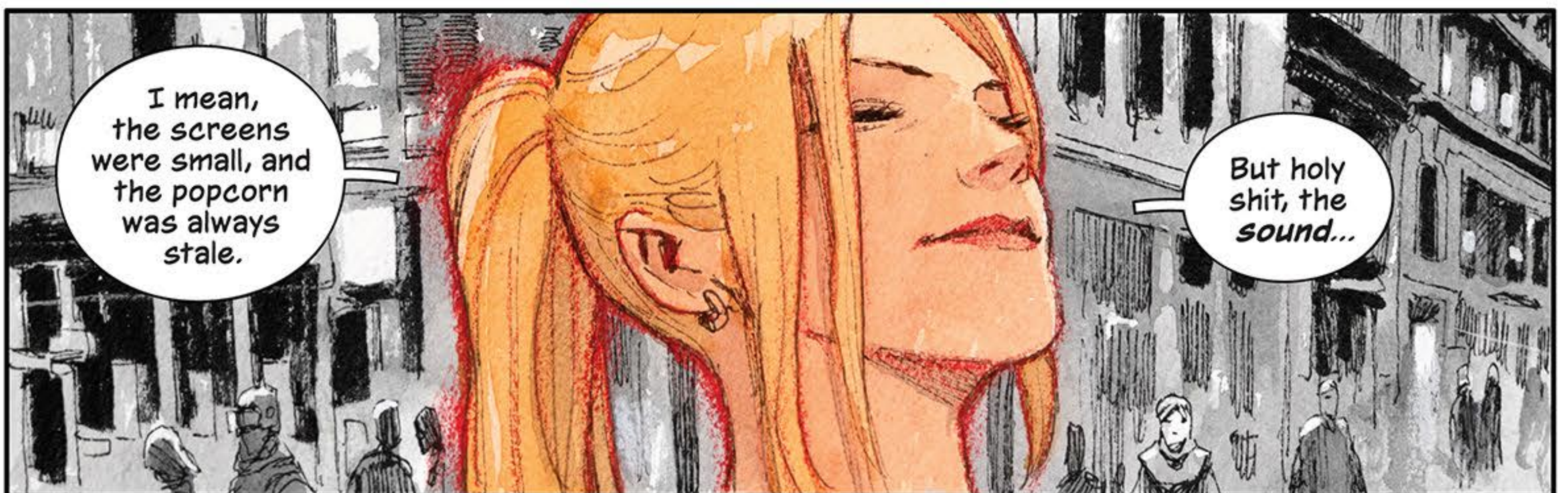
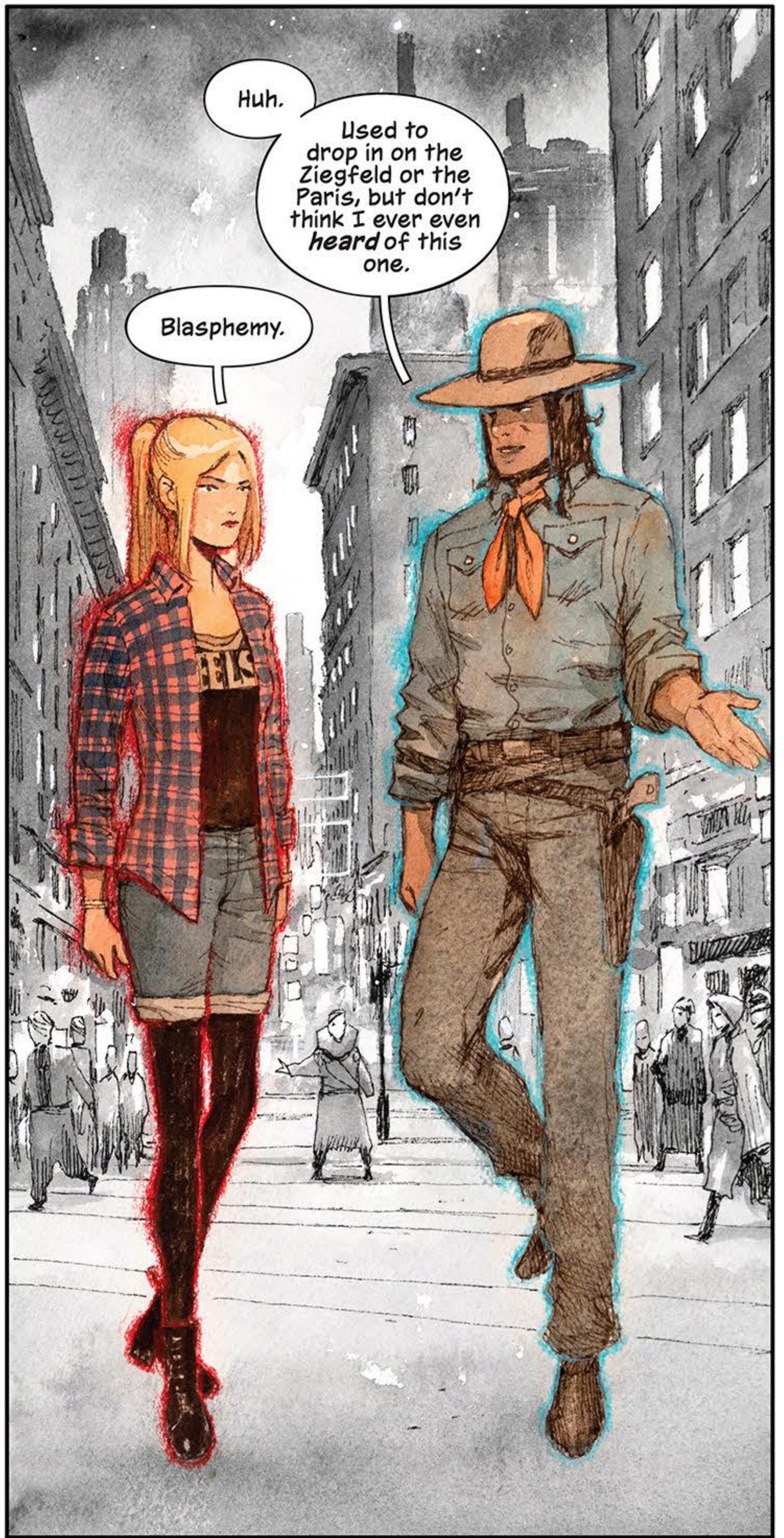
Meet me at the corner of Mercer and Houston!

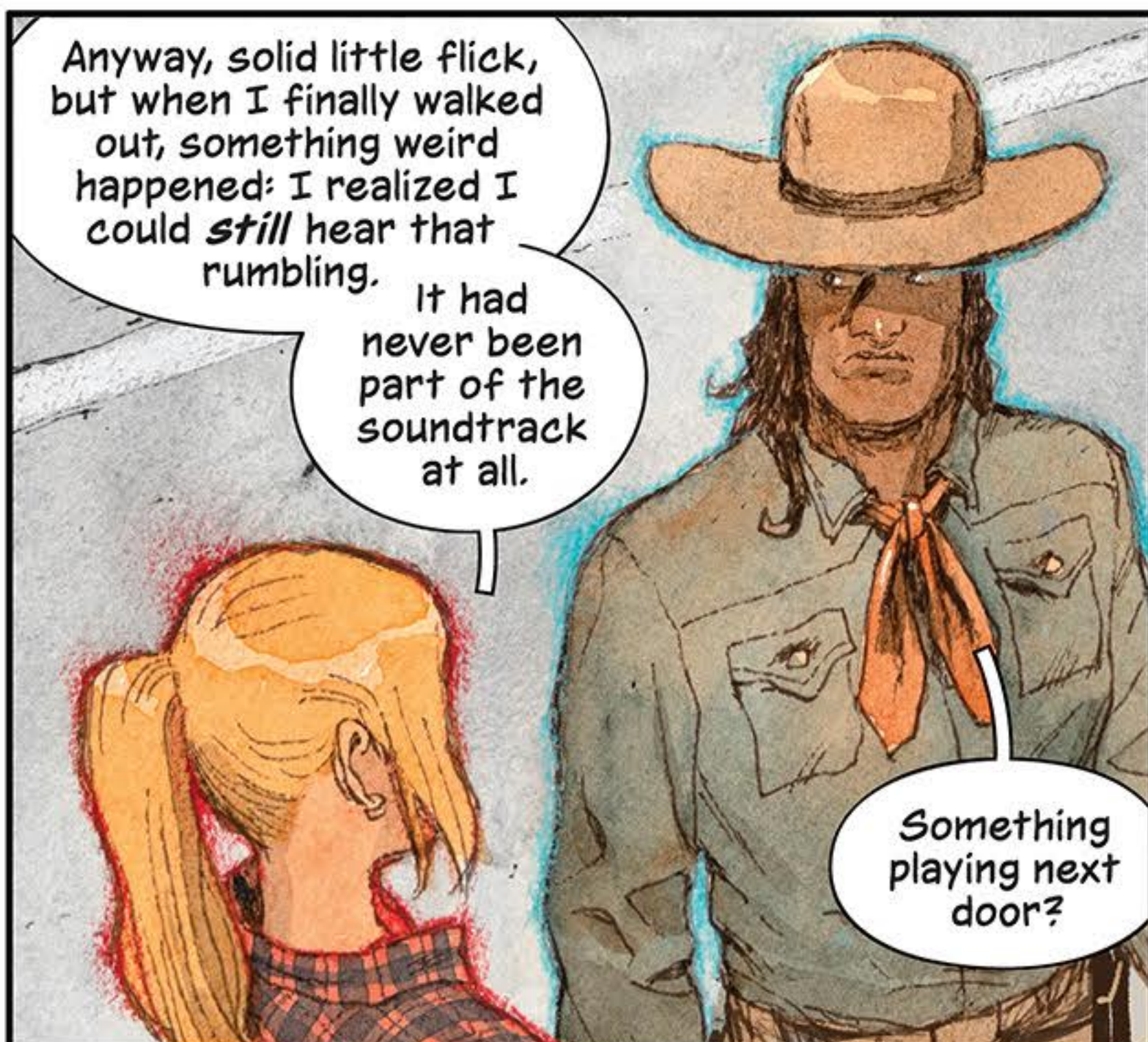
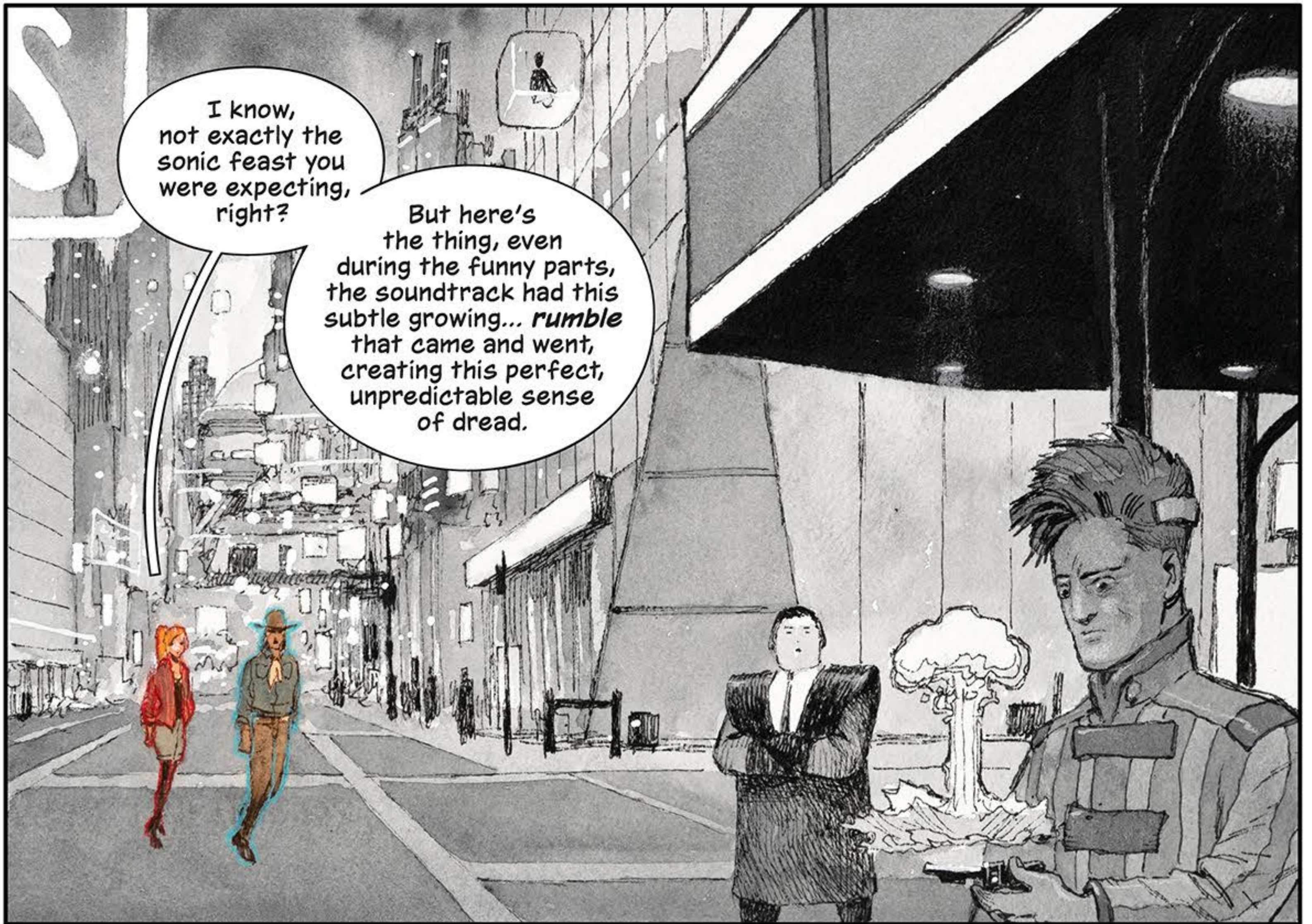
Why there?













And you *liked* subway cars constantly interrupting your motion pic...

...your movie?

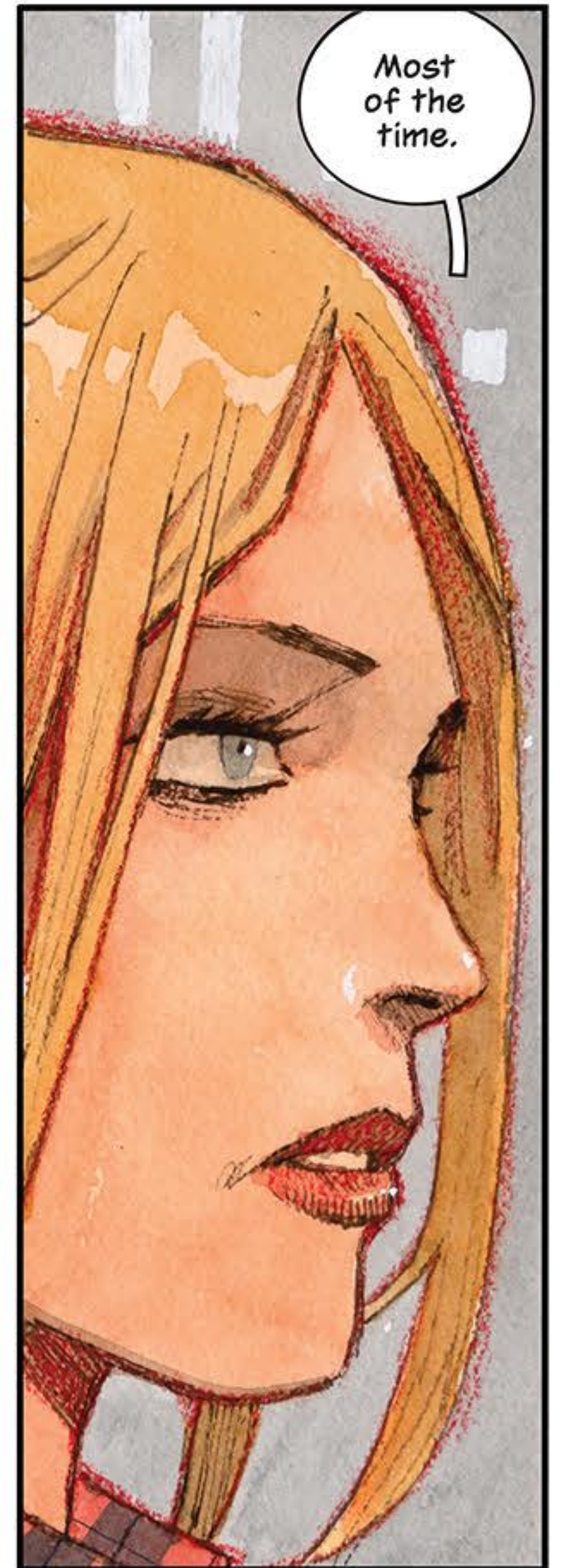
Every single time for the next thousand things I saw there.



No offense, but that sounds distracting as all hell.

Maybe, but I used to *love* that push and pull of the real world with whatever I was watching.

Being submerged in somebody else's story while also feeling that, like, periodic tug on the hose of your diving suit? It was weirdly comforting.



Most of the time.



Anyway.

Welcome to the old Angelika.

What is it these days?

IT'S THE ♪
♪ ENNNND

OF THE ♪
♪ WORLD AS
WE KNOW IT...

AND IIIIII ♪
FEEEEEL FIIINE...



Um.



You *did* bring me to a strip club.

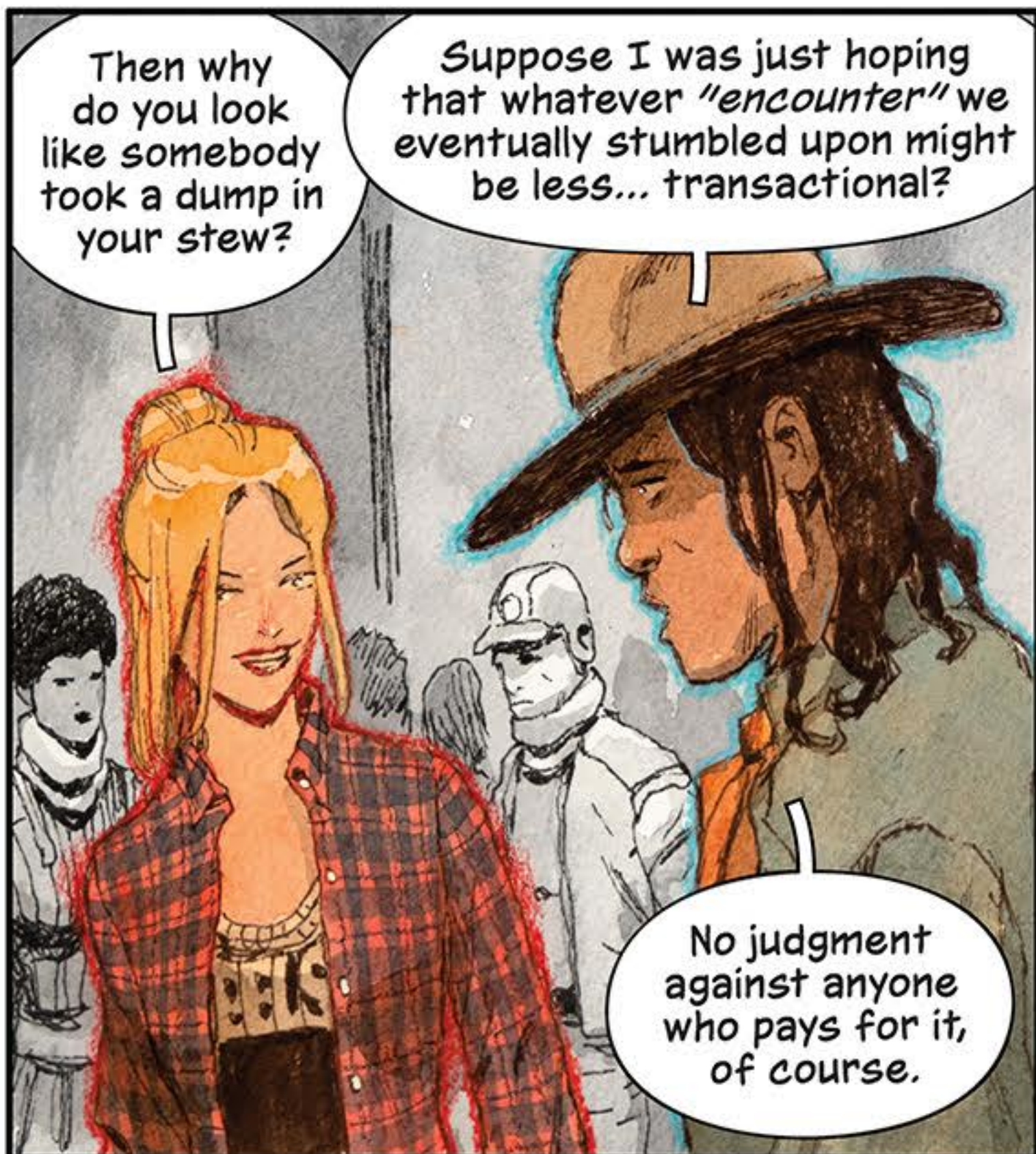
One that also features penises!

Are you and your era's social norms completely scandalized?



By fellas enjoying each other's company?

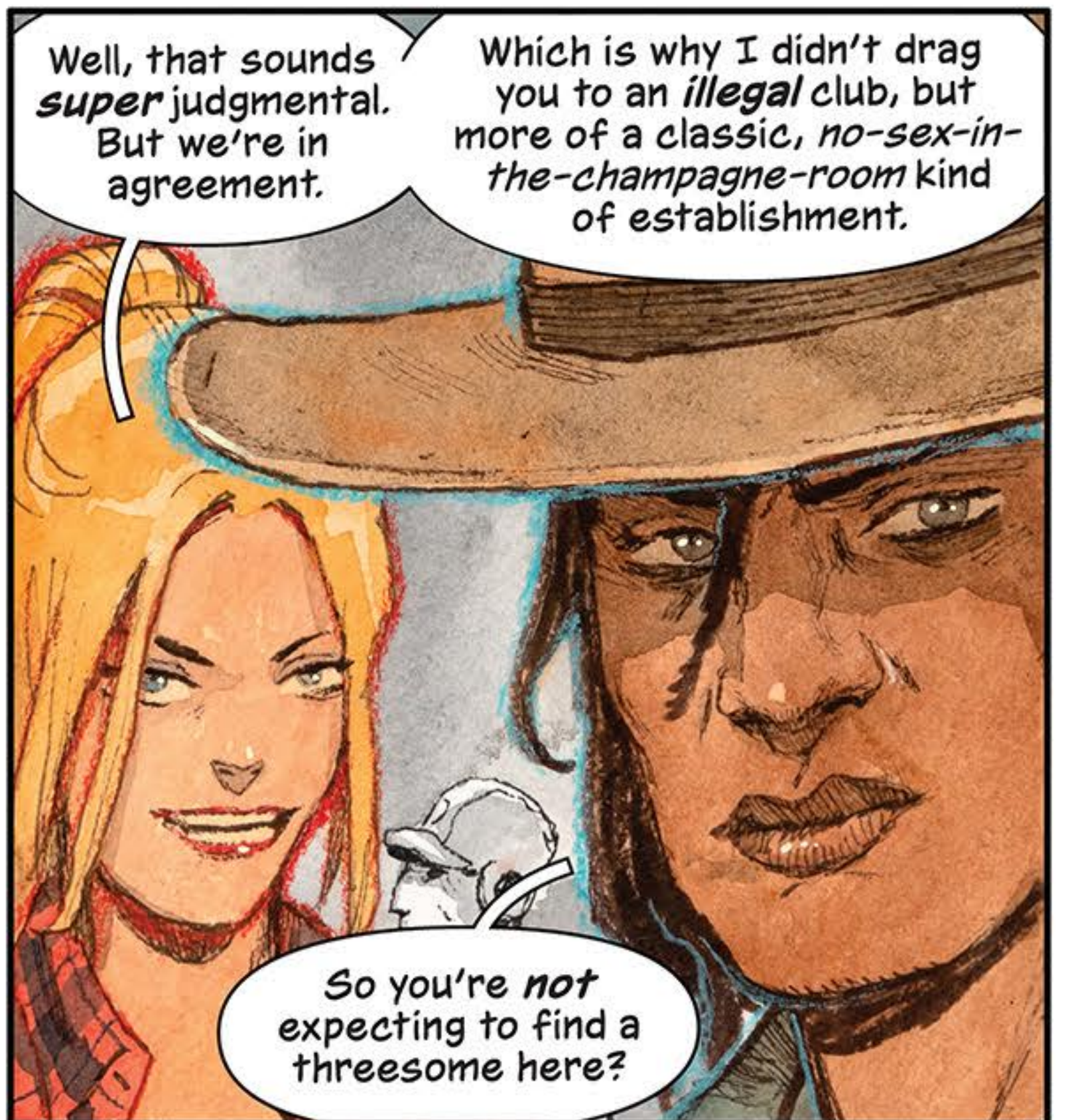
That was old hat long before I came around.



Then why do you look like somebody took a dump in your stew?

Suppose I was just hoping that whatever "encounter" we eventually stumbled upon might be less... transactional?

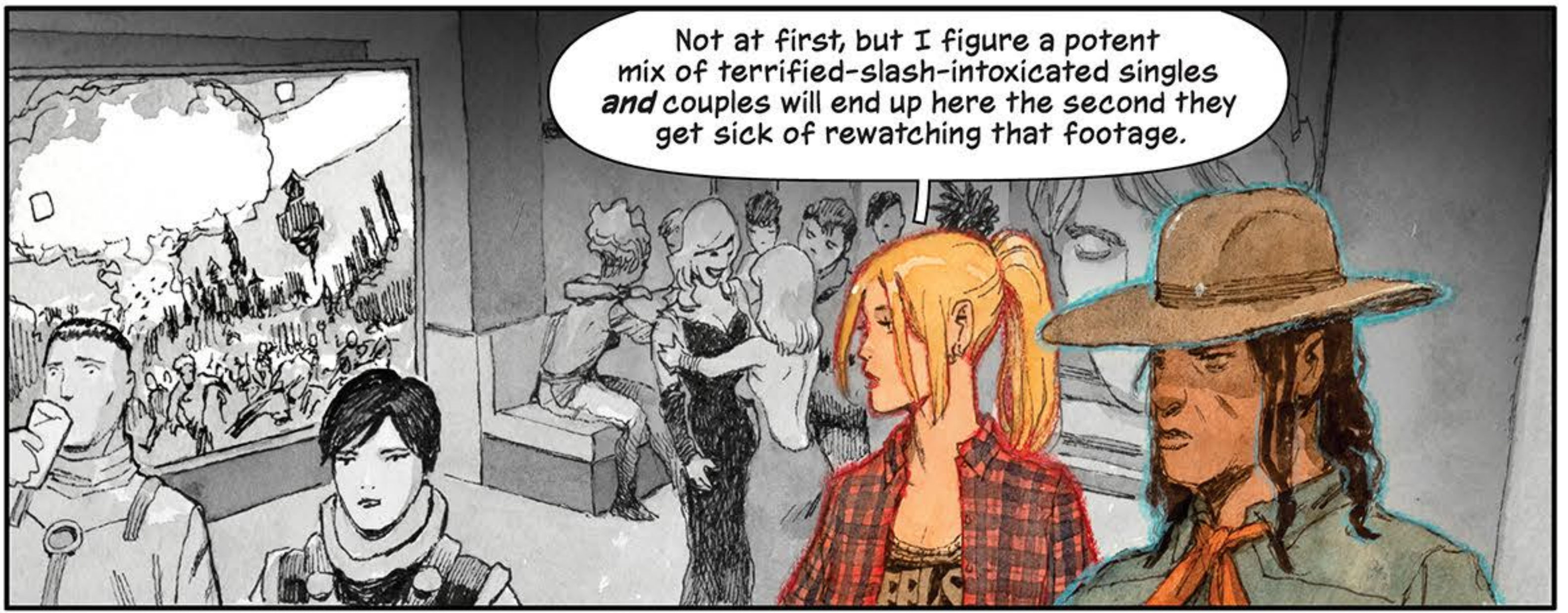
No judgment against anyone who pays for it, of course.



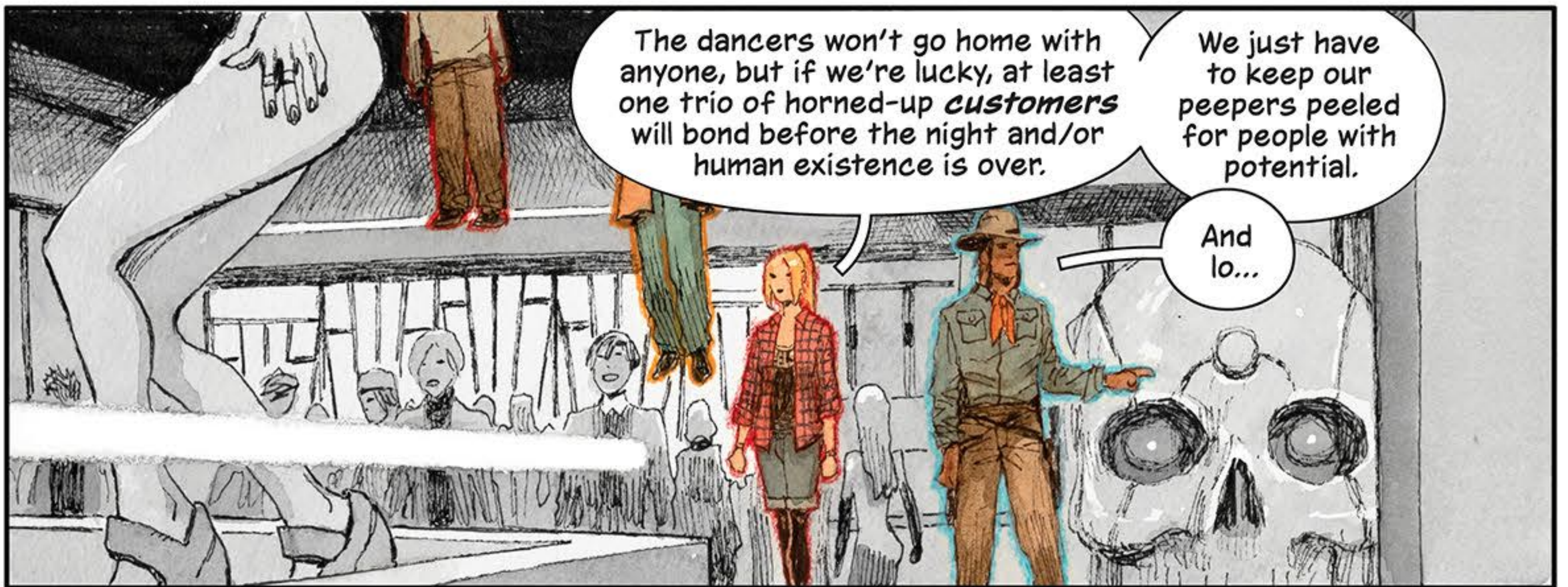
Well, that sounds *super* judgmental. But we're in agreement.

Which is why I didn't drag you to an *illegal* club, but more of a classic, *no-sex-in-the-champagne-room* kind of establishment.

So you're *not* expecting to find a threesome here?



Not at first, but I figure a potent mix of terrified-slash-intoxicated singles *and* couples will end up here the second they get sick of rewatching that footage.

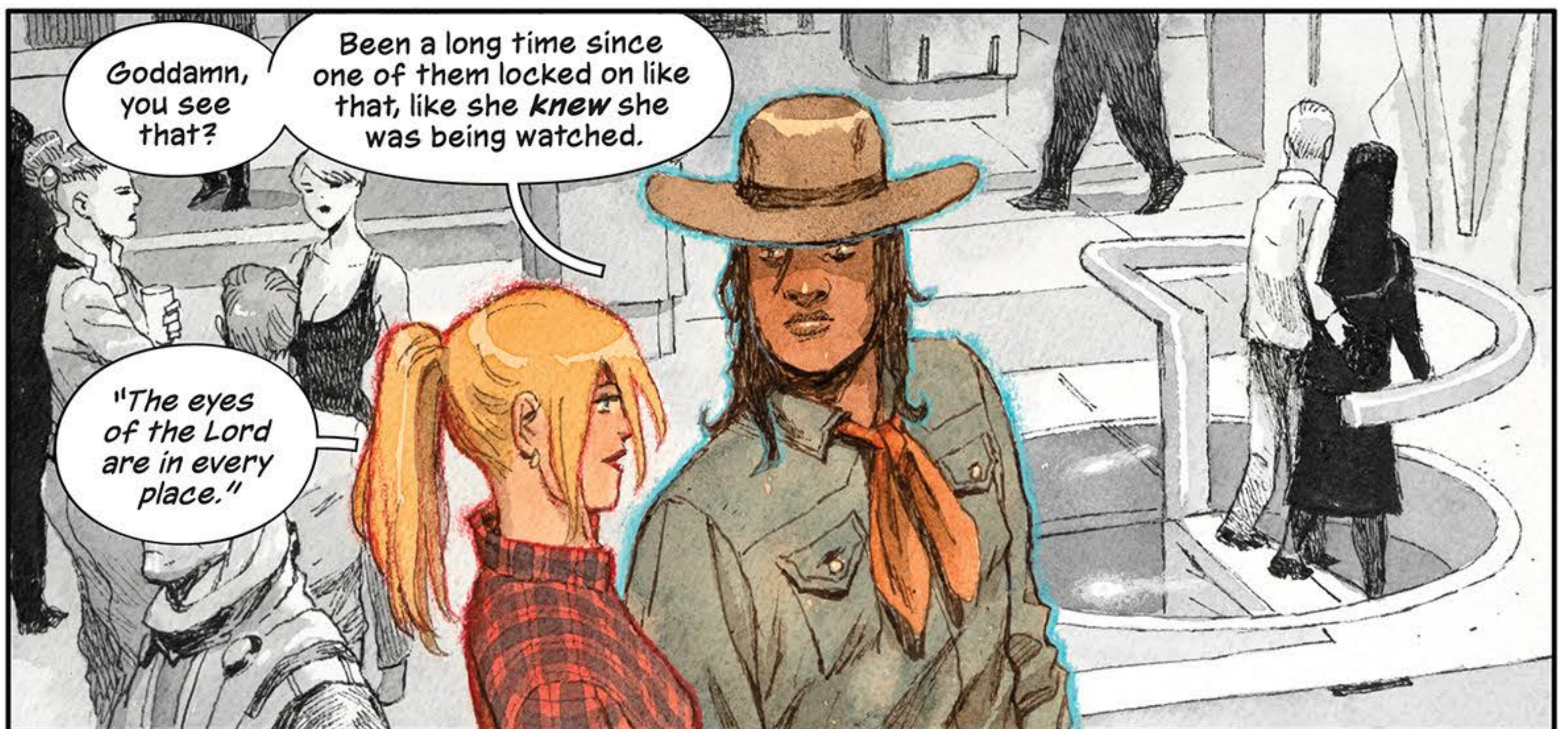
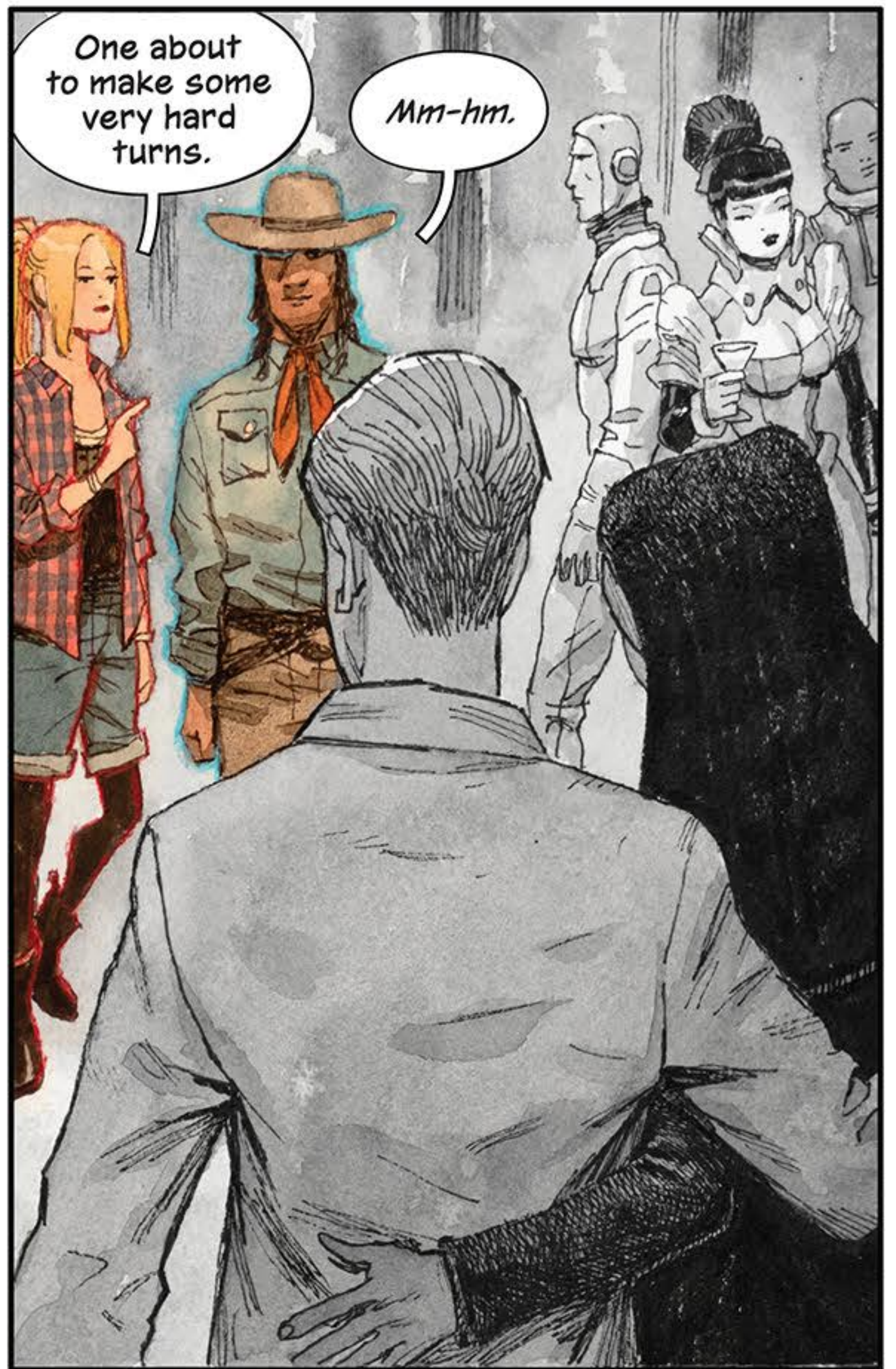


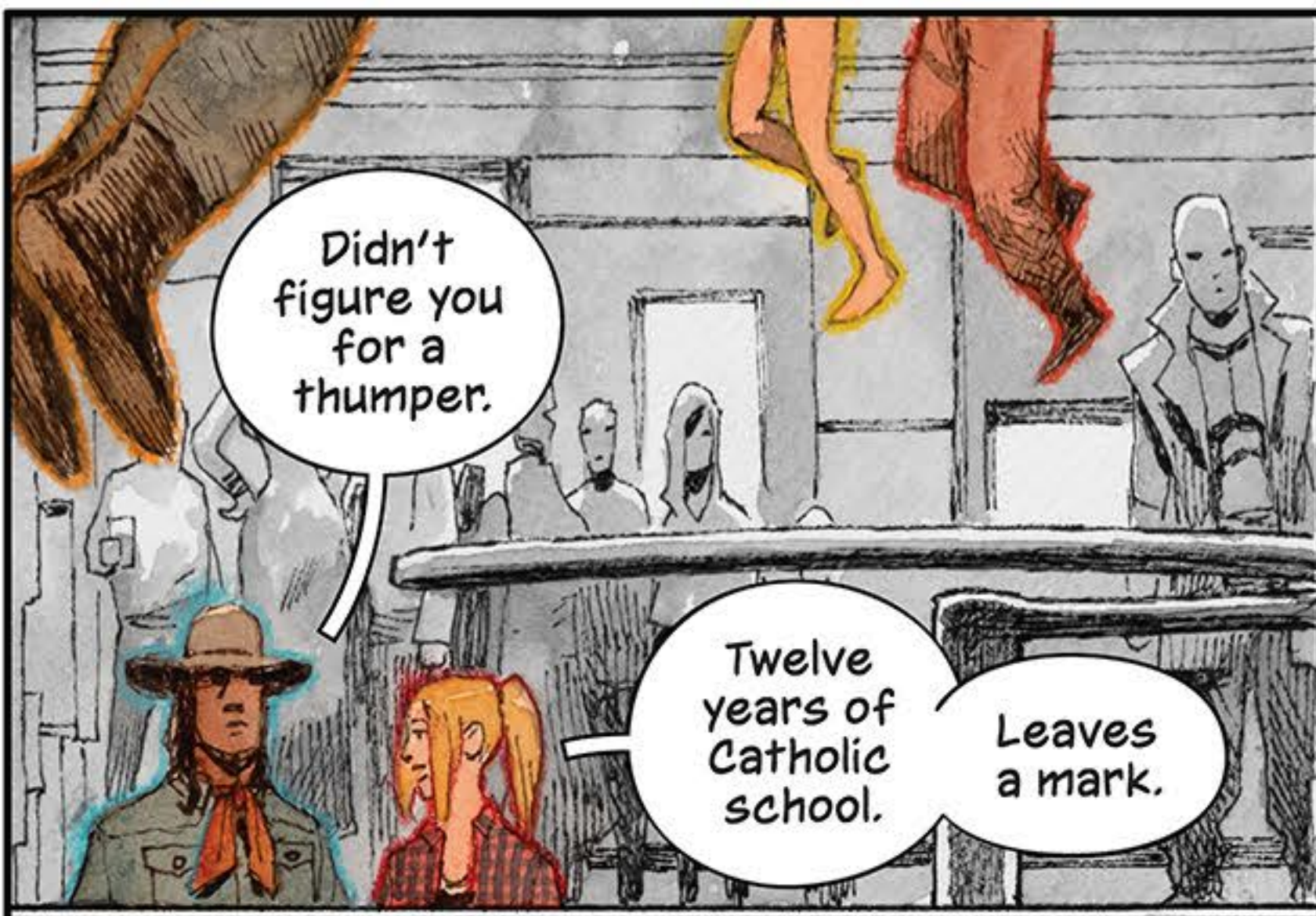
The dancers won't go home with anyone, but if we're lucky, at least one trio of horned-up *customers* will bond before the night and/or human existence is over.

We just have to keep our peepers peeled for people with potential.

And lo...



