

BRIAN K. VAUGHAN  
NIKO HENRICHON

# Spectators™

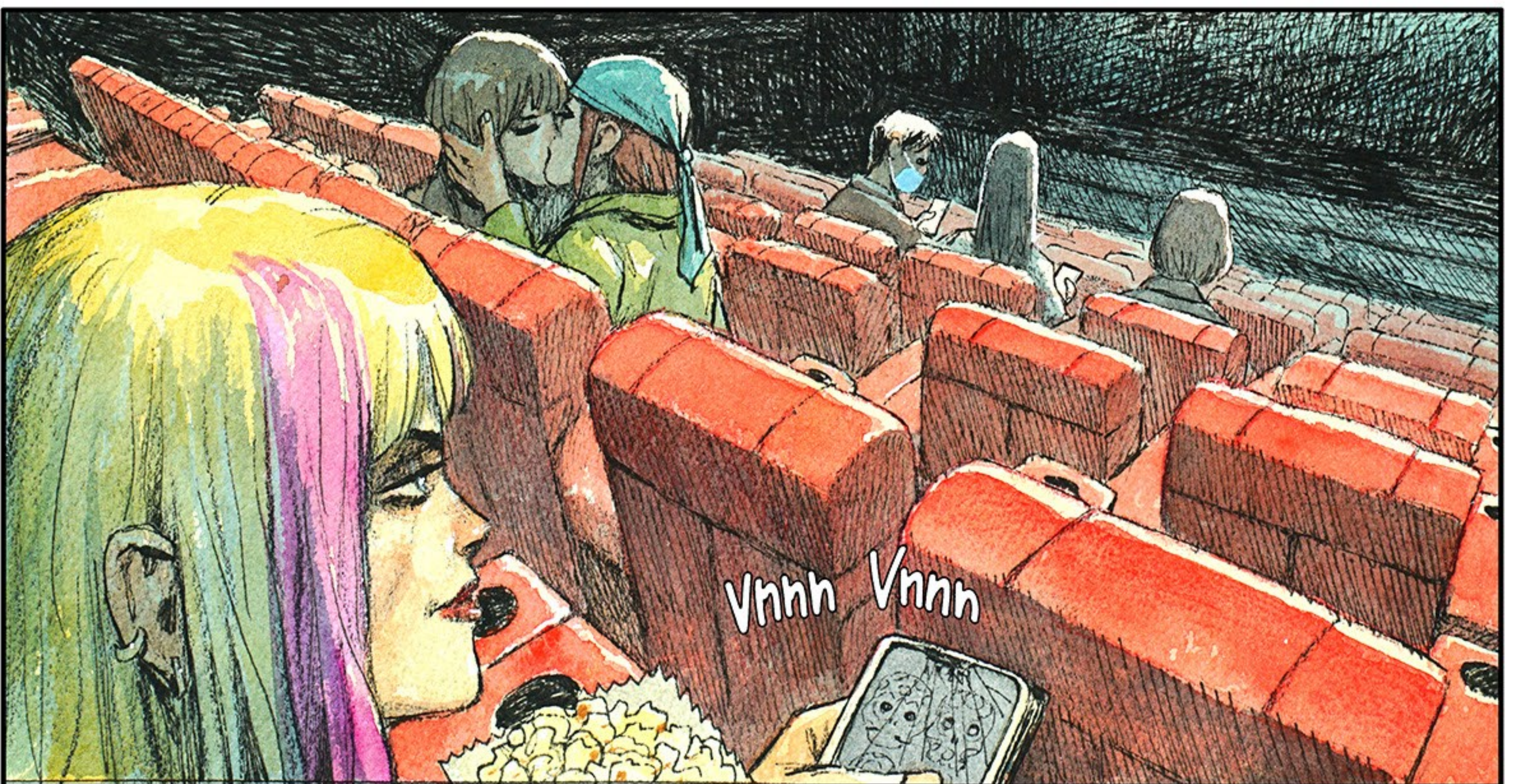
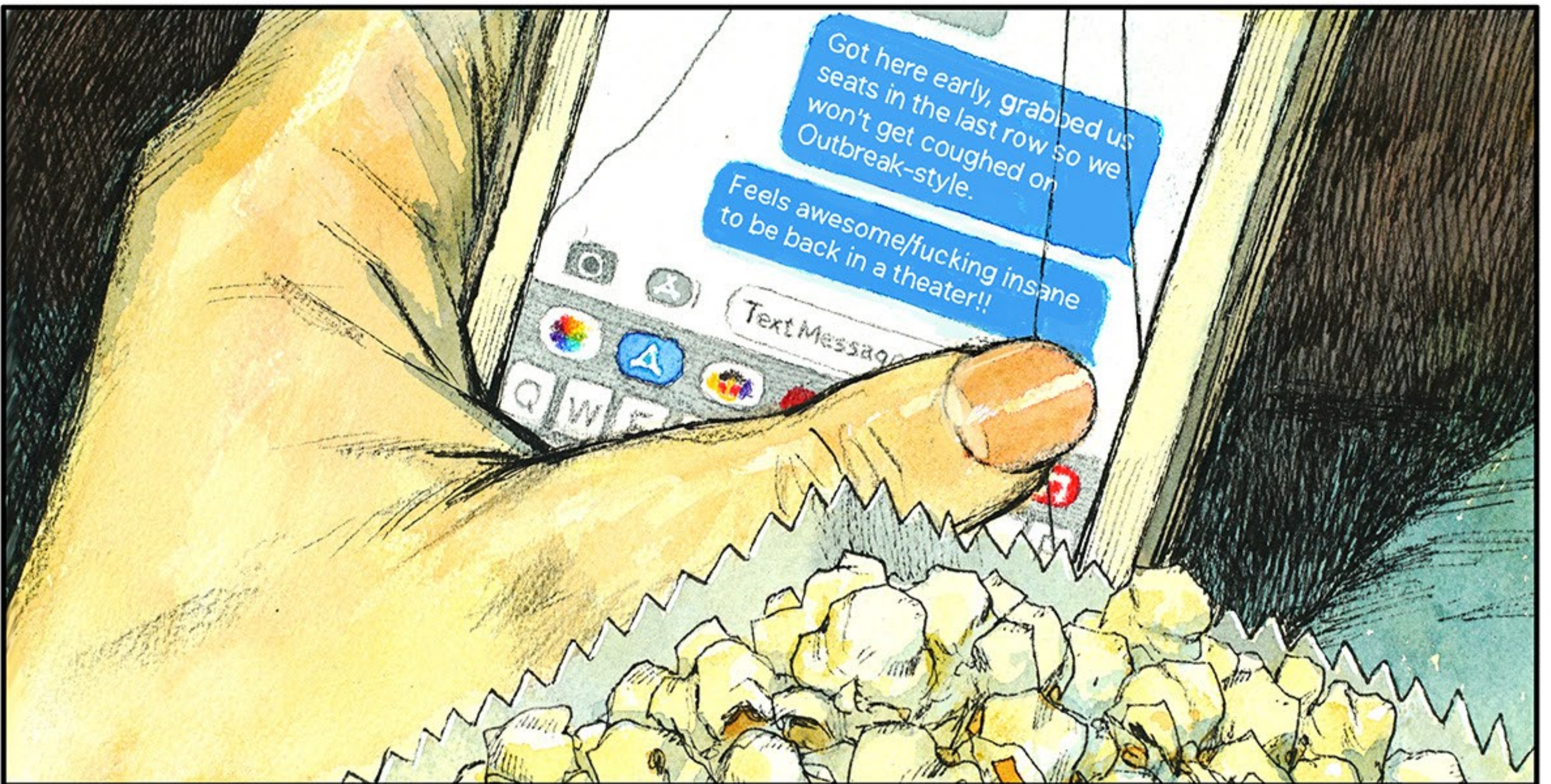
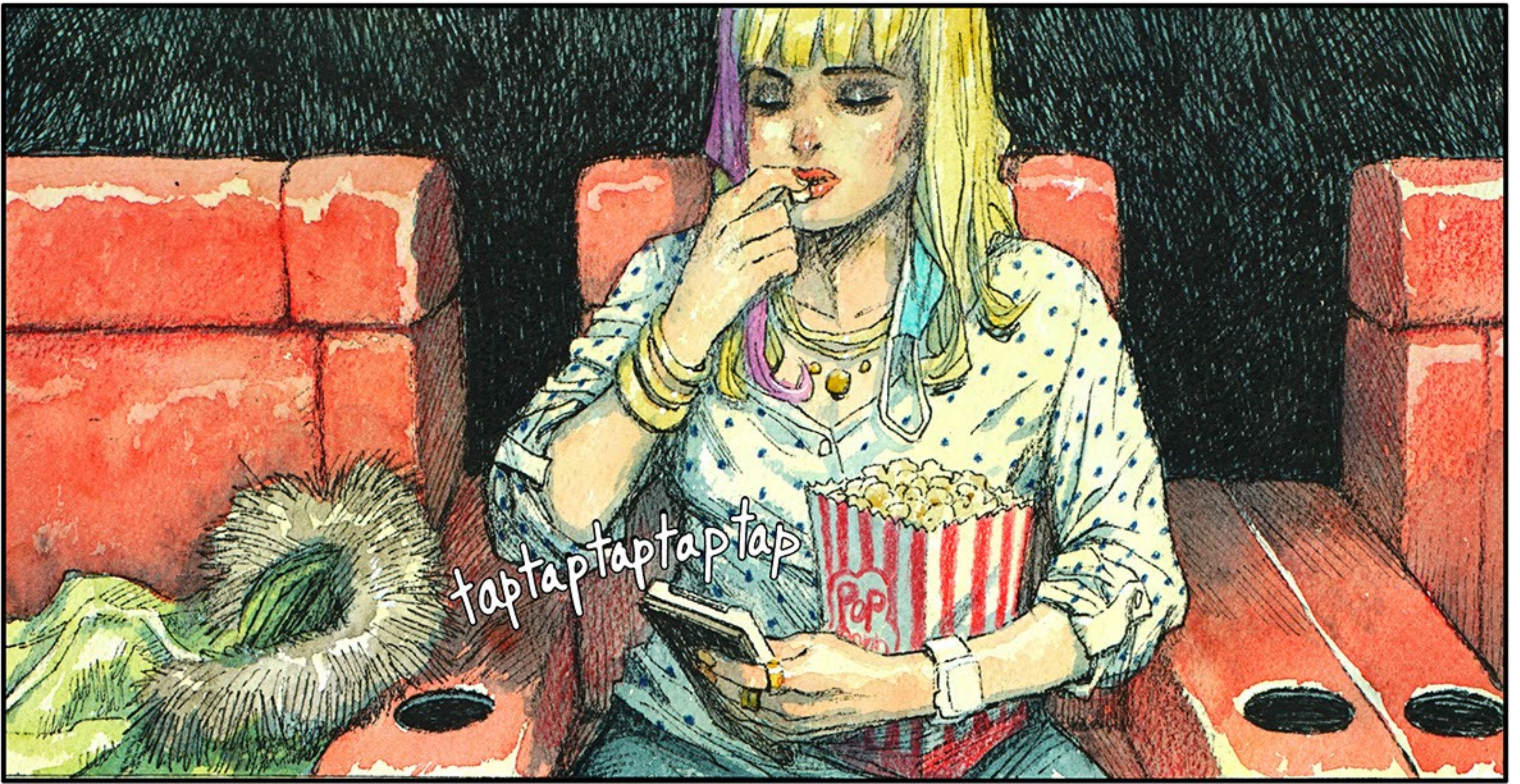




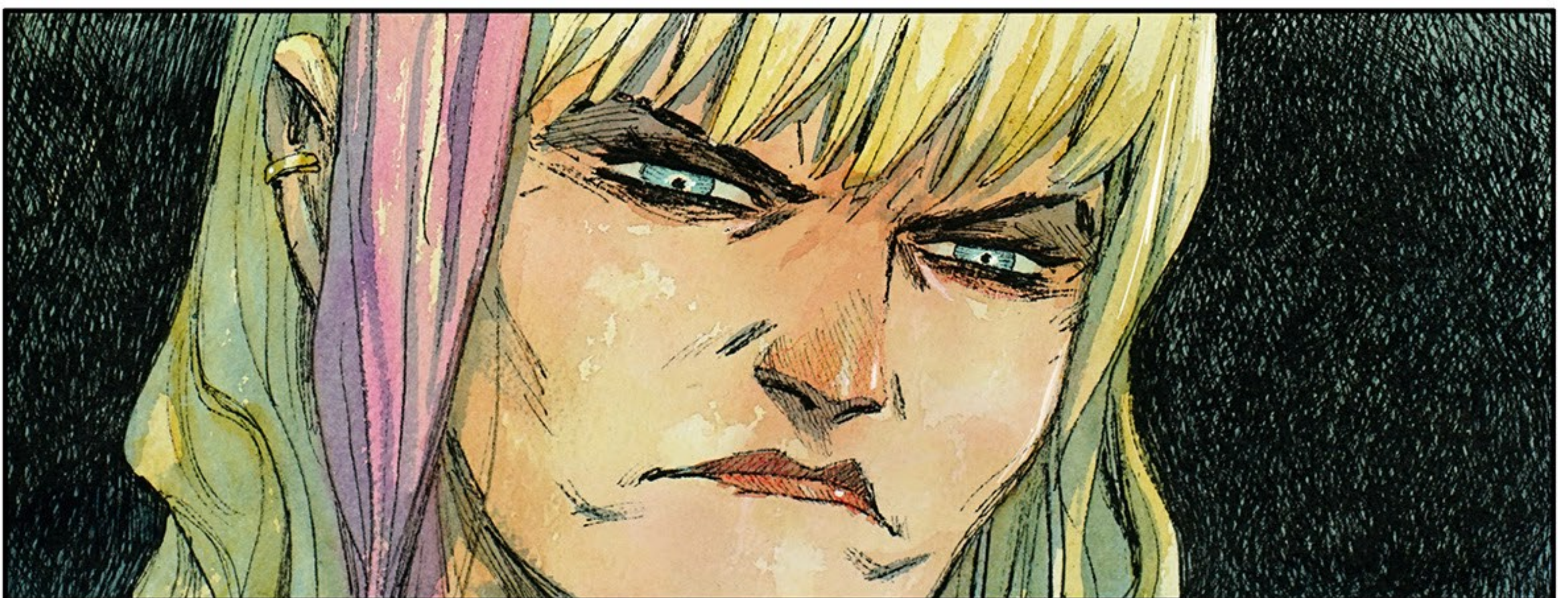
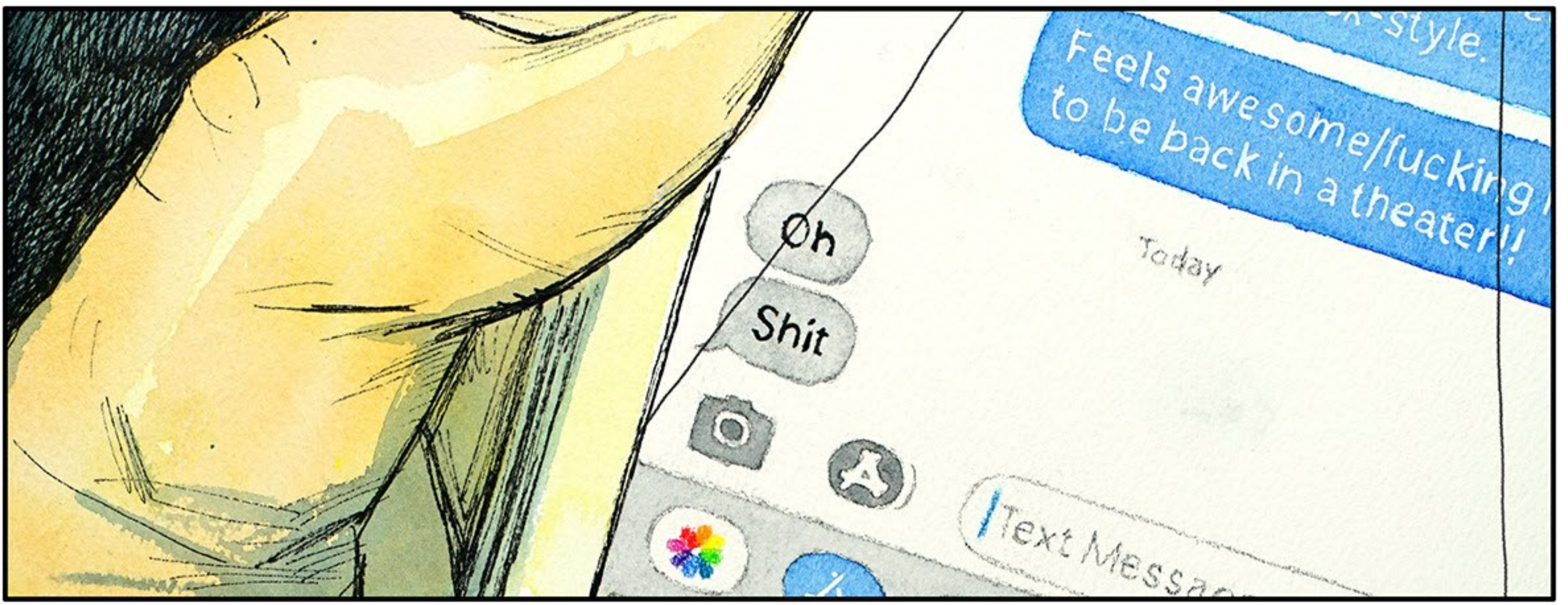


**NYC'S VILLAGE VIII  
WELCOMES YOU BACK  
TO THE MOVIES!**





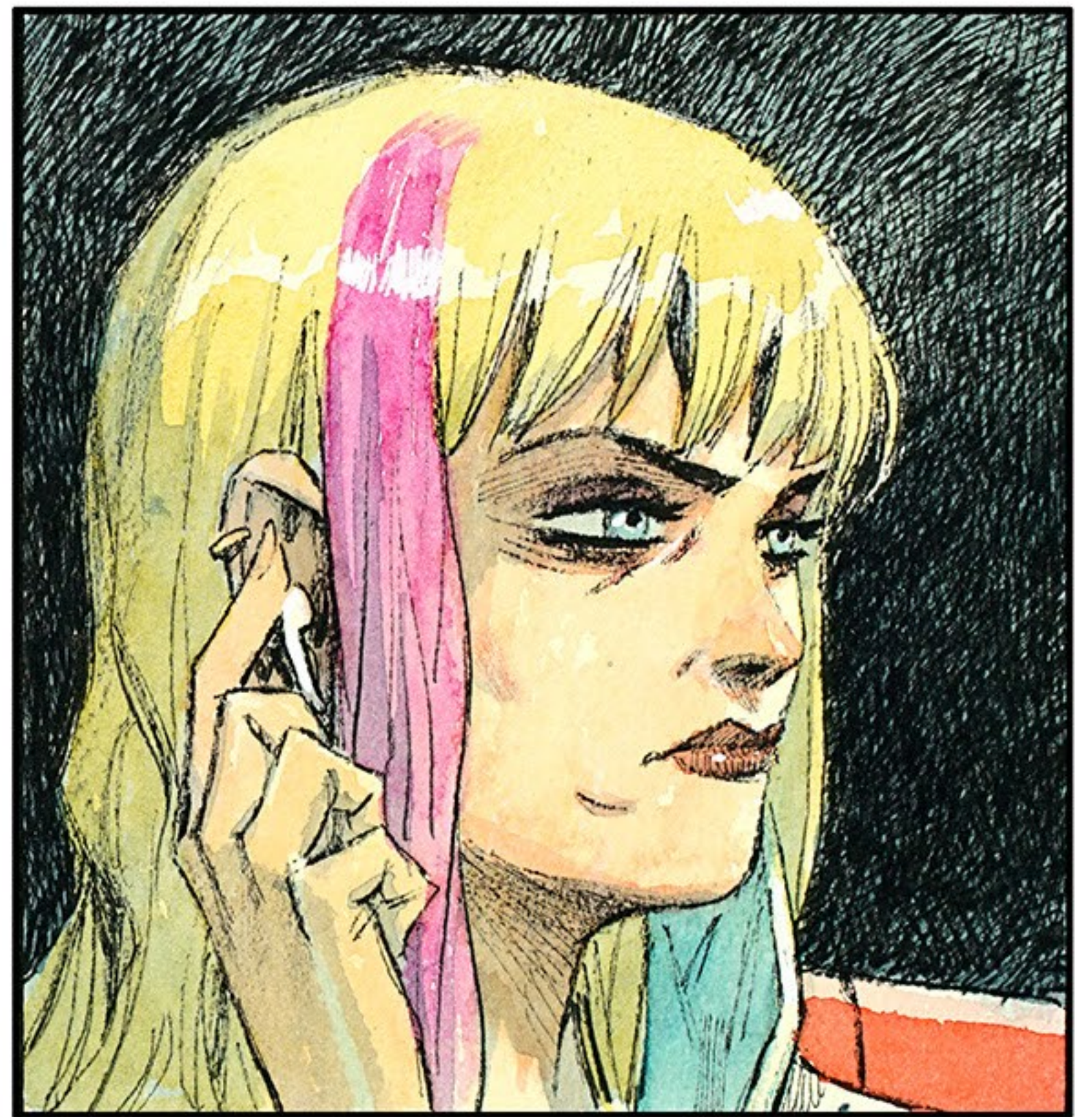
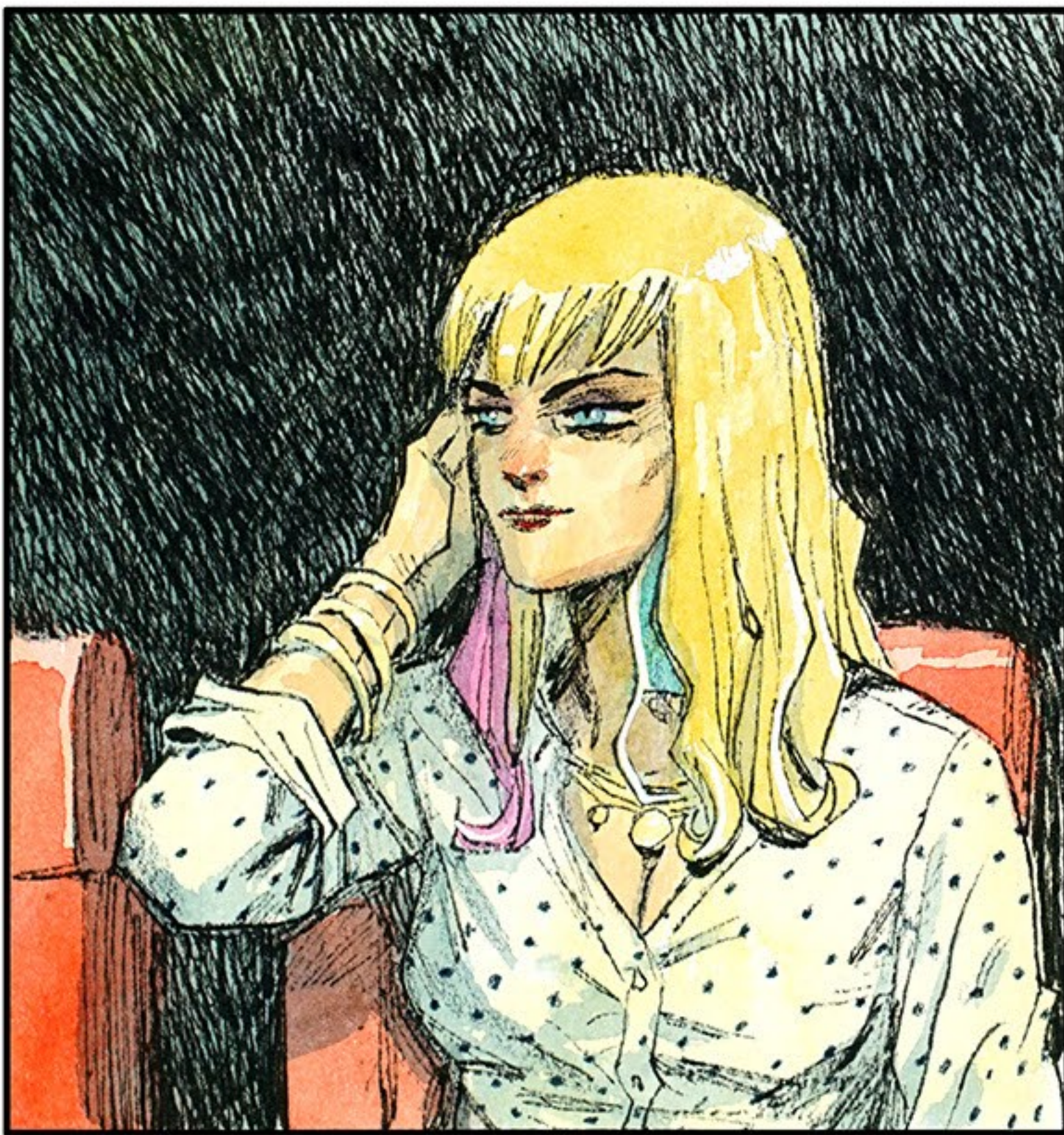
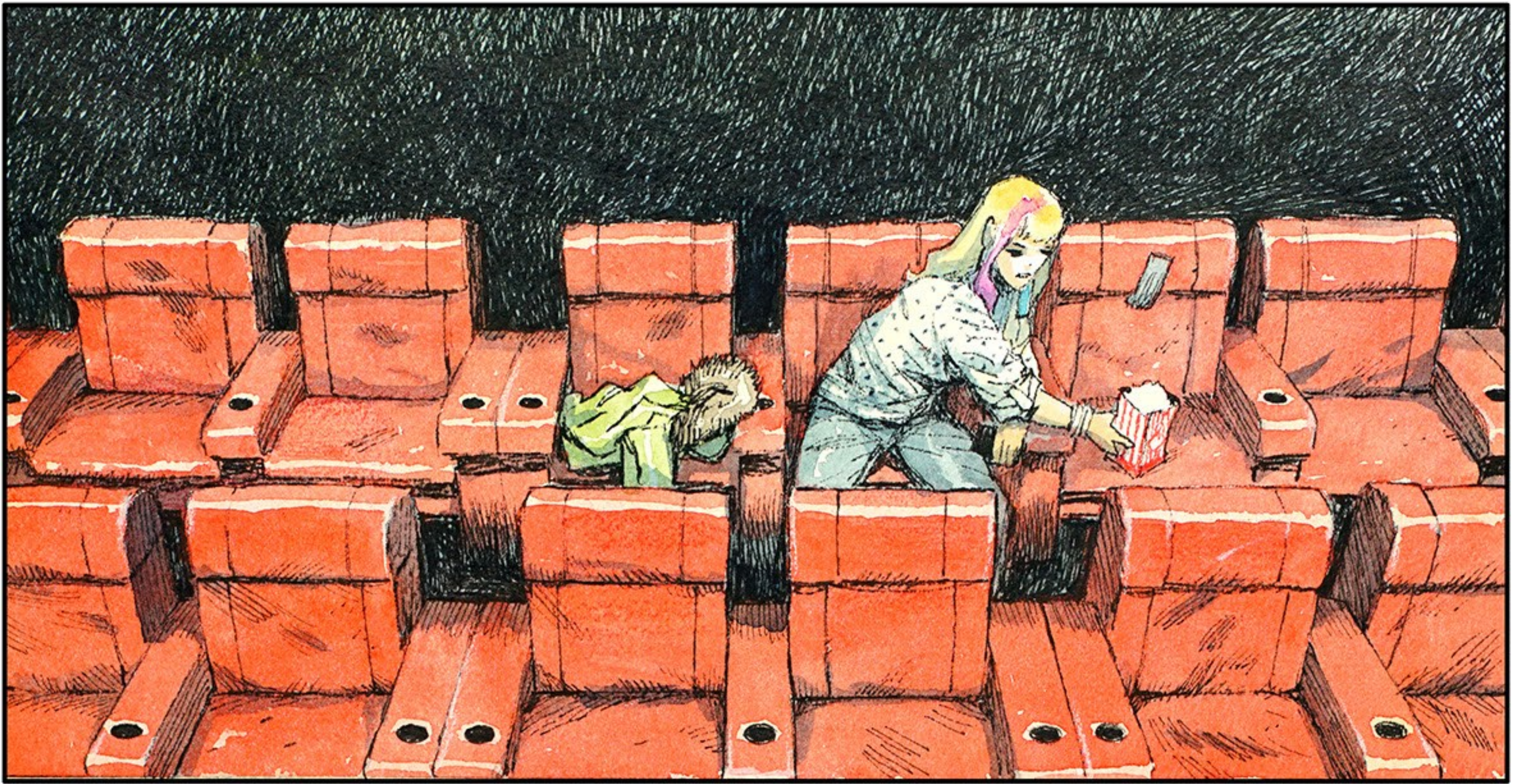














AA

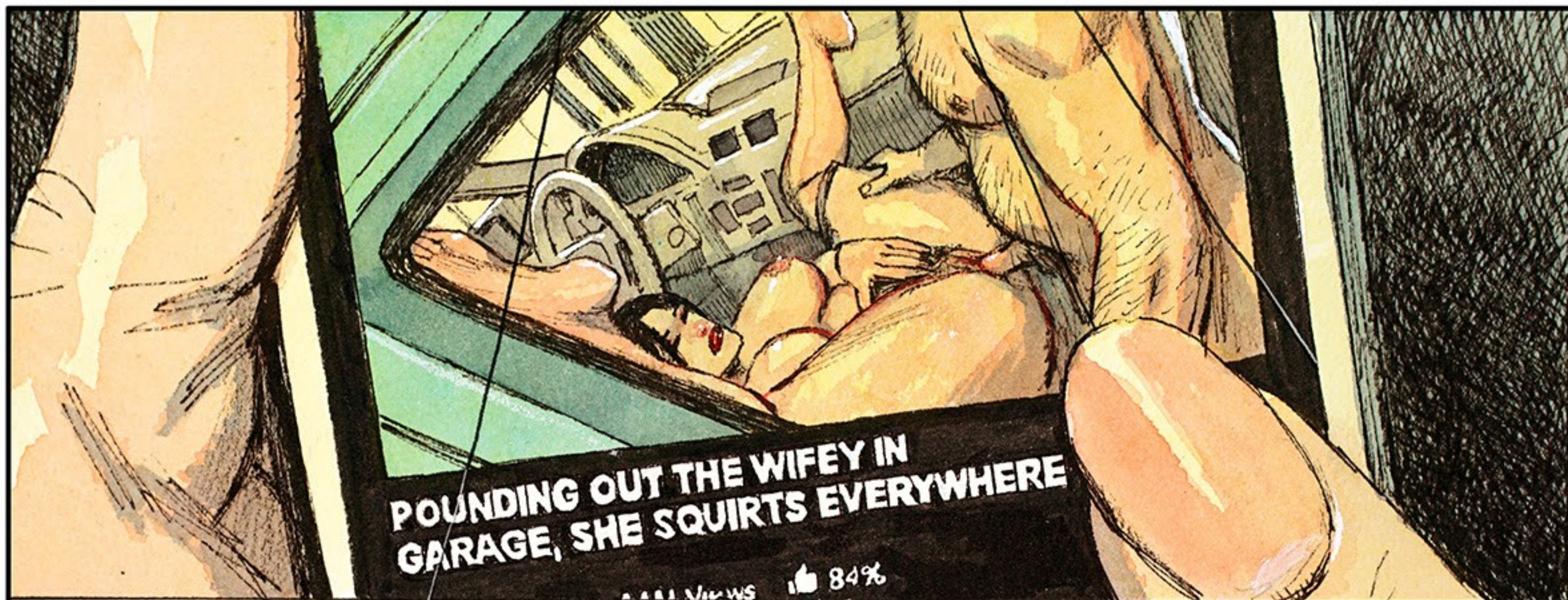
pornhub.com

tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap tap

amateur couples real



Video results



**POUNING OUT THE WIFEY IN GARAGE, SHE SQUIRTS EVERYWHERE**

1,111 Views 84%



**REAL employe sucks off boss and gets creampie!!**

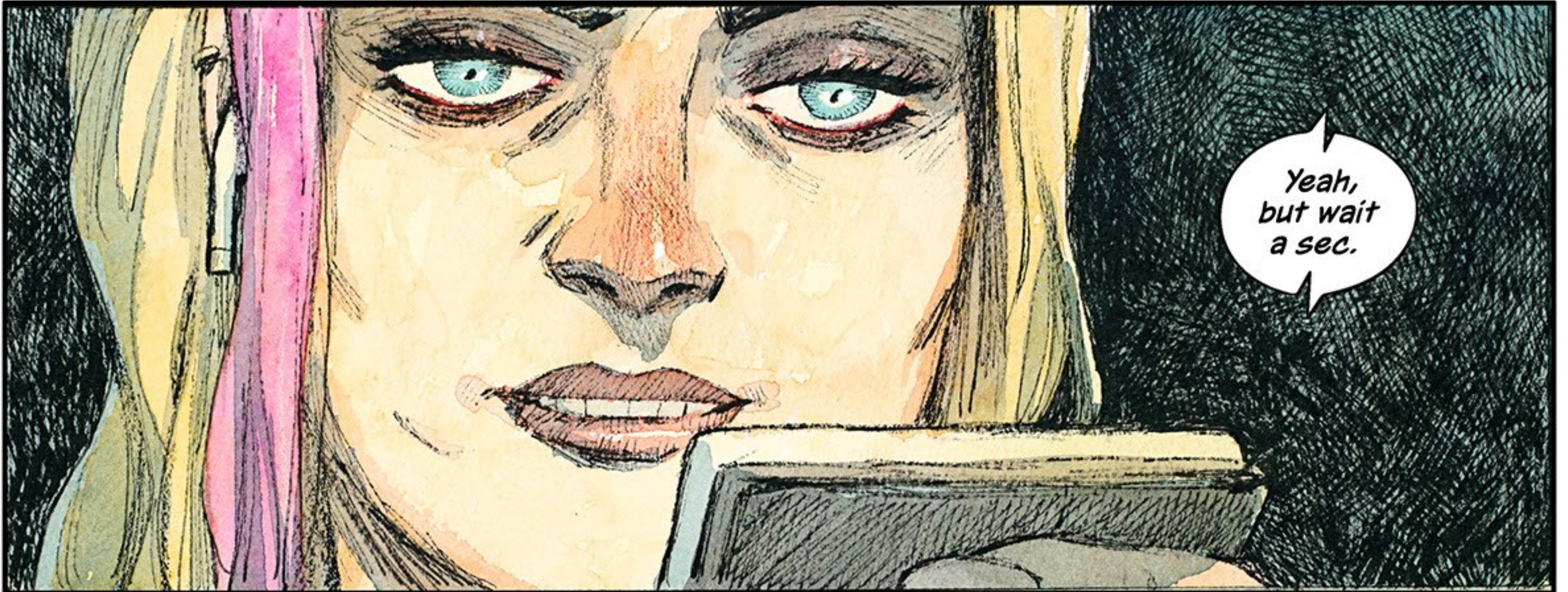


**My dumb boyfriend gives himself a charley horse during sex**





My dumb boyfriend gives him a charley horse during sex



Yeah, but wait a sec.



My dumb boyfriend gives himself a charley horse during sex



No one wants to see that, babe.





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

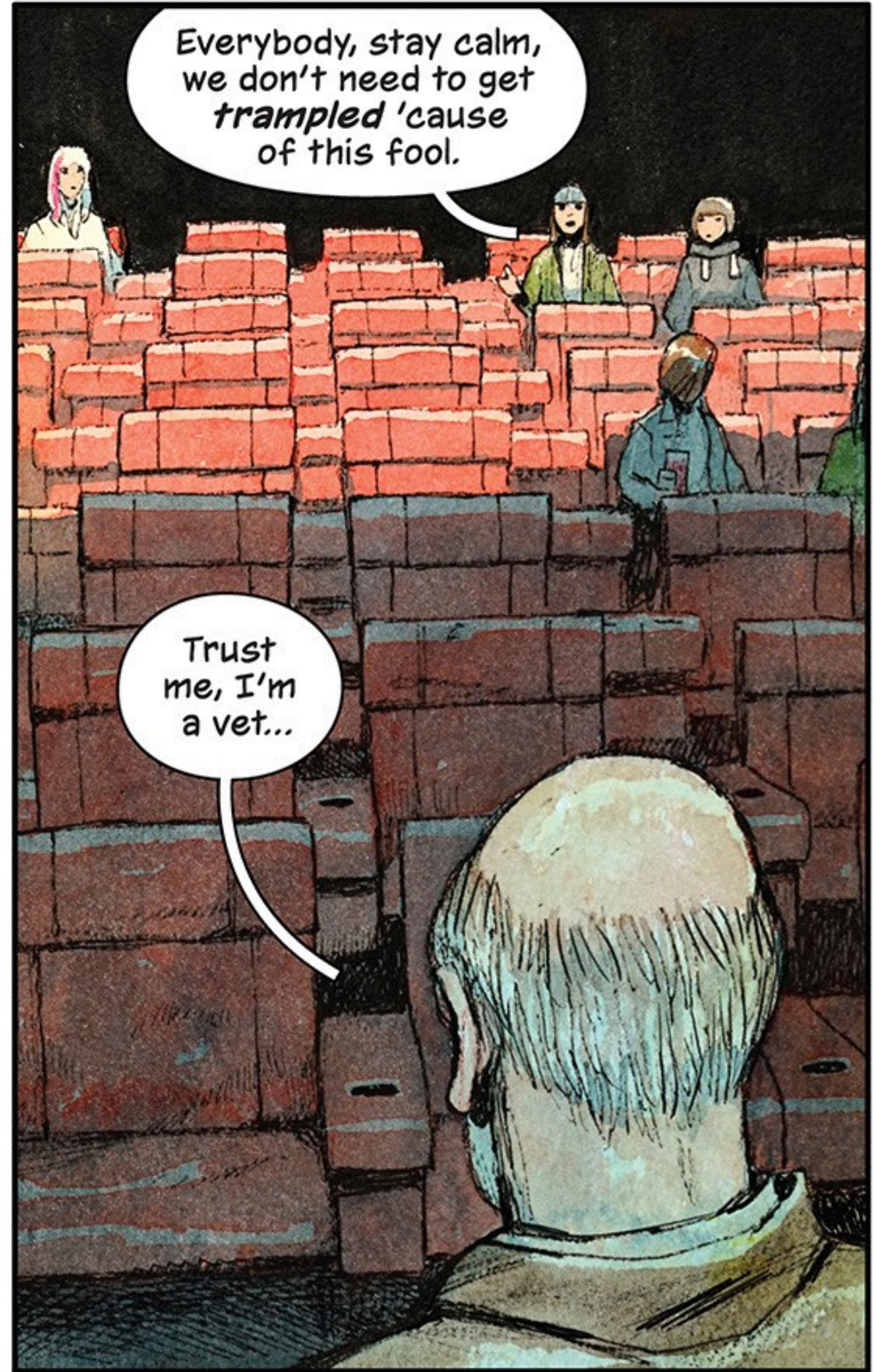


BOOM













So this might be, like, gang activity?!

We gotta call--

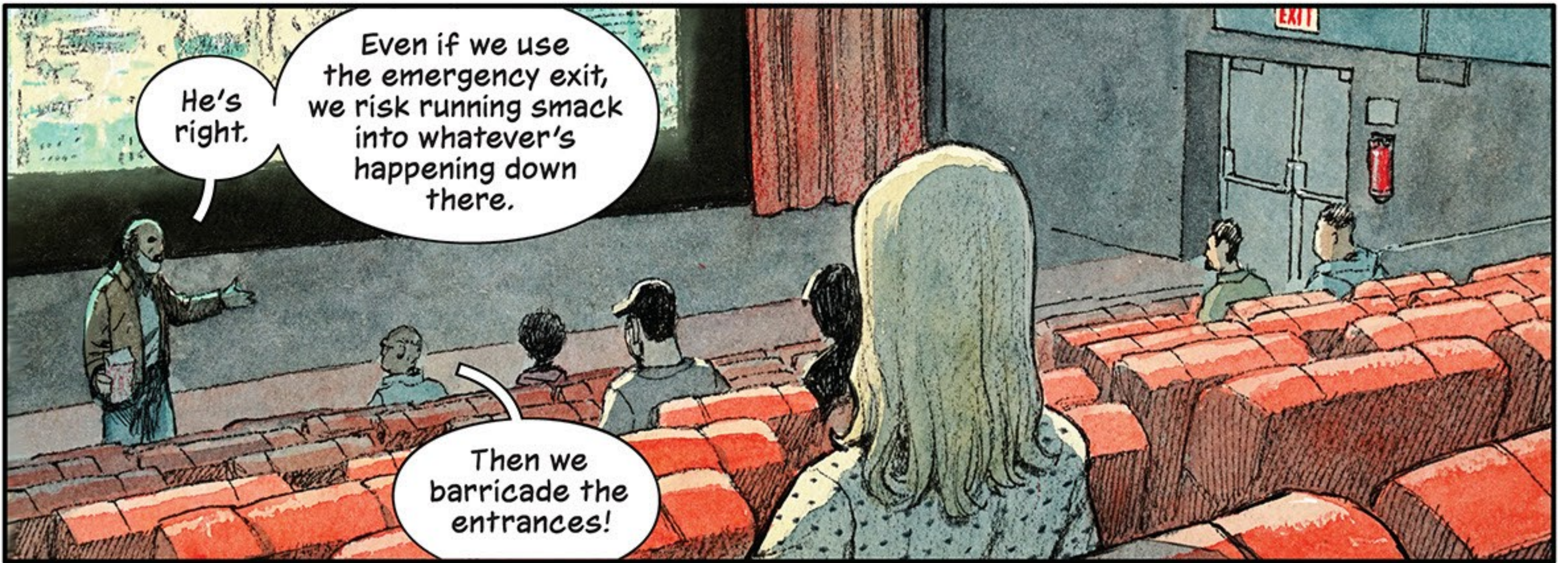
Yeah, 911 has me on hold.



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?

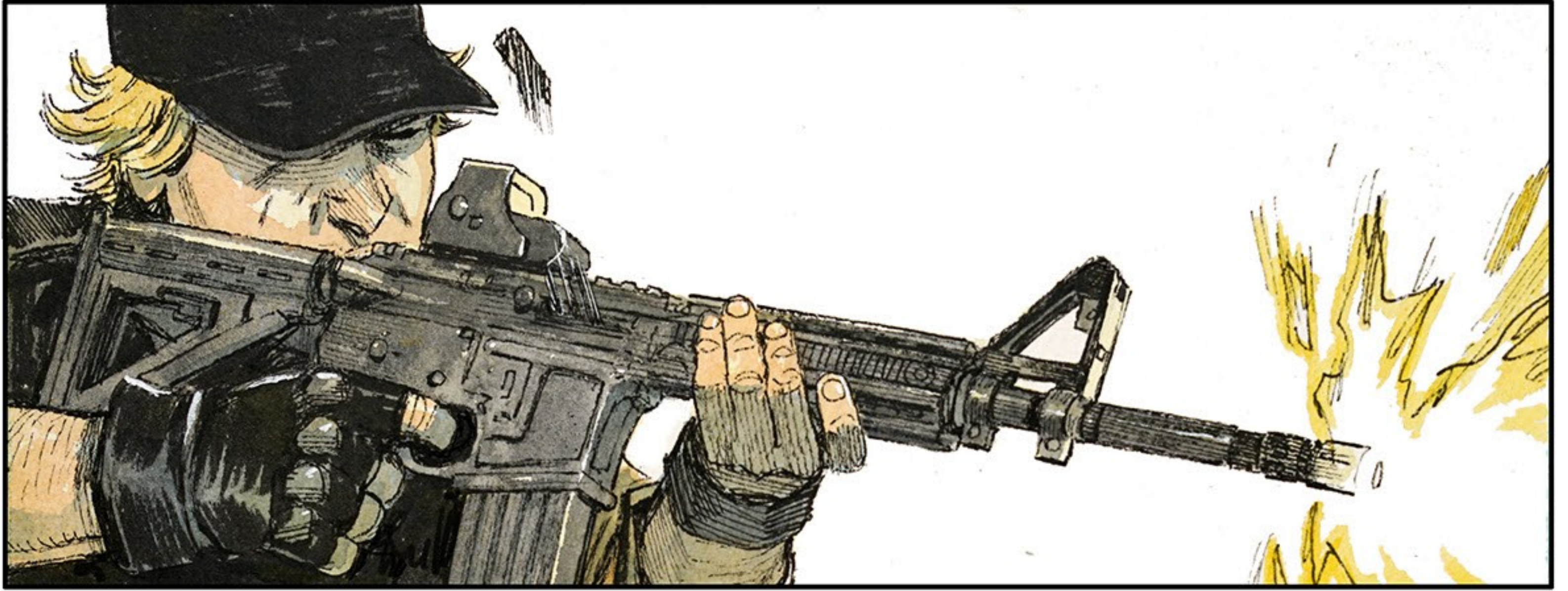
Hey.



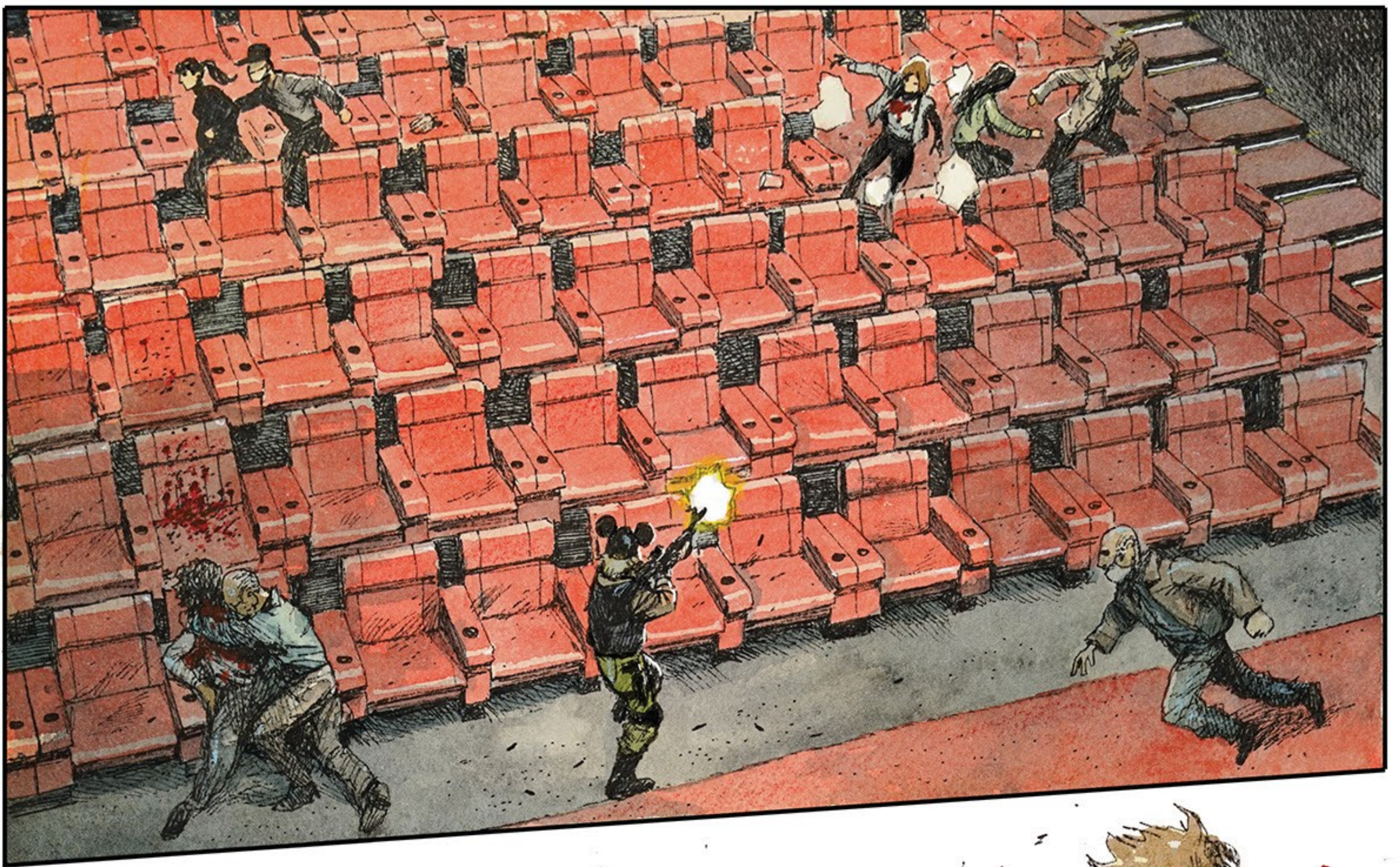
Don't talk to her like that.



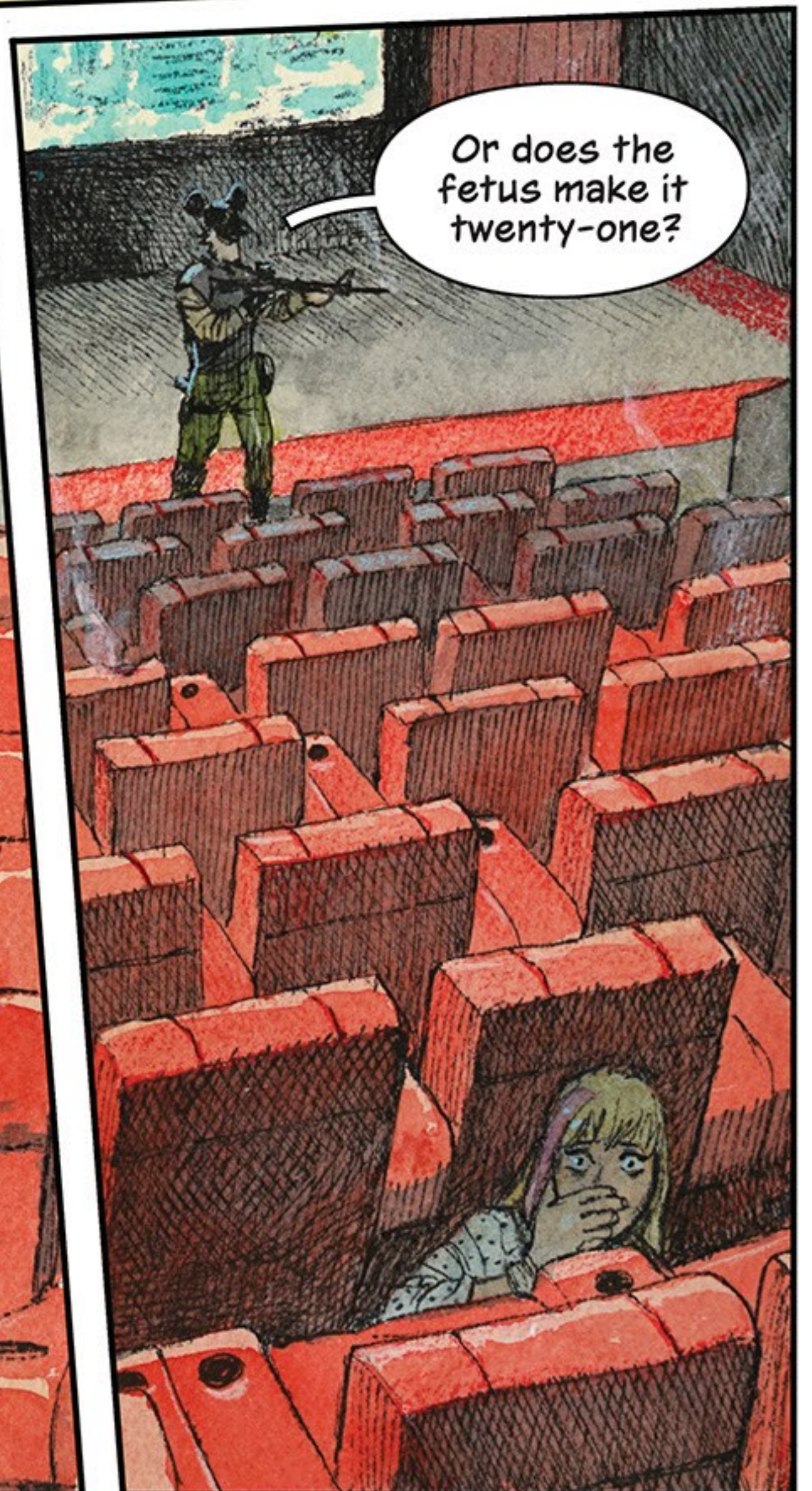
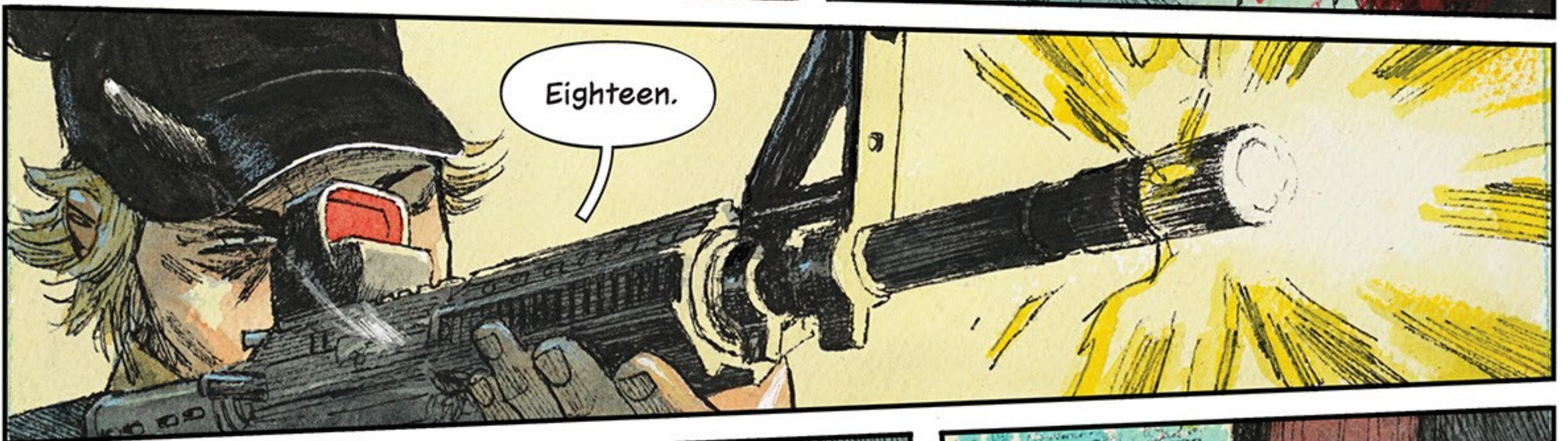




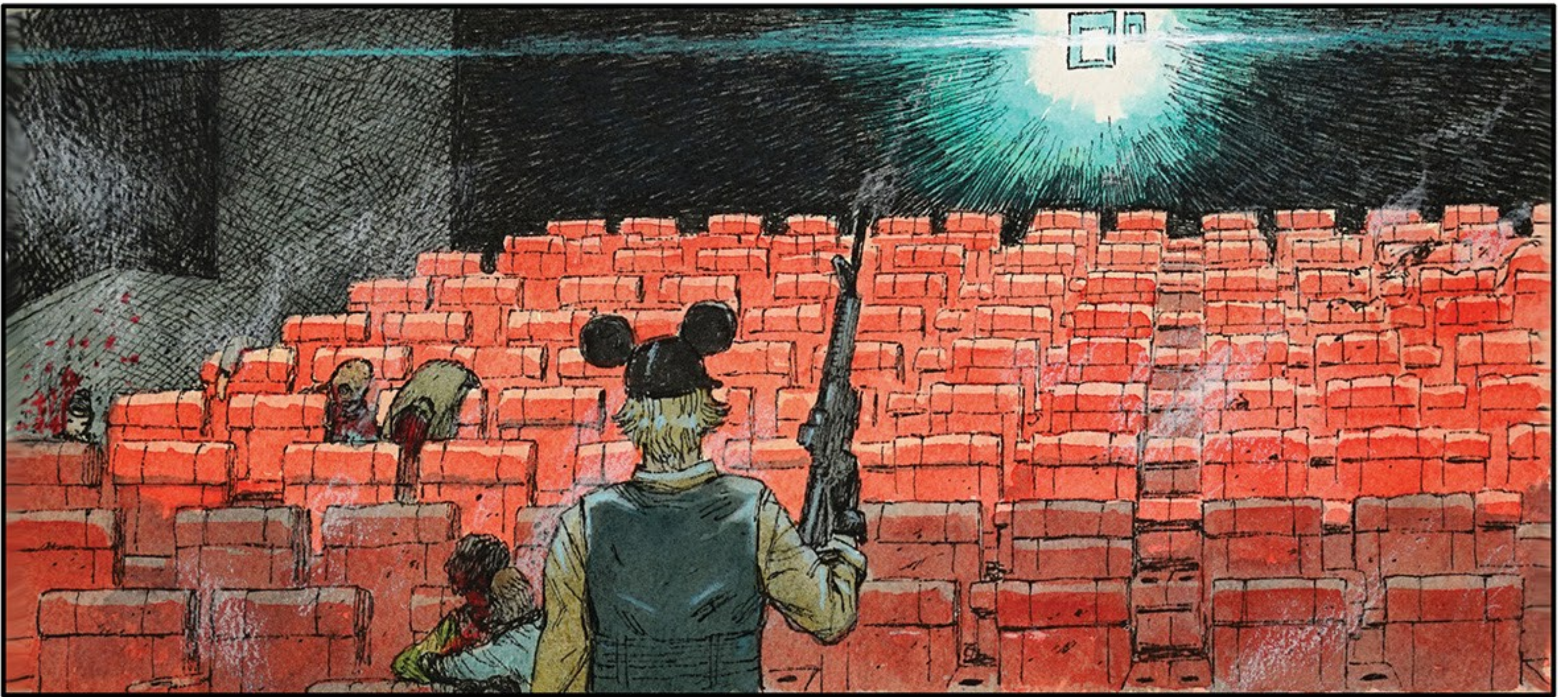
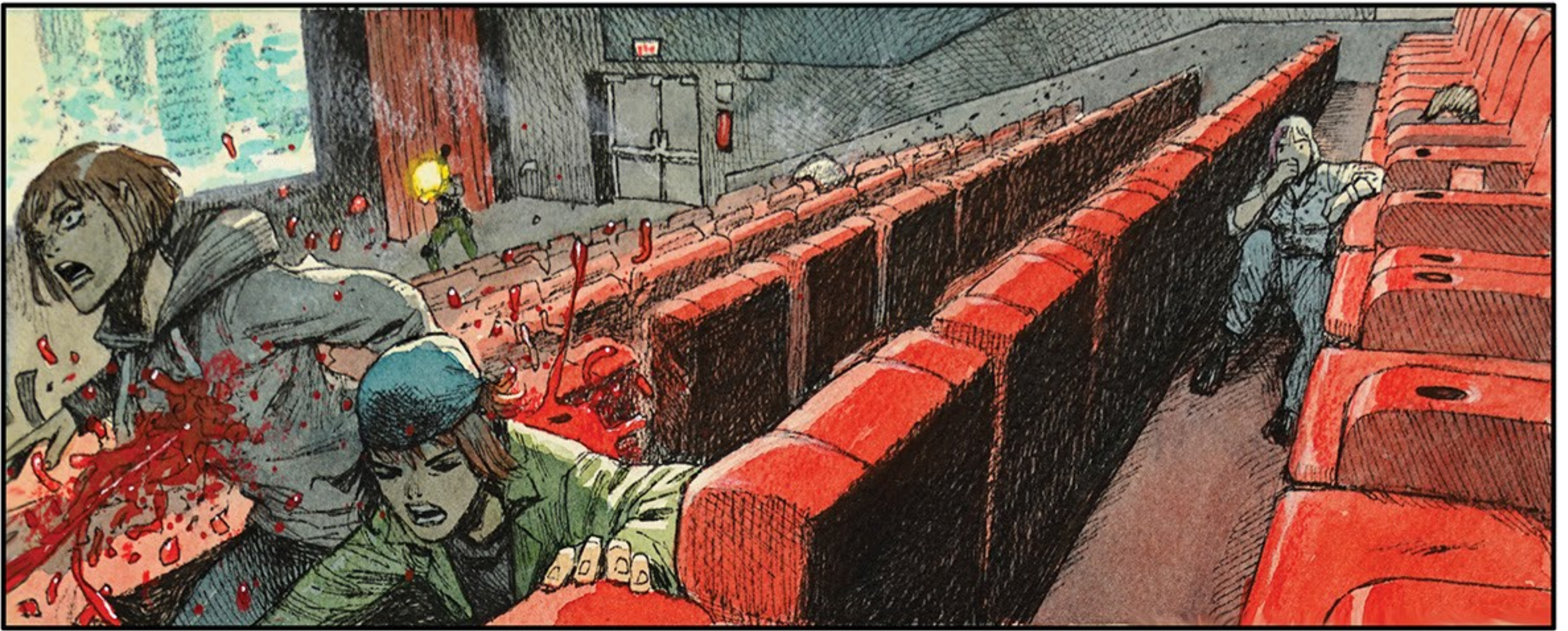




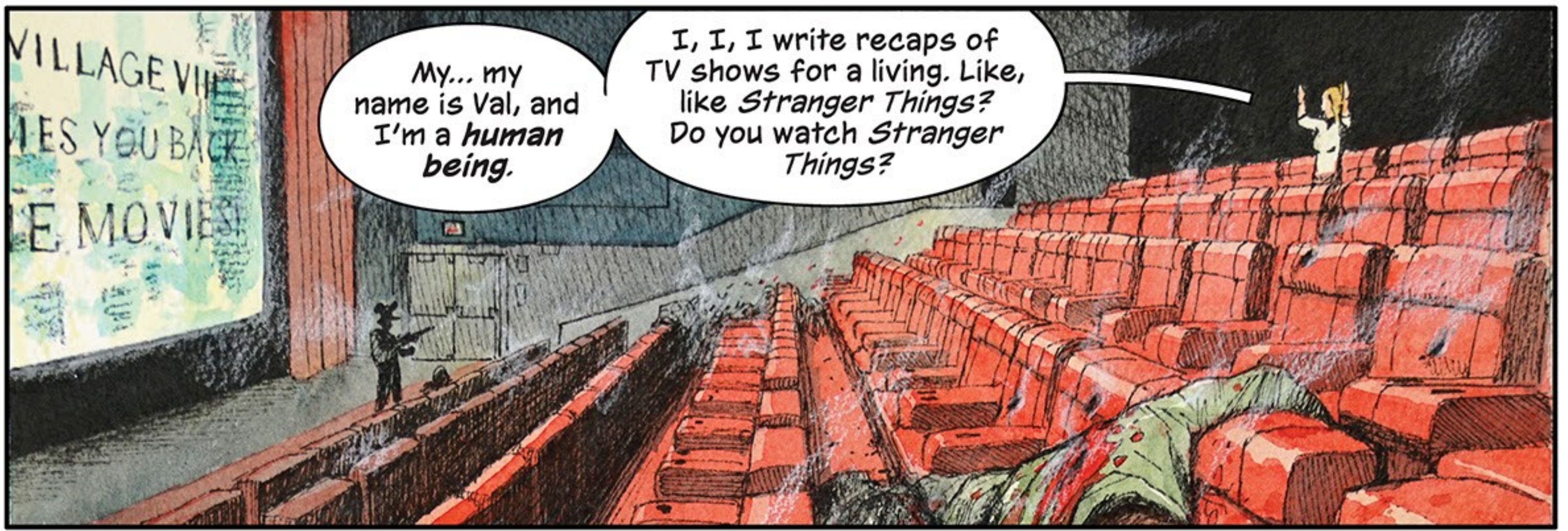






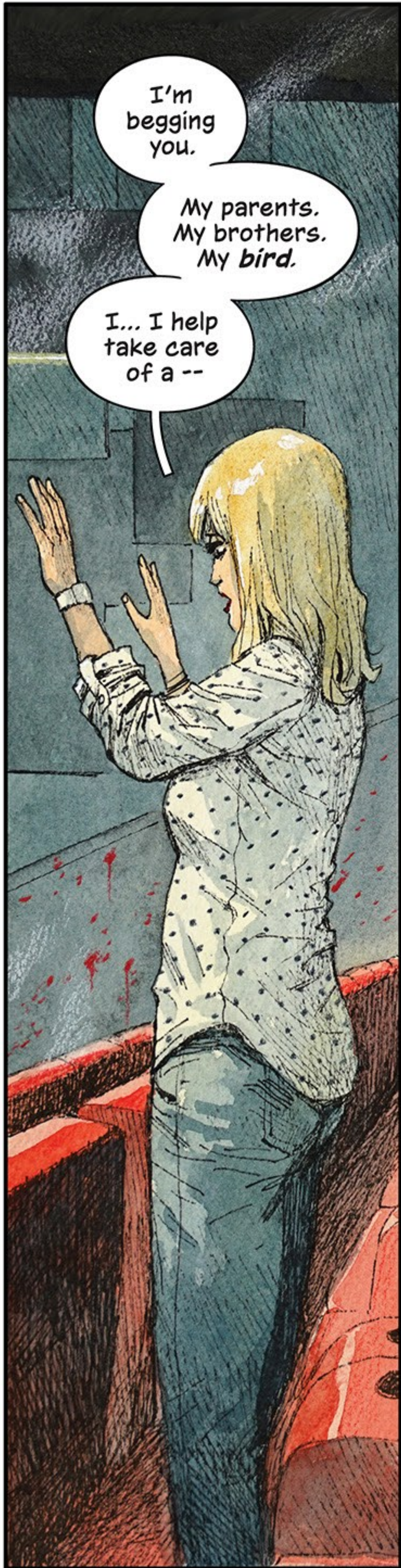






My... my name is Val, and I'm a *human being*.

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.

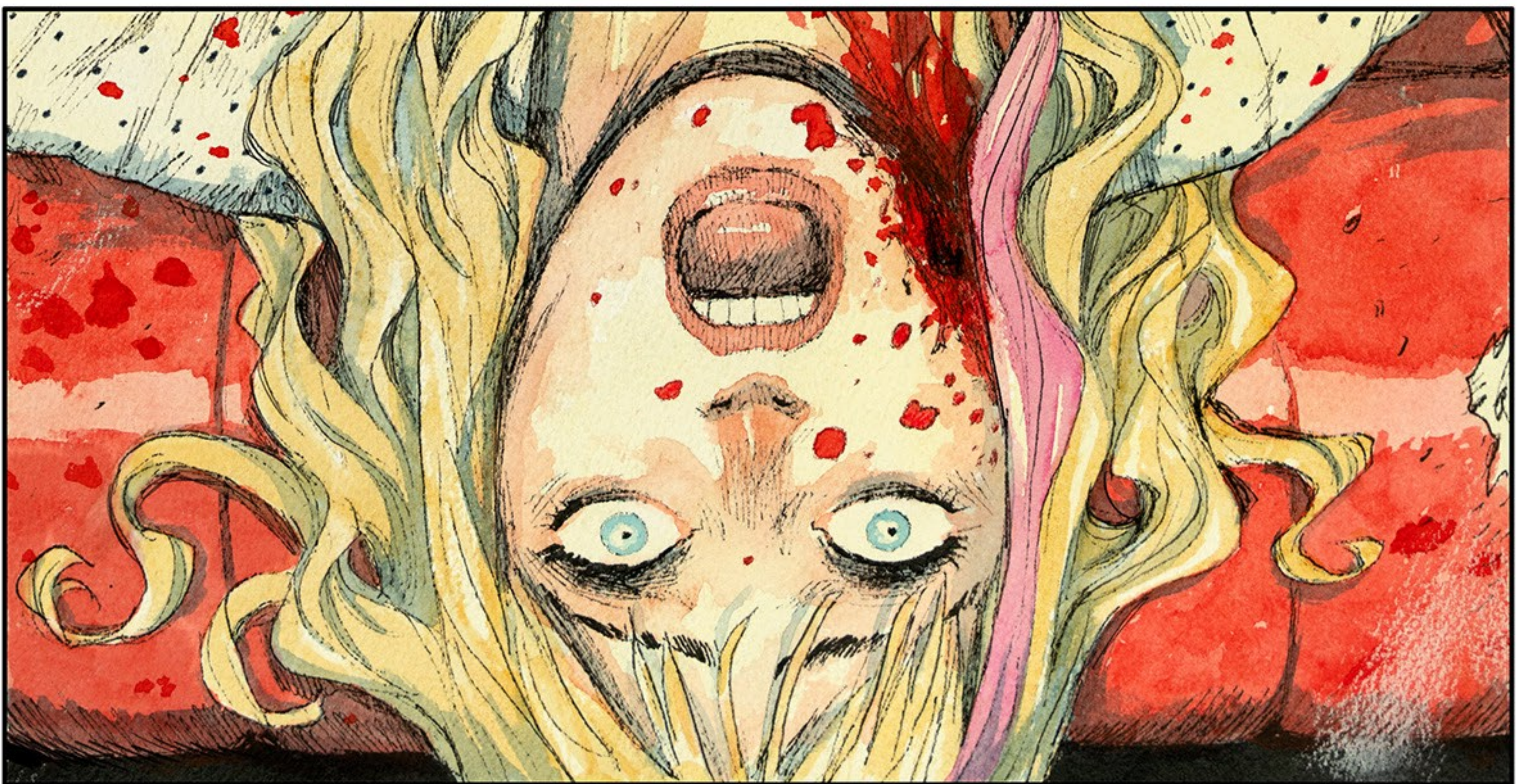
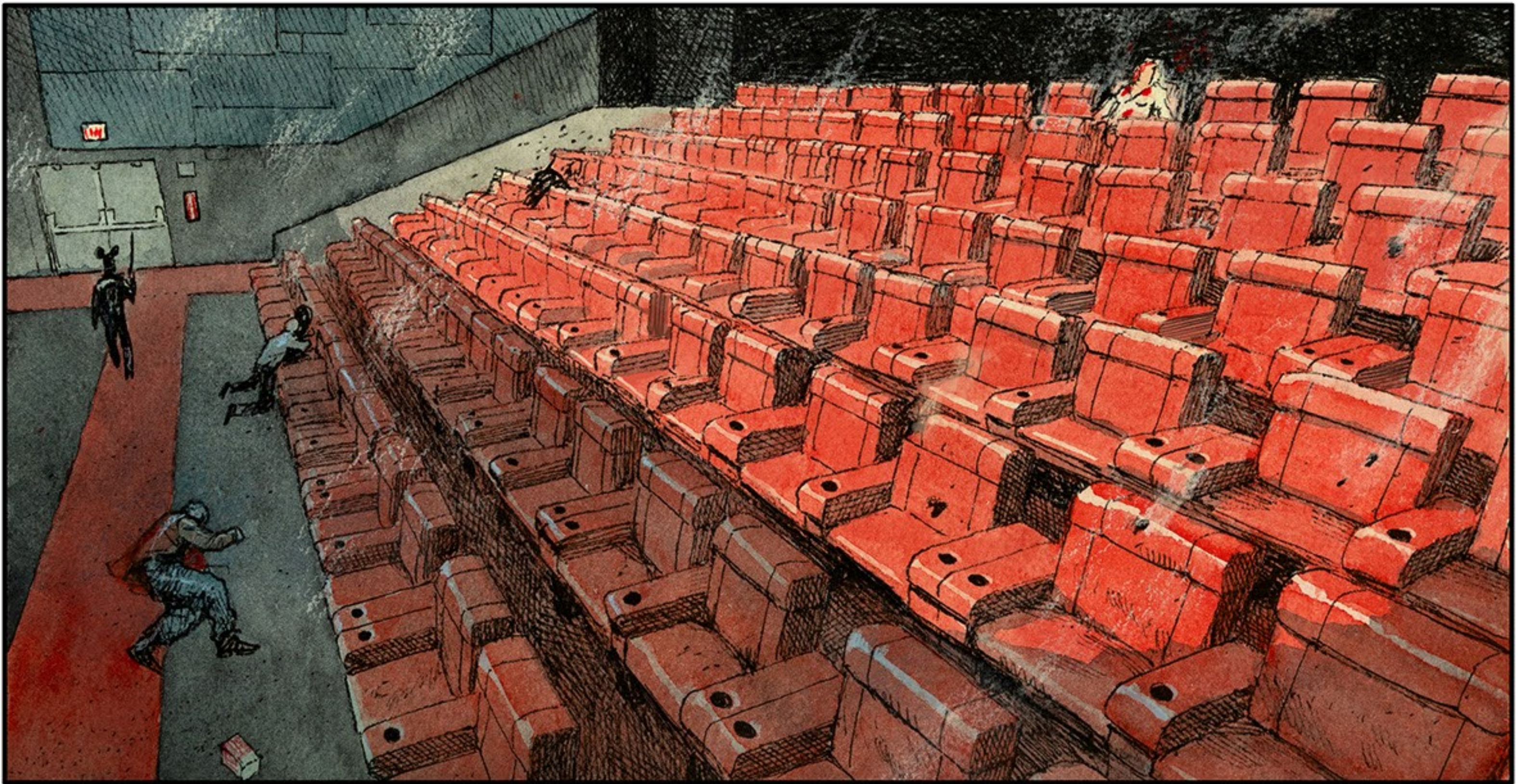


Sorry?

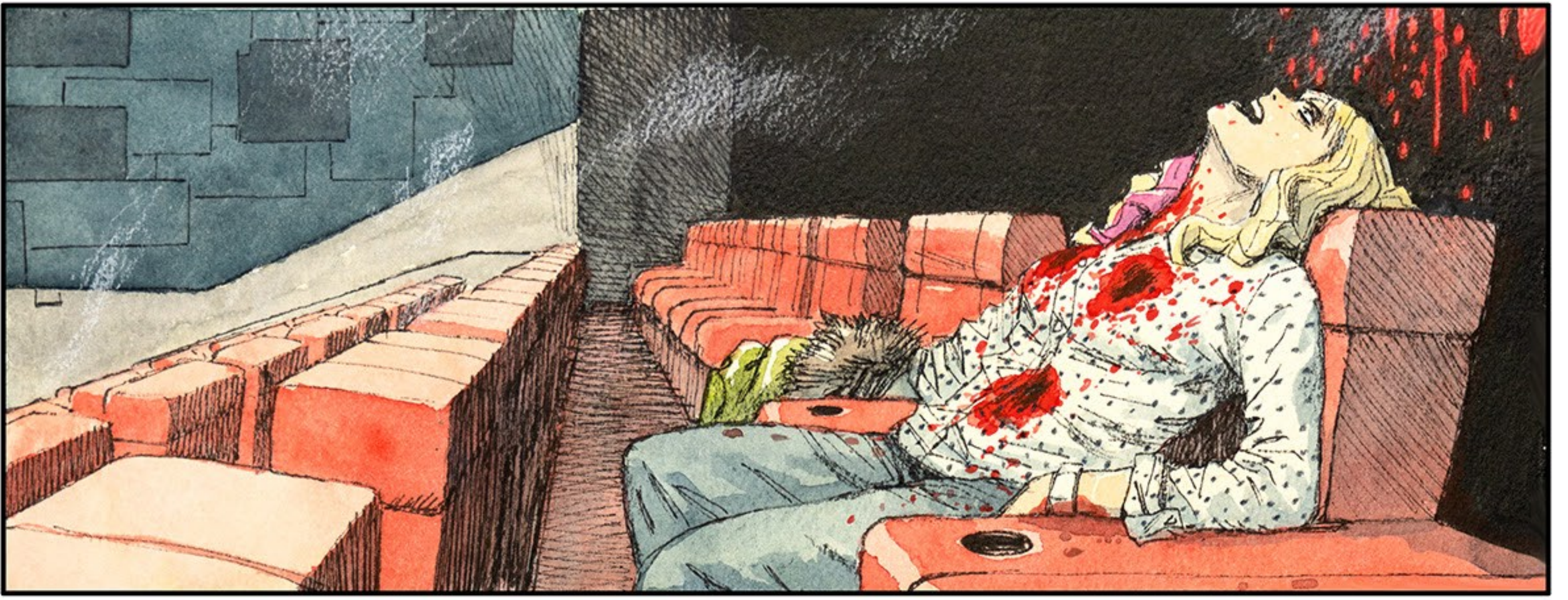




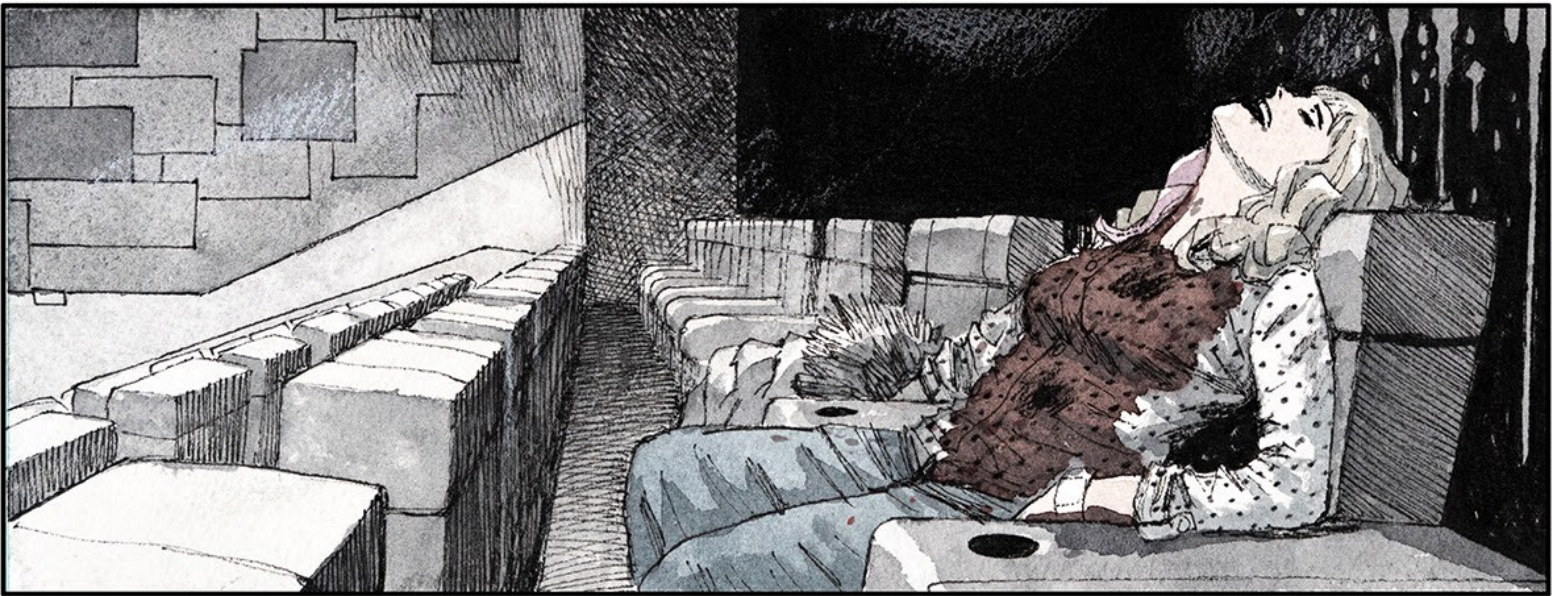








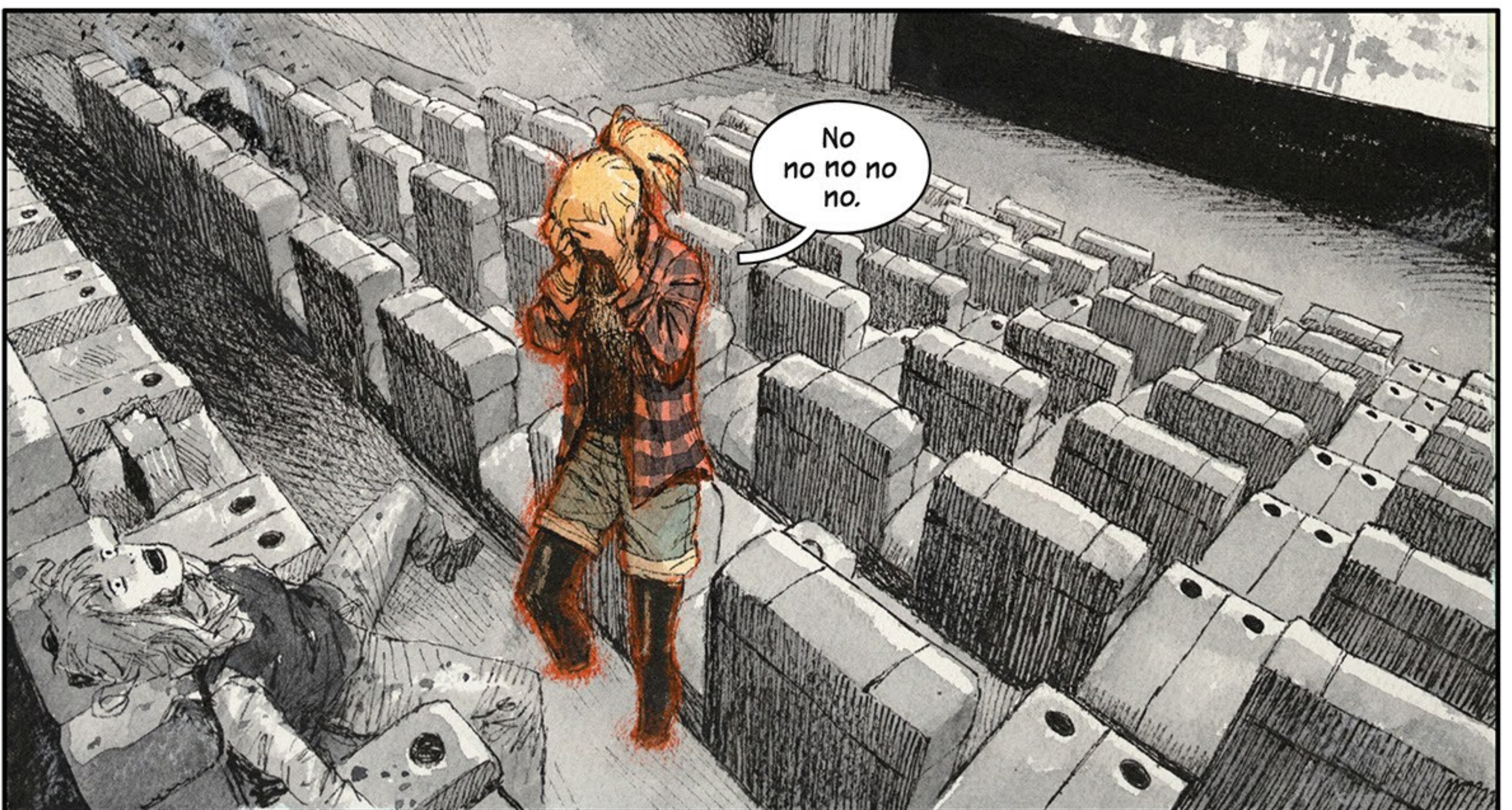
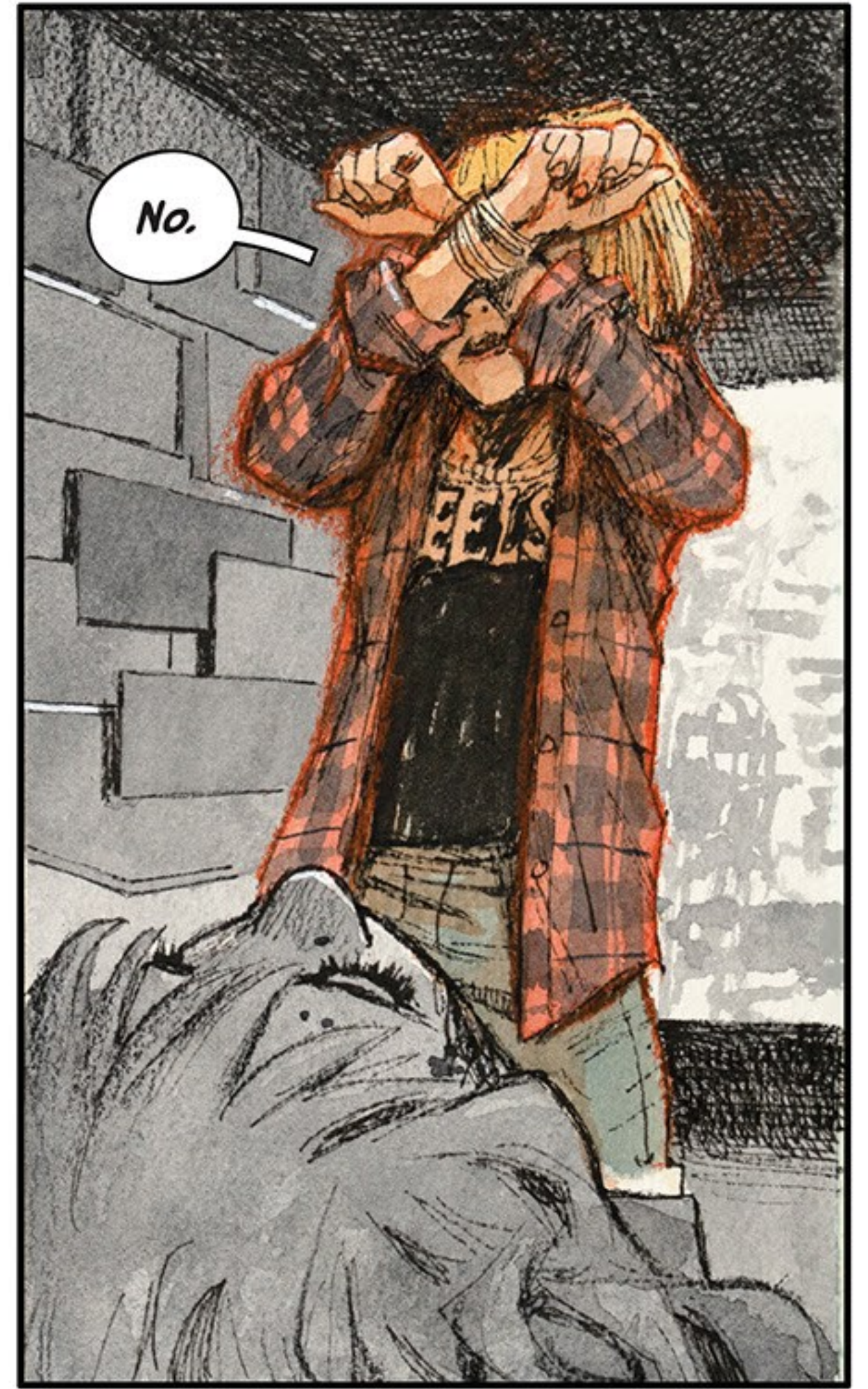




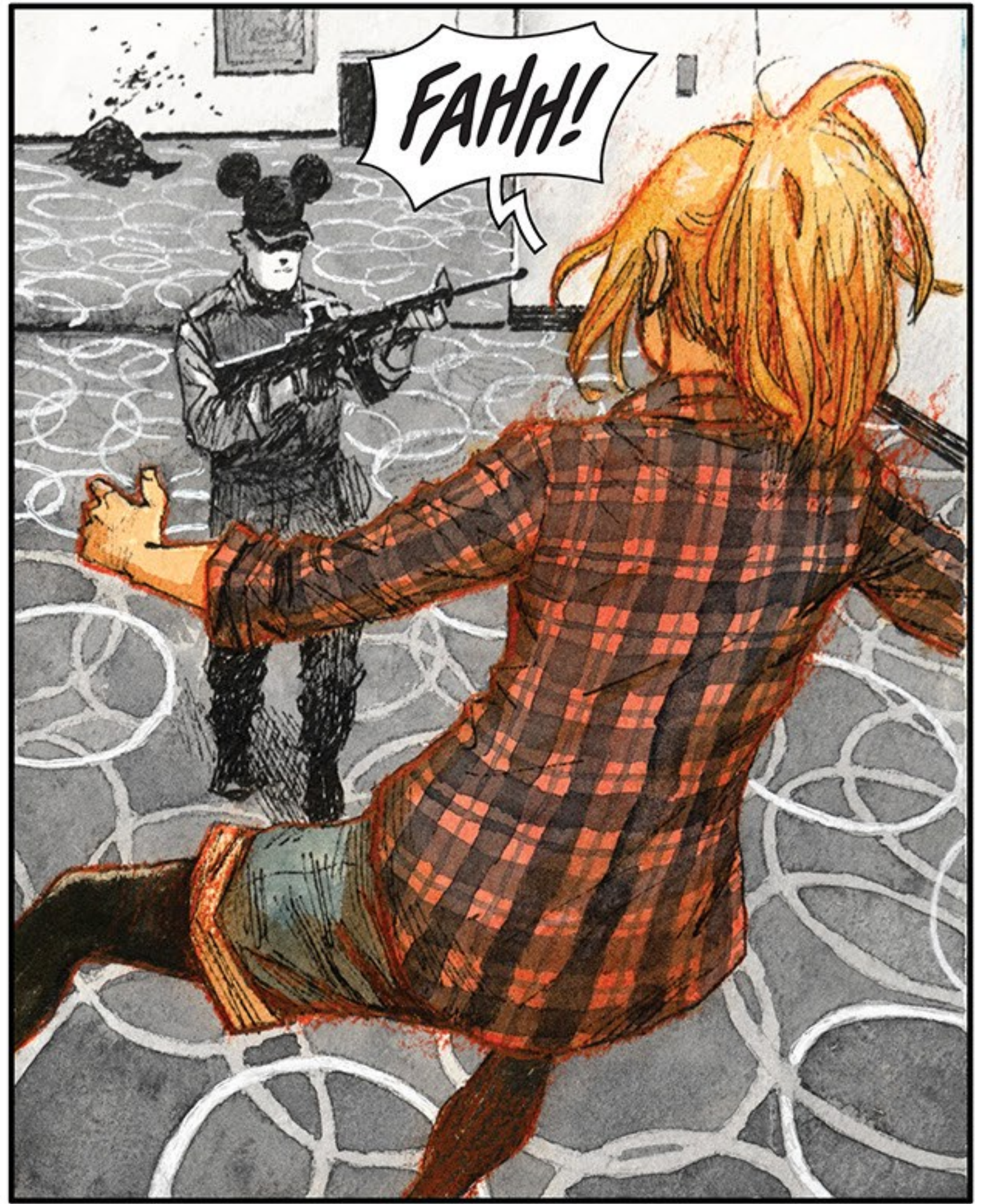
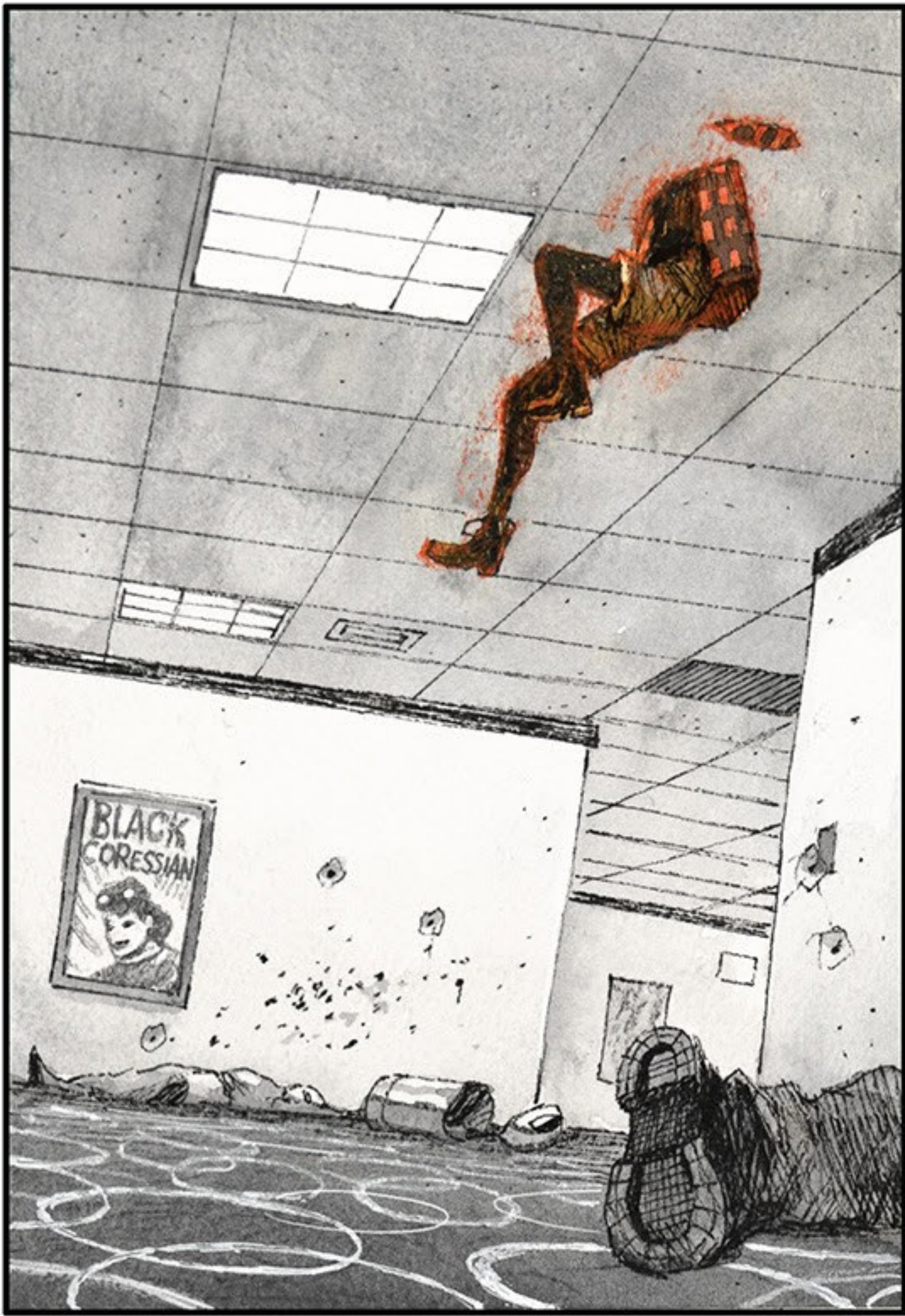








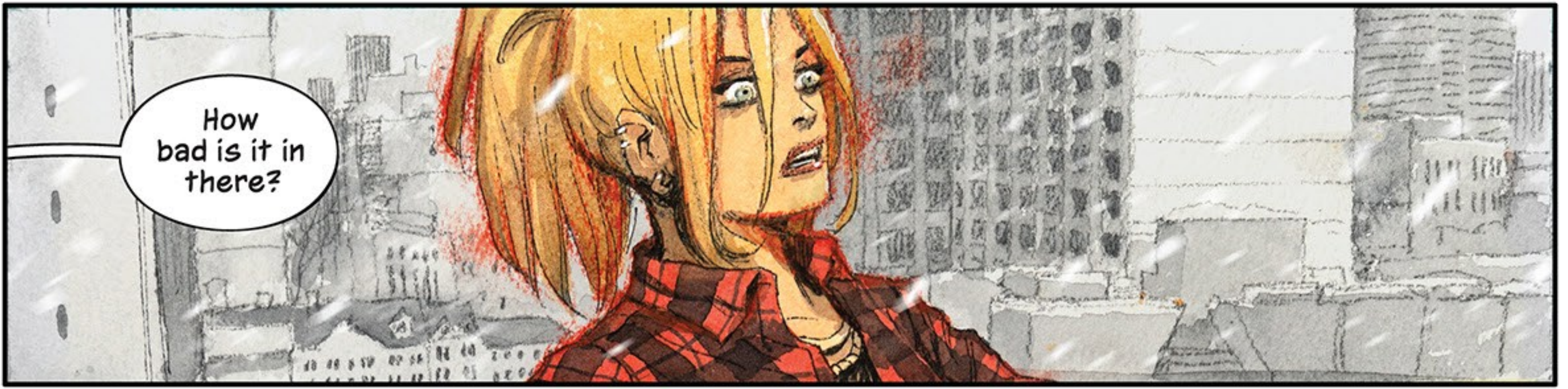












How bad is it in there?



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.

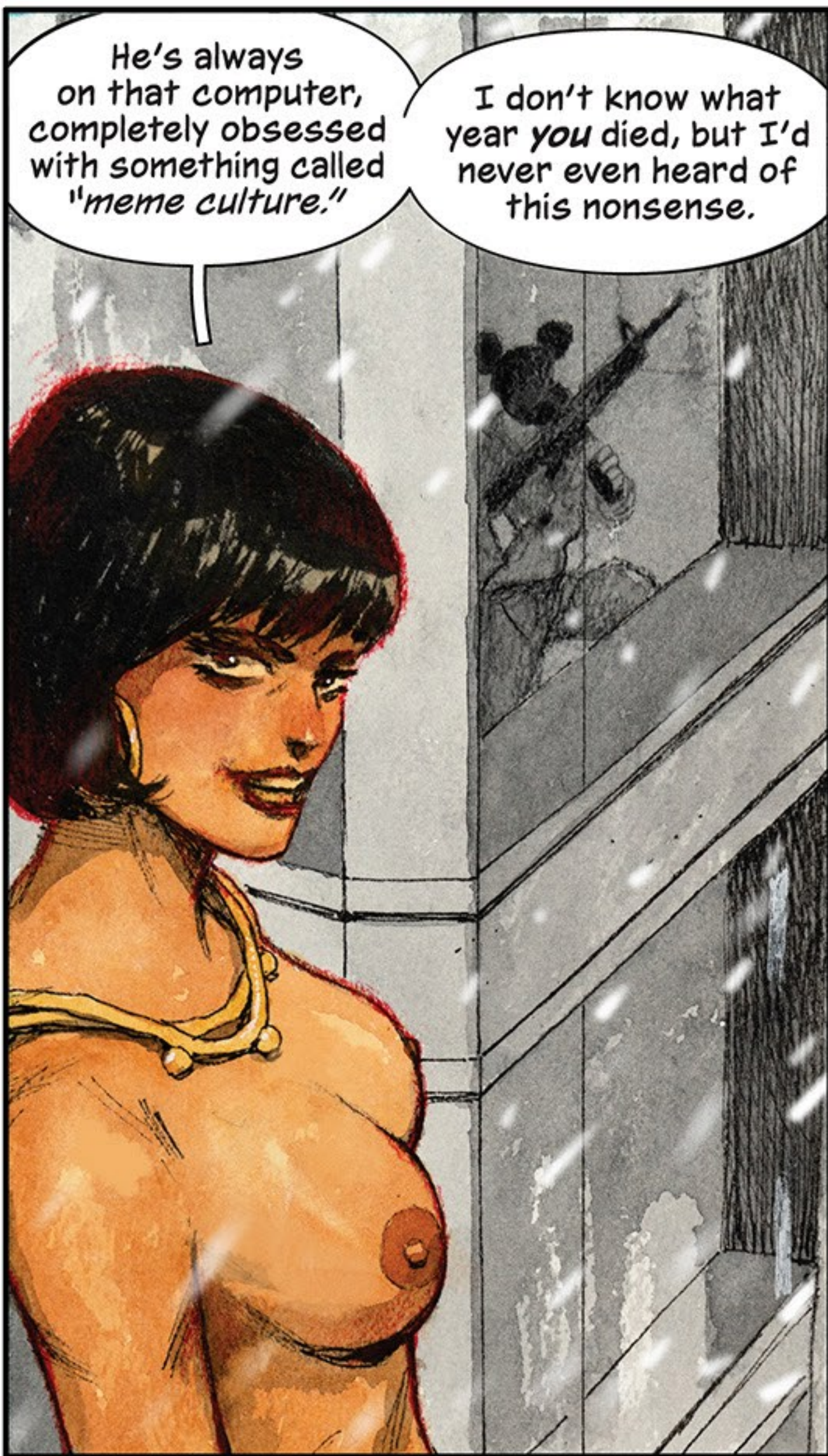
Wants all the other virgin  
broken toys out there to  
follow his lead, try to beat  
his "high score."



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.







You and I, we're not restless souls with some final romantic mission to complete.

None of our kind has ever haunted, possessed, or in any other manner interacted with anyone from the living world, their pets, their appliances, etcetera.

But what if--



Billions of spirits have tried, and all have shit the bed. The living can't see us, can't hear us, can't *nothing* us.

It takes some getting used to, but you and I will never be anything more than sweet nothings, passive observers of those we left behind.



Then... why?

What's the goddamn point?

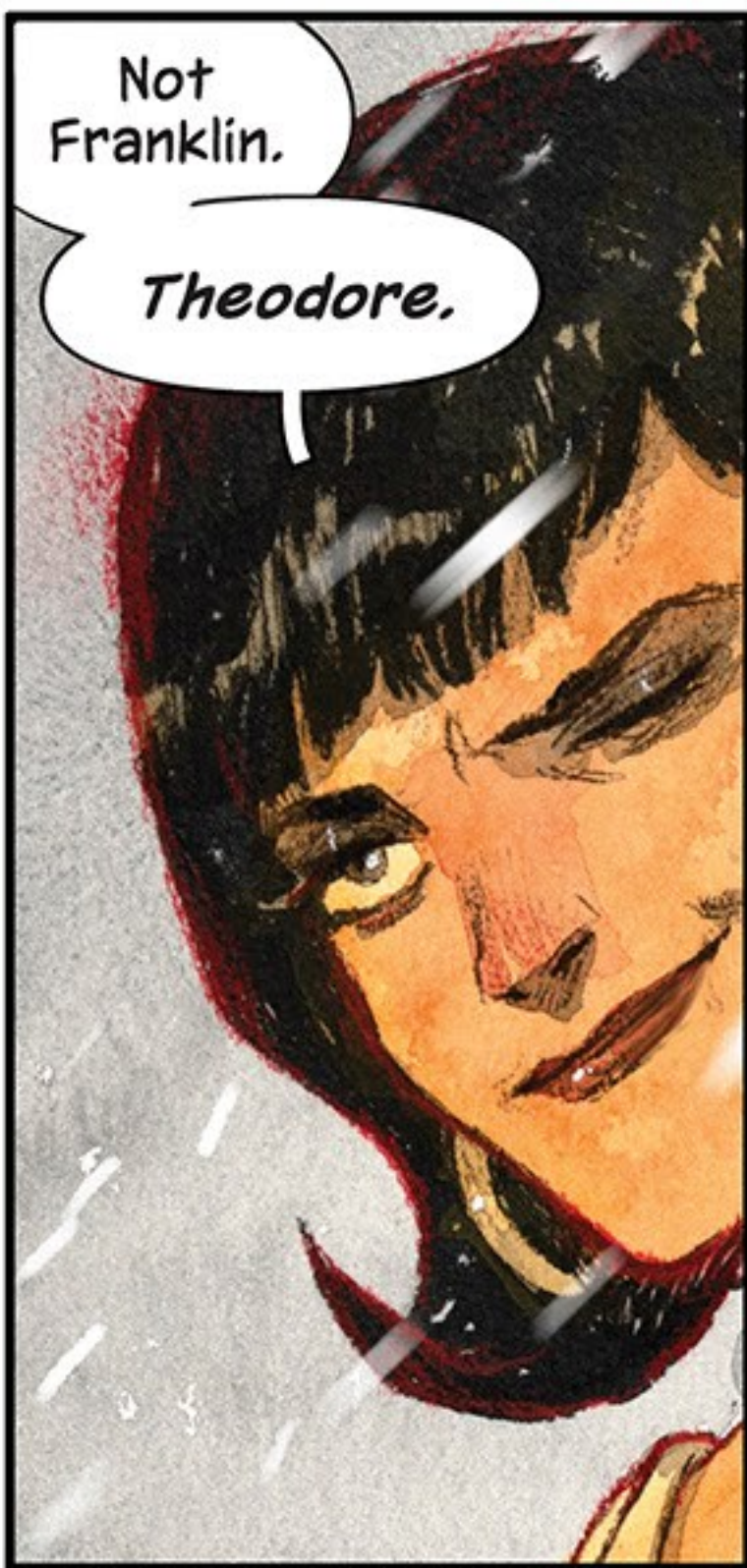


Beats me.

But my dear friend President Roosevelt has a theory. He thinks we might have an obligation to --

Hang on, F.D.R. is still around?





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."

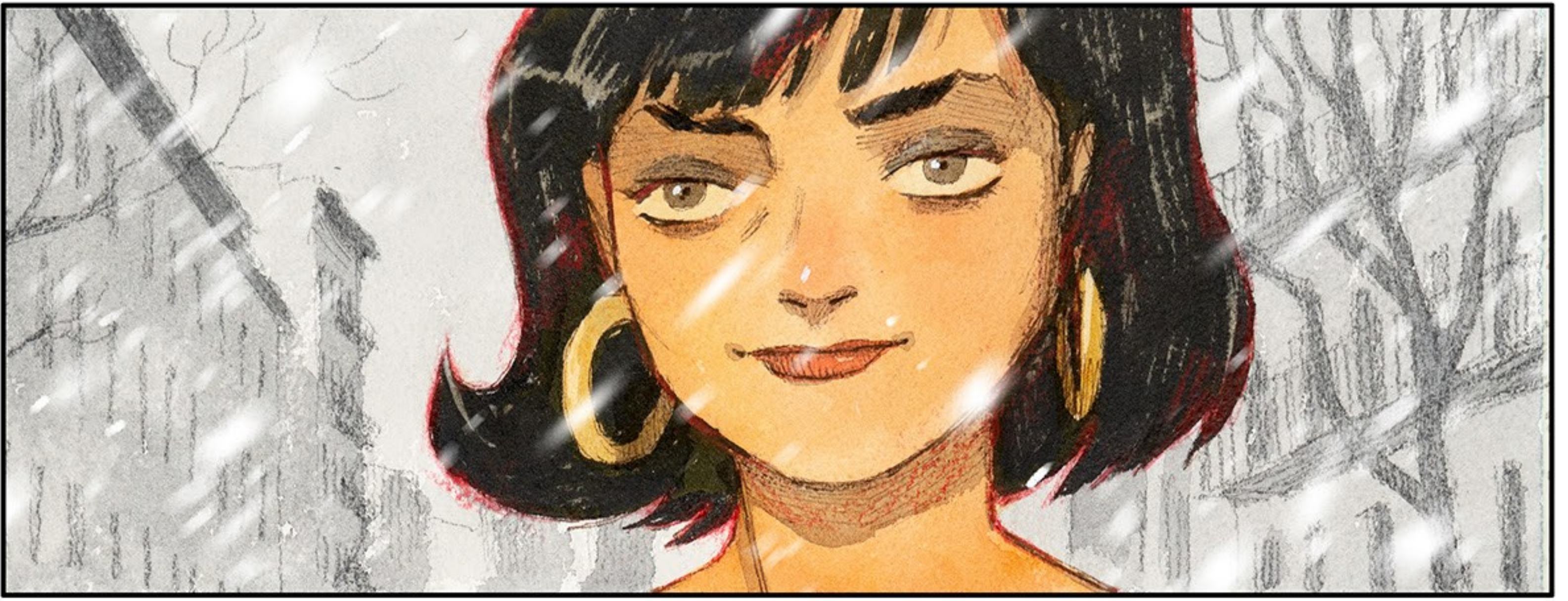
How long could they...?



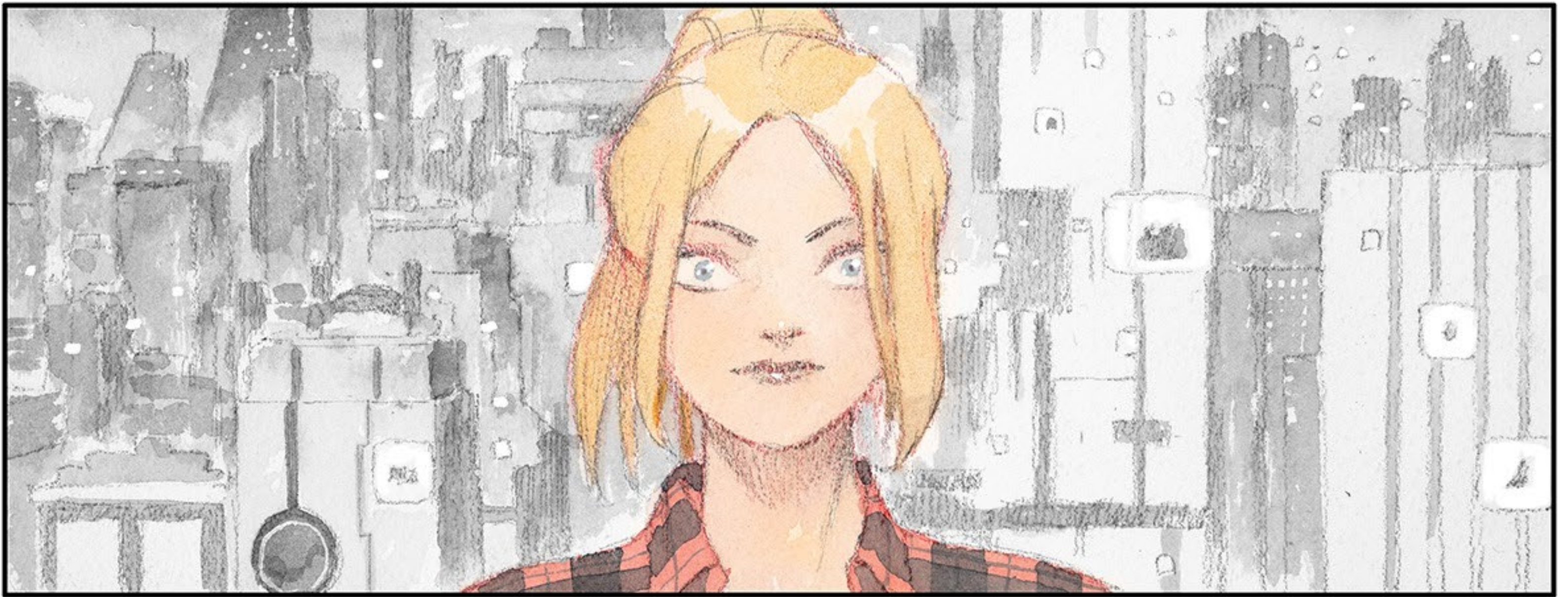
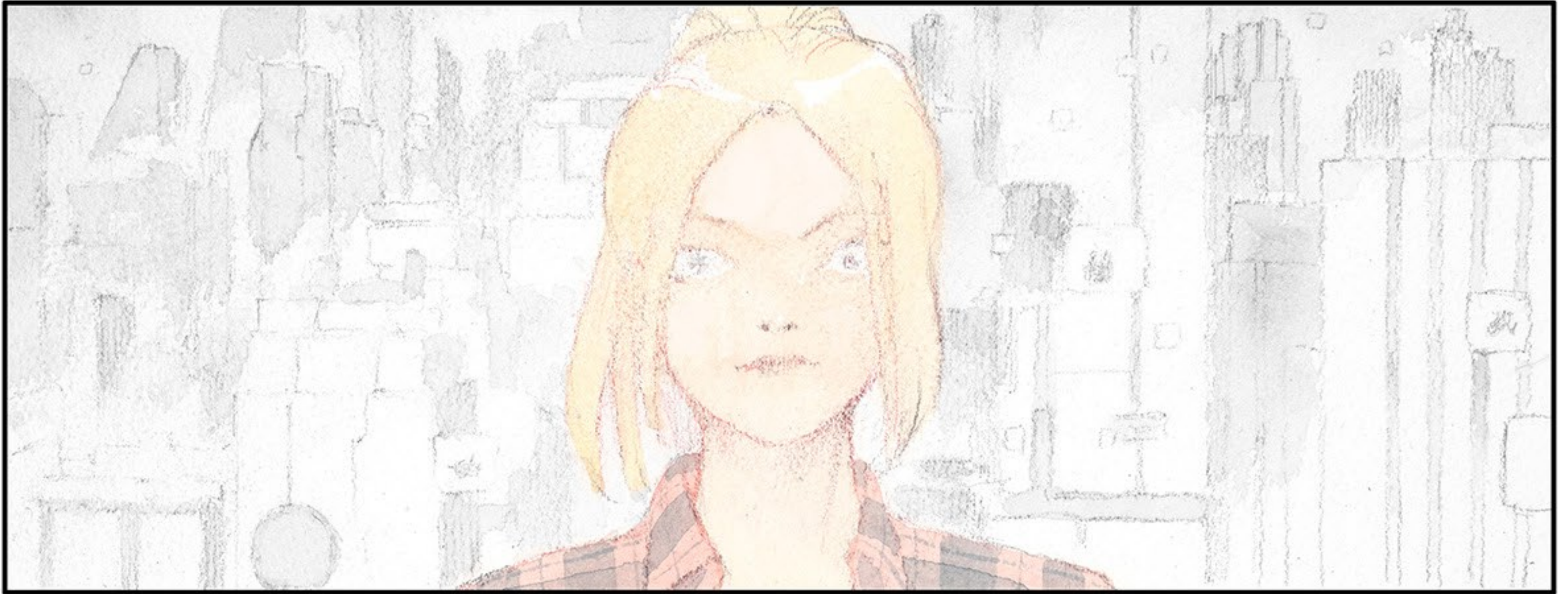
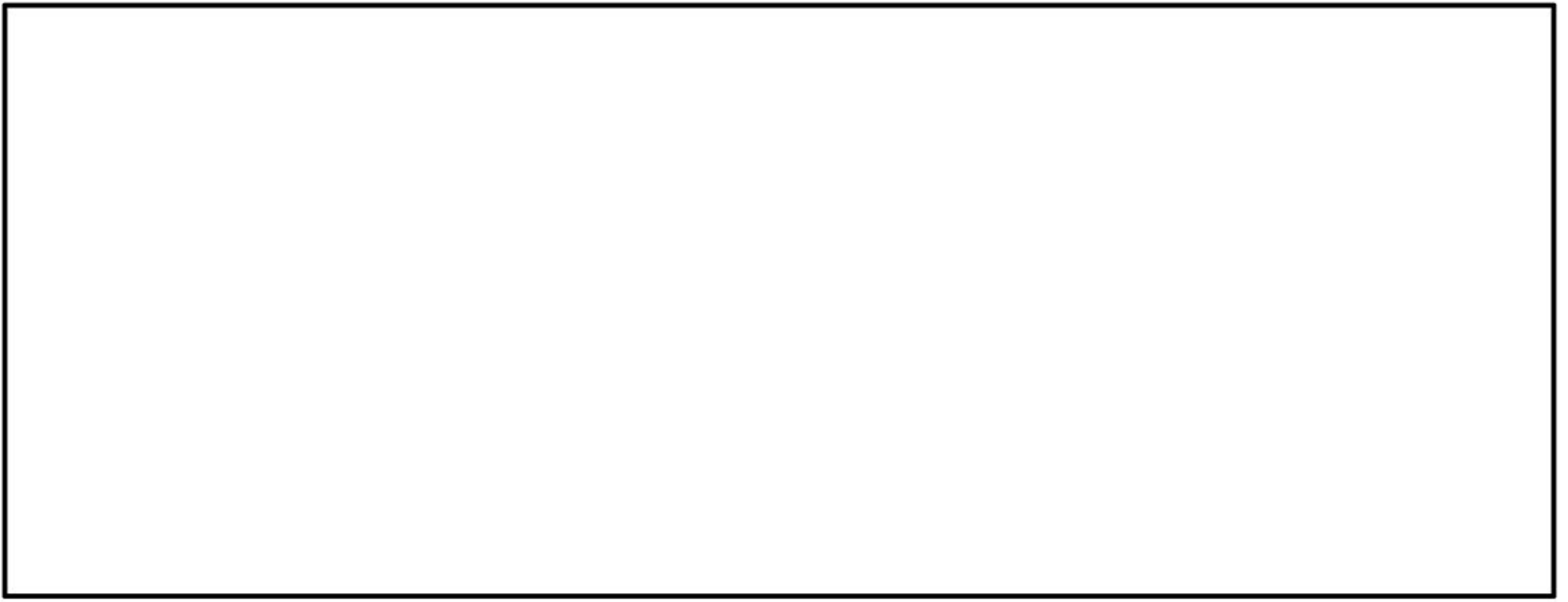
...keep watching?

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















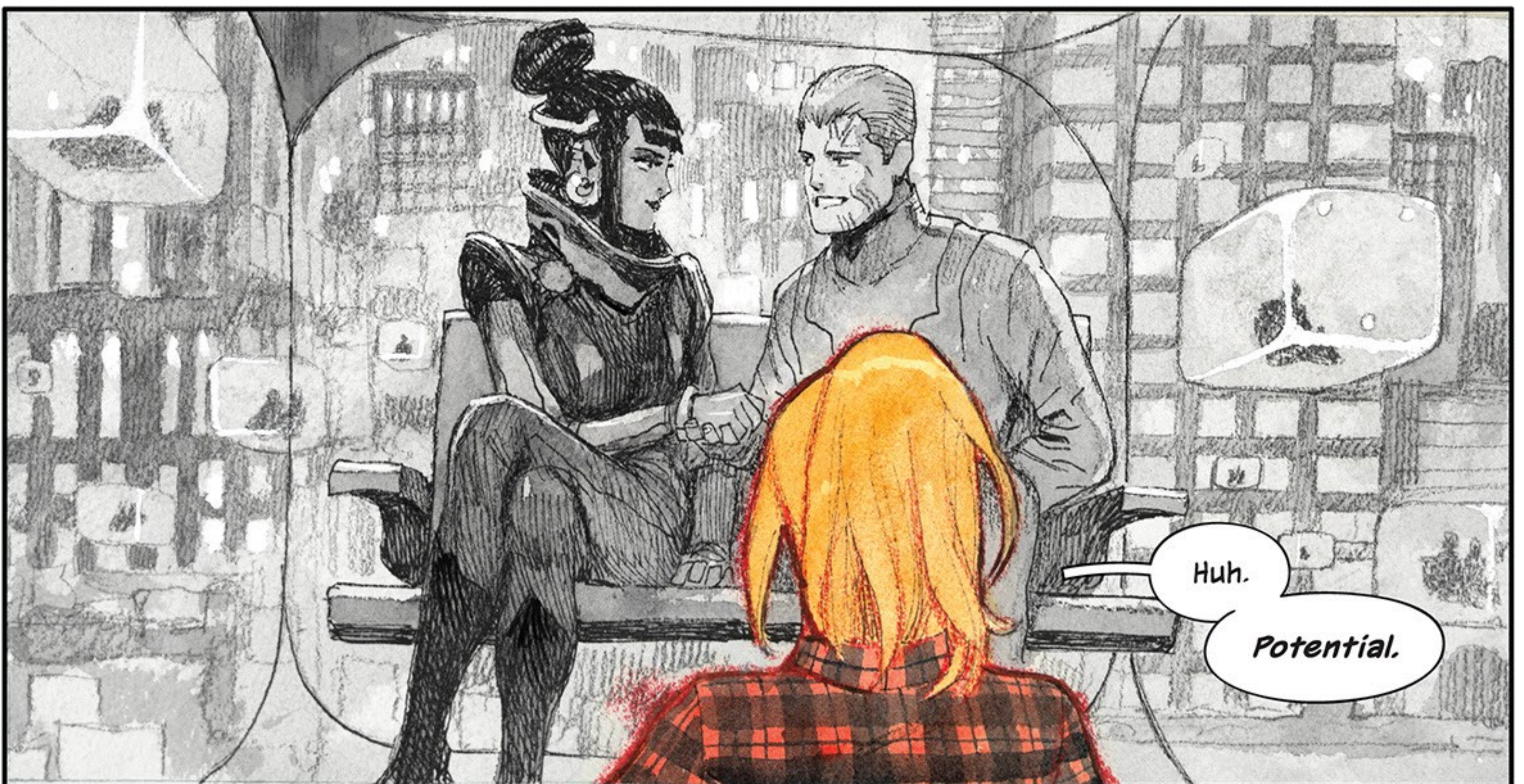
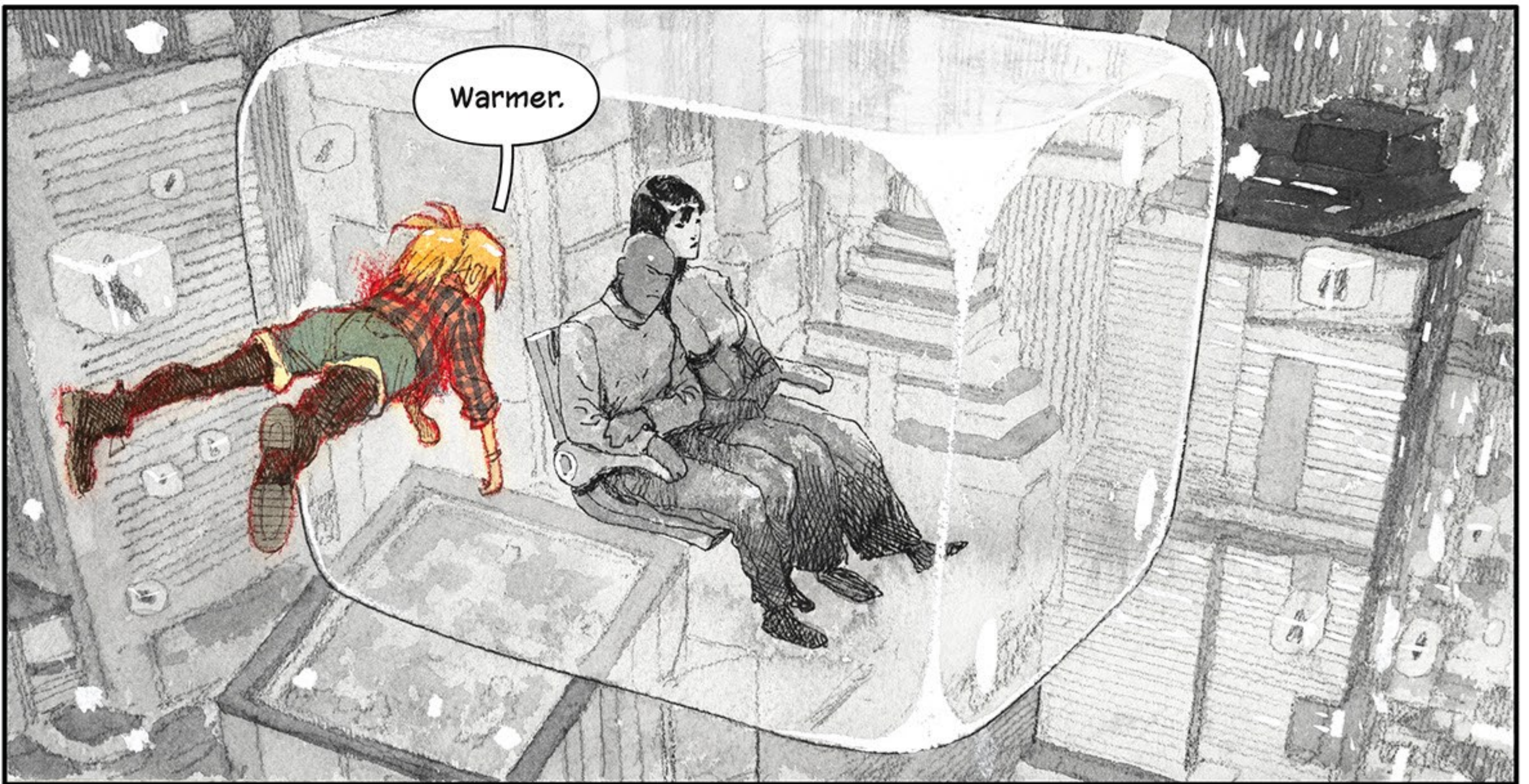


Another evening, another ten million new episodes.

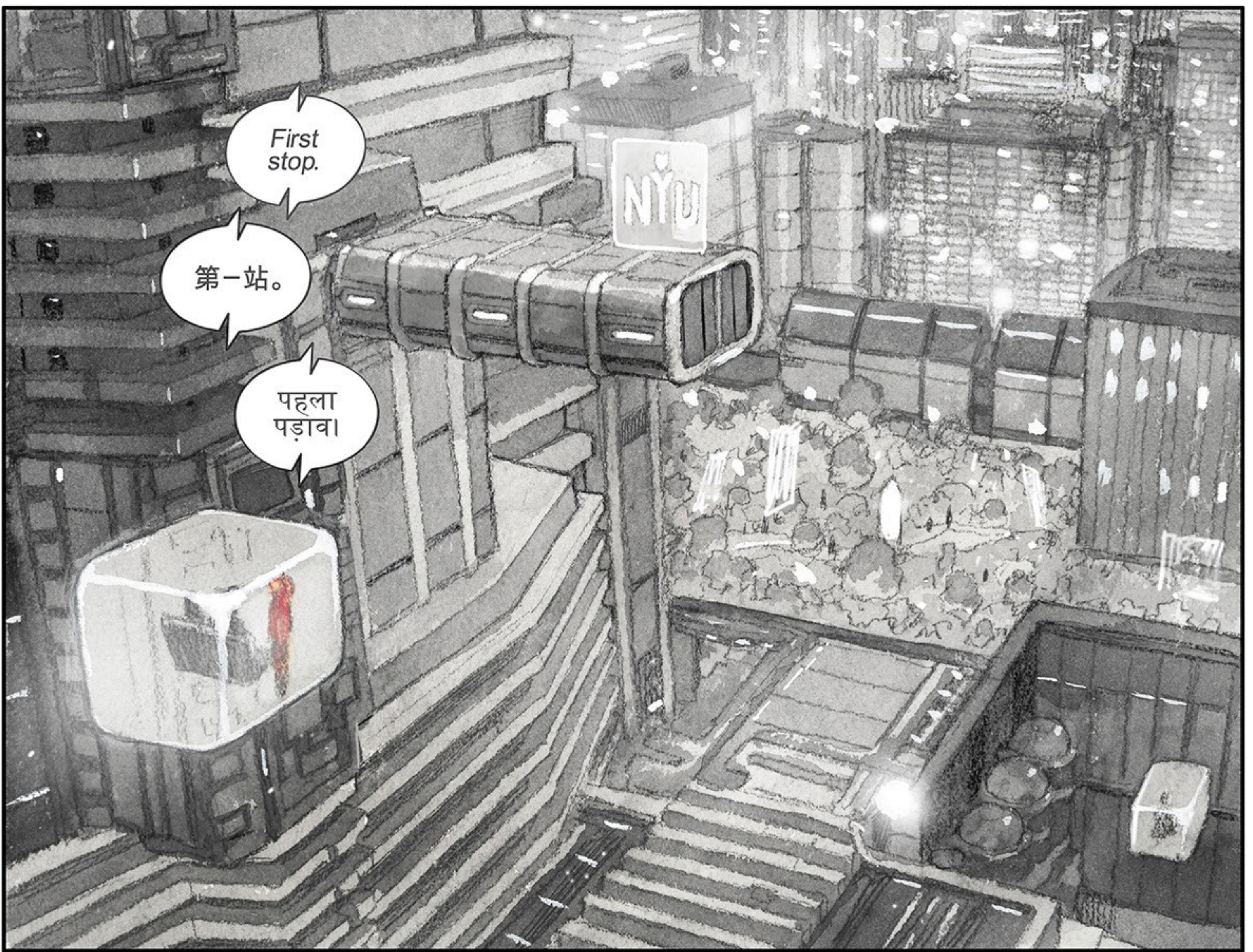
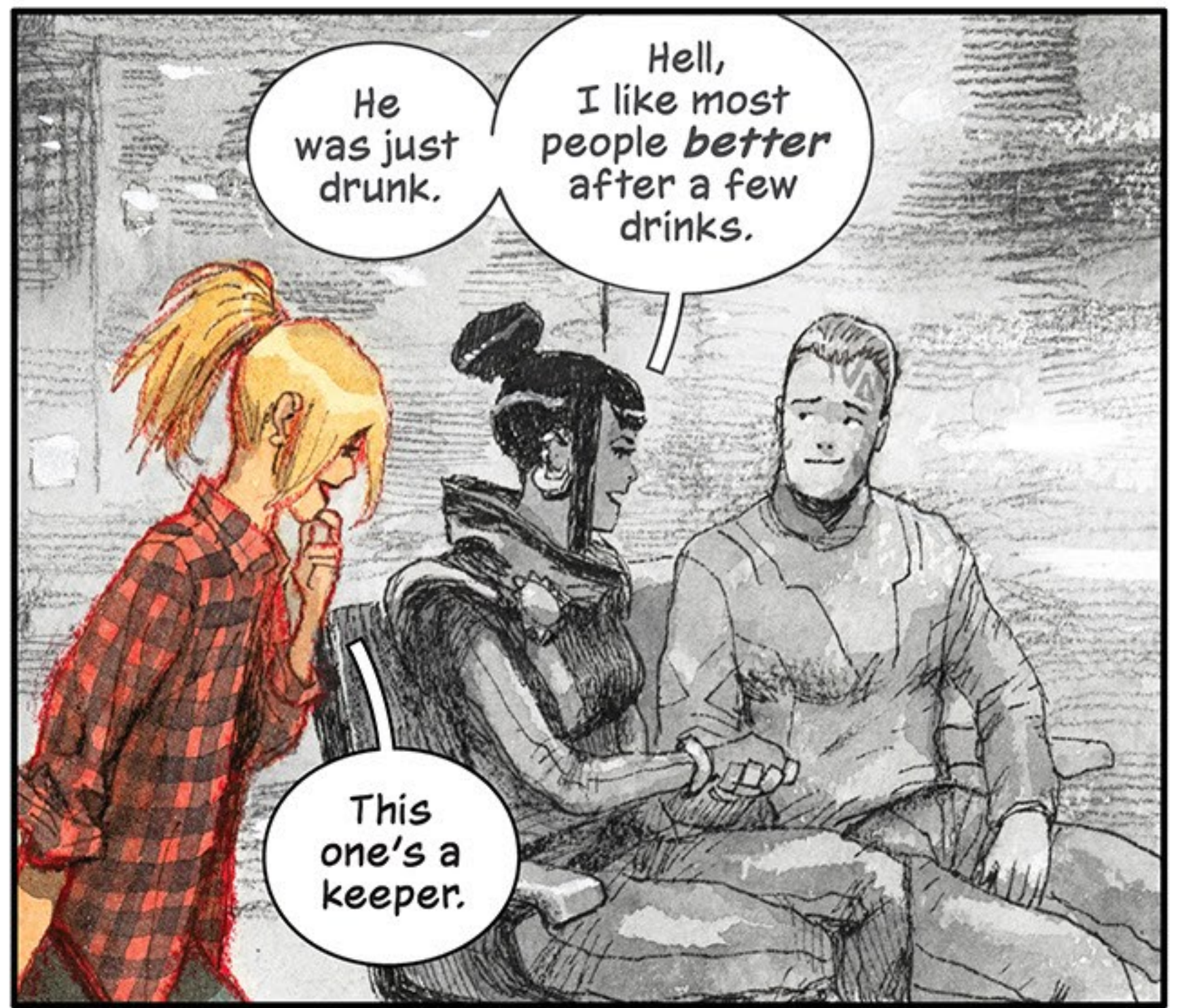


How's a girl to choose...?