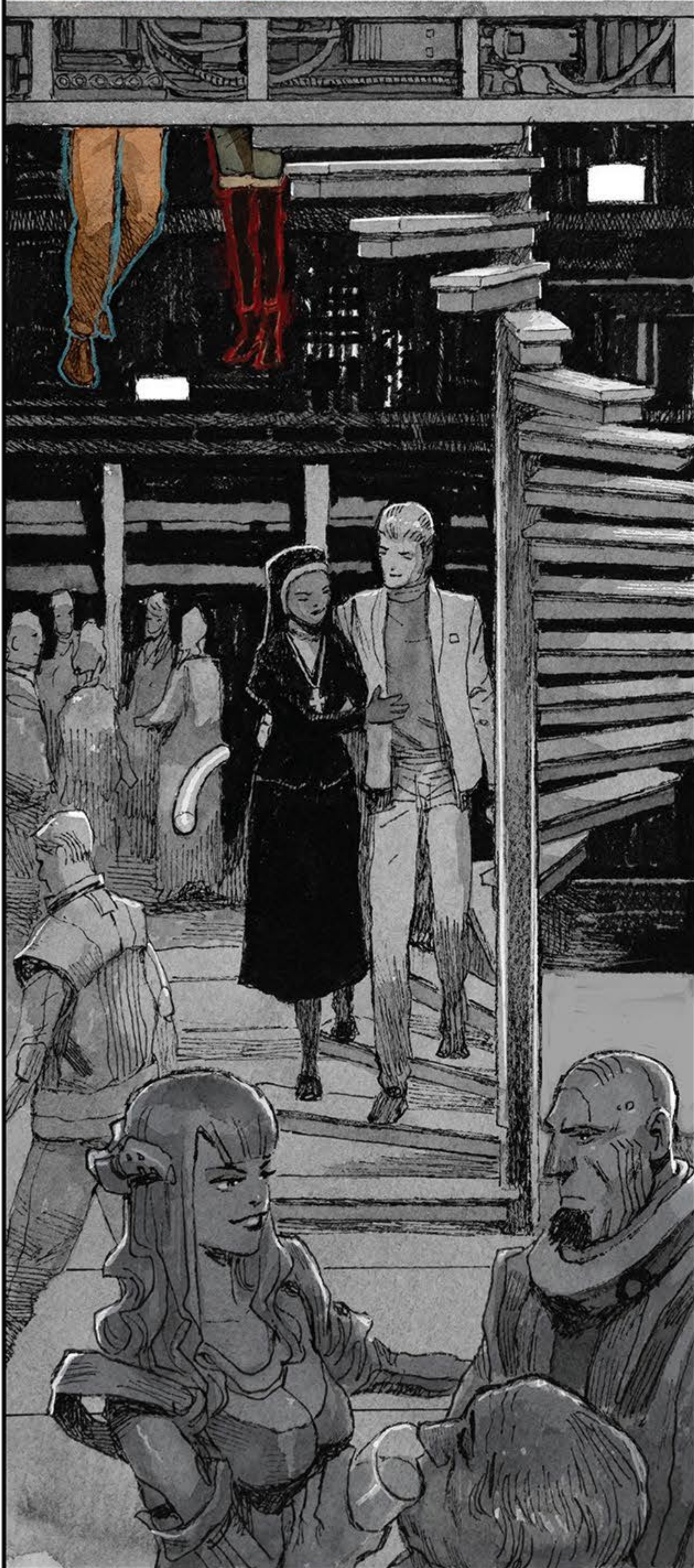




Didn't figure you for a thumper.

Twelve years of Catholic school.

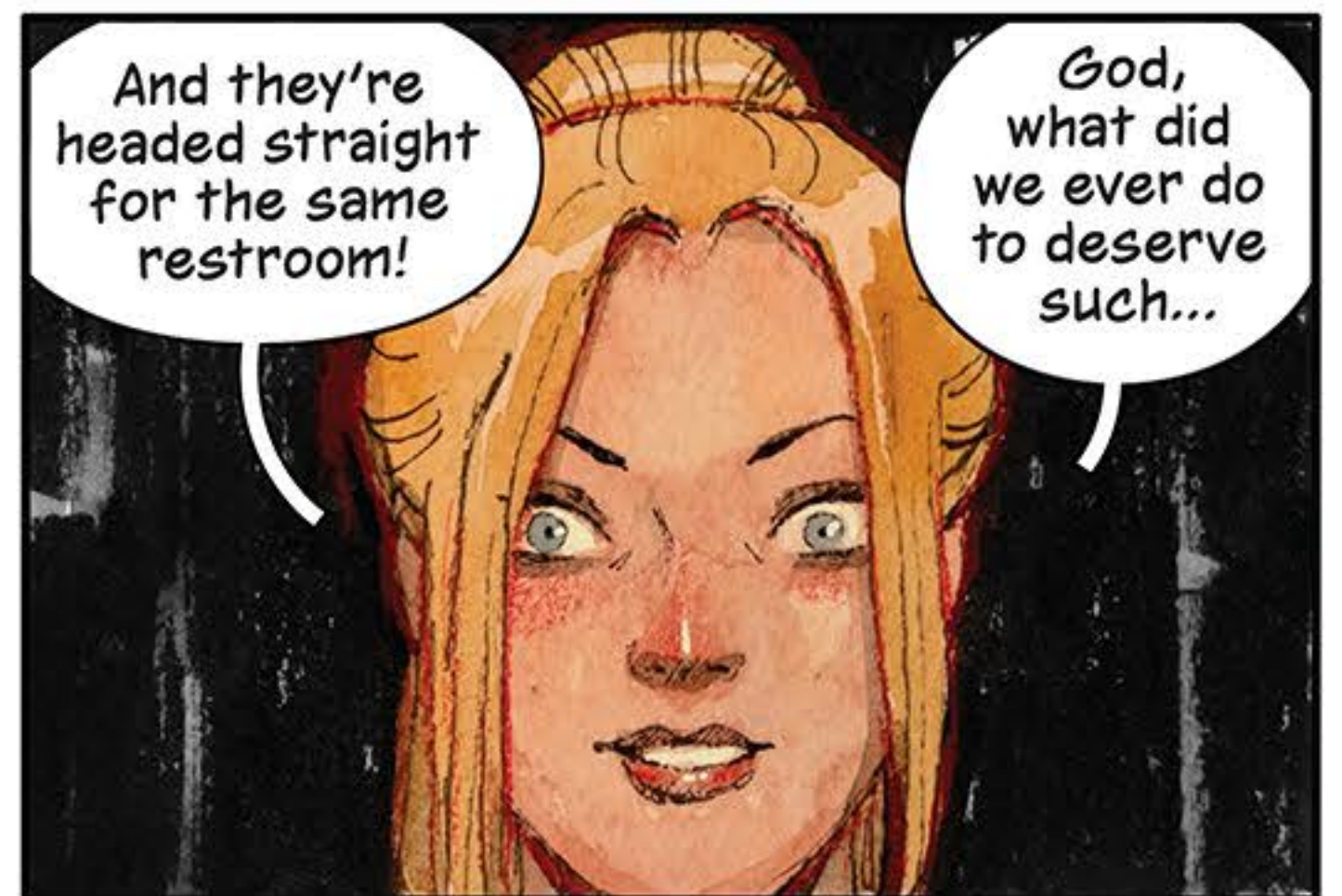
Leaves a mark.



Then is this maybe the wrong direction for tonight?

Are you kidding?

Sister Christian and Mister Right here are the hottest duo I've ever met.



And they're headed straight for the same restroom!

God, what did we ever do to deserve such...



...shit.



Long
time, Valerie
Amber
Norwich.

Who's the
spook?

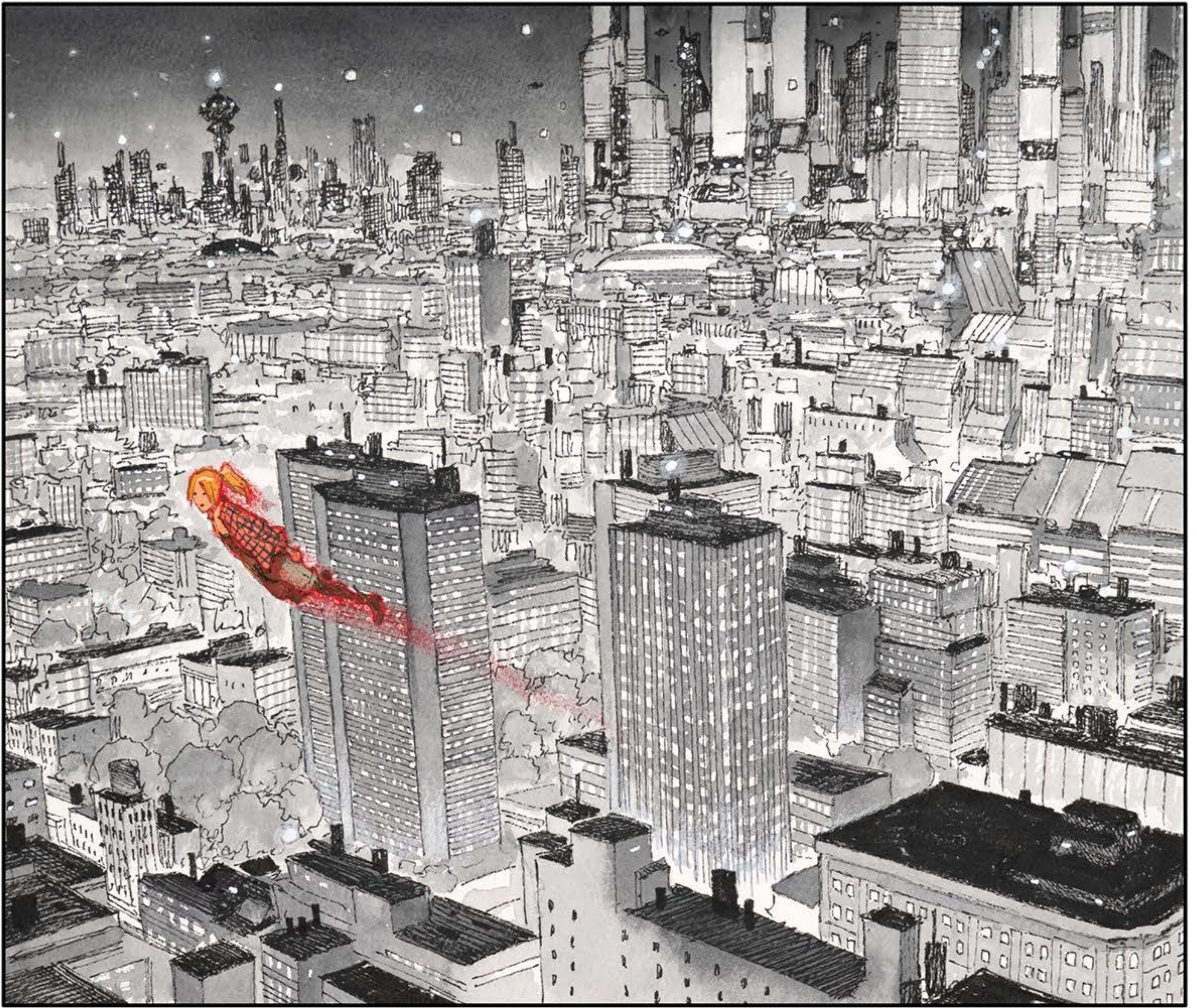


You
best not be
referring
to me.

Don't
engage.

He's
just my
stalker.





Val,
wait!



Go
home,
Sam.

If you end up
on this lunatic's
radar, he'll spend
the next decade
torturing you.

Decade...?



On and off since he doxxed me.

Which is why I strongly suggest you split, before that asshole starts digging up *your* past.



Hey.

The moment ever comes you want me gone for good, say the word.



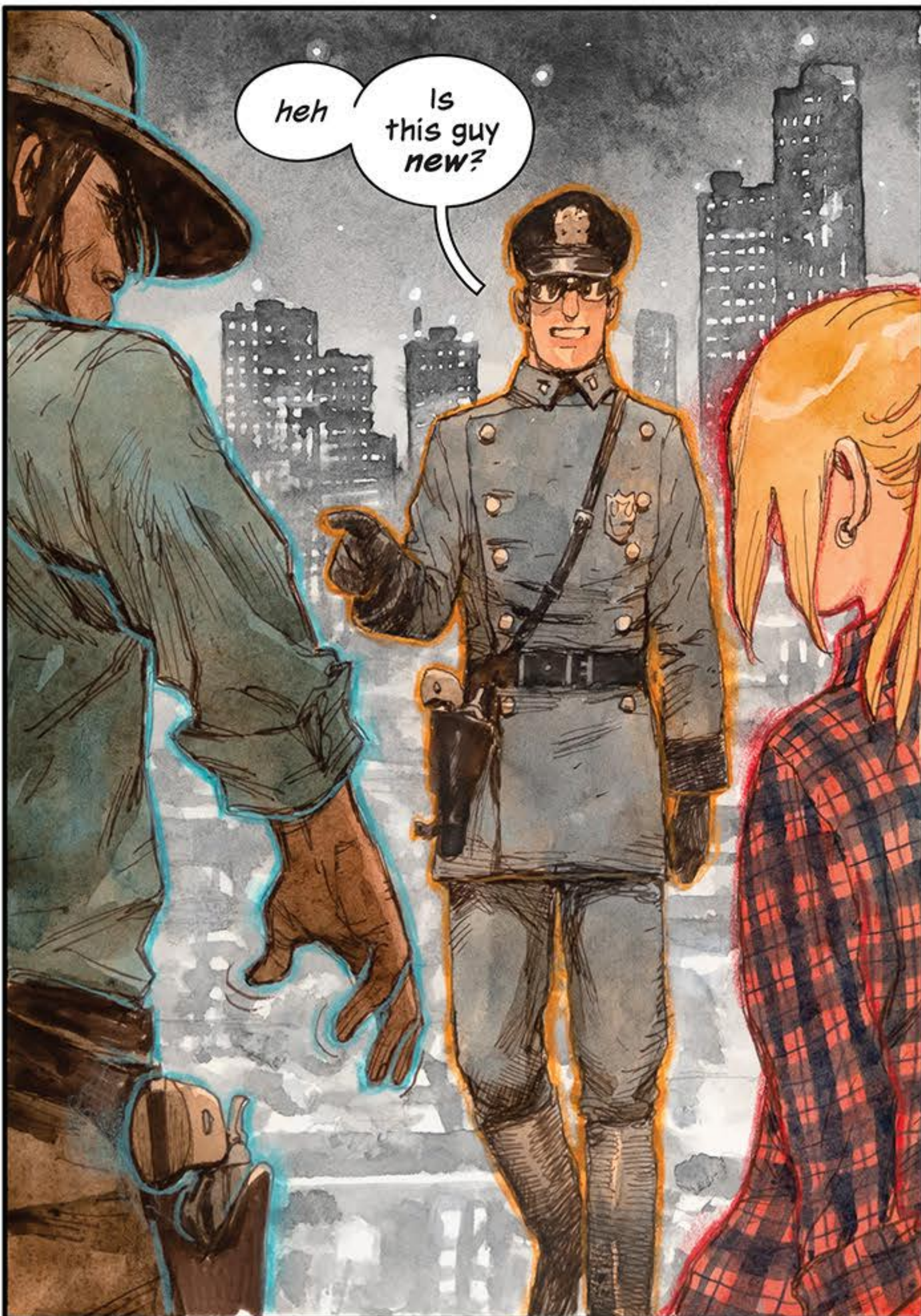
Until then, I ain't leaving your side.

Least not until we've caught our show.



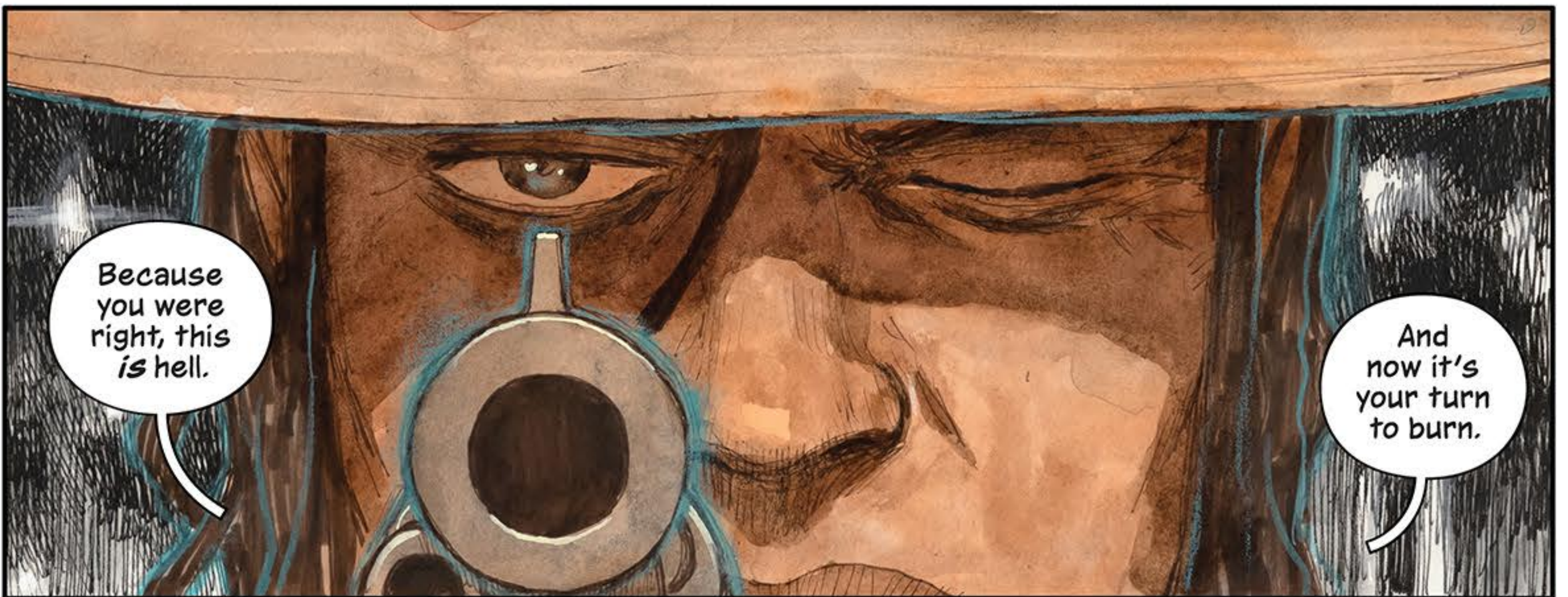
You know what they call a female Peeping Tom?

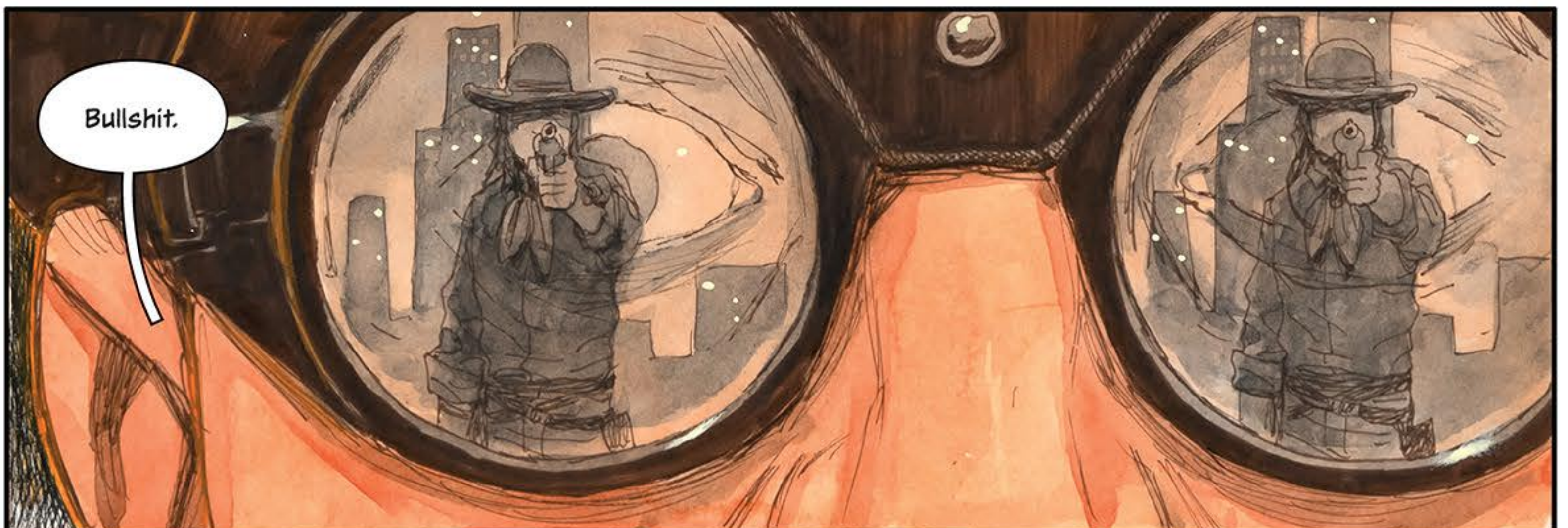




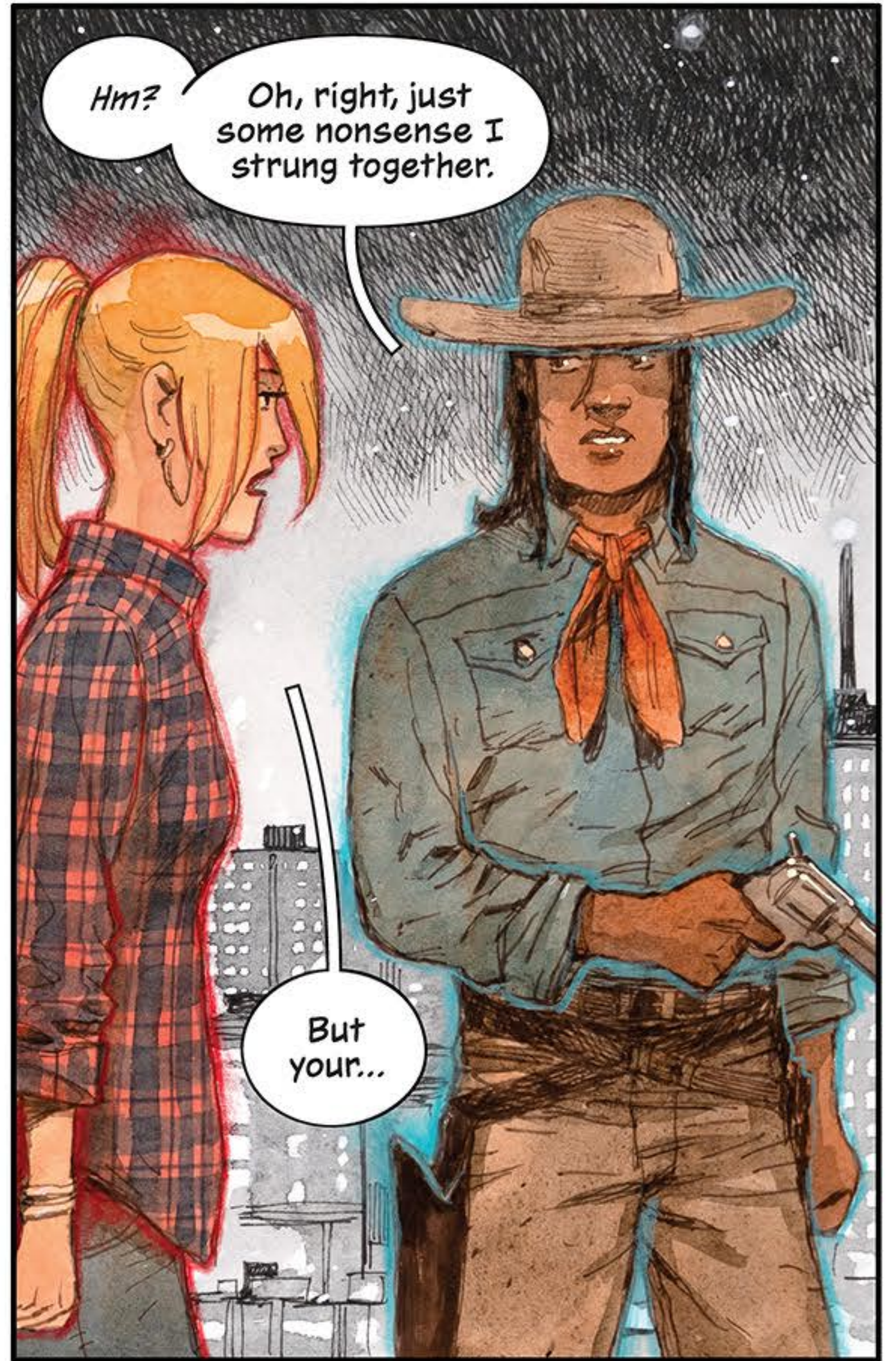
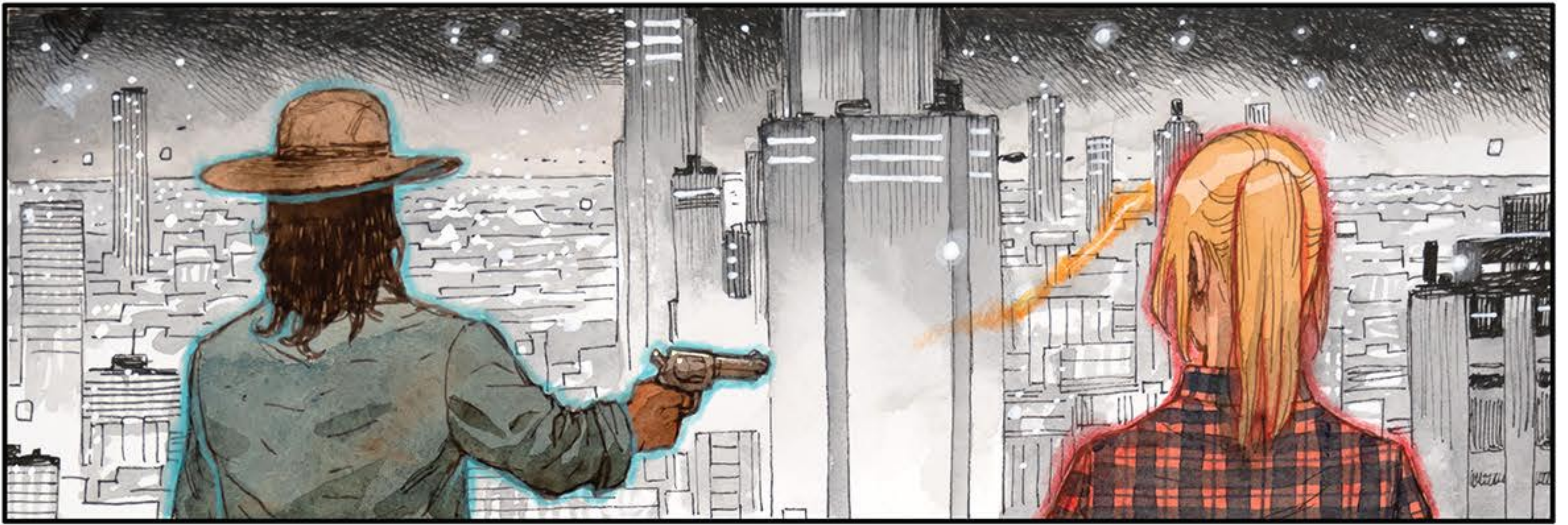
You're threatening a man you can't hurt with a weapon you can't even...













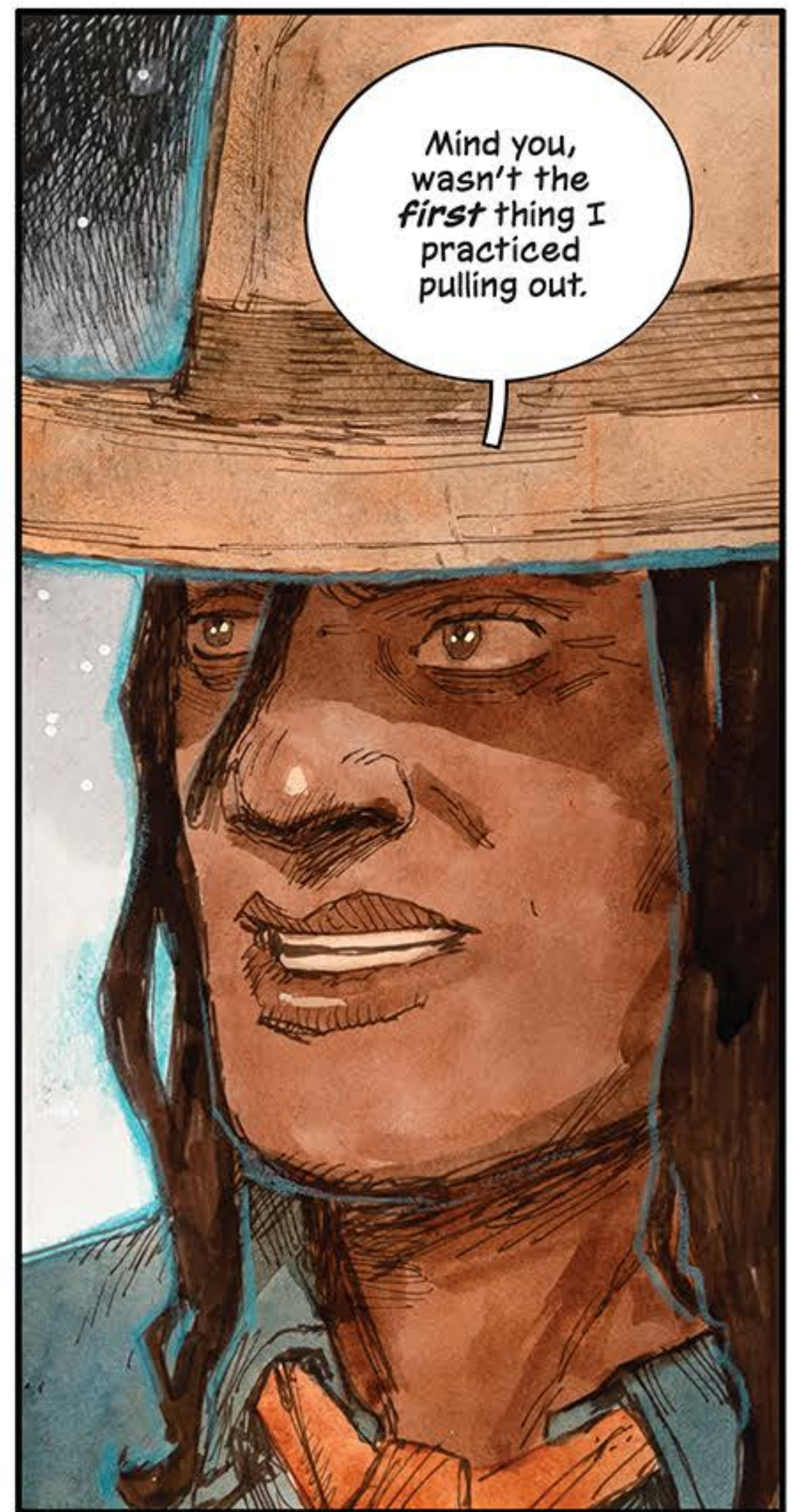
Trick of the light.

Phantasmal sleight of hand.



Enough years of trying, any spirit could learn to do the same.

I finally got the hang of it somewhere between Uranus and Neptune.



Mind you, wasn't the *first* thing I practiced pulling out.



I honestly have no idea if anything you ever say is true...

...and I'm perfectly okay with that.

SARGE!



The nuke, sarge!

They figured out who did it!



Who the fuck is "they," private?

The news!

And not, like, Foxfire or Bāguà or whatever.



This is from *The New York Times*... so it might actually be real, right?



And?
It was motherfucking Red China, wasn't it?

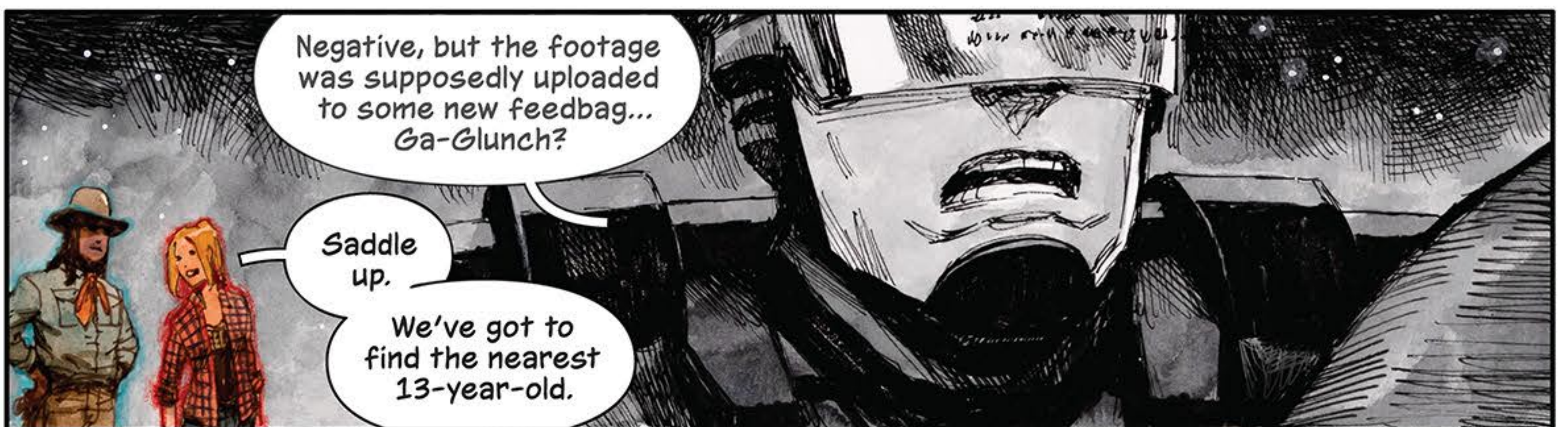
Actually, ma'am, they're calling it *home-grown*.



Americans did this?

And made a damn iWitness of themselves pushing the button.

You've seen it?!



Negative, but the footage was supposedly uploaded to some new feedbag... Ga-Glunch?

Saddle up.

We've got to find the nearest 13-year-old.



They know how to watch everything.

You have, er, someone particular in mind?

You'll be relieved to hear I don't keep tabs on minors.

Not for moral reasons, just because they're all boring as shit.

But like a dozen years ago, I used to follow a bunch of storylines in that apartment building down there.

Some of the sexiest couples ever assembled under one roof, but I had to bail after the selfish jerks all started having kids.

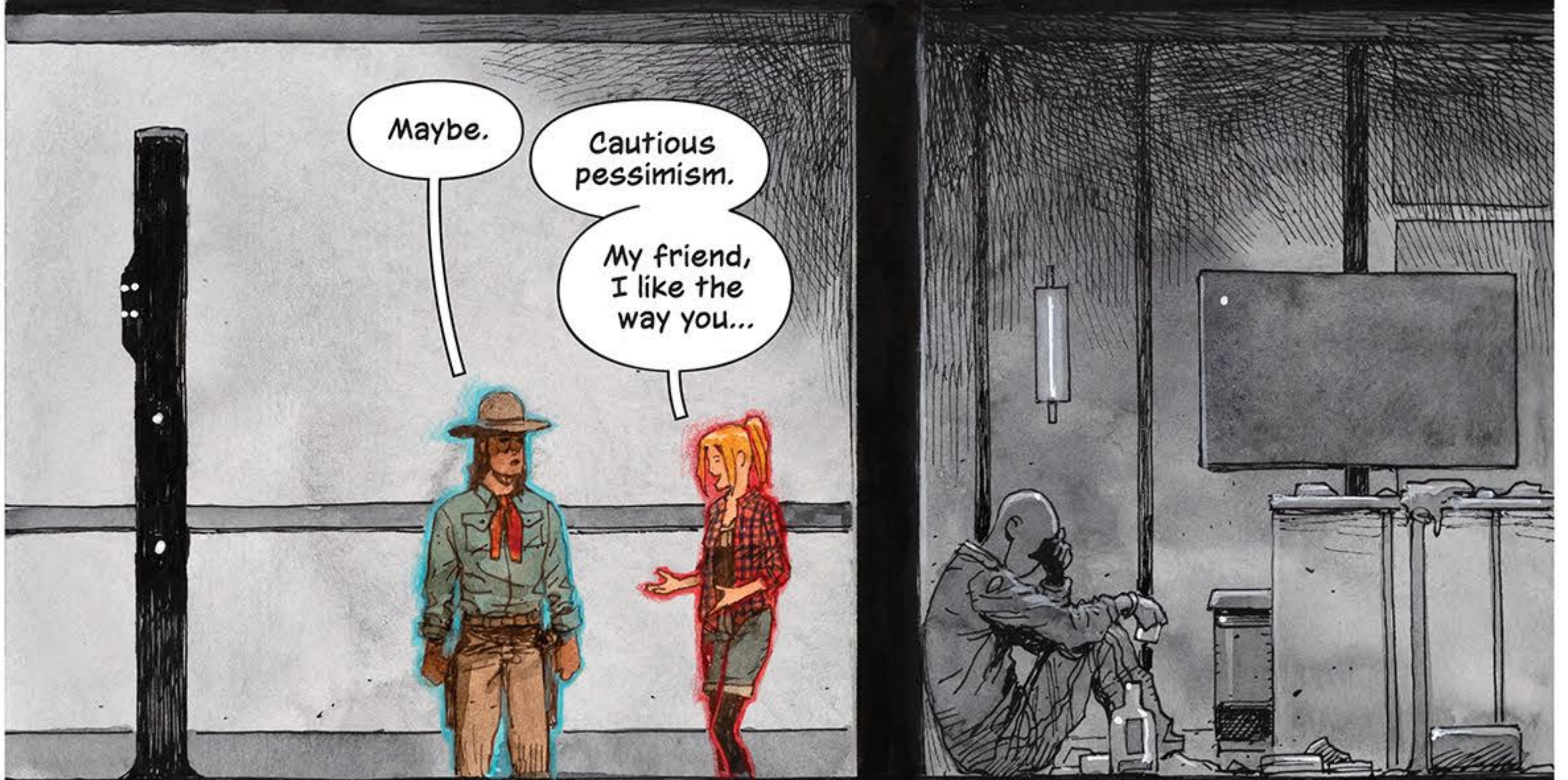
Ah.

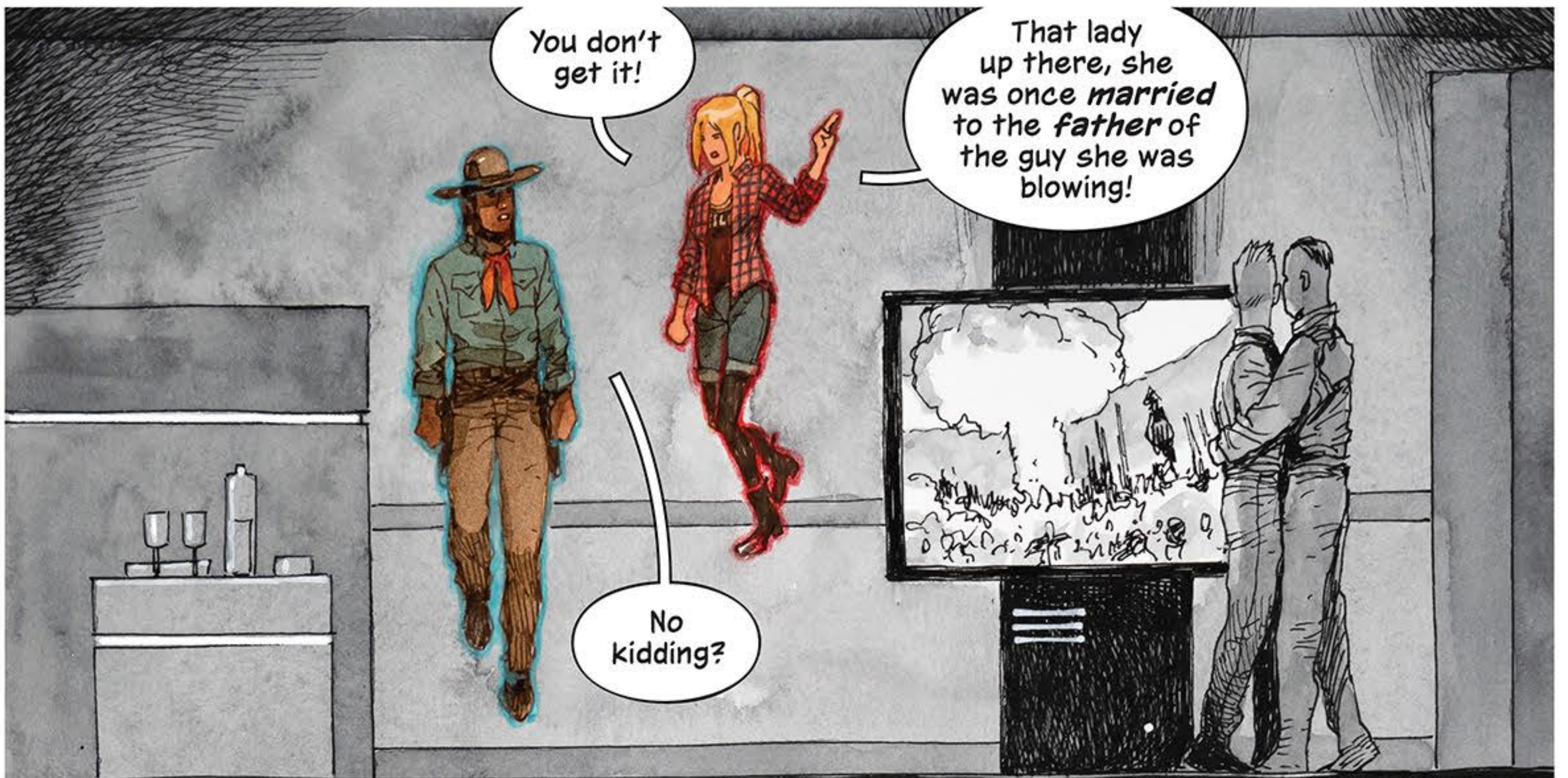
Anyway, fingers crossed one of their spuds has sprouted into someone with access to videos from domestic terrorists.

So you believe it? About Anaheim?

That somebody out there was sick enough to do that to their own people?

UN TOQUE DE QUEDA PARA TODA LA CIUDAD DE NUEVA YORK SIGUE EN EFECTO





You don't get it!

That lady up there, she was once *married* to the *father* of the guy she was blowing!

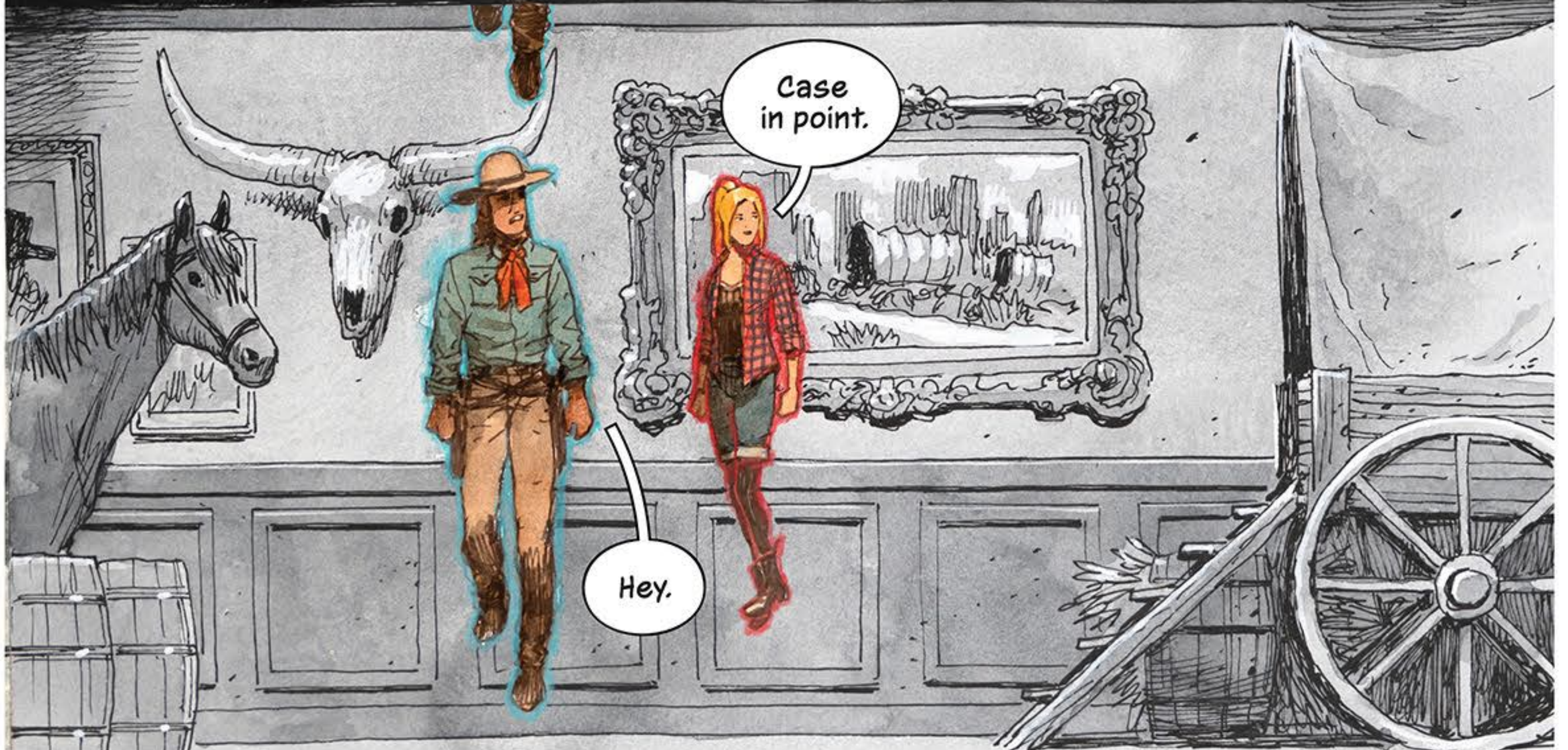
No kidding?