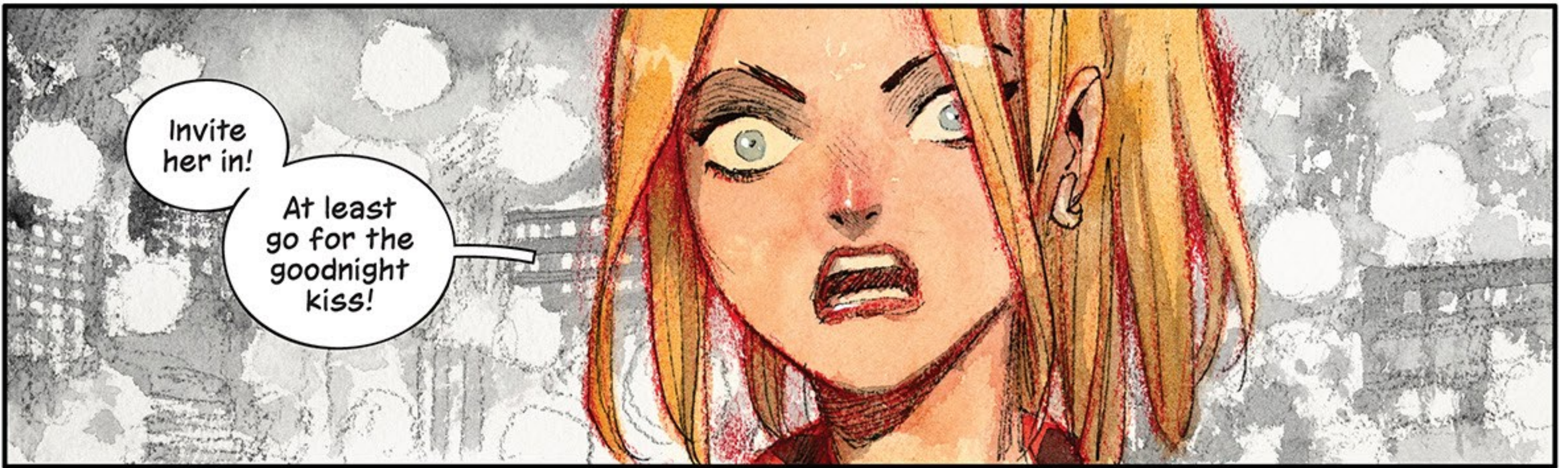
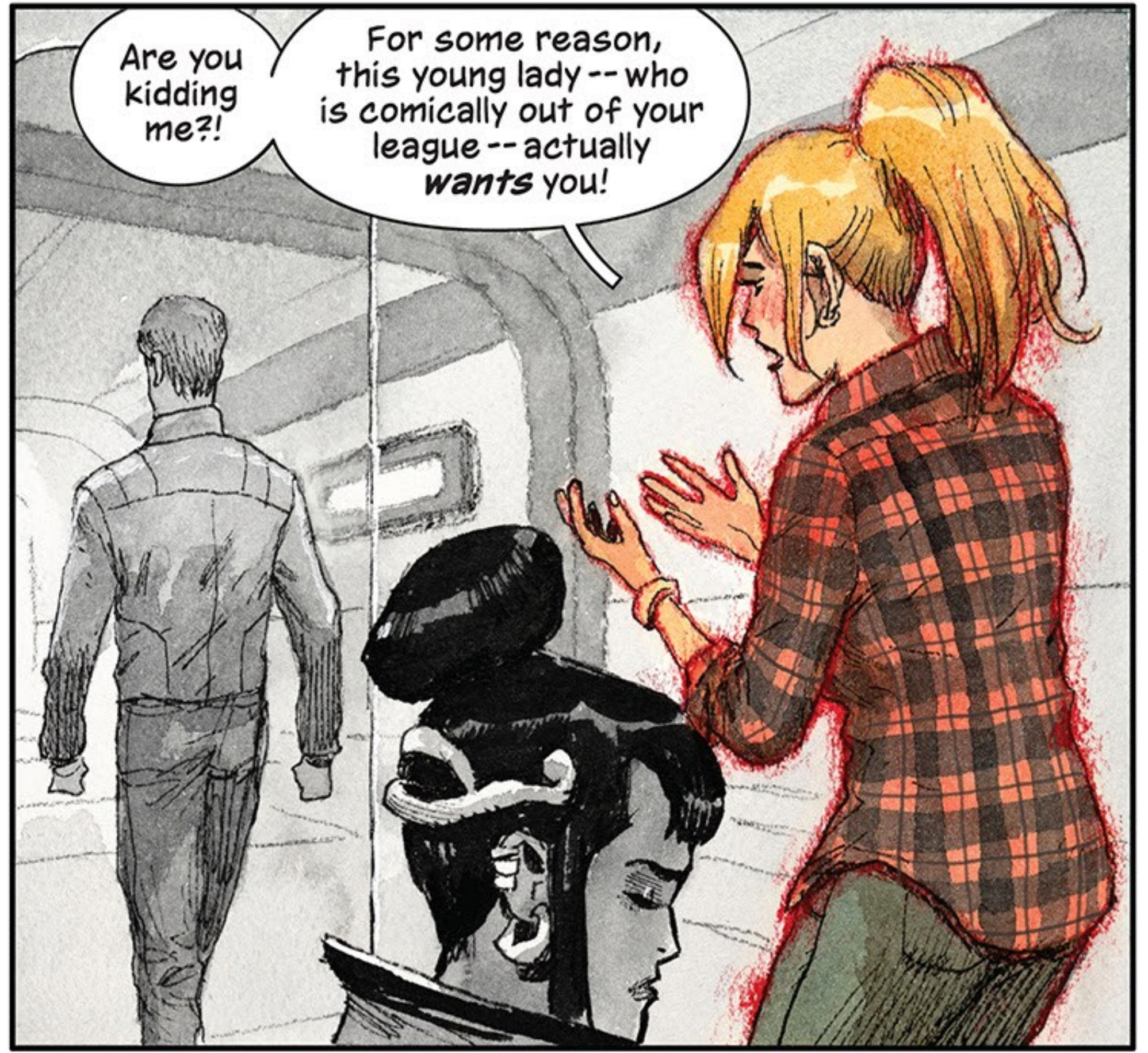




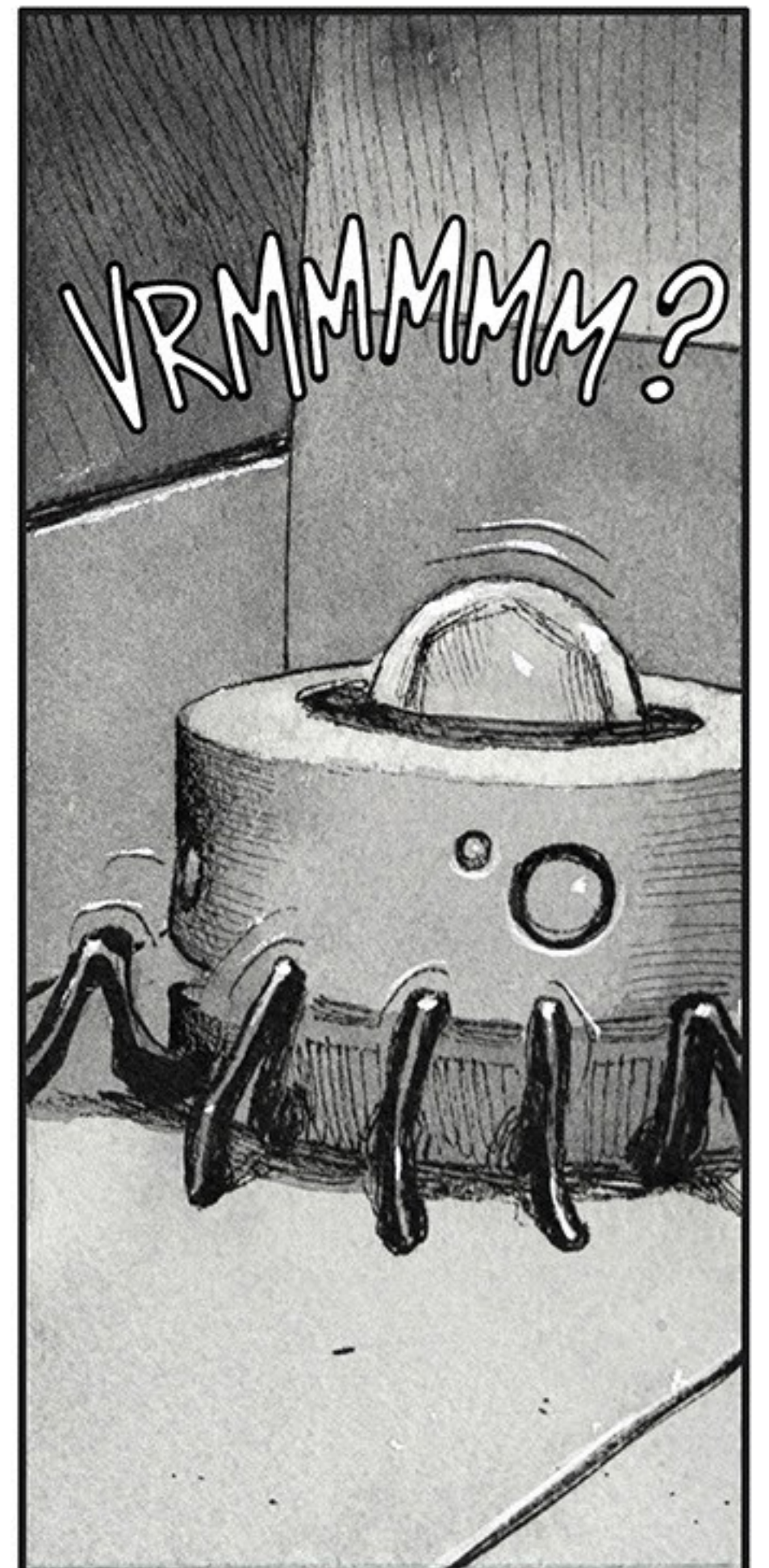




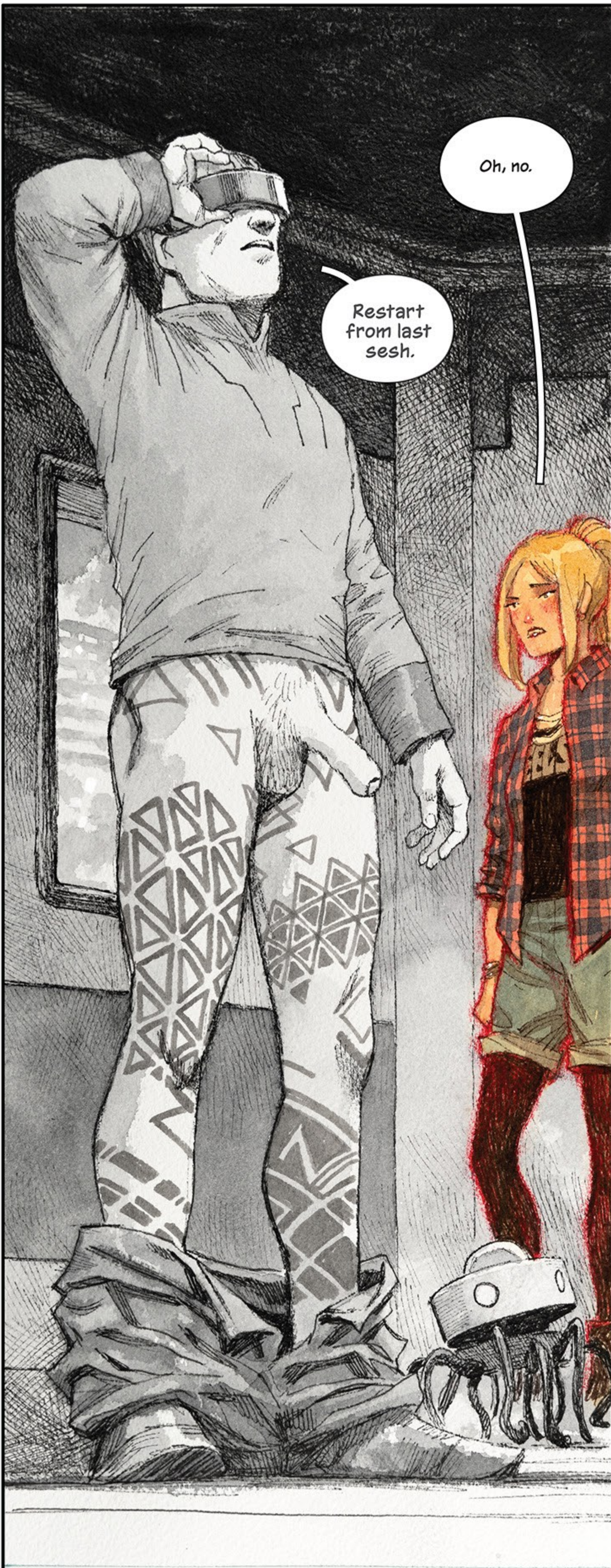






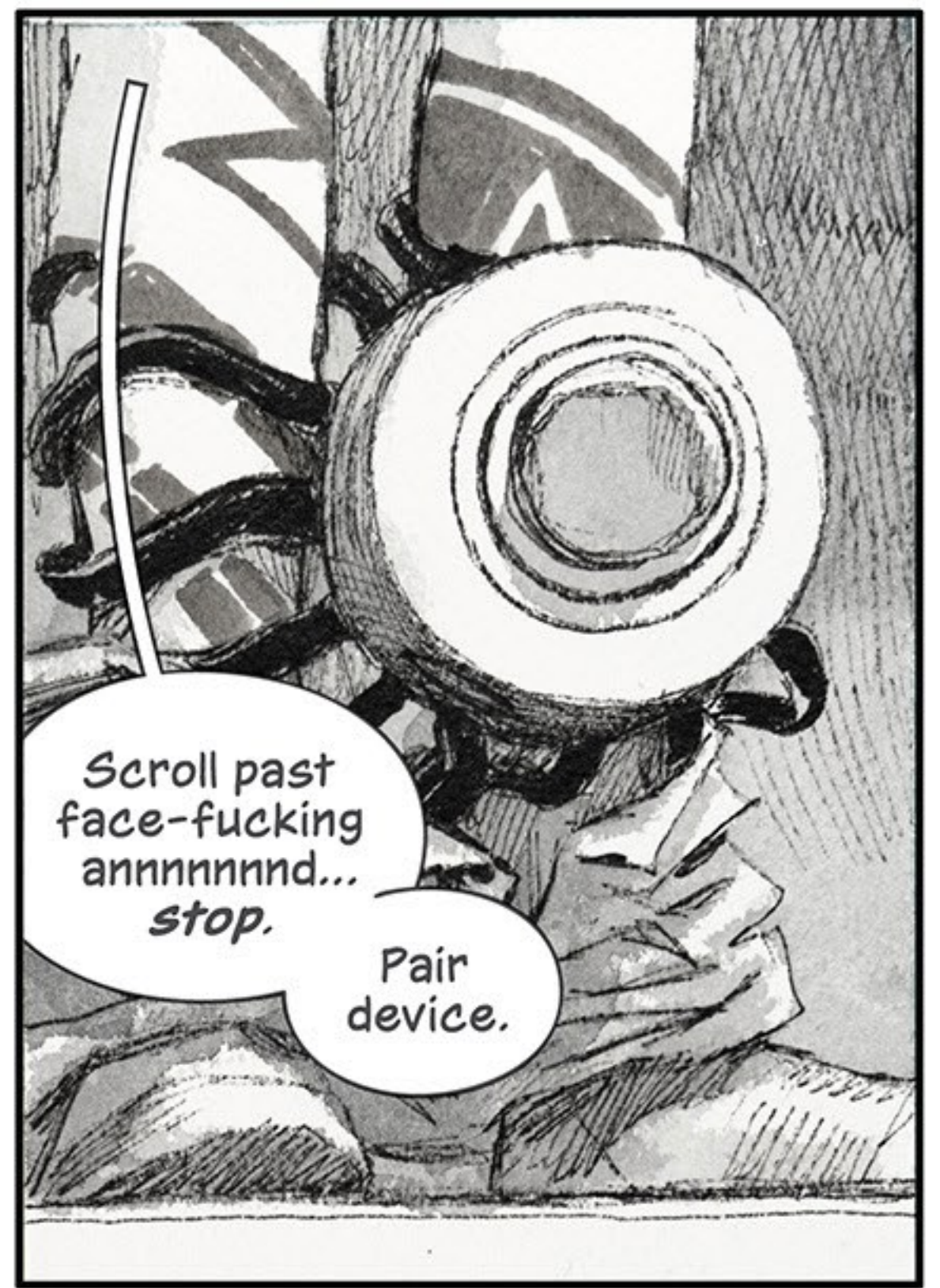






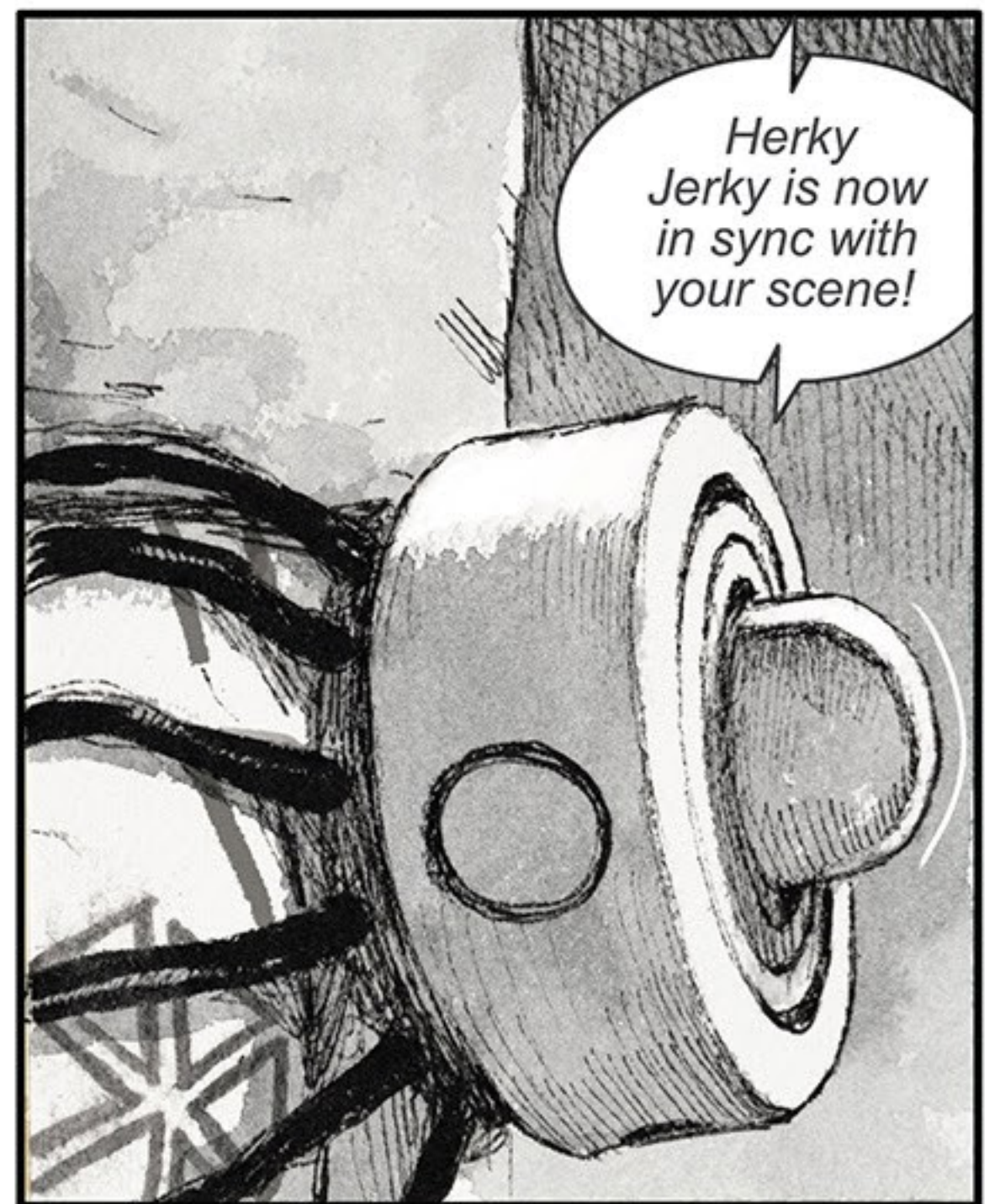
Oh, no.

Restart from last sesh.



Scroll past face-fucking annnnnnd... stop.

Pair device.



Herky Jerky is now in sync with your scene!

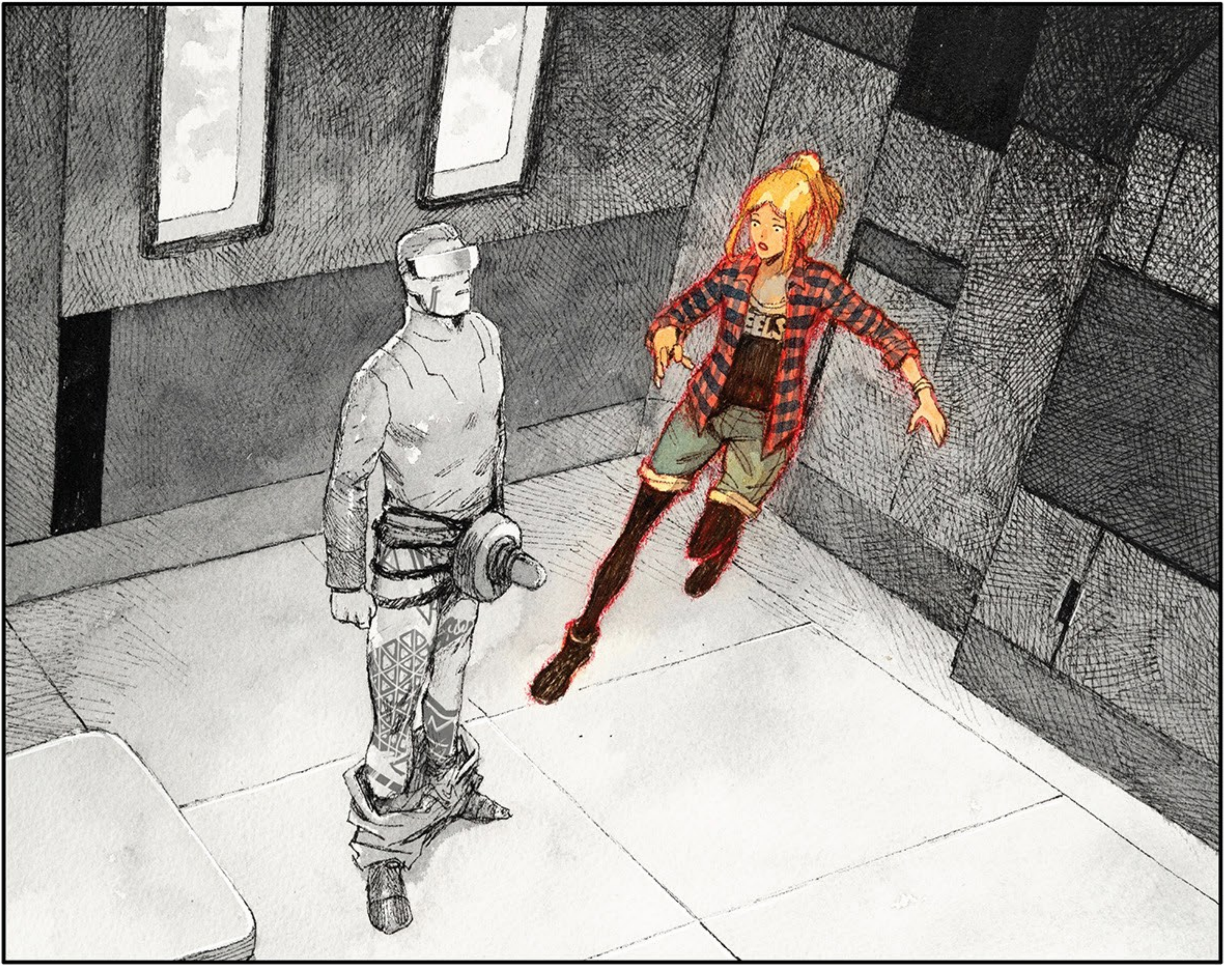
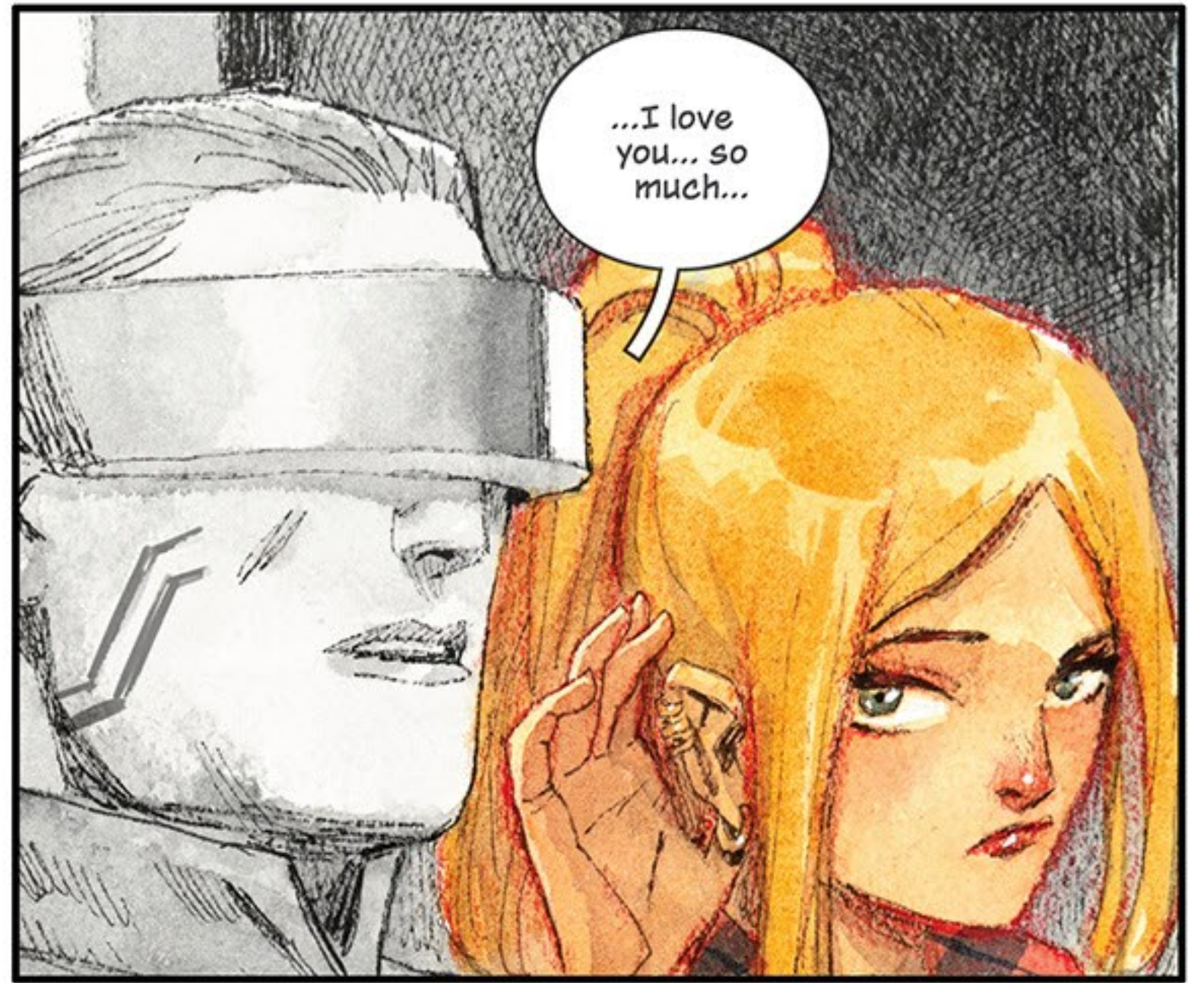
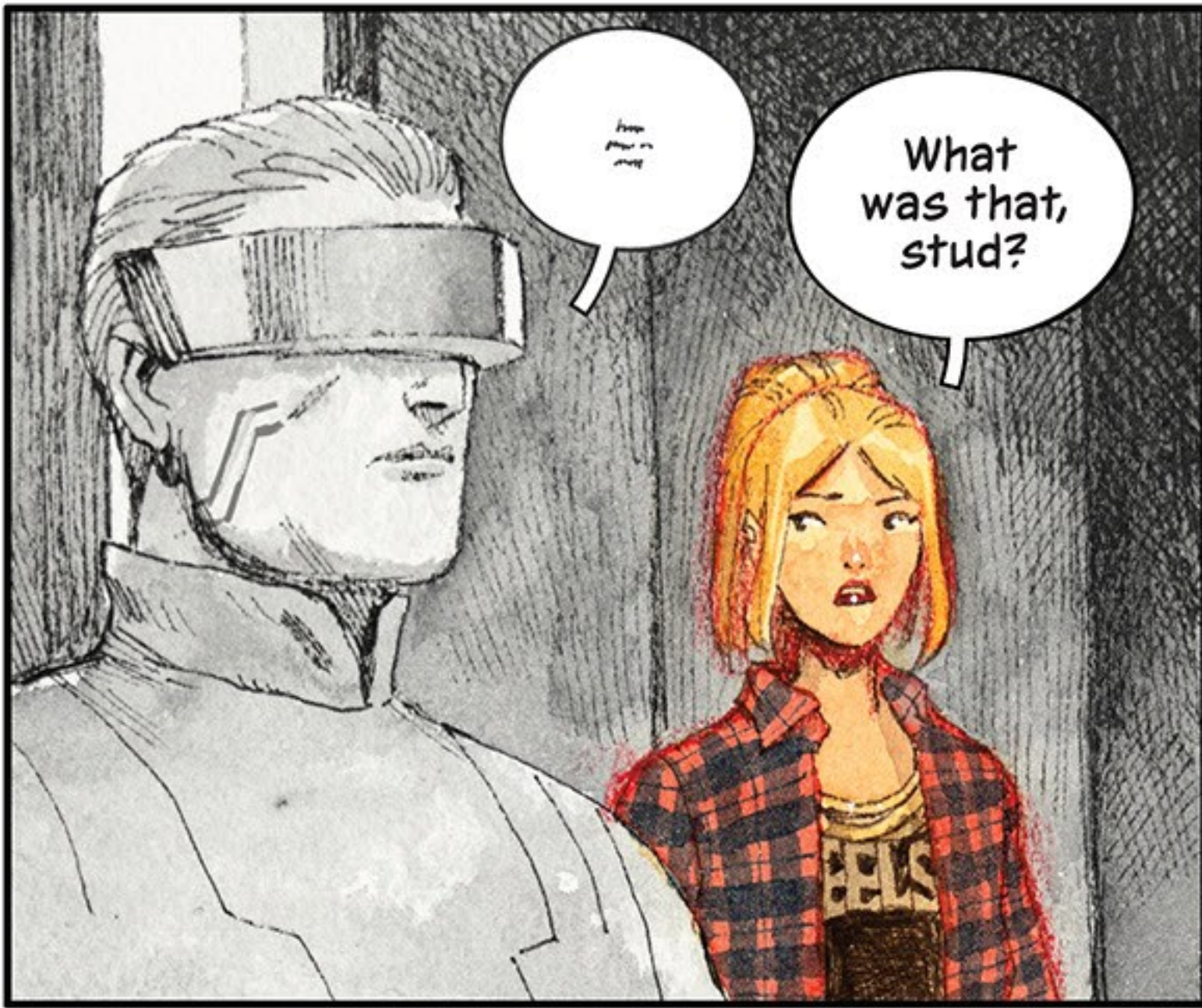


Nggh

God, I miss Tinder.

VSSK  
VSSK  
VSSK









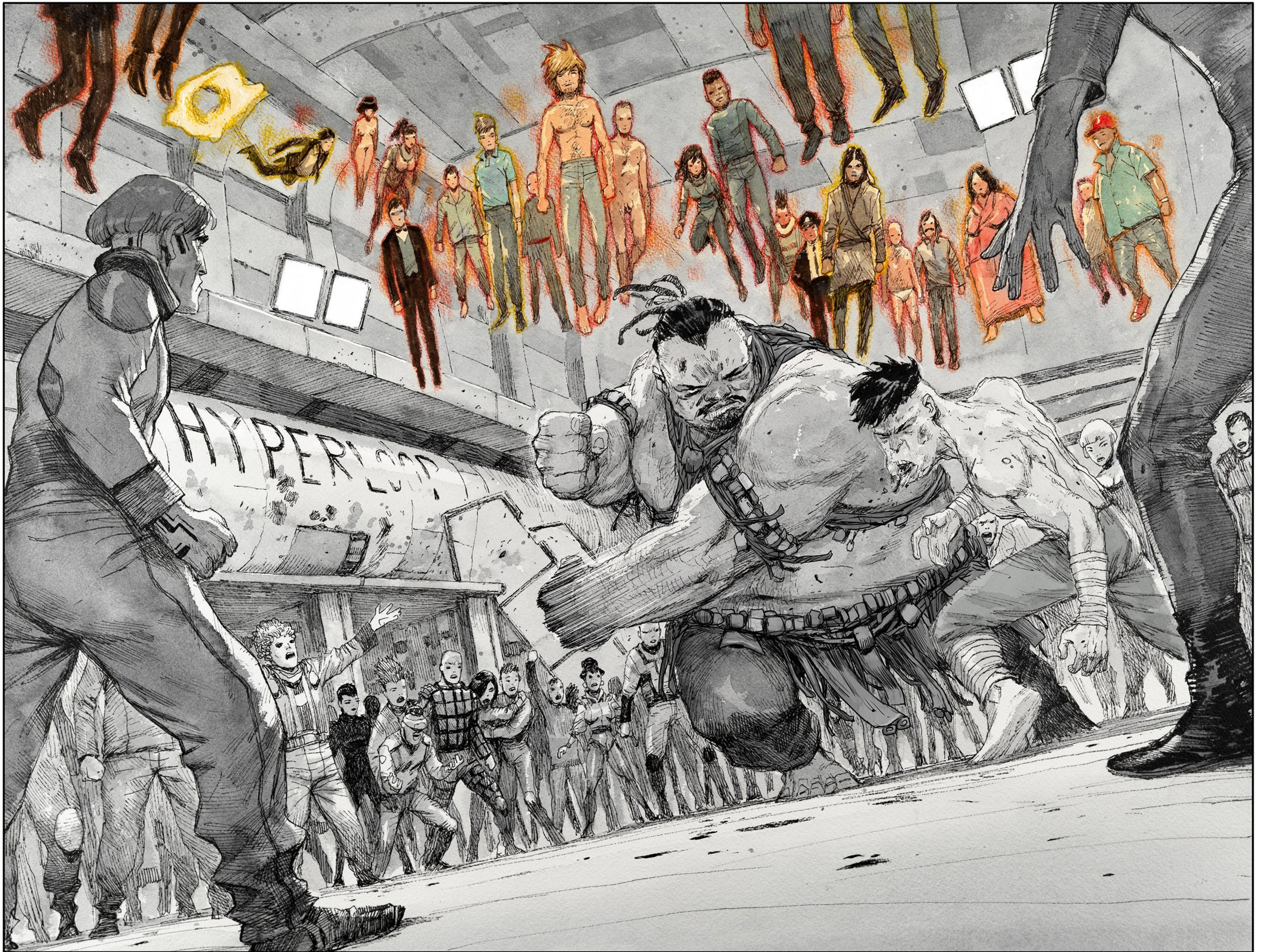








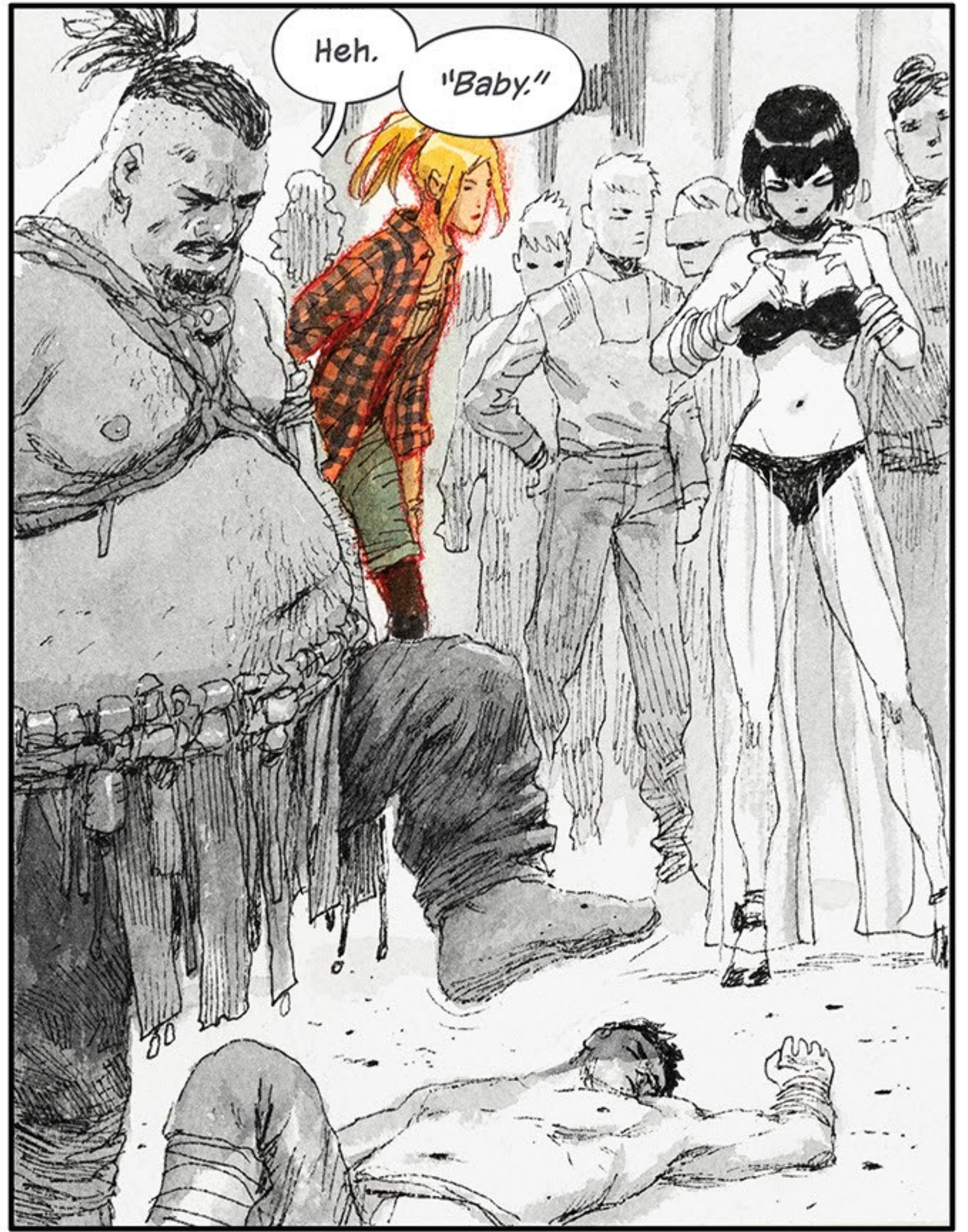
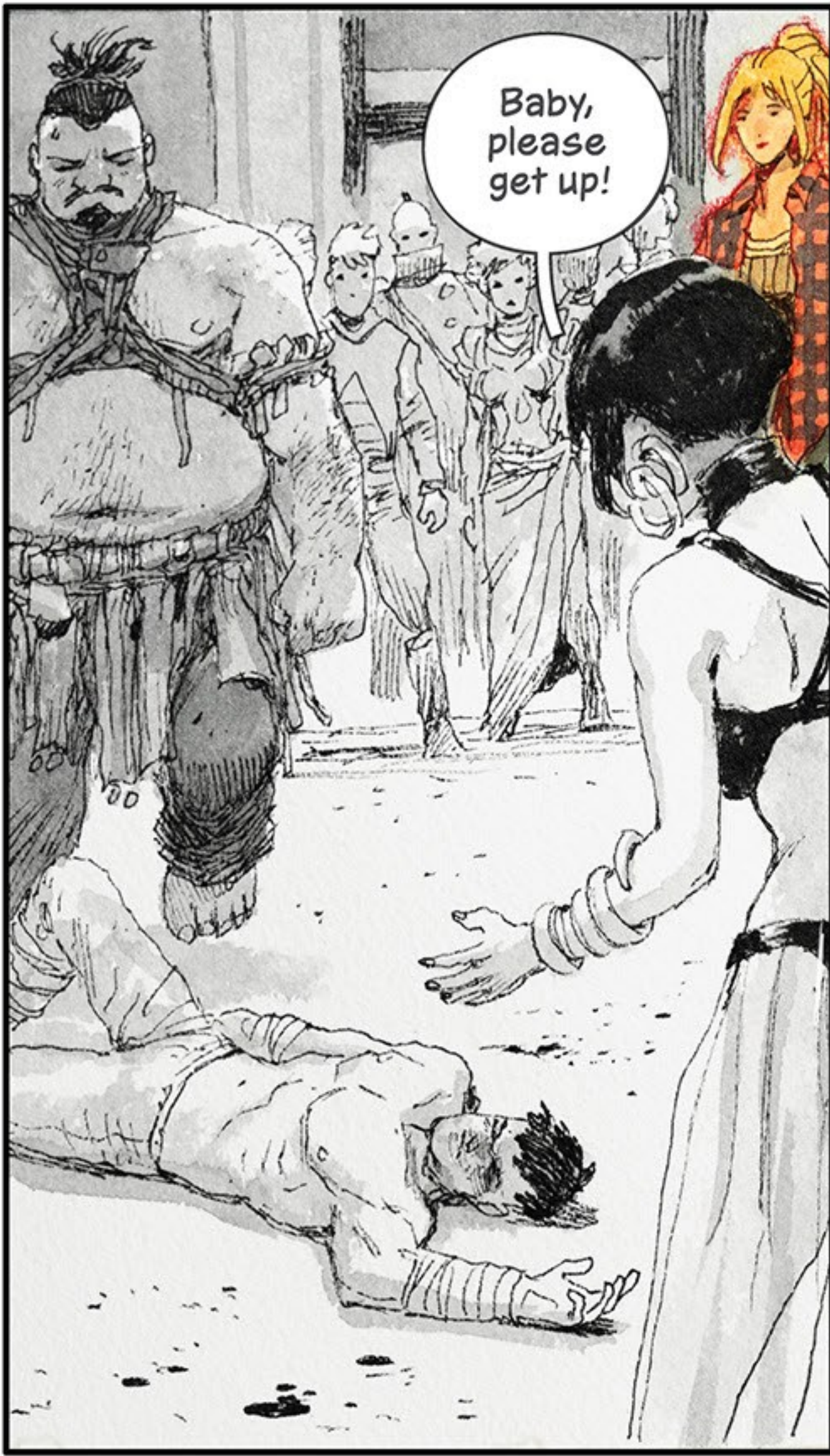




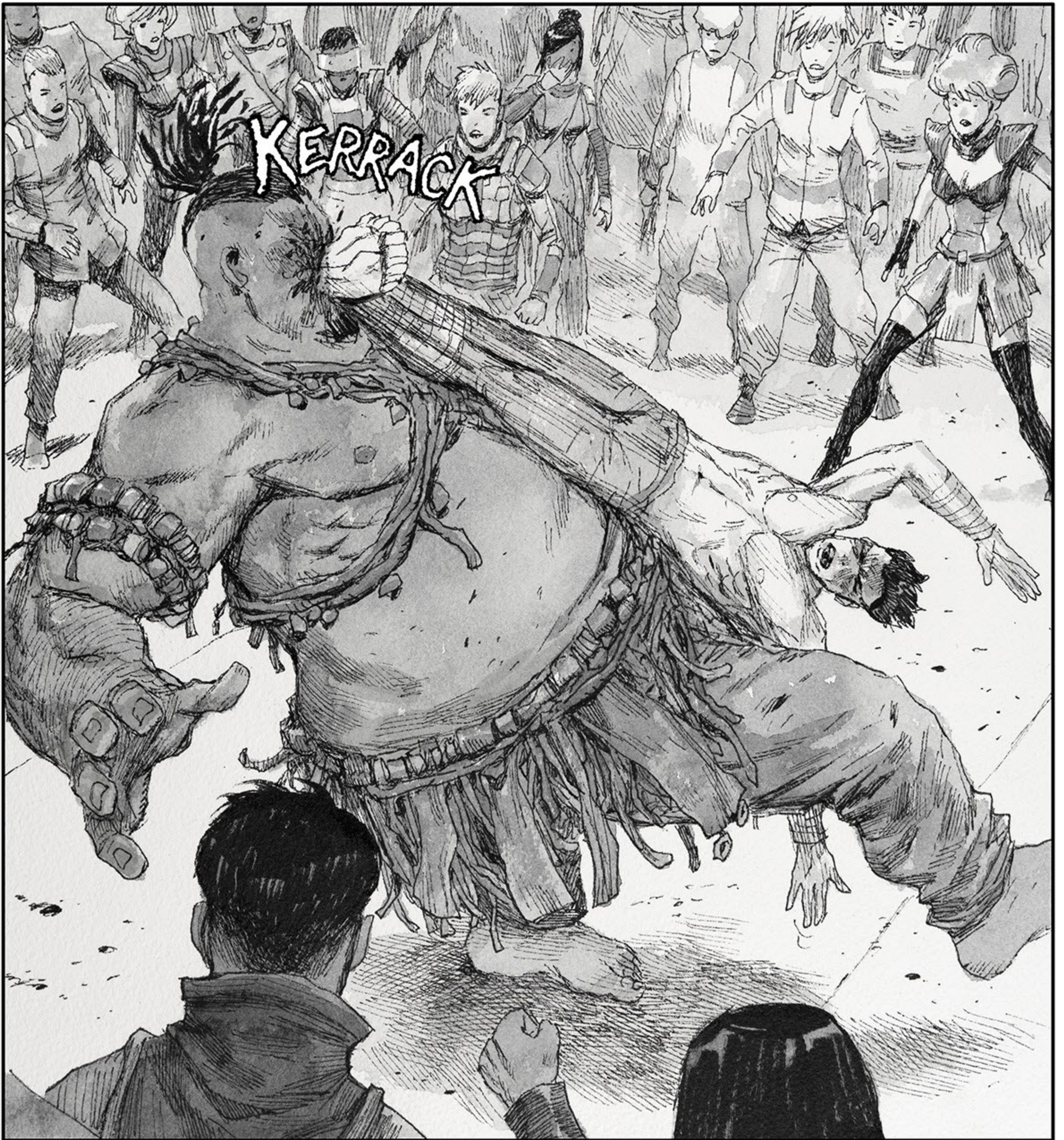




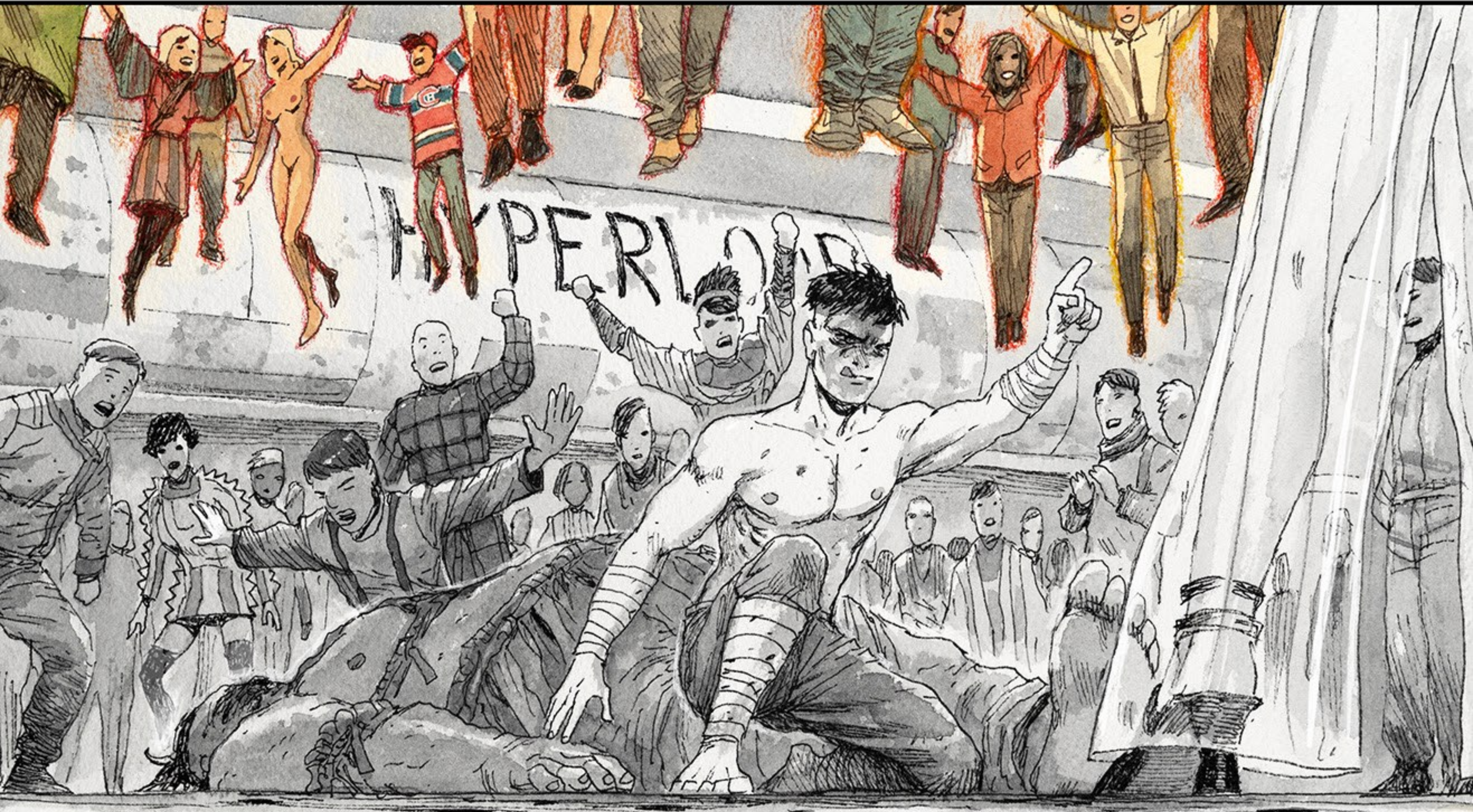
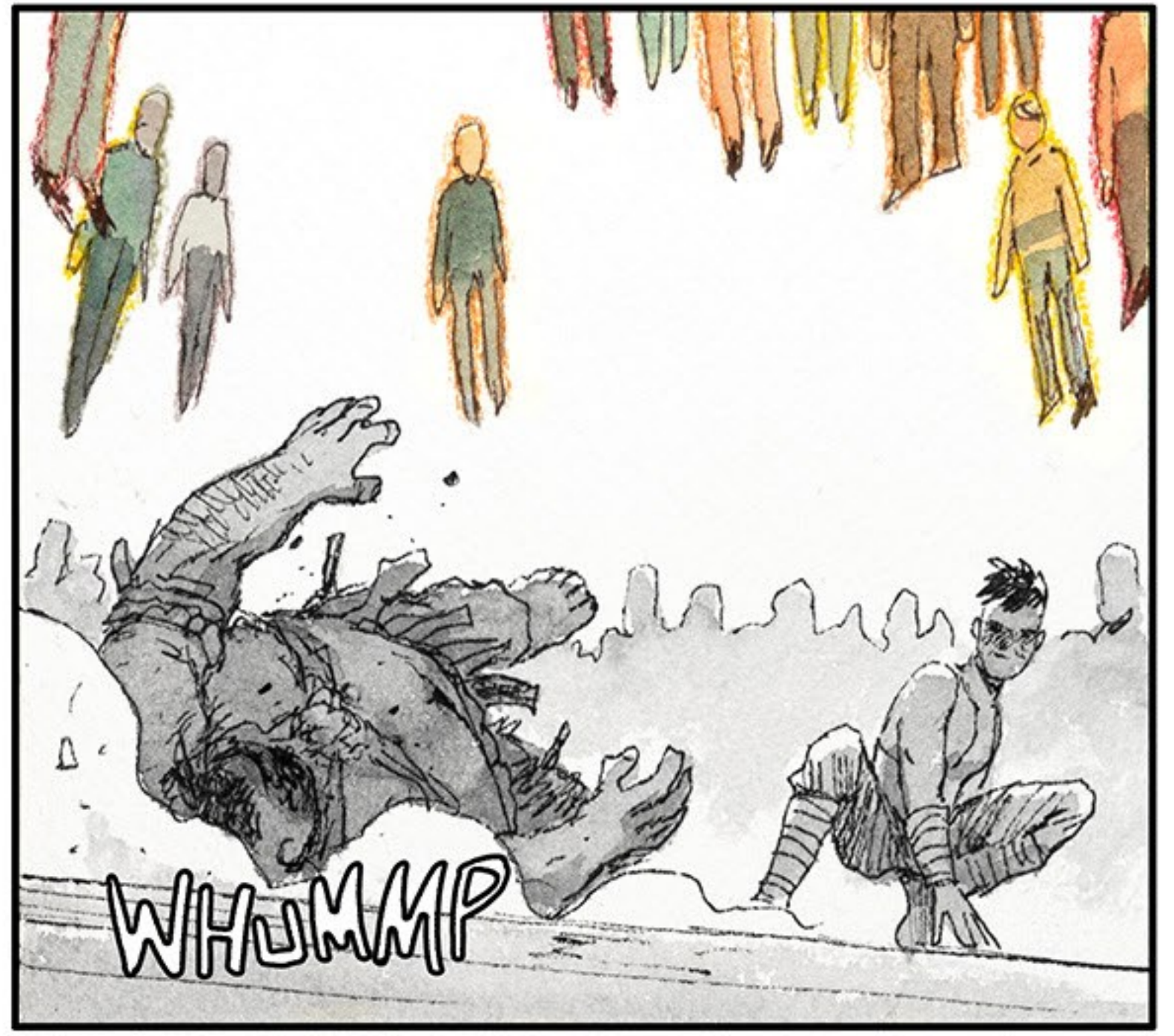








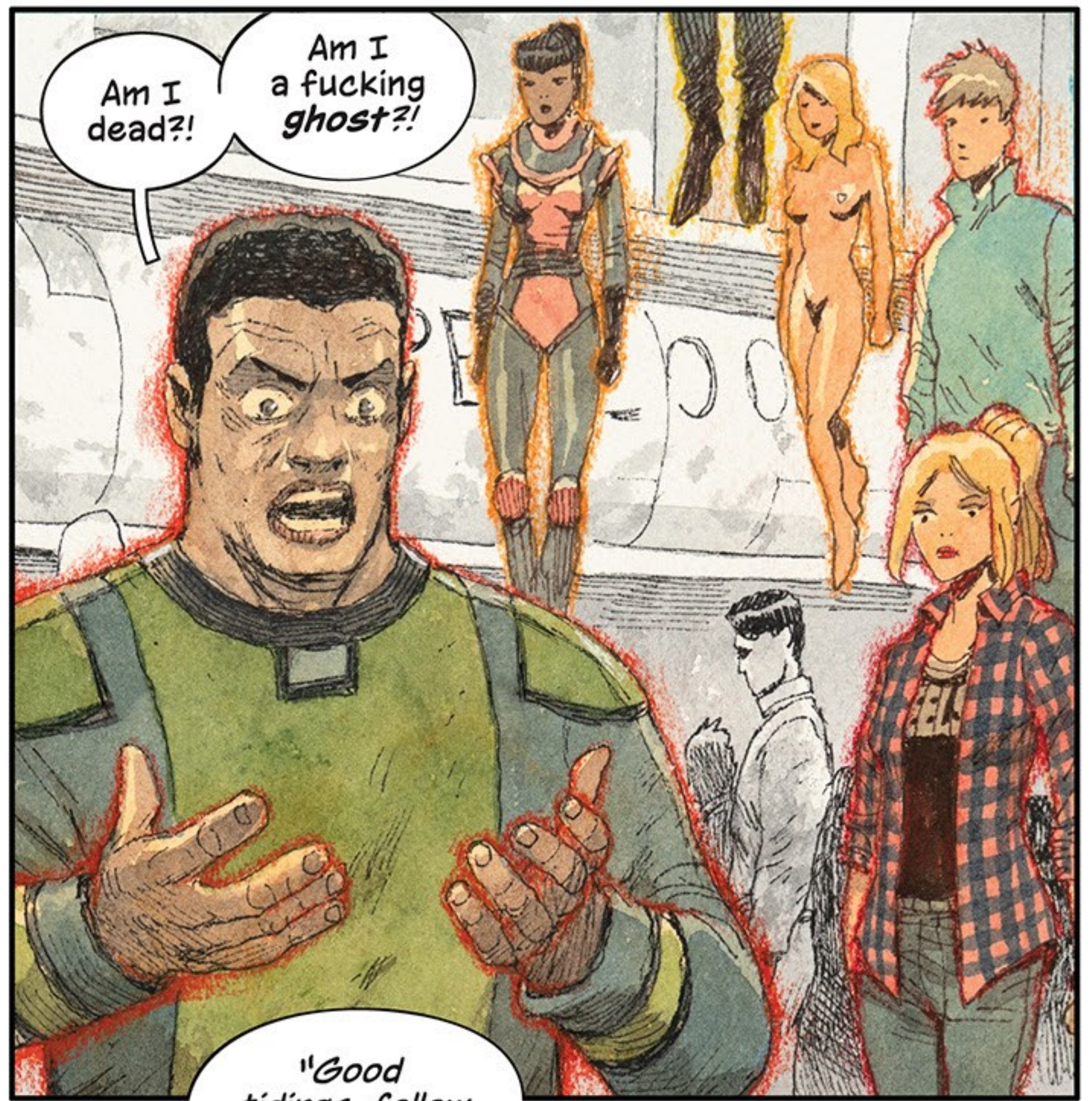




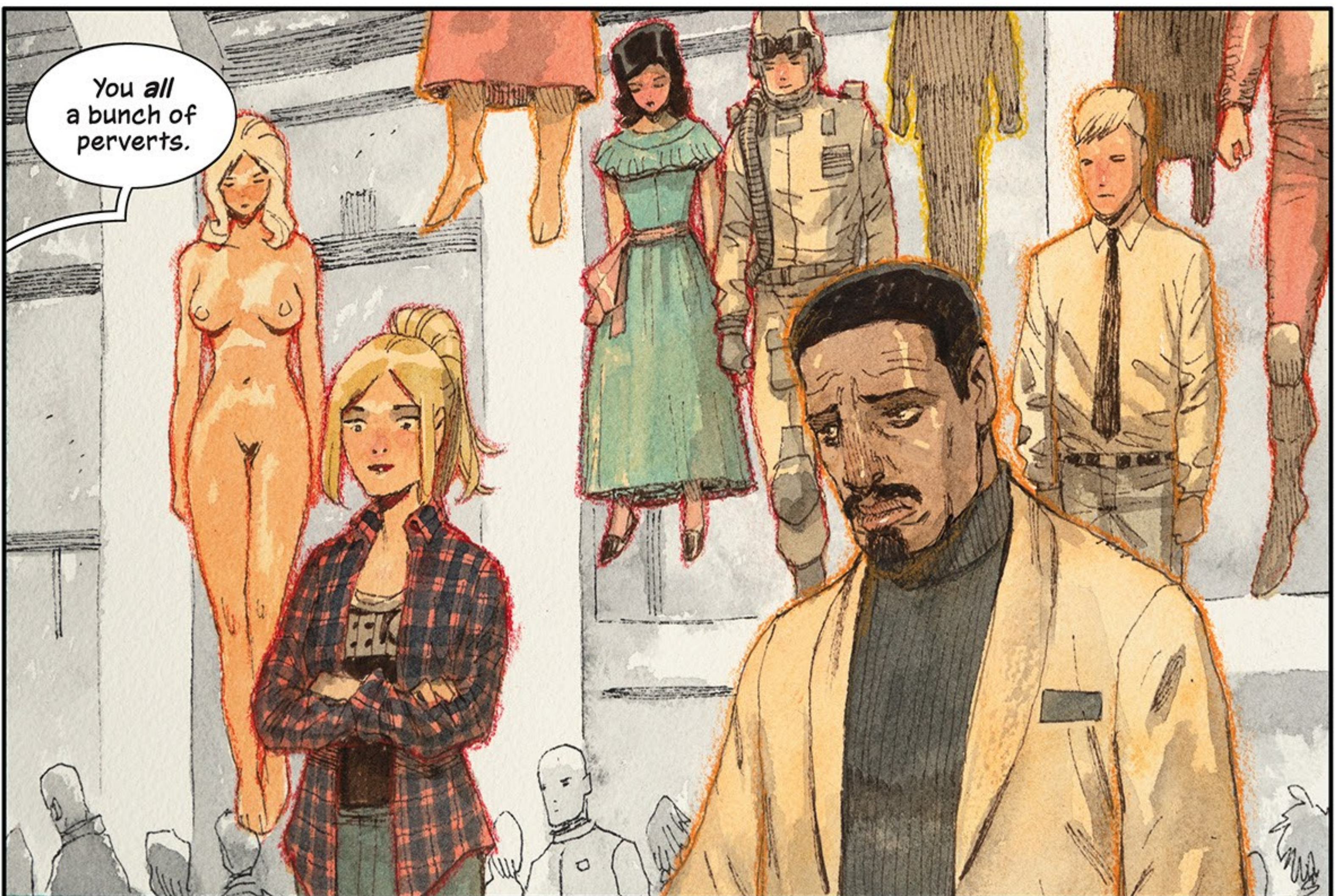
















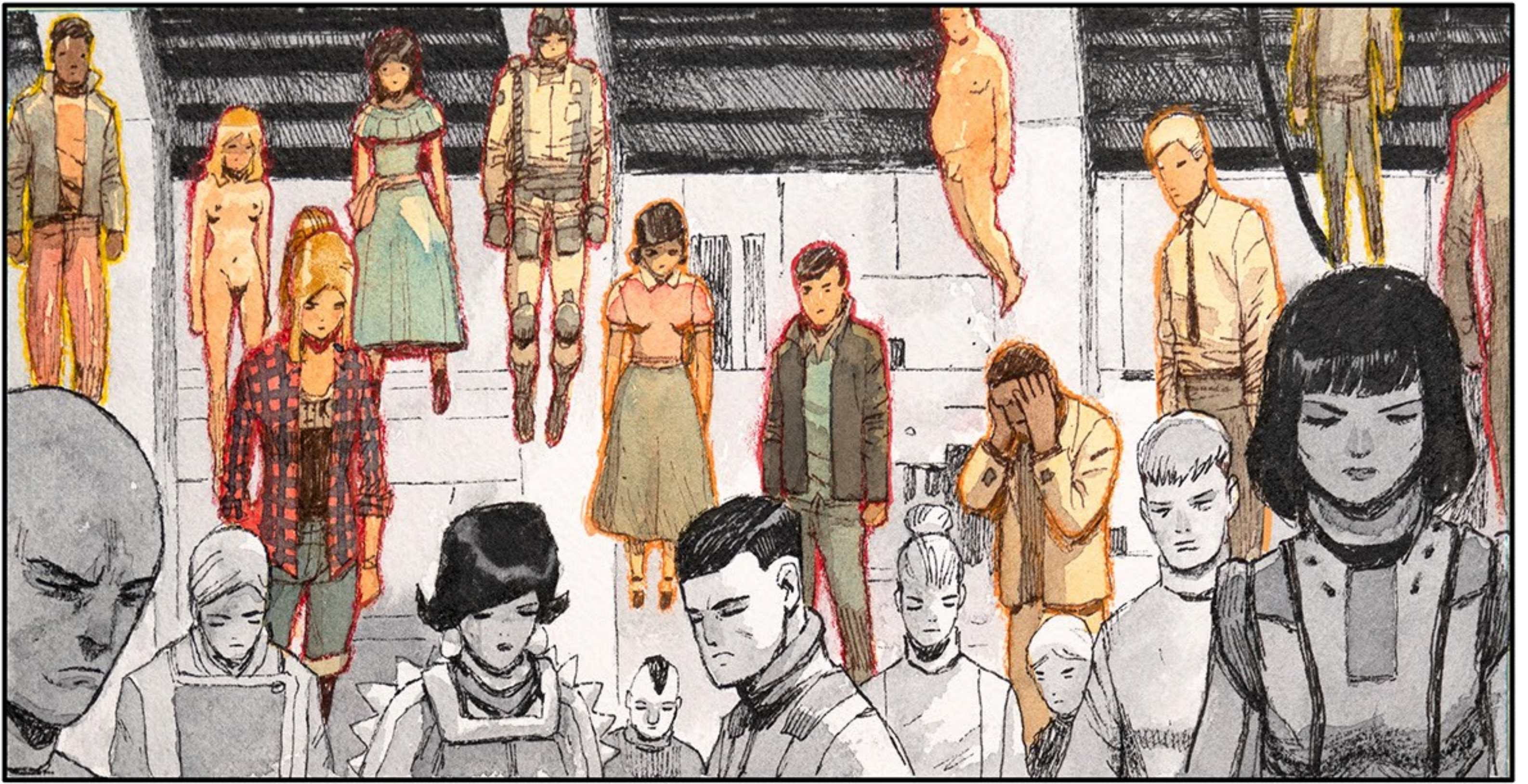




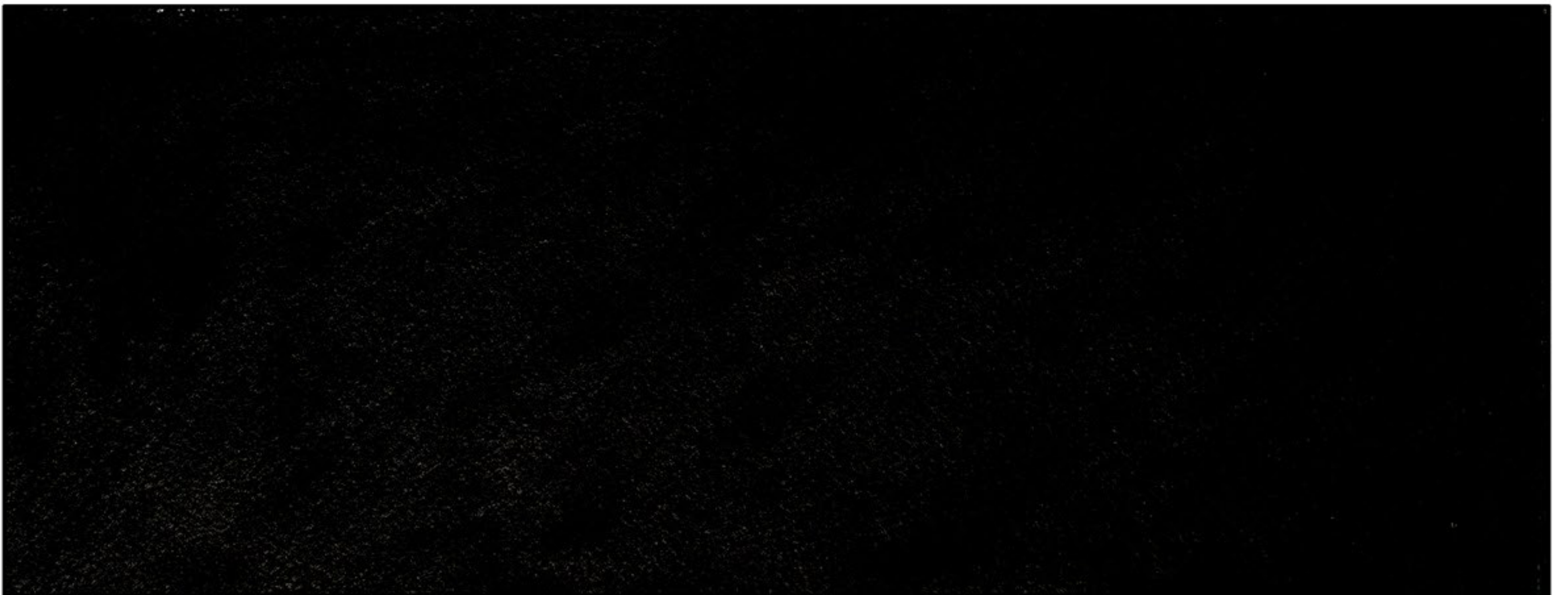
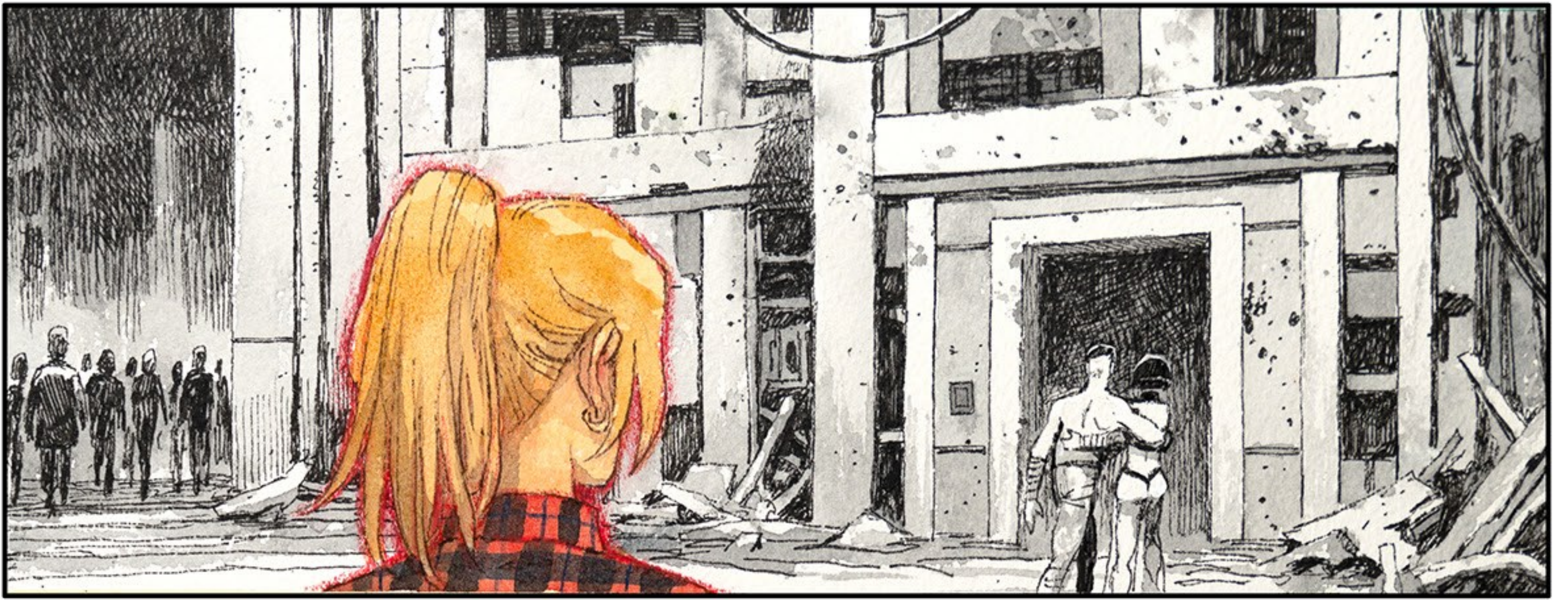




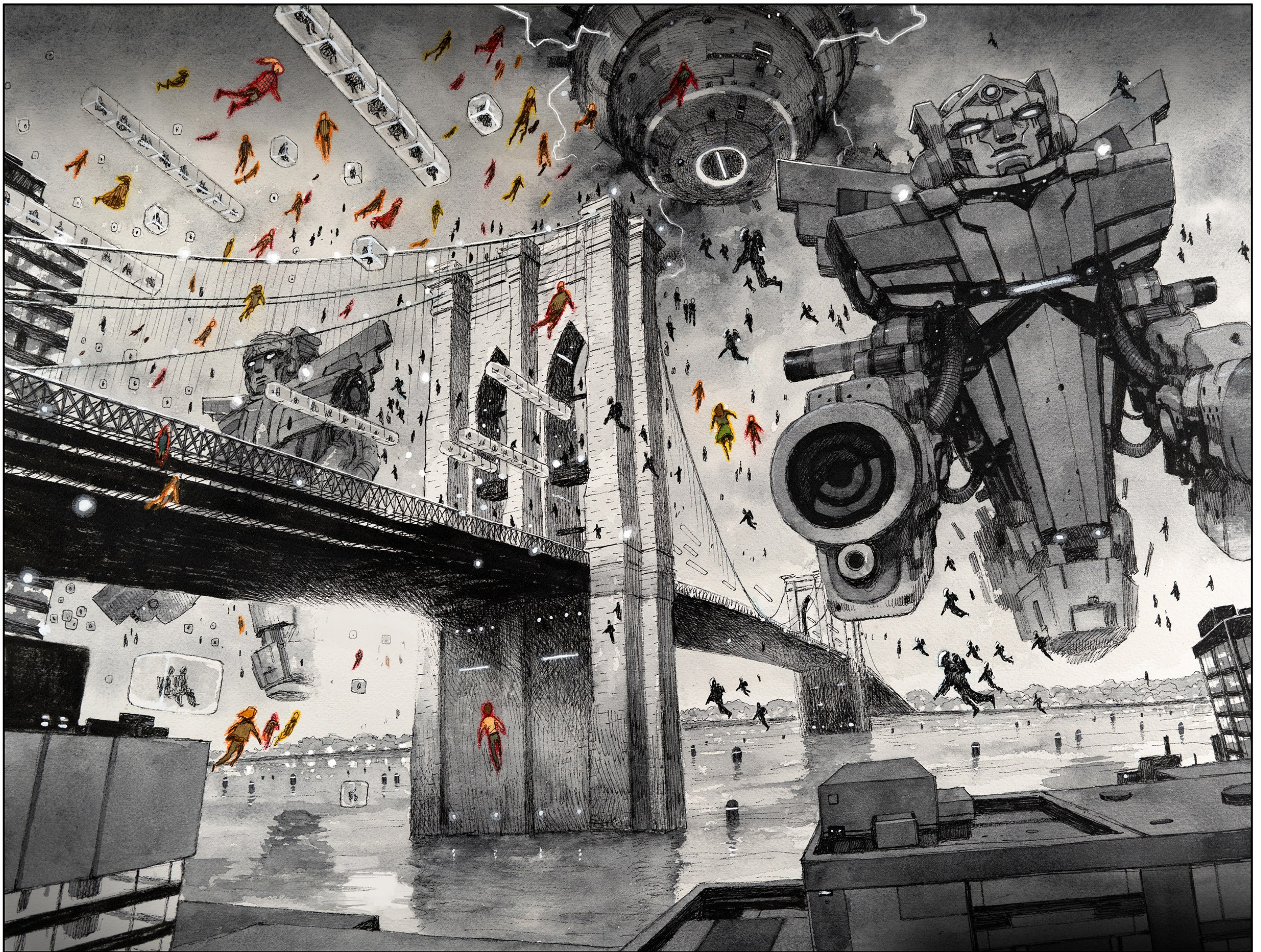




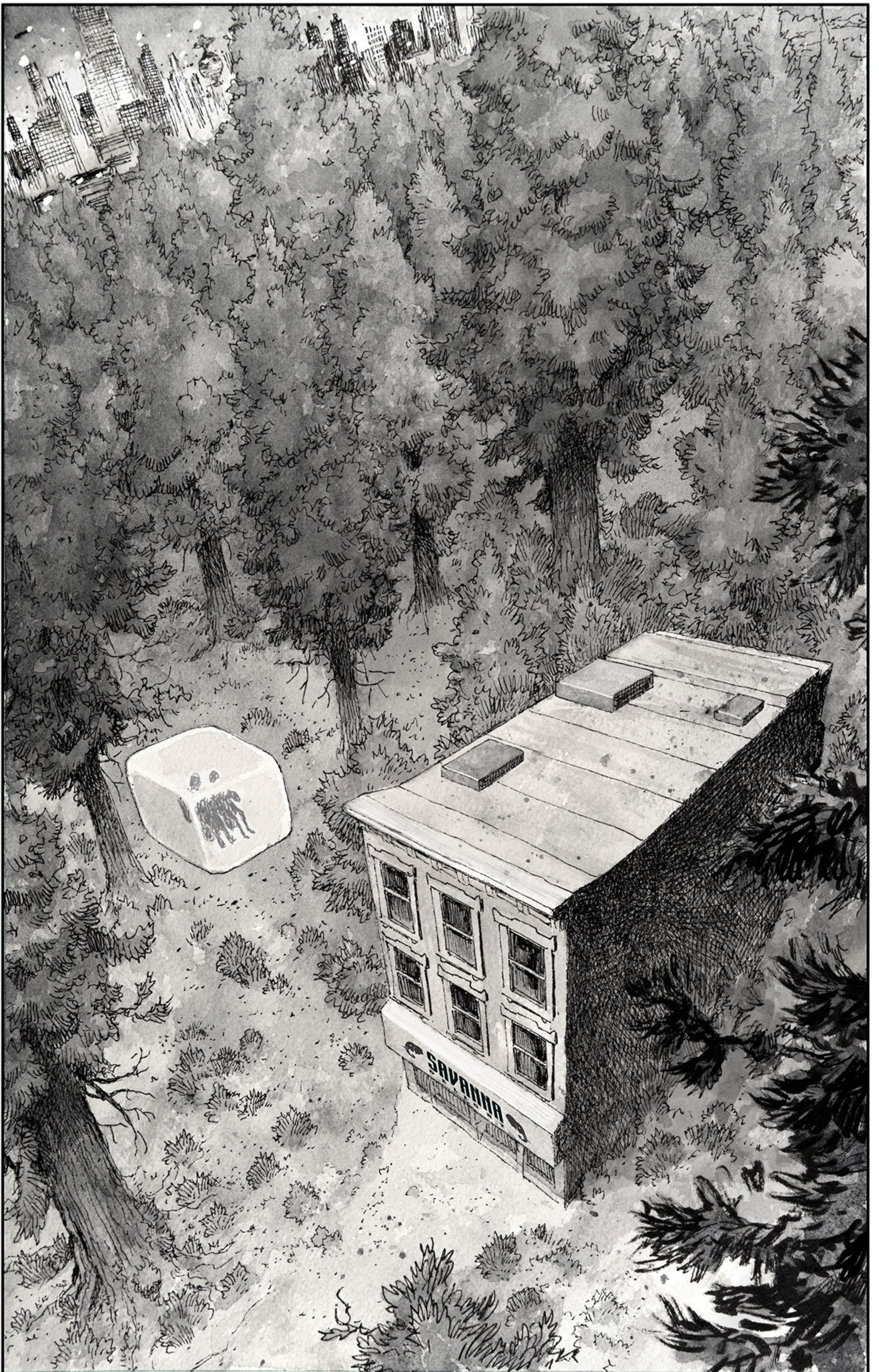




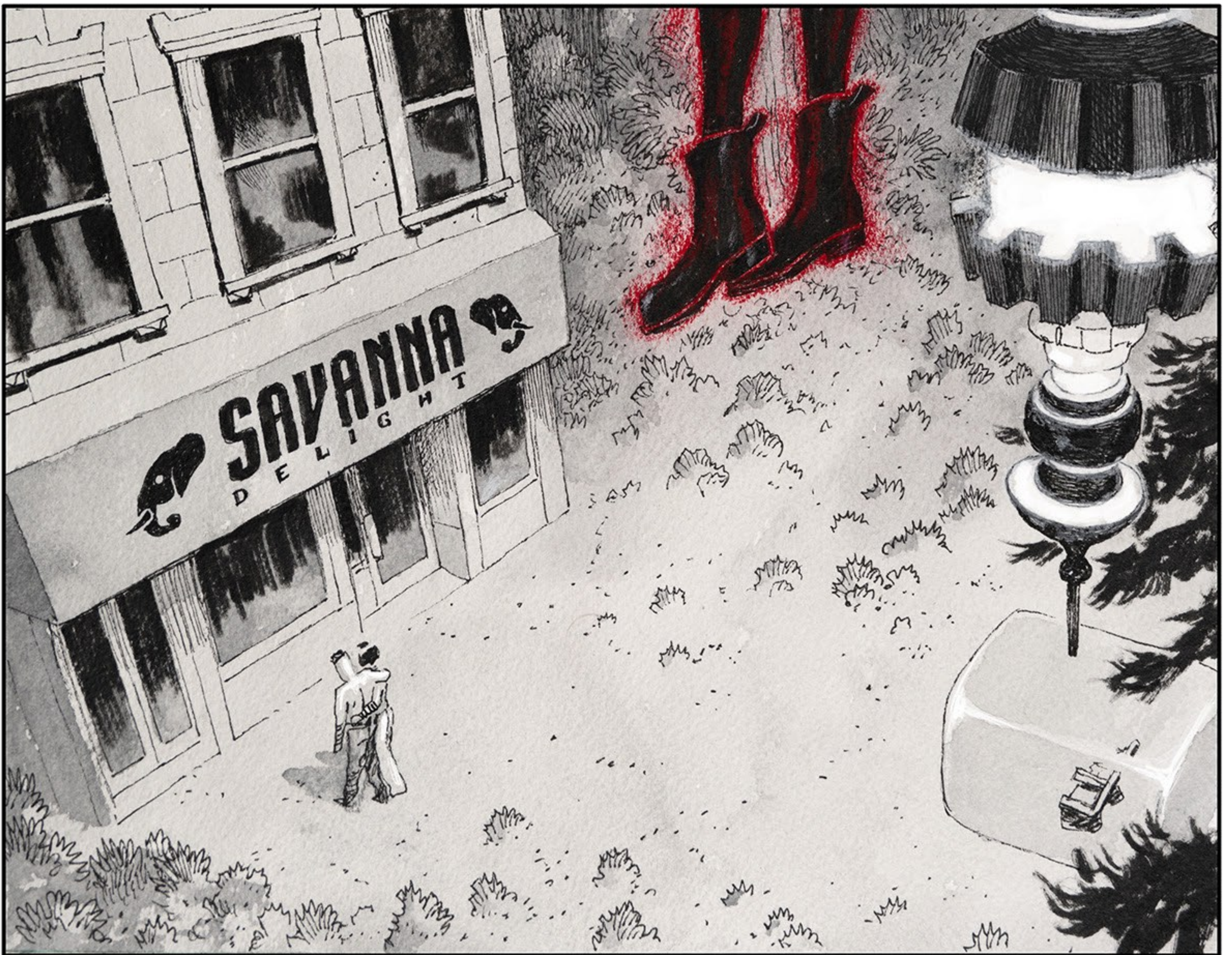
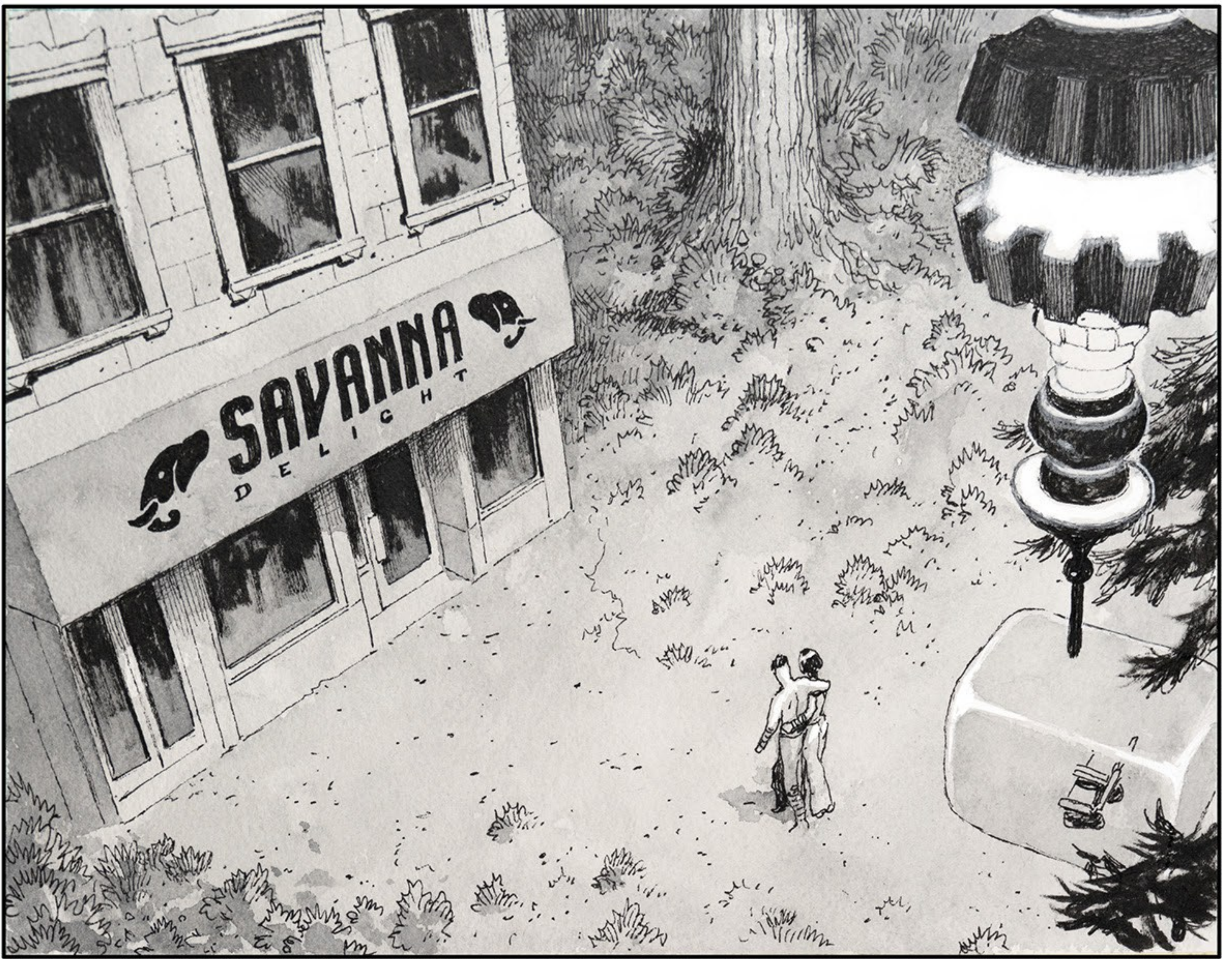




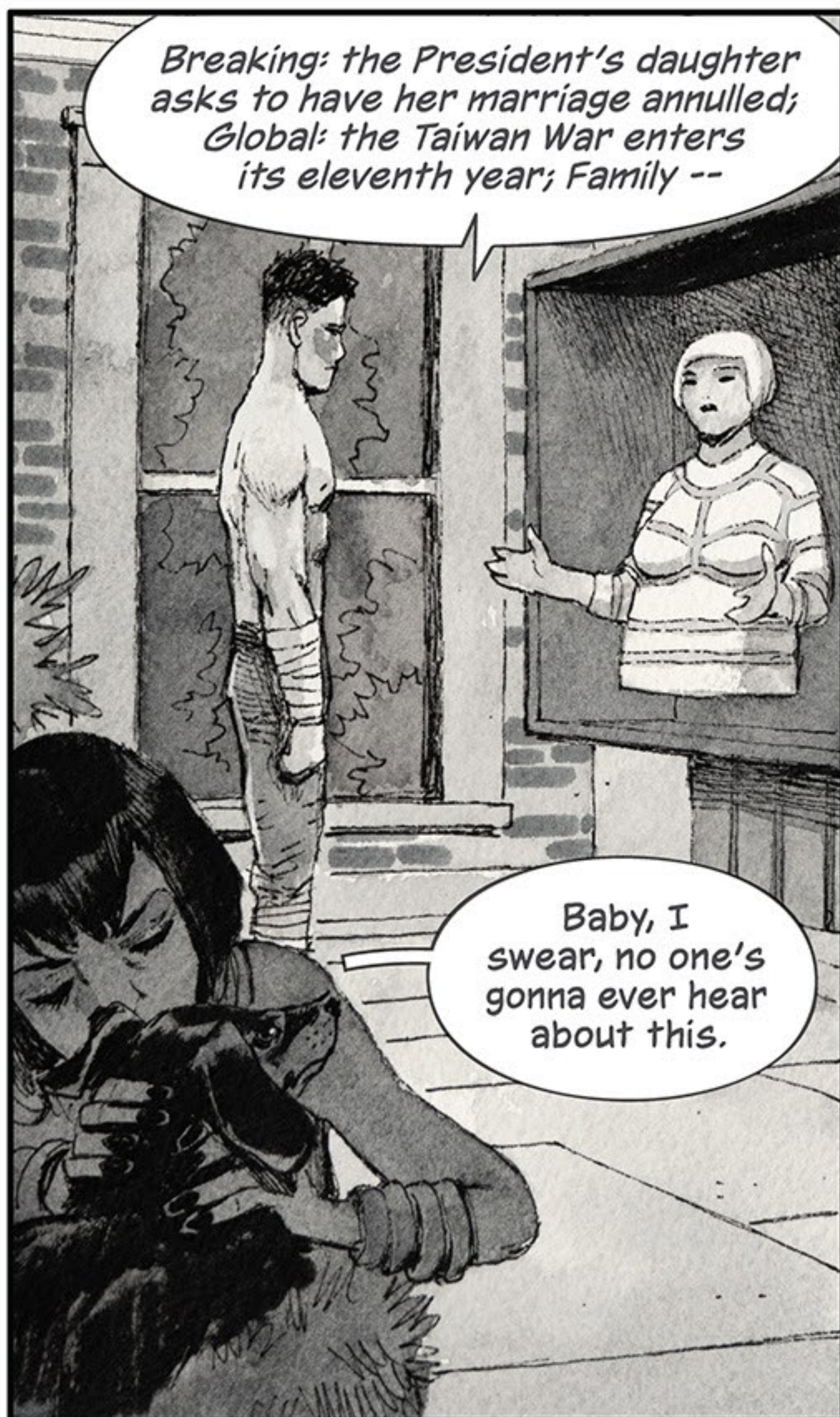
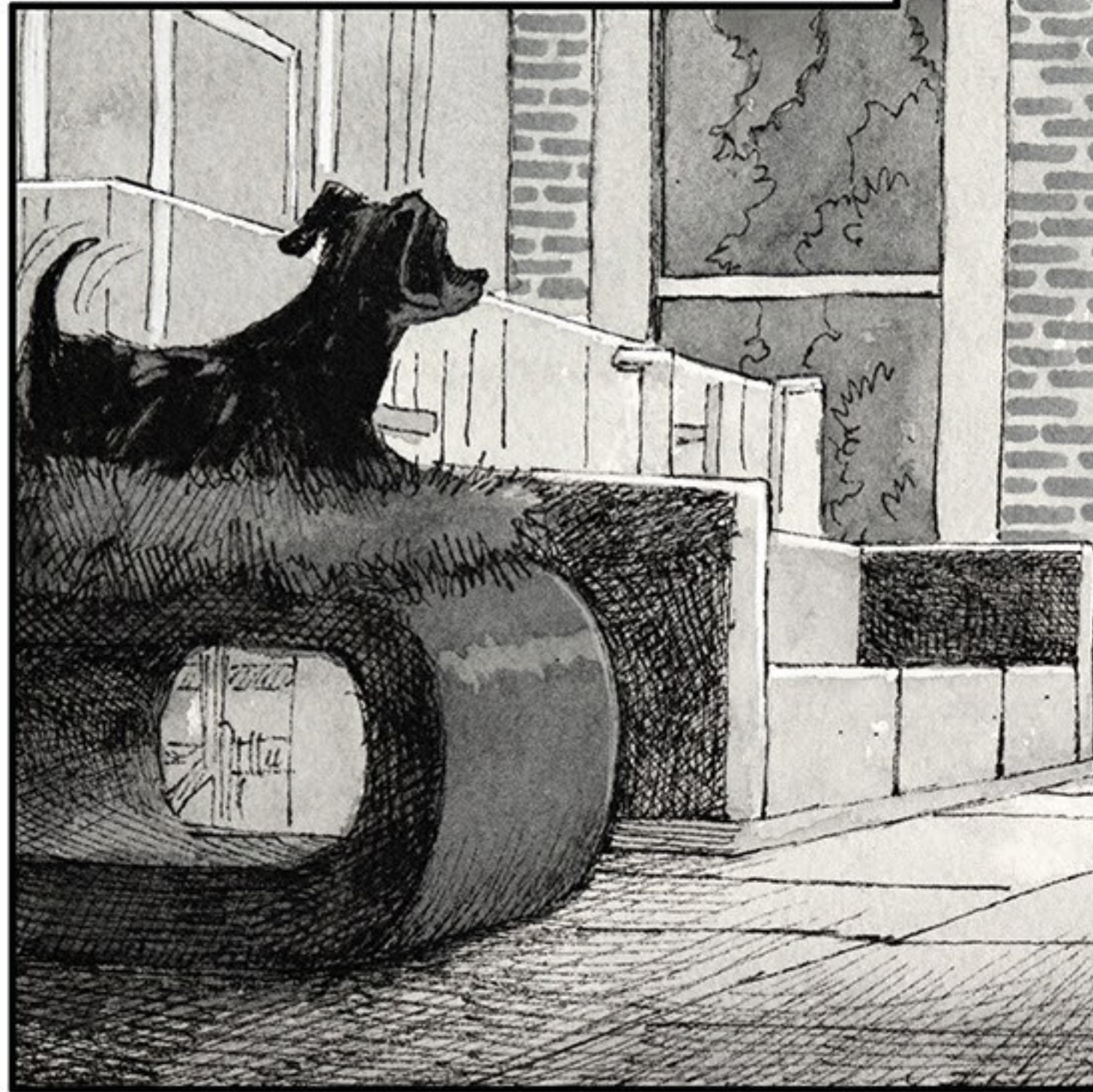




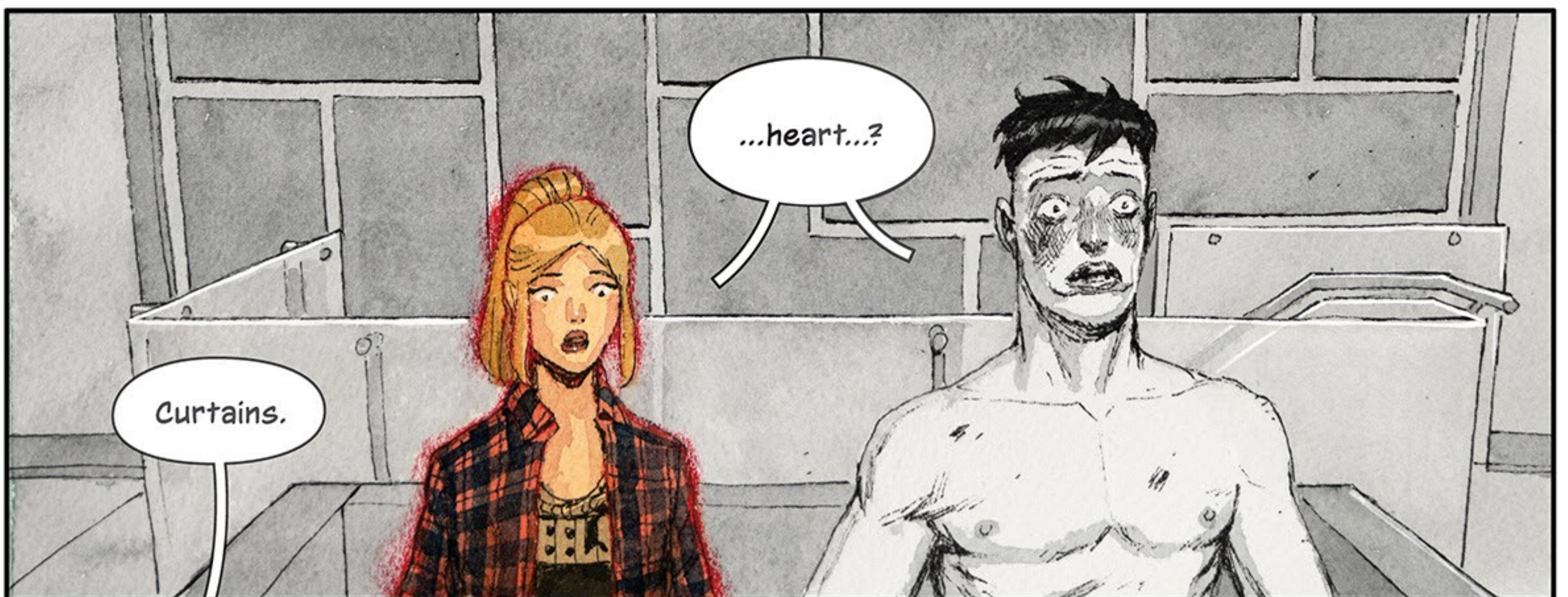
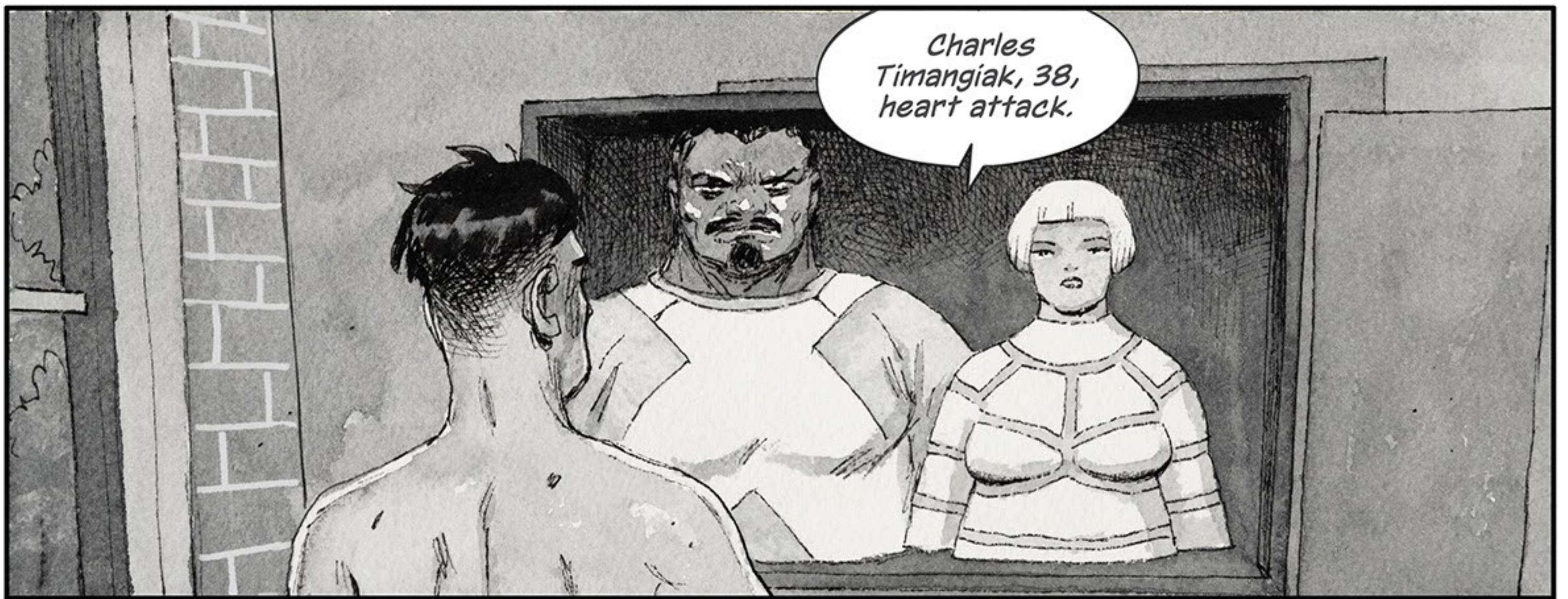
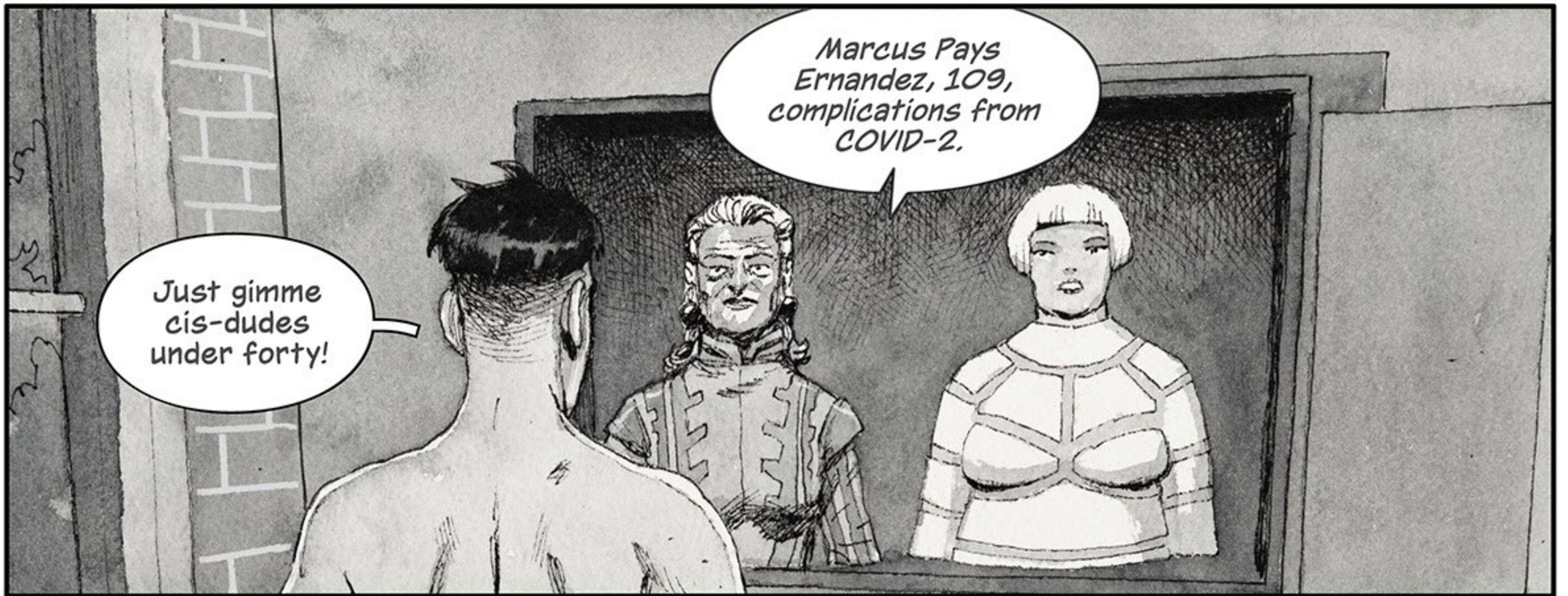
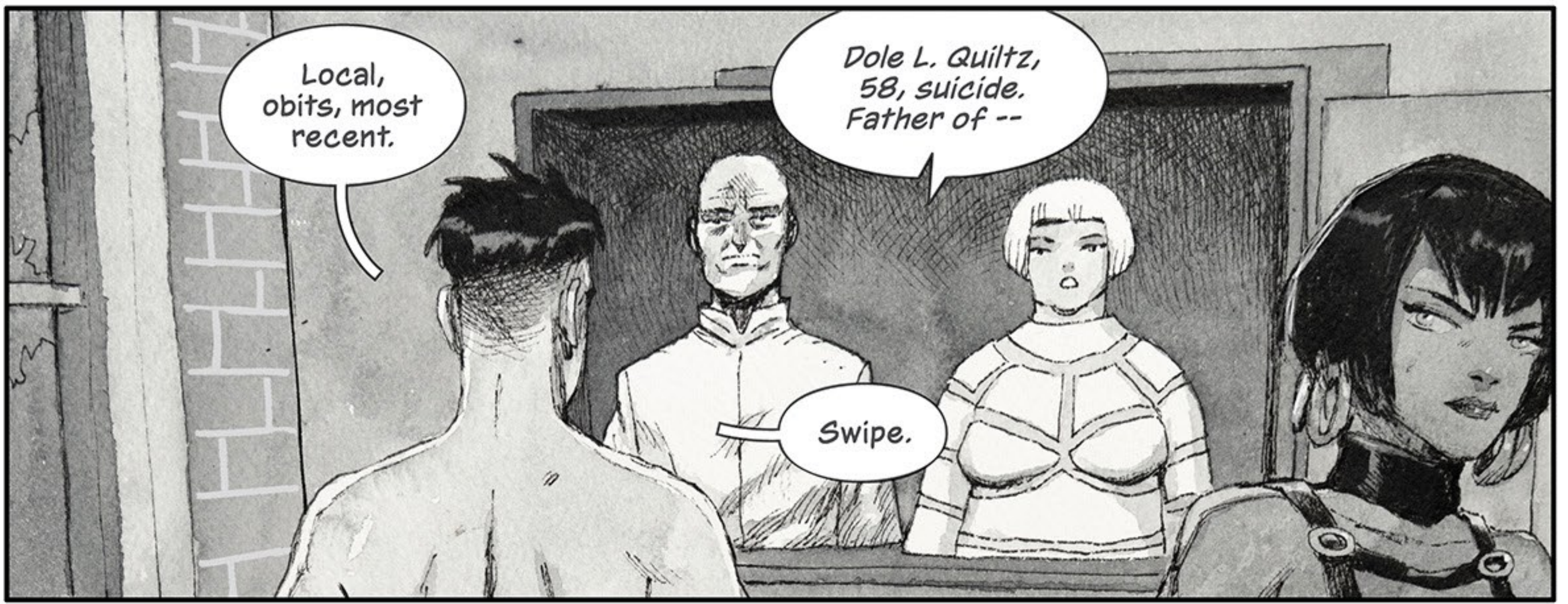




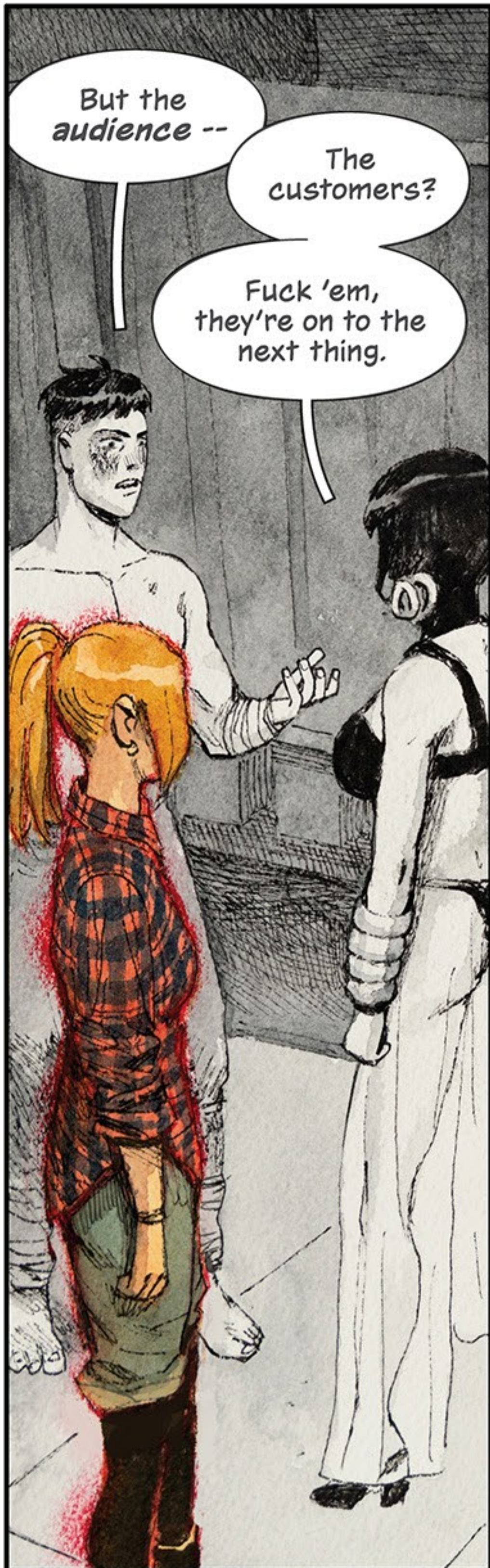












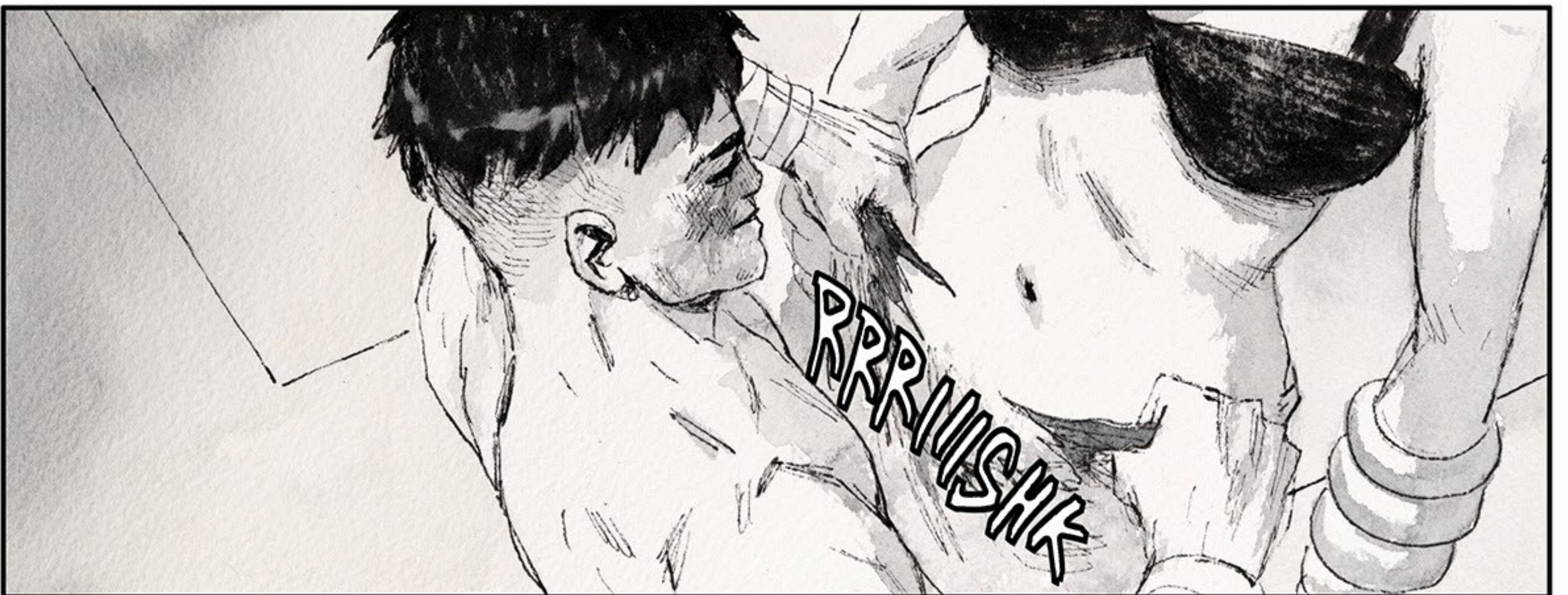
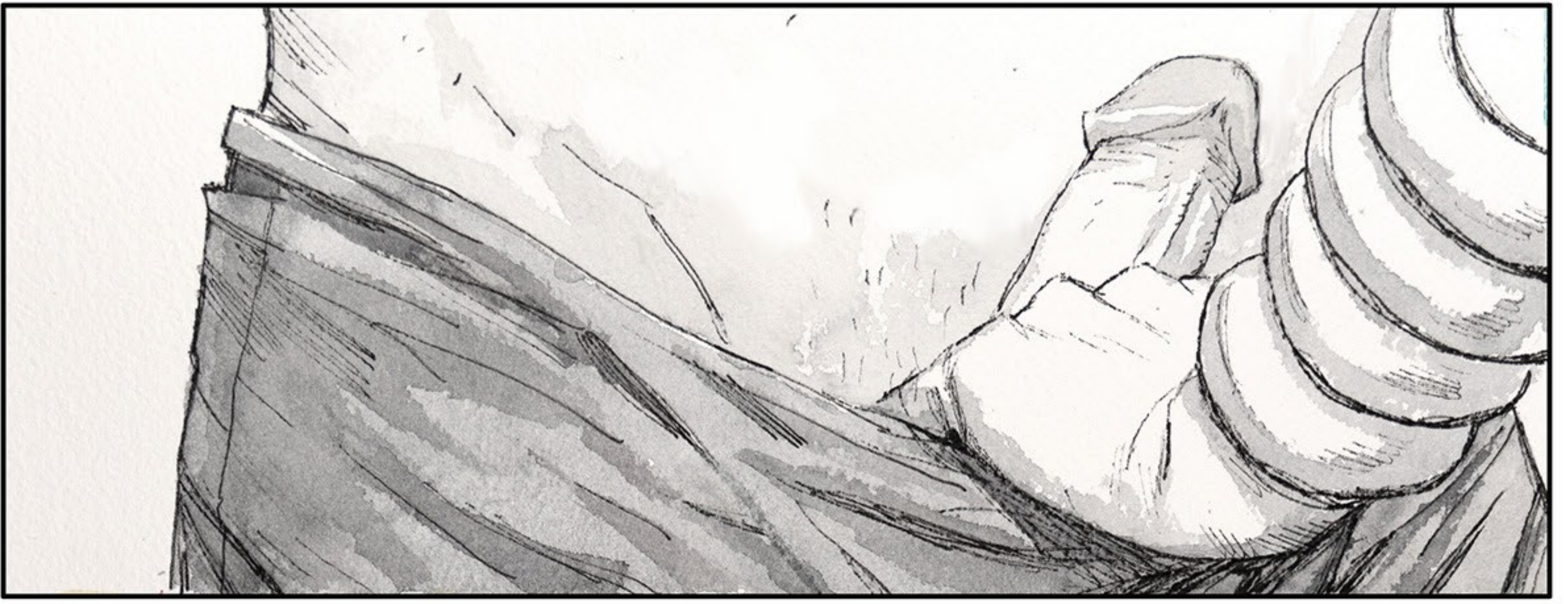




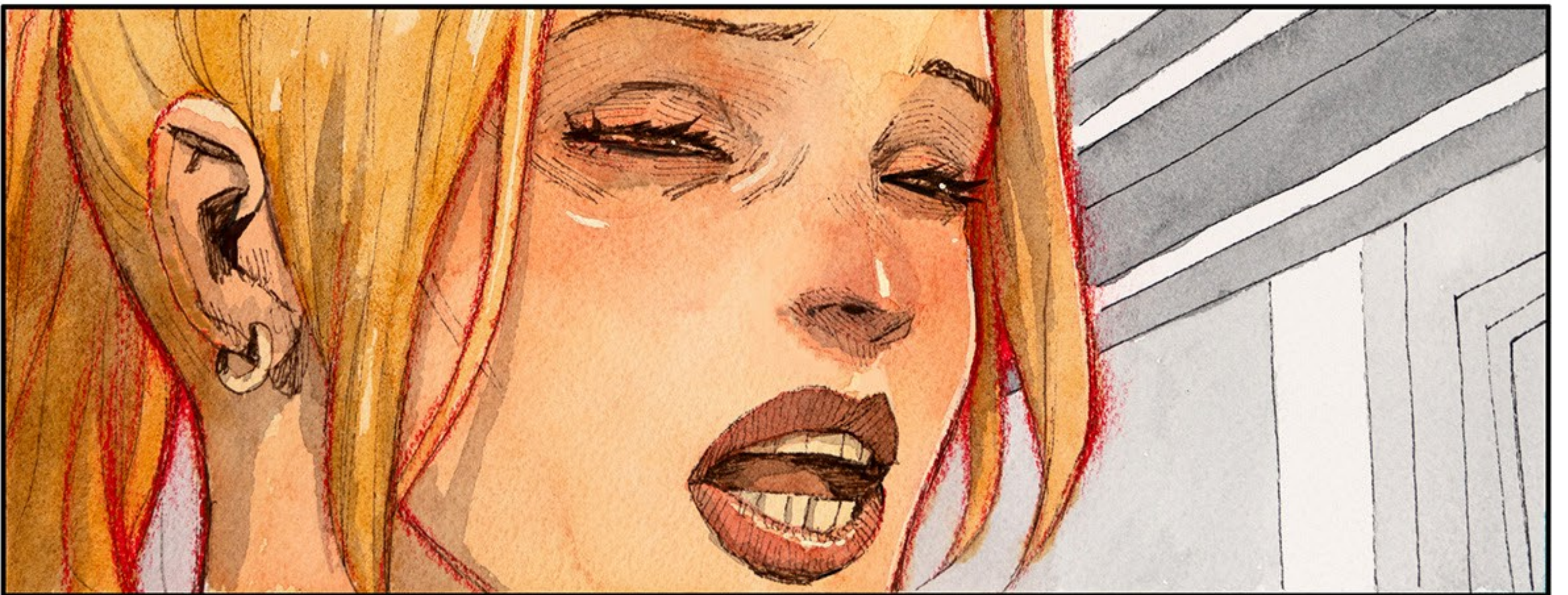
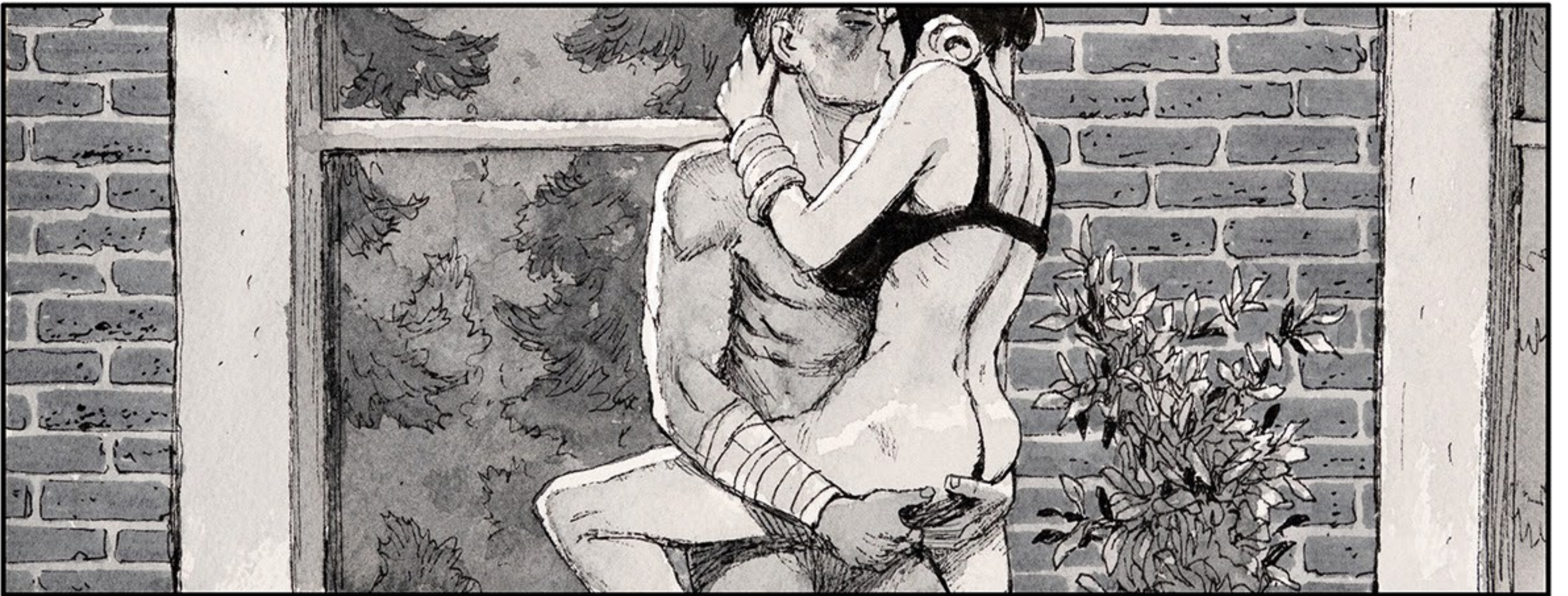
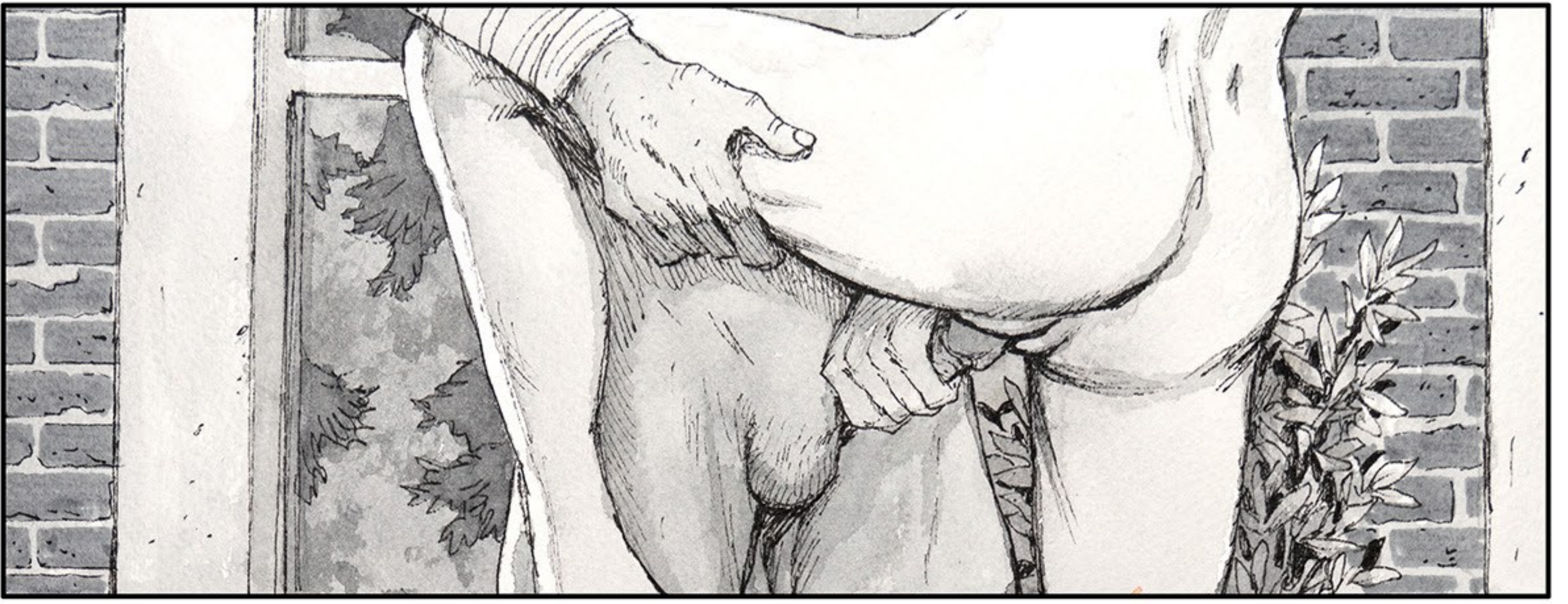
Yes,  
ma'am.

Then shut  
your mouth and  
make me cum  
already.

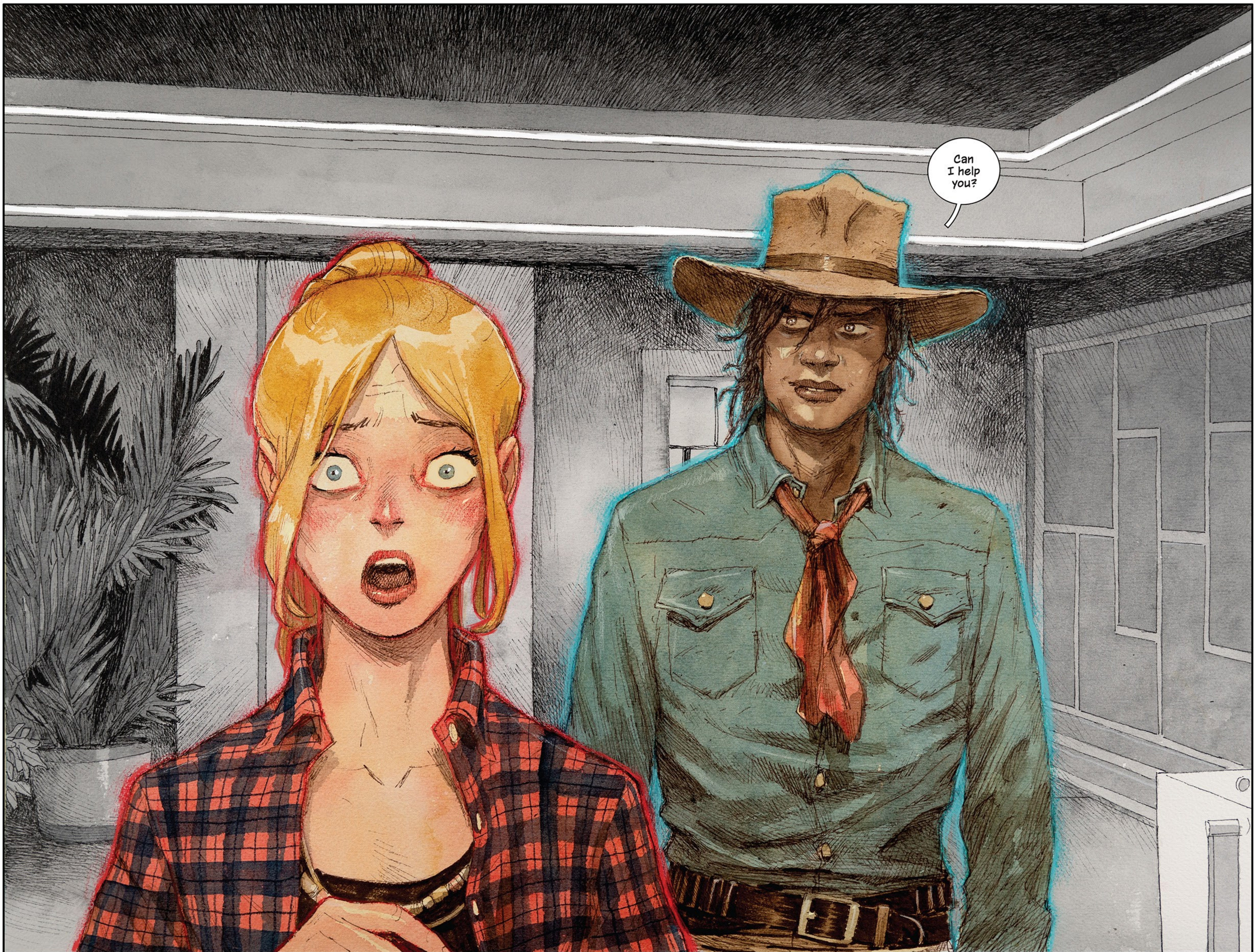










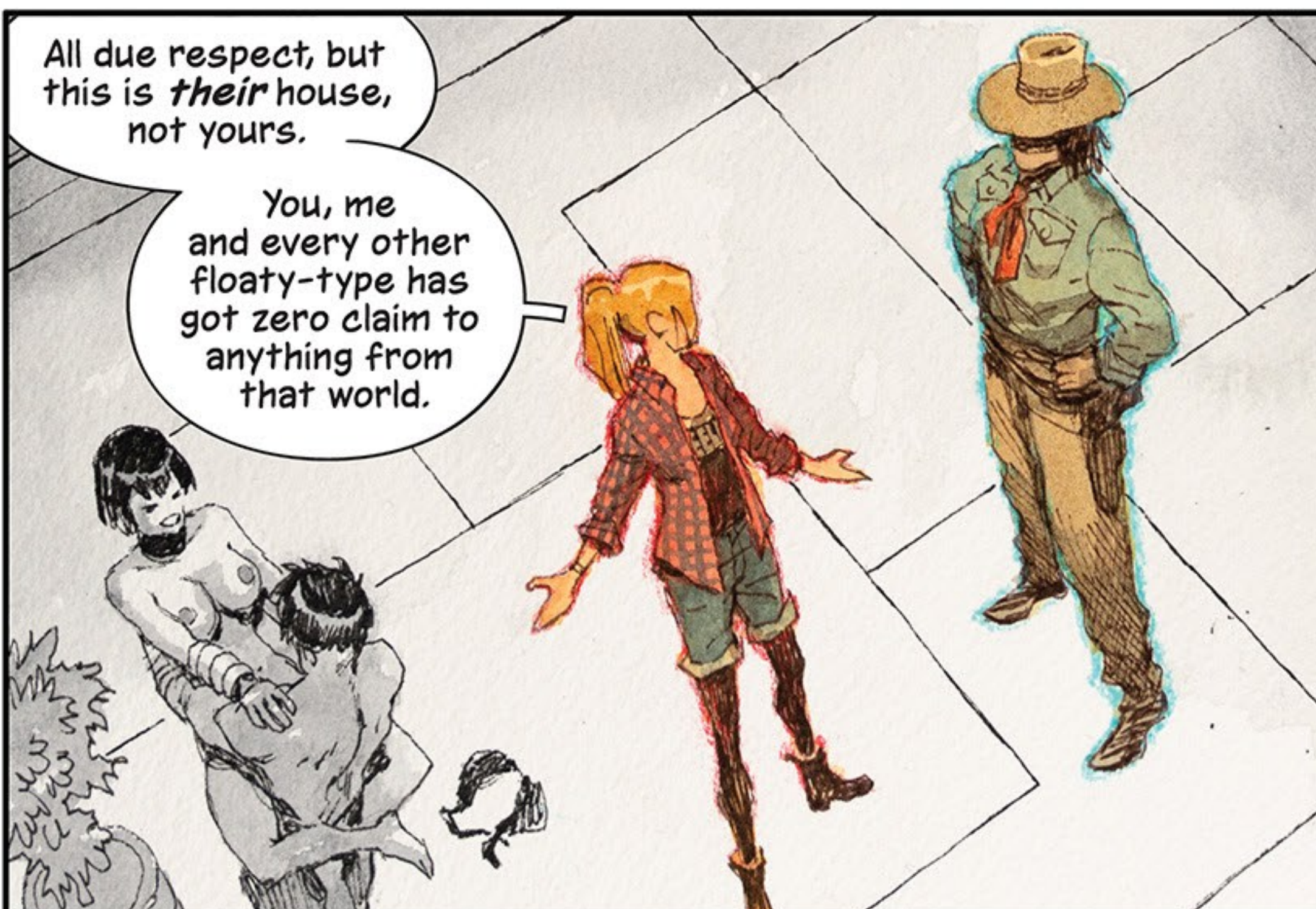
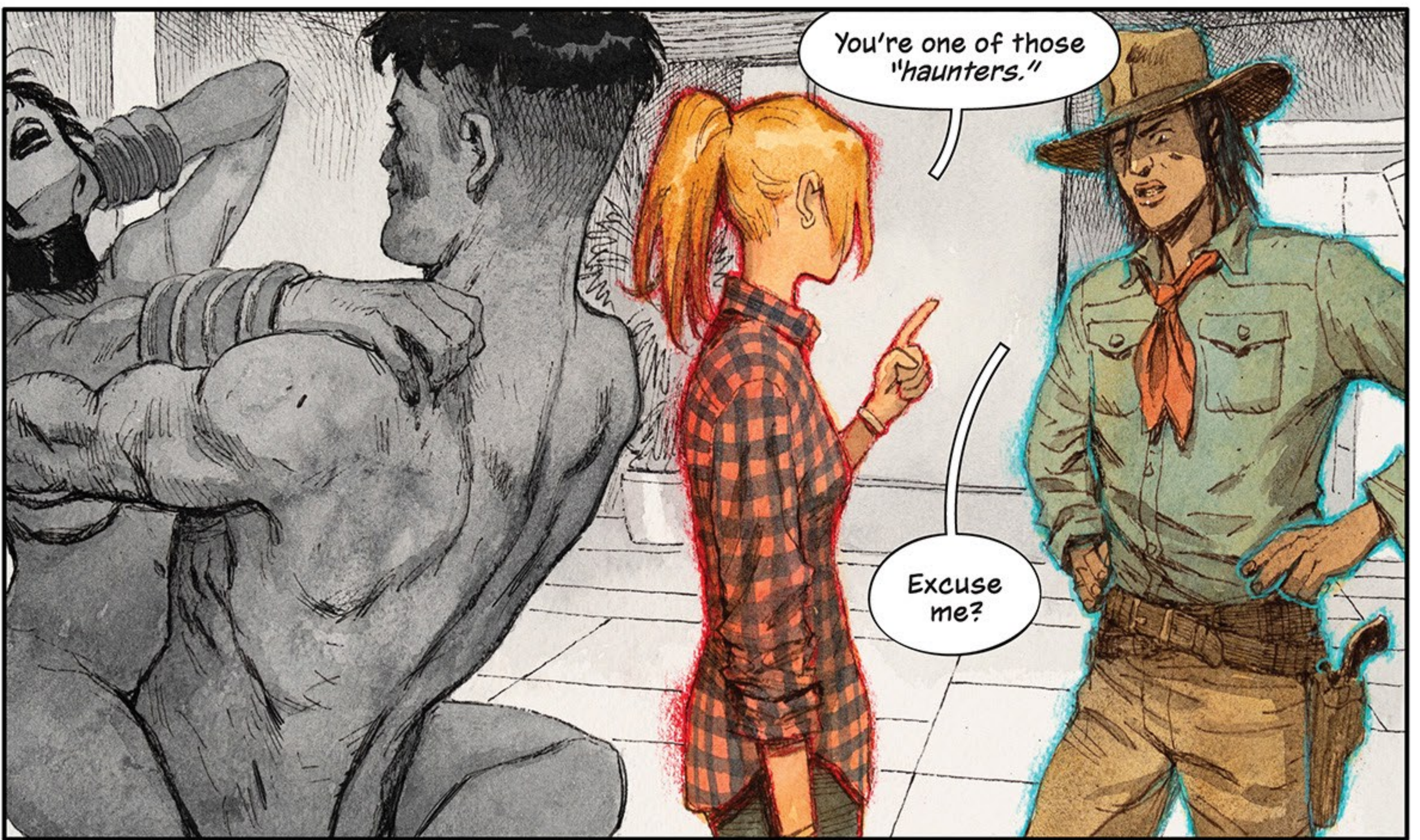


Can I help you?