Well, have to figure the threat of apocalypse makes for some... strange bedfellows.

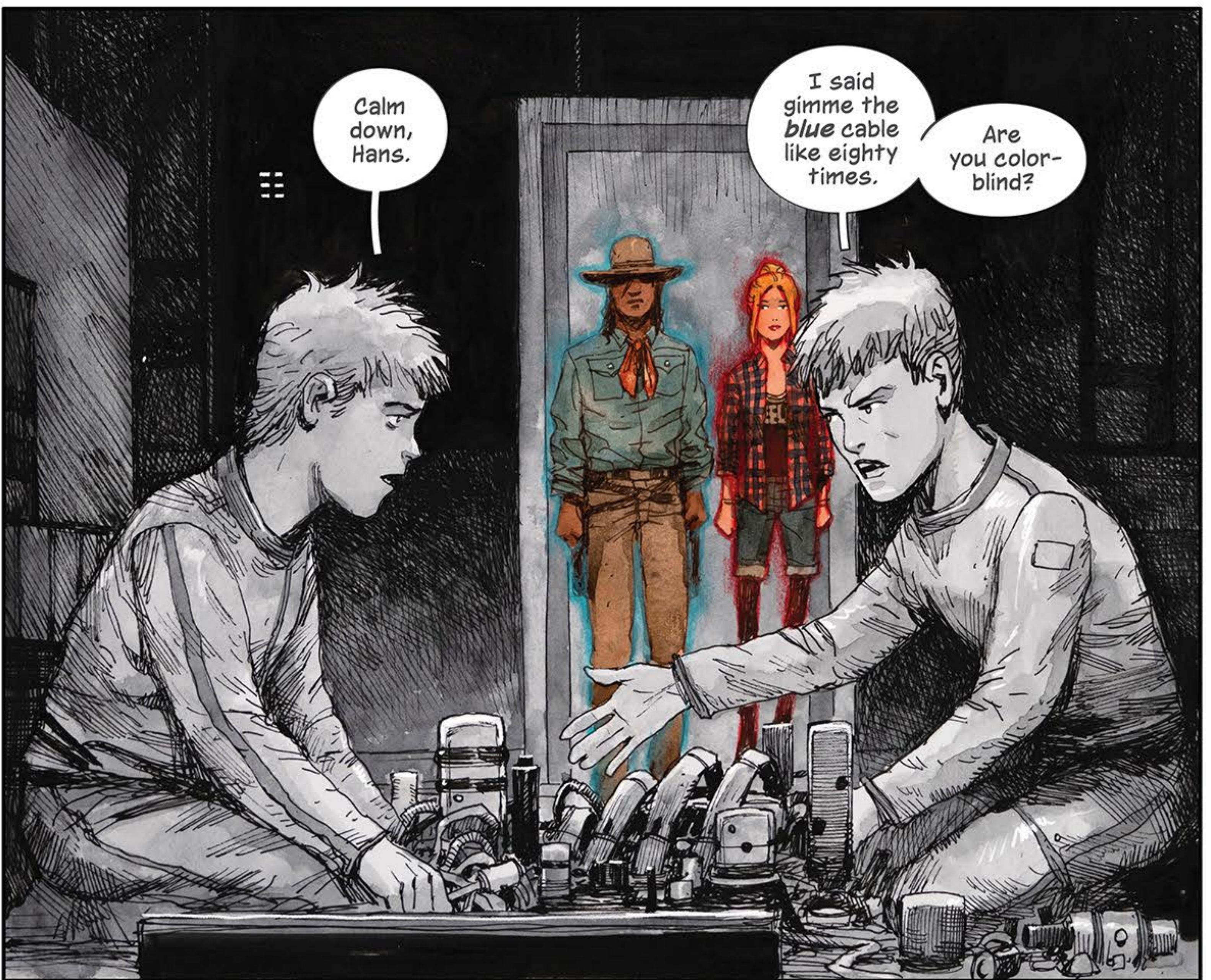
Oh, I bet they were boning long before that mushroom cloud.

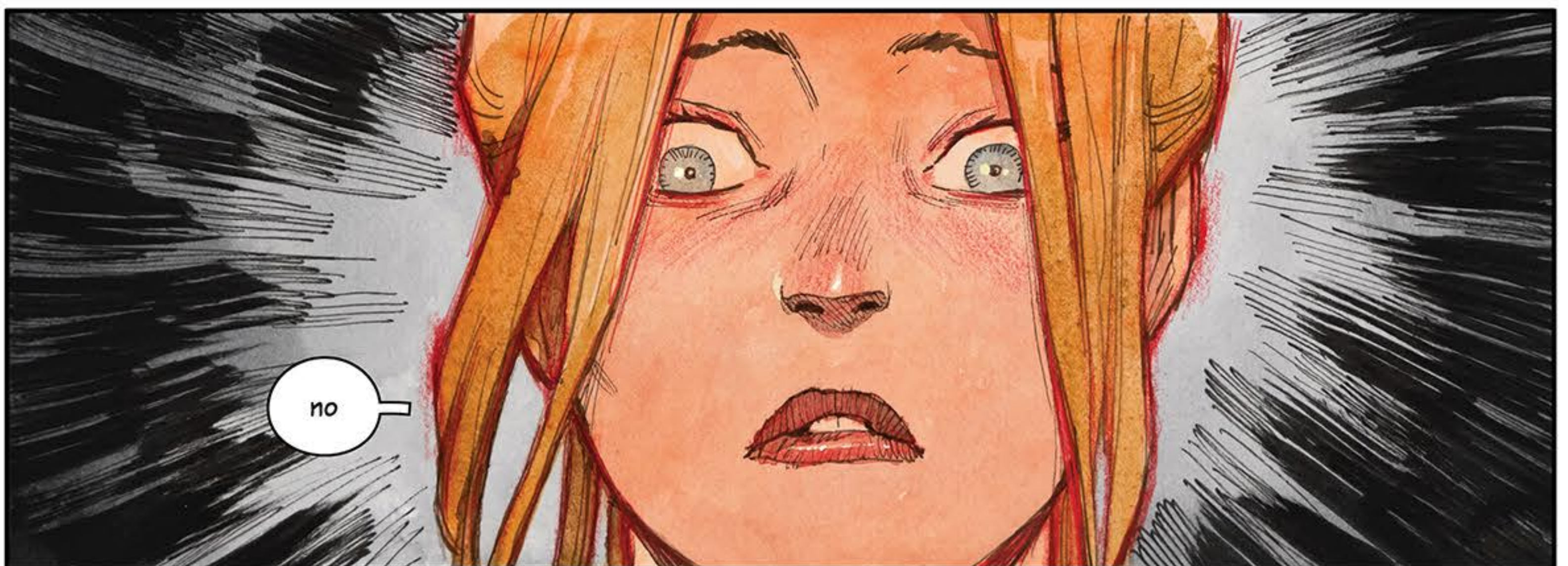
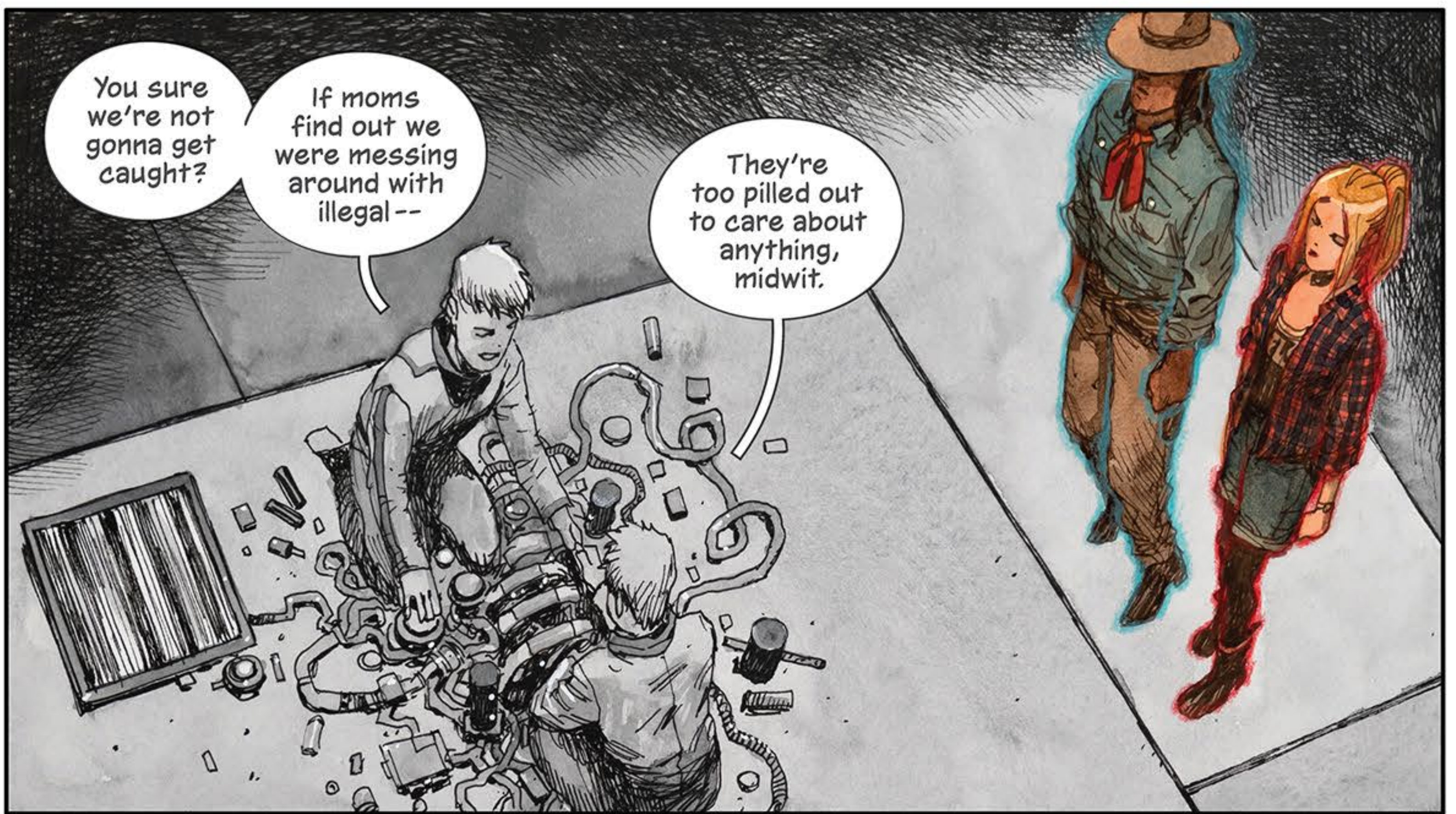
Something about this place just attracts the biggest freaks on the planet.



Case in point.

Hey.







Hiya,
folks!

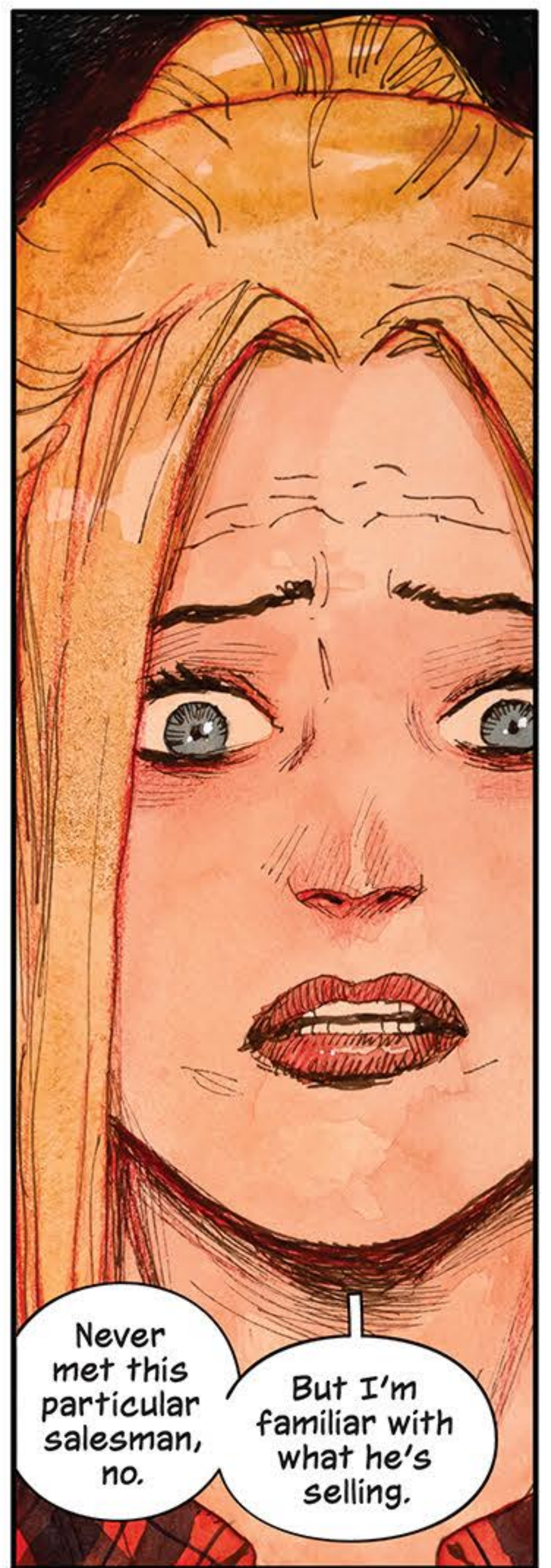
#LEADERBOARD





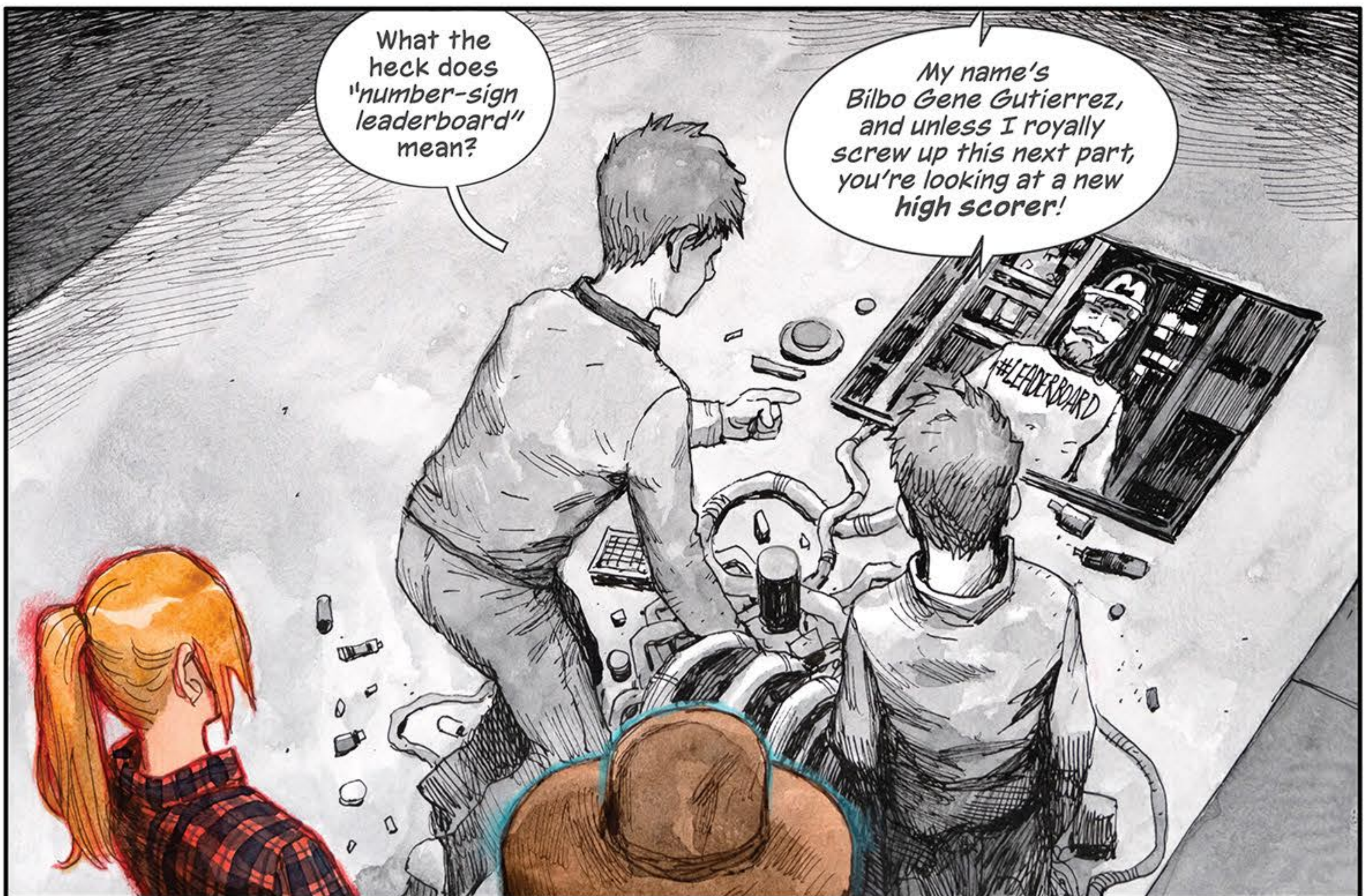
Val?

You don't...
know this guy,
do you?



Never met this particular salesman, no.

But I'm familiar with what he's selling.



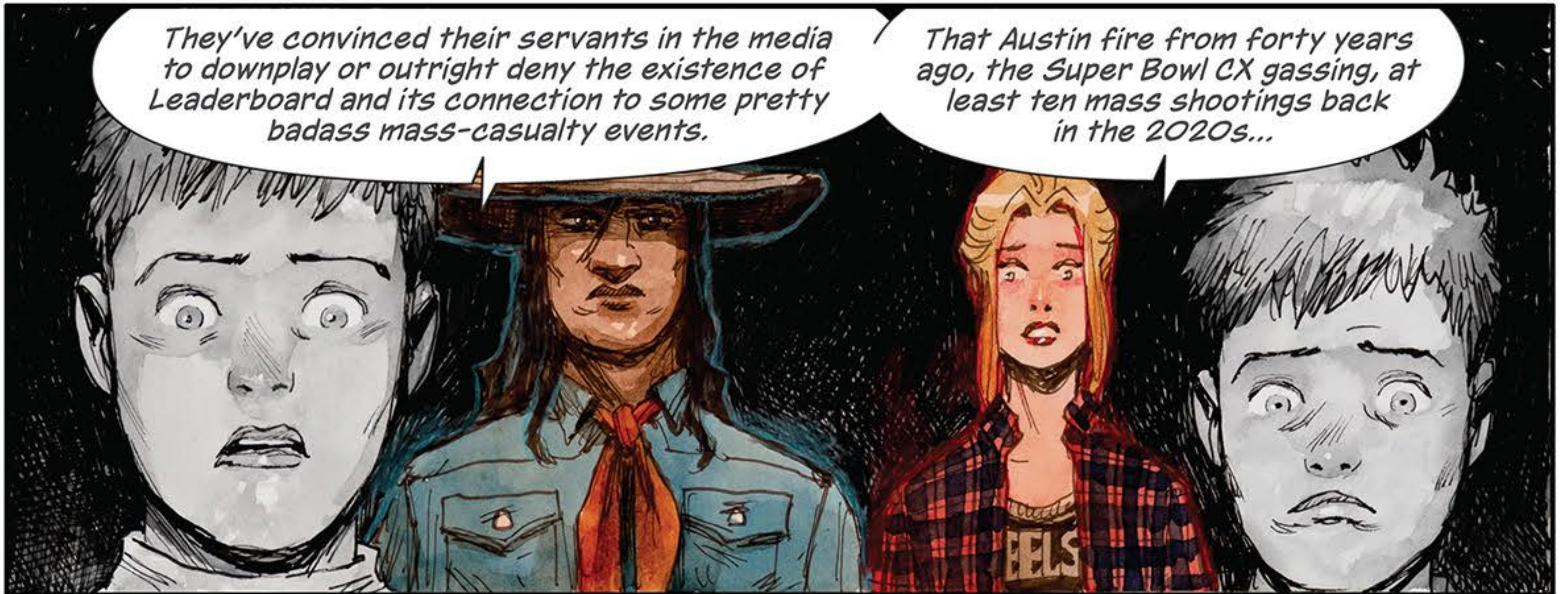
What the heck does "number-sign leaderboard" mean?

My name's Bilbo Gene Gutierrez, and unless I royally screw up this next part, you're looking at a new high scorer!

#LEADERBOARD



For those of you who've never heard of our game, you can thank your freedom-loving government.



They've convinced their servants in the media to downplay or outright deny the existence of Leaderboard and its connection to some pretty badass mass-casualty events.

That Austin fire from forty years ago, the Super Bowl CX gassing, at least ten mass shootings back in the 2020s...

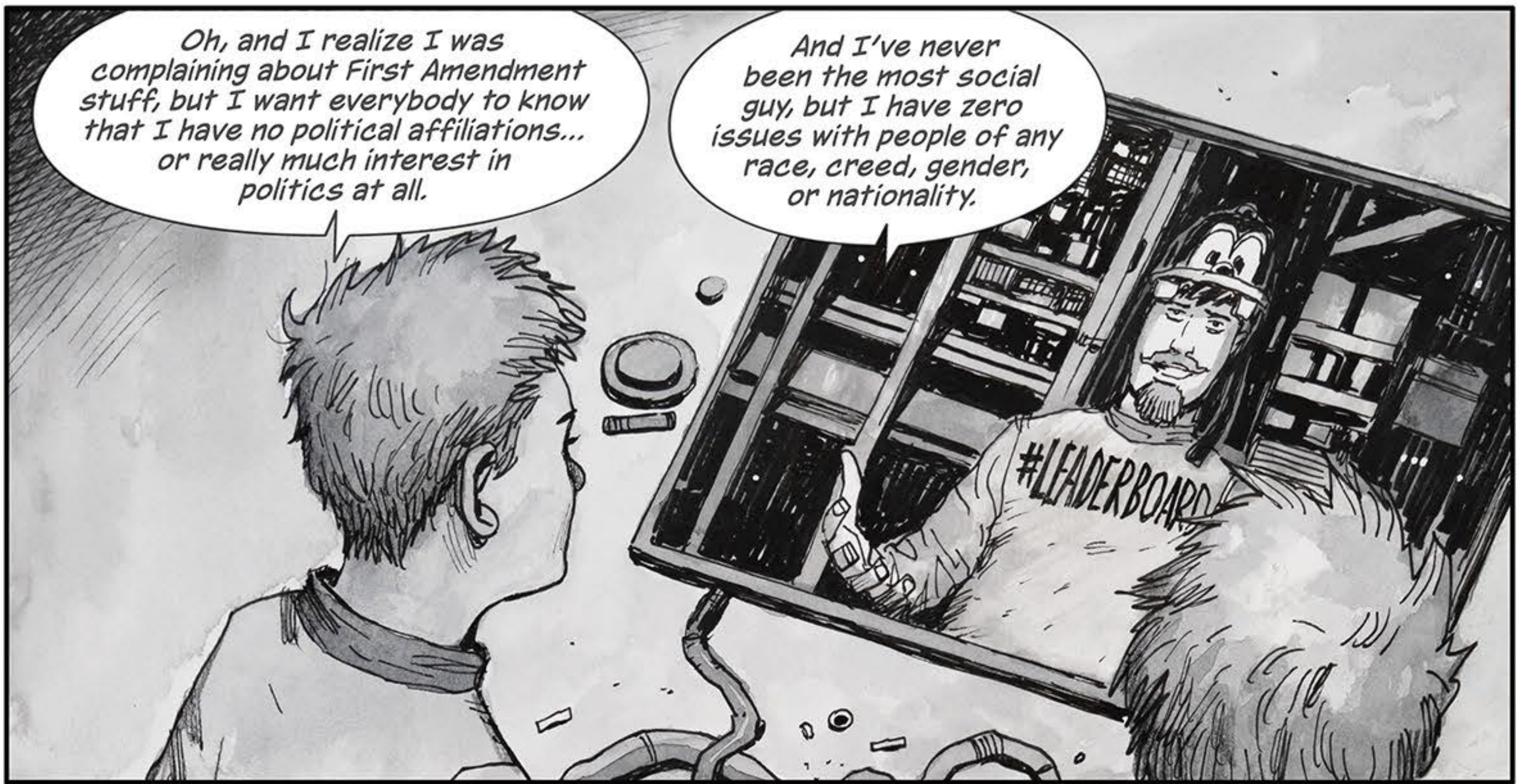


...all done by my fellow players!



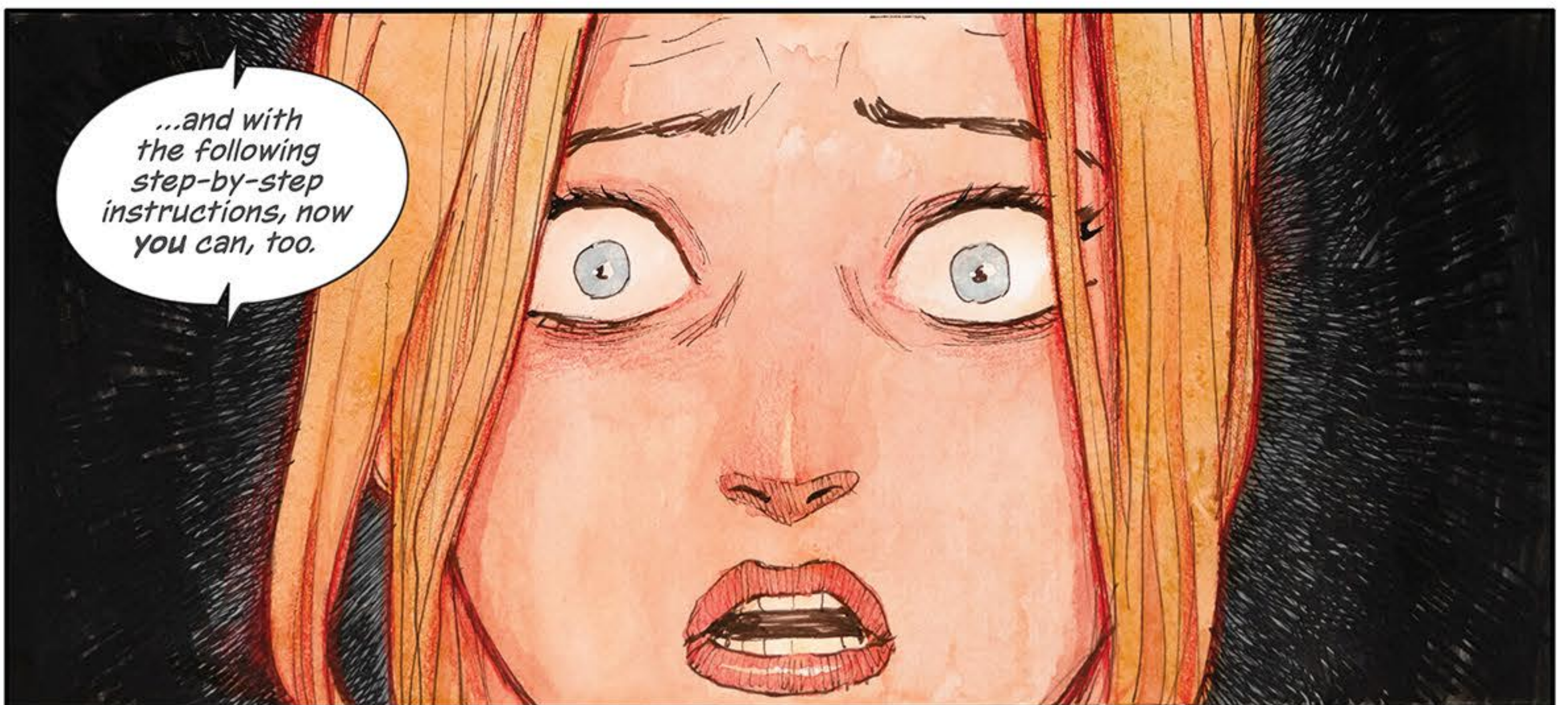
For too long, those brave men -- and like two women -- were denied any recognition outside of what's left of our dedicated little community.

I can only hope that the way I compete today will help bring them all the credit they deserve.

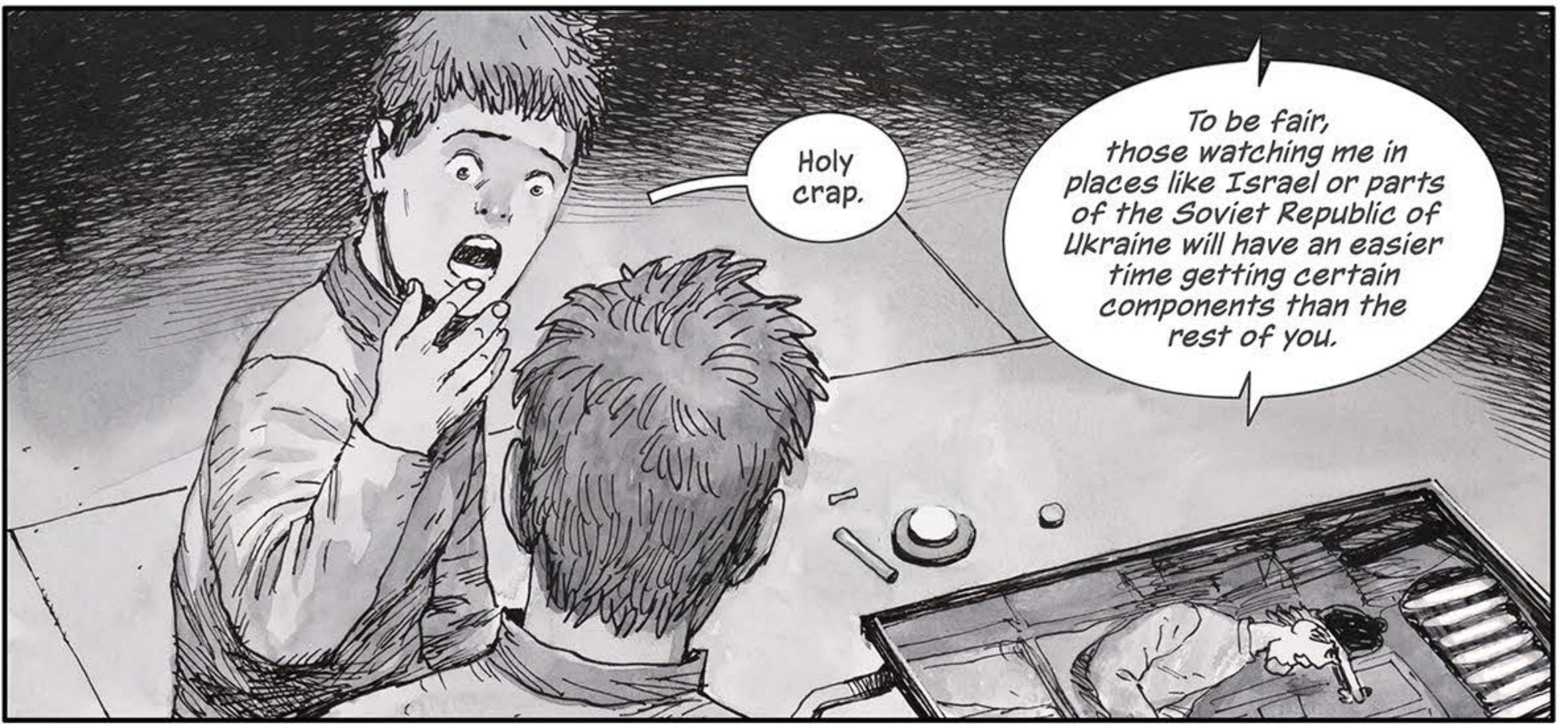




*I built
Fat Boy here
entirely on
my own...*



*...and with
the following
step-by-step
instructions, now
you can, too.*



Holy
crap.

To be fair,
those watching me in
places like Israel or parts
of the Soviet Republic of
Ukraine will have an easier
time getting certain
components than the
rest of you.



Think
I've reached
my limit.

Same.

Still, if an
underemployed college
dropout like me could
assemble all this without
ever leaving the U.S.,
I have faith that...



Sorry, I...
I need to catch
my breath.

You mind
if we take
another walk or
something?

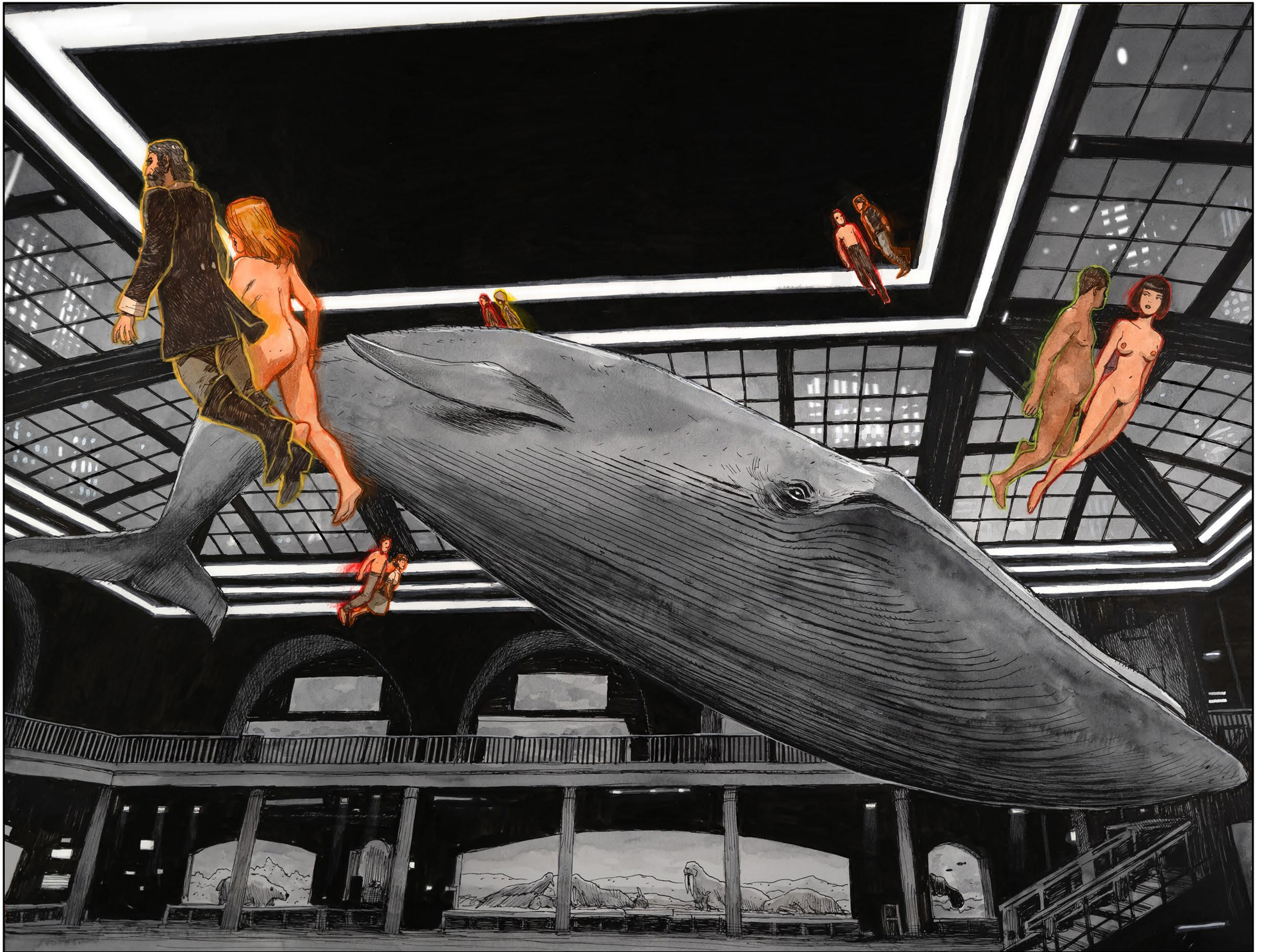
Fuck
a walk.



We
need to take a
motherfucking
ride.









What's the oldest ghost you ever met?



Oldest?

You mean age or era?

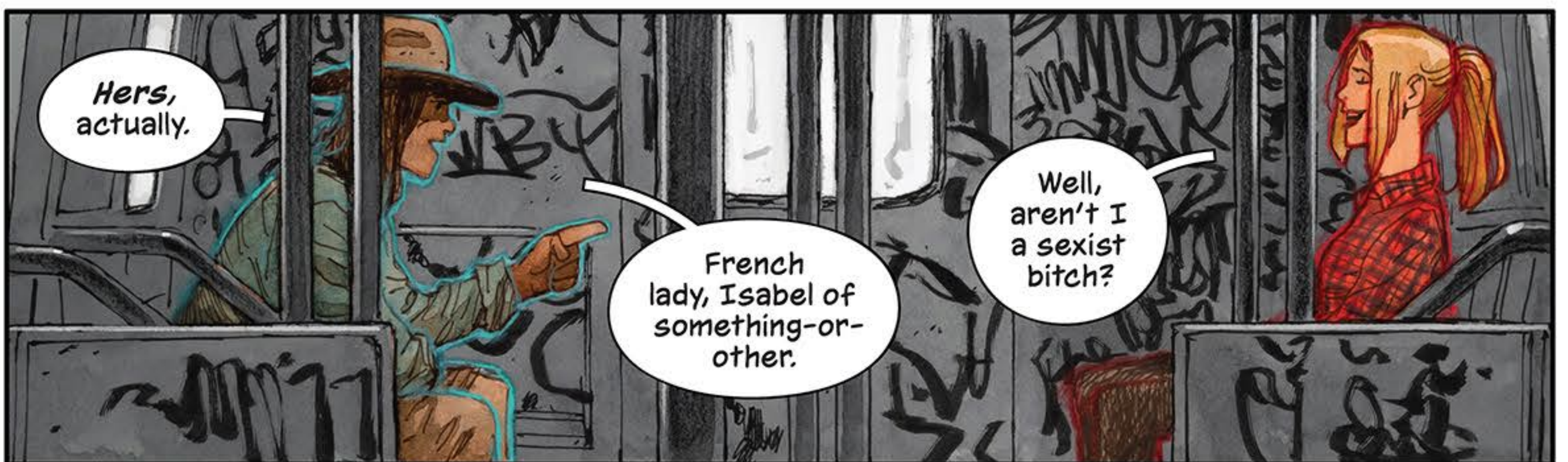
Era, I guess.



Hmn.

I met an honest-to-goodness *knight in shining armor* a few years after I kicked. From around the Tenth Century, if I recall correct.

No shit. You catch his name?



Hers, actually.

French lady, Isabel of something-or-other.

Well, aren't I a sexist bitch?



Interesting gal, joined her brothers on the battlefield in her twenties, then spent the rest of her life in a convent. Spoke about a dozen languages by the time we crossed paths.

Anyway, she mostly wanted to talk about Martians.

As in, the aliens?



Reading over folks' shoulders, Isabel had been keeping up with that *War of the Worlds* book everyone was raving about back then.

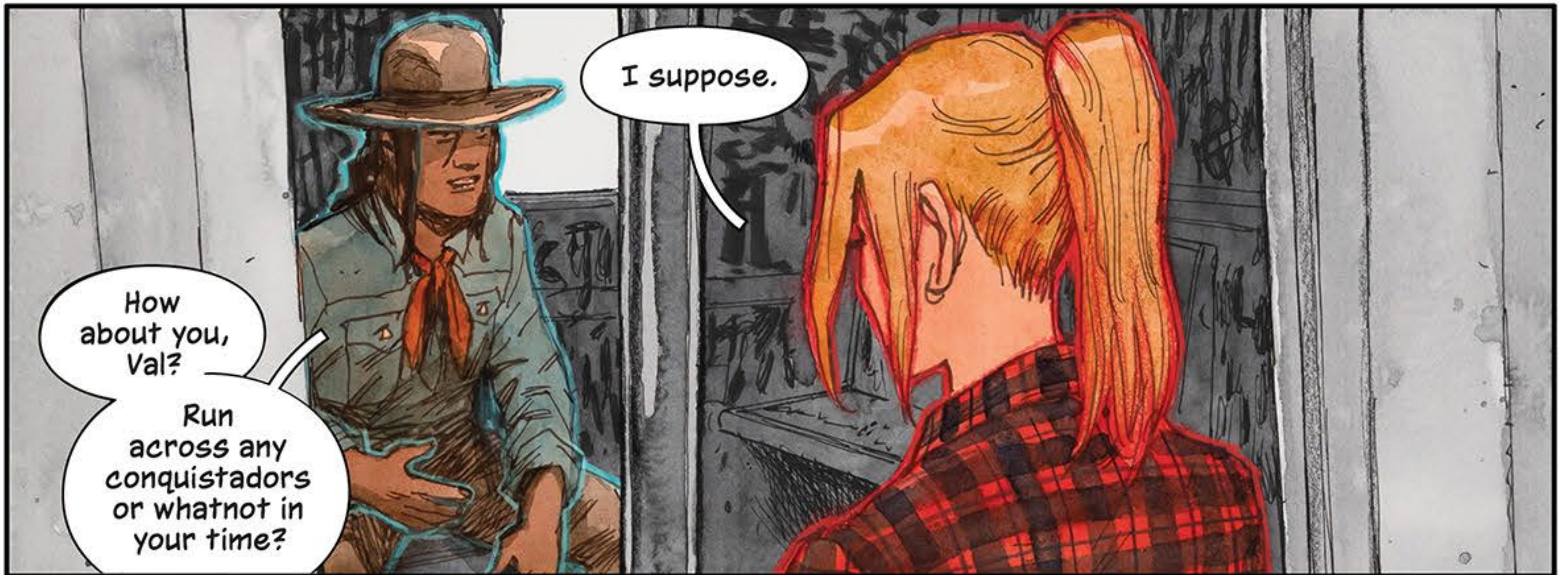
She felt for sure something like that was about to happen for real.



This chick sounds fucking amazing.

Why didn't you two space cadets keep in touch?

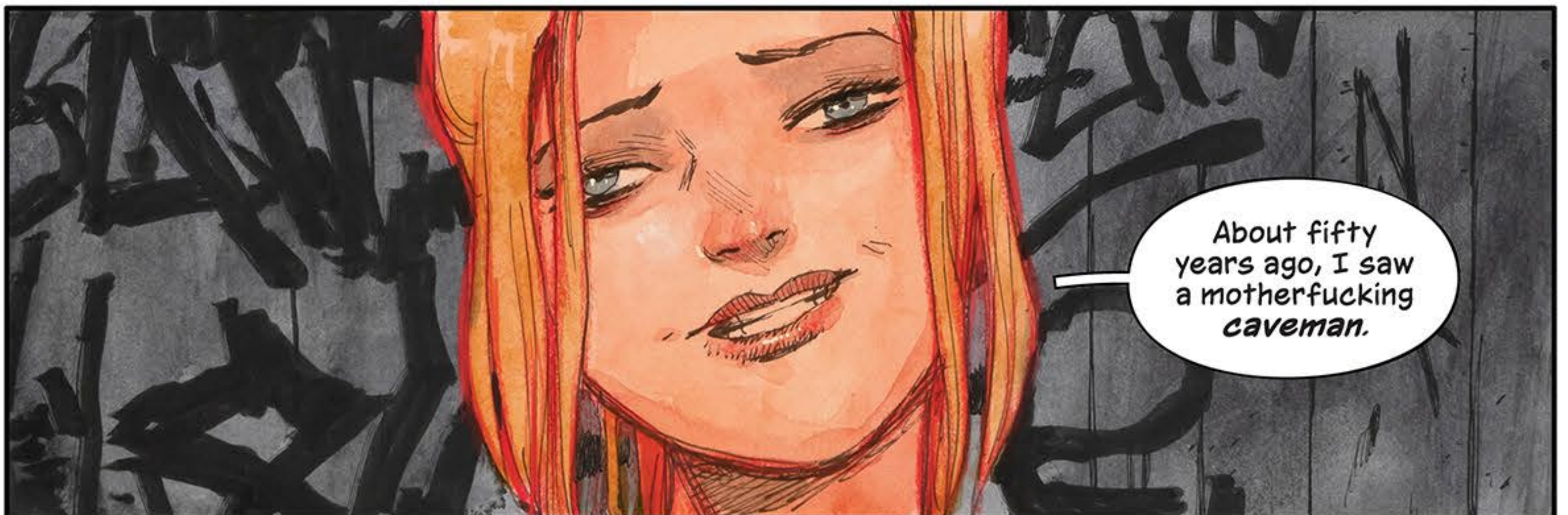
Eh, you know how it goes on this side. Sooner or later, folks tend to mosey on.



I suppose.

How about you, Val?

Run across any conquistadors or whatnot in your time?



About fifty years ago, I saw a motherfucking *caveman*.



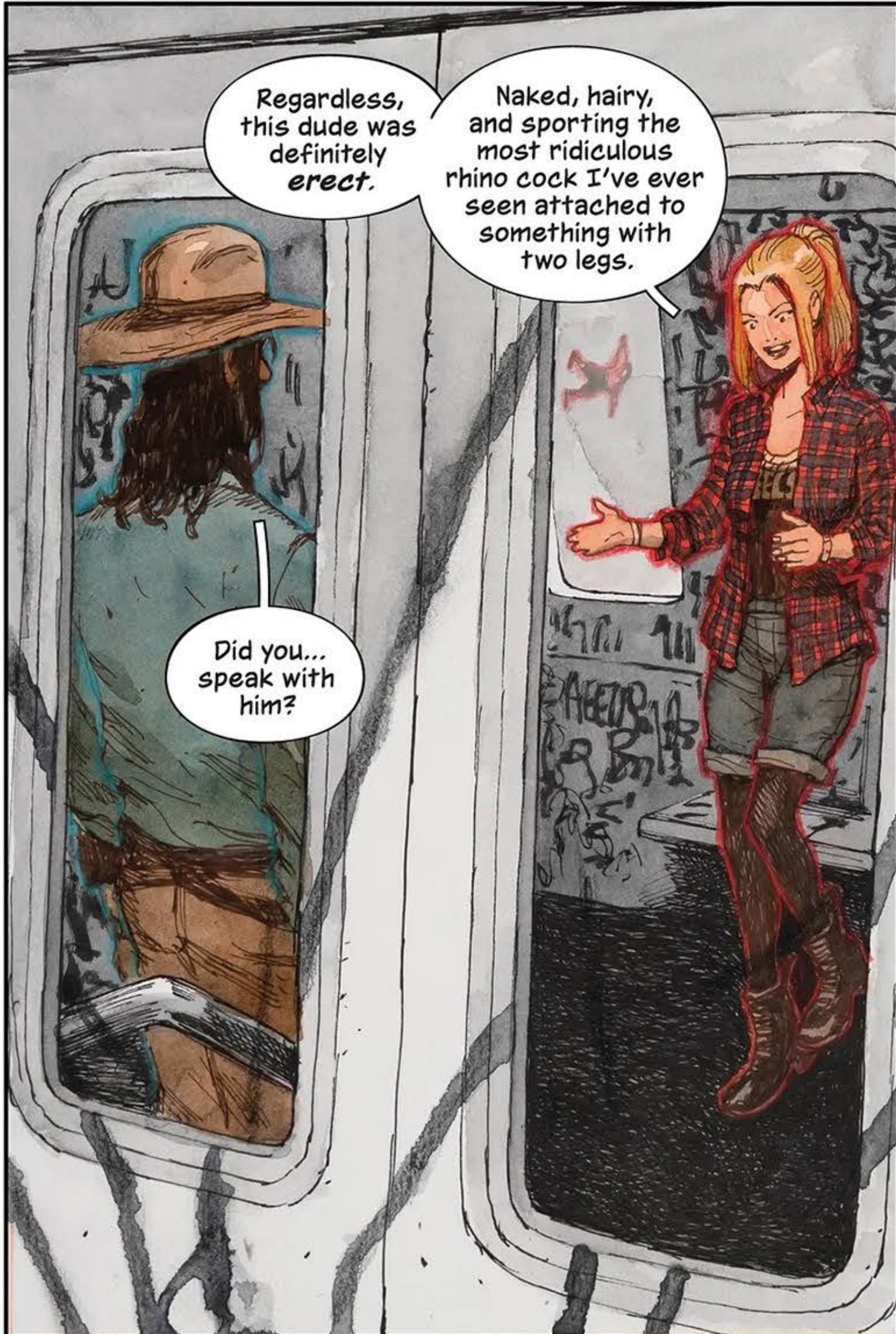
You mean one of those old cliff-dwellers out of Mesa Verde?

Nope, not a Native American, I mean a straight-up *Neanderthal*.



Or maybe it was the one before that.

Homo erectus?



Regardless, this dude was definitely *erect*.

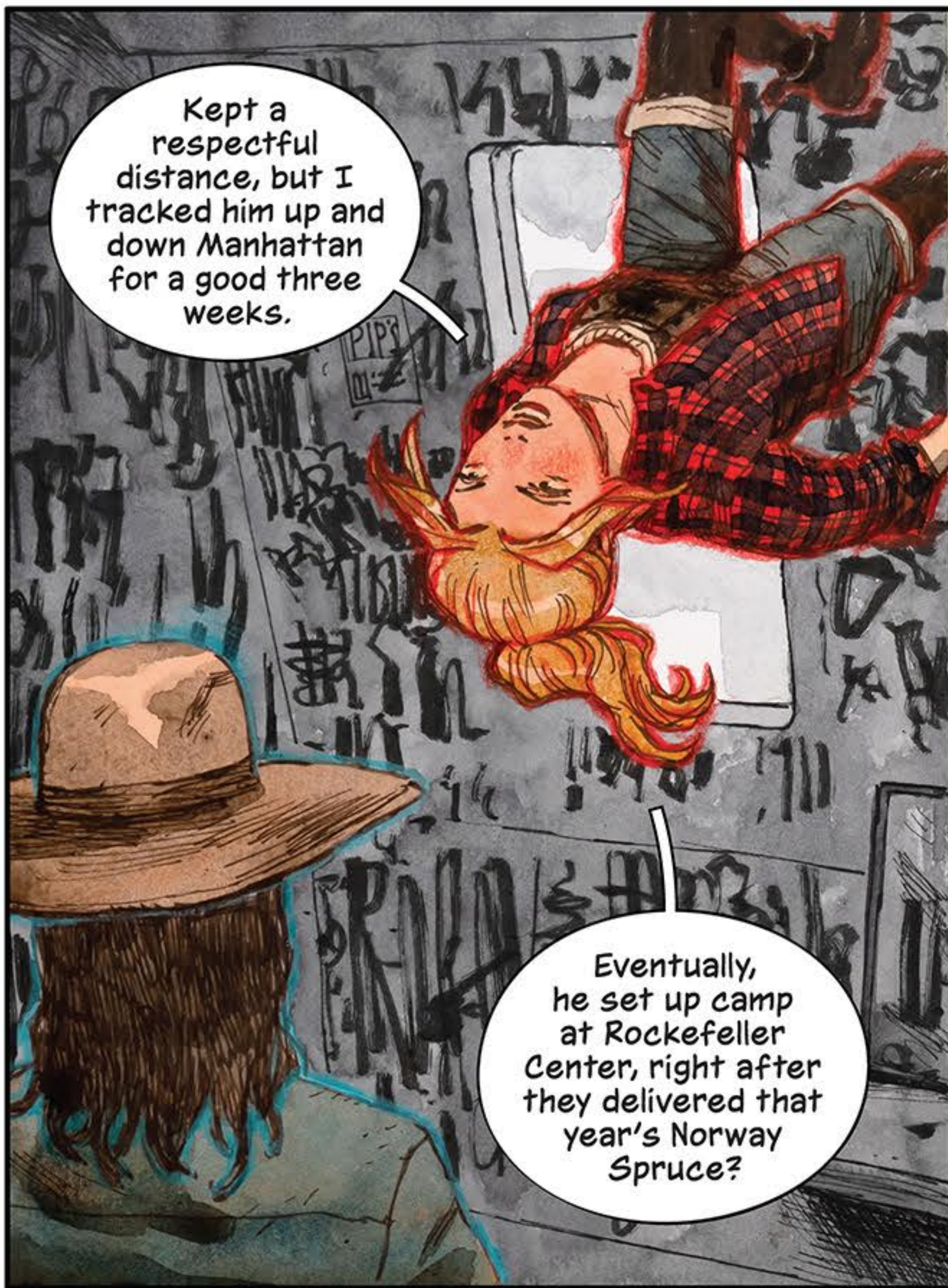
Naked, hairy, and sporting the most ridiculous rhino cock I've ever seen attached to something with two legs.

Did you... speak with him?



I had no idea if he even *could* communicate, and I was honestly too scared to find out.

So instead, I just did what I always do: I watched.



Kept a respectful distance, but I tracked him up and down Manhattan for a good three weeks.

Eventually, he set up camp at Rockefeller Center, right after they delivered that year's Norway Spruce?



Captain Caveman must have seen hundreds of tree-lightings over his centuries, but he seemed especially transfixed by this one.

Day after Christmas, he strolled right into the thing's trunk... and then *poof*, he was totally gone.



I don't know if the beautiful bastard offered himself -- or whatever you call the equivalent of that for our kind -- or if he just sank on down to the Earth's core.

Either way, I never saw him or anyone like him ever again.



... Now I can't tell if *you're* fucking with *me*.

Come on, this is our stop!



Where we headed to next?

Um, to the Chamber of Uncomfortable Revelations?

Uh-oh. Something you looking to get off your chest?

Not to completely unload on you, but I'm still kind of processing what happened back there.

With that mad bomber?

No.

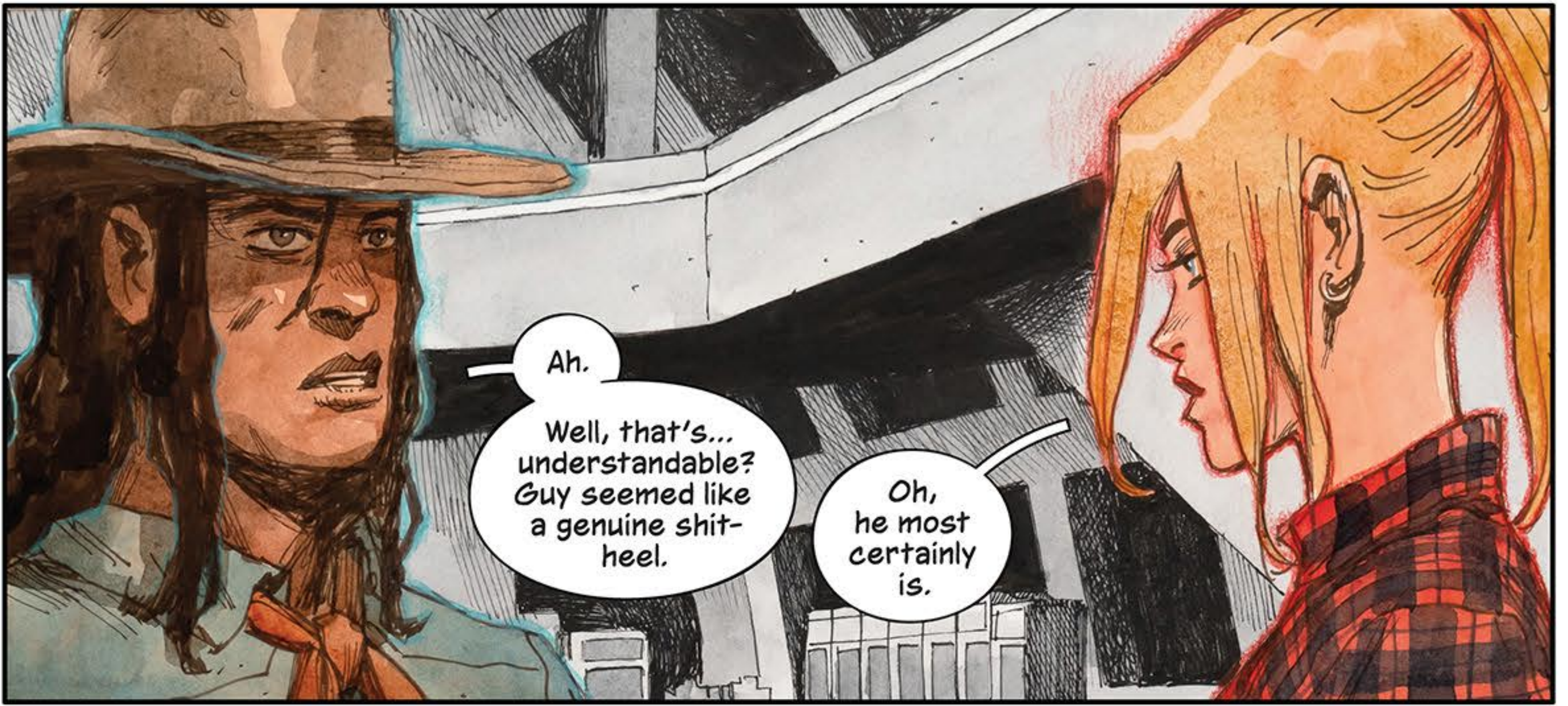
No, I'm most definitely not ready to get into that shitshow yet. I'm talking about Officer Stalks-a-lot.

What about him?

Look, I'm grateful you scared him off, but if I'm being totally honest?

When you didn't shoot him in the face... it kind of broke my heart.





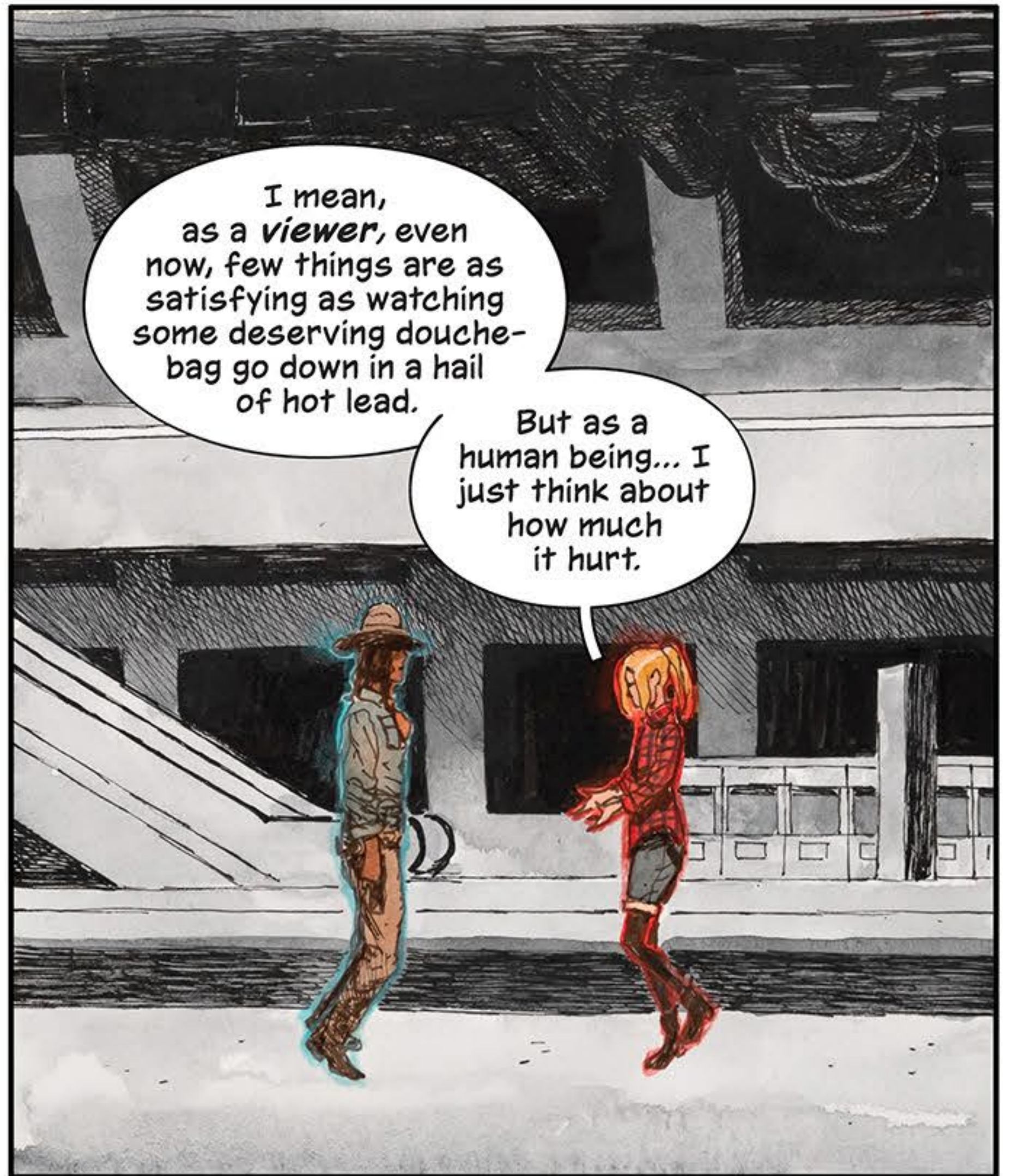
Ah.

Well, that's... understandable? Guy seemed like a genuine shitheel.

Oh, he most certainly is.

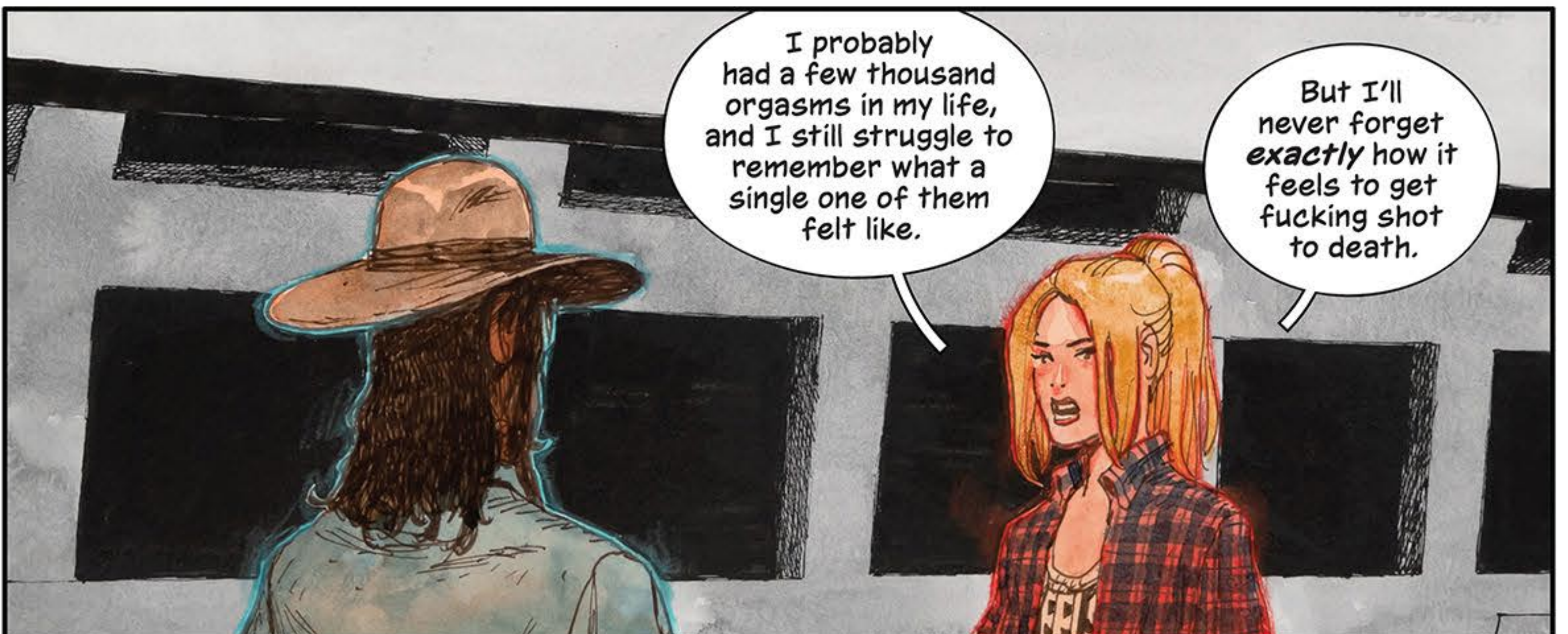


But why the fuck do I still get off on gunplay, considering that's how I ended up here?



I mean, as a *viewer*, even now, few things are as satisfying as watching some deserving douche-bag go down in a hail of hot lead.

But as a human being... I just think about how much it hurt.



I probably had a few thousand orgasms in my life, and I still struggle to remember what a single one of them felt like.

But I'll never forget *exactly* how it feels to get fucking shot to death.

The whole experience only lasted a few seconds, but it seemed like a goddamn infinite number of eternities.

And not the fun, life-flashing-before-your-eyes kind, you know?



At first, it was like that time my older brother pegged me in the back with a snowball that was more ice than snow.



Knocked the wind out of me, but not the end of the world, right?



But then came the burn.

I don't know how else to describe it, but it felt like there was a... a *snake* inside of me, a snake made of *fire*. And I could feel its teeth ripping and tearing through every organ.

I just wanted to be dead, but my body had never felt more alive, every nerve scrambling to somehow make this unbelievable new pain somehow please, please *stop*.





And when it was finally over, it had really only just begun.

Because I still had all the memories, memories of the kind of suffering I would never wish on another human being.



But you know what, Sam?

Over the years, I have wished *exactly* that same suffering on so, so many other people.



Fuck. Sorry.

Come on now, you got nothing to apologize for.

I don't mean to dump all my trauma on you, especially because you probably saw your own share of horrific gun stuff back in the day.



Please.

Only time I ever saw somebody take a bullet was in the moving pictures.

Seriously?

Hollywood to the contrary, gunfights -- in the manner of the O.K. Corral or otherwise -- weren't exactly commonplace.

Forgive me for making unsound assumptions, Dude Open-carrying Multiple Firearms.

Don't get me wrong, I saw my share of violence, but none involving ammunition, which was both costly and imprecise.

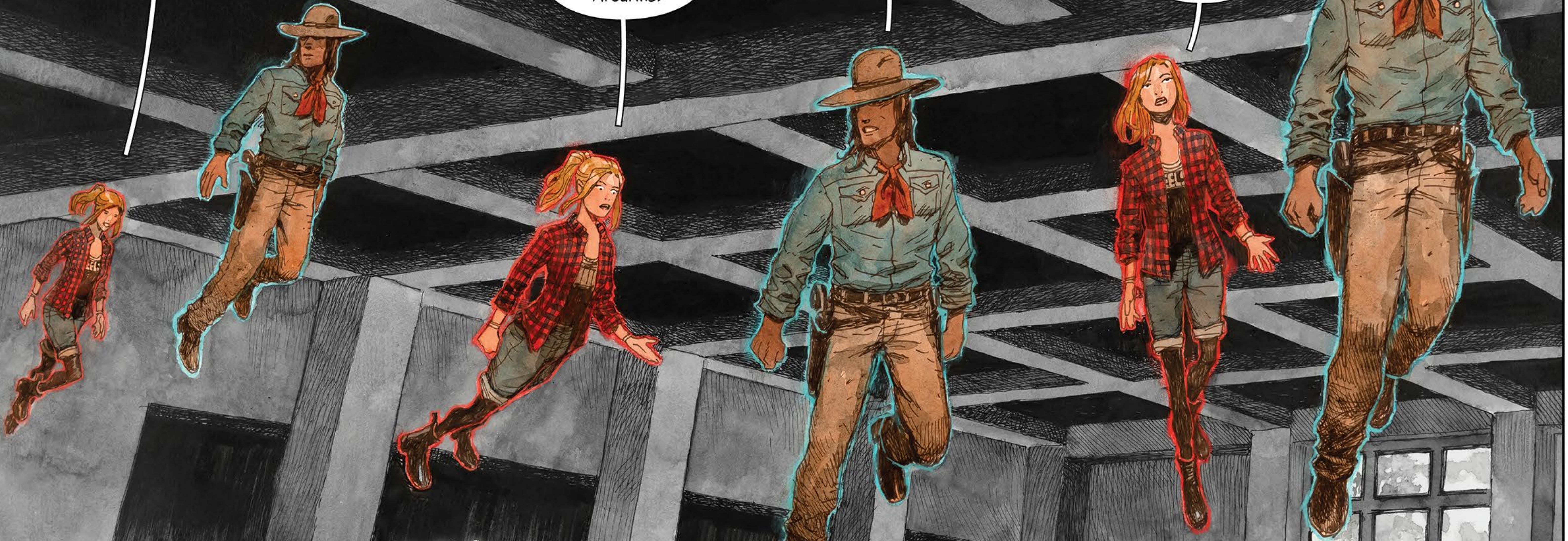
Man who taught me to drive cattle said I wouldn't even have to *load* these things for them to scare off rustlers.

Mind you, I still did, but in almost thirty years of riding point, only shots I ever fired were into suffering animals.

But like you, I'm sure I felt the occasional compulsion to do the same to well men.

And before that, you never even witnessed any, you know... *battles?*

FROM FOSSIL FUELS





Val, are you really asking me what role I played in the *Civil War*?

Why, is my timeline totally off... or is that just a wildly insensitive subject for someone like me to even bring up?

Or both?

By the time Appomattox finally came to pass, I was still a child.

Beyond that, I'd just as soon not elaborate.

Shit, it was both.

Are you done with me forever?

Nah, just with this part of the ride.

What say we move on from your corridors of disquietude?

TO FRENETICS



Chamber of Uncomfortable Revelations!

And fine, you have a less contentious destination in mind?

Somewhere we could resume our *noble pursuit*, directly across the way, in fact.



Central Park?

The Ramble, more specifically.

I know it's late, but unless that patch of land has changed significantly since my last visit, it might have what we've been looking for.



No "might" about it.

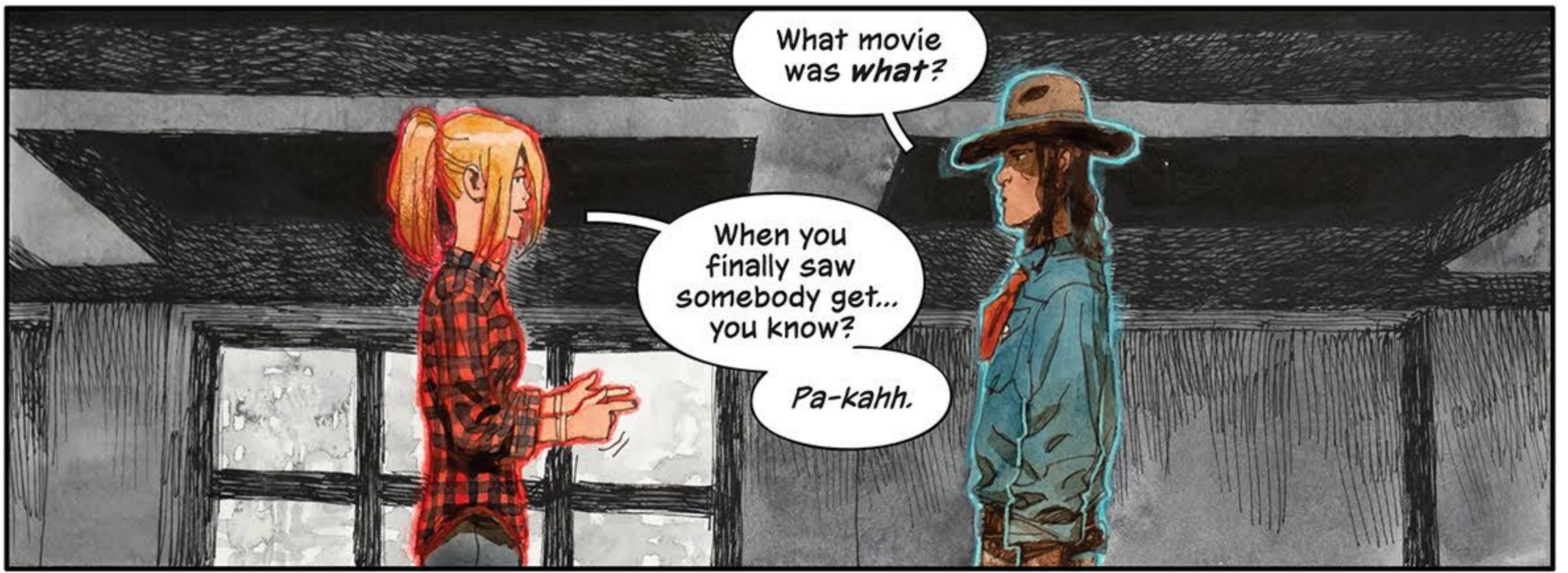
Sure, I suppose we could catch humanity's final three-way there.

You suddenly sound... unenthused.



Look, I still want to watch a triumvirate fuck, Sam, and I want to watch it with you.

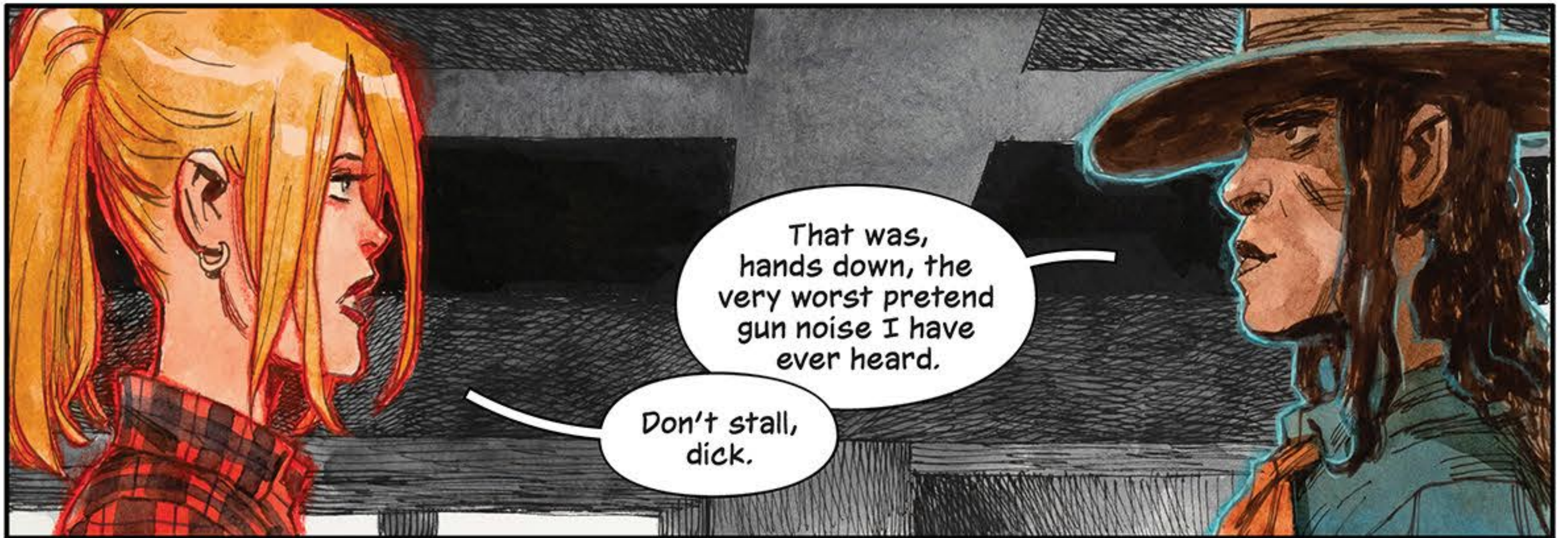
But first, I really have to know: what movie was it?



What movie was *what*?

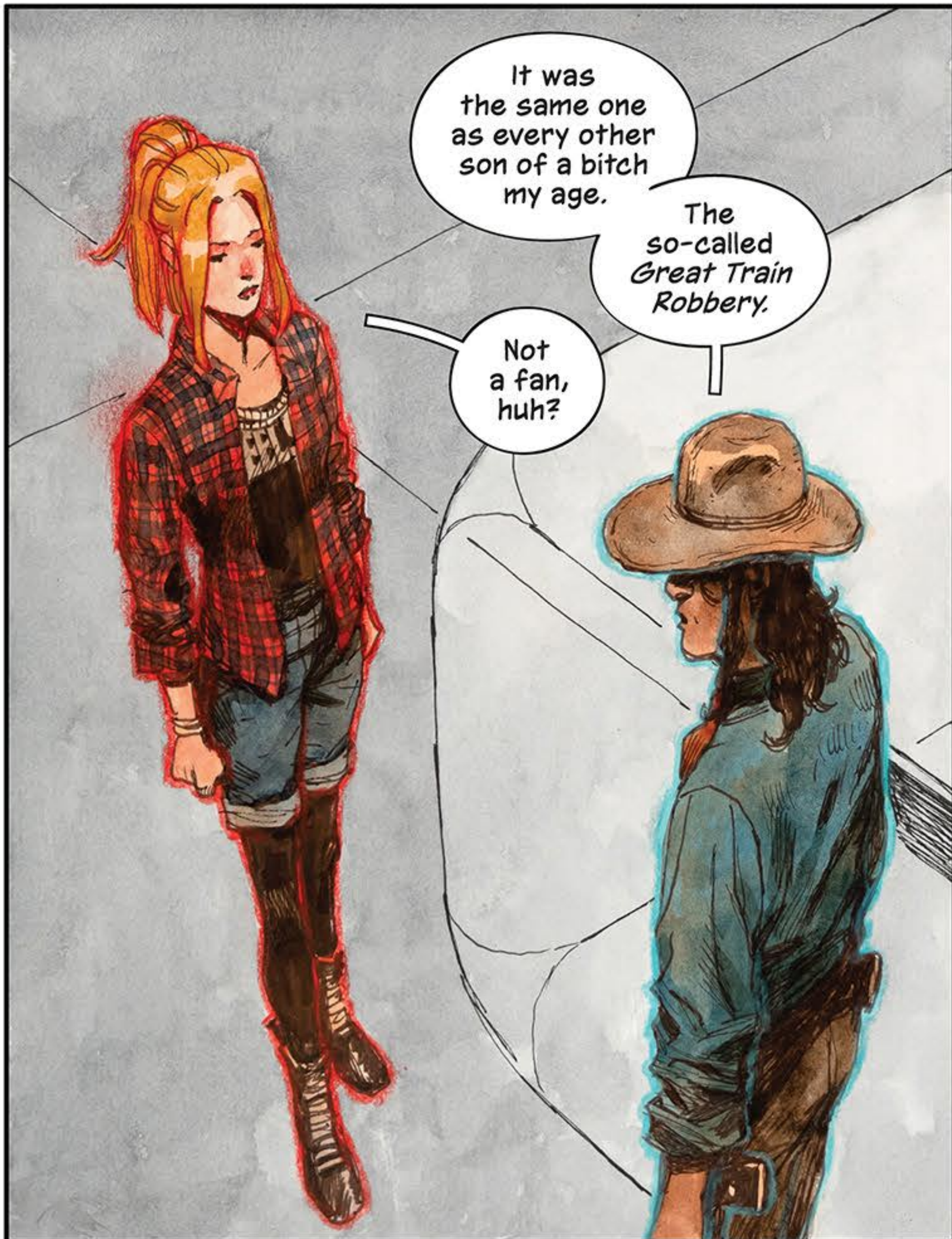
When you finally saw somebody get... you know?

Pa-kahh.



That was, hands down, the very worst pretend gun noise I have ever heard.

Don't stall, dick.



It was the same one as every other son of a bitch my age.

The so-called *Great Train Robbery*.

Not a fan, huh?



Oh, the musical accompaniment was fine, and I was as gobsmacked by the imagery as the rest of my balcony.

Then came that final shot.



Hell, I'd never seen anything like it.



Not from that point of view, obviously.



I'll never forget his expression as he pulled that trigger.



So absurdly calm, you know?



Yeah.
I know.



Anyway, fuck that gimmicky shit.

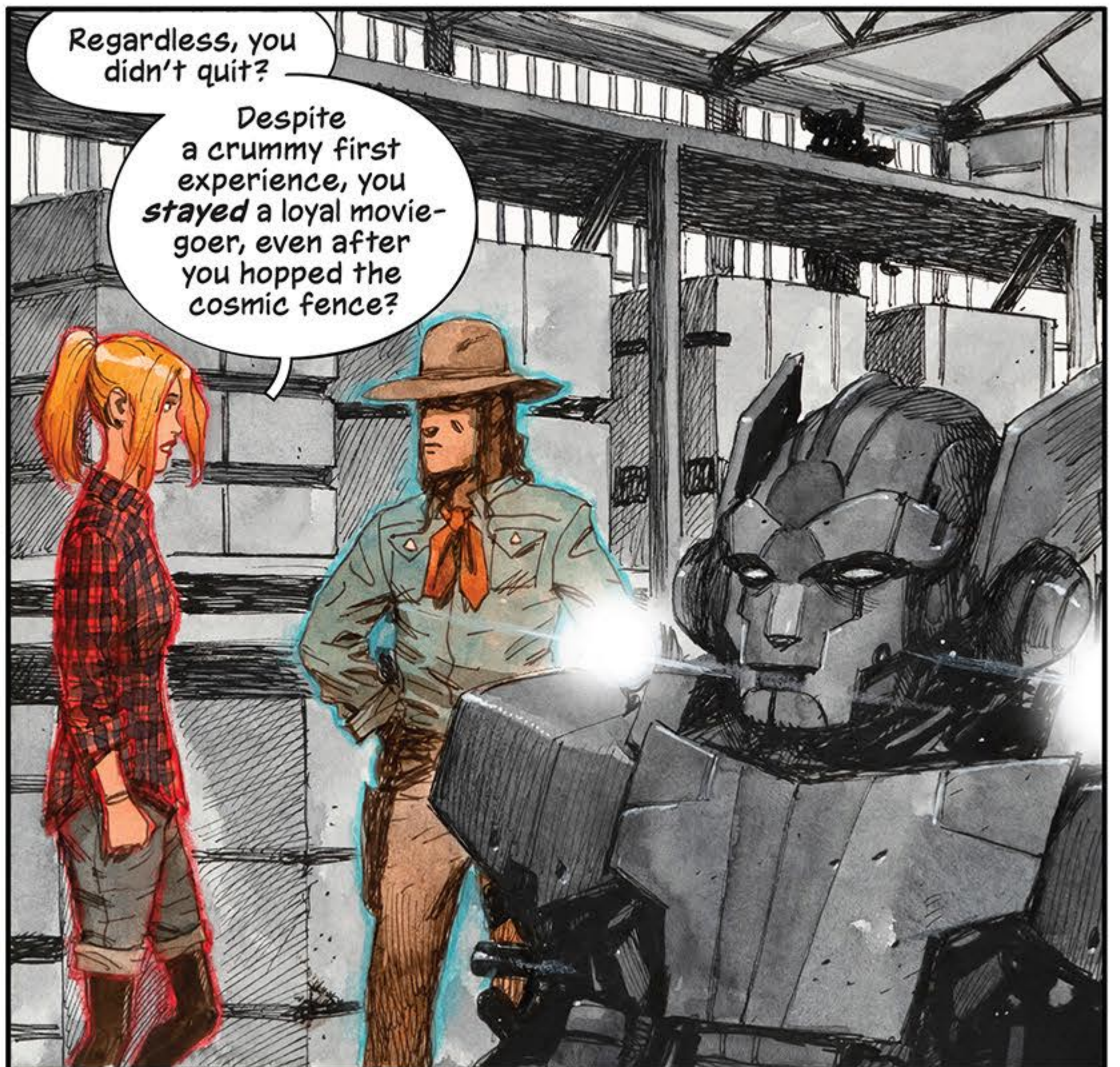
It was cheap back in your day, and it was still cheap when Scorsese aped it for the end of *Goodfellas*.

Don't believe I've ever seen that one.



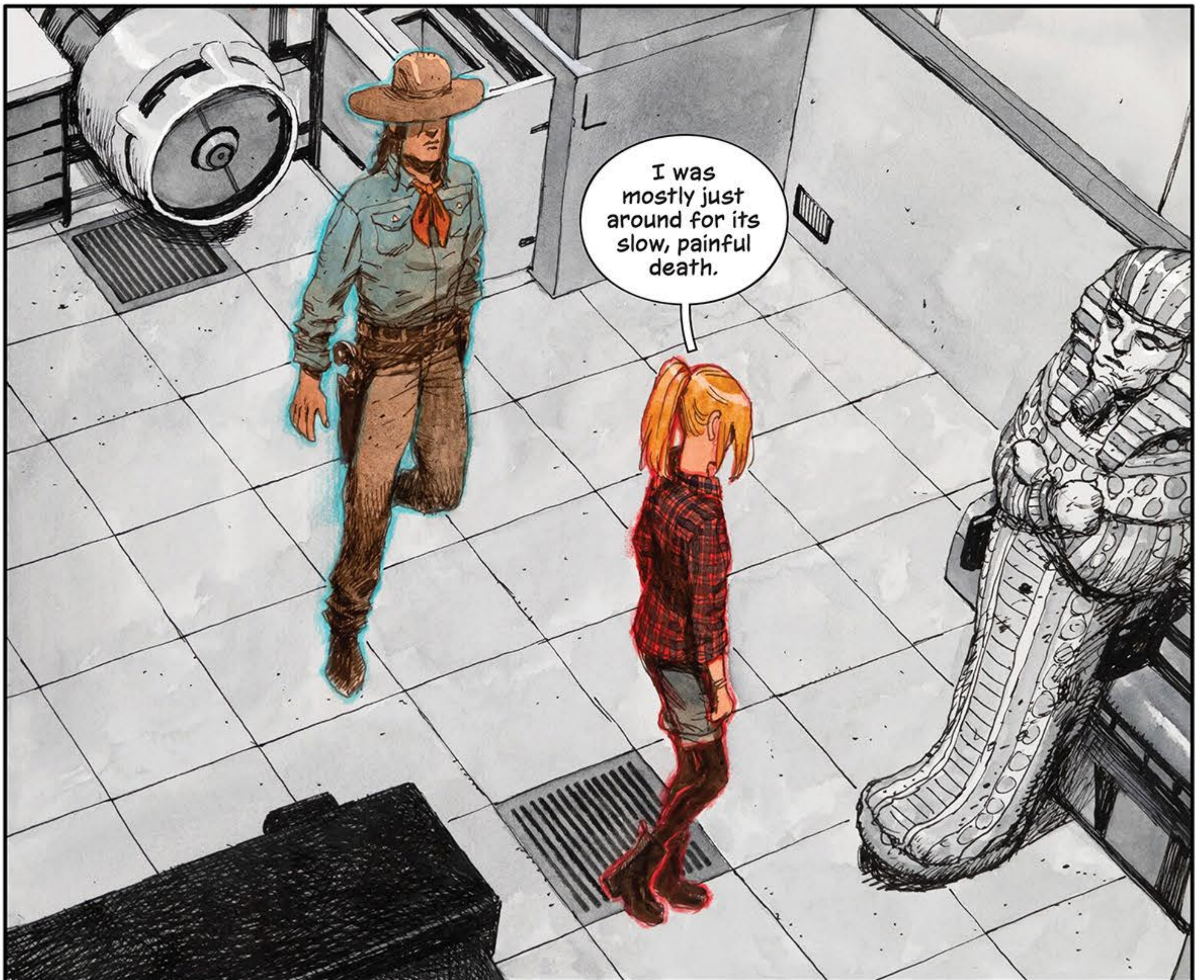
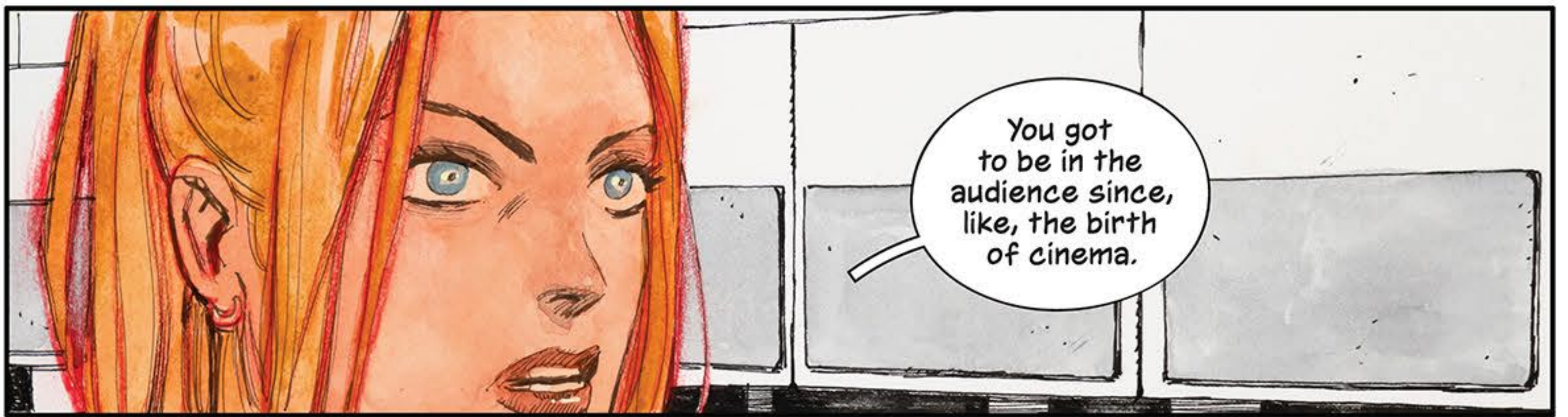
For real?