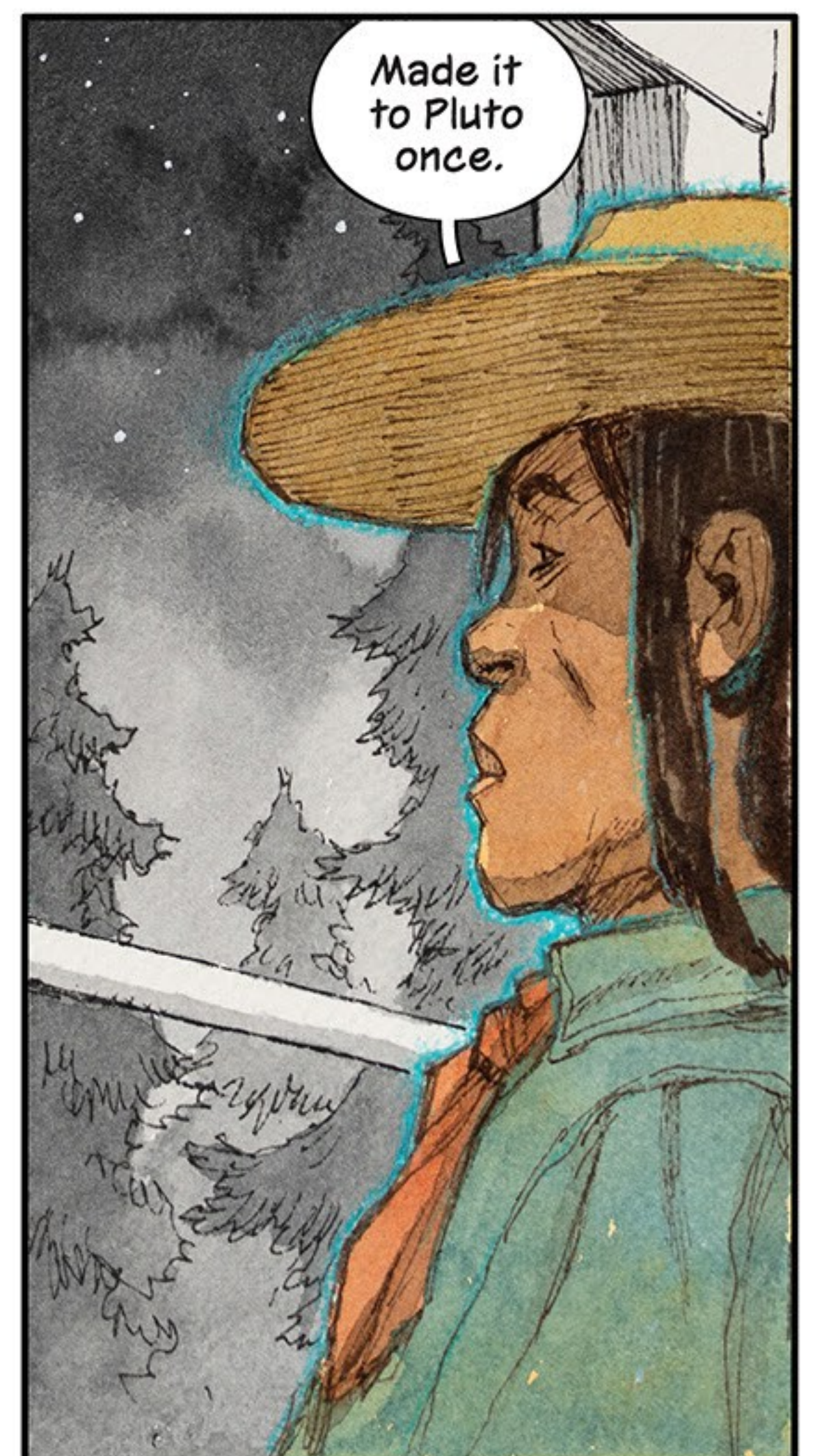
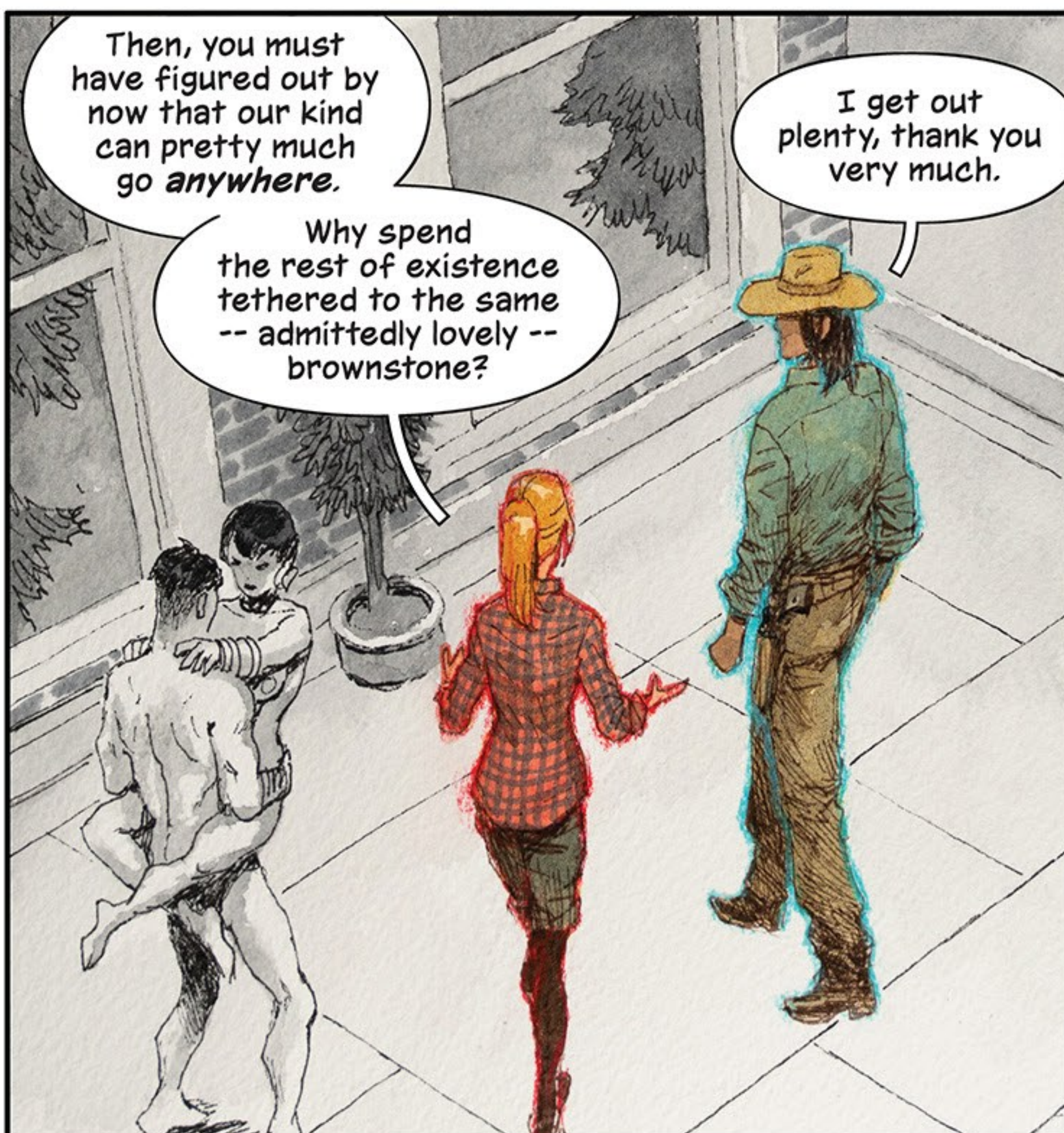




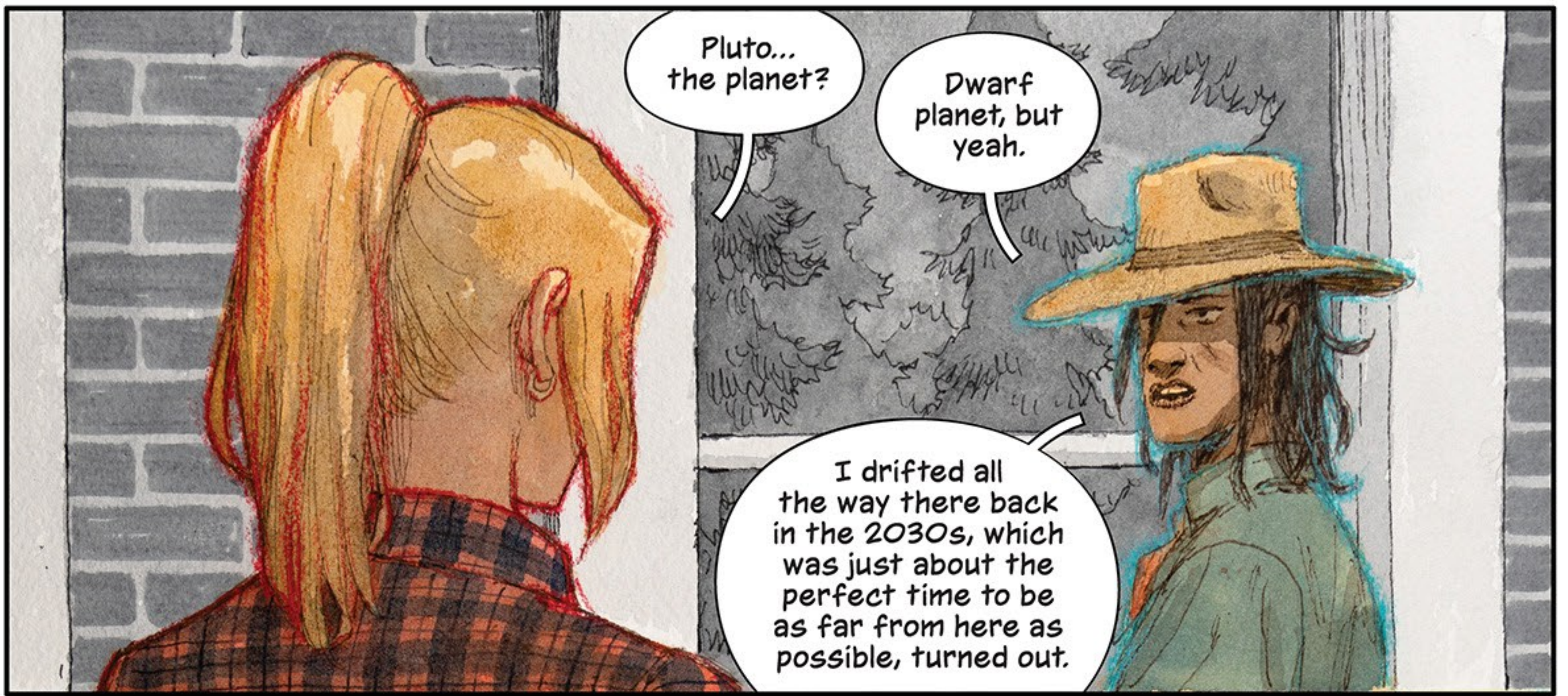












Pluto...  
the planet?

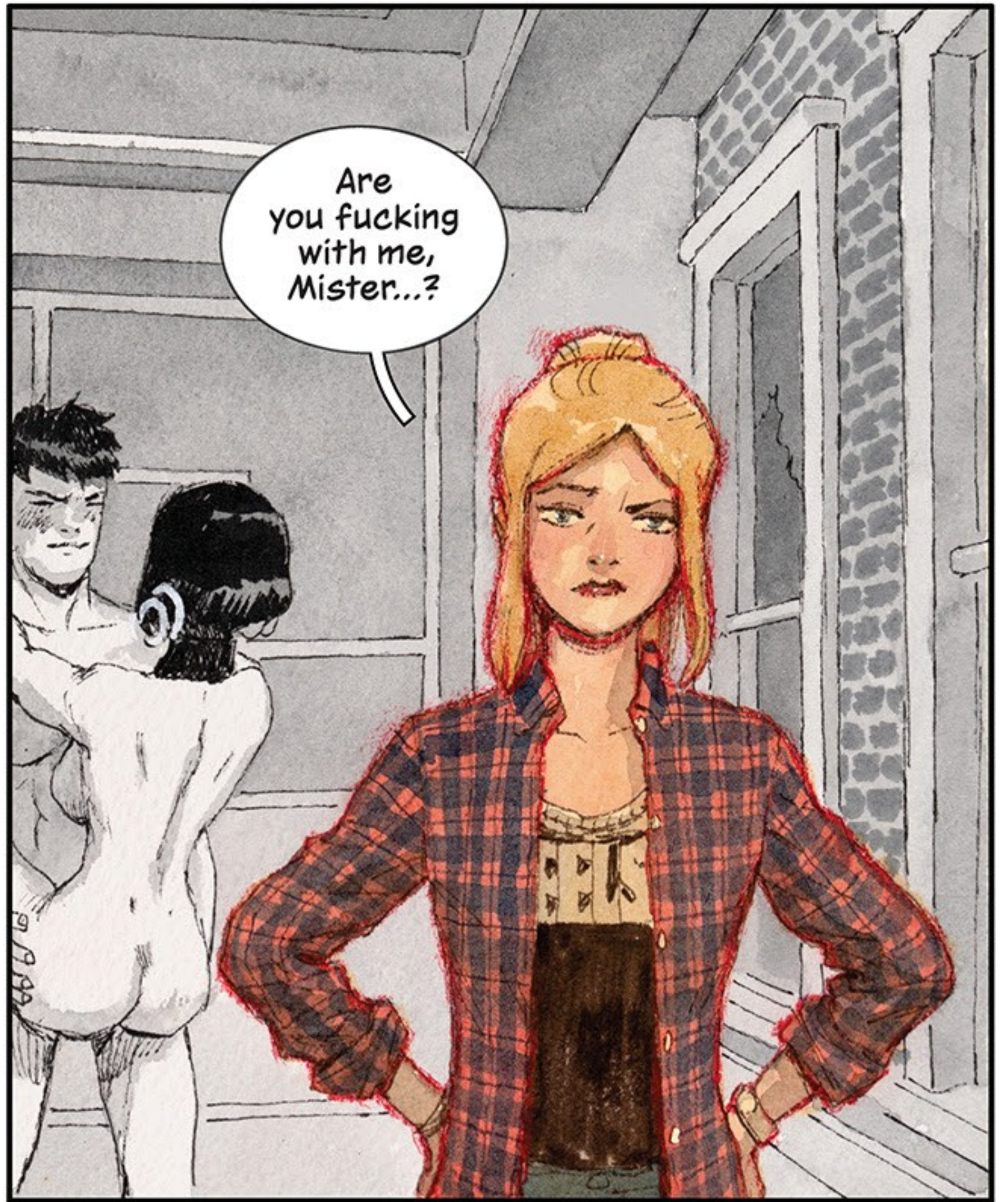
Dwarf  
planet, but  
yeah.

I drifted all  
the way there back  
in the 2030s, which  
was just about the  
perfect time to be  
as far from here as  
possible, turned out.



Anyway, took me nine  
years to reach the thing,  
but just under *sixteen*  
to find my way back.

Got turned  
way the hell  
around somewhere  
between Saturn  
and Jupiter.

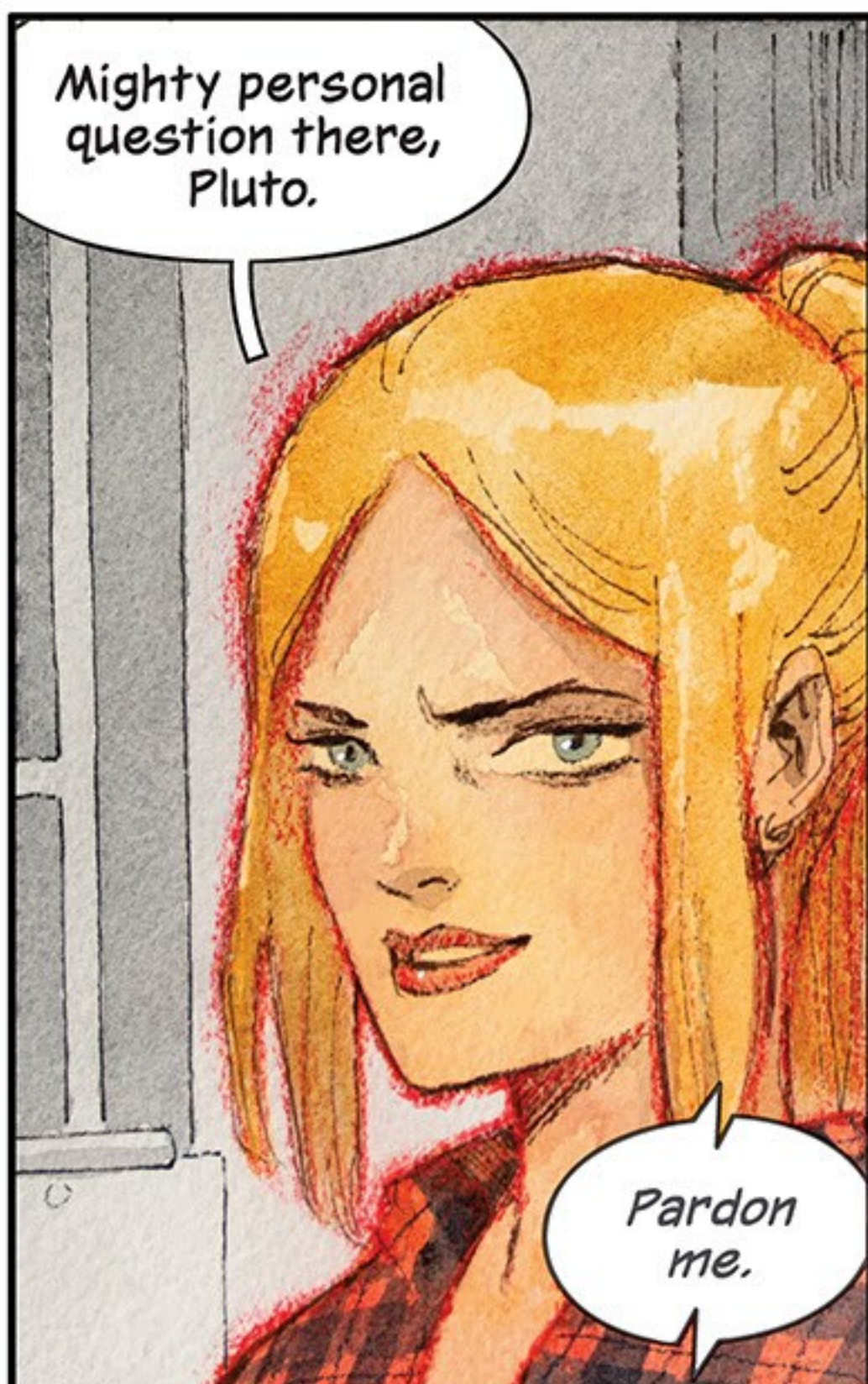


Are  
you fucking  
with me,  
Mister...?



Sam.

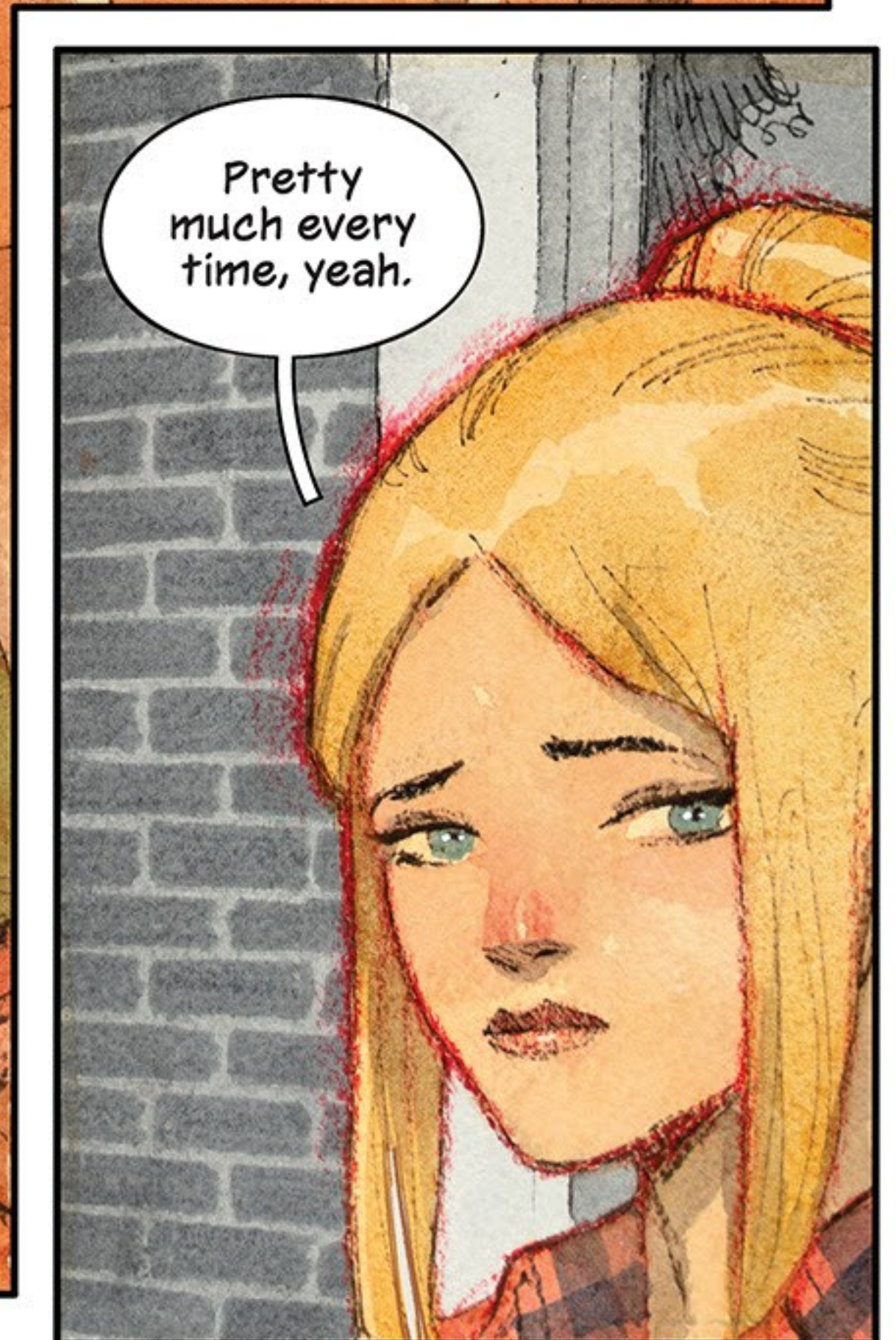








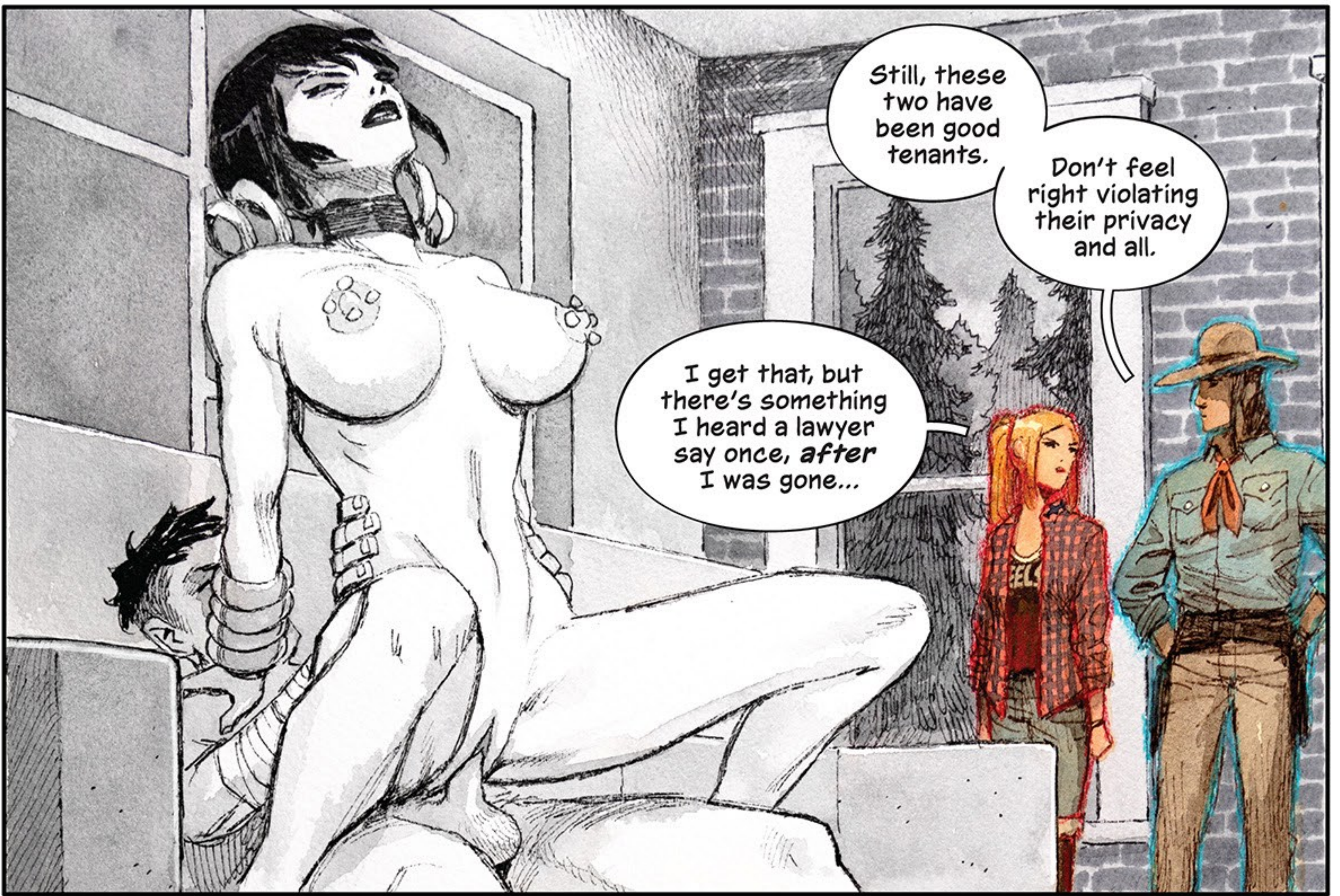












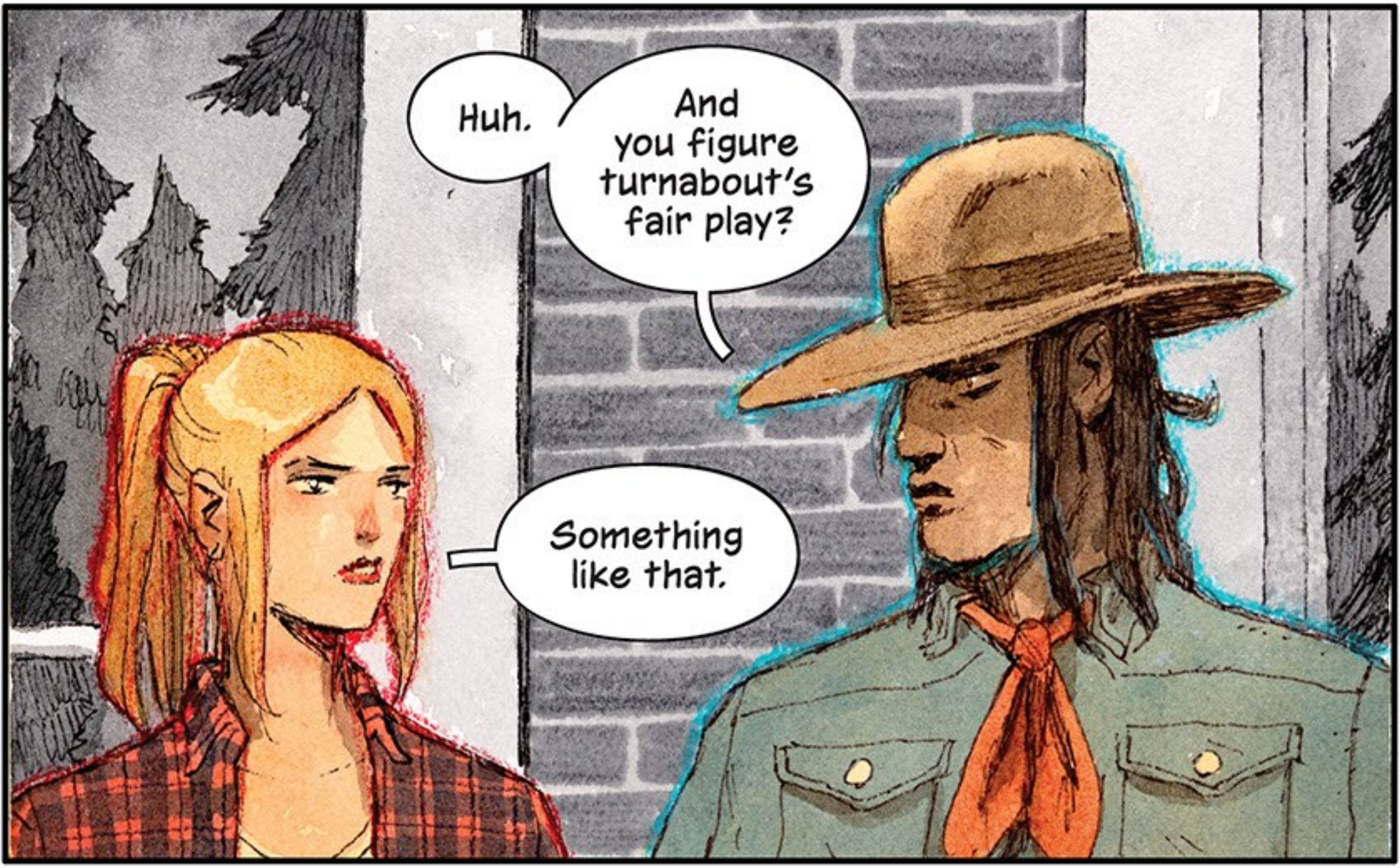
Still, these two have been good tenants.

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.

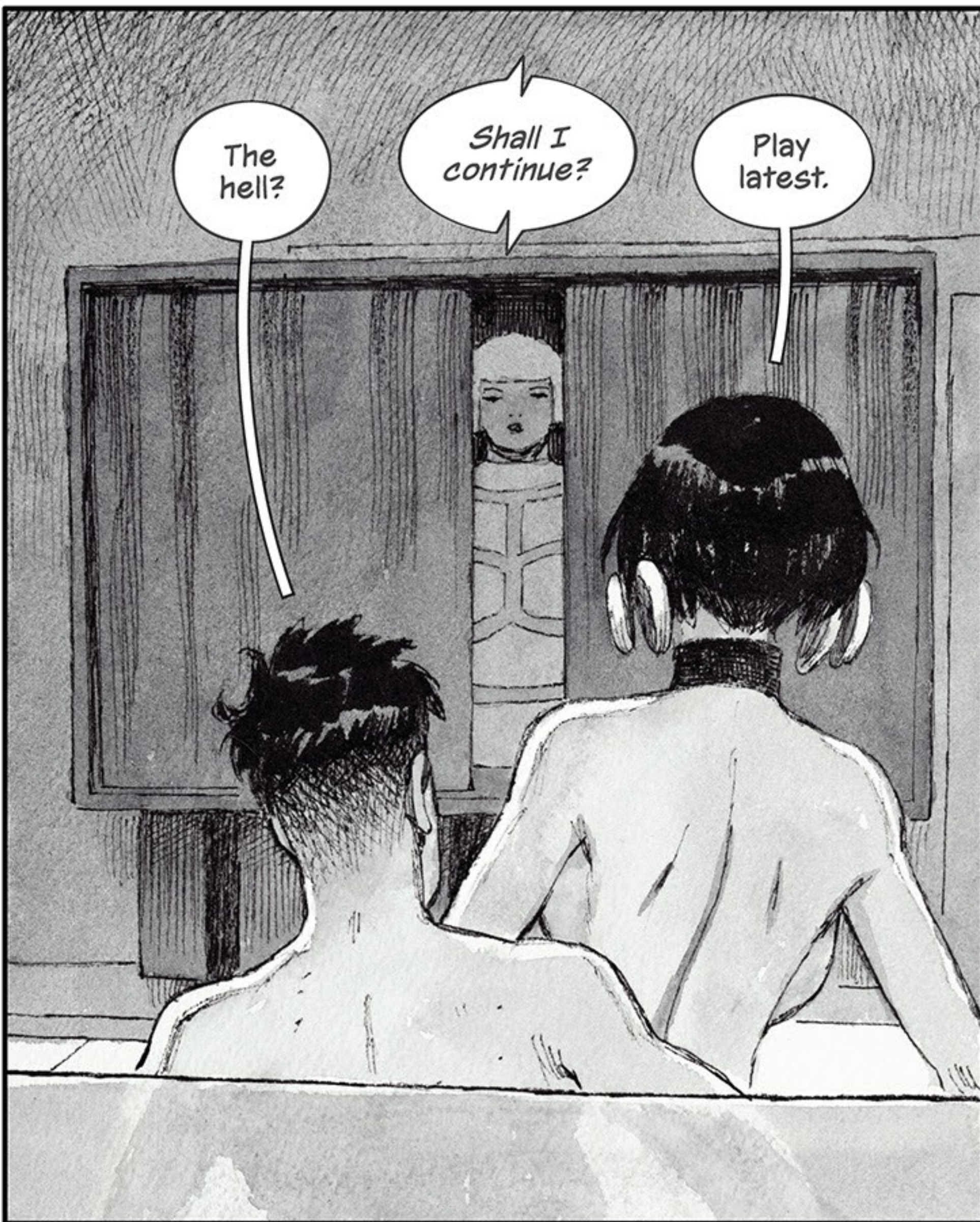


Wait, are you making fun of my outfit?

Pardon me.

You have *eighty-nine* breaking news alerts.

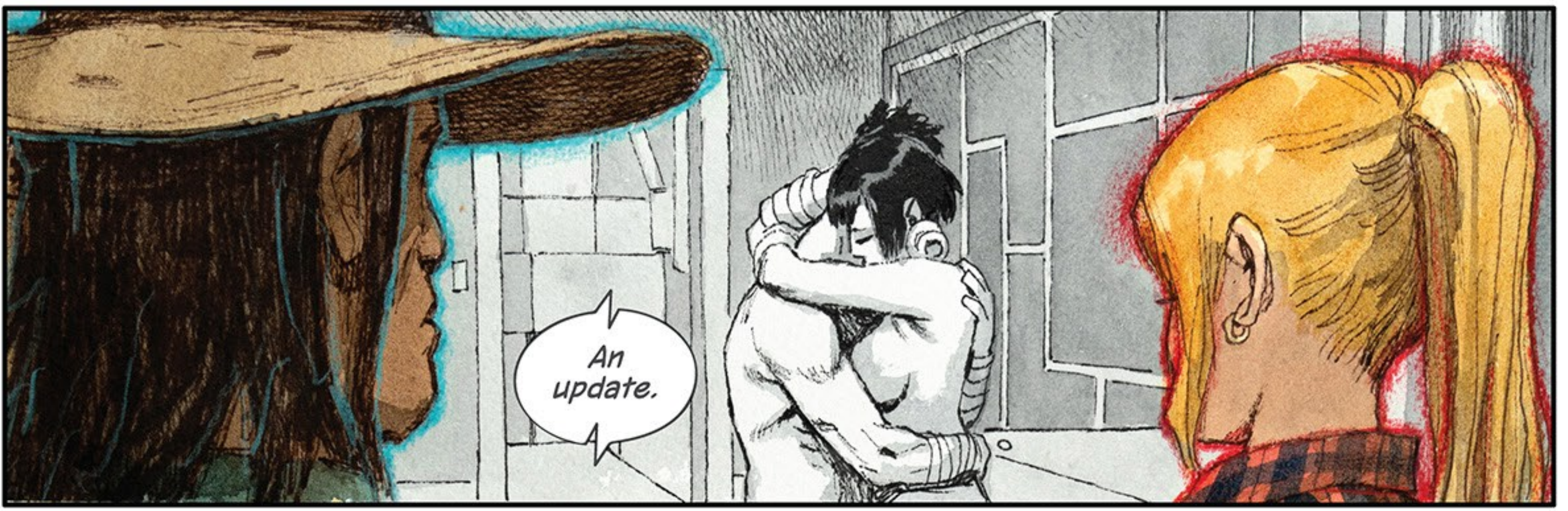












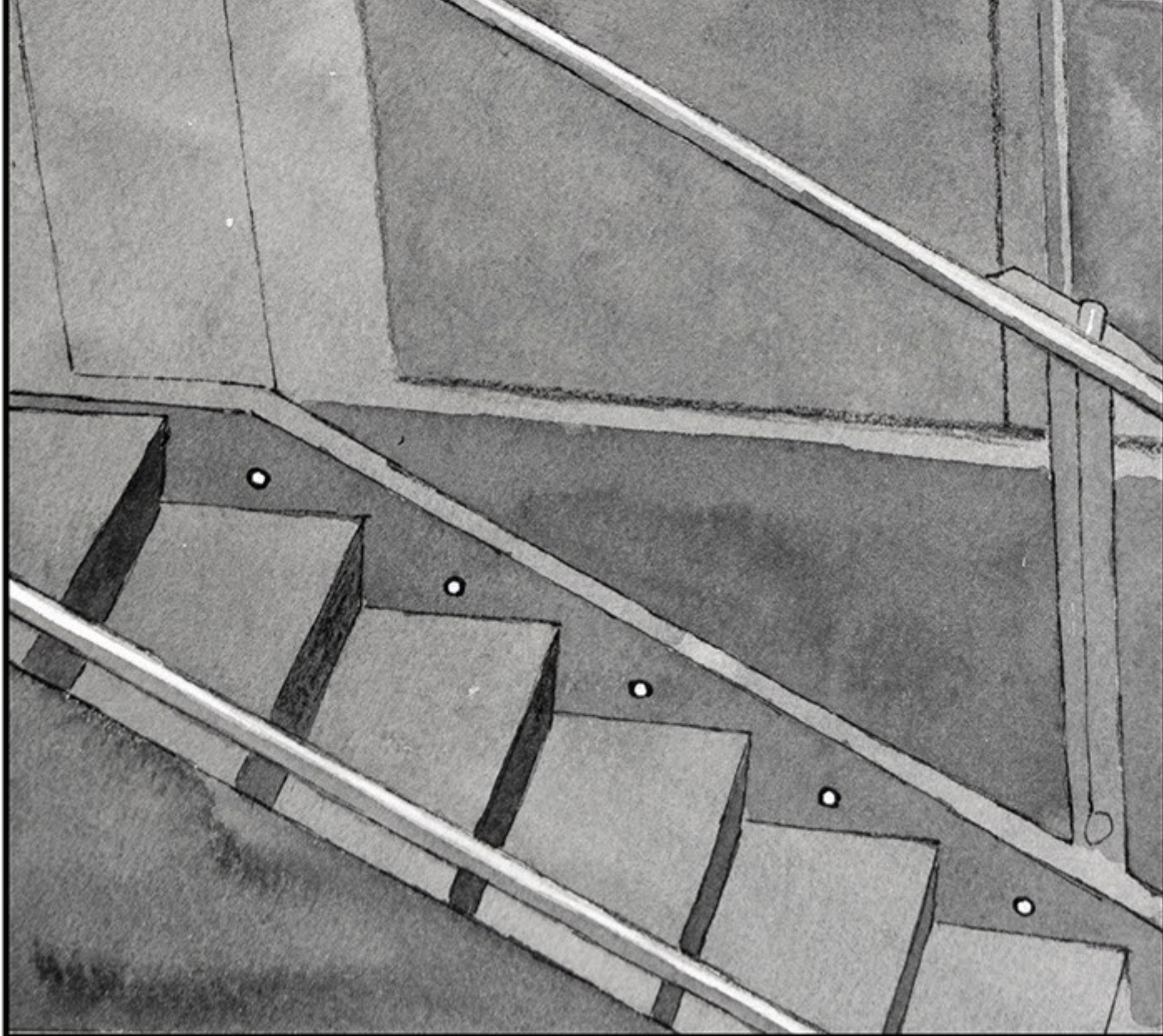
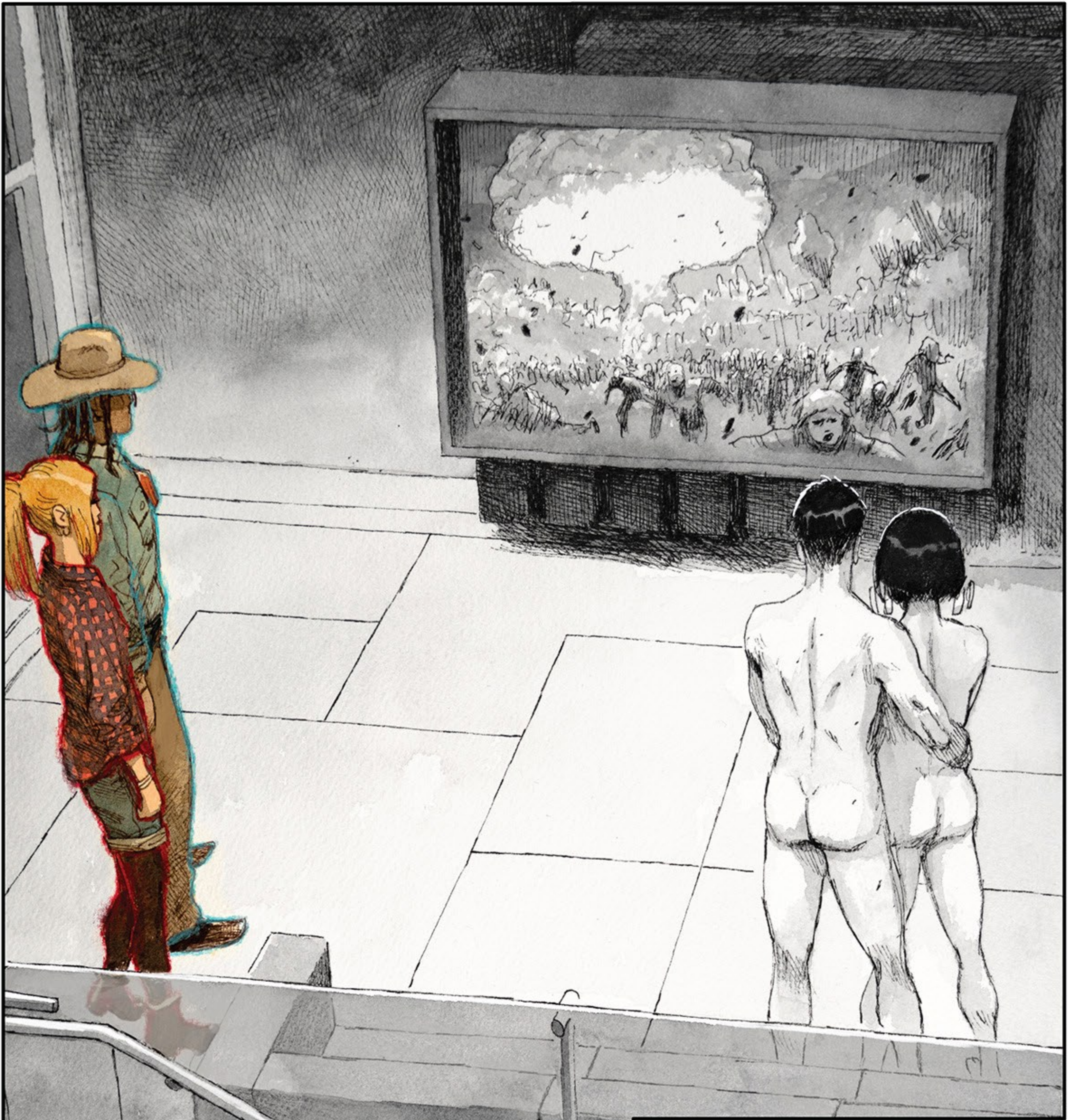




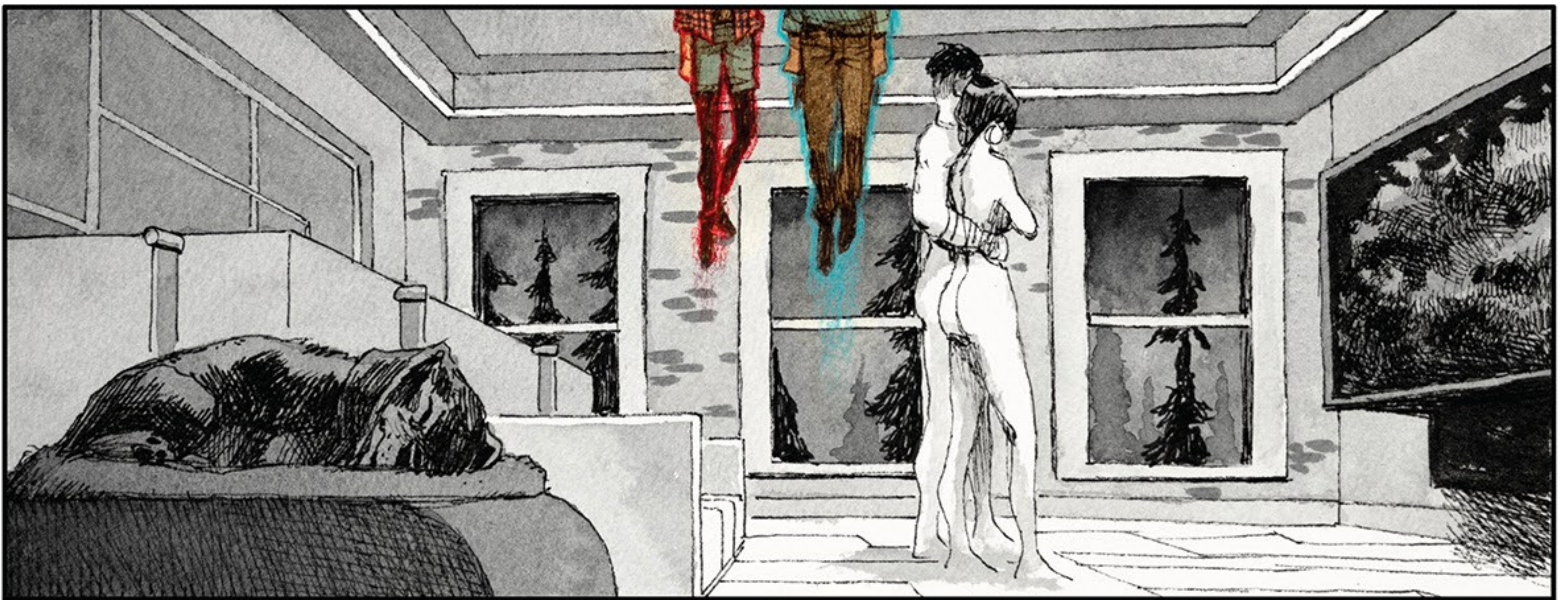
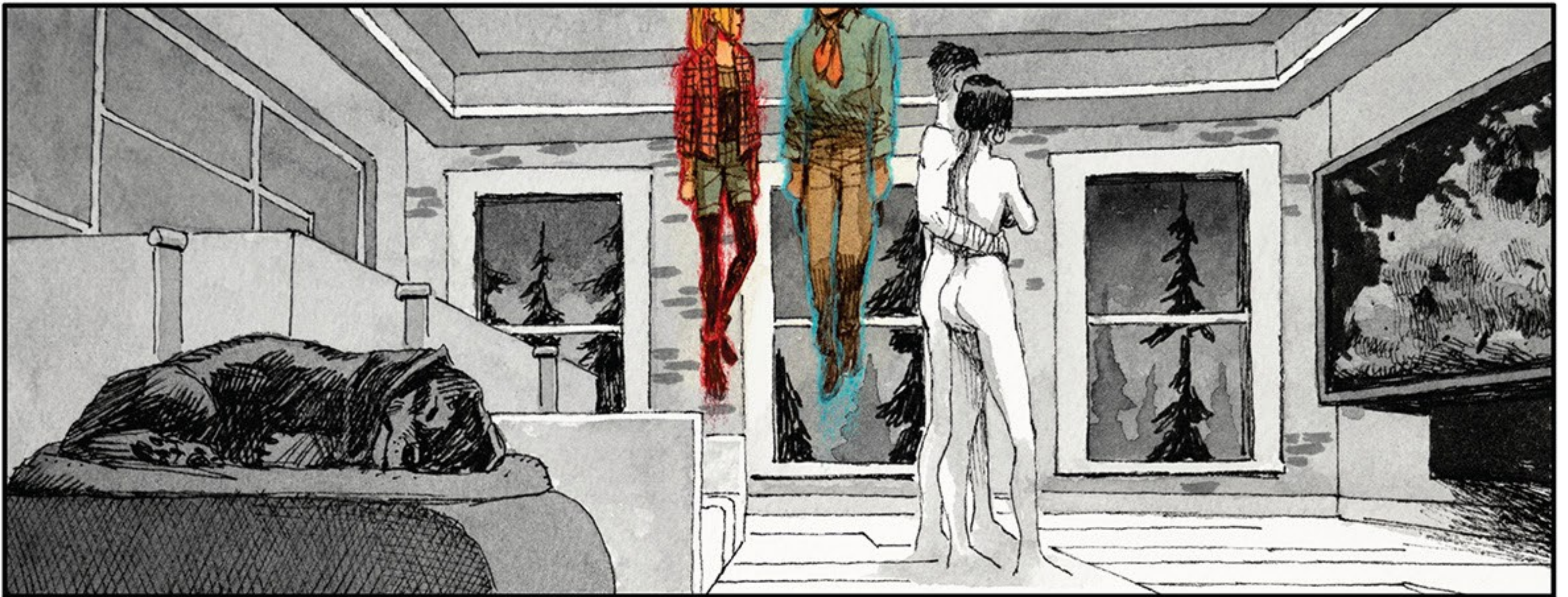
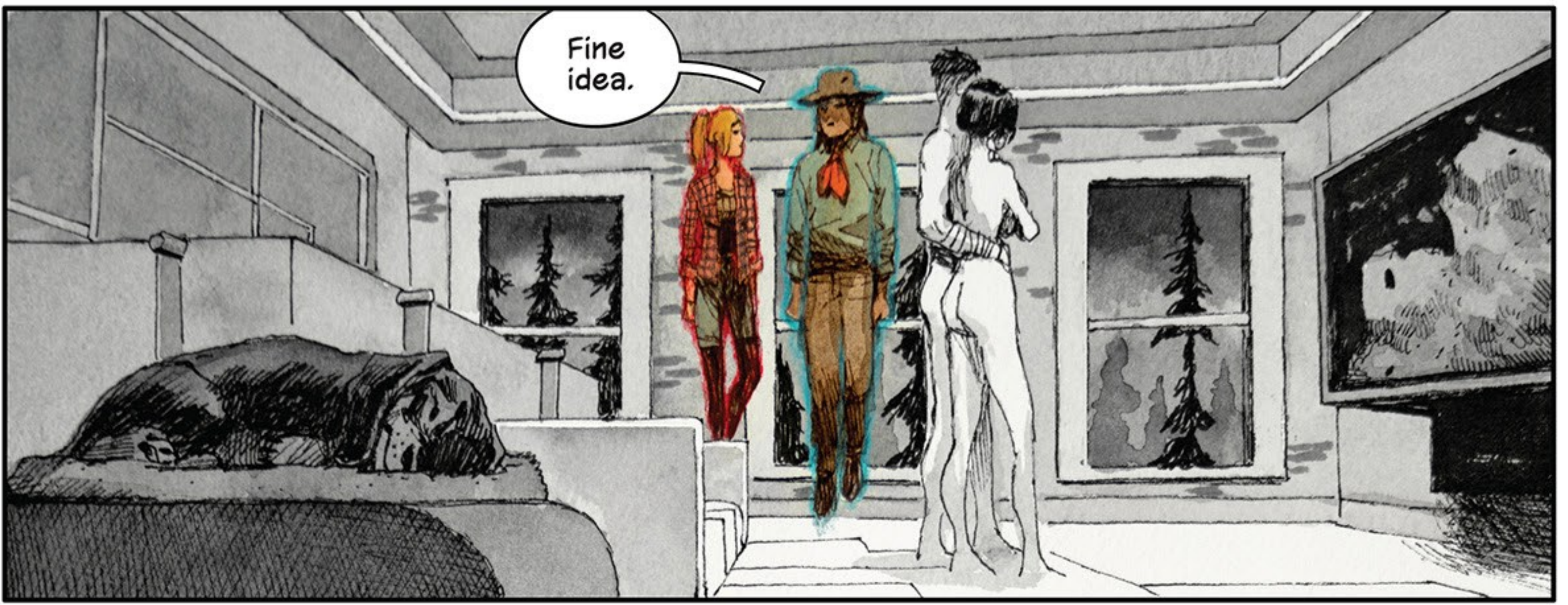
















So.



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.

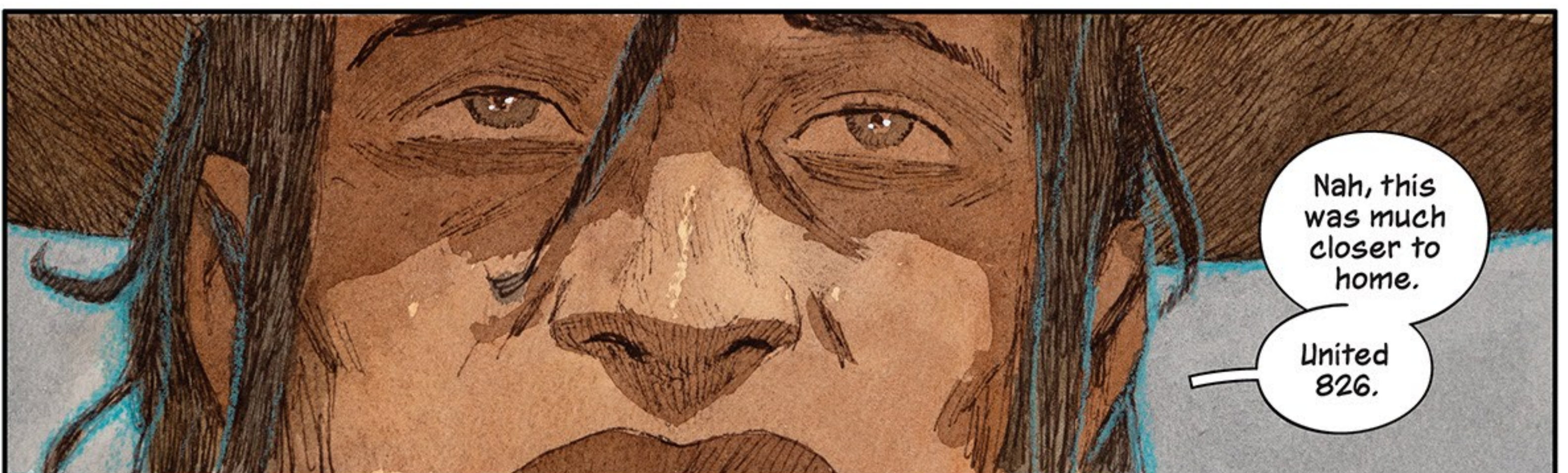
Umm, actually, I get a little nauseous whenever I go higher than the scrubbers.



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.

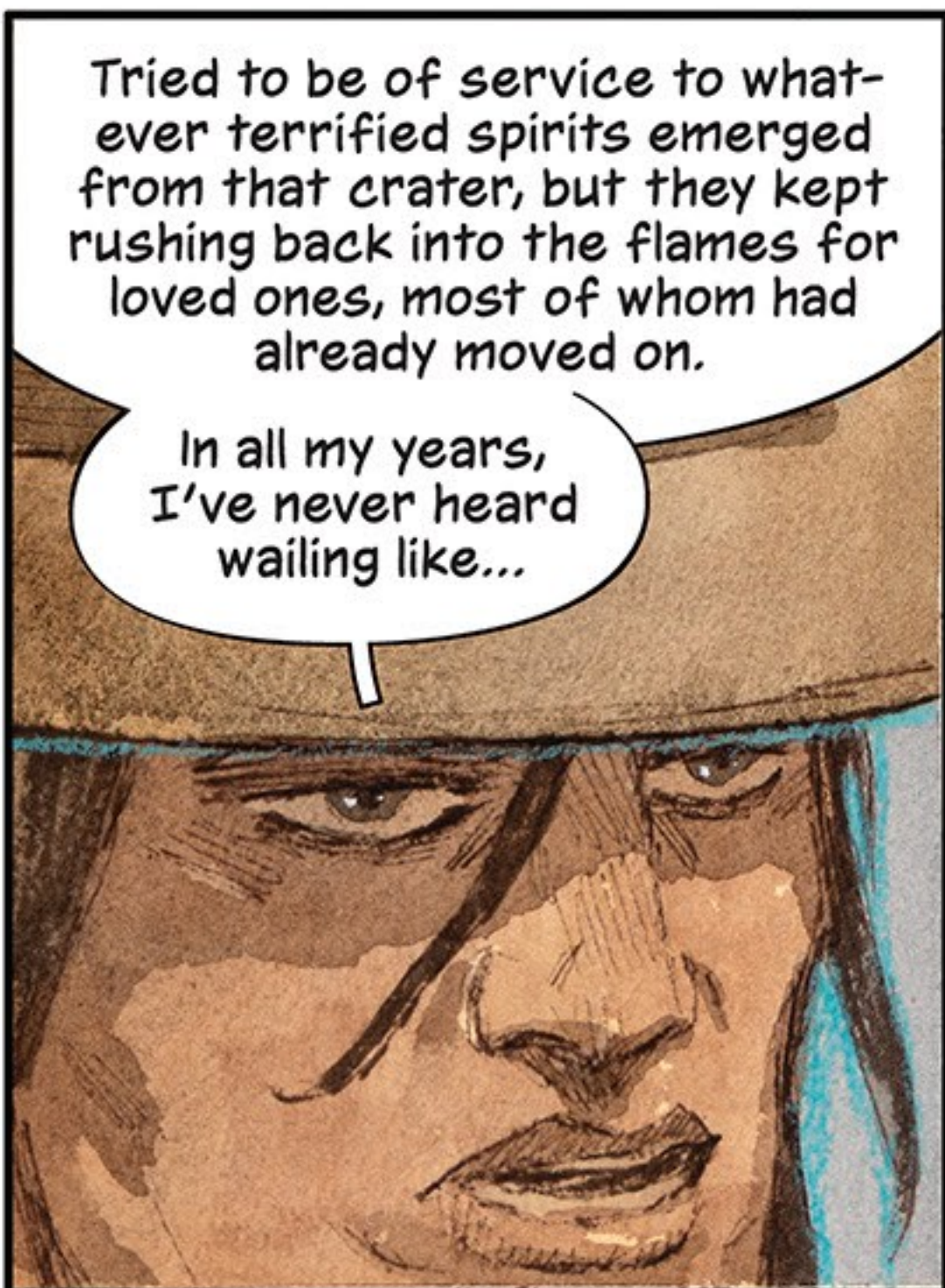
1960... but damned if I can recall the month, which speaks to the relentless march of time and such, not the magnitude of this particular tragedy.



Terrorism?

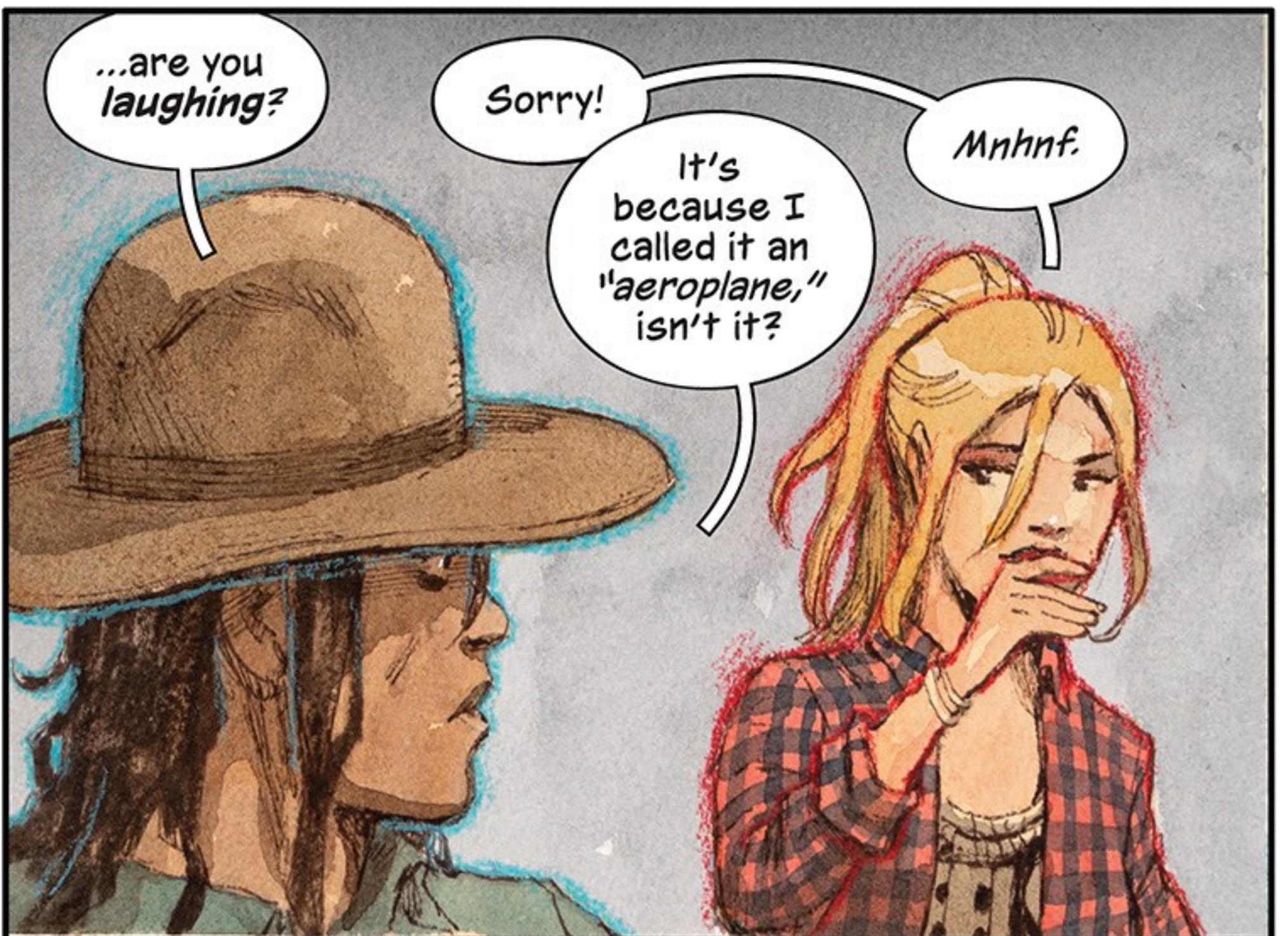
Accident, midair collision with *another* aeroplane.

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...



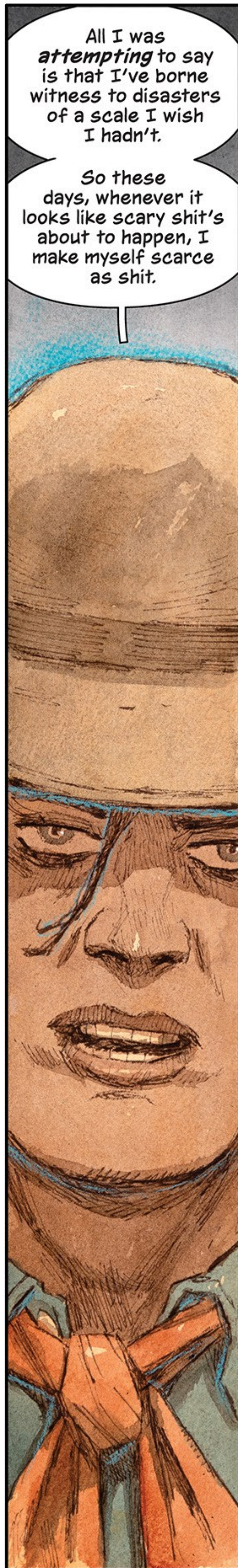
...are you laughing?

Sorry!

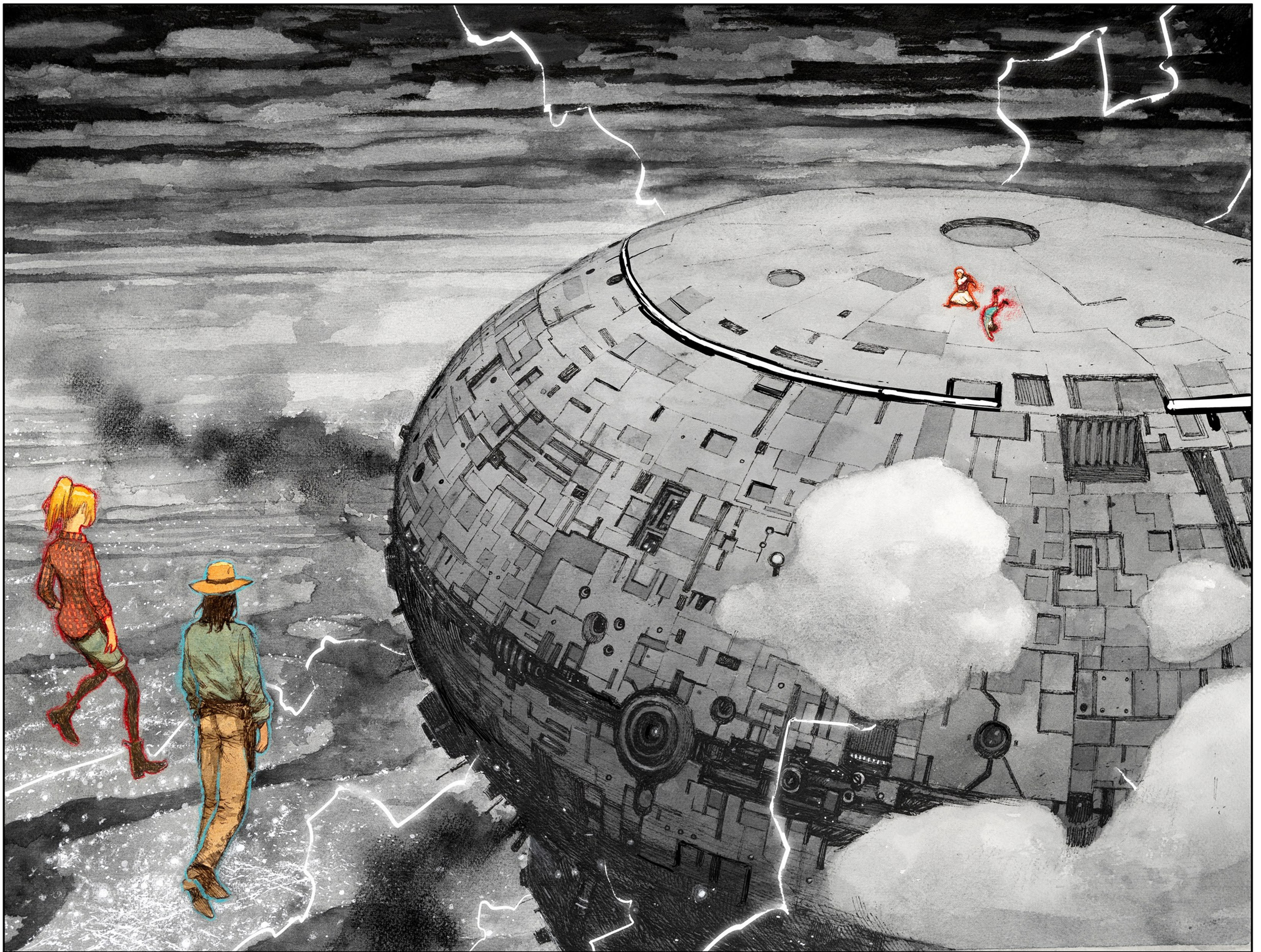
It's because I called it an "aeroplane," isn't it?

Mnhnf.













You were saying?

Nothing.

Just, if the dummies down there have gone and gotten themselves cancelled, I'm gonna be pissed.