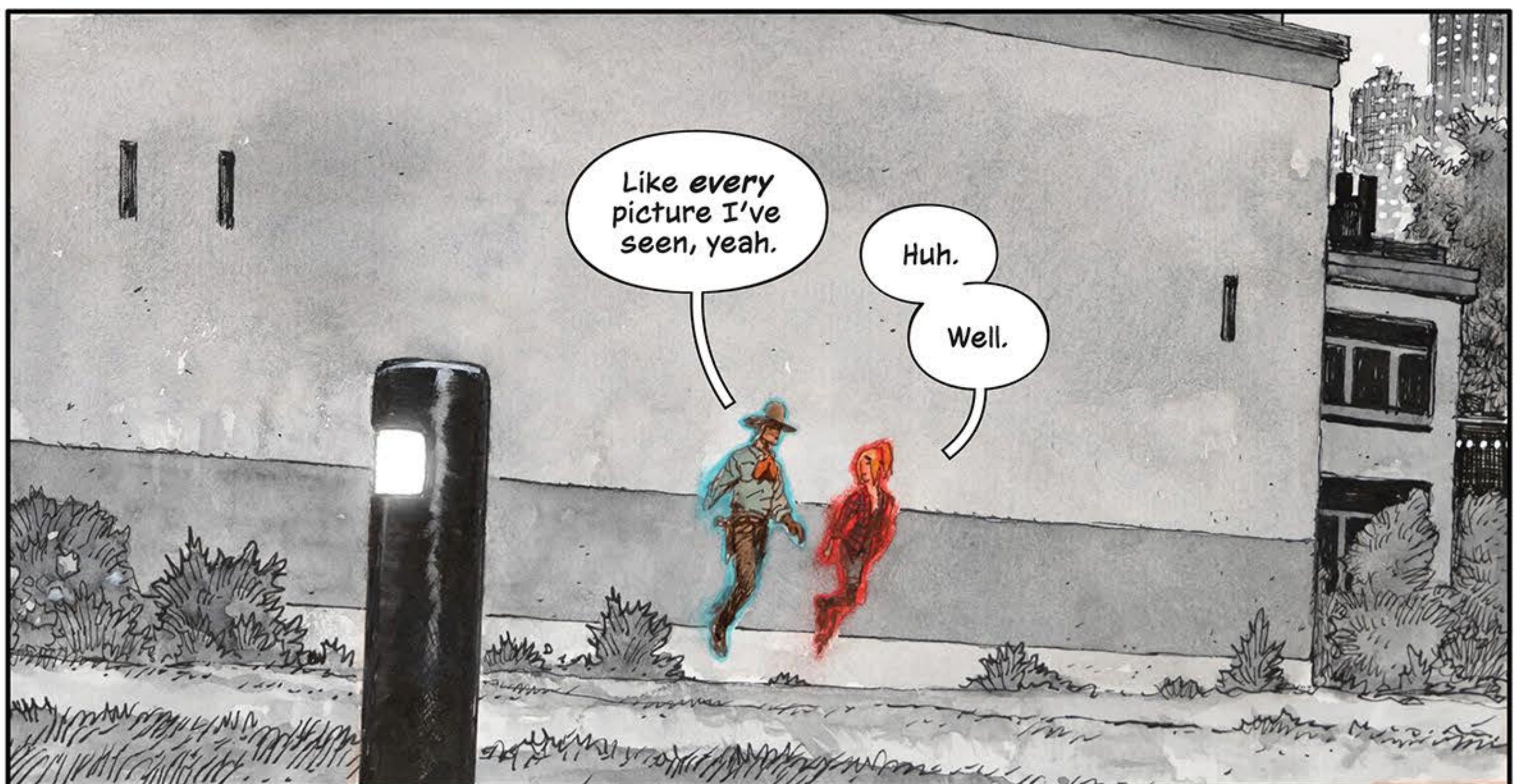
That's... refreshing.



Regardless, you didn't quit?

Despite a crummy first experience, you *stayed* a loyal movie-goer, even after you hopped the cosmic fence?







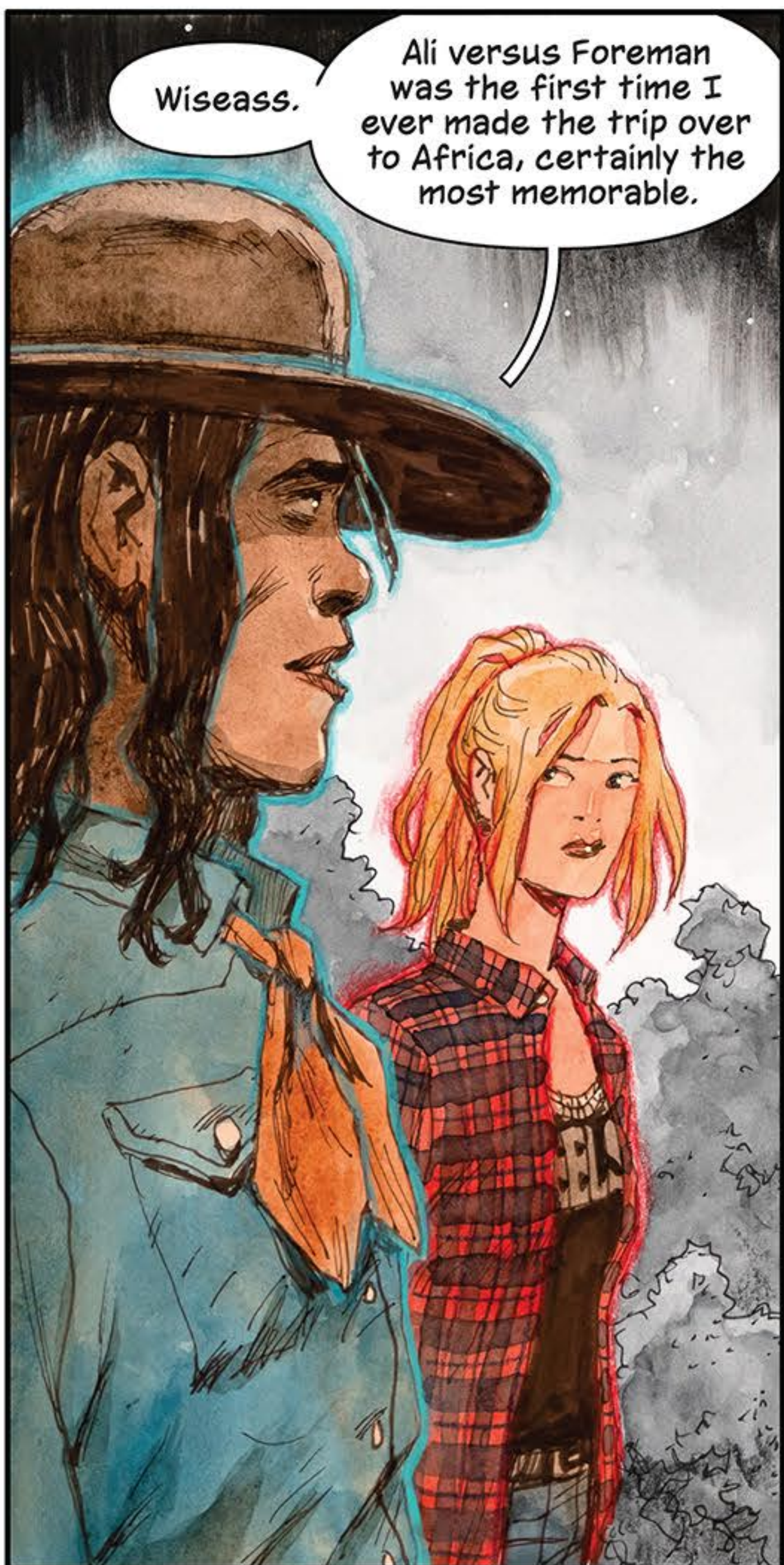
You didn't miss much.



No, don't think I did.

Wasn't that a Jackie Chan flick?

If I'm being honest, even my *favorite* motion picture pales in comparison to something like the Rumble in the Jungle.



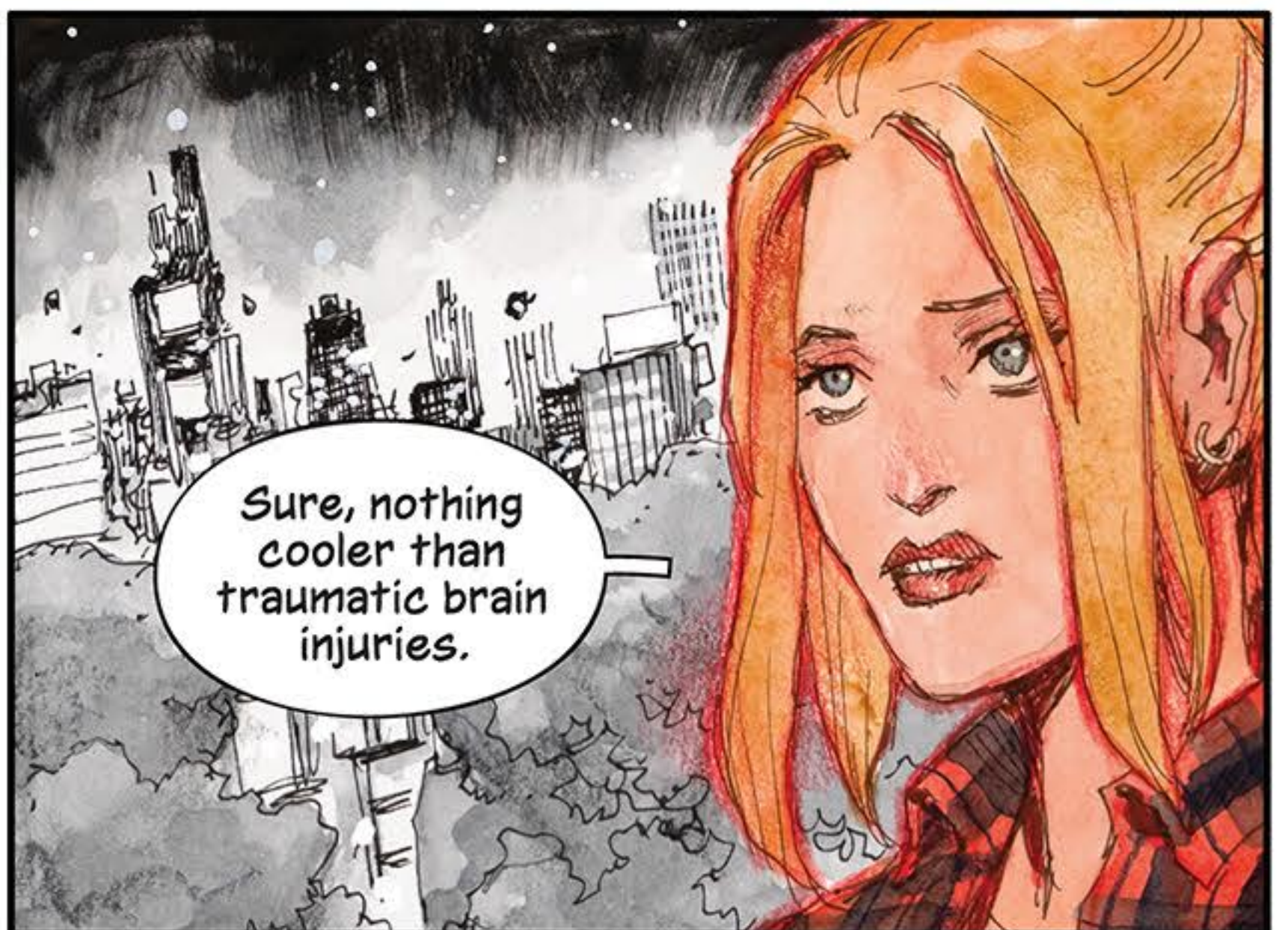
Wiseass.

Ali versus Foreman was the first time I ever made the trip over to Africa, certainly the most memorable.



Not an exaggeration to say there must have been a million souls hovering around that ring when the fight began, men from every nation and era imaginable.

I can still hear the impact of that final left hook to poor George's face.



Sure, nothing cooler than traumatic brain injuries.



Not a devotee of the sweet science, I gather.

Or of any "contact" sport.

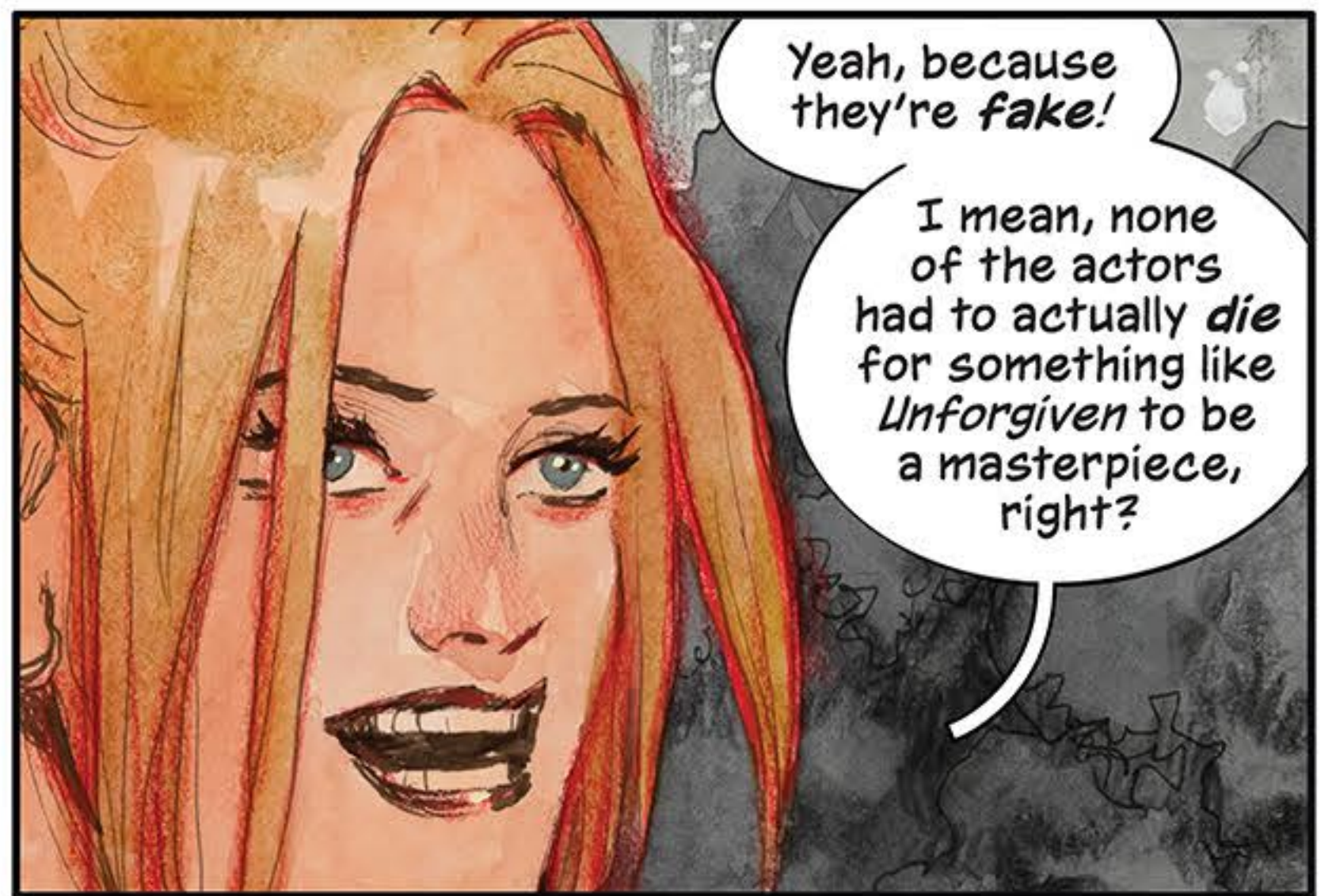
I met a former NFL player a few years back, and even though he lived into his eighties, he had just about zero memories of anything after he retired in his *twenties*.



Getting hit in the head so many times you're still paying the price in the fucking afterlife?

Well, didn't you say you enjoy taking in violent films?

How is watching something like that fun?



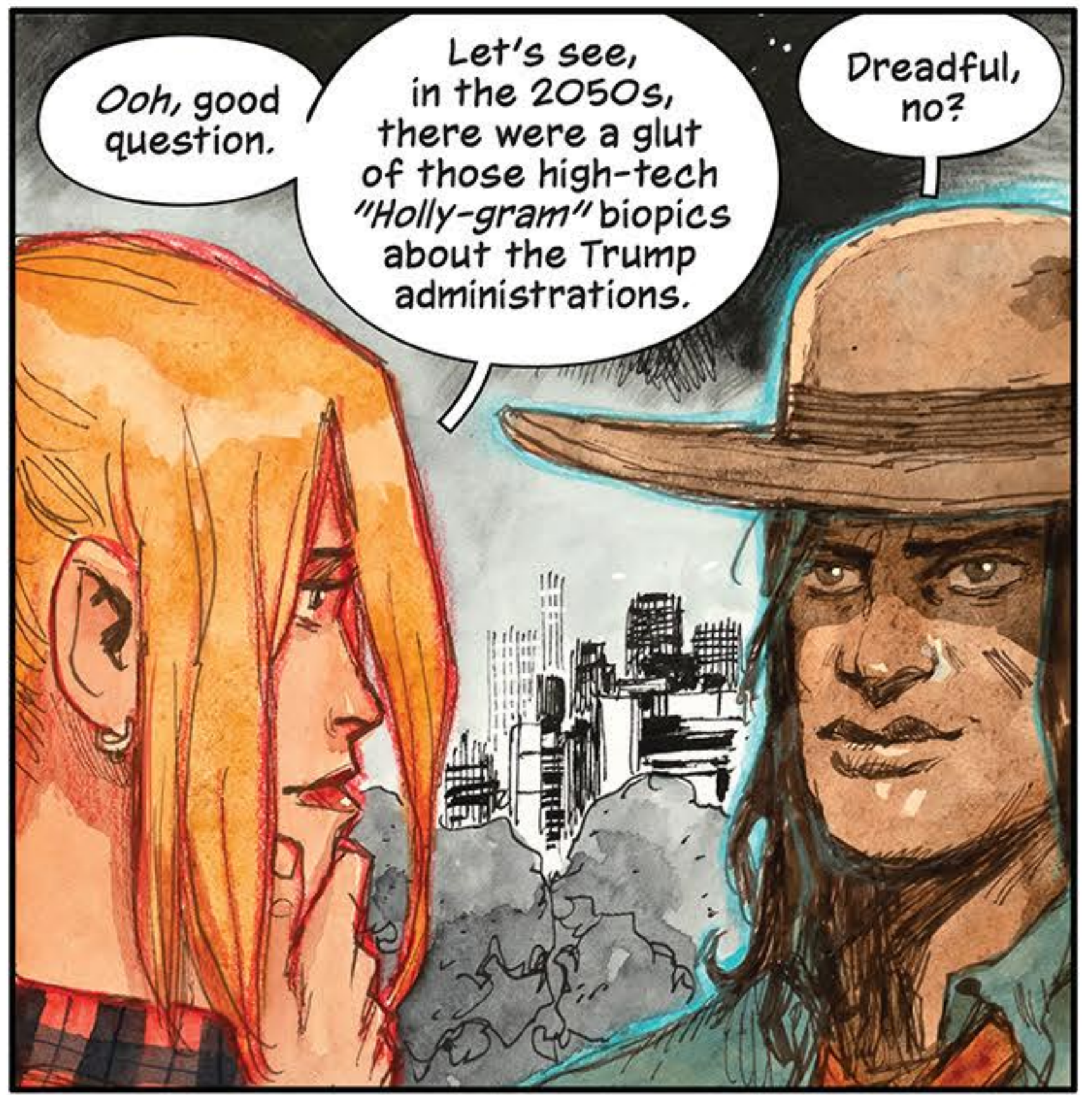
Yeah, because they're *fake*!

I mean, none of the actors had to actually *die* for something like *Unforgiven* to be a masterpiece, right?



You say so.

Like every "western," I thought that one was a bucket of loose horse-shit.





Of course you're a fellow nerd!

Let me guess, you're obsessed with 2001?

Didn't much care for that film... or the year, come to think of it.



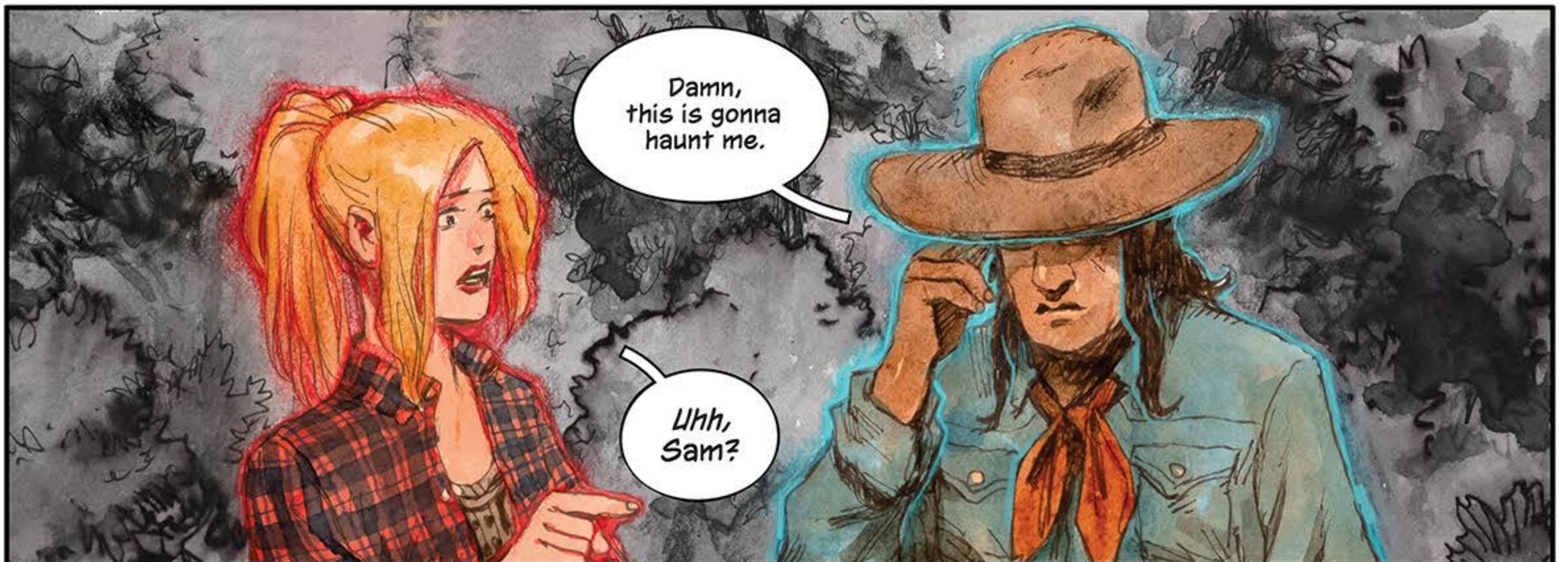
No, I'd say my absolute favorite motion picture would have to be *Enemy Mine*.



What the sweet Christ is *Enemy Mine*?!?

Before your time, maybe.

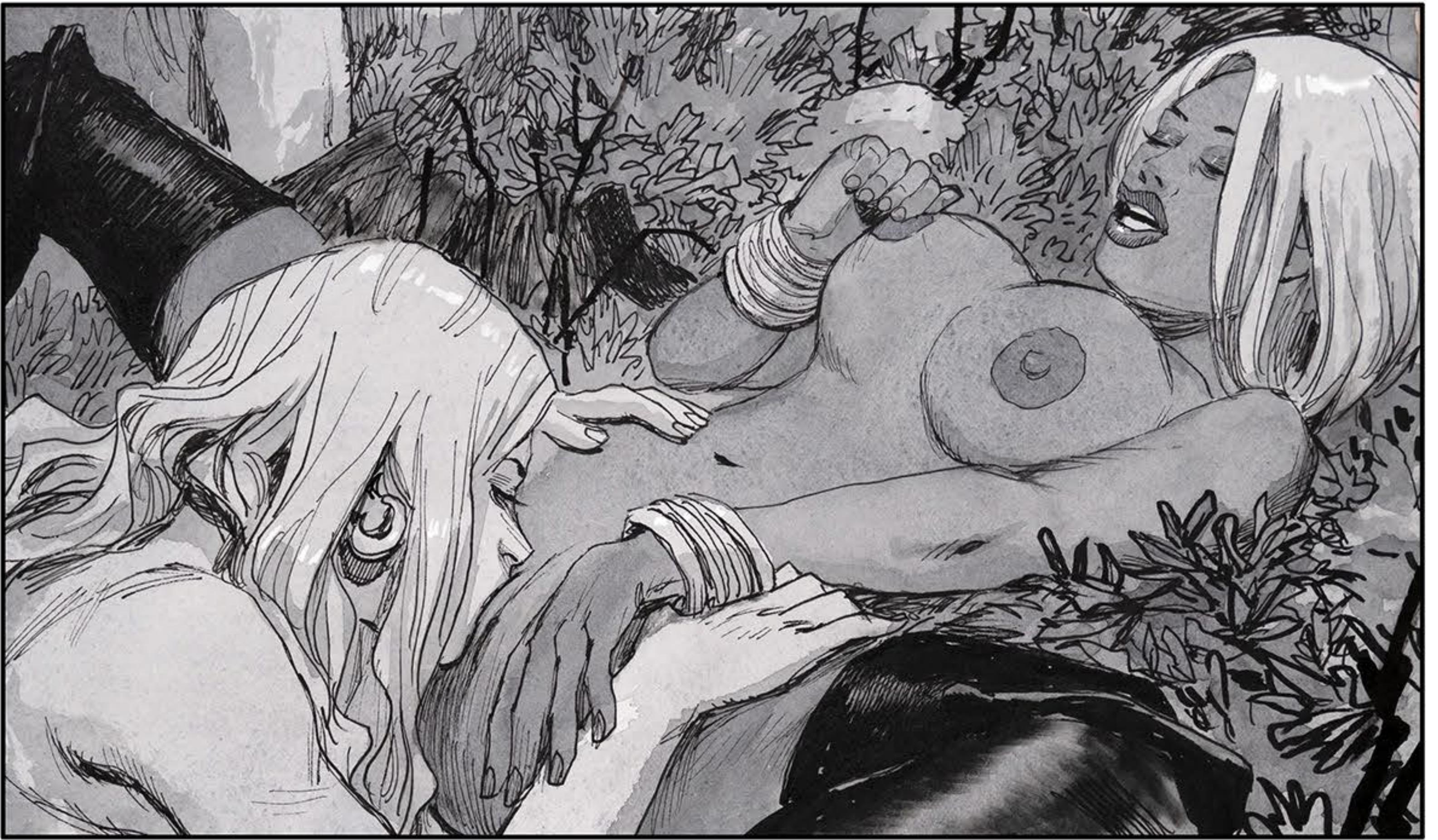
Just a beautiful tale starring the great Louis Gossett, Jr. And that white boy... what in the world was his name?



Damn, this is gonna haunt me.

Uhh, Sam?









I do believe this is the single most impressive group of copulators ever assembled.

And not a dick-sucking Roomba as far as the eye can see.



Beg your pardon?

You know, those sex robots everyone's addicted to.

And no stupid VR glasses either, just glorious flesh on flesh.



I'm mighty grateful for the variety of pairings...

...but we're somehow still in want of a proper *threesome*, no?



You know what they say: don't look a gift horse in the gaping asshole.



Besides, it's only a matter of time before one of these couples peels apart and joins another fuck-session already in progress.

Maybe.

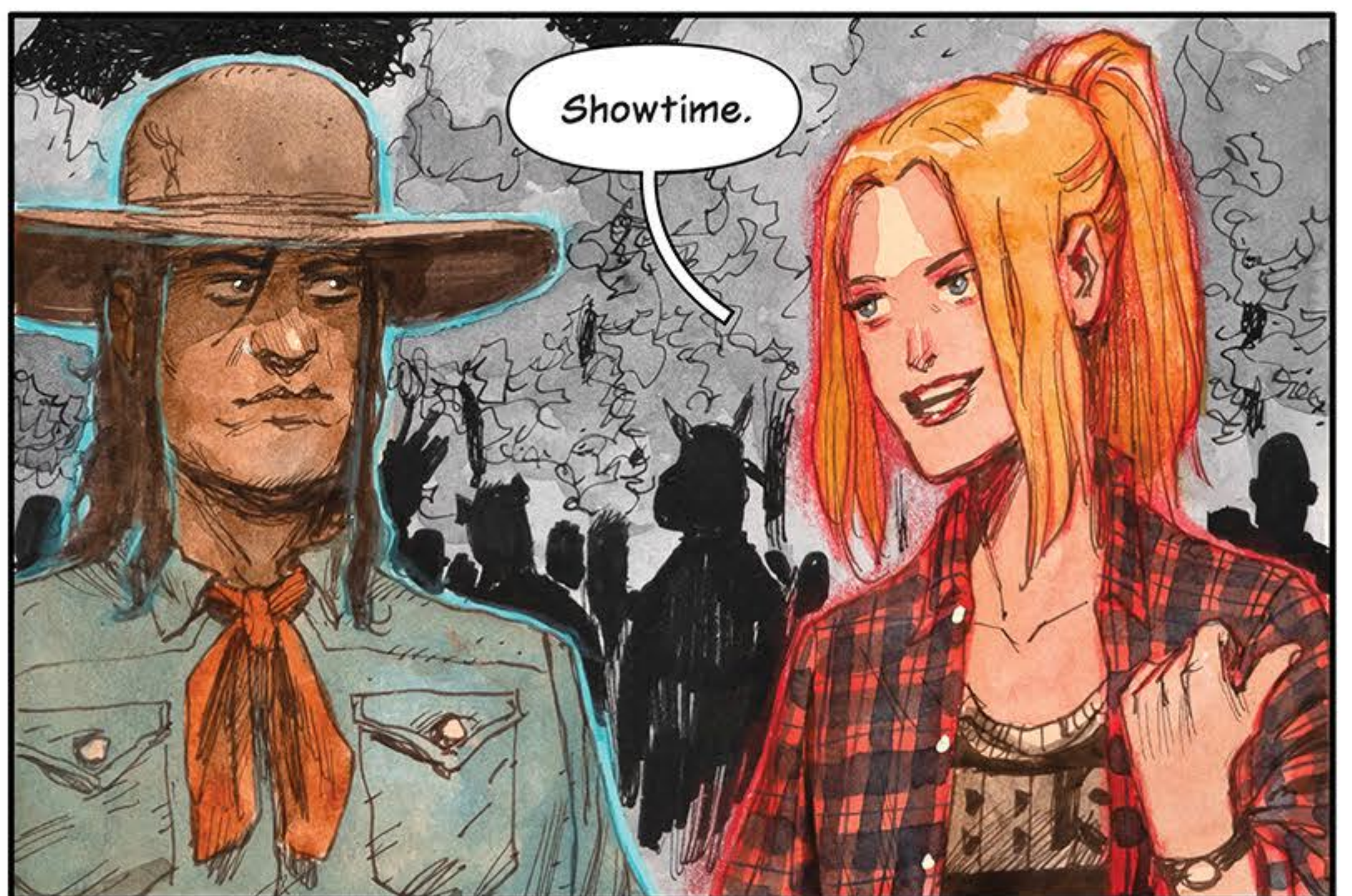
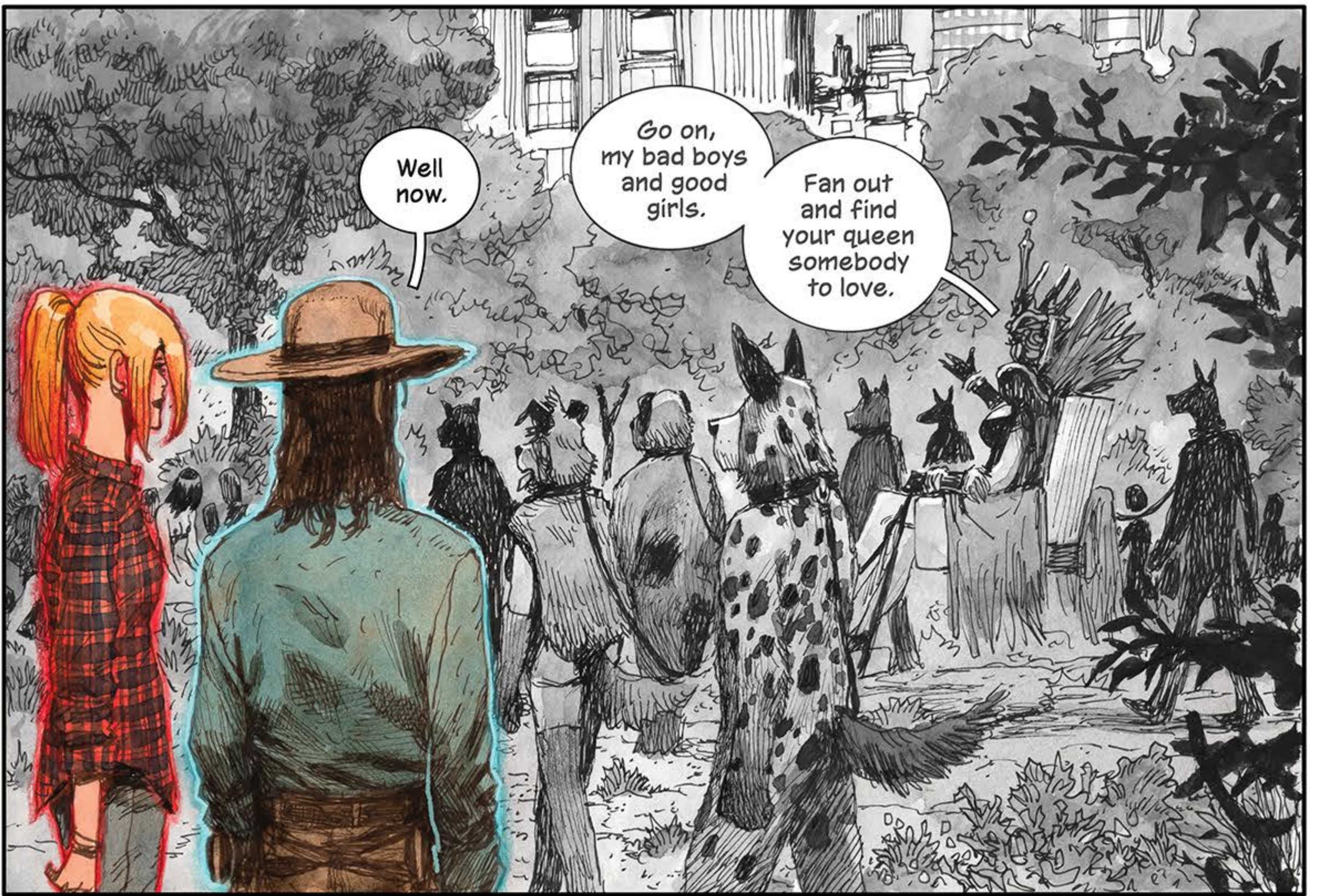
Just hard to decide exactly where to focus my --

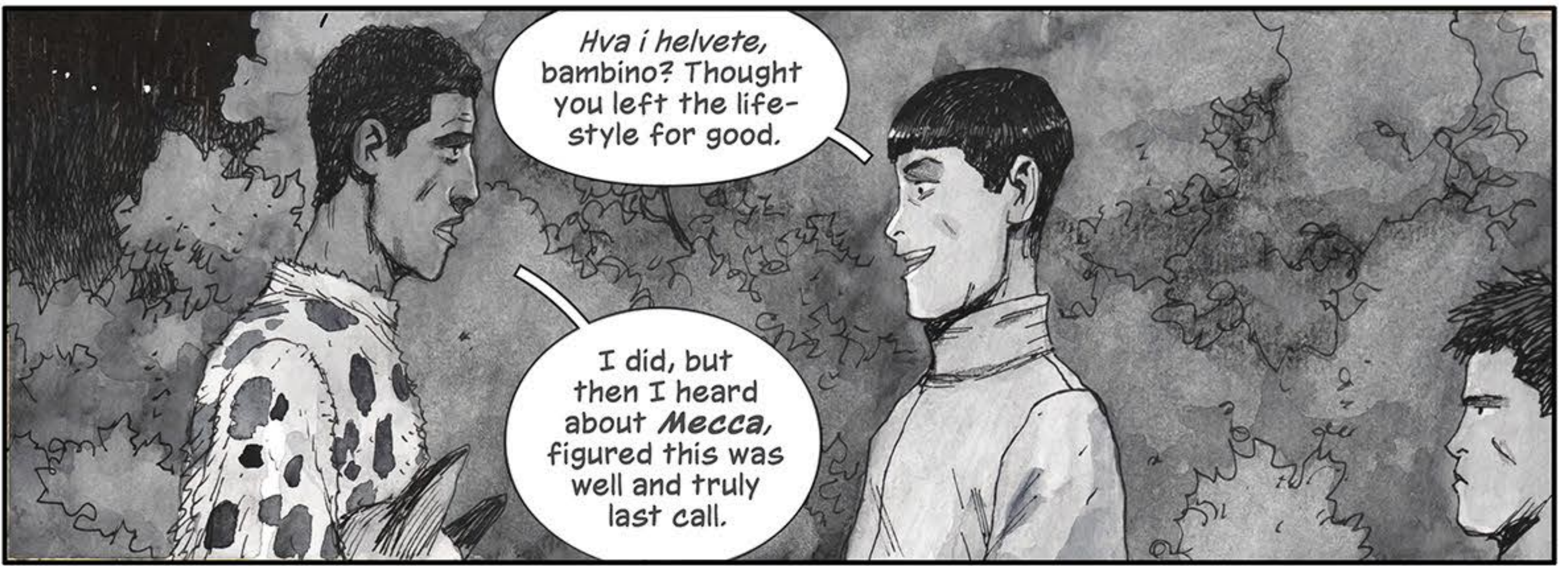


The end is nigh, bitches!



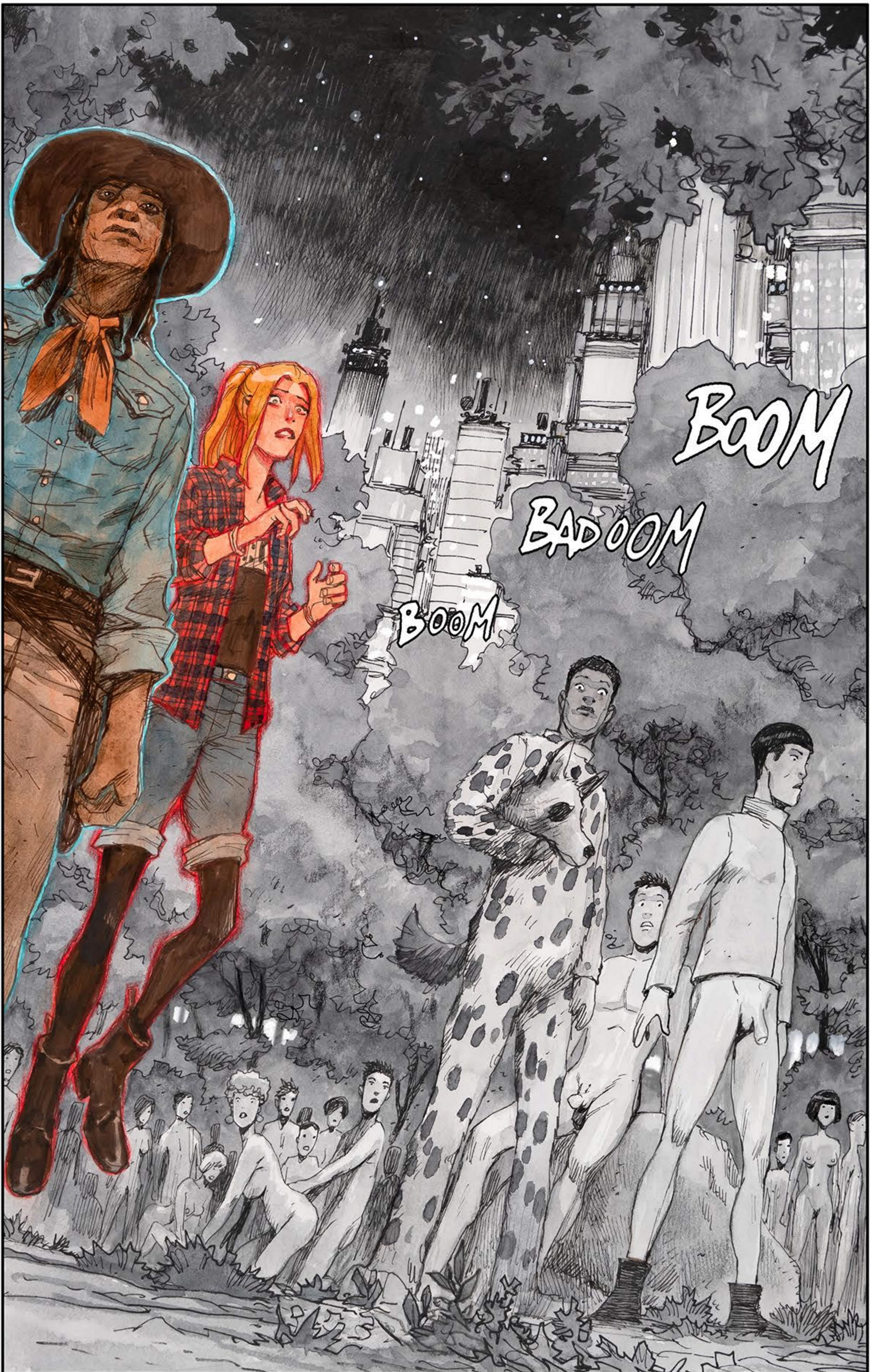
Get your last pearl necklaces before you walk through those pearly gates!





Not long after Anaheim, another psycho set off a *dirty bomb* outside the Great Mosque. It's already complete Armageddon over there. Like, *literally*.









Calm yourselves, littles.

OutDoor says it's just more assholes with fire-works.