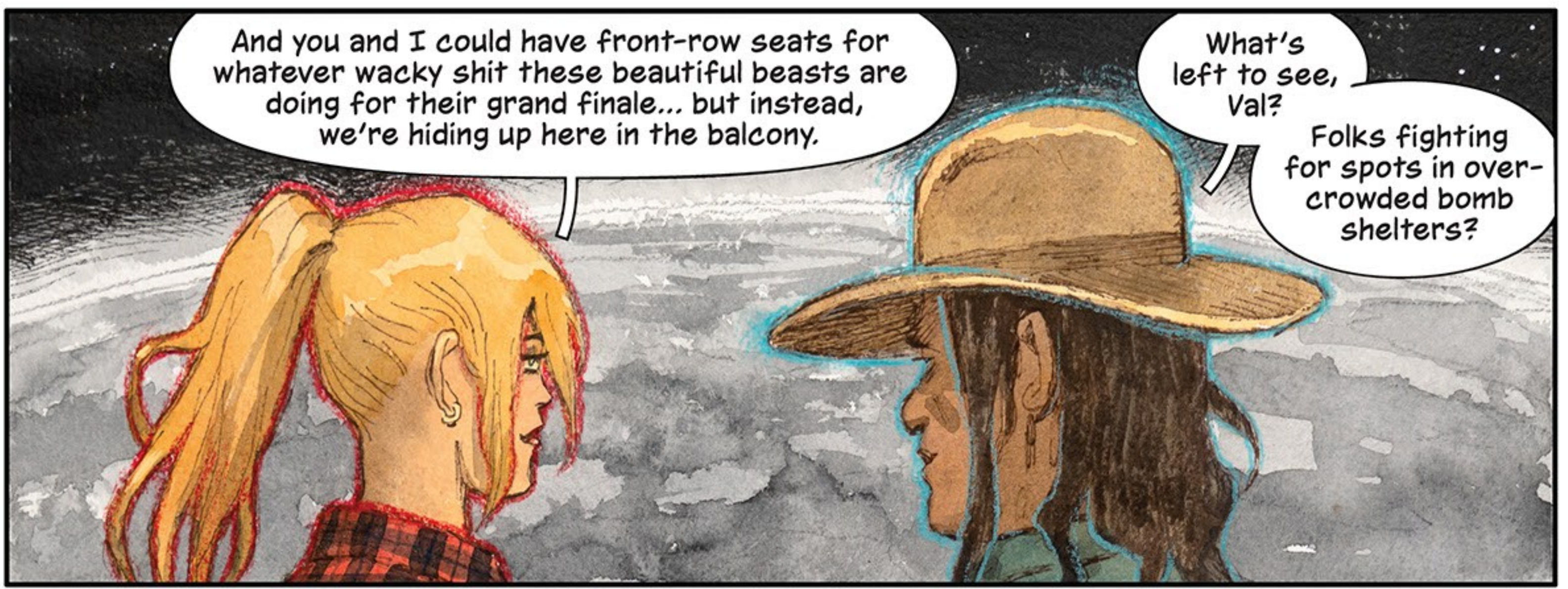












And you and I could have front-row seats for whatever wacky shit these beautiful beasts are doing for their grand finale... but instead, we're hiding up here in the balcony.

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?

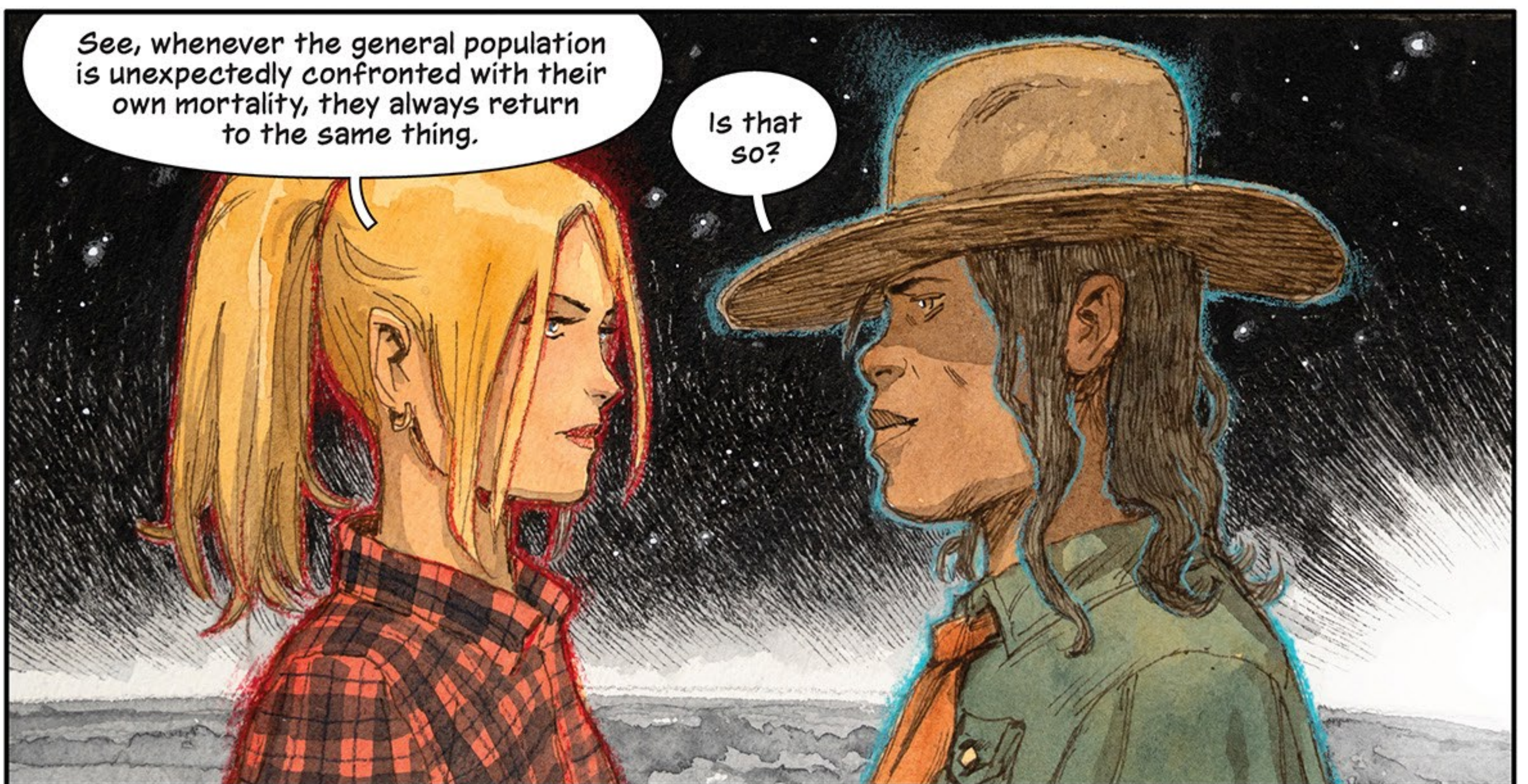
Reminds me of that asteroid scare in '28.



The rounding error?

That's the one.

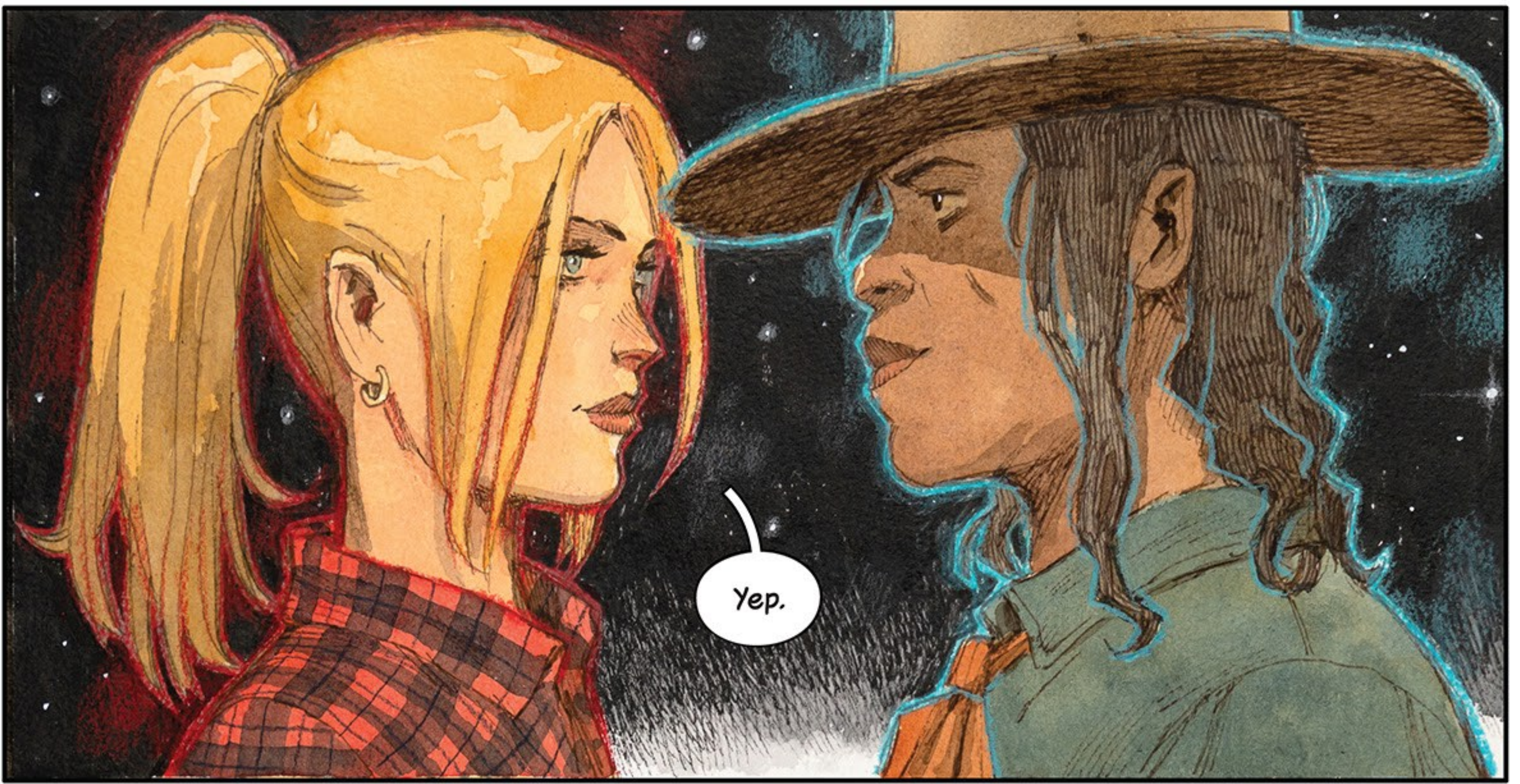
When it looked as if Judgment Day was imminent, Brooklyn damn near became an open-air brothel.



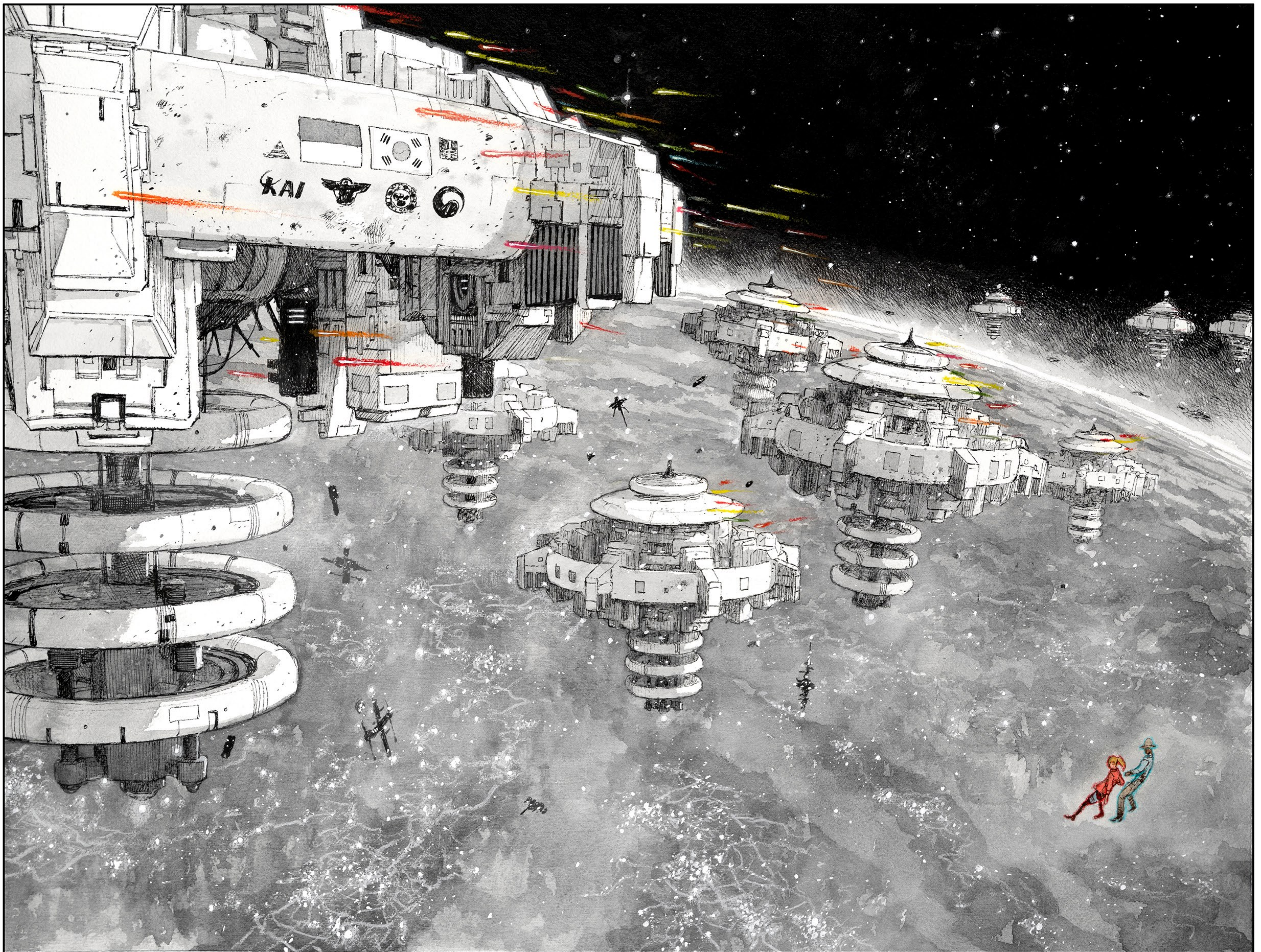
See, whenever the general population is unexpectedly confronted with their own mortality, they always return to the same thing.

Is that so?

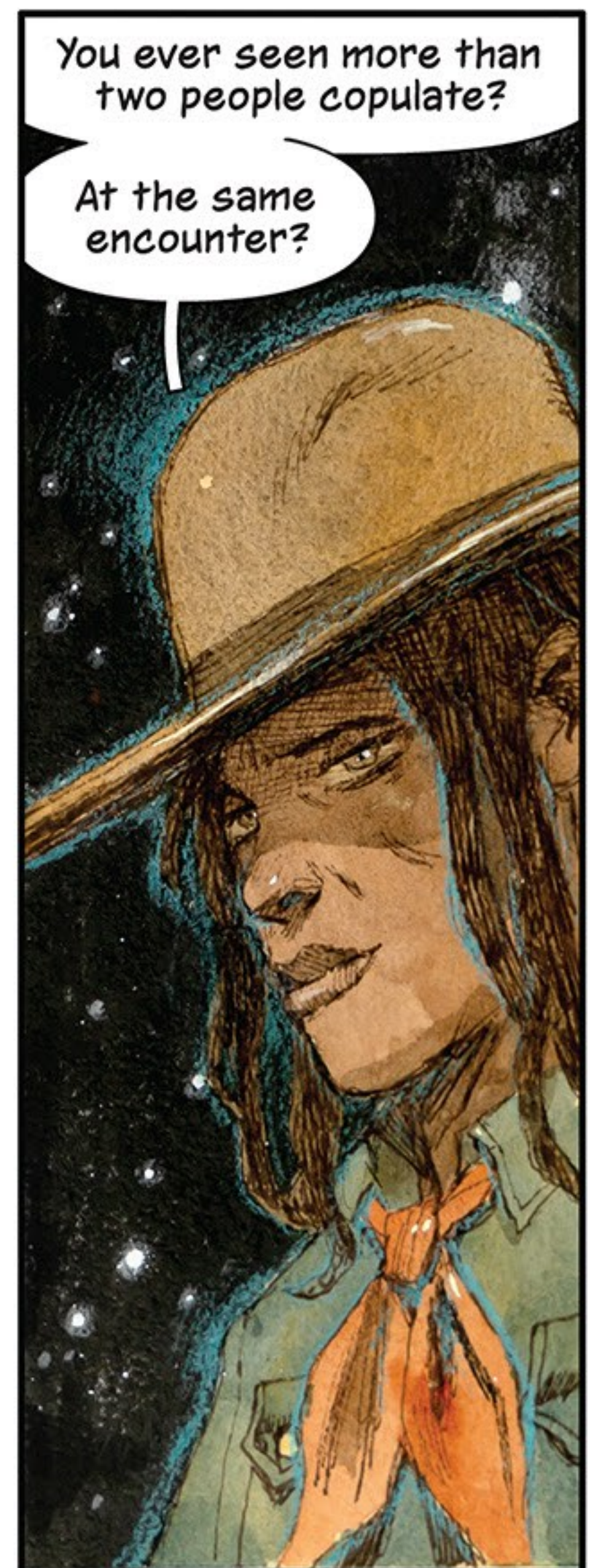




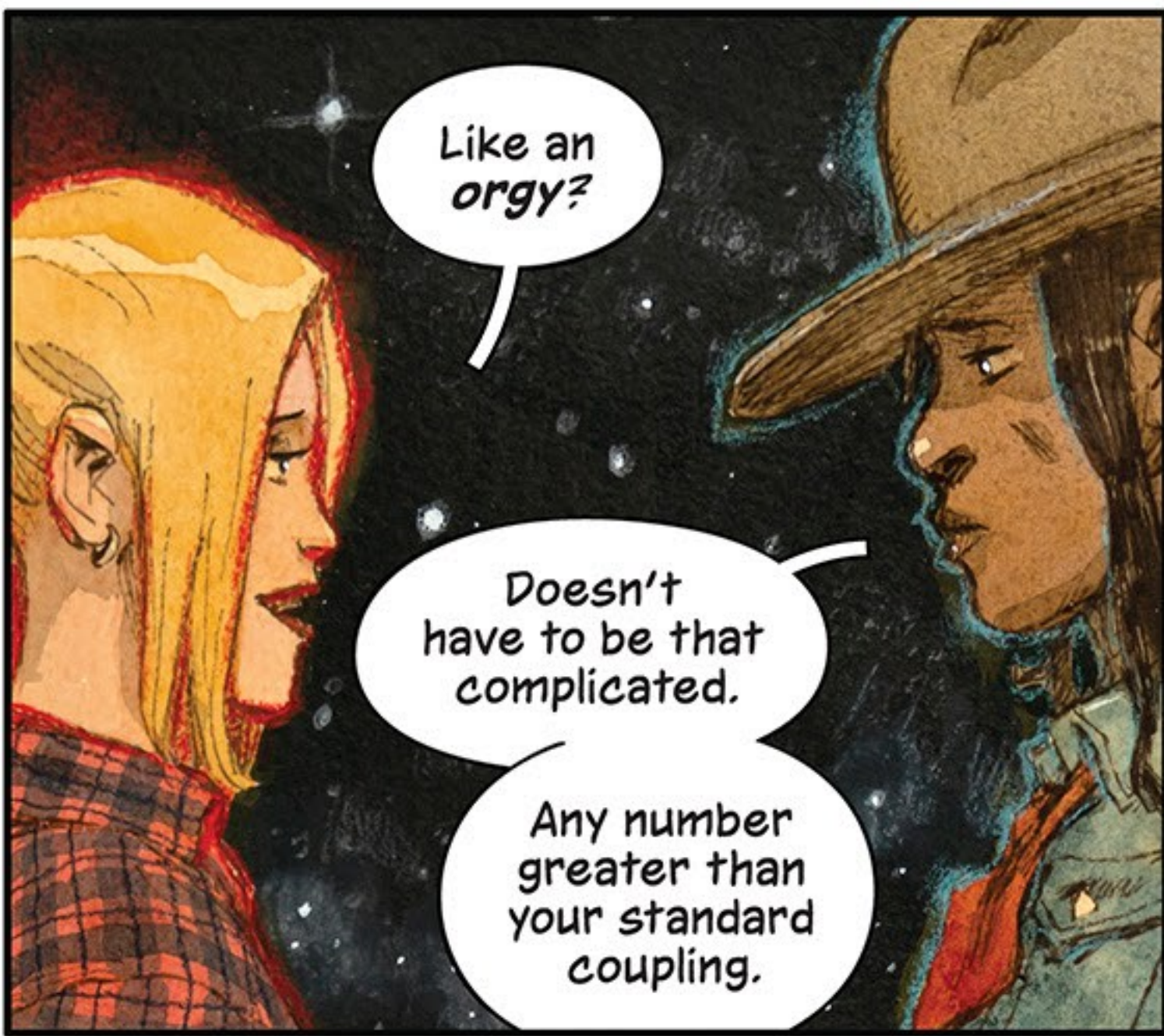








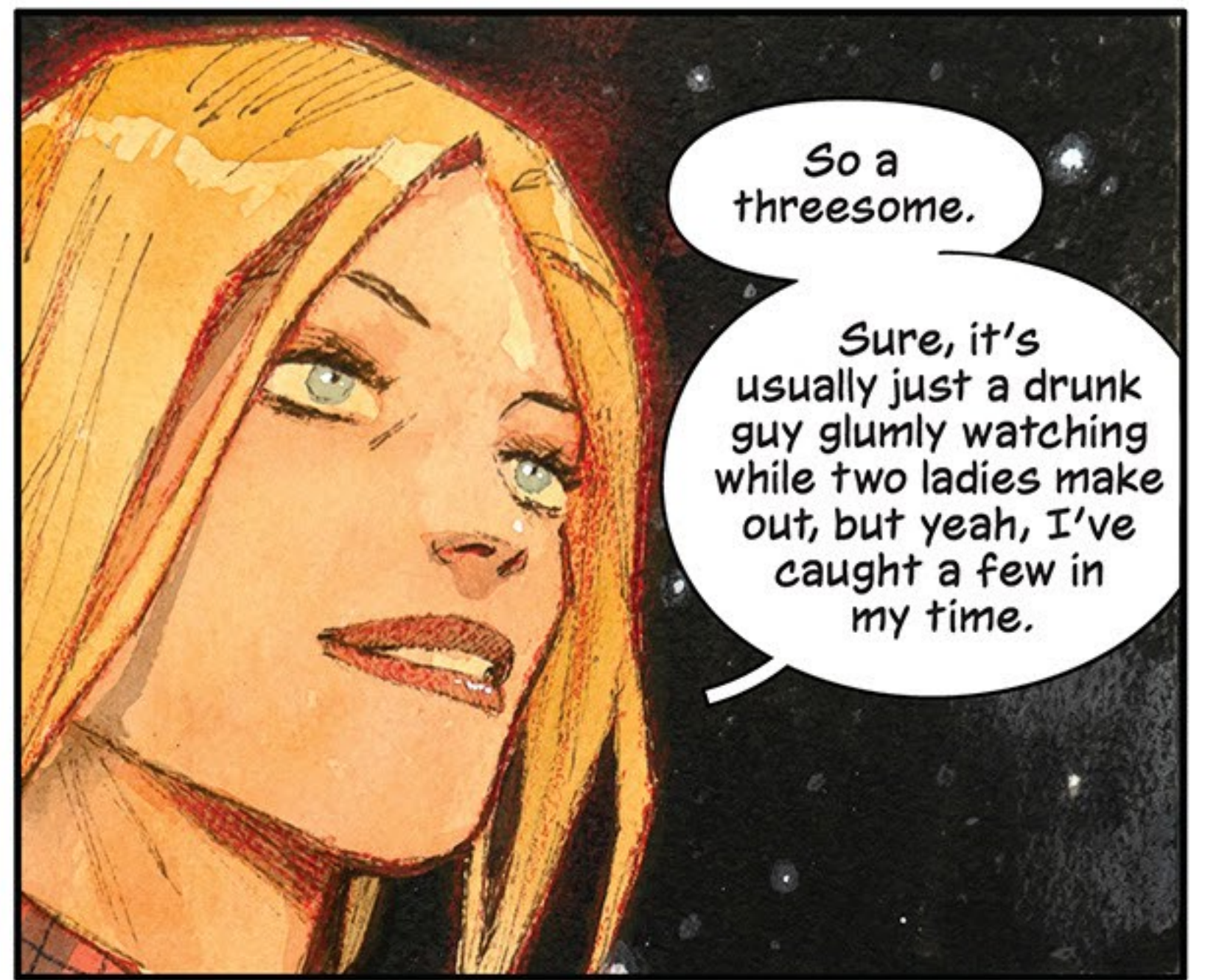




Like an orgy?

Doesn't have to be that complicated.

Any number greater than your standard coupling.



So a threesome.

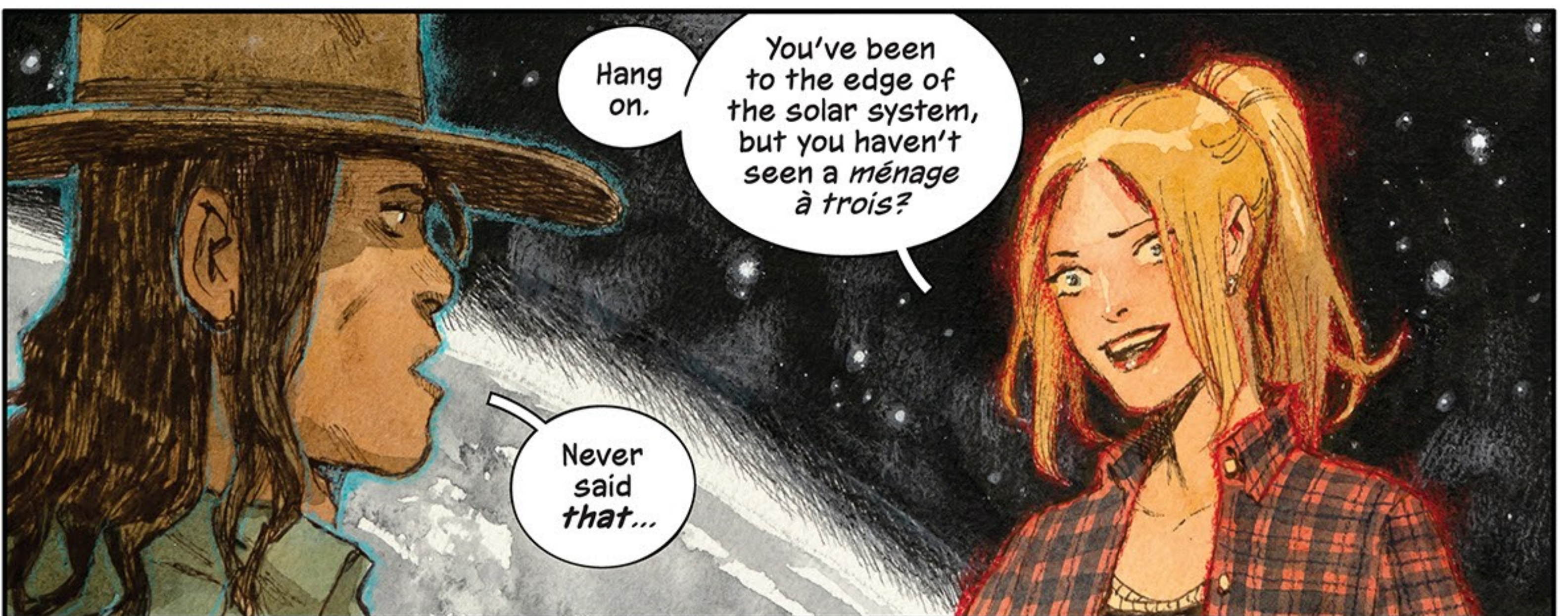
Sure, it's usually just a drunk guy glumly watching while two ladies make out, but yeah, I've caught a few in my time.



Well, if this is really the potential conclusion of all such gatherings... I suppose I wouldn't object to viewing one up close and personal.

Fuck yes!

That's the fucking spirit!

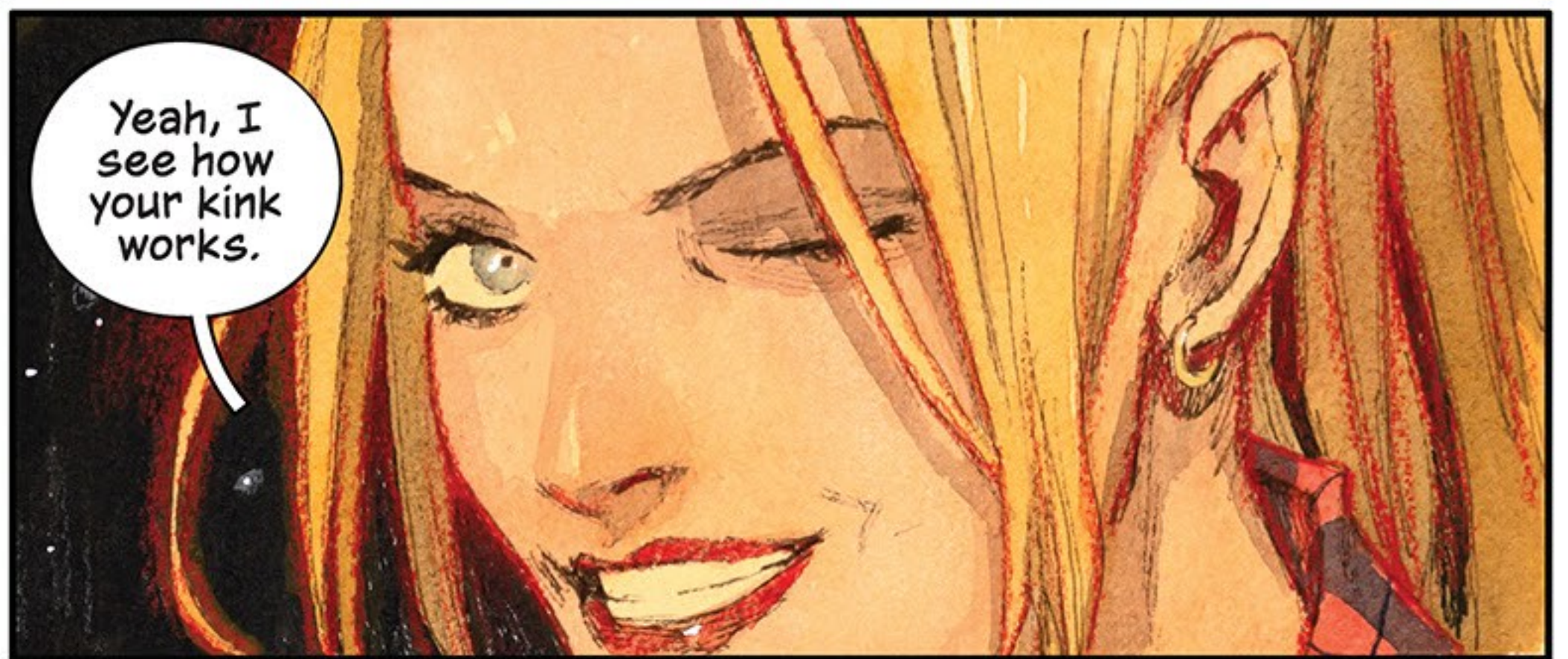


Hang on.

You've been to the edge of the solar system, but you haven't seen a *ménage à trois*?

Never said that...





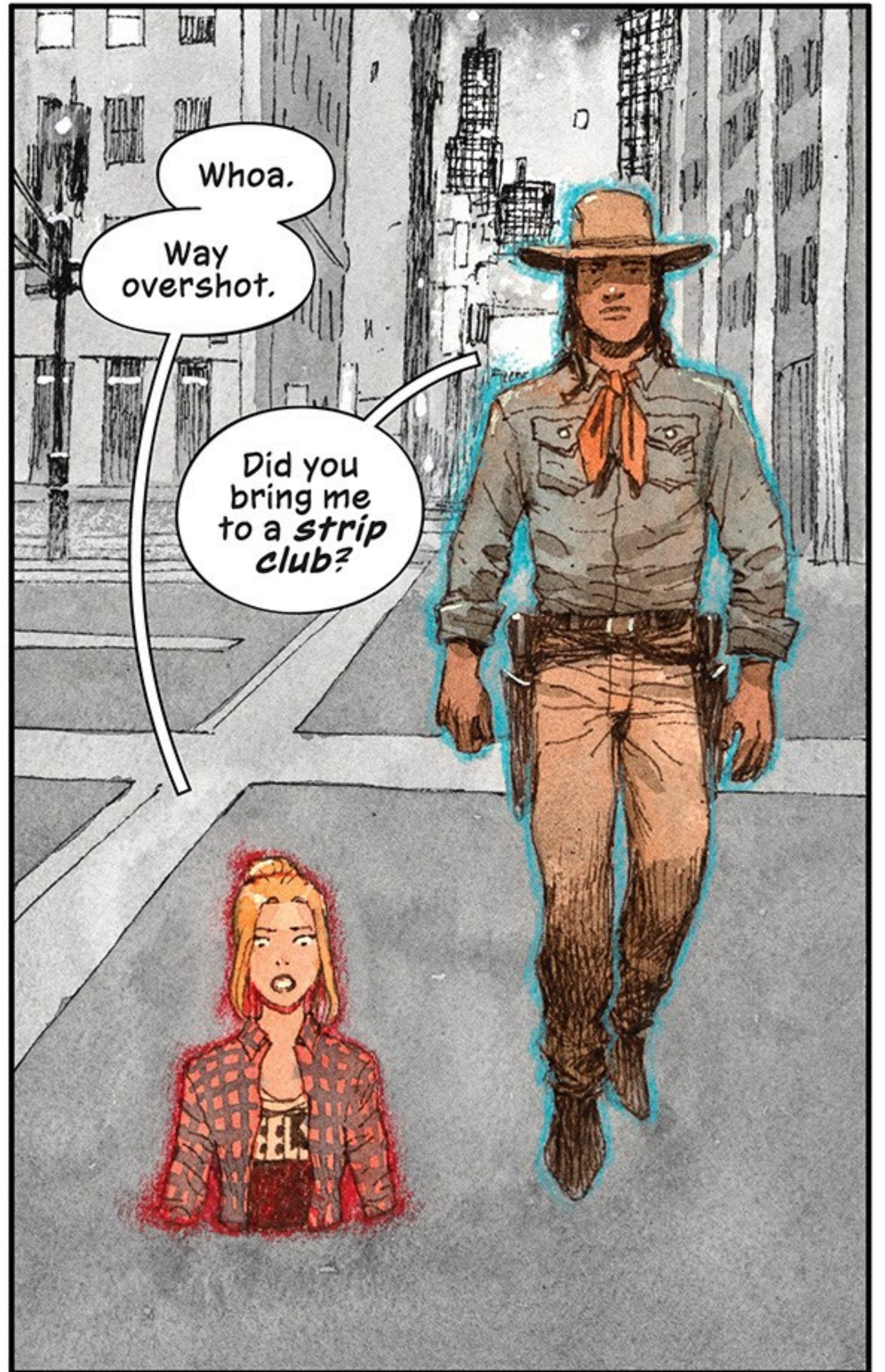
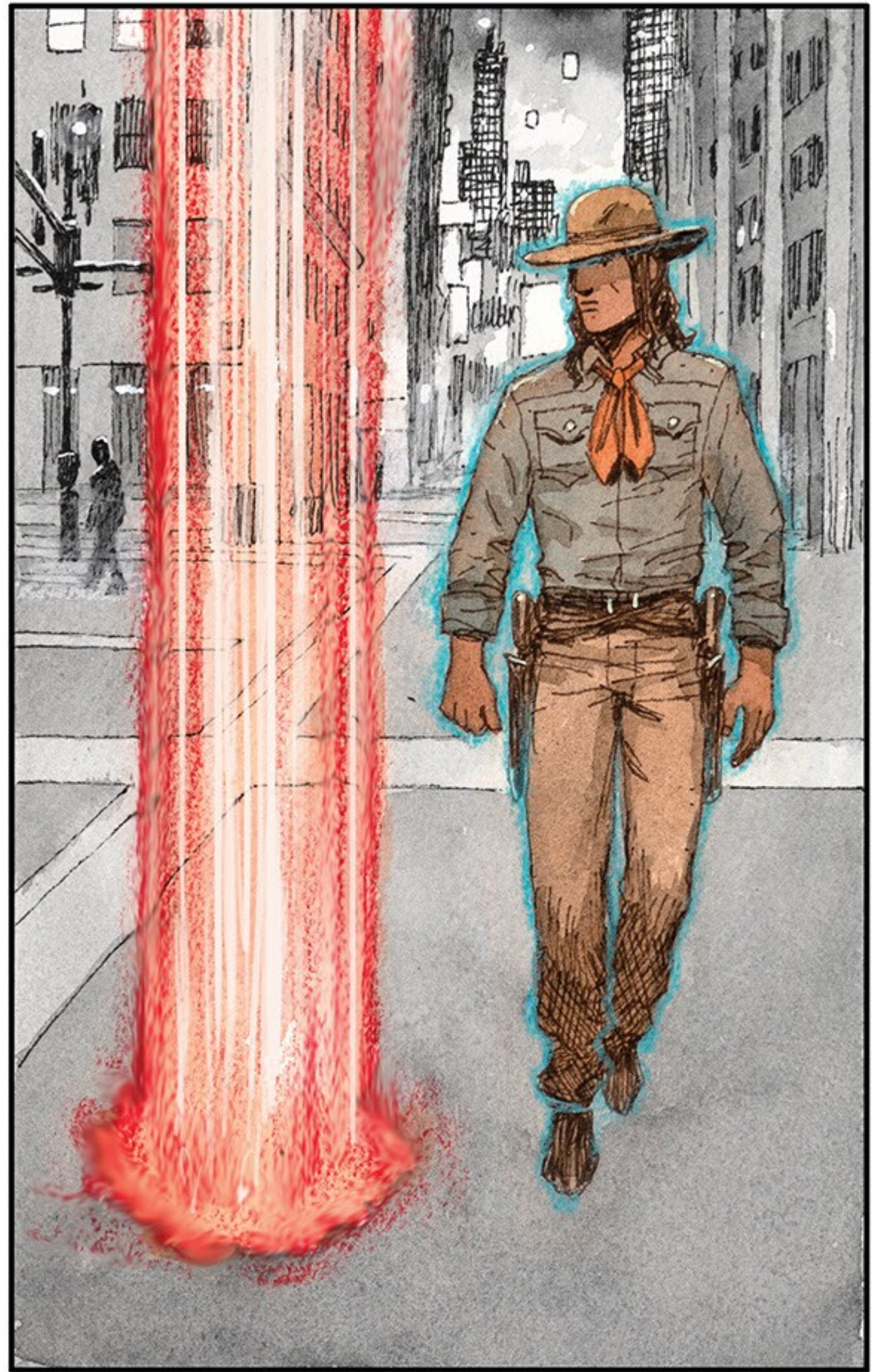
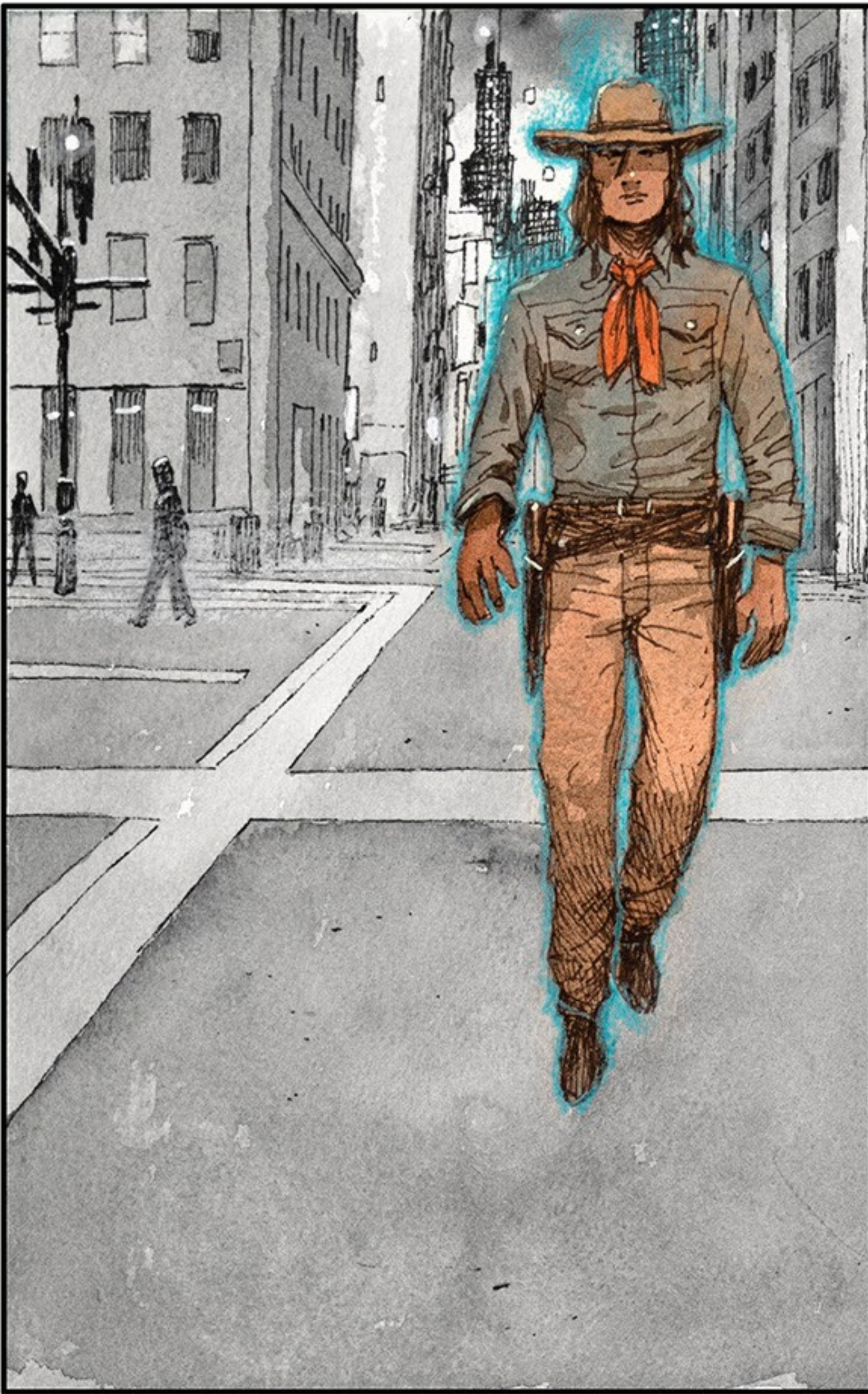




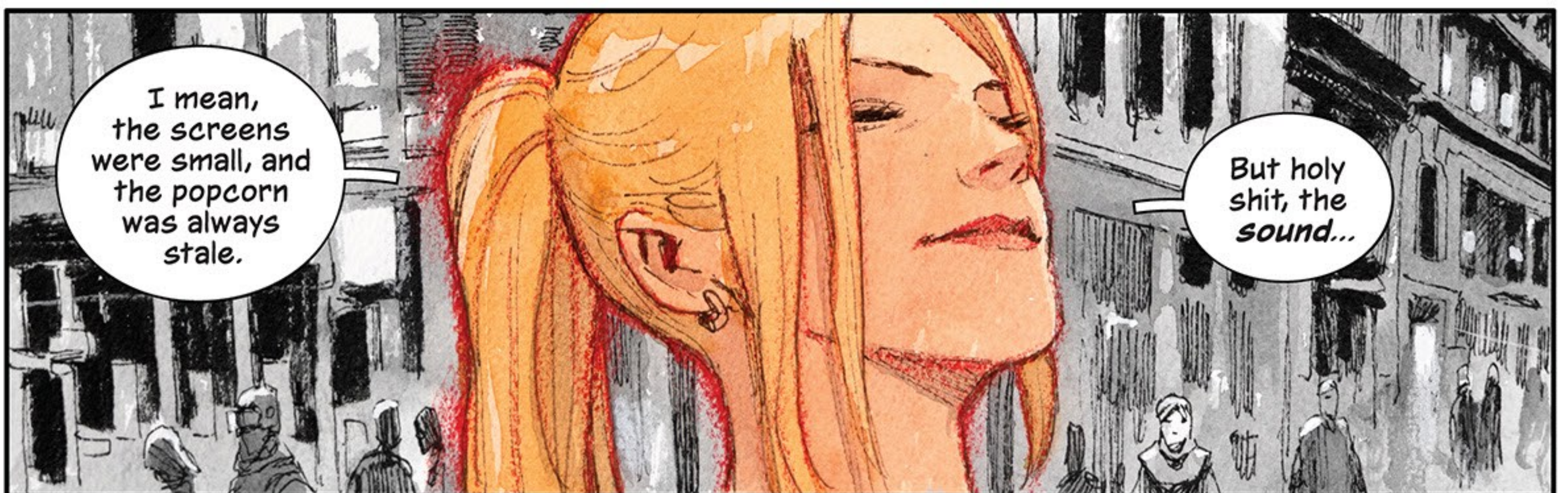
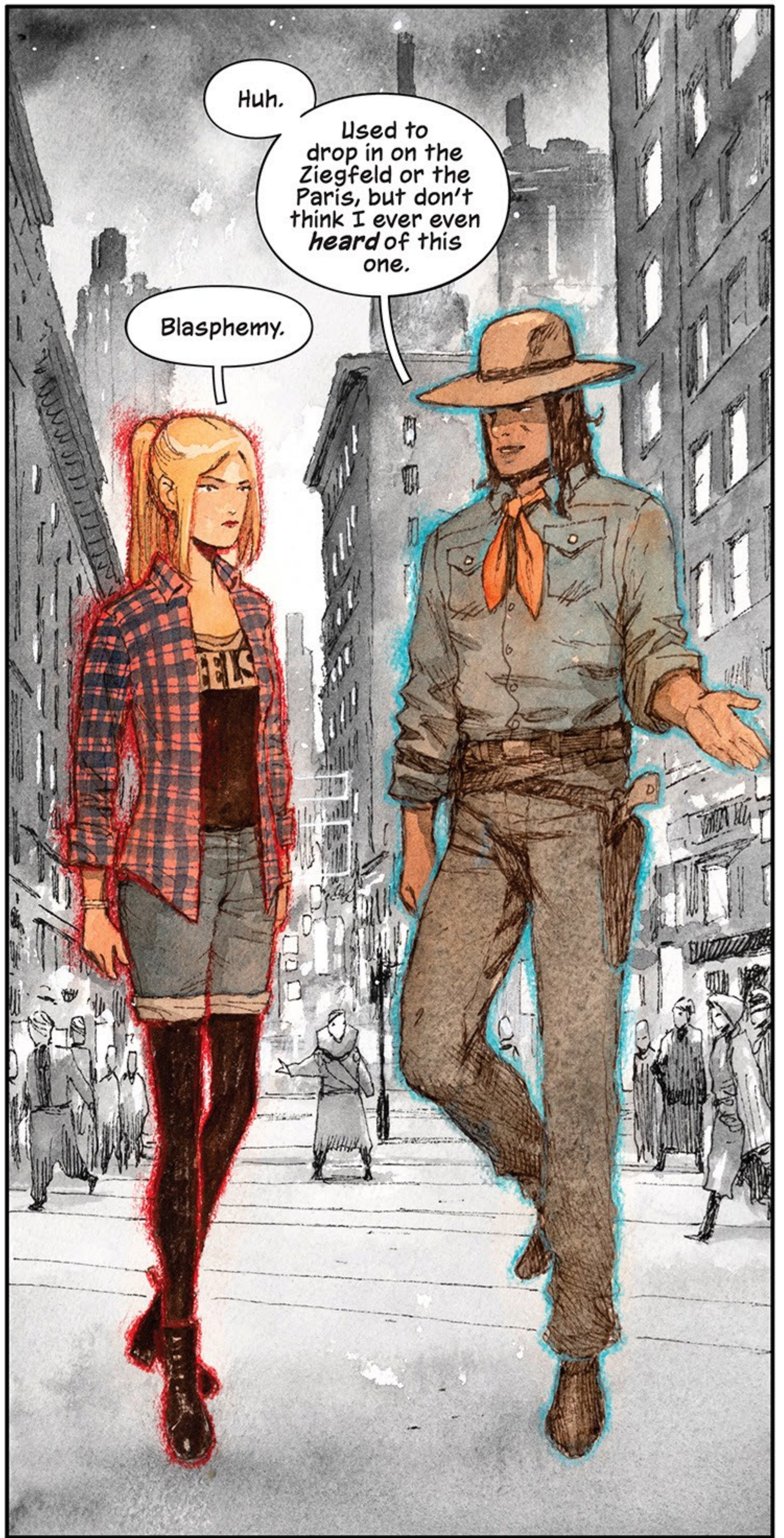




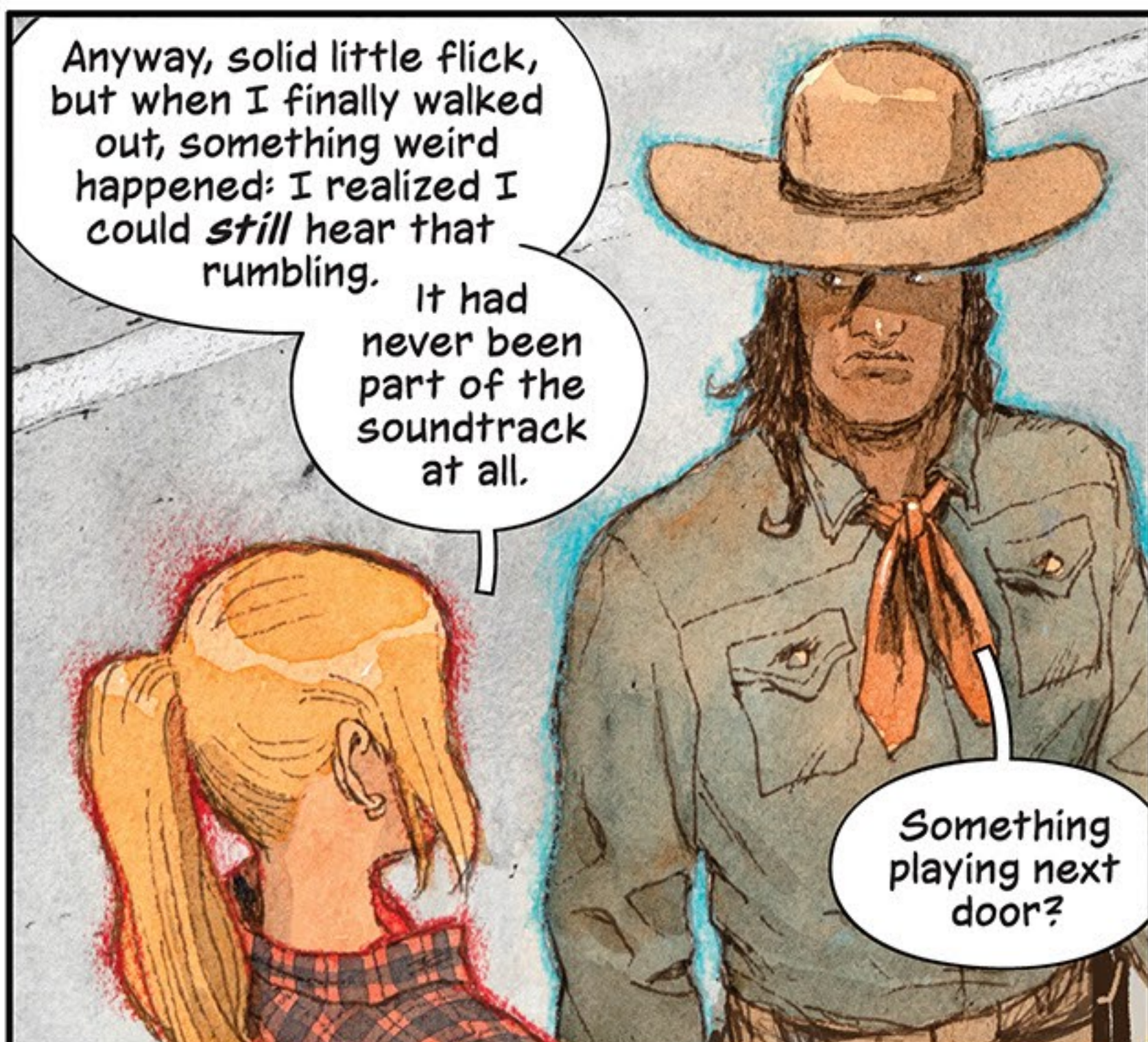
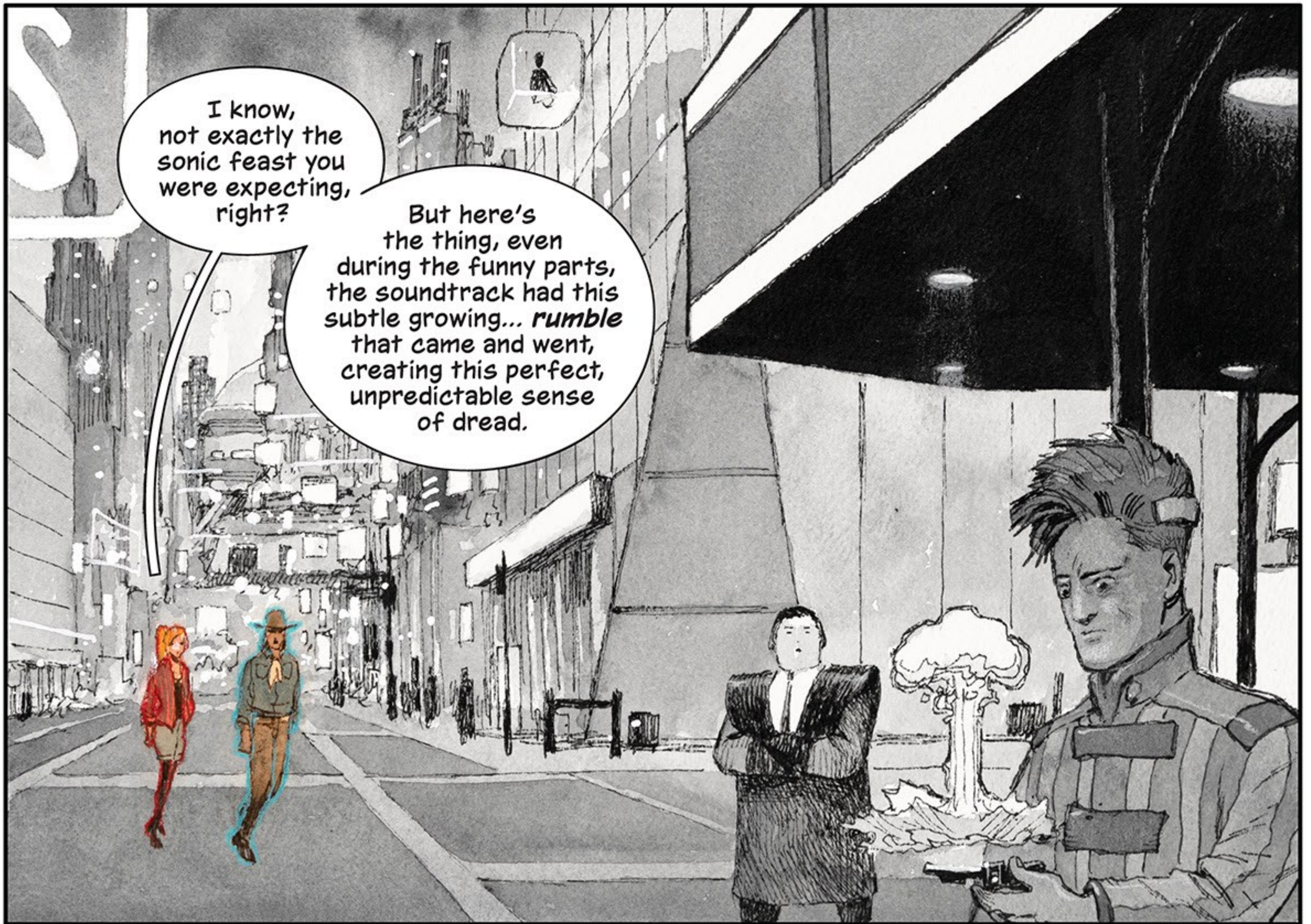




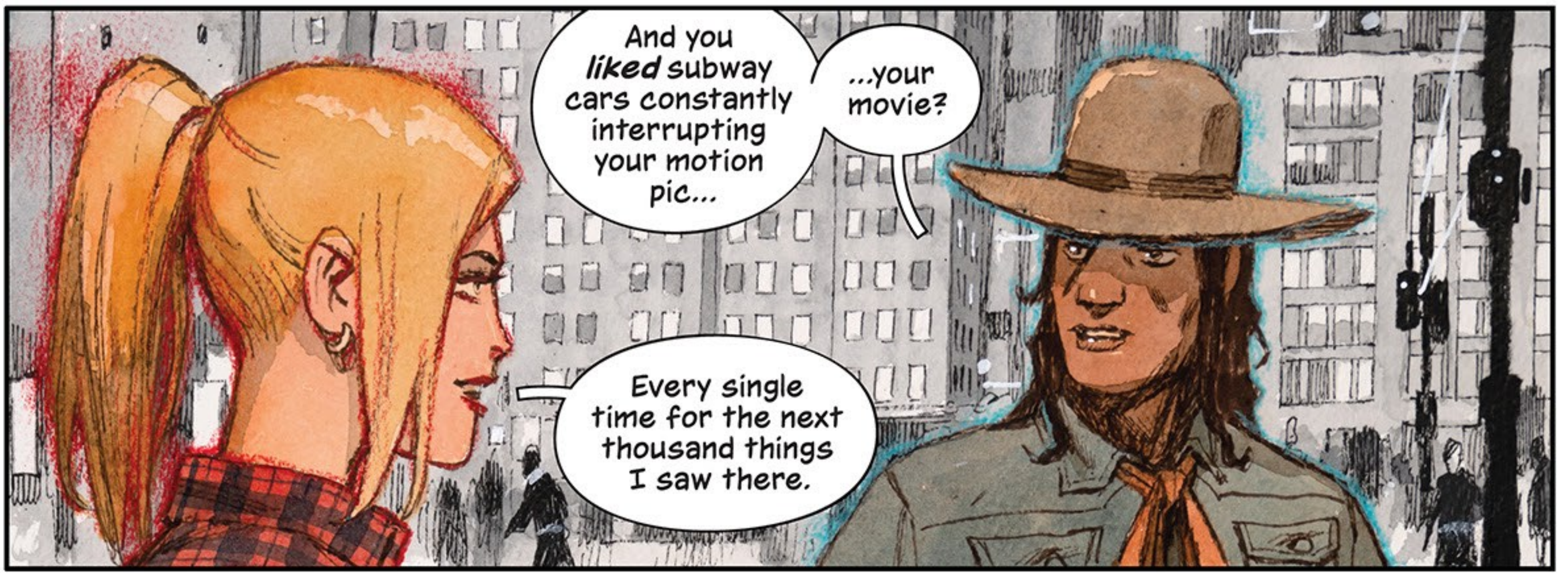












And you *liked* subway cars constantly interrupting your motion pic...

...your movie?

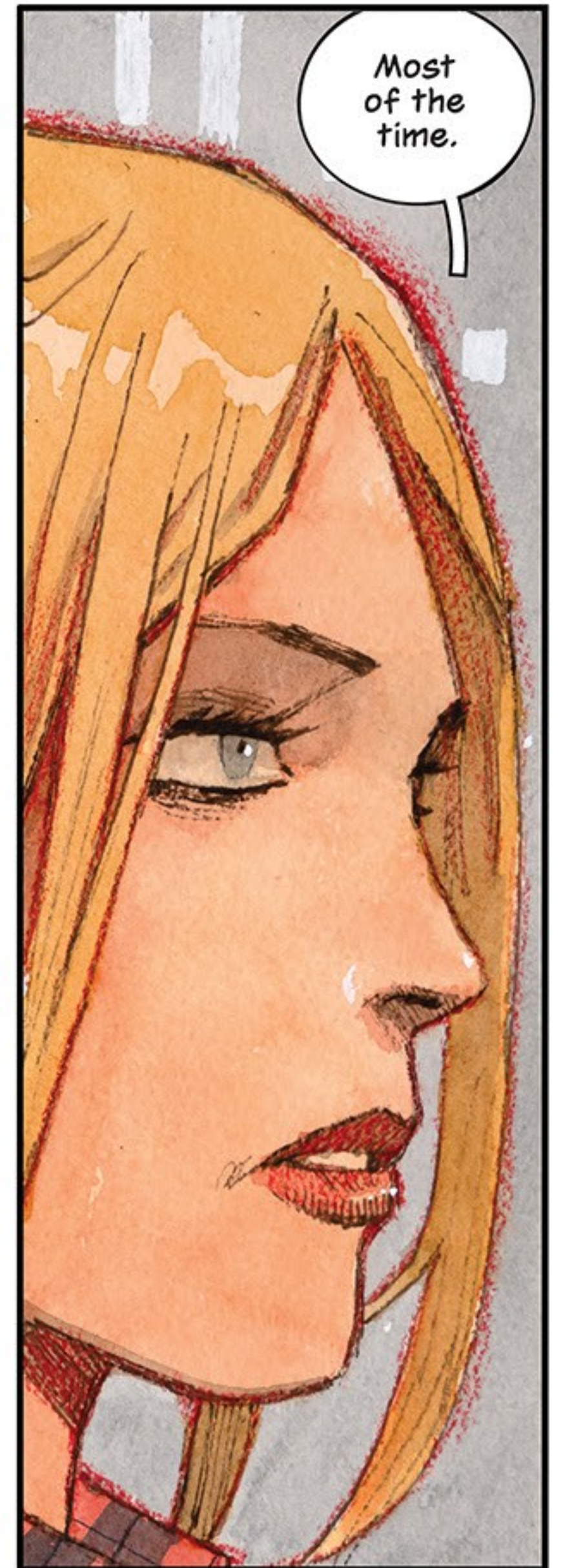
Every single time for the next thousand things I saw there.



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.

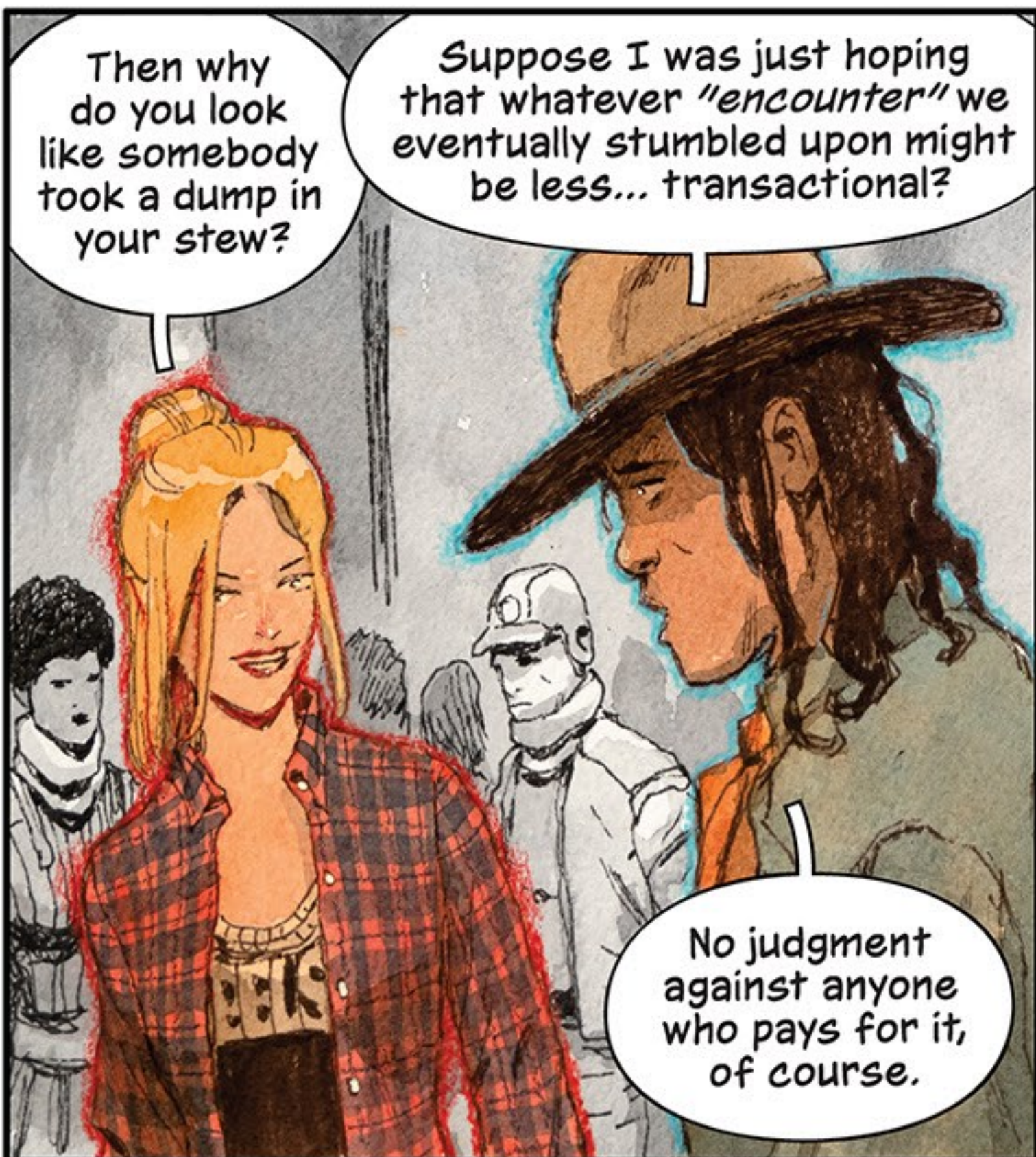
One that also features penises!

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



By fellas enjoying each other's company?

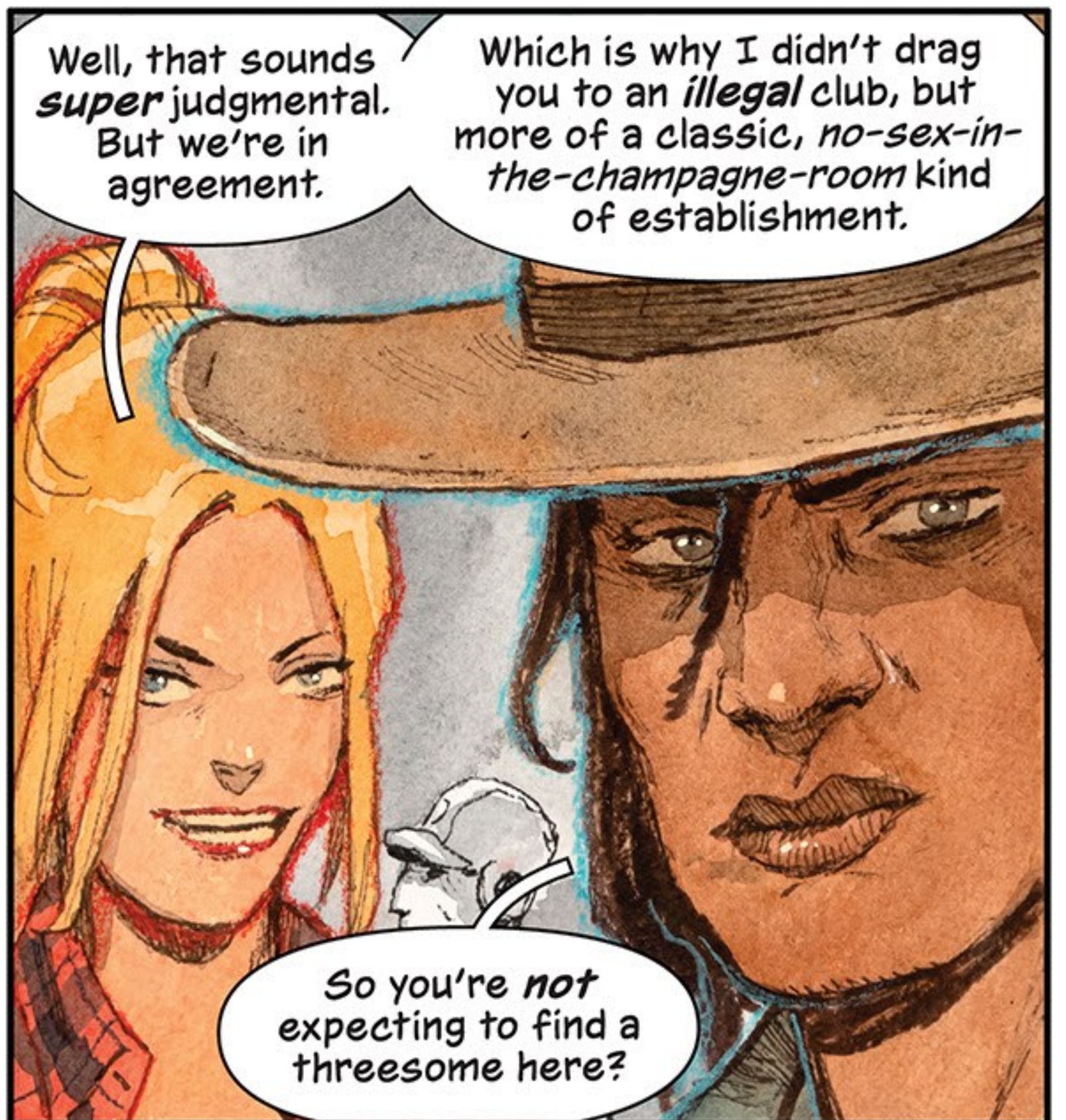
That was old hat long before I came around.



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.

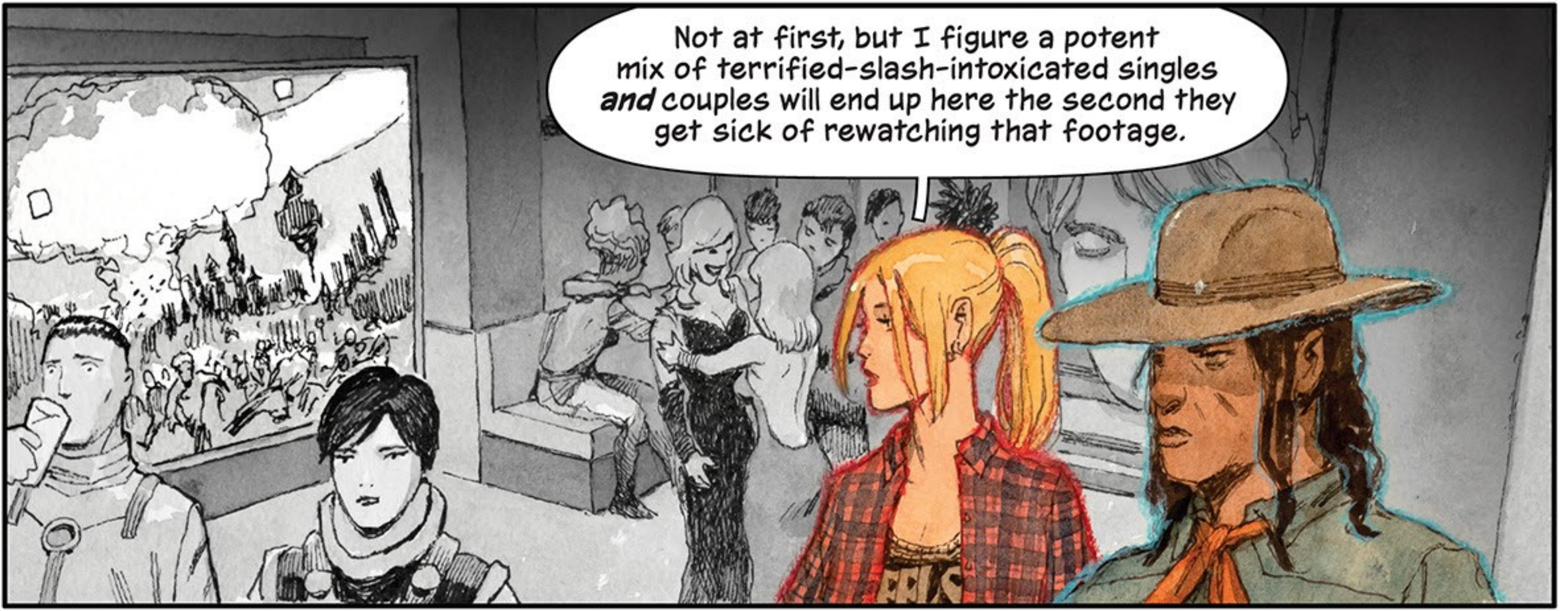


Well, that sounds *super* judgmental. But we're in agreement.

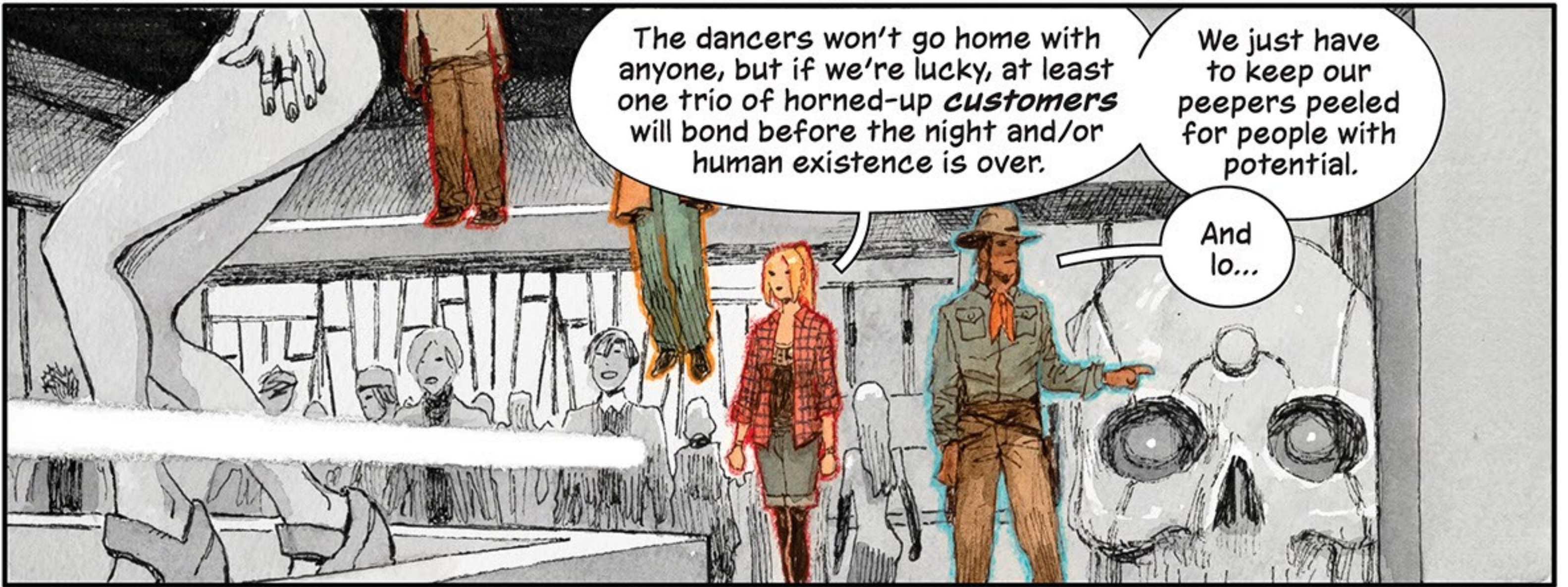
Which is why I didn't drag you to an *illegal* club, but more of a classic, *no-sex-in-the-champagne-room* kind of establishment.

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





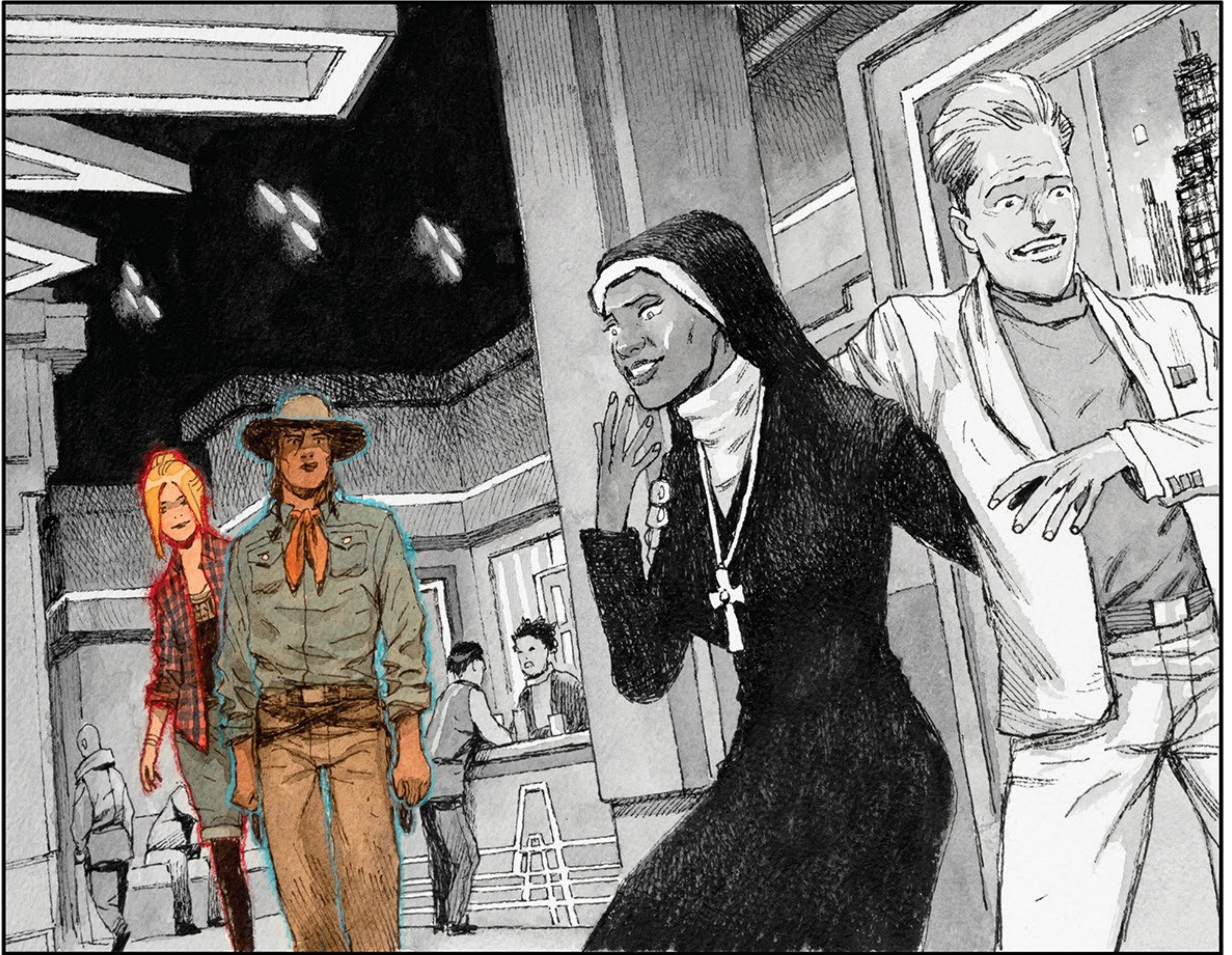
Not at first, but I figure a potent mix of terrified-slash-intoxicated singles *and* couples will end up here the second they get sick of rewatching that footage.



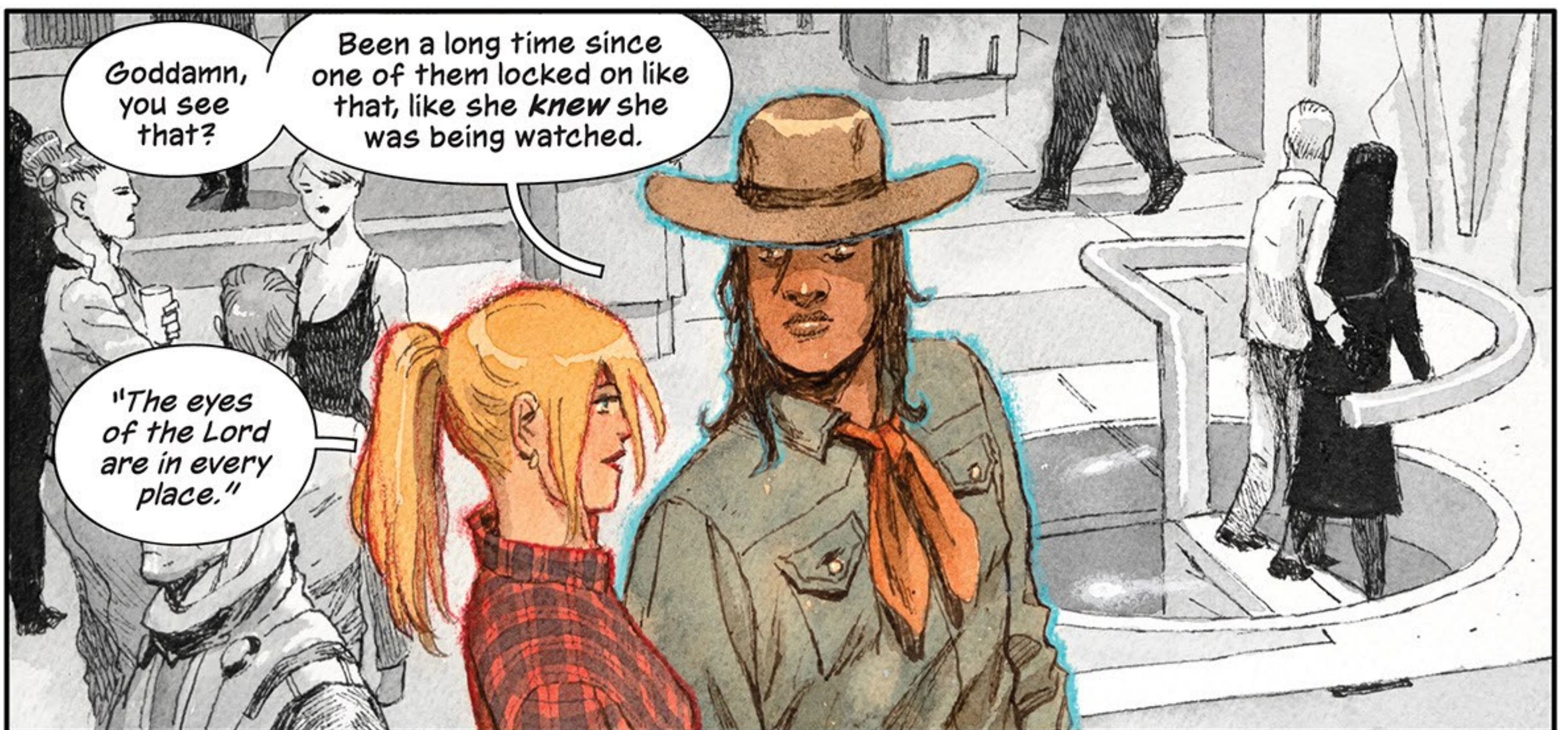
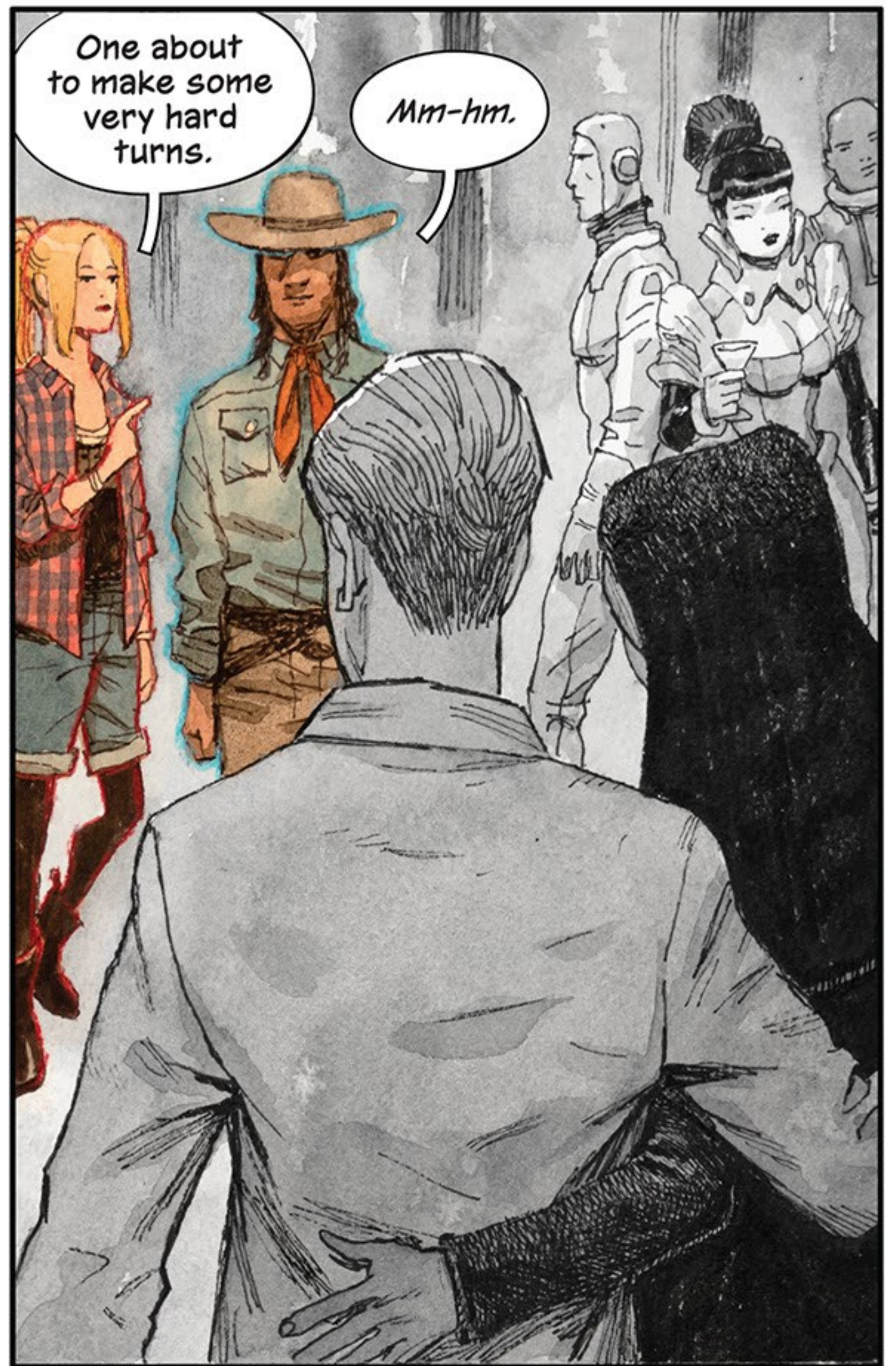
The dancers won't go home with anyone, but if we're lucky, at least one trio of horned-up *customers* will bond before the night and/or human existence is over.

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

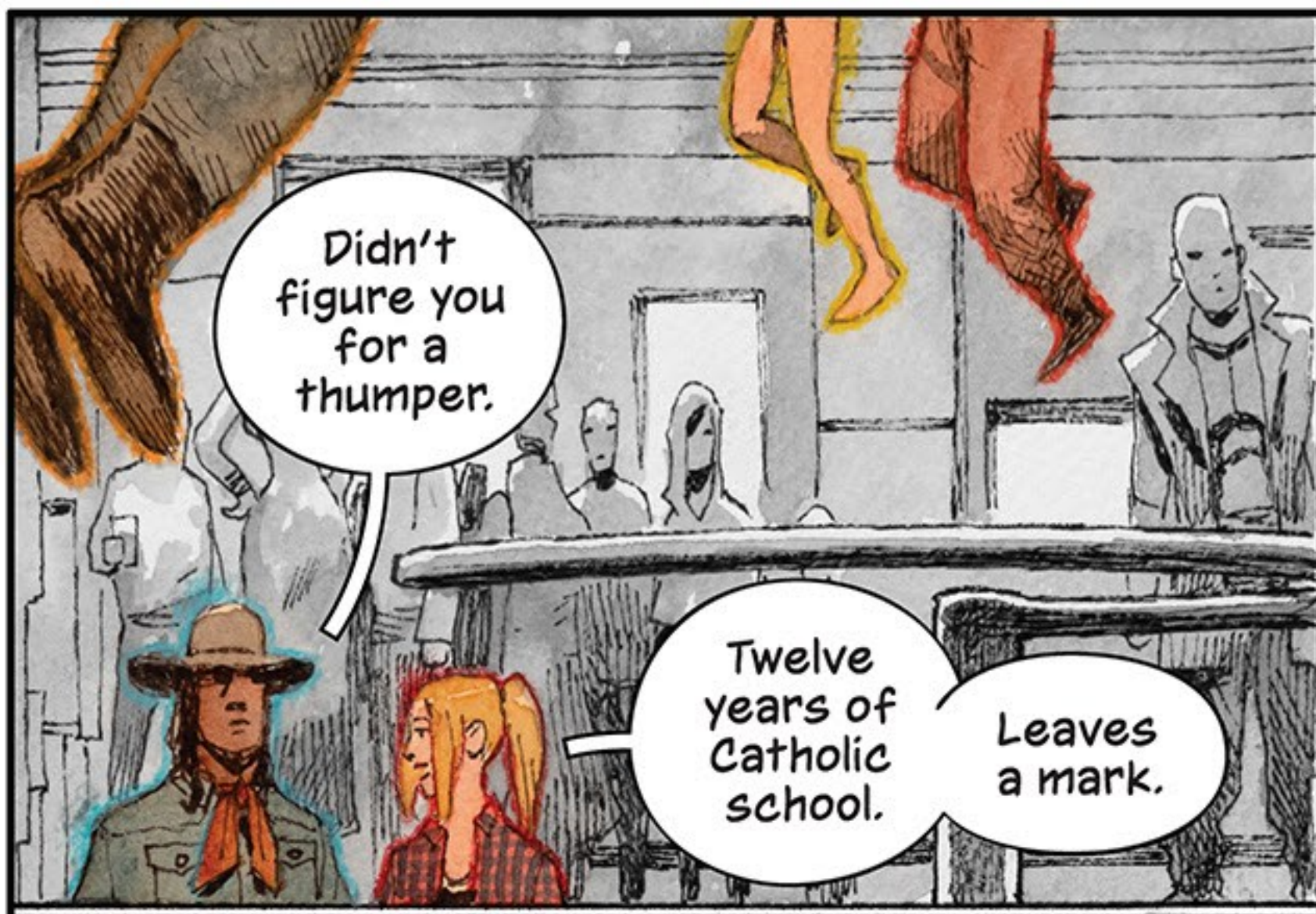
And lo...







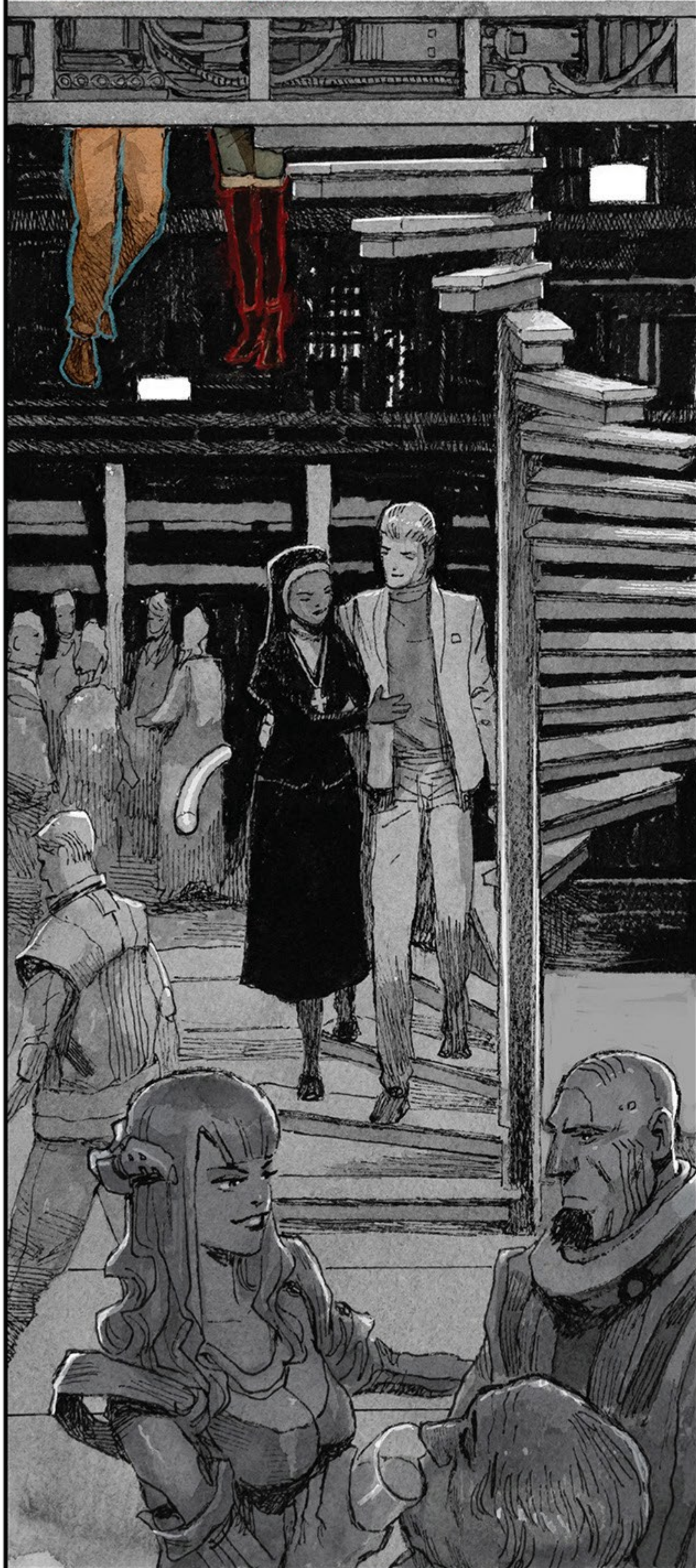




Didn't figure you for a thumper.

Twelve years of Catholic school.

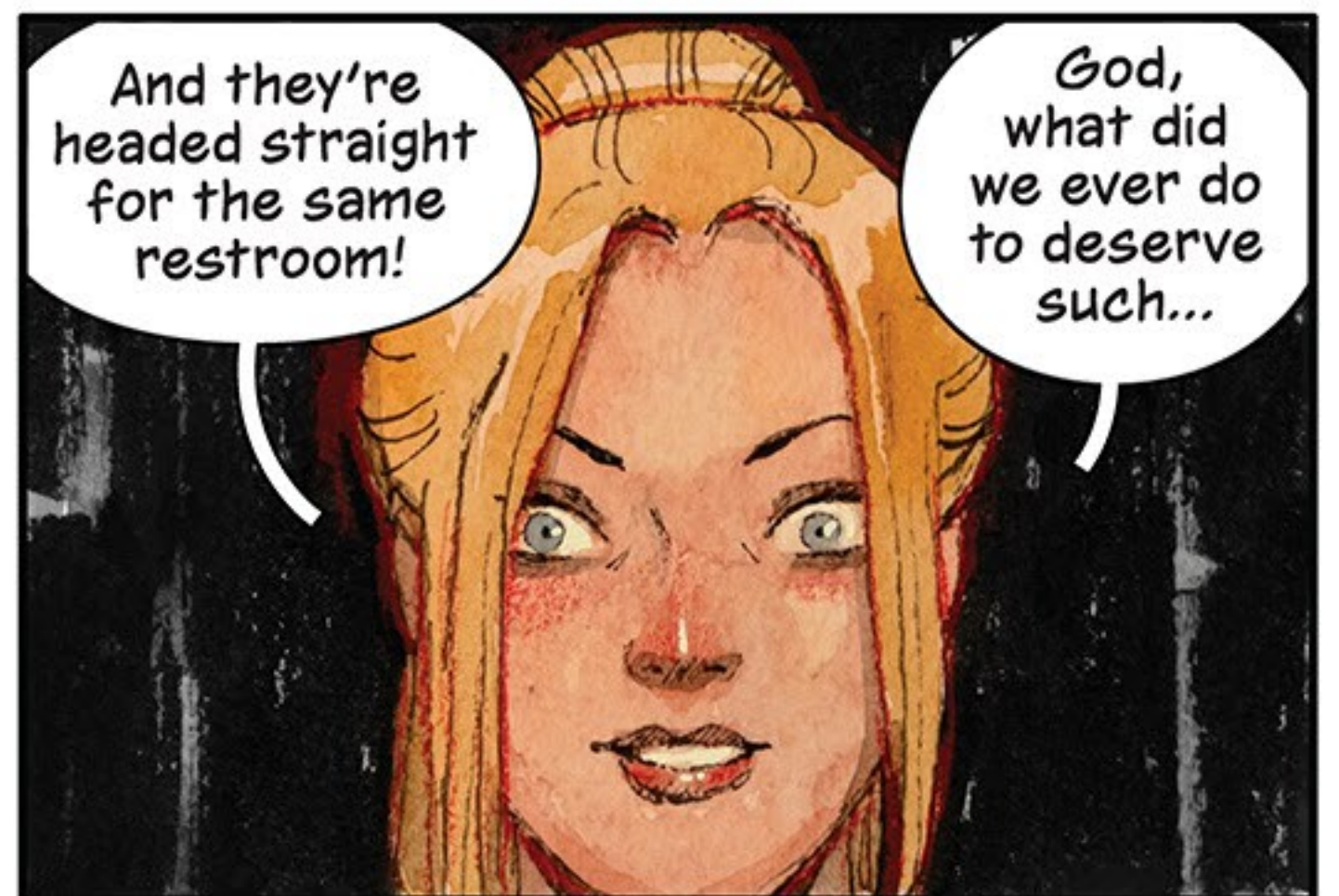
Leaves a mark.



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.

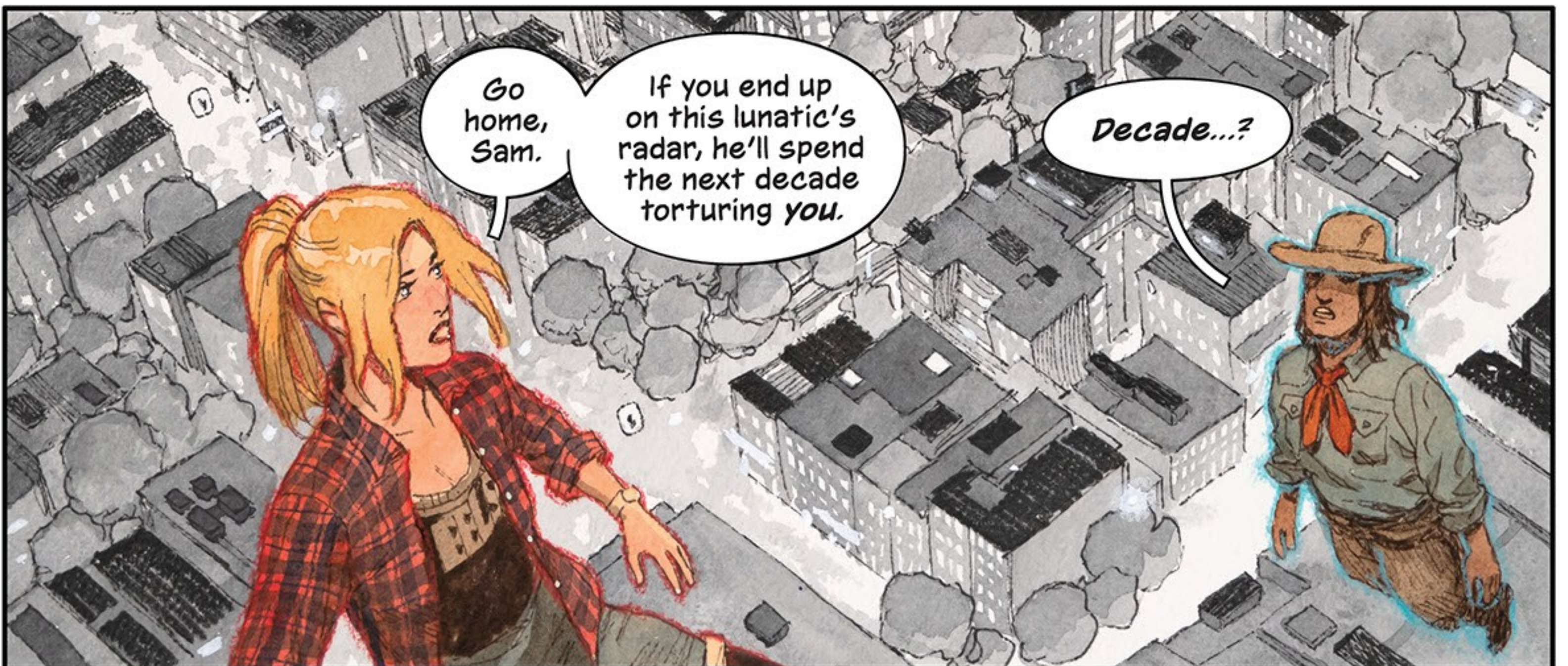
Don't engage.

He's just my stalker.

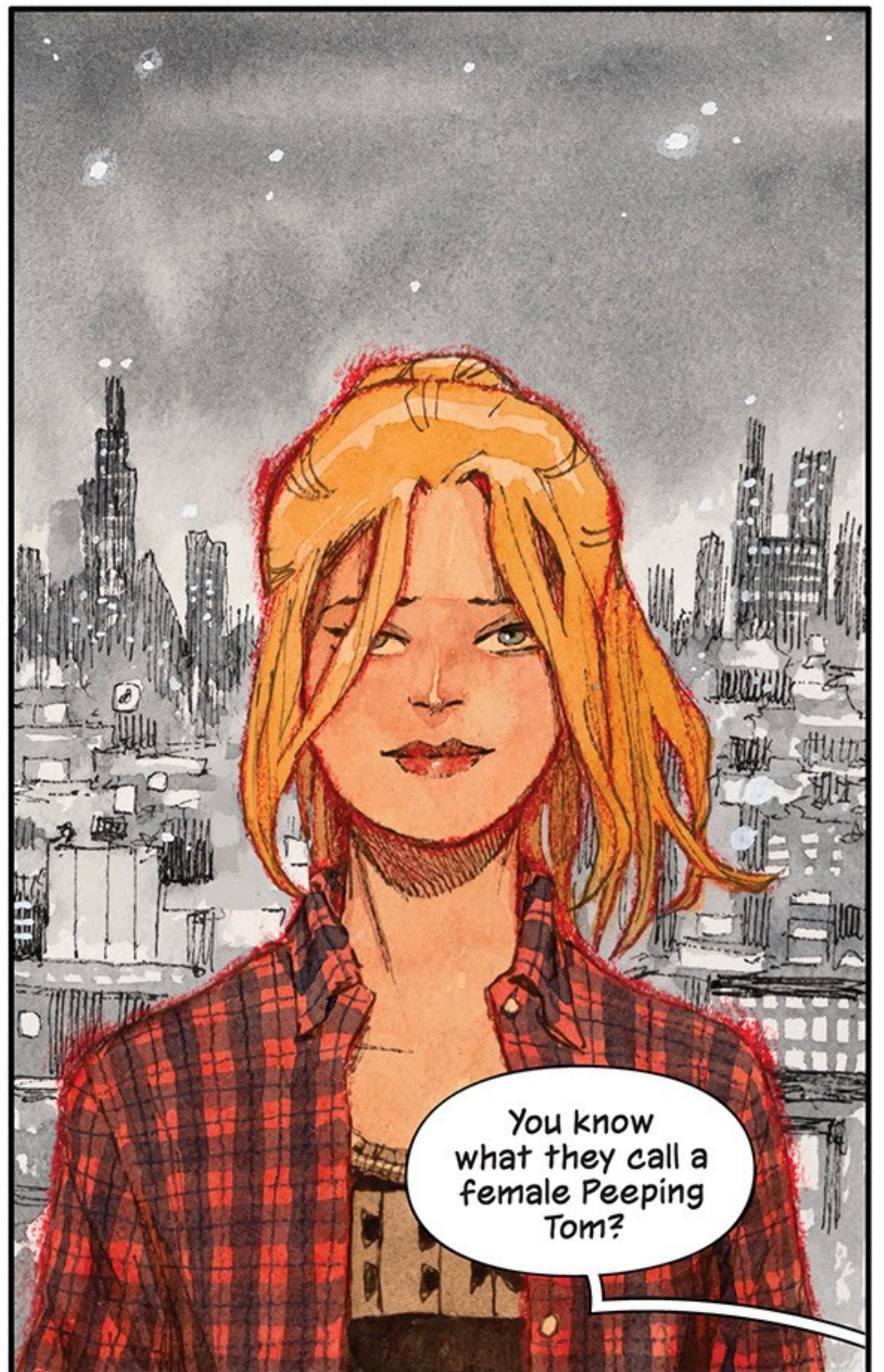
















Seriously,  
I'm asking.

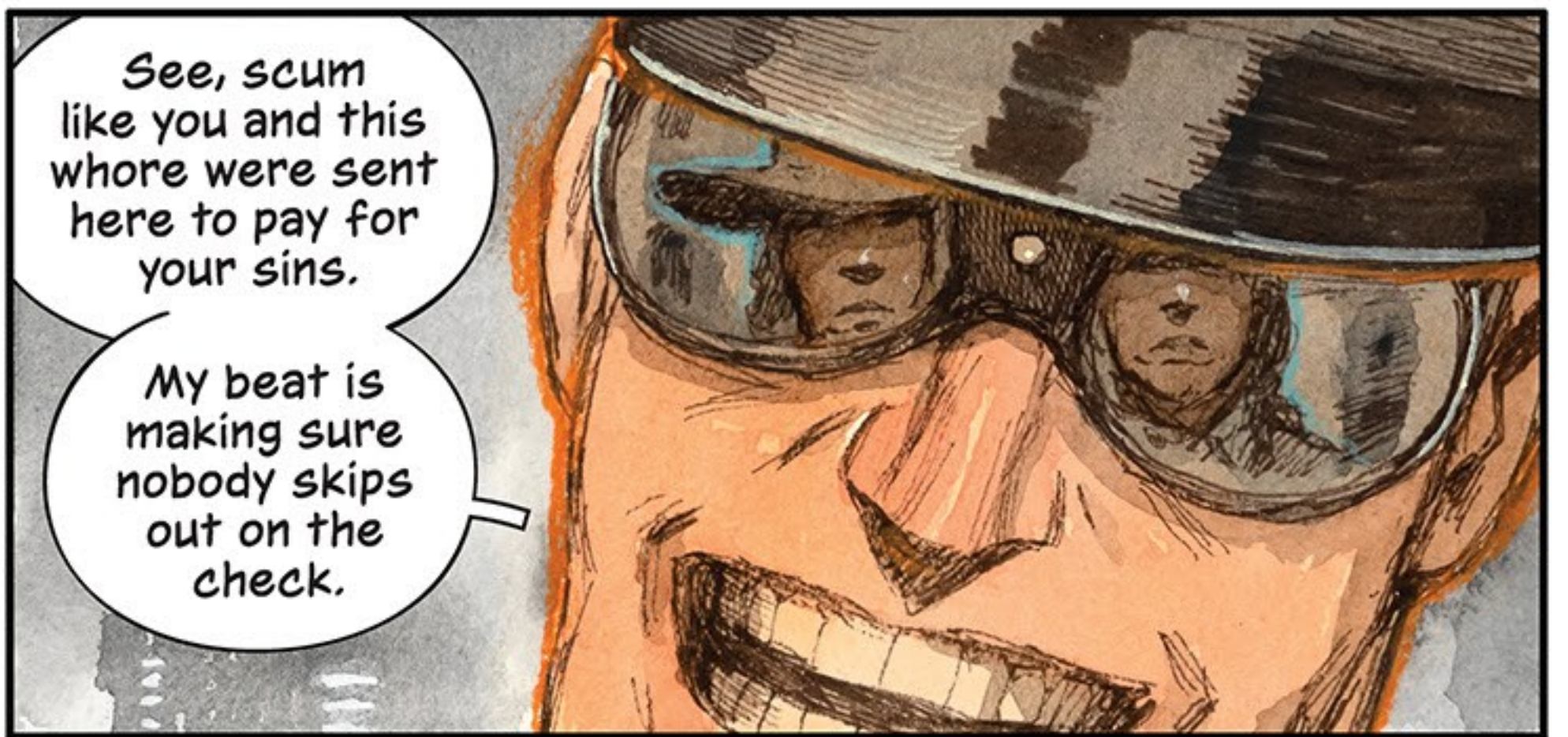
'Cause this  
degenerate  
broad is the  
first one I  
ever met.



The hell  
is your  
problem?

Hell isn't a  
problem.

It's my  
*precinct.*



See, scum  
like you and this  
whore were sent  
here to pay for  
your sins.

My beat is  
making sure  
nobody skips  
out on the  
check.



Yup.

That's about  
enough of this  
motherfucker.





Slap leather,  
you son of  
a bitch.

...



heh

Is this guy  
new?



Your six-shooter's  
nothing but window  
dressing!

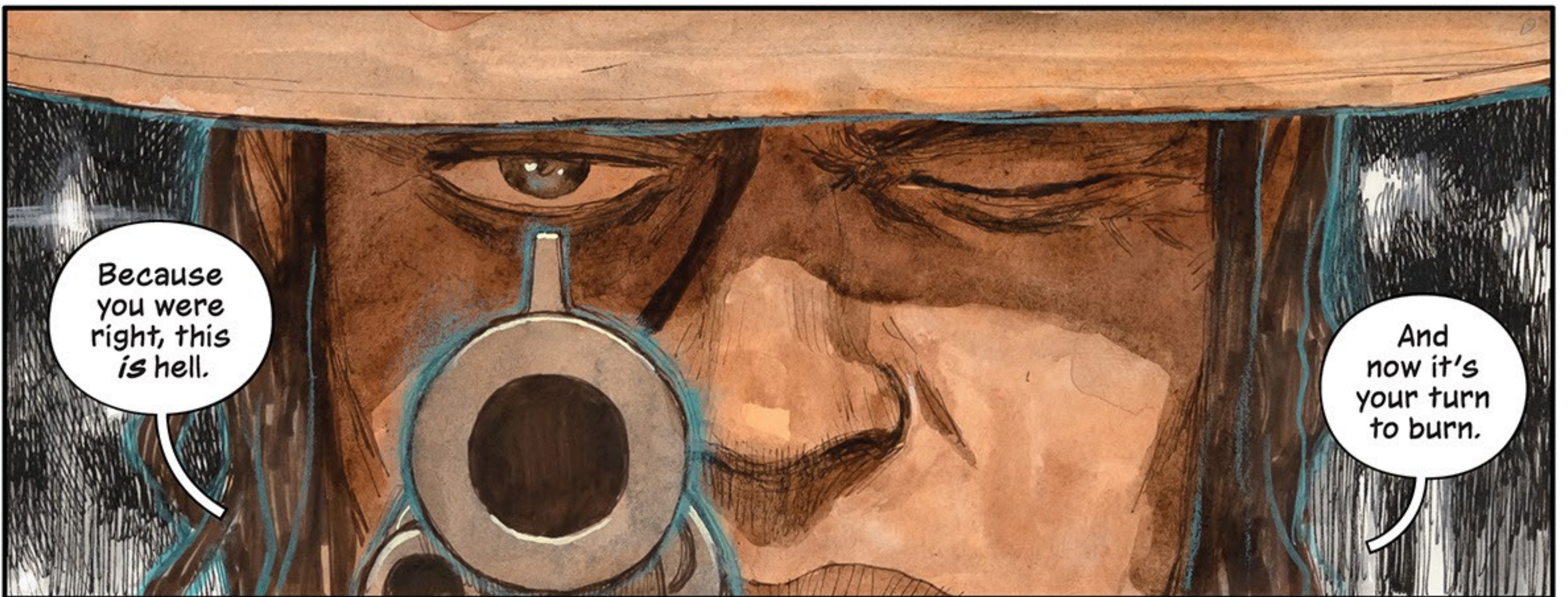
Just like  
my piece! Like  
everything in  
this fucking  
nightmare!



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







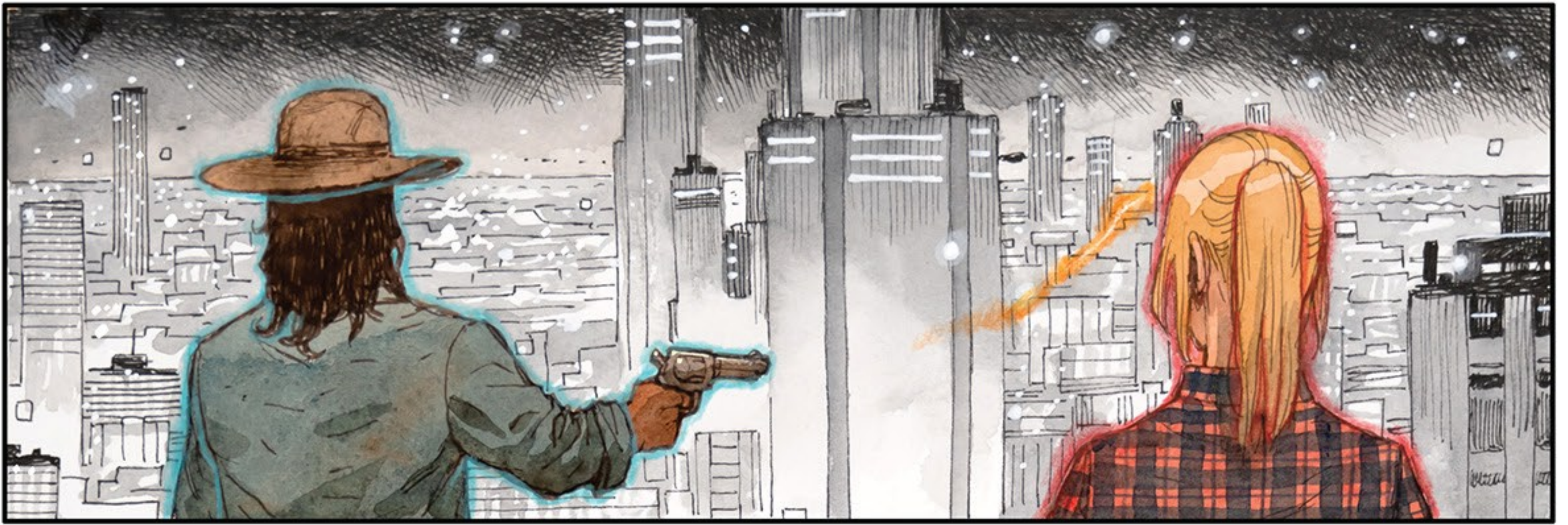
















Trick of the light.

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!**



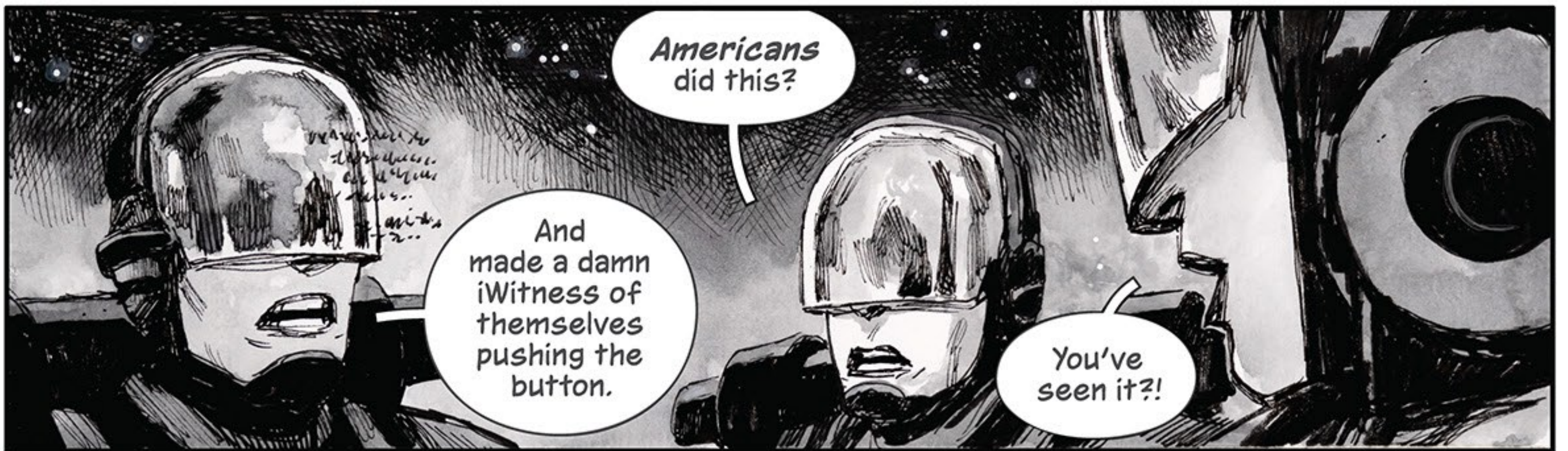






And?  
It was motherfucking Red China, wasn't it?

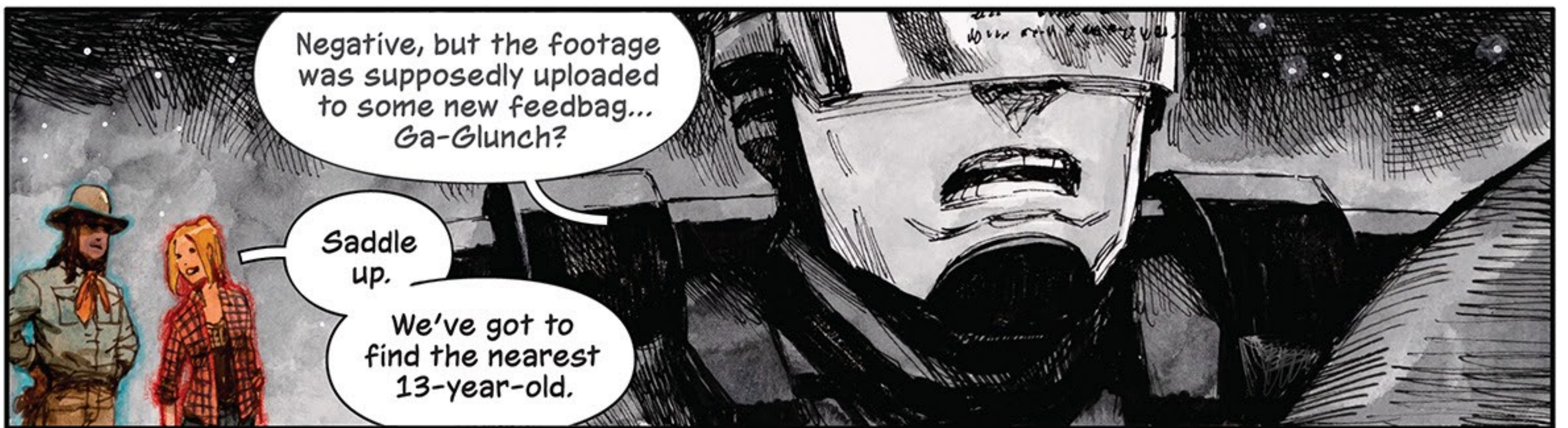
Actually, ma'am, they're calling it *home-grown*.



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-Blunch?

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?

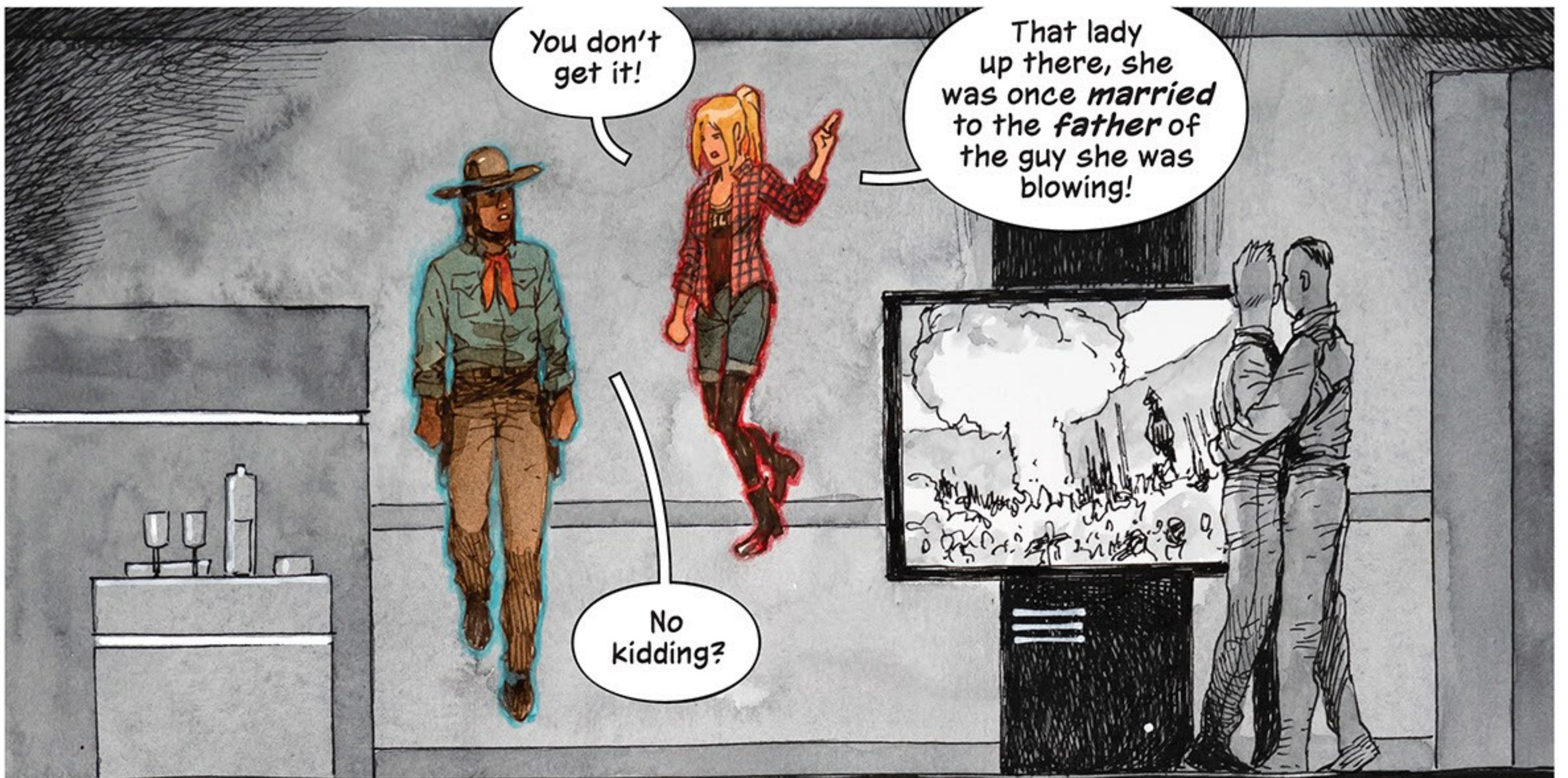
That somebody out there was sick enough to do that to their own people?

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





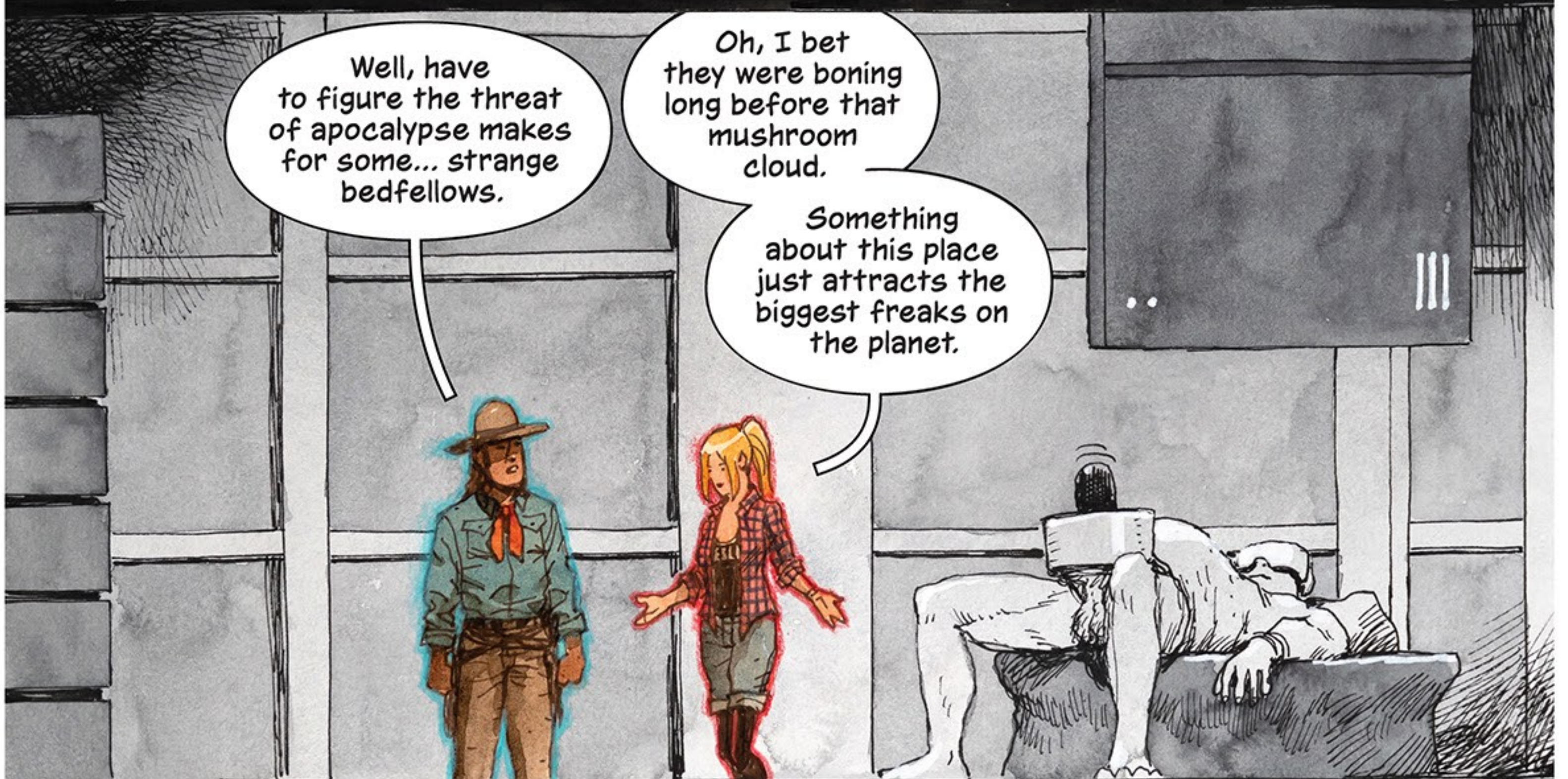




You don't get it!

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

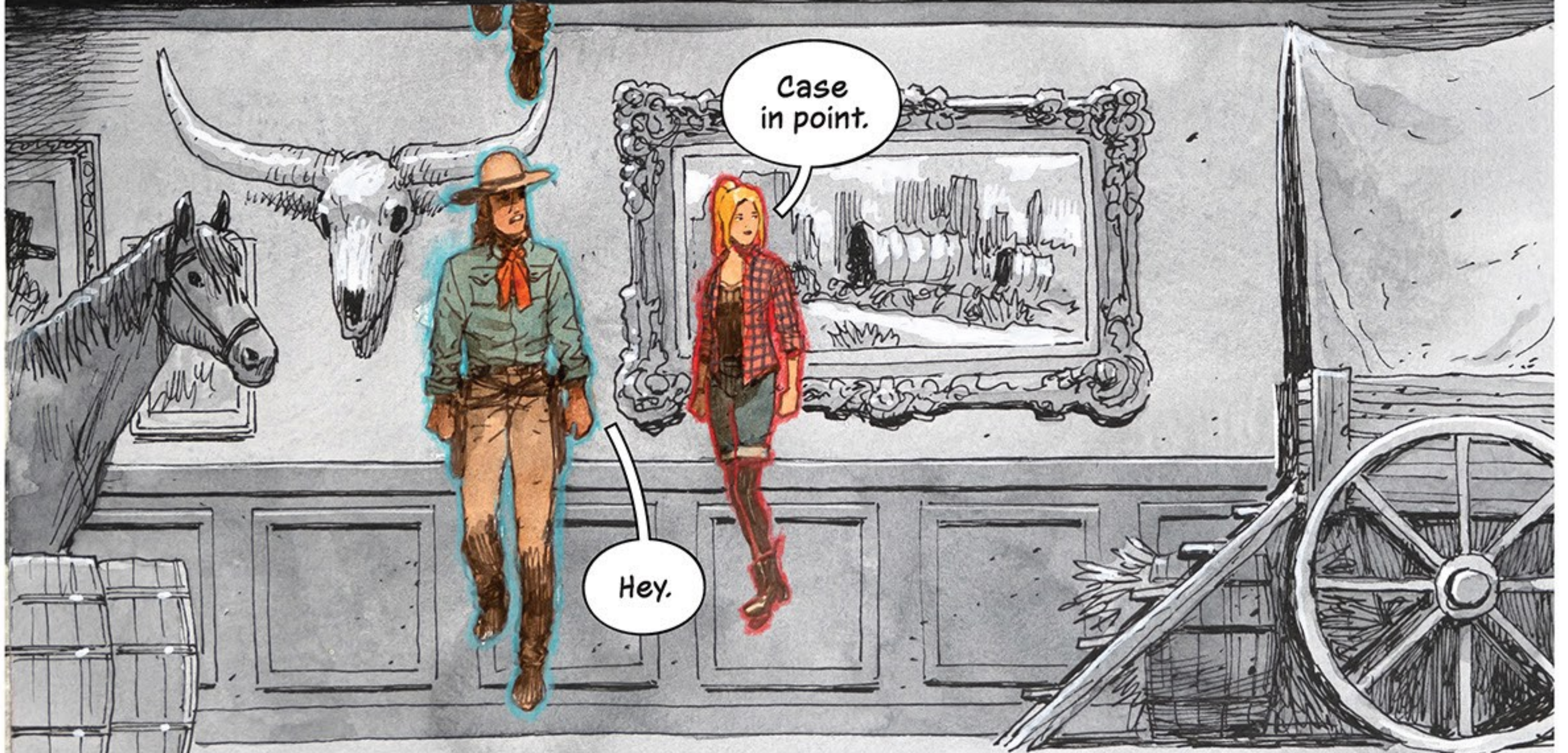
No kidding?



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

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

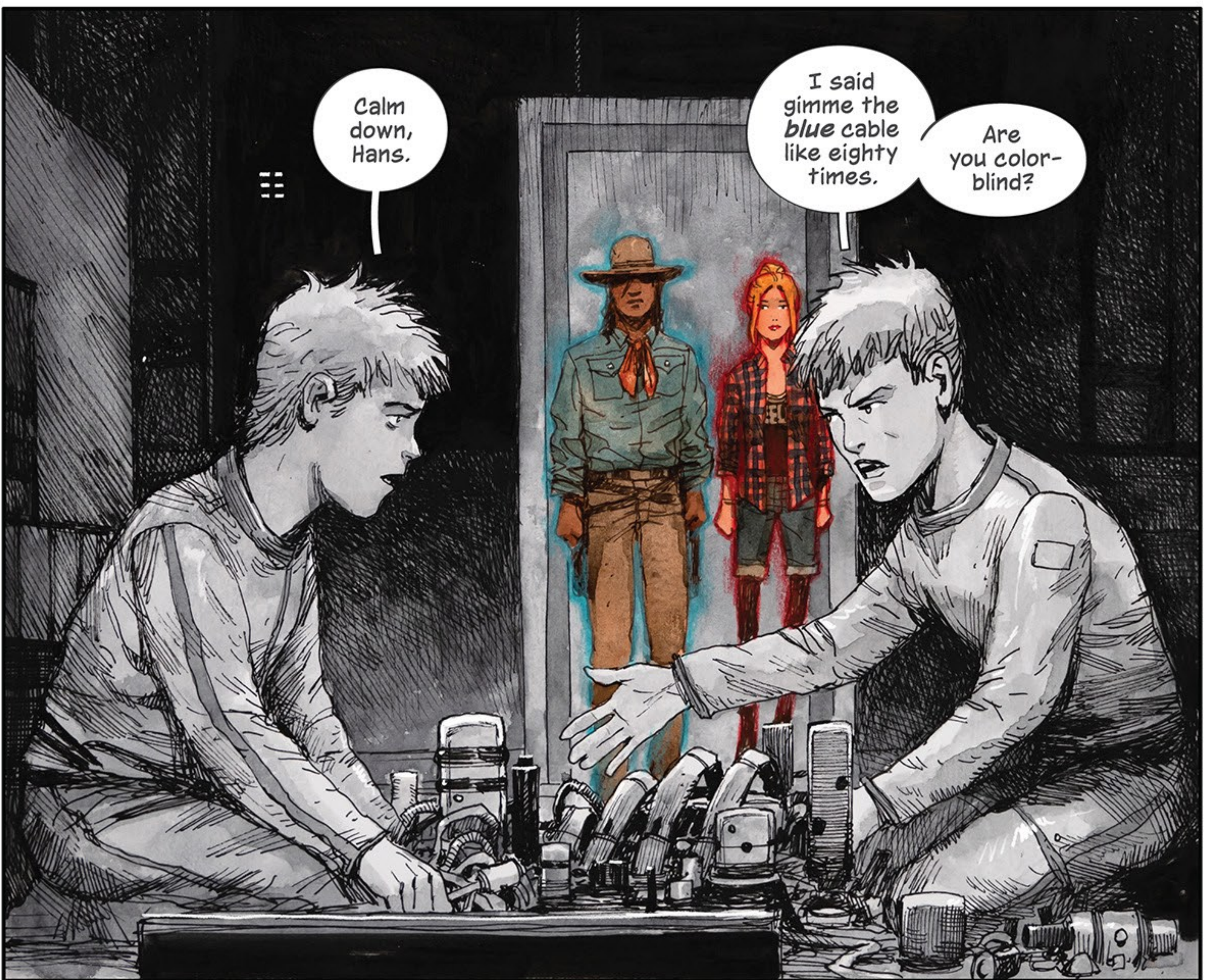
Something about this place just attracts the biggest freaks on the planet.