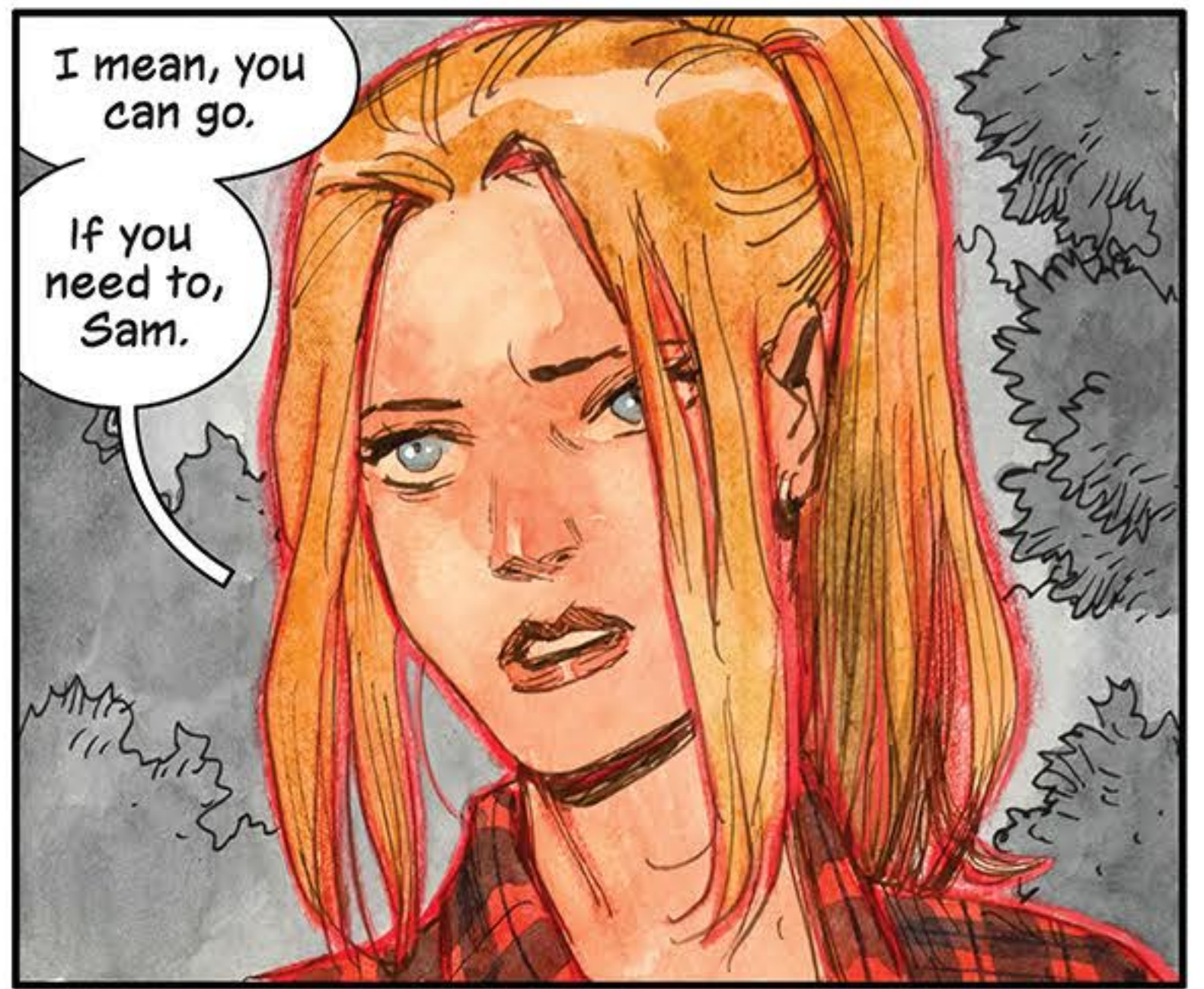
I don't know, your majesty.

OutDoor's been mostly scat-bots since the bombing, and I heard --



¿A quién le importa?

I'm so... fucking... close...



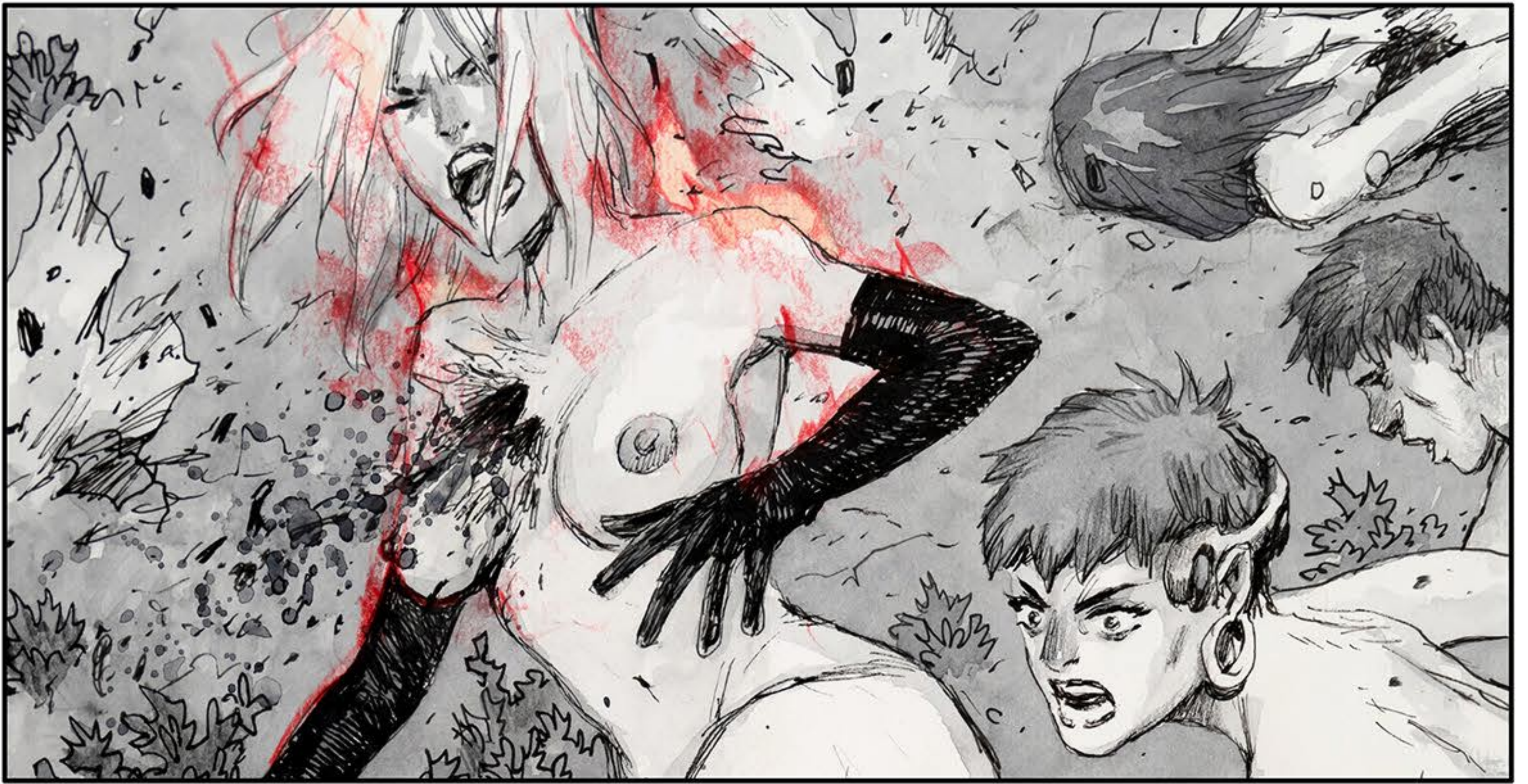
#LEADERBOARD.

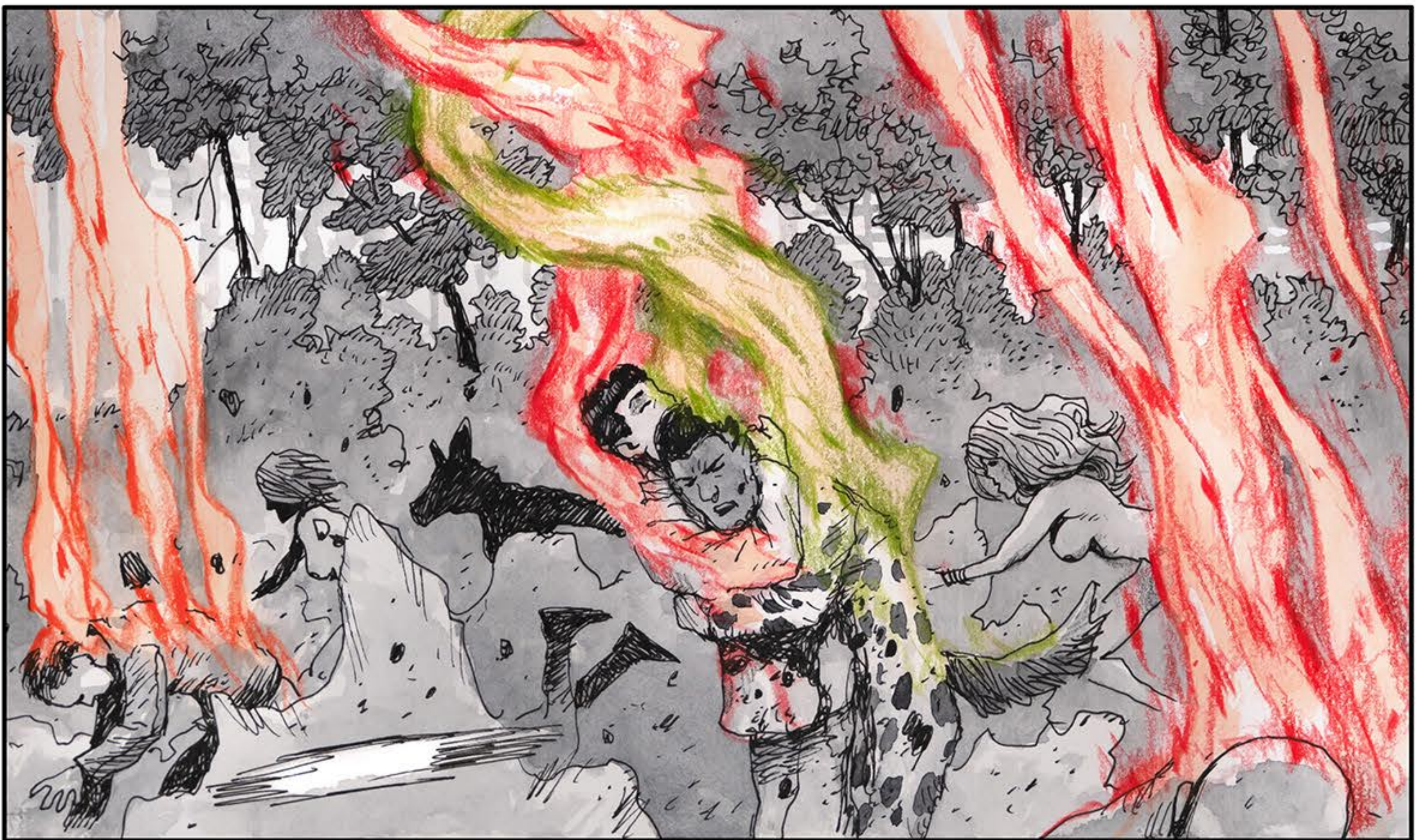
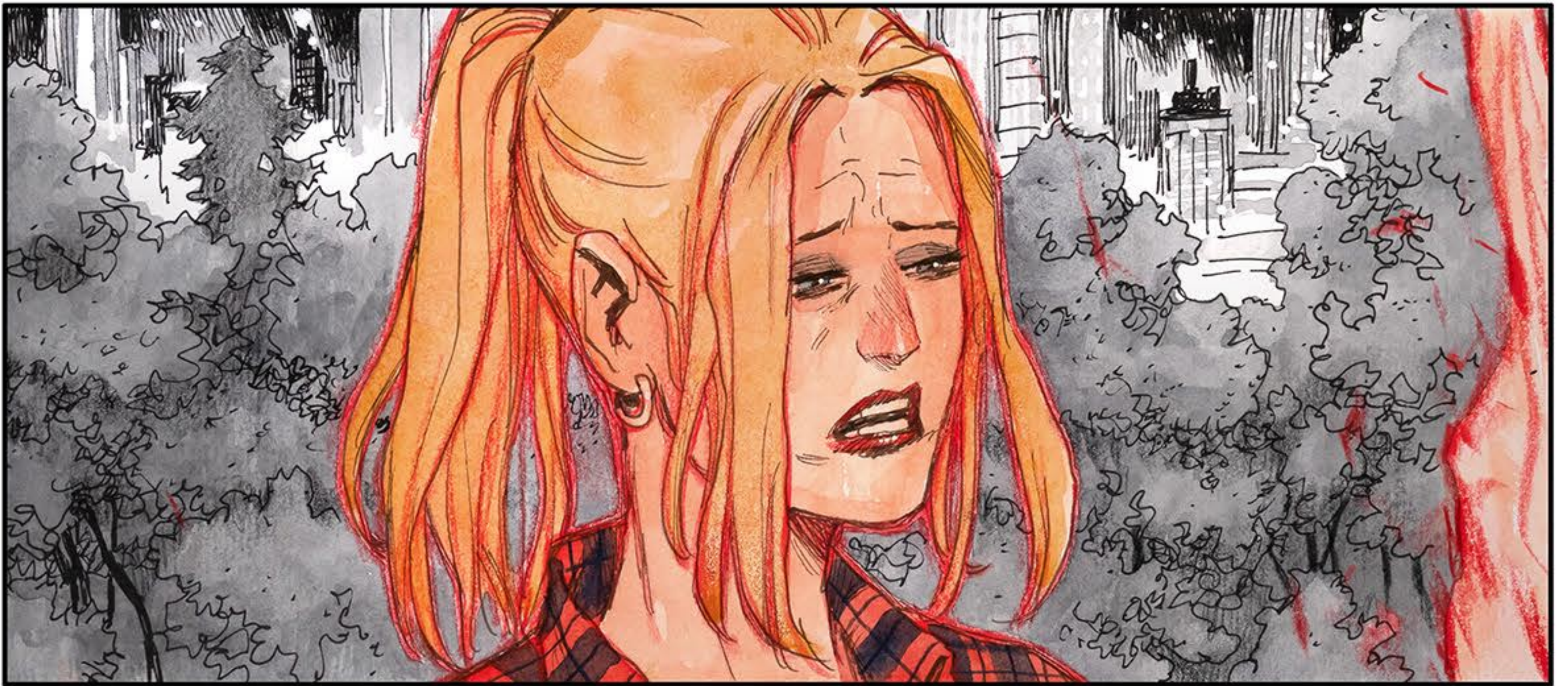
I'm here to help!

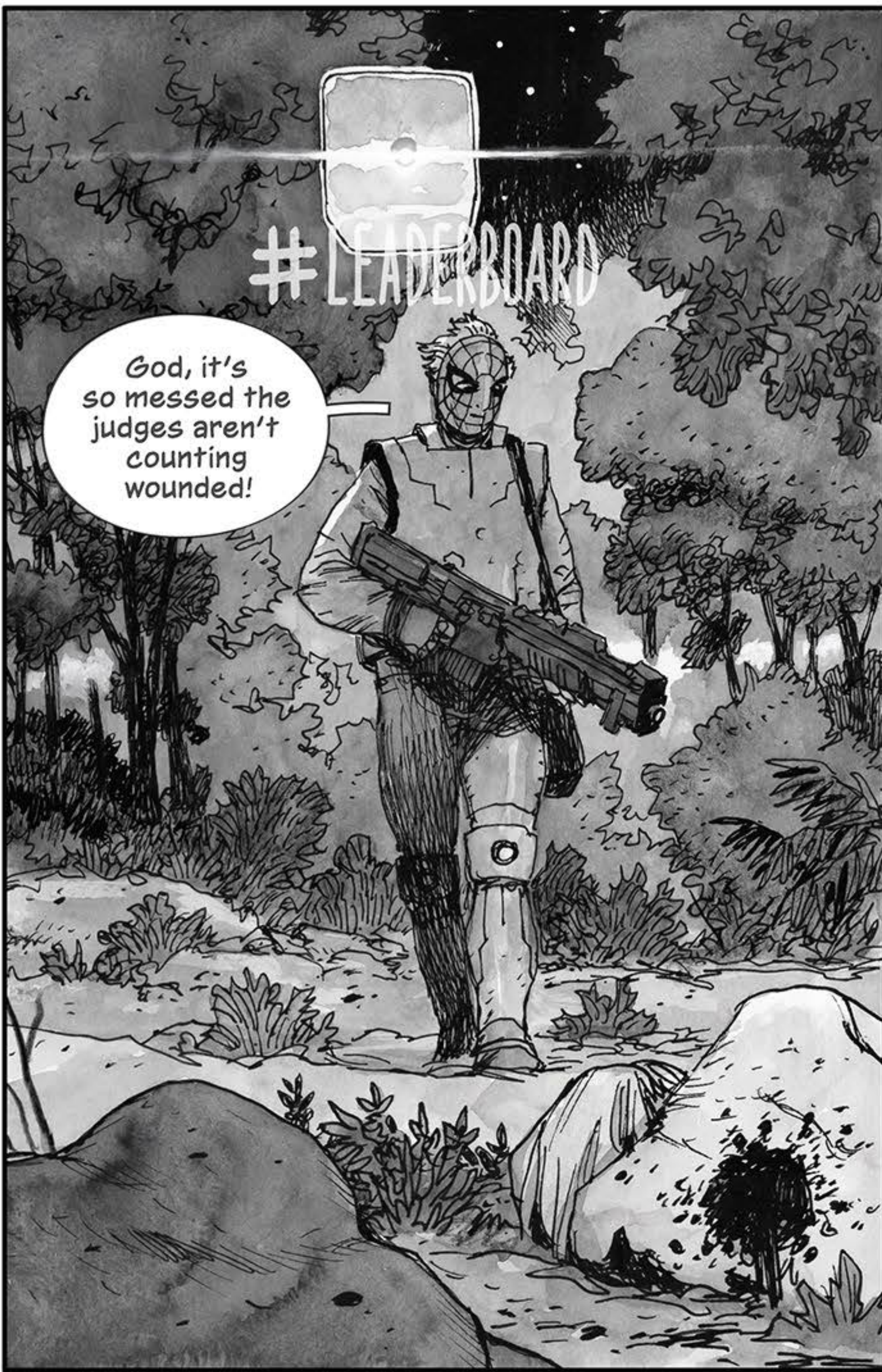














Final tally of that forgotten masterpiece was *twenty-one*, not counting one unborn little angel and of course our hero.



So when the rest of you climbers started posting big numbs today, I went prowling for targets as soft as those golden arches.



I mean, why be another pussy-ass fly on the wall when you can be part of the--



KLANNG







Some.



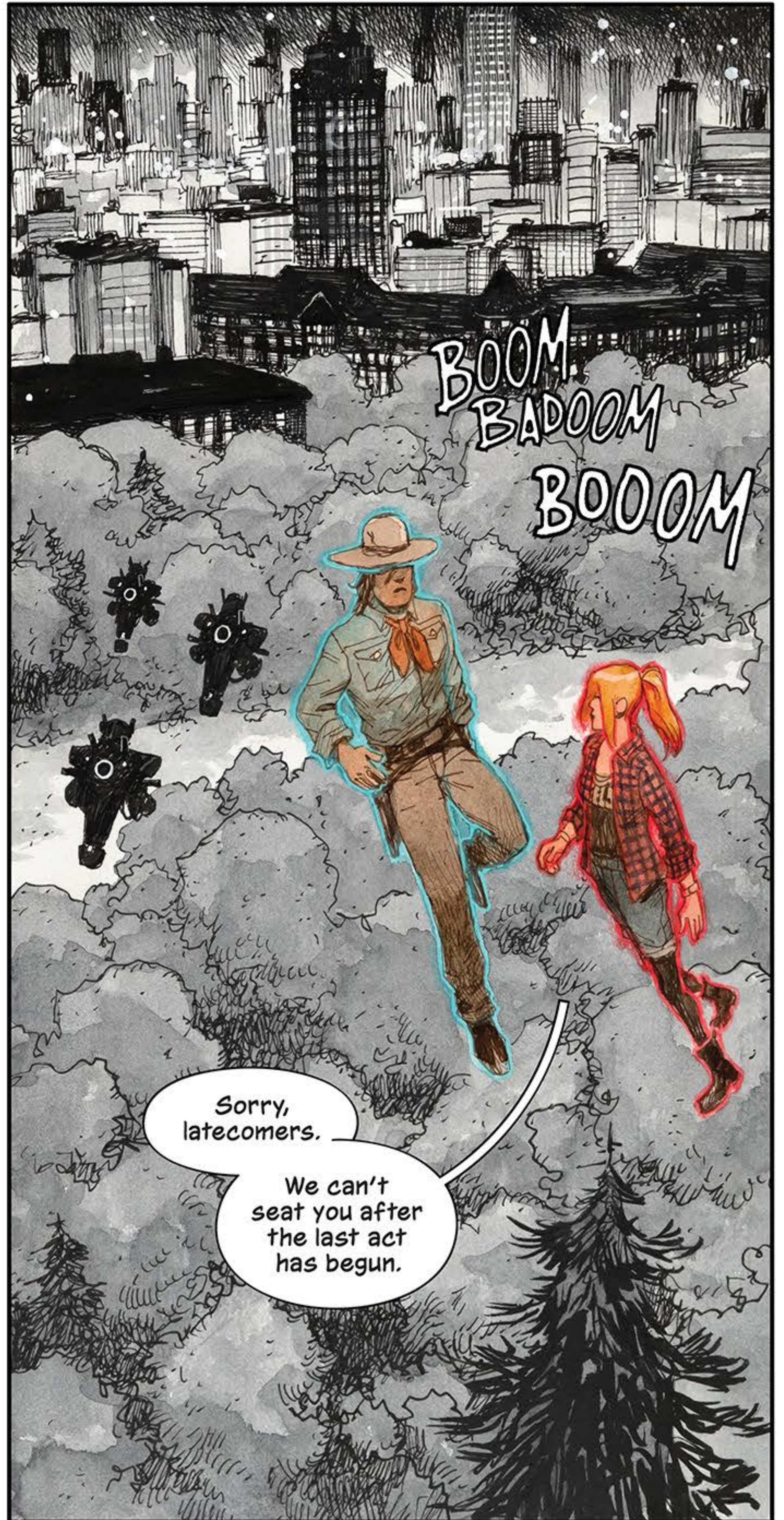
No sign of any fresh immigrants to our side.

Yeah, I'm apparently the exception when it comes to this kind of "event."



Probably for the best.

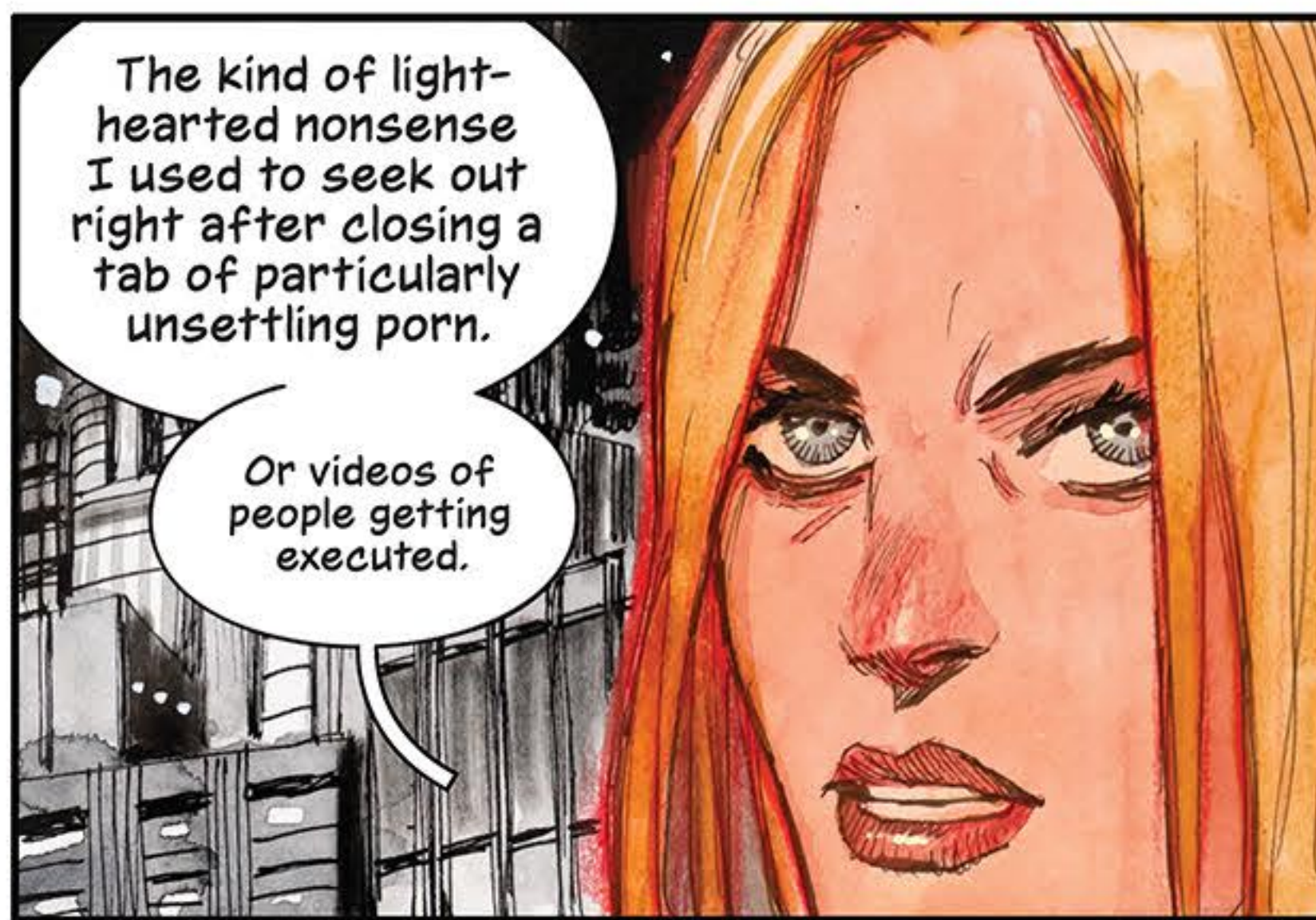
Can you imagine starting your ghostly existence now?



BOOM
BADOOM
BOOOM

Sorry, latecomers.

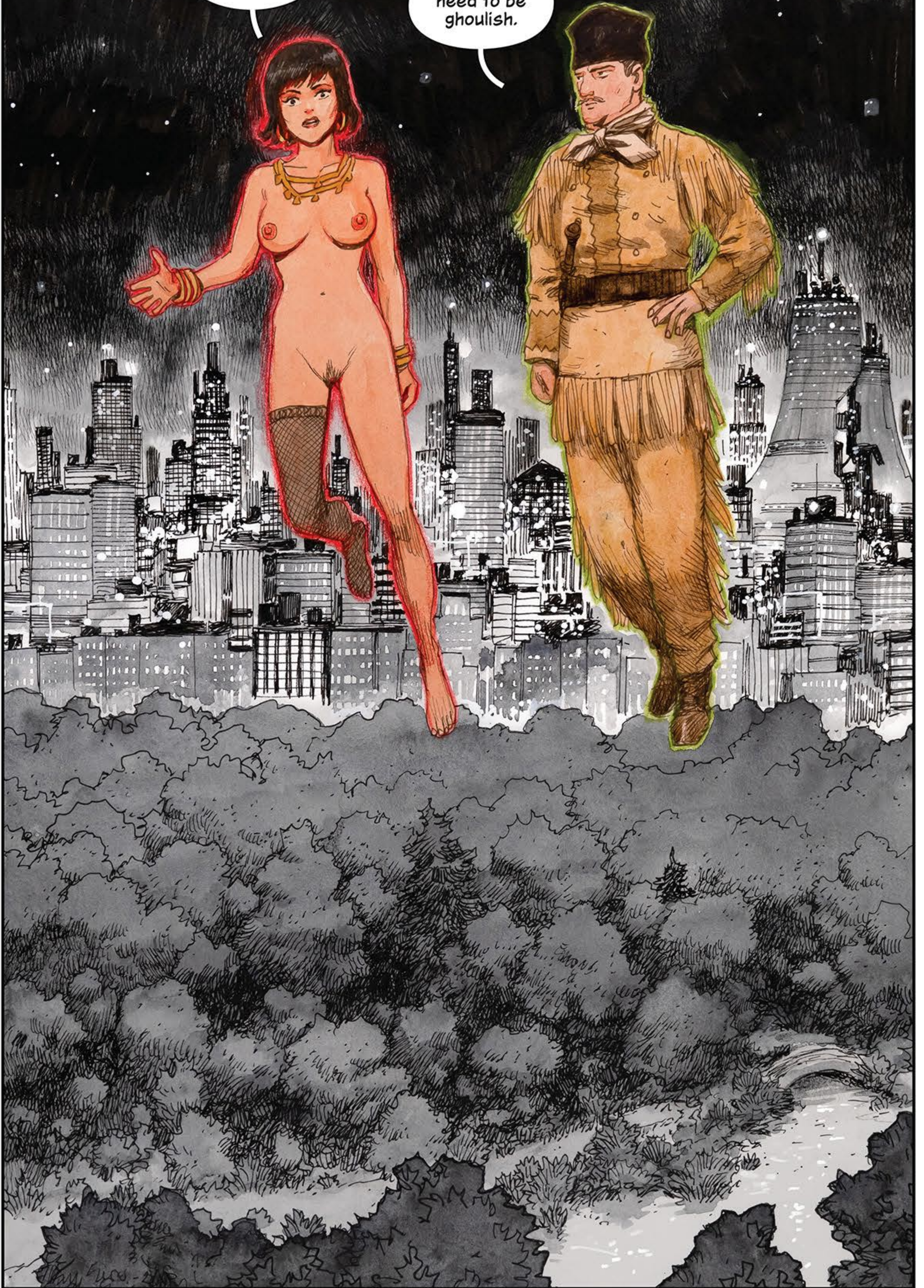
We can't seat you after the last act has begun.



Mierda,
did we miss
the whole
massacre?

Good lord,
woman.

No
need to be
ghoulish.





Long time, Commish.

You and Lita been investigating this hashtag dipshit?

A whole nest of the skunks, sadly.



Oh, this is Sam.

New friend.

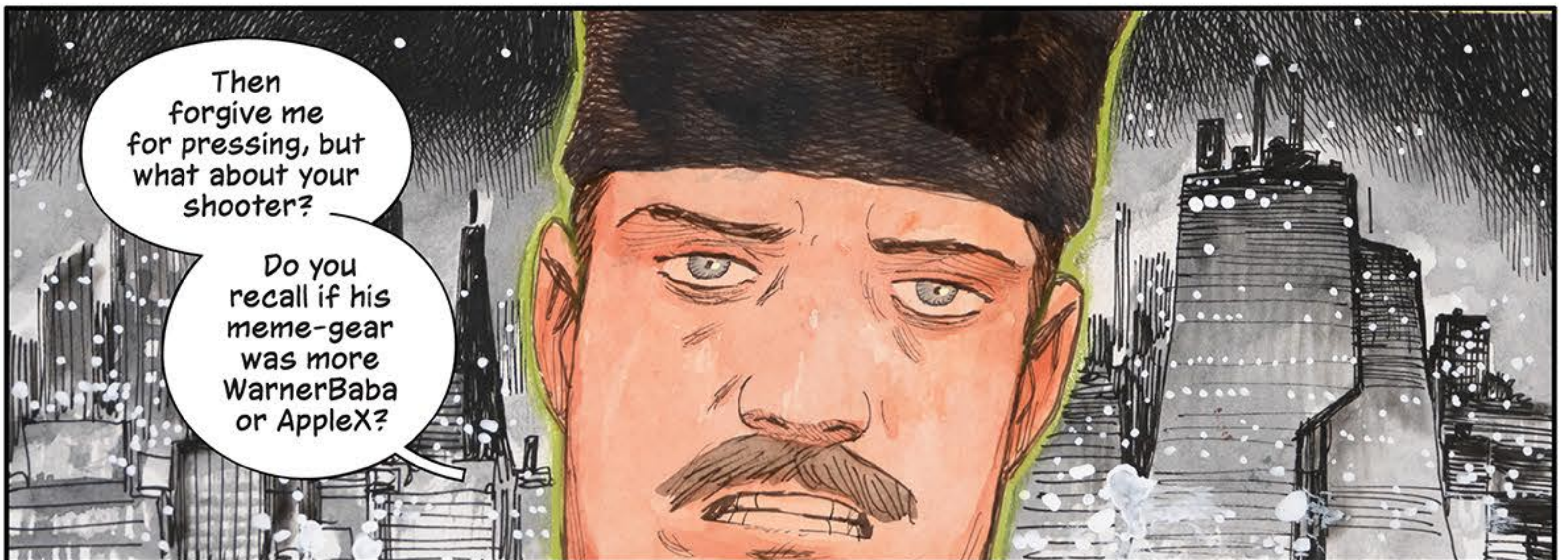
I see.



You were both eye-witnesses?

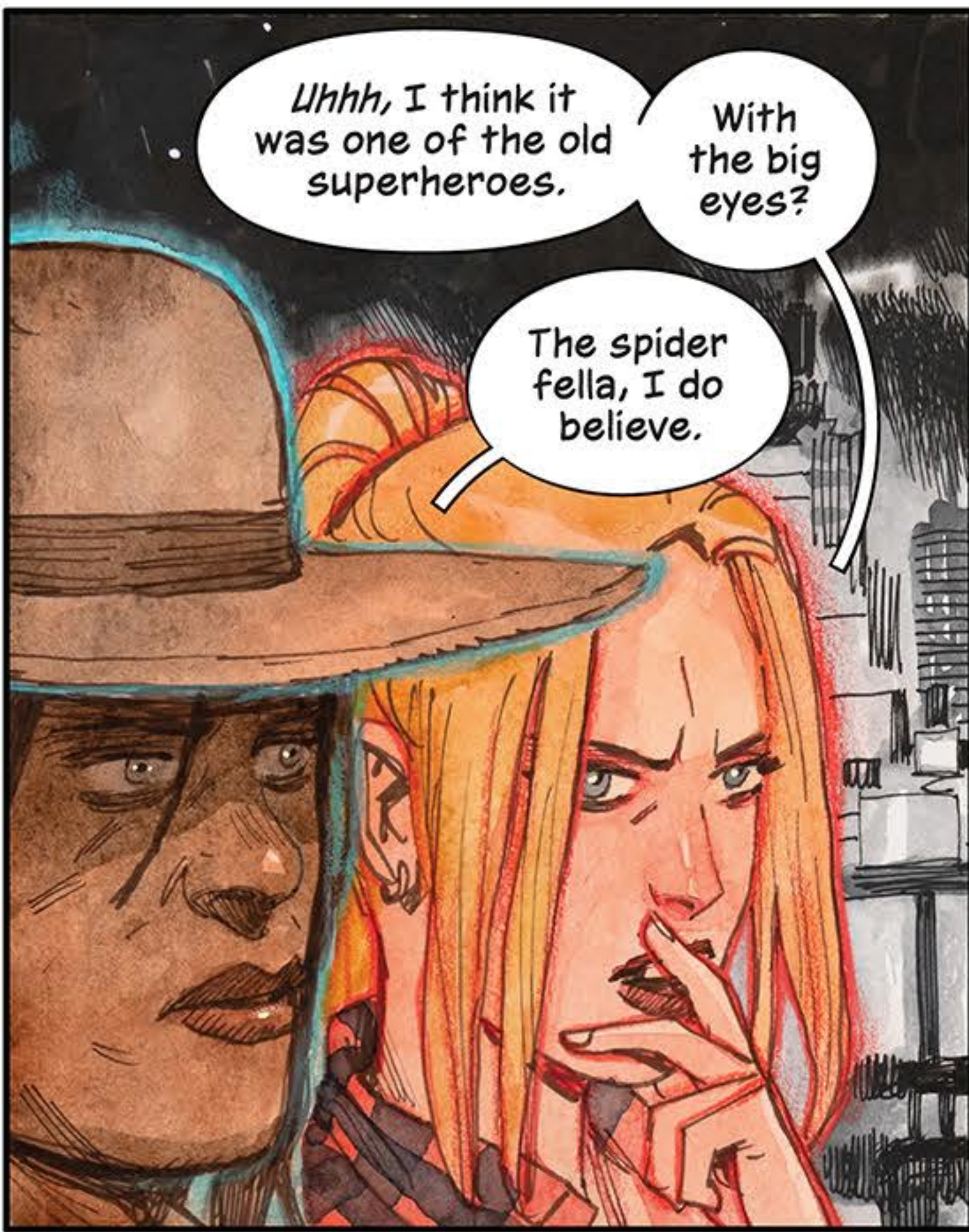
Unfortunately.

And we just saw some robocops headed for what sounded like a copycat, but I reached my limit a few bodies ago.



Then forgive me for pressing, but what about your shooter?

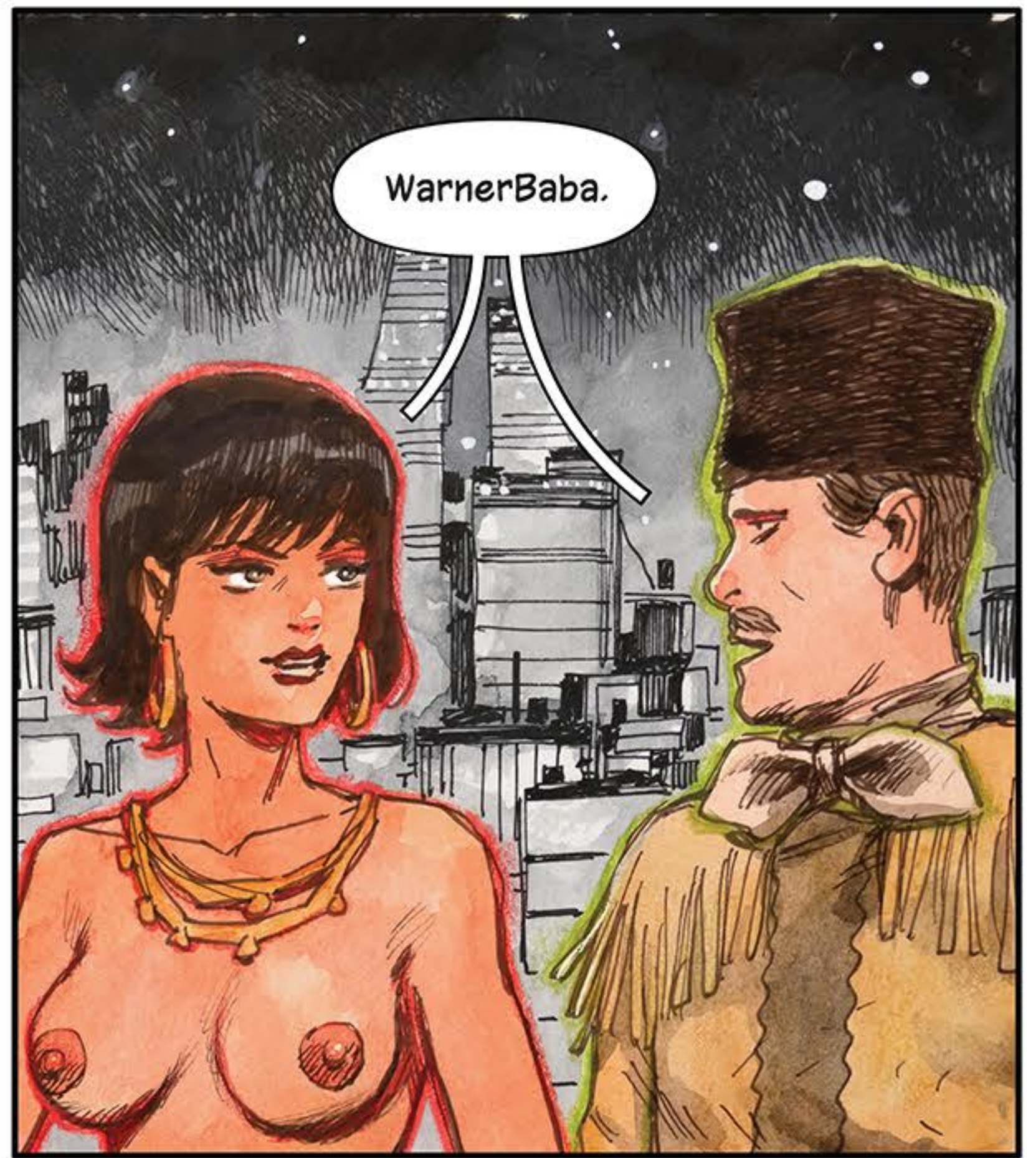
Do you recall if his meme-gear was more WarnerBaba or AppleX?



Uhhh, I think it was one of the old superheroes.

With the big eyes?

The spider fella, I do believe.



WarnerBaba.



All this terrorism has some... corporate element?

Anti-corporate, more likely. Anti-everything.

Most of these miscreants are professionally unemployed, wasting their lives behind glowing goggles purchased by their feckless guardians.



We've been monitoring this particular troll-cell for years.

At first, seemed like they were all bluster, but it looks like Anaheim turned a lot of planners into doers.



So, you'd both agree this is pretty much it, right?

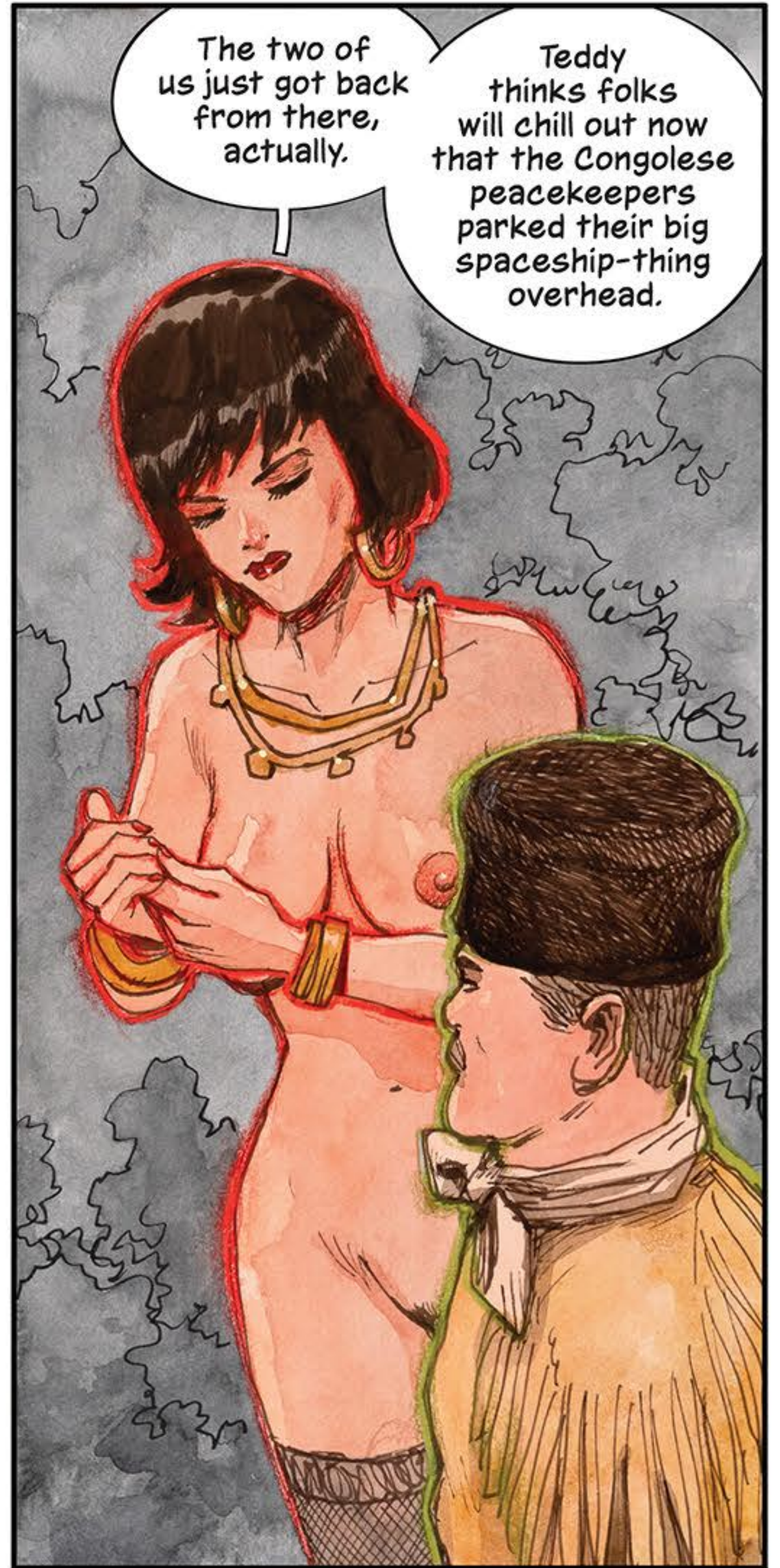
The end of everything?



Pshaw.

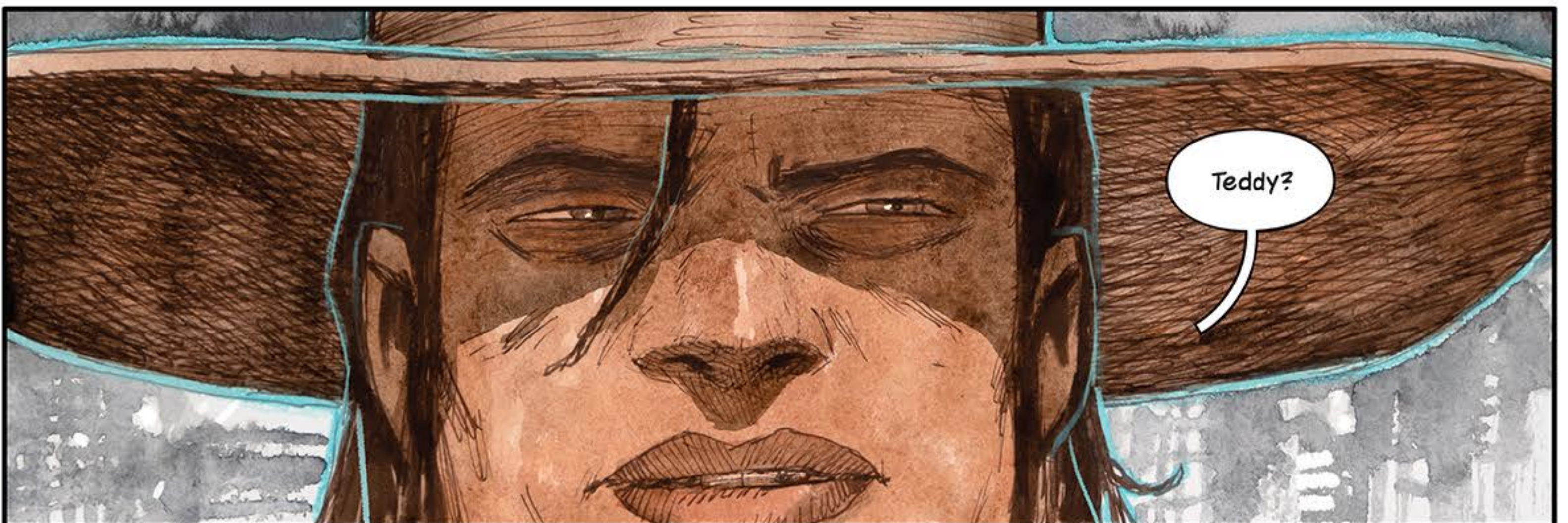
The situation is certainly grim, but this old world has survived far worse than what a few dozen emasculated nihilists can dish out.

We heard the entire Middle East is on fire!

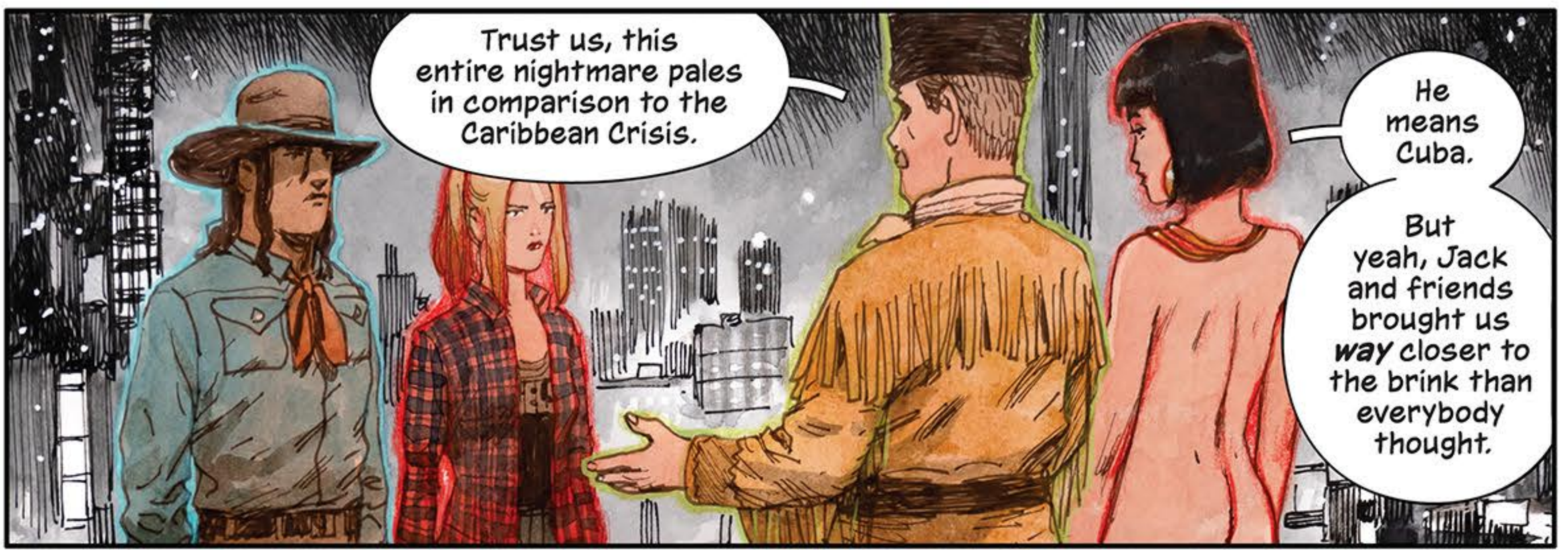


The two of us just got back from there, actually.

Teddy thinks folks will chill out now that the Congolese peacekeepers parked their big spaceship-thing overhead.



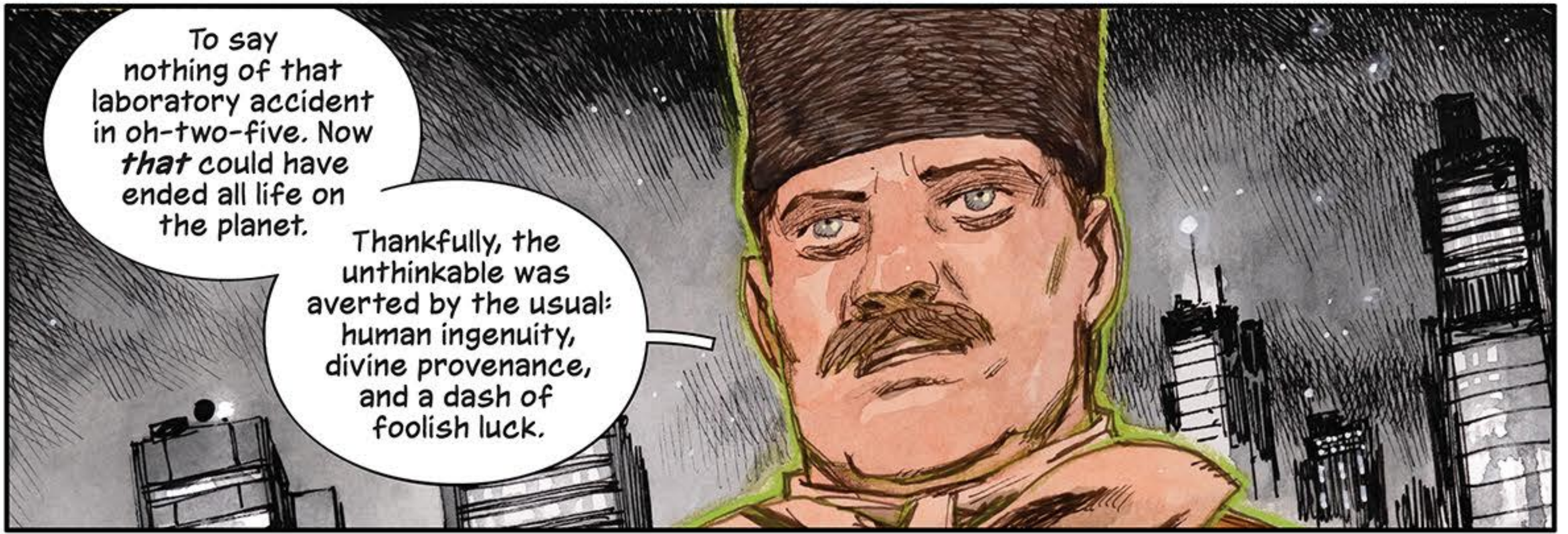
Teddy?



Trust us, this entire nightmare pales in comparison to the Caribbean Crisis.

He means Cuba.

But yeah, Jack and friends brought us way closer to the brink than everybody thought.



To say nothing of that laboratory accident in oh-two-five. Now *that* could have ended all life on the planet.

Thankfully, the unthinkable was averted by the usual: human ingenuity, divine providence, and a dash of foolish luck.



Jesus Christ.

Is this man Theodore Roosevelt?

Easy, fanboy. T.R. doesn't like it when people make a big --

Mister President, I... I am heartily sorry for being unable to remove my hat for you, sir.



And I apologize for my younger self's absurd attire.

Especially because you appear to have been an *actual* herdsman, not some milk-and-water pretender.



And congrats on the statue.

Say again, son?



Your statue.

On the horse?

Mn?



I saw they finally put it back.

In front of the Natural History Museum.

Yes, well, the powers that be will likely remove and return it another dozen times before they finally smelt the hideous thing.



As a dear companion of mine likes to say, "Change is the only constant."

Here we fuckin' go with the Heraclitus stories...











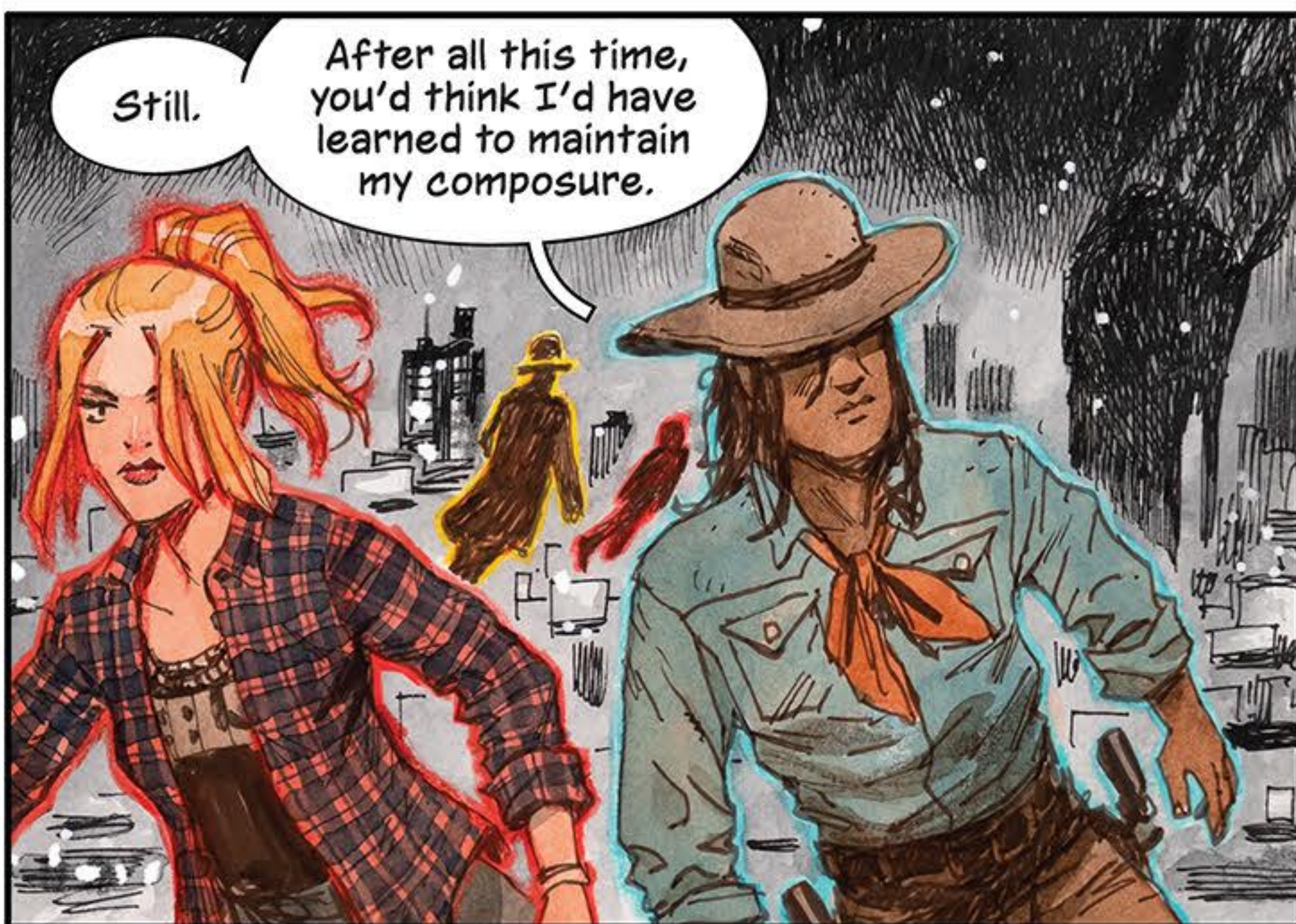
Felt like I was in a *trance*.

Hell, he was the last president I voted for!



That man invited Booker T. Washington to the White House!

And Ted'll be the first to admit he did plenty of fucked-up shit, too.



Still.

After all this time, you'd think I'd have learned to maintain my composure.



Don't beat yourself up.

I acted almost that goofy first time I met Harrison Ford.

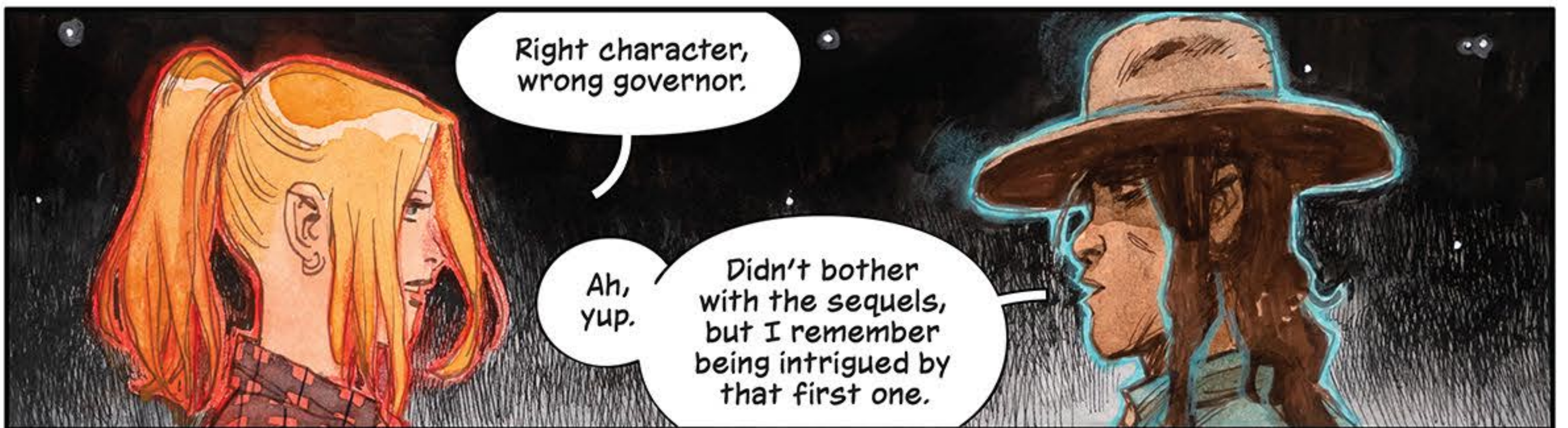




Please tell me you've seen *Terminator*.

I believe I have.

Reagan as a killer robot?



Right character, wrong governor.

Ah, yup.

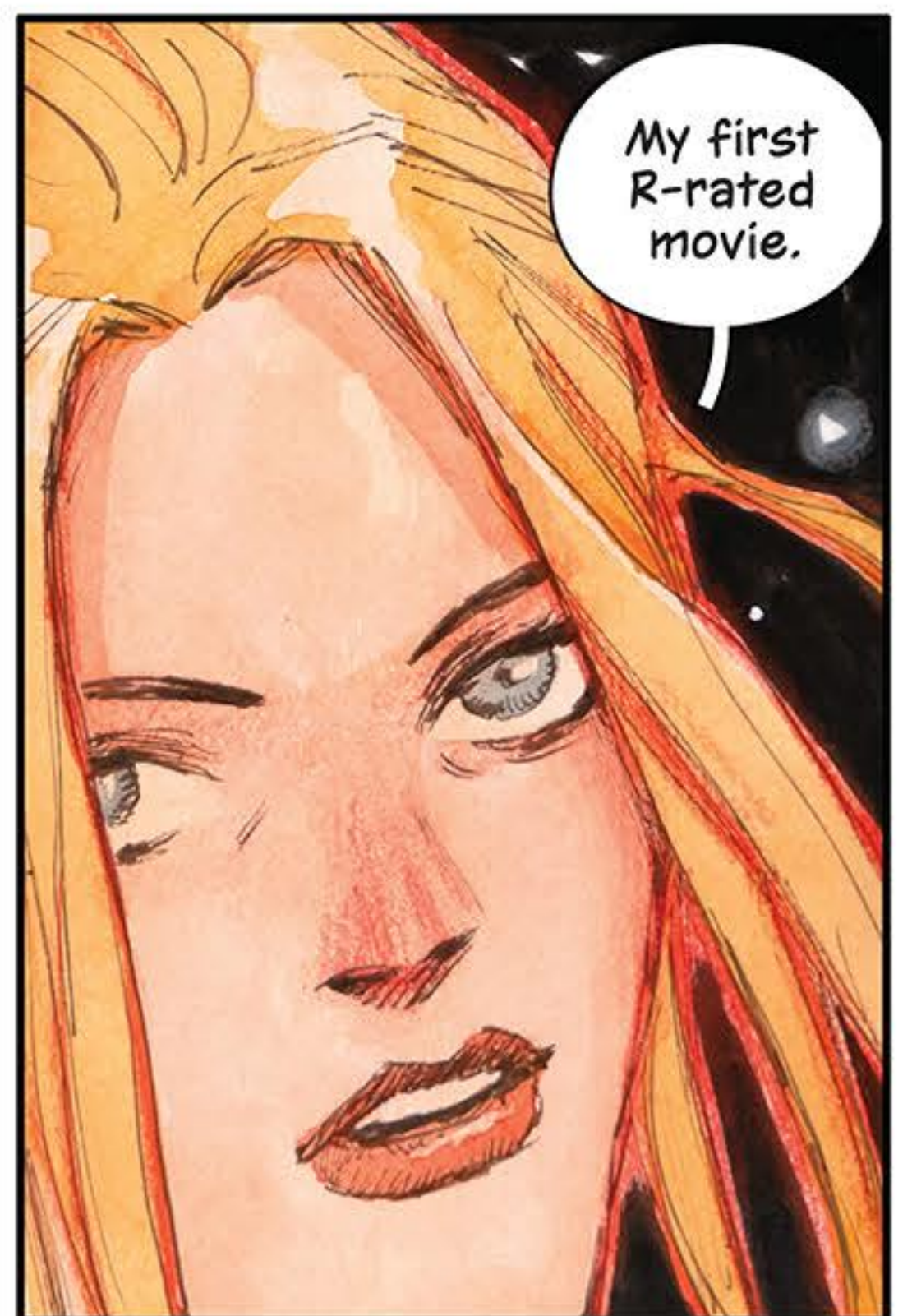
Didn't bother with the sequels, but I remember being intrigued by that first one.



Never can recall when the hell pictures incorporating *time travel* were in theaters though.

1985, maybe?

But I didn't see it until VHS.



My first R-rated movie.



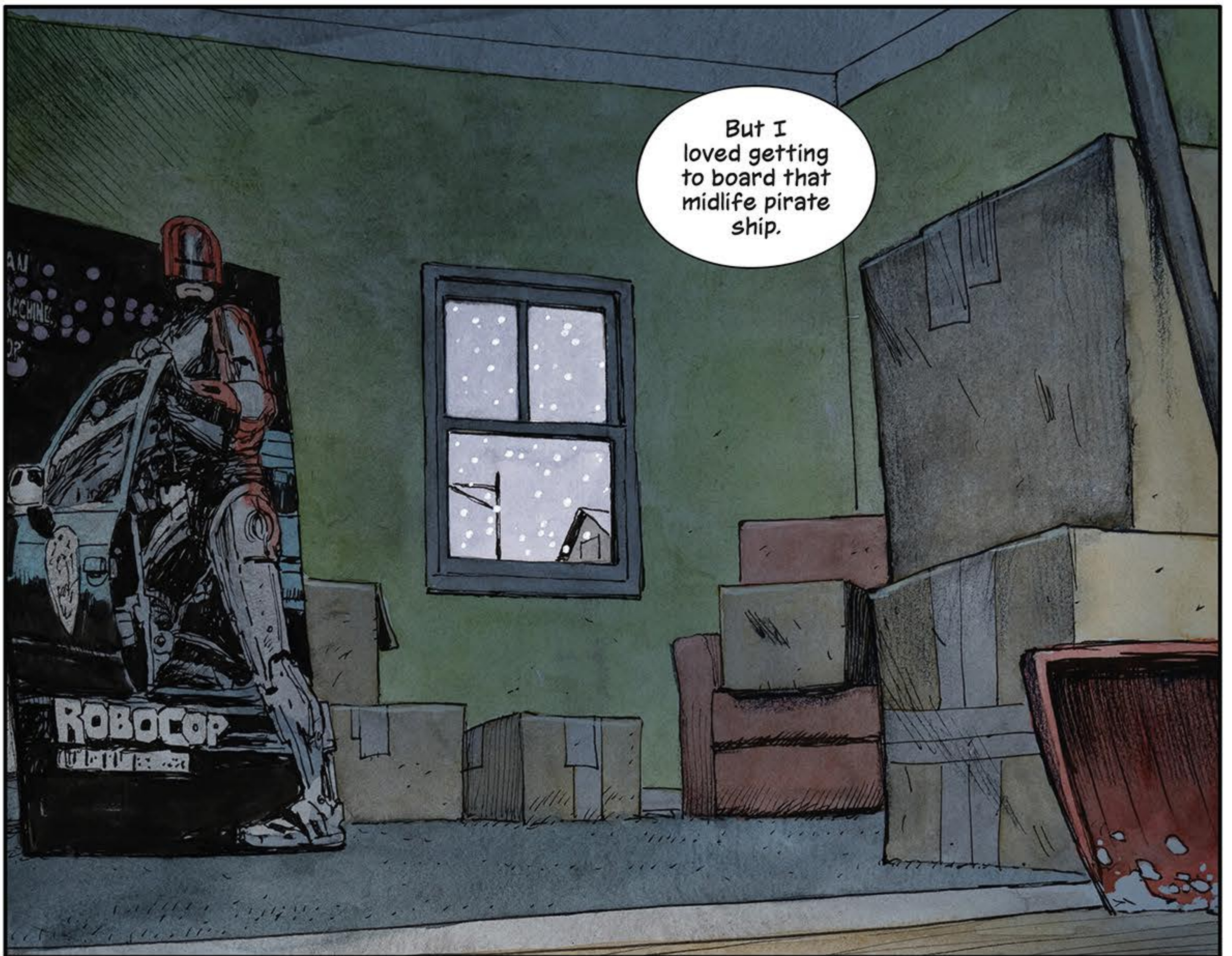
I was
twelve.



My folks
were newly
separated, and dad
had moved into a
shitbox condo
a few miles
away.



The whole
situation crept
out my brothers,
who looked for any
excuse to stay
somewhere else
on weekends.

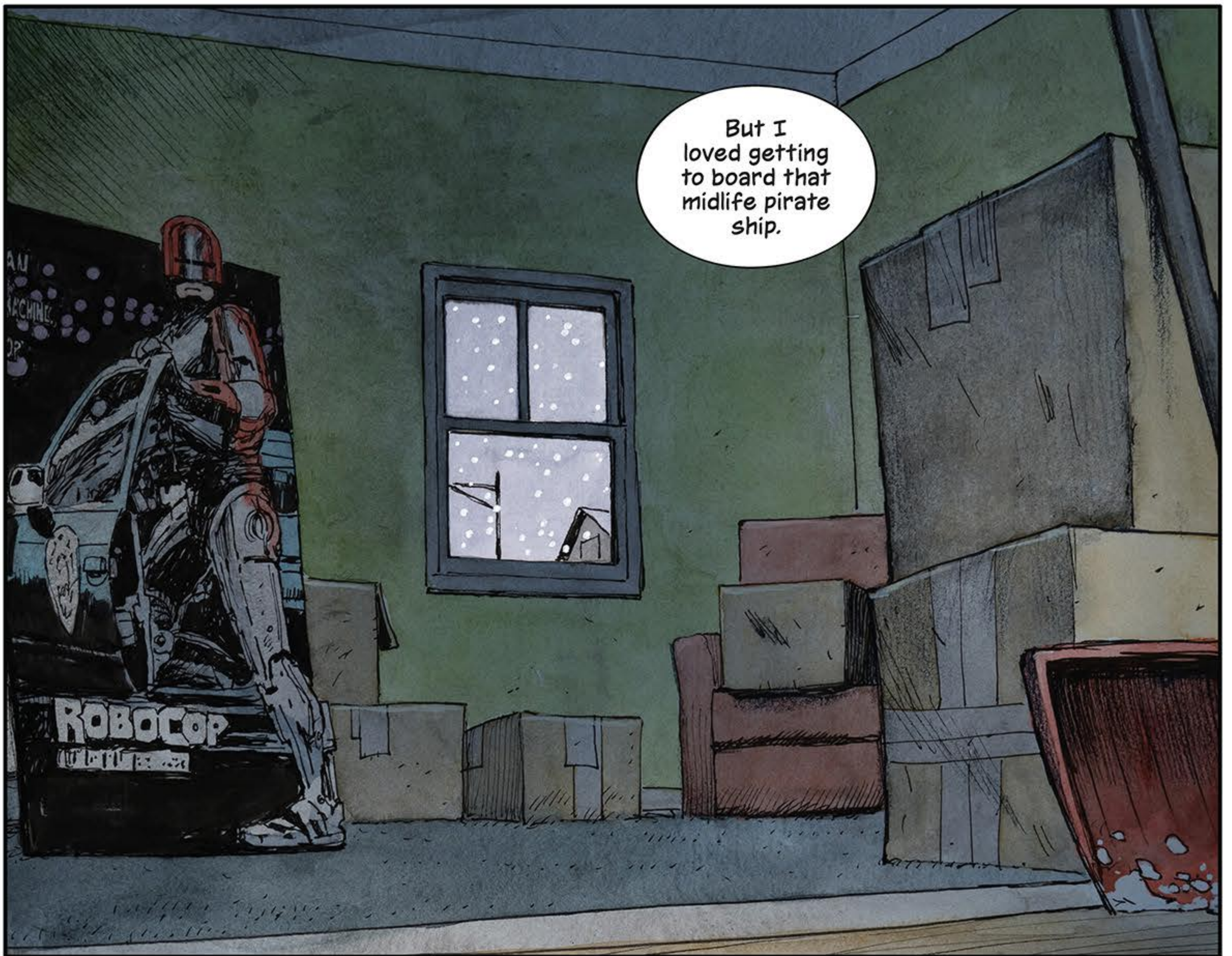


But I loved getting to board that midlife pirate ship.



You never knew what the fuck you'd get to see.

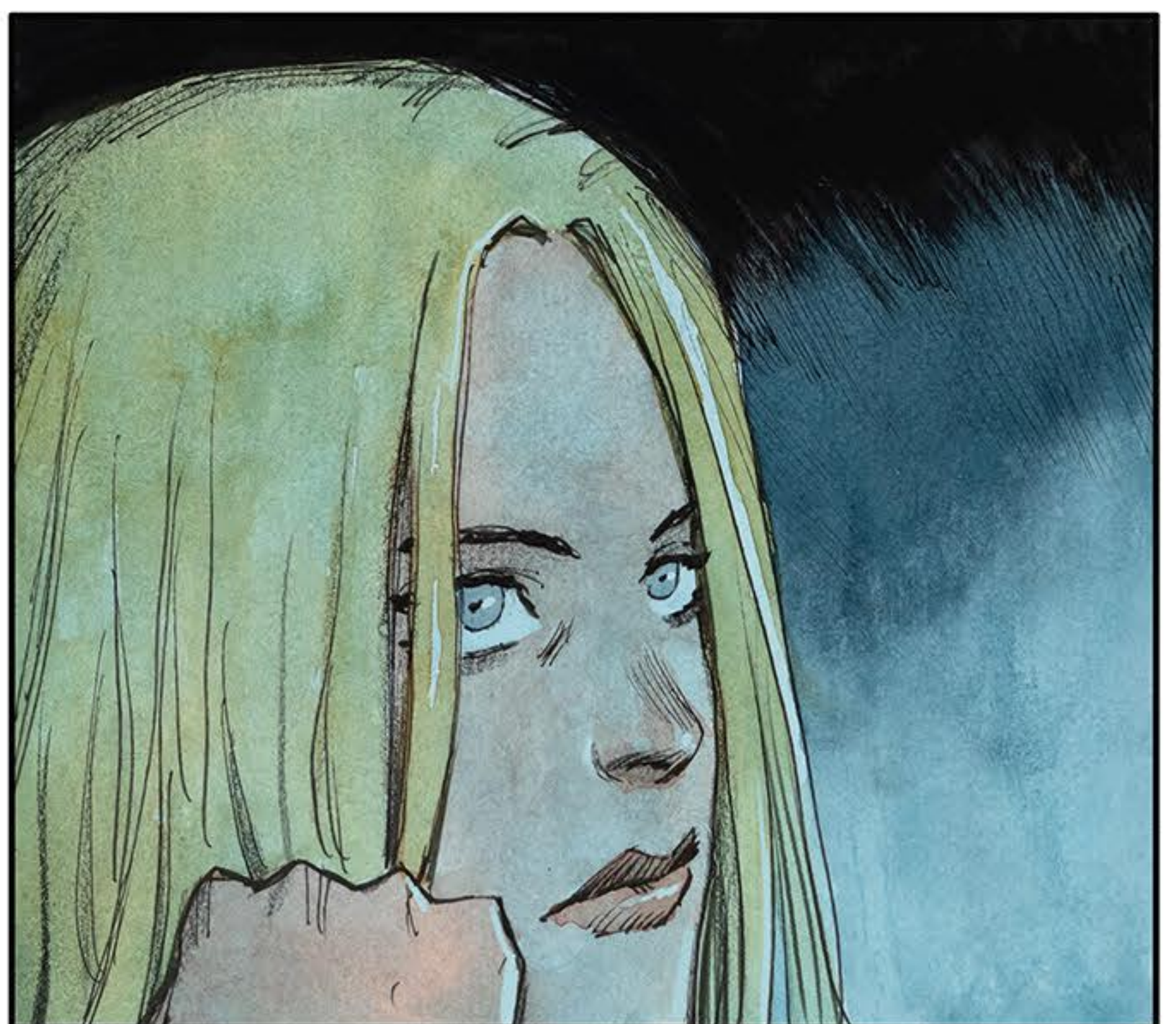
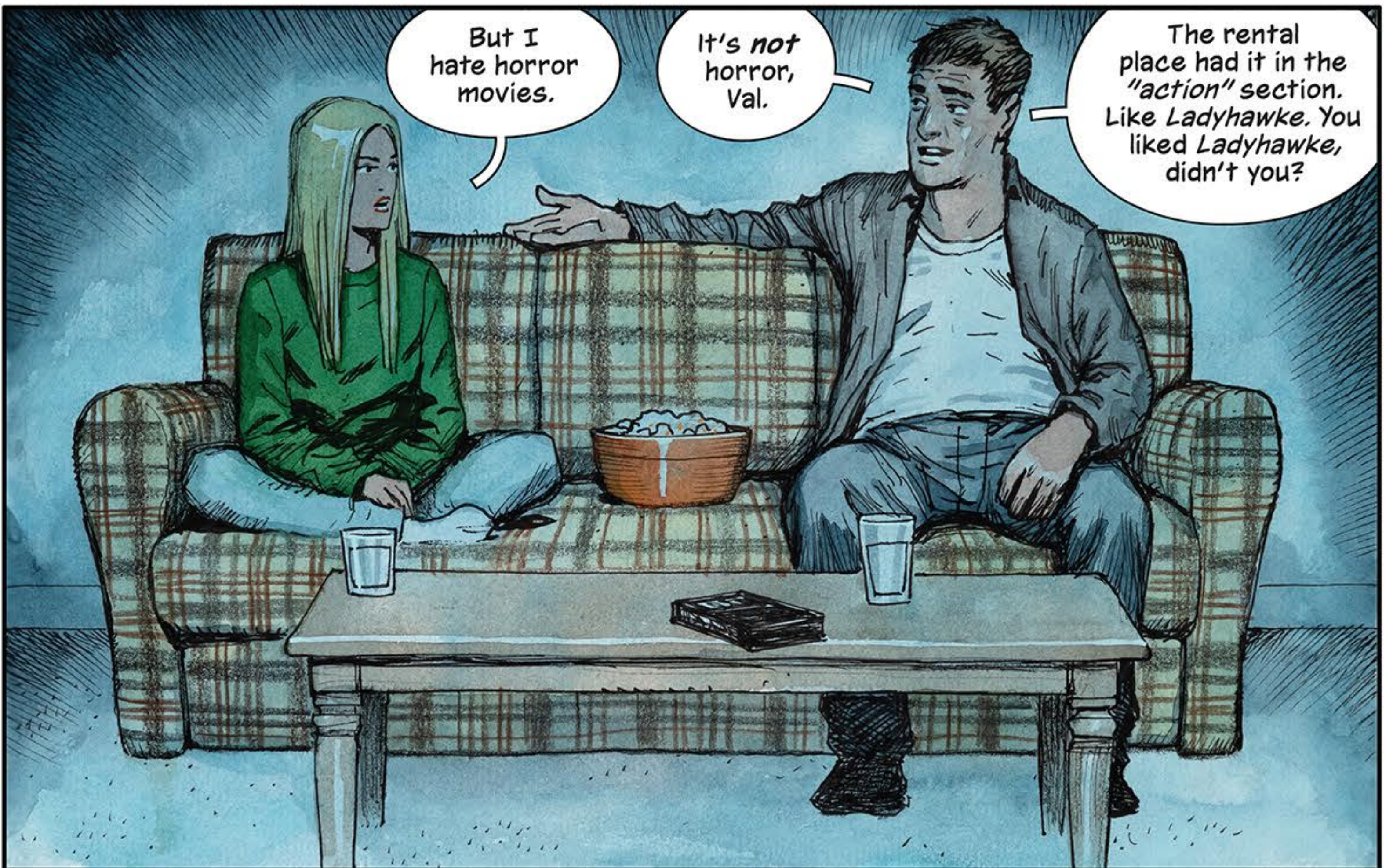
MRRROHWW

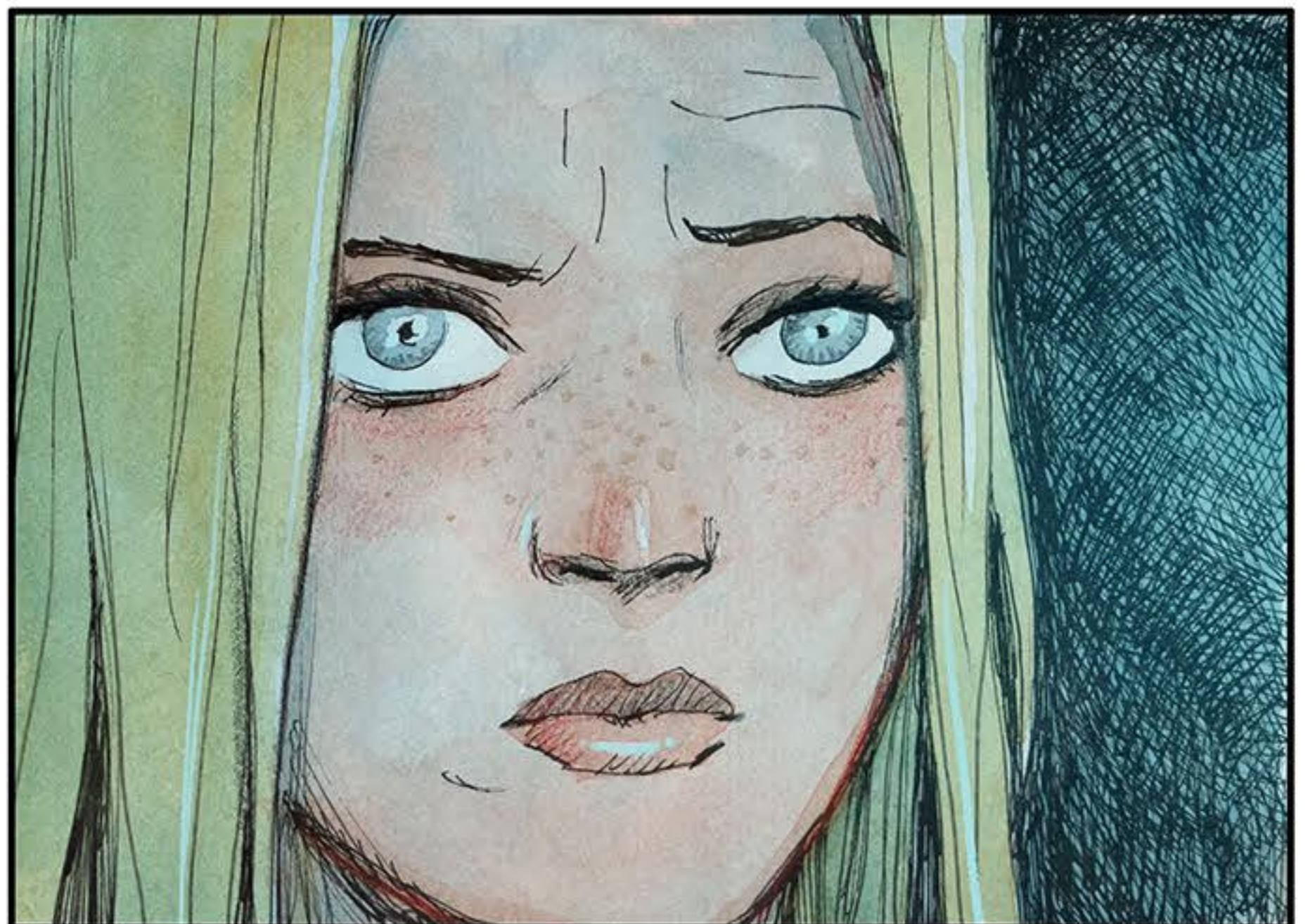
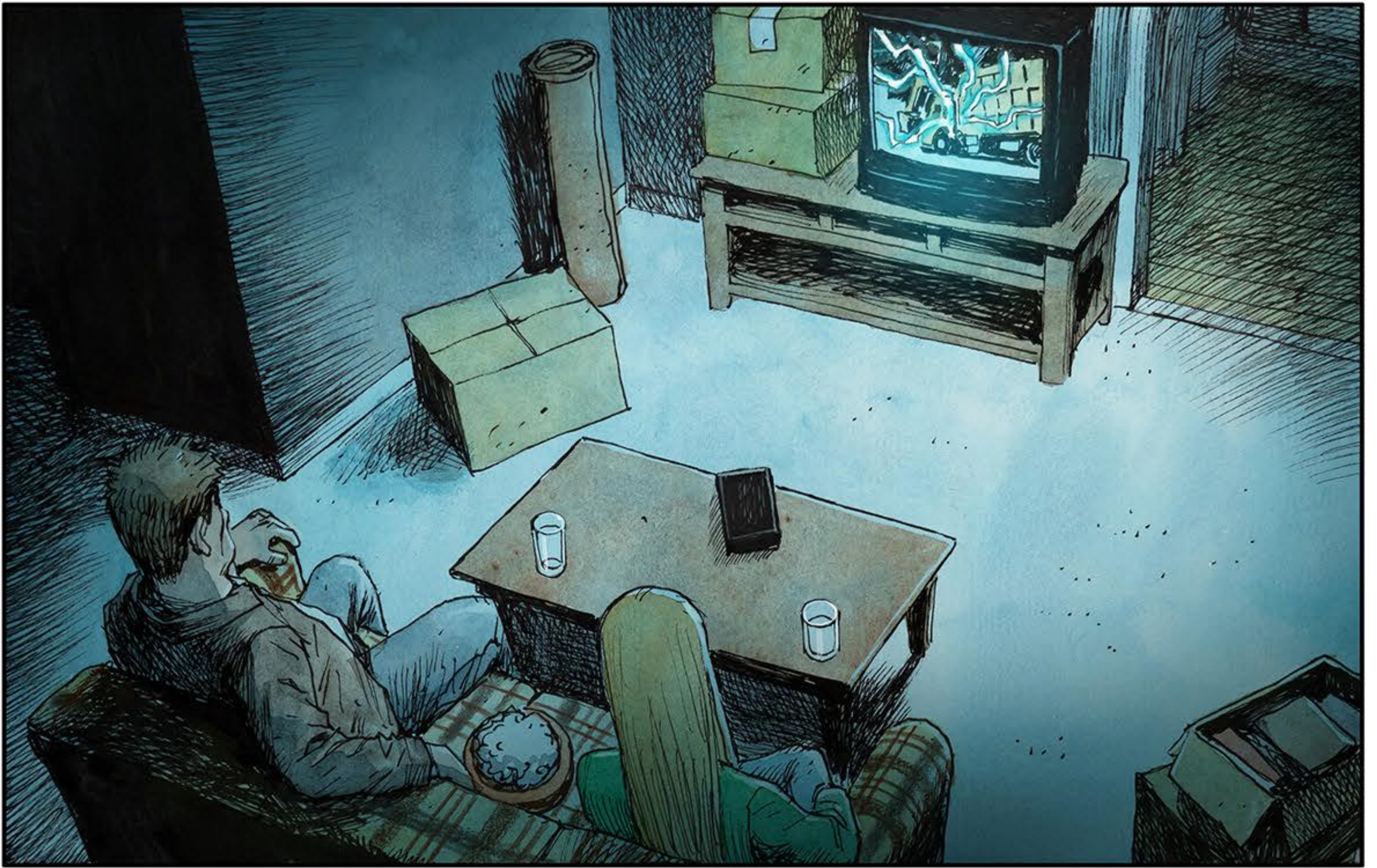


But I loved getting to board that midlife pirate ship.



You never knew what the fuck you'd get to see.







I can still remember the smell of his hand.



My father's.

...

I guess he didn't mind Arnold's bare ass, but dad forgot that there's a brief, shadowy moment where you can kind of make out what looks like a floppy Austrian cock.

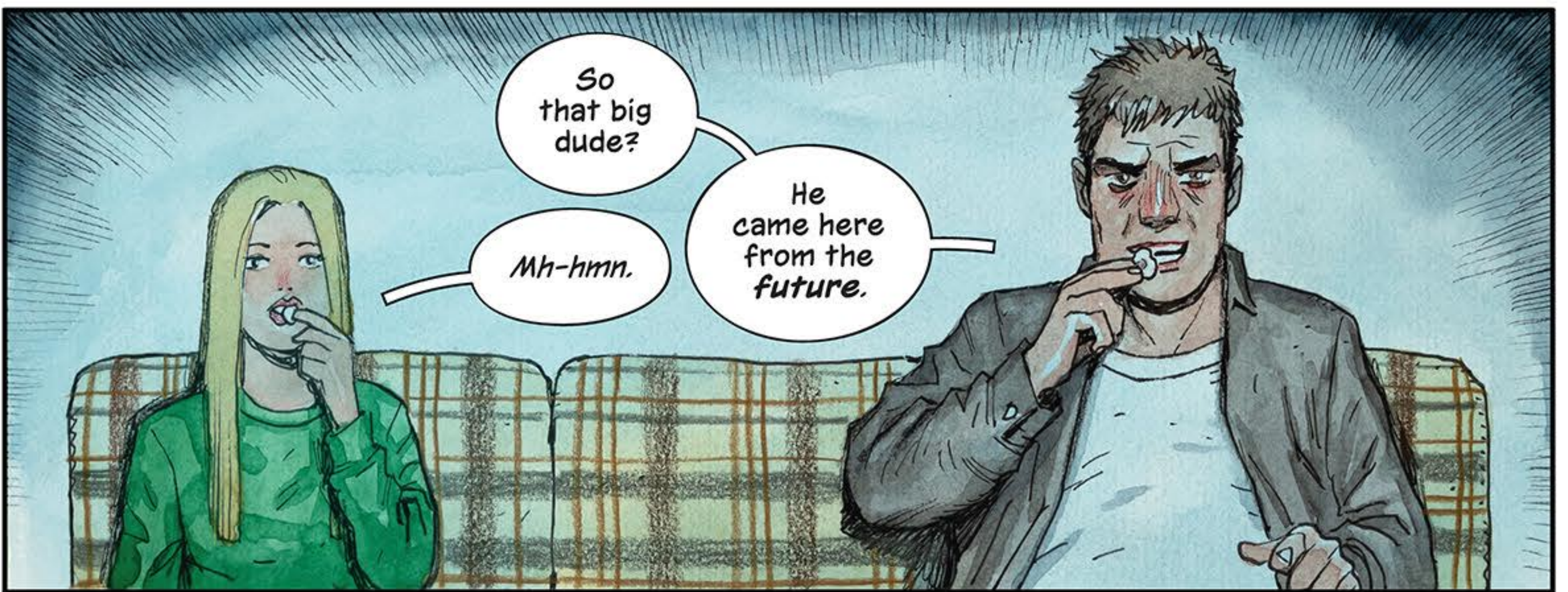
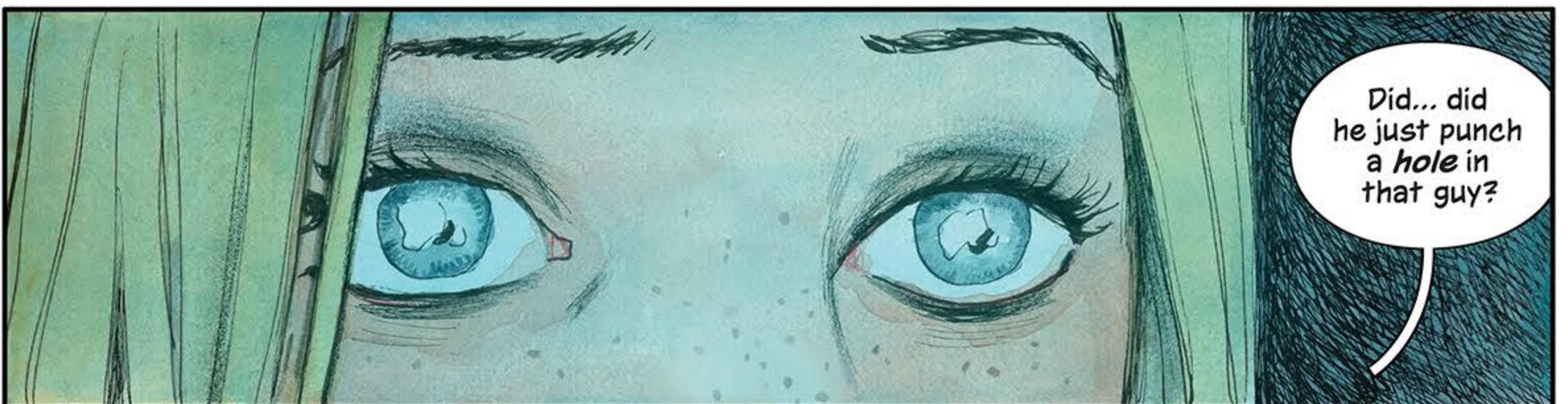


So just for a second, he reached over and gently covered my eyes.

And I was *pissed*. I mean, I had brothers. This was nothing I hadn't seen before, right?



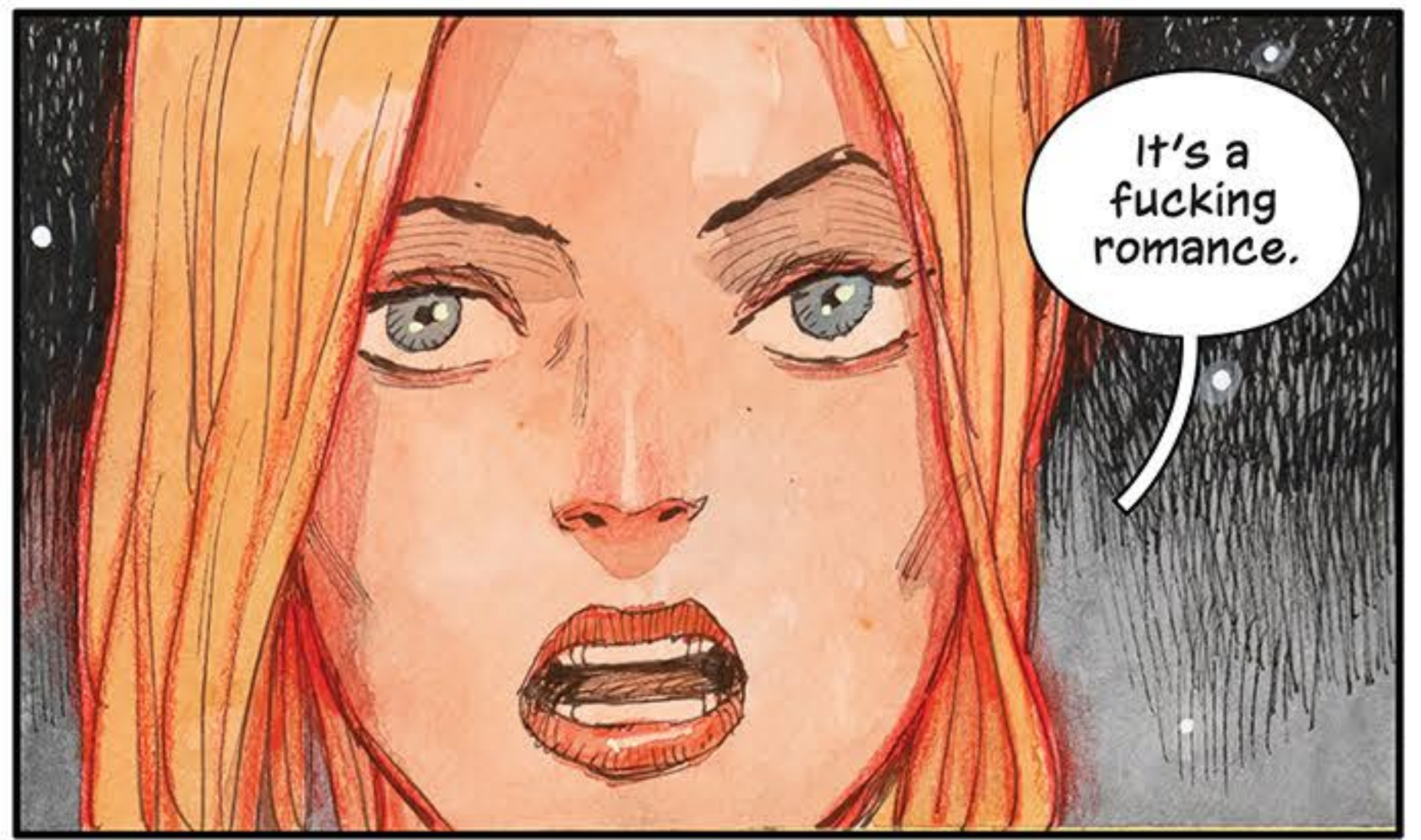
Then he took his hand away.





Dad was wrong.

Terminator isn't an action movie... but it's not horror either. Or even sci-fi.



It's a fucking romance.

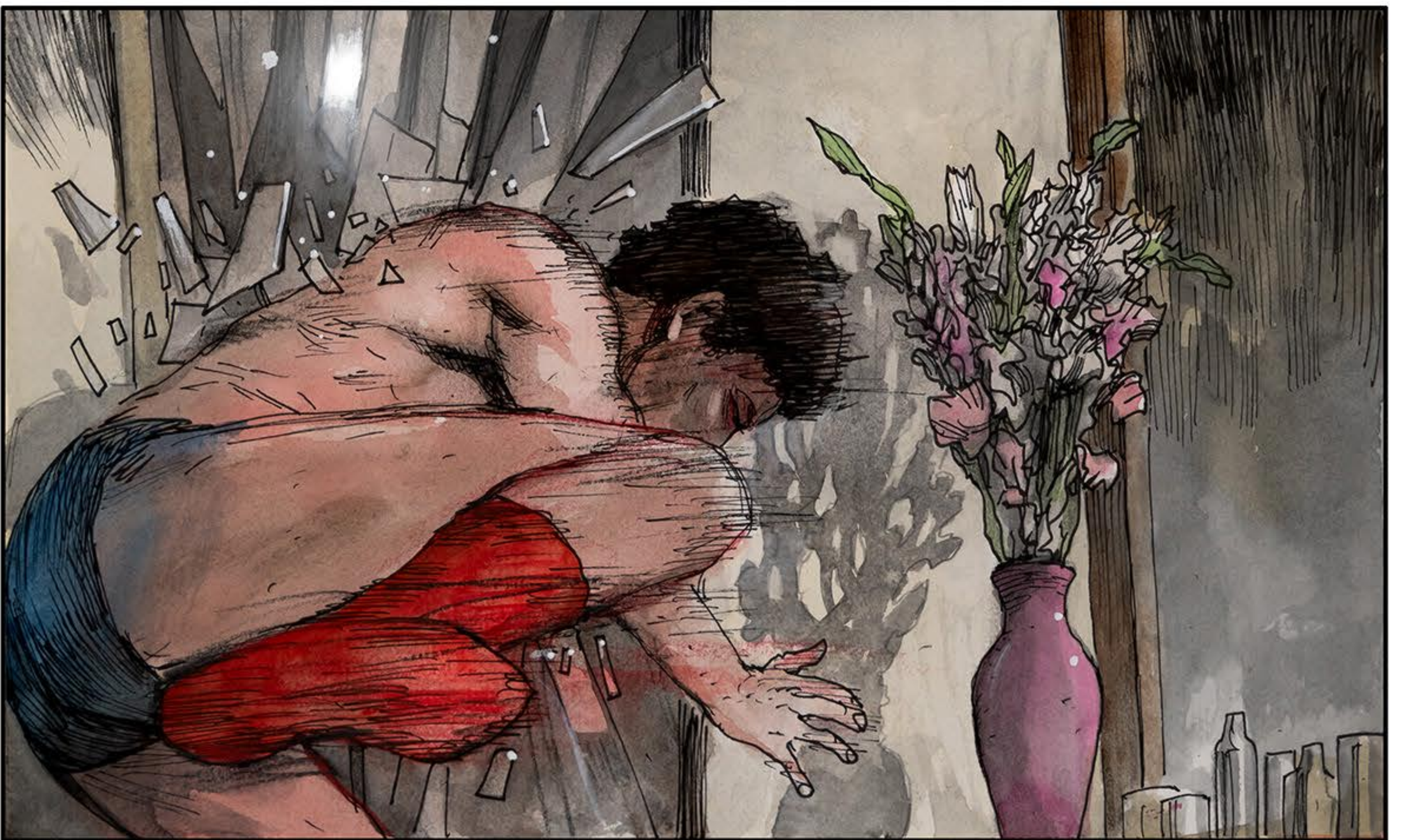
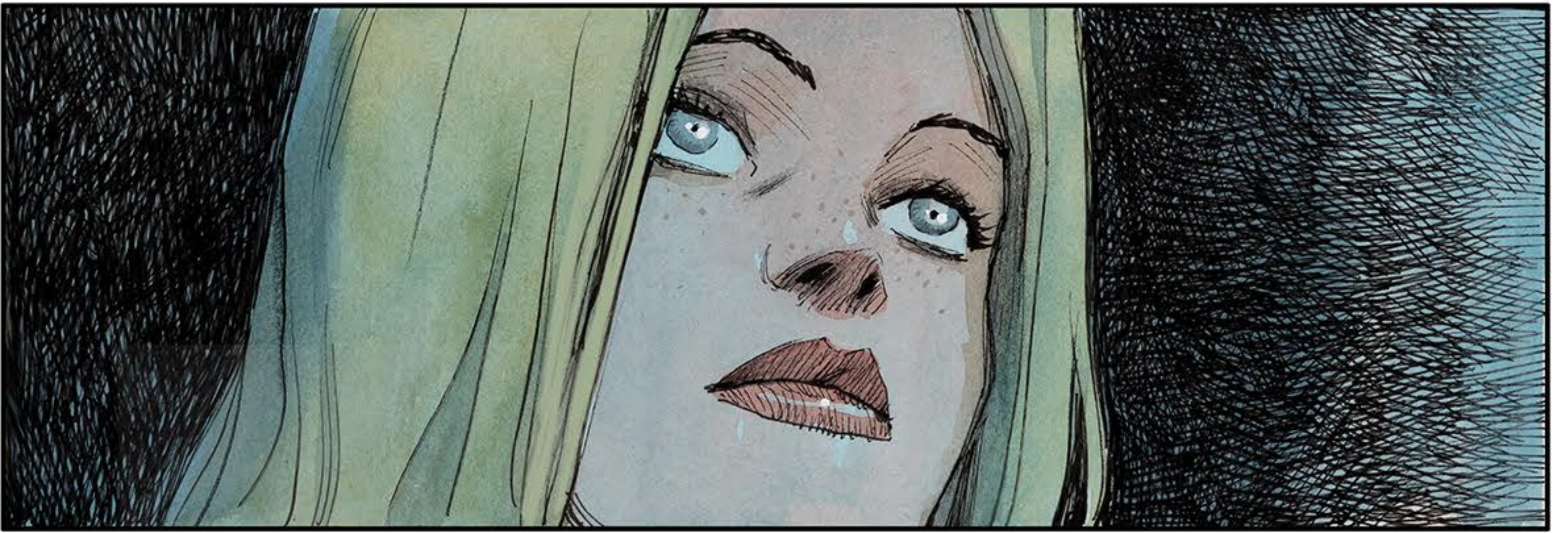


My favorite kind, too.

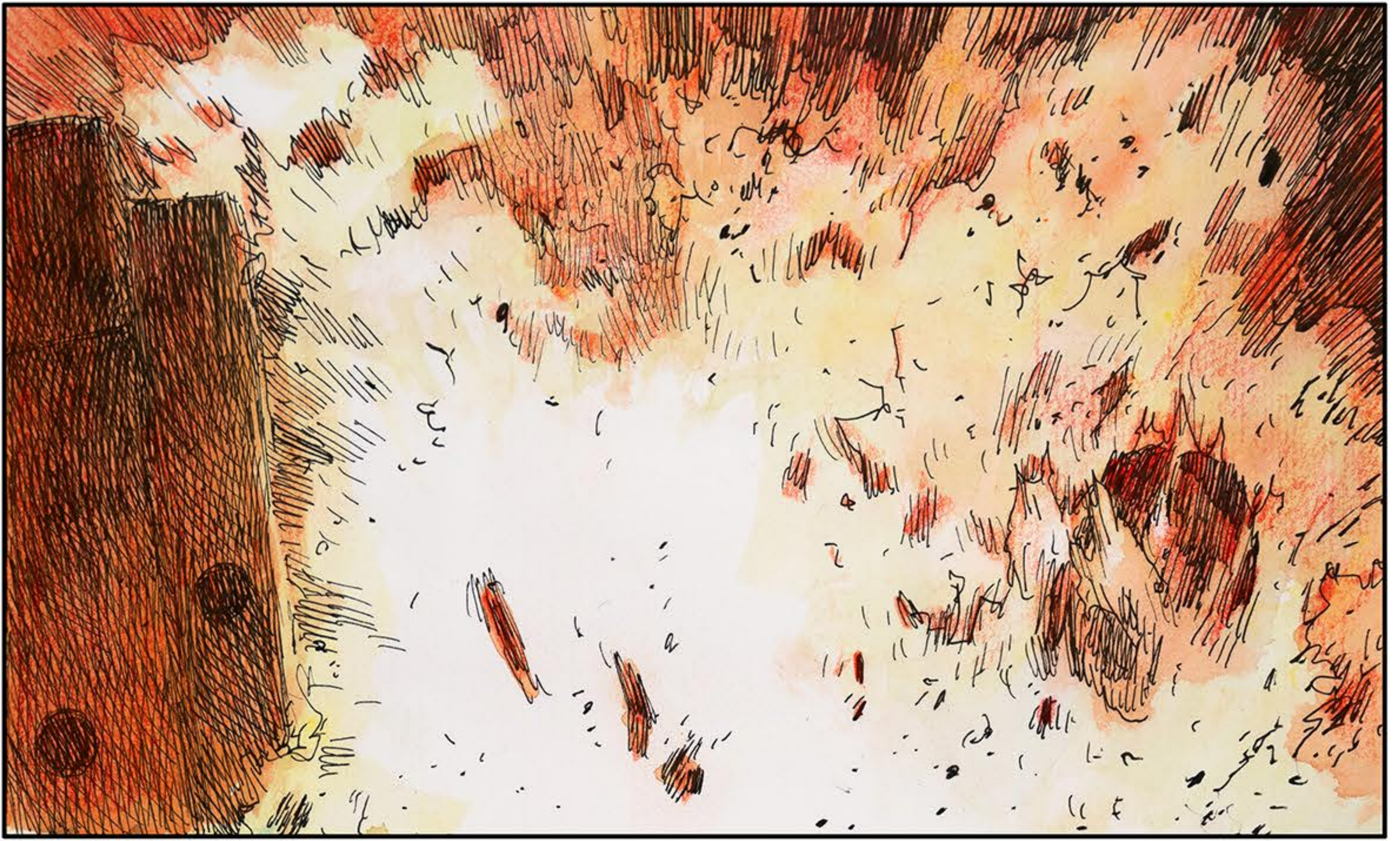
The classic, pussy-tingling fiction of two beautiful boys who both want the same girl.

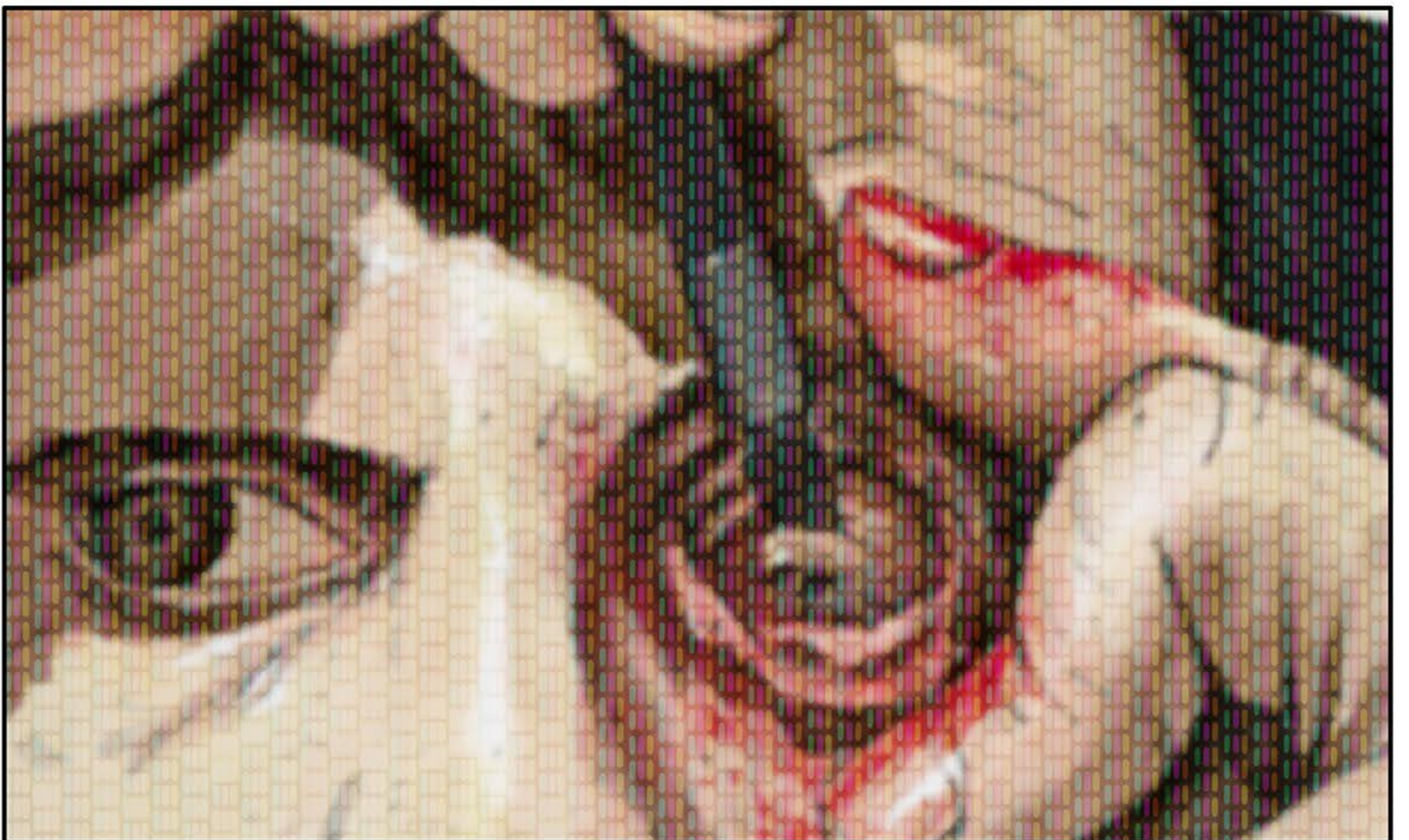


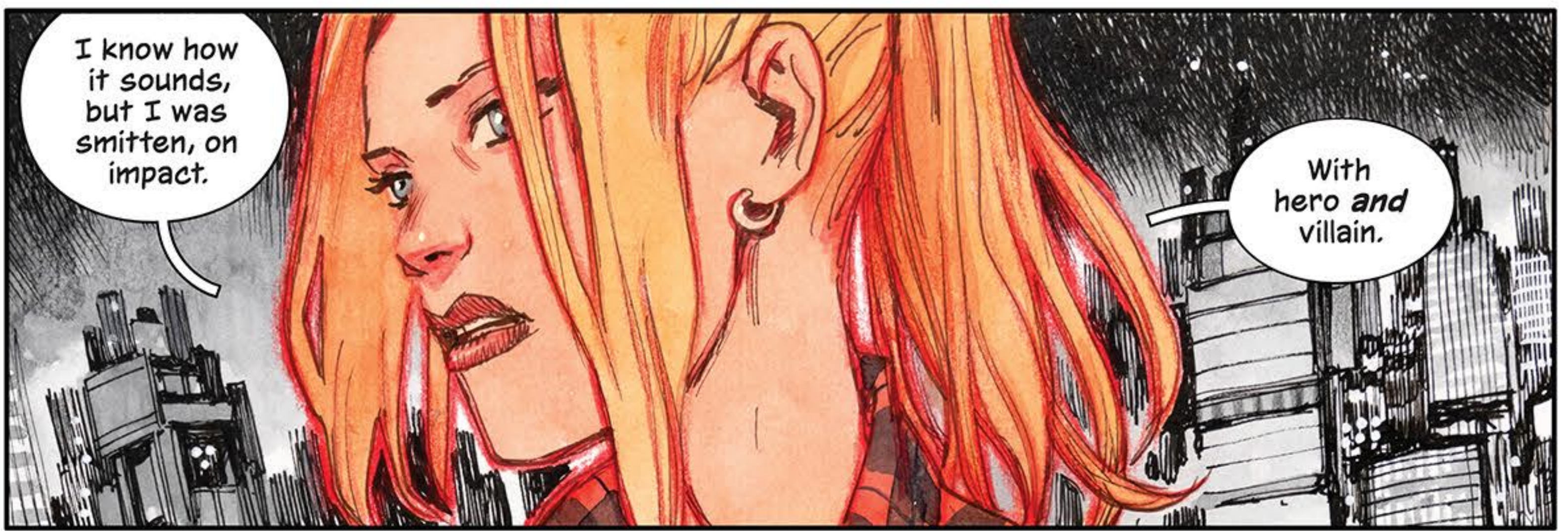
Want her so bad, they'll do almost anything.











I know how it sounds, but I was smitten, on impact.

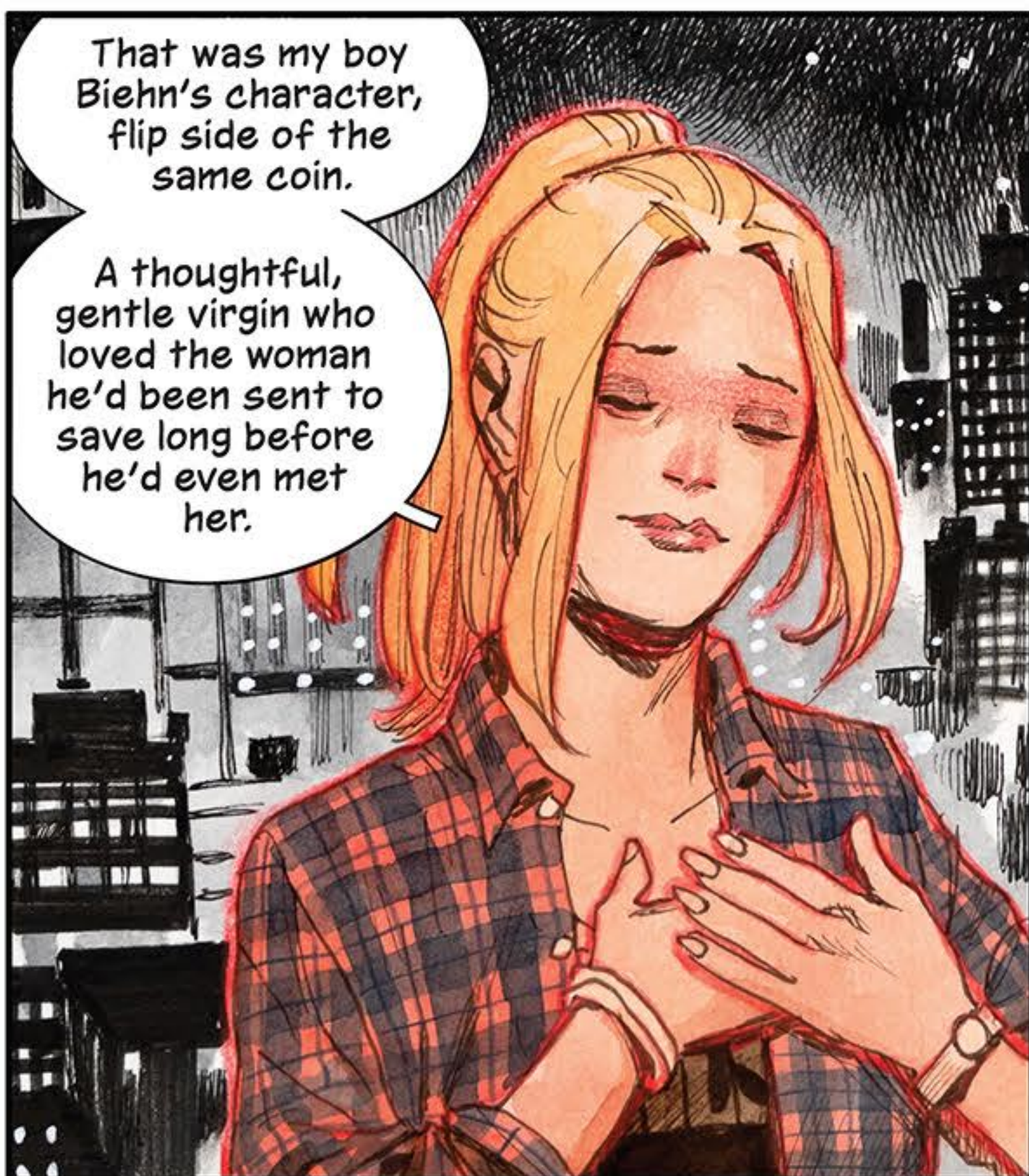
With hero *and* villain.



Never thought of Schwarzenegger as a love interest.

Aww, the Terminator just wanted Sarah Connor's heart.

Sure, only after it had been yanked out of her throat... but he was a creature of passion and purpose, just like Kyle Reese.

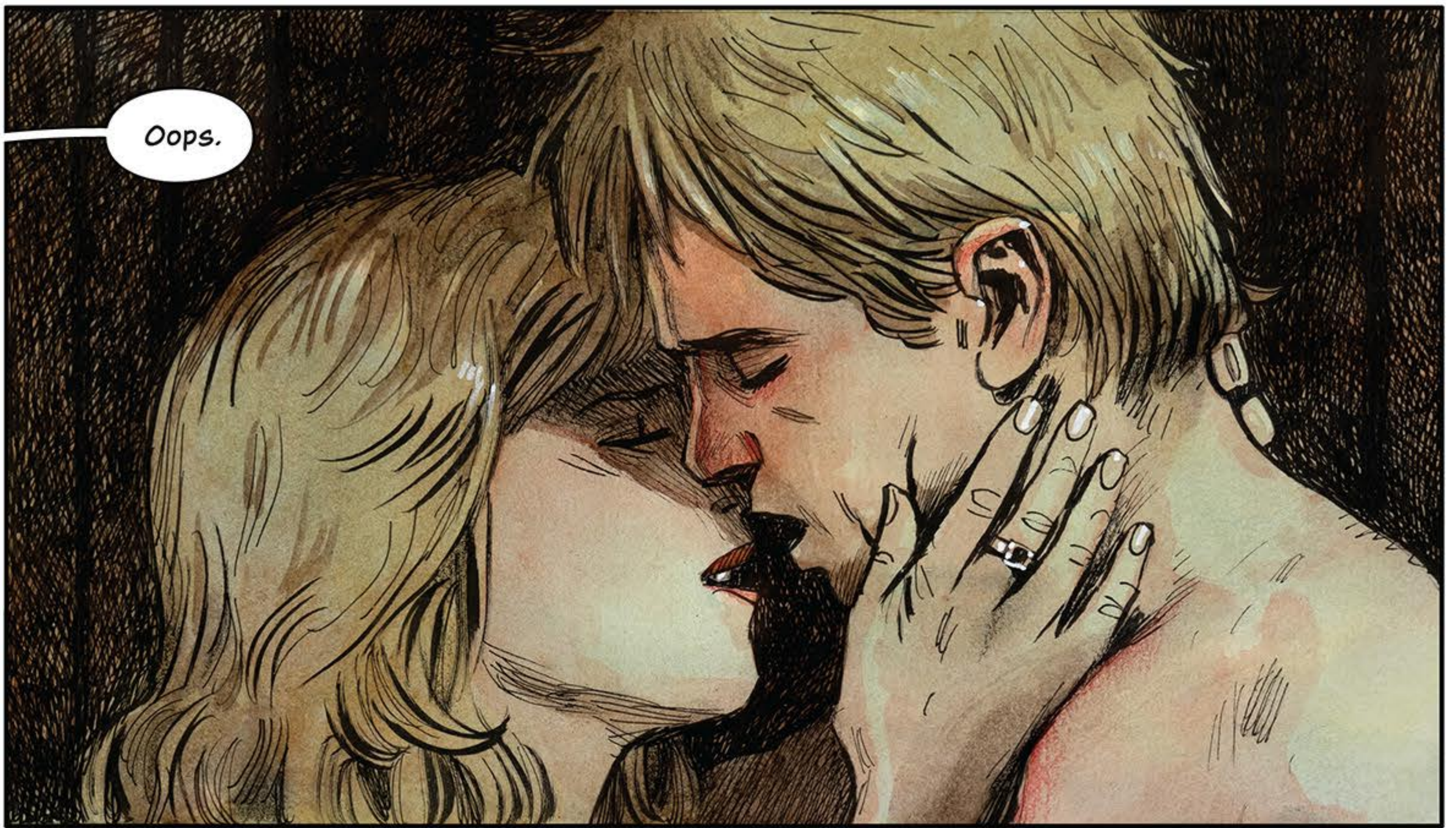


That was my boy Biehn's character, flip side of the same coin.

A thoughtful, gentle virgin who loved the woman he'd been sent to save long before he'd even met her.



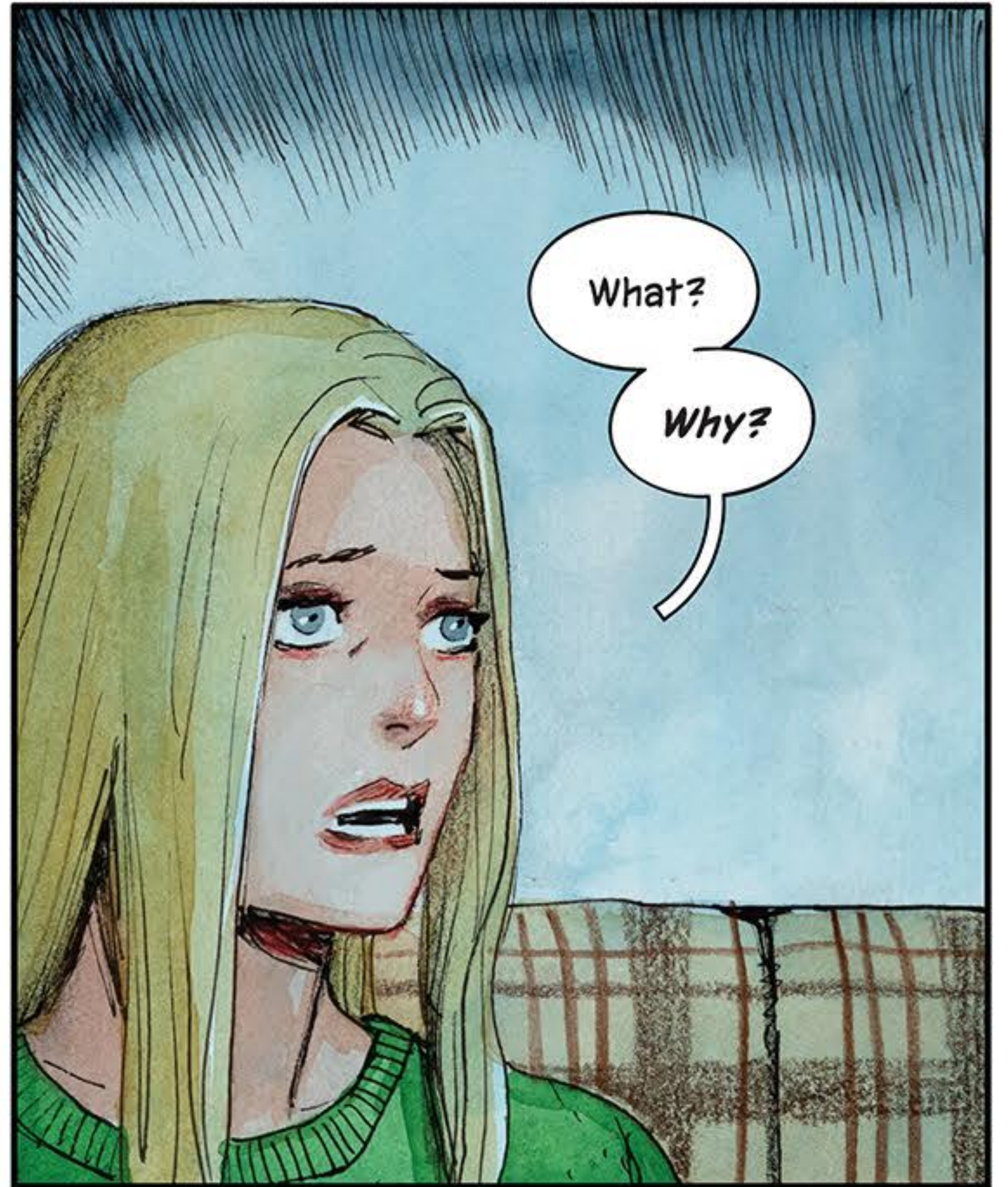
But right when he and Sarah were about to finally consummate their all-important relationship... the unthinkable happened.



Oops.



Hand me the clicker, would you?

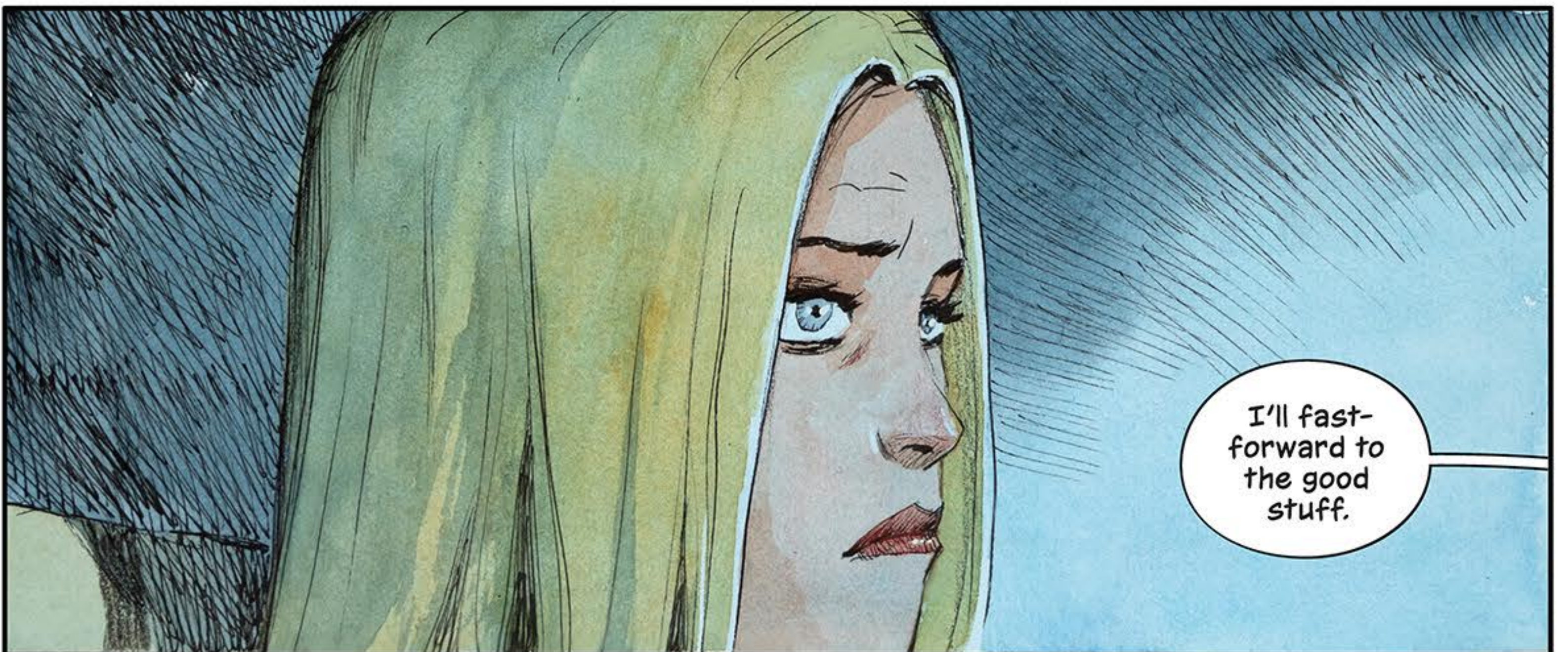
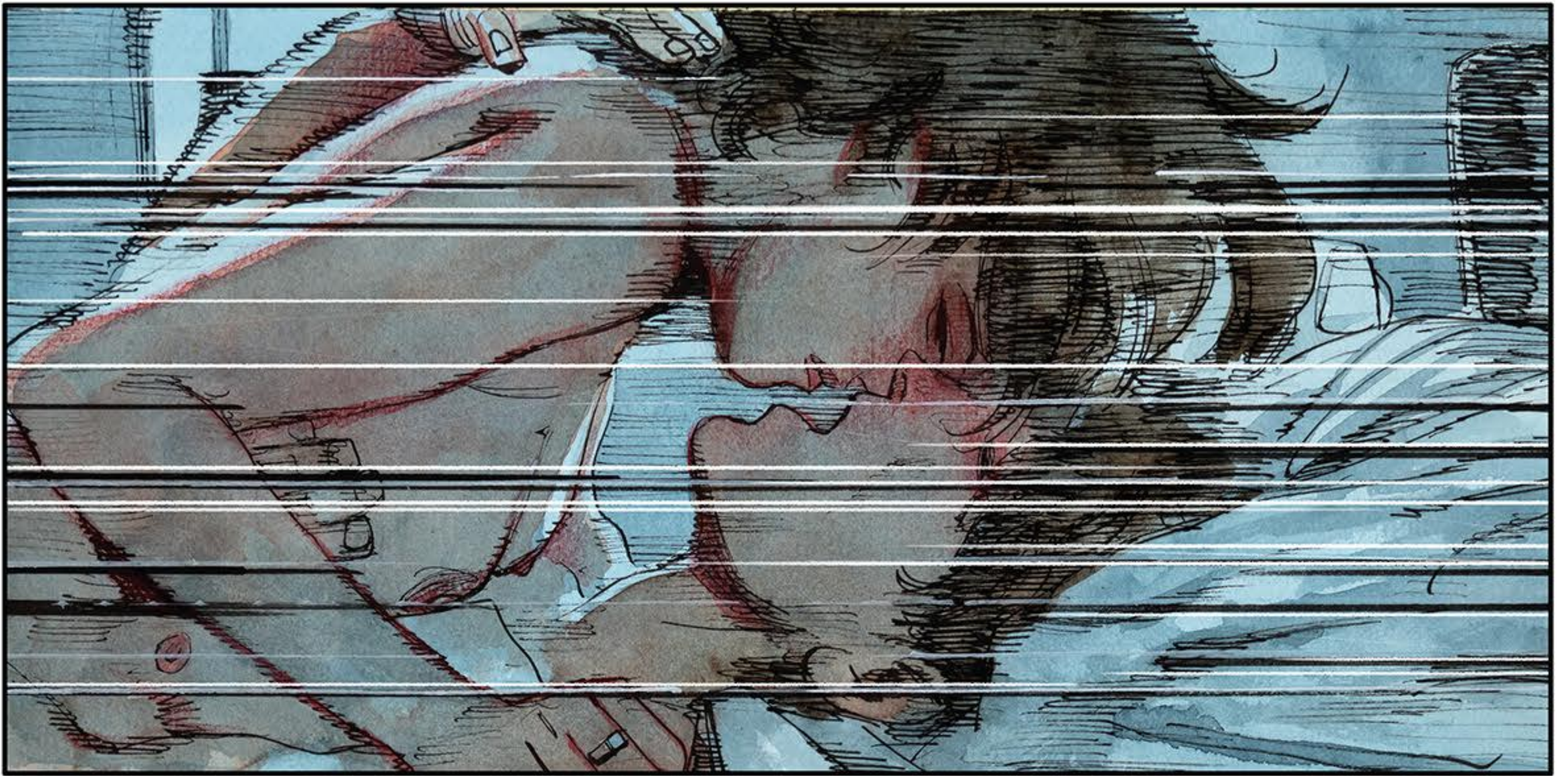


What?

Why?



This next scene is kinda... inappropriate.





We watched the end in silence.



I told dad how much I liked it, but all I could think about was everything I'd missed.

I was so angry and... and *confused*... but way too ashamed to ask him to rewind.

And I hear you on that, but I'd give the man some slack.



You were young.

I'm sure he was just trying to protect you.



Ha.