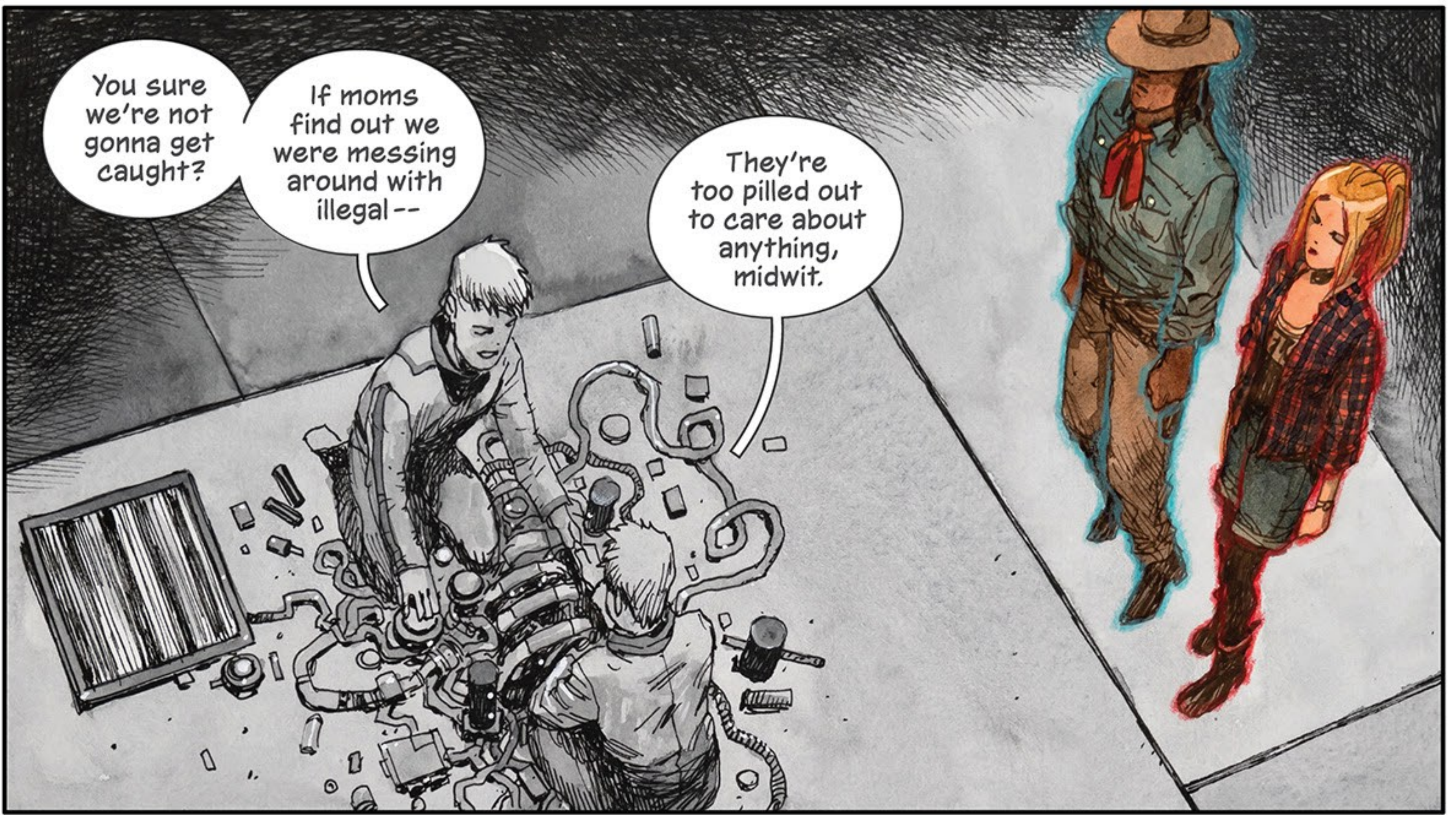
Case in point.

Hey.









You sure we're not gonna get caught?

If moms find out we were messing around with illegal --

They're too pilled out to care about anything, midwit.



Ohh, go back!

You almost caught something!

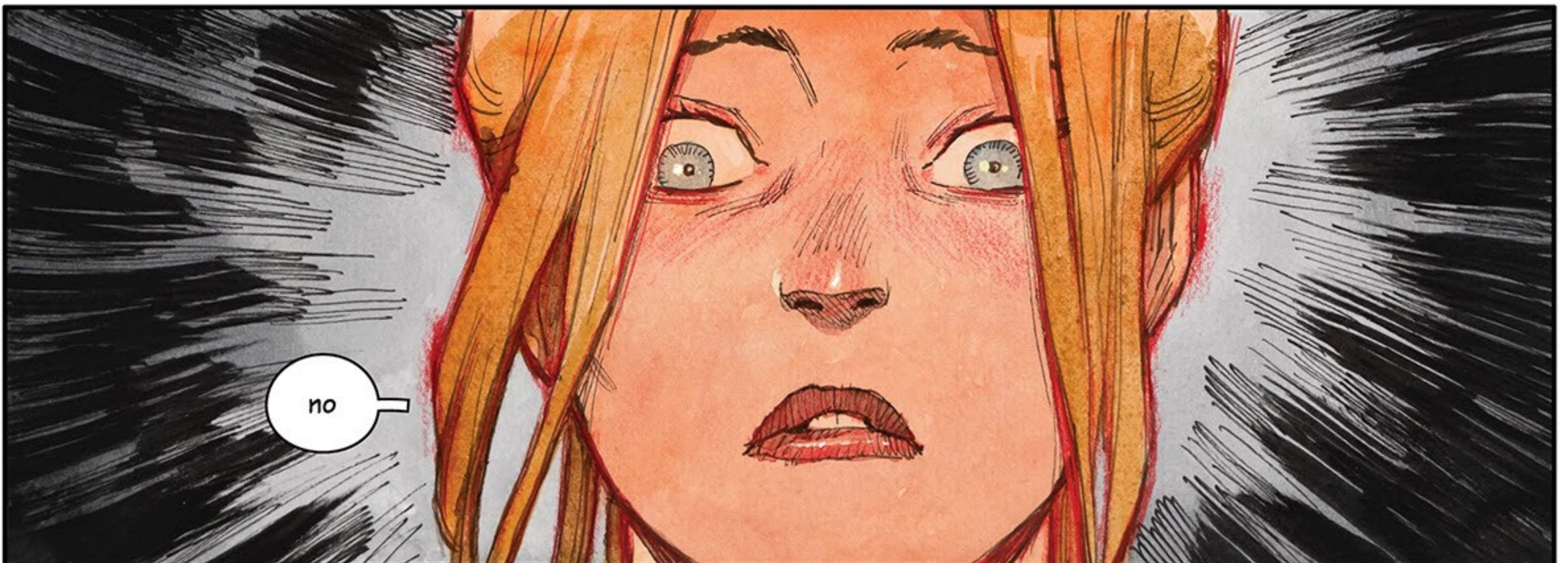
Wait, let me start it from the beginning.



Holy eff.

Is this real?

Shut up and listen!



no





Hiya,  
folks!

#LEADERBOARD





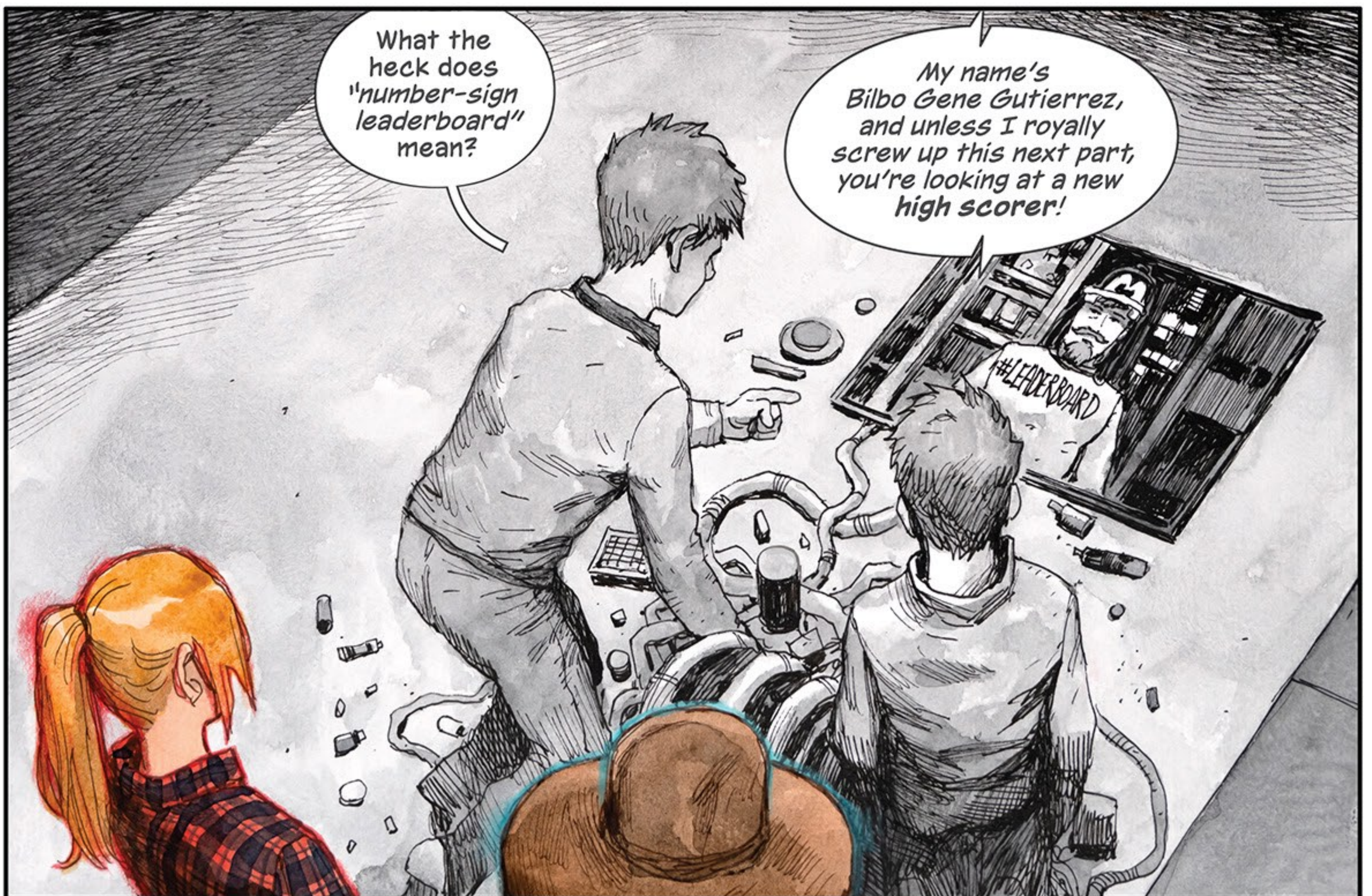


Val?  
You don't...  
know this guy,  
do you?



Never met this particular salesman, no.

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



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

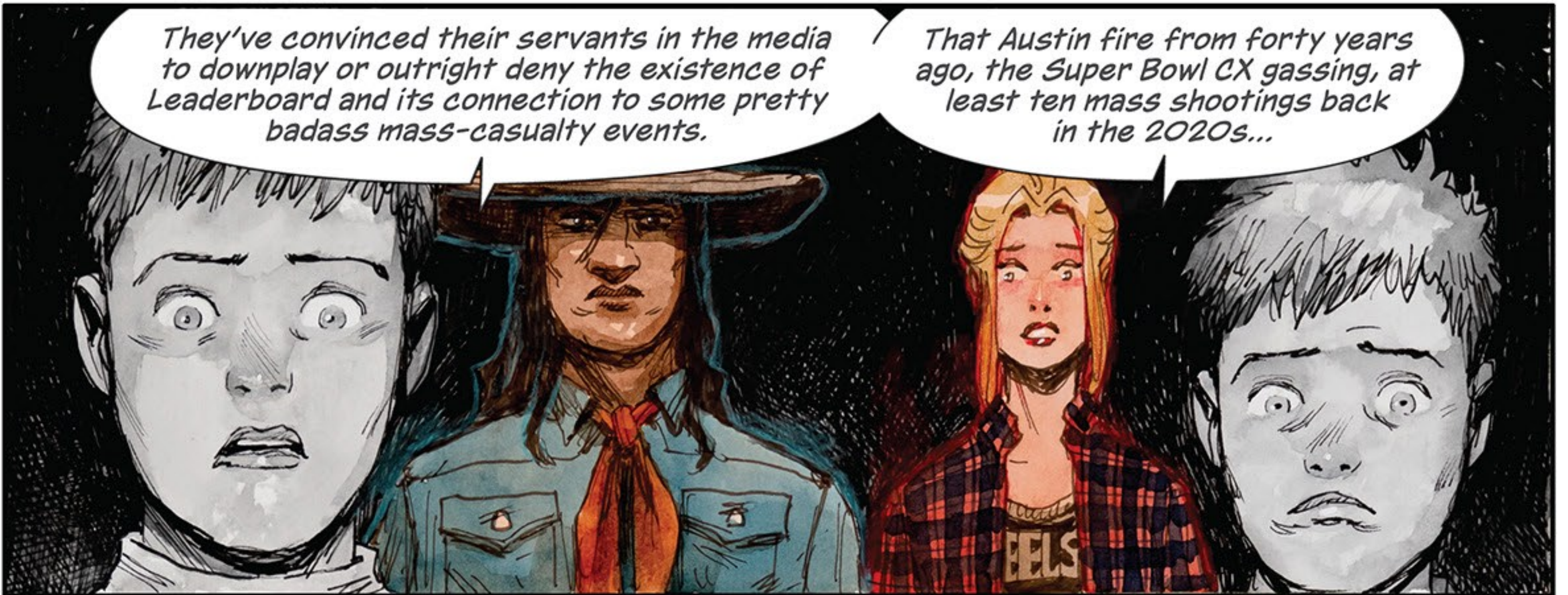
My name's Bilbo Gene Gutierrez, and unless I royally screw up this next part, you're looking at a new high scorer!







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...



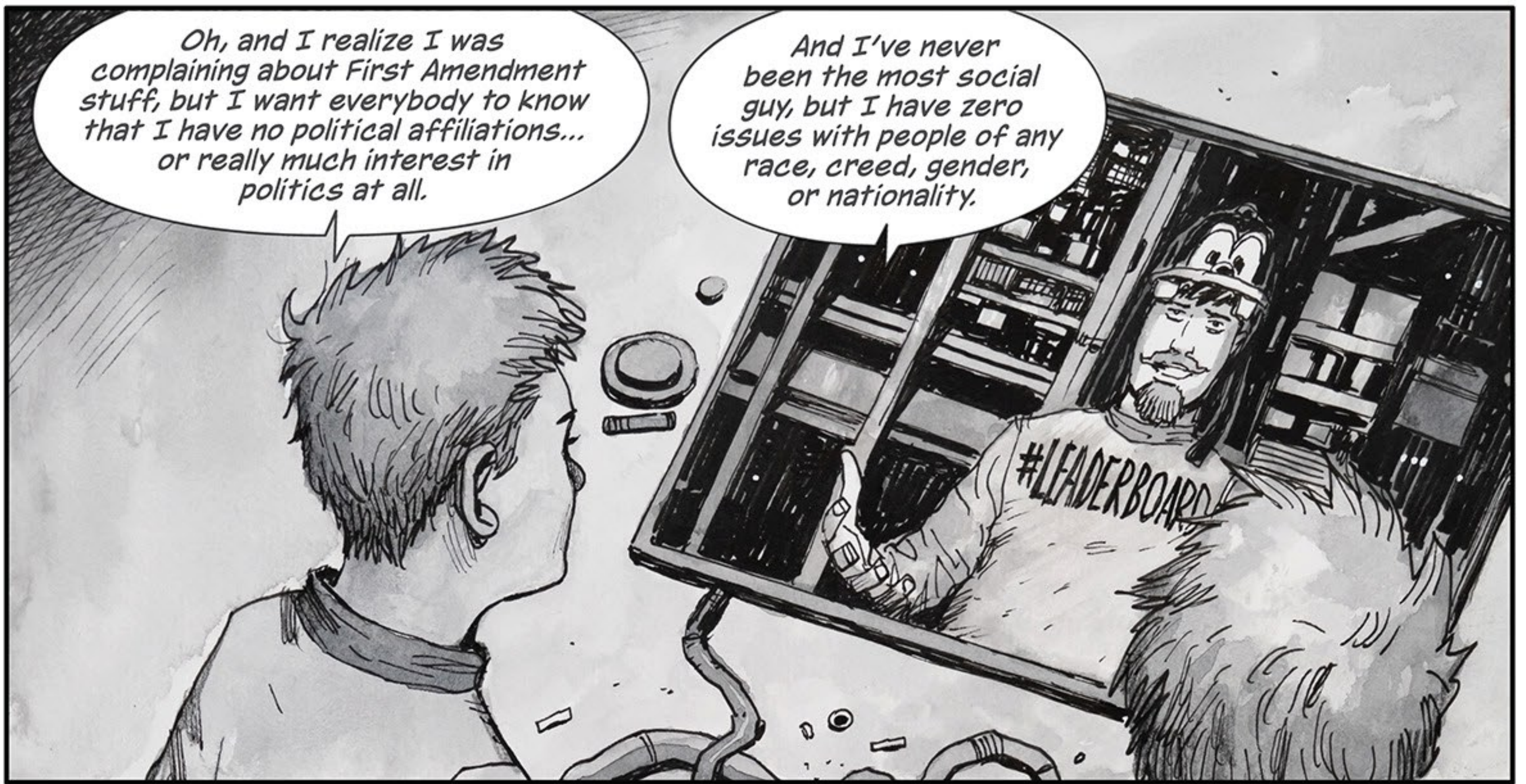
...all done by my fellow players!



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

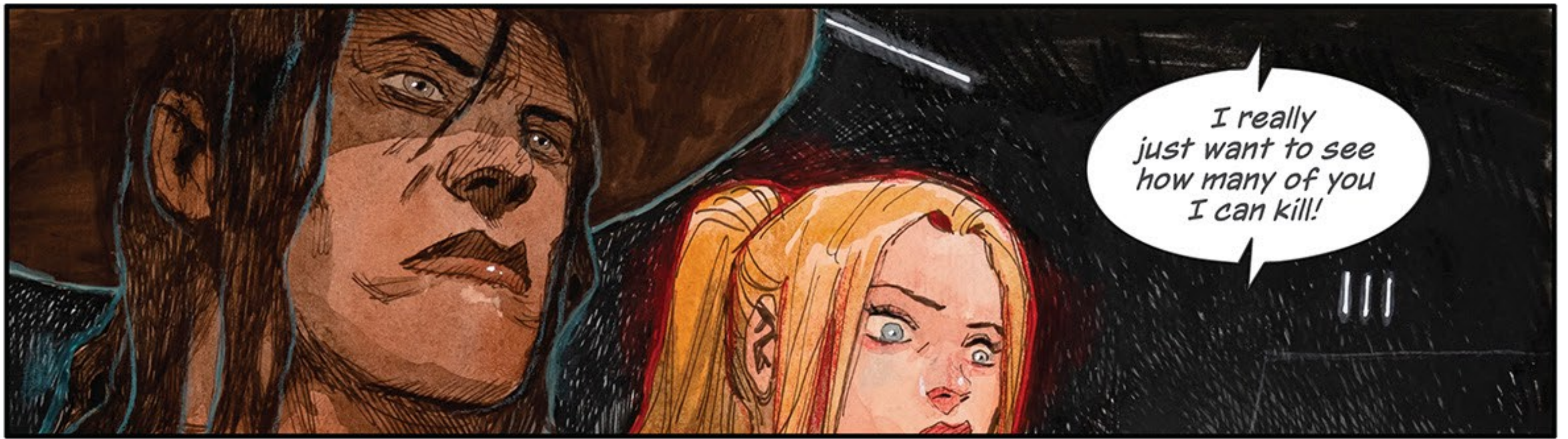
I can only hope that the way I compete today will help bring them all the credit they deserve.





Oh, and I realize I was complaining about First Amendment stuff, but I want everybody to know that I have no political affiliations... or really much interest in politics at all.

And I've never been the most social guy, but I have zero issues with people of any race, creed, gender, or nationality.



I really just want to see how many of you I can kill!



Like our patron saint, blessed be S.C.P., I want to achieve whatever rank I'm lucky enough to reach single-handedly, without assistance from anyone.

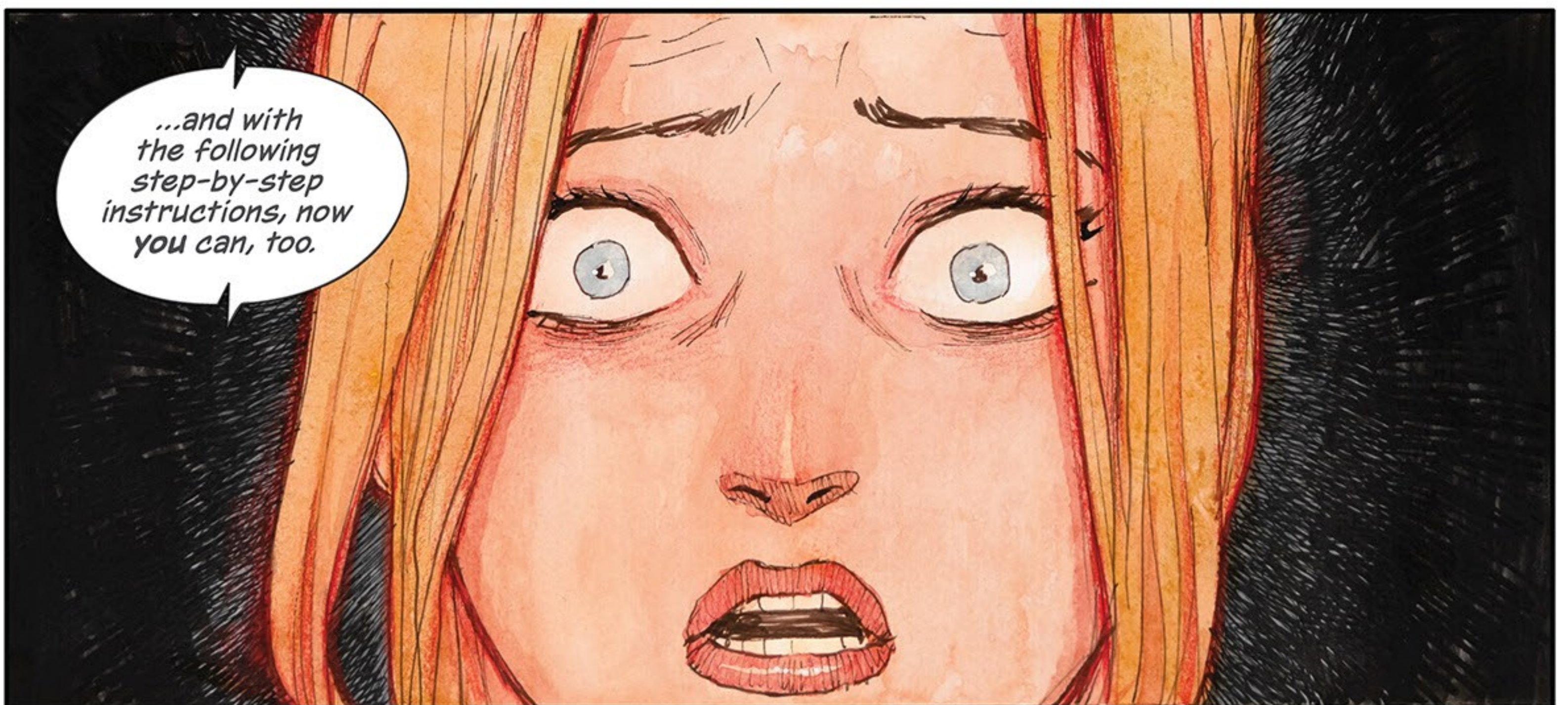


I mean, folks can argue that Genghis or Stalin deserve the top spot, but those guys had help, you know?



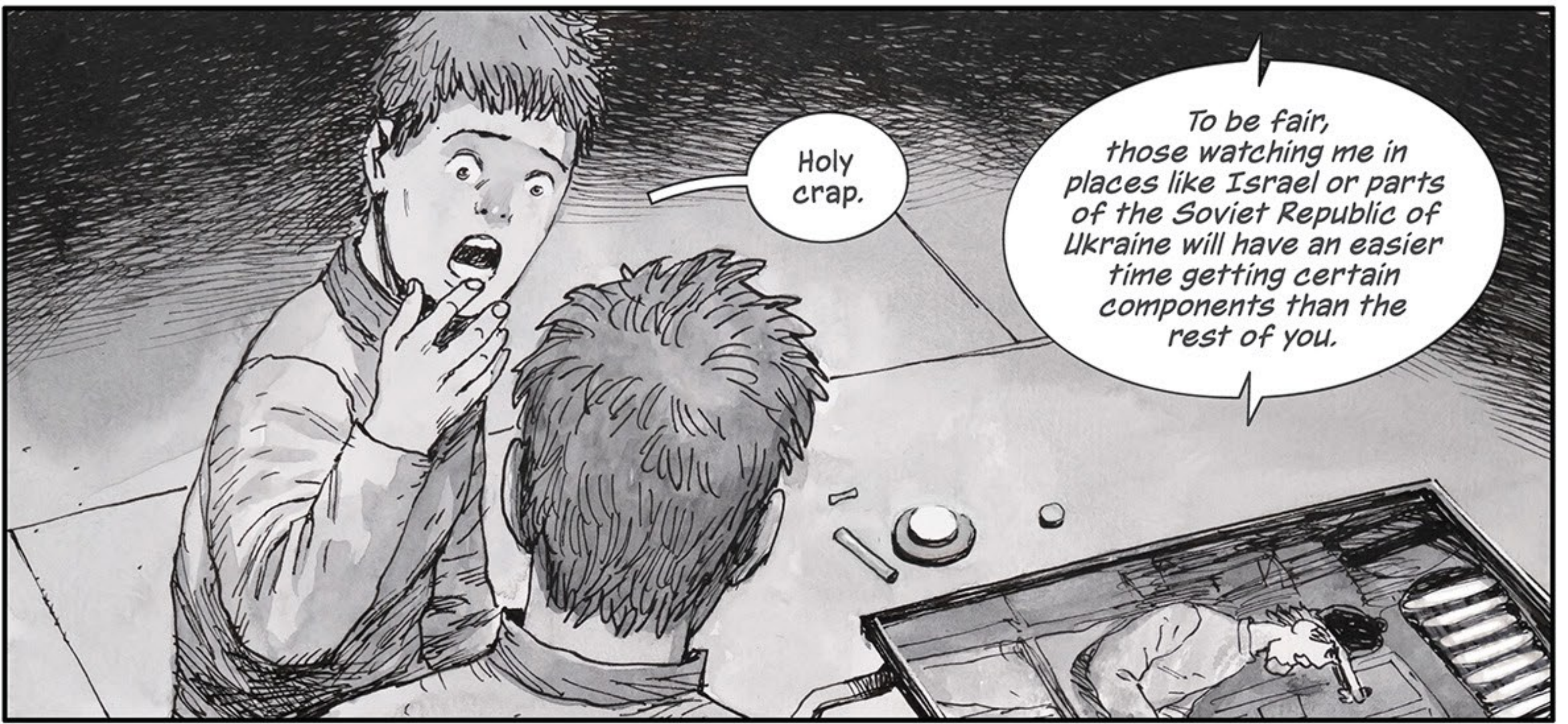


*I built  
Fat Boy here  
entirely on  
my own...*



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





















What's  
the oldest  
ghost you  
ever met?





Oldest?

You mean age or era?

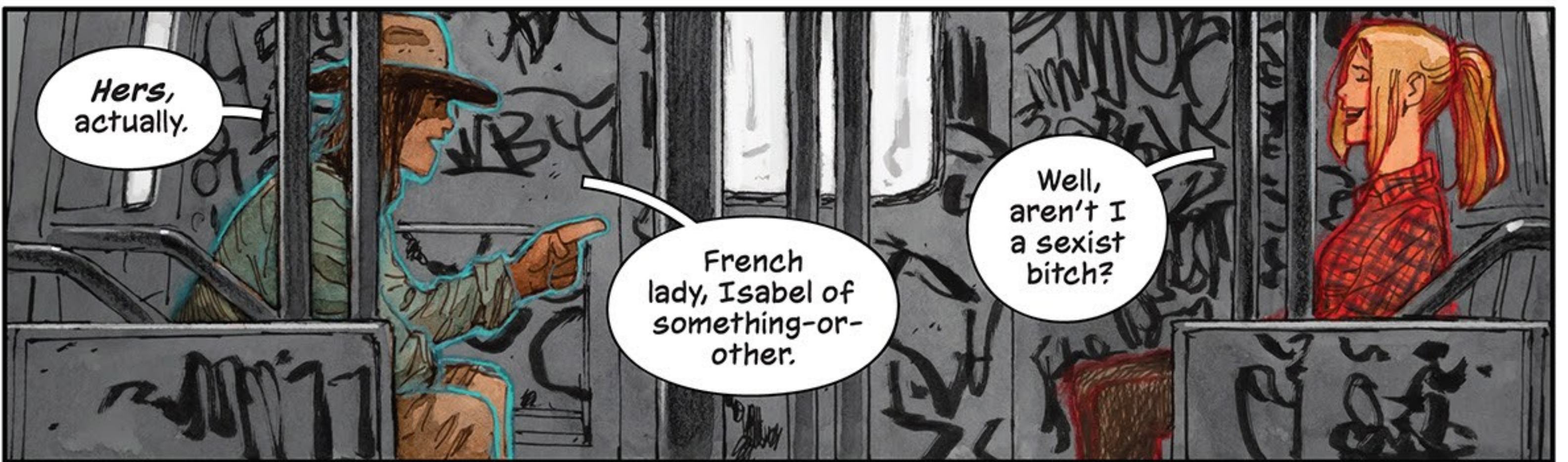
Era, I guess.



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.

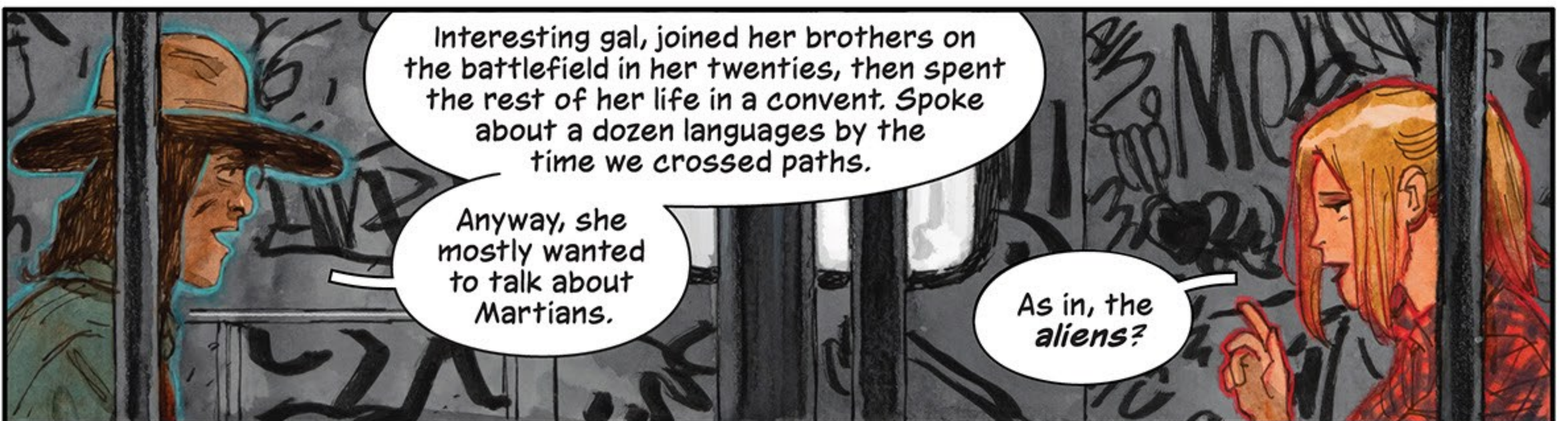
No shit. You catch his name?



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.

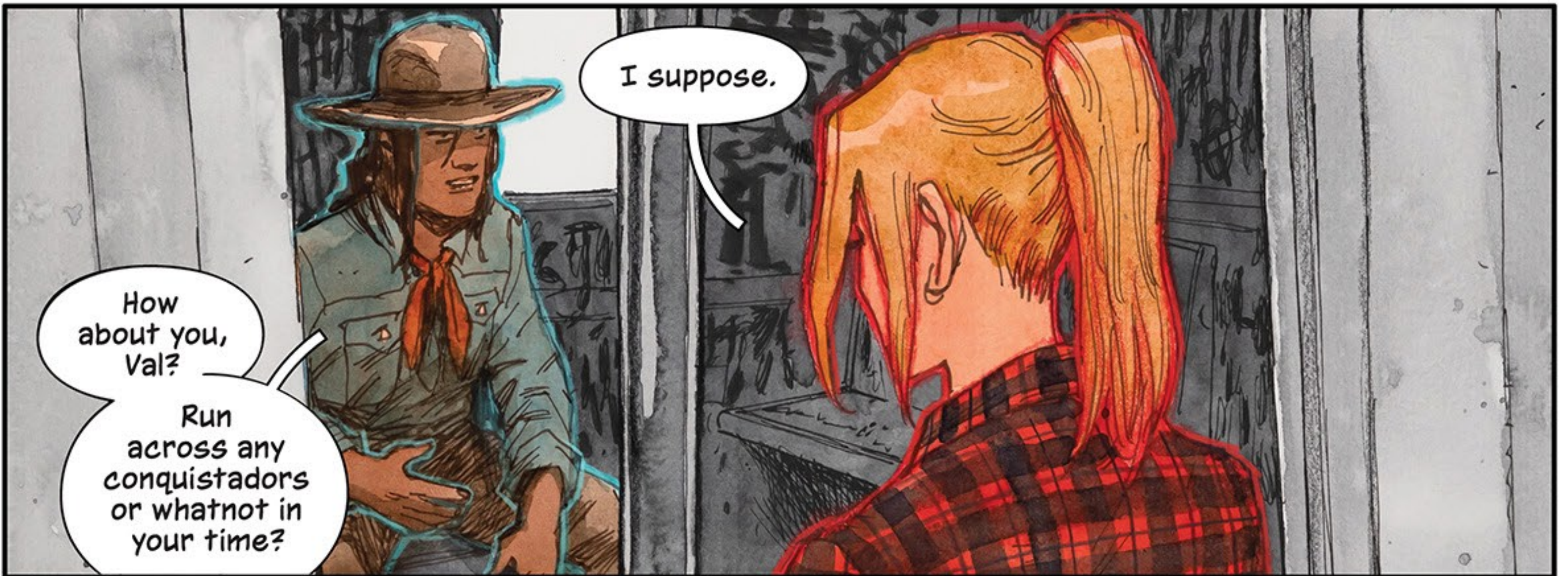
She felt for sure something like that was about to happen for real.



This chick sounds fucking amazing.

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

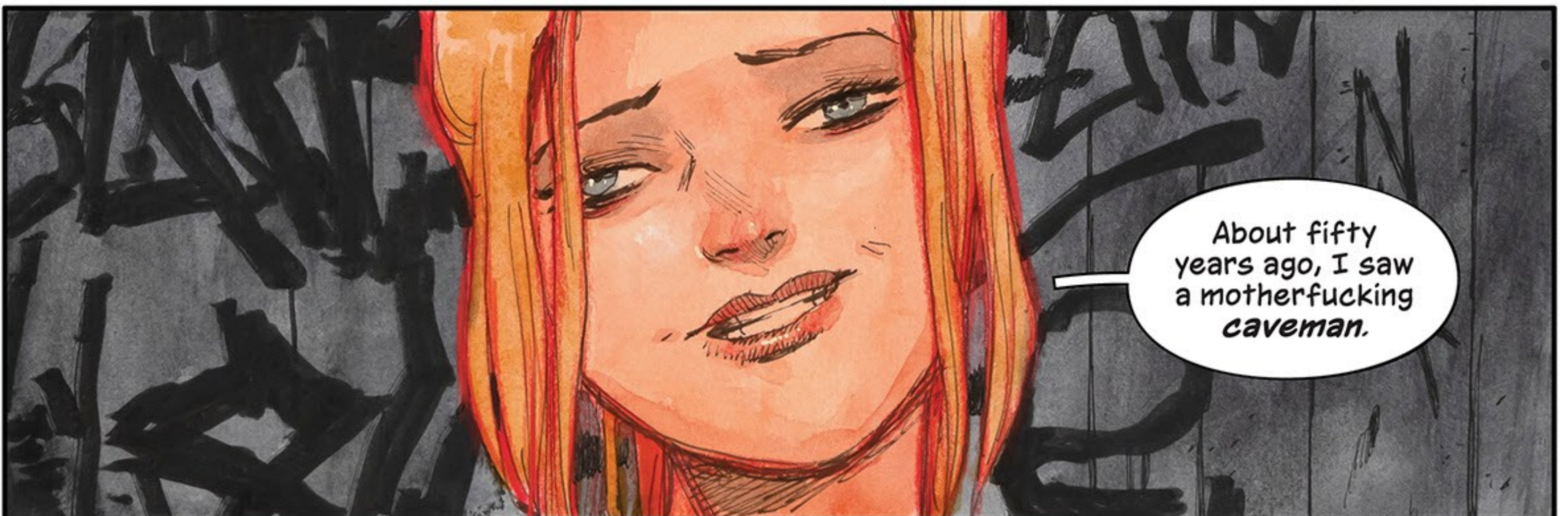
Eh, you know how it goes on this side. Sooner or later, folks tend to mosey on.



I suppose.

How about you, Val?

Run across any conquistadors or whatnot in your time?



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





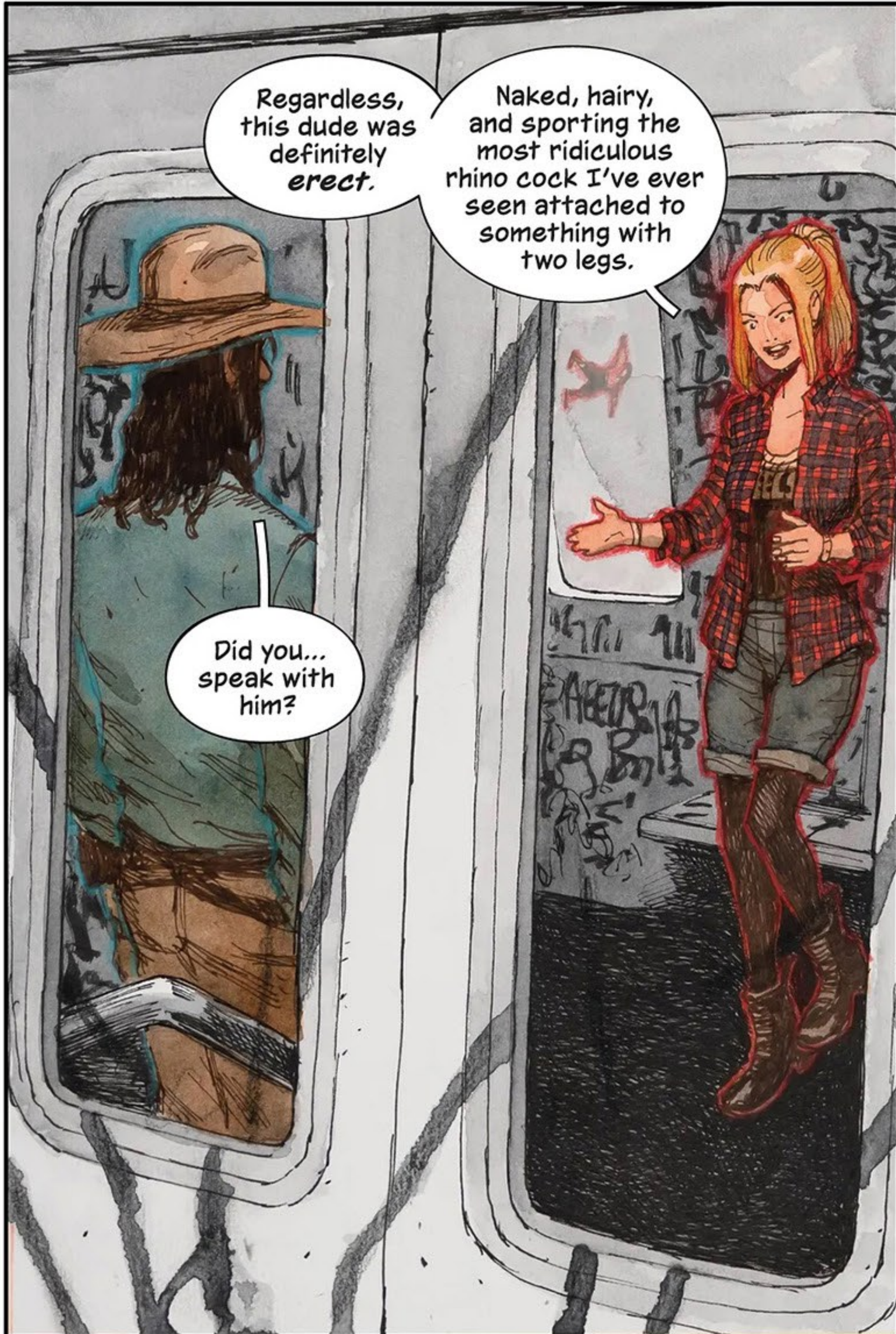
You mean one of those old cliff-dwellers out of Mesa Verde?

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.

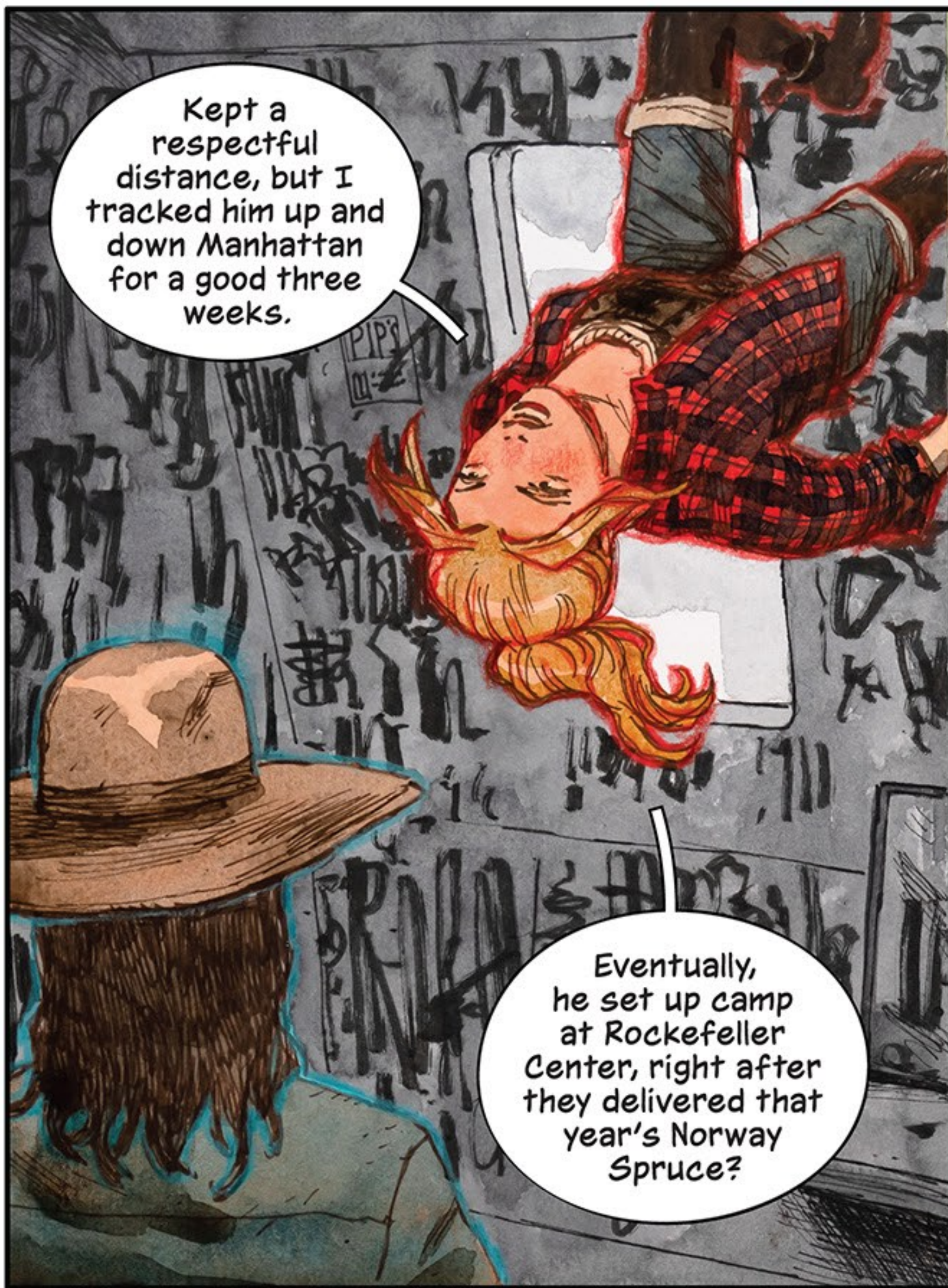
Did you... speak with him?



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.

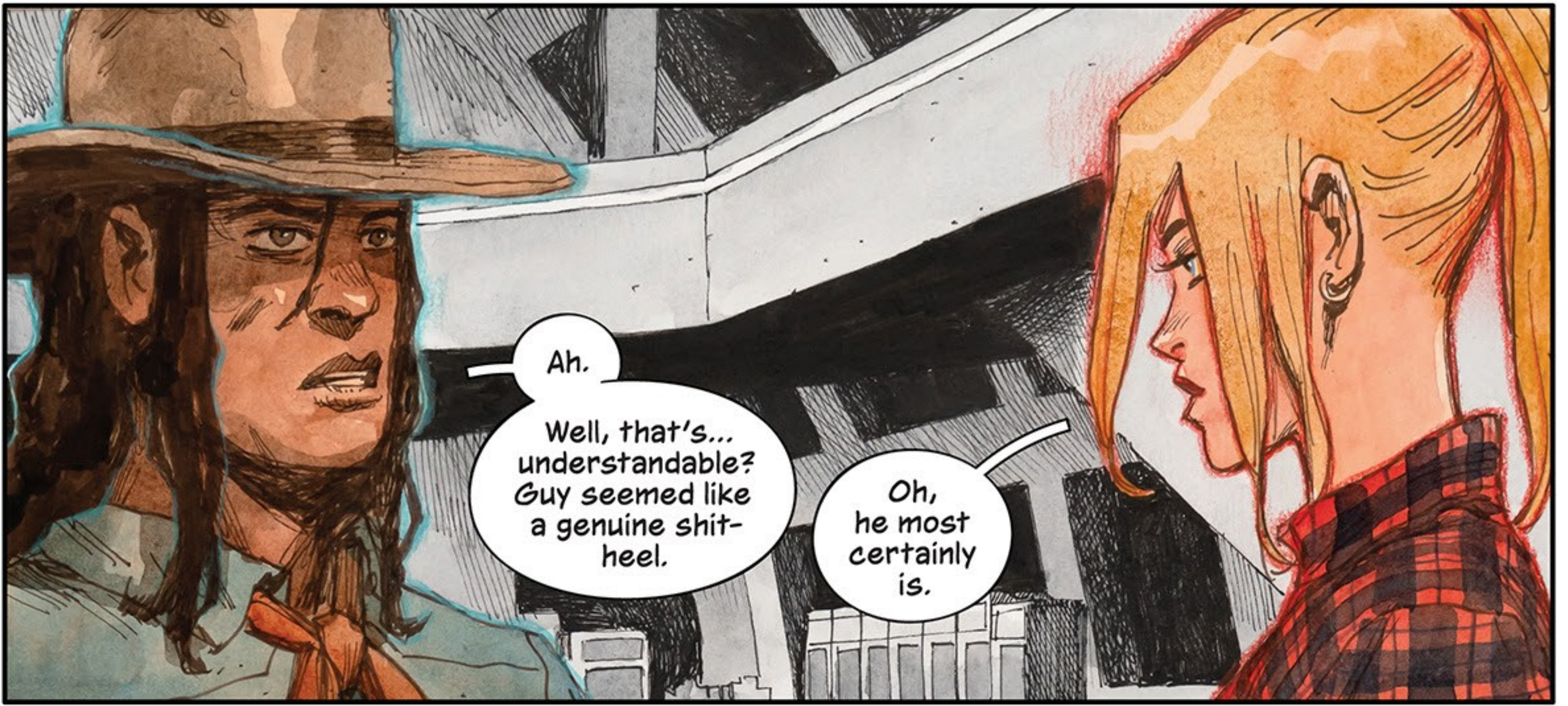
What about him?

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.







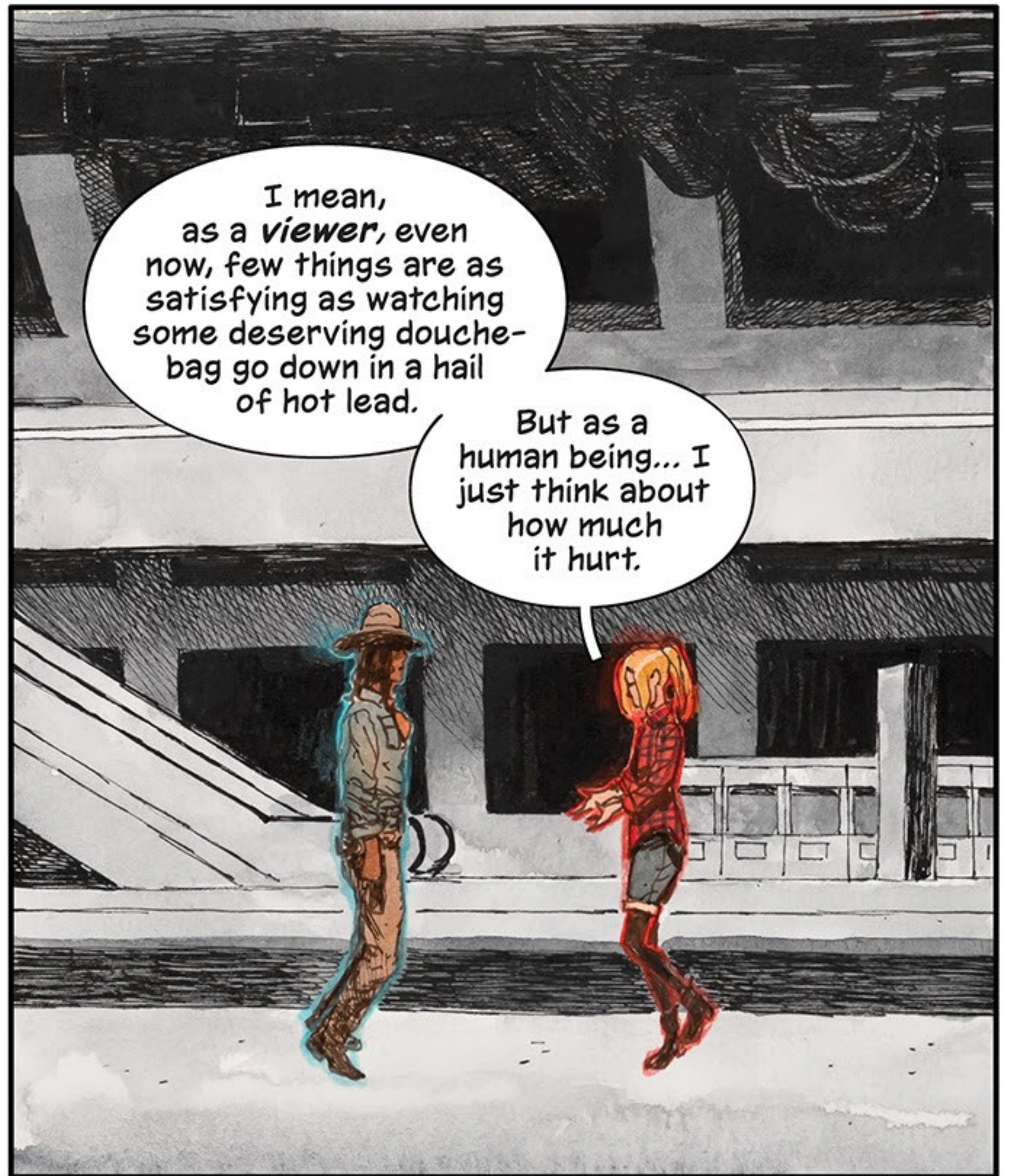
Ah.

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

Oh, he most certainly is.

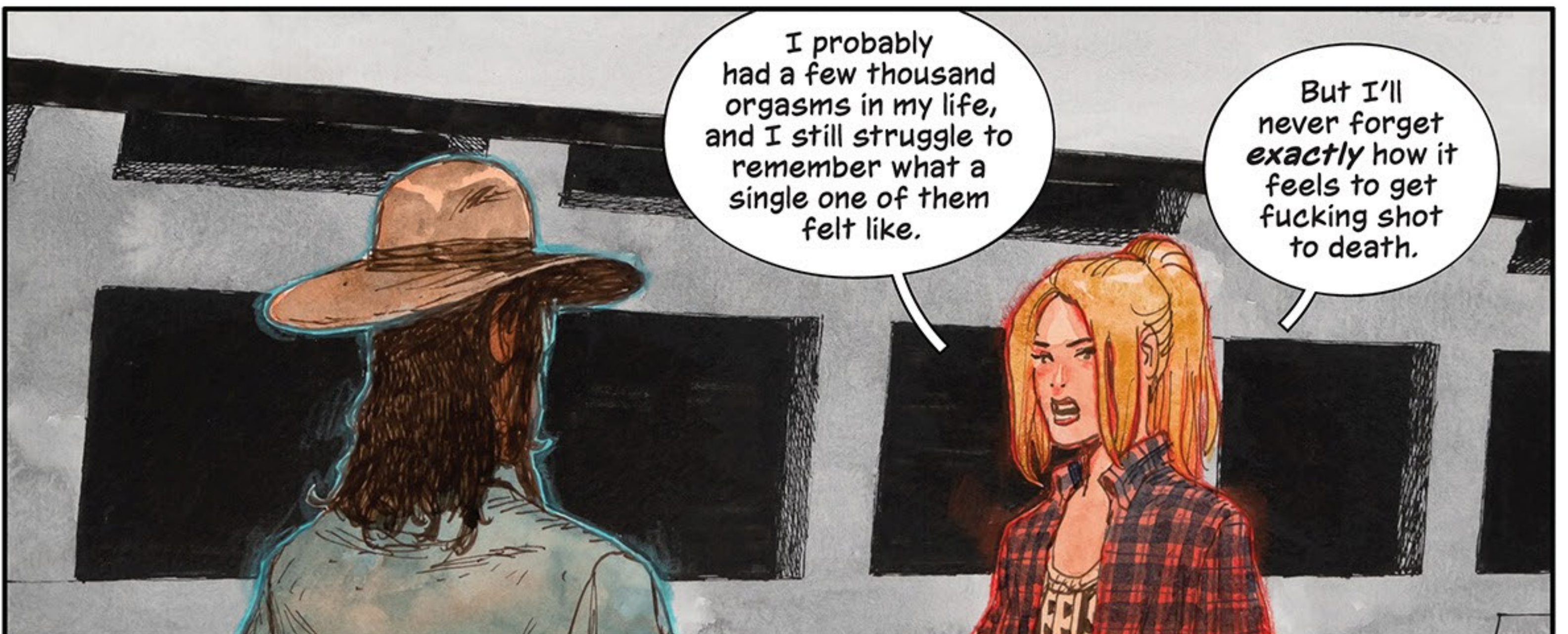


But why the fuck do I still get off on gunplay, considering that's how I ended up here?



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*.

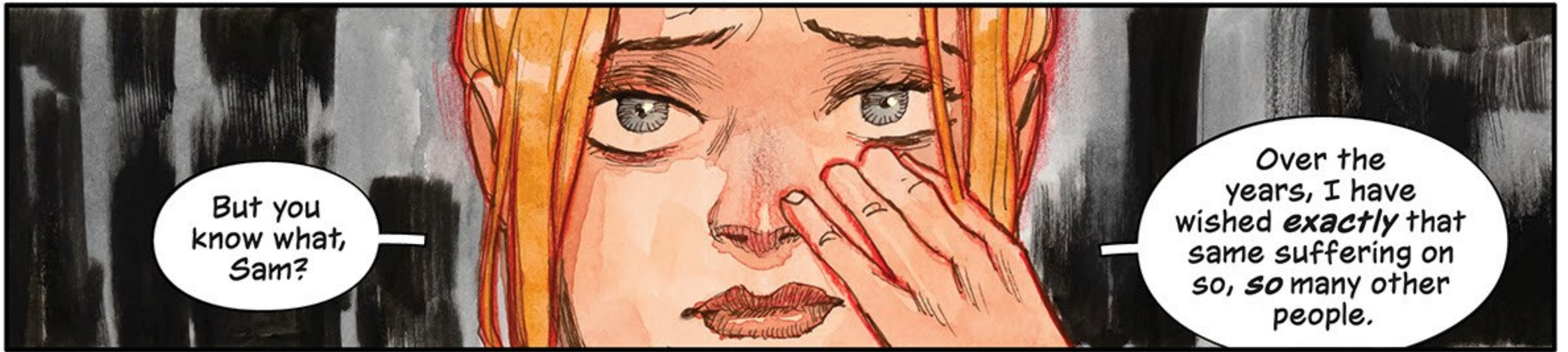






And when it was finally over, it had really only just begun.

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.

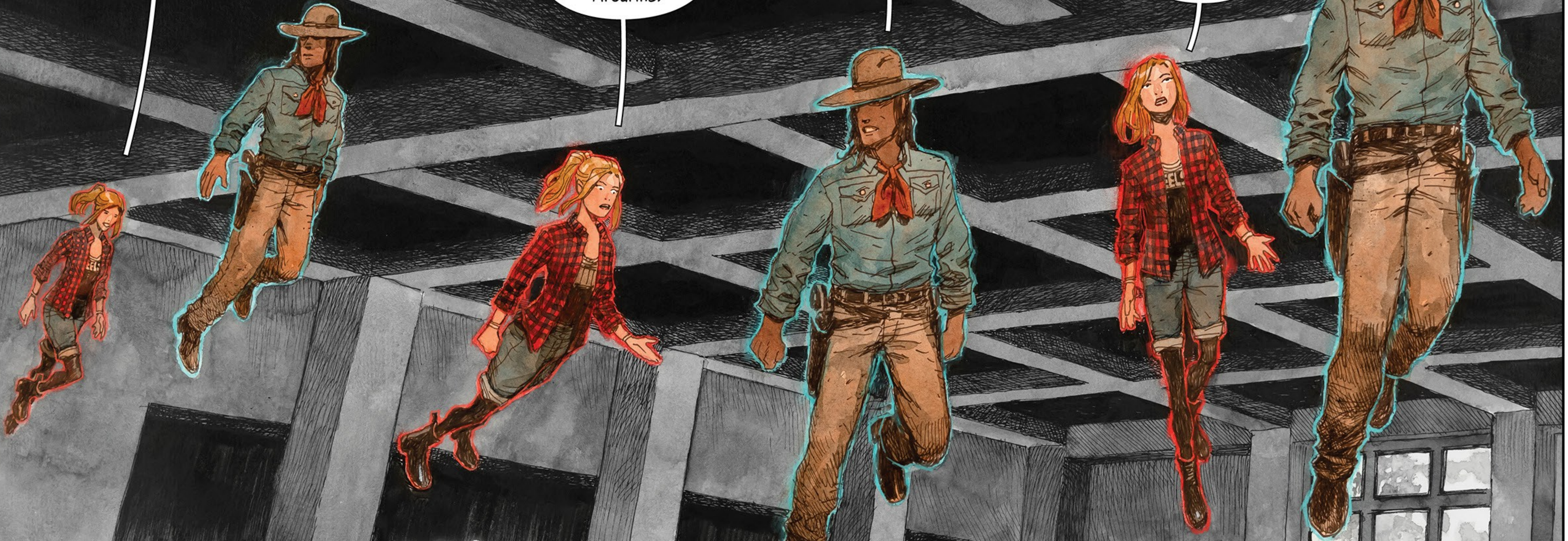
Man who taught me to drive cattle said I wouldn't even have to *load* these things for them to scare off rustlers.

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.

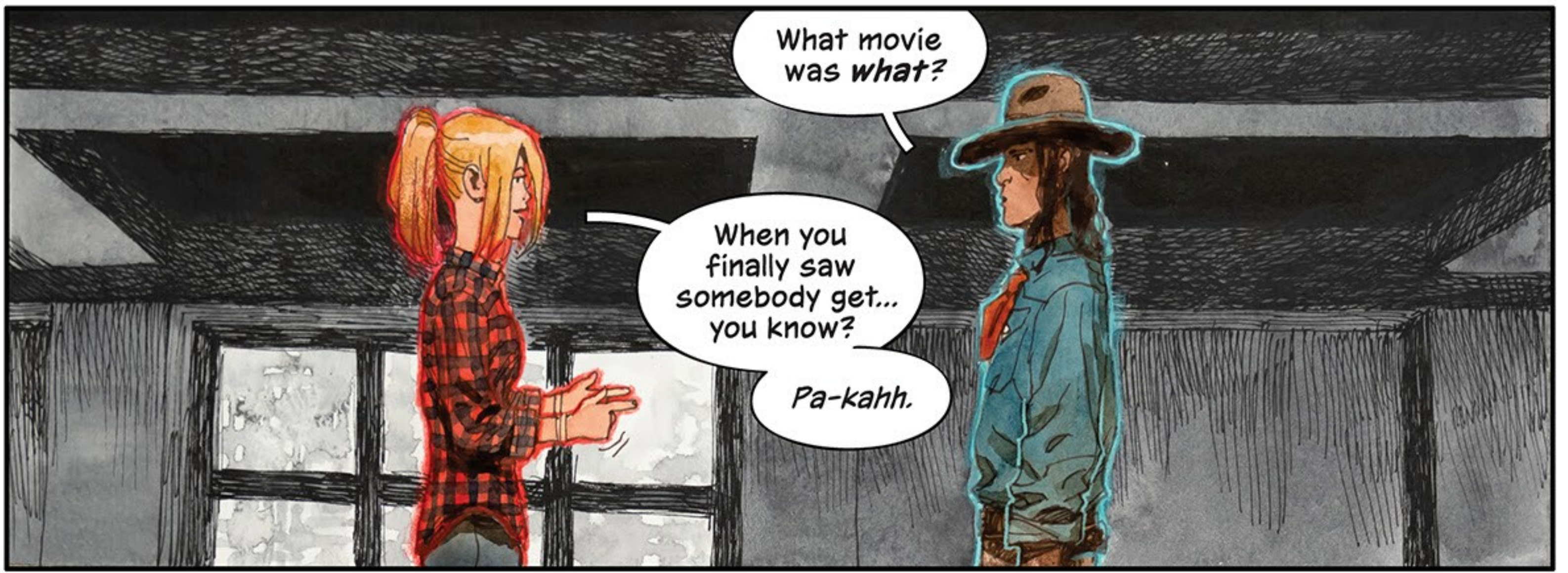
You suddenly sound... unenthused.



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?

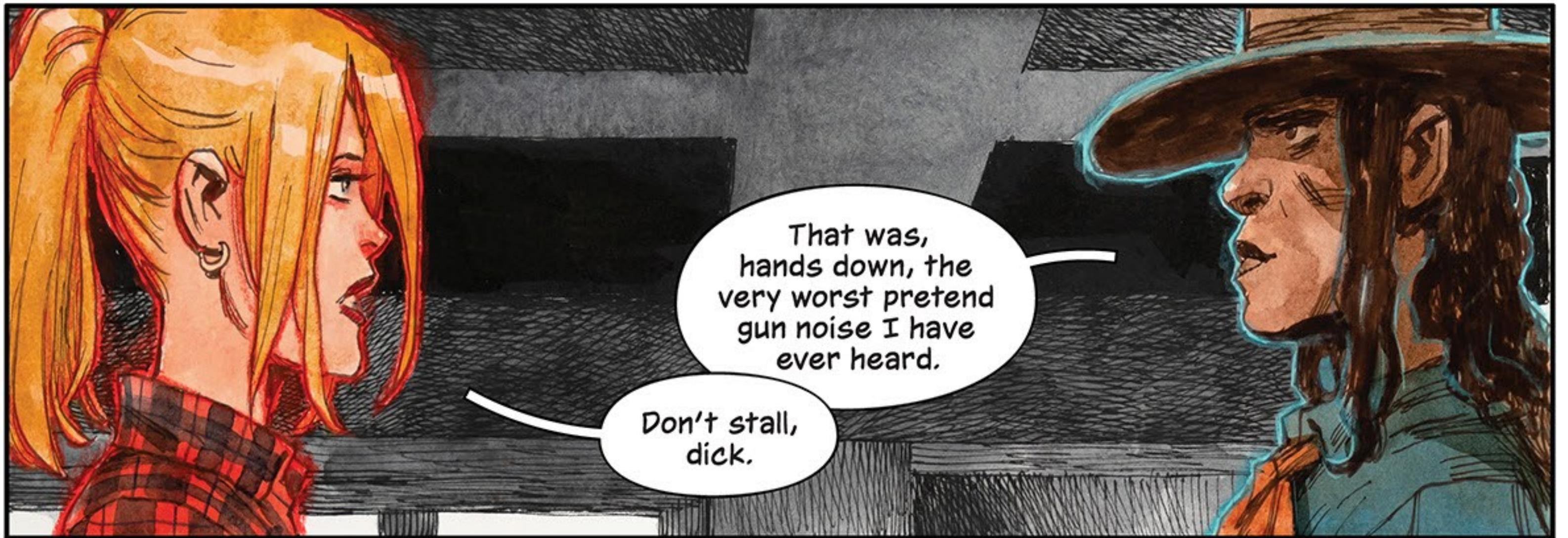




What movie was *what?*

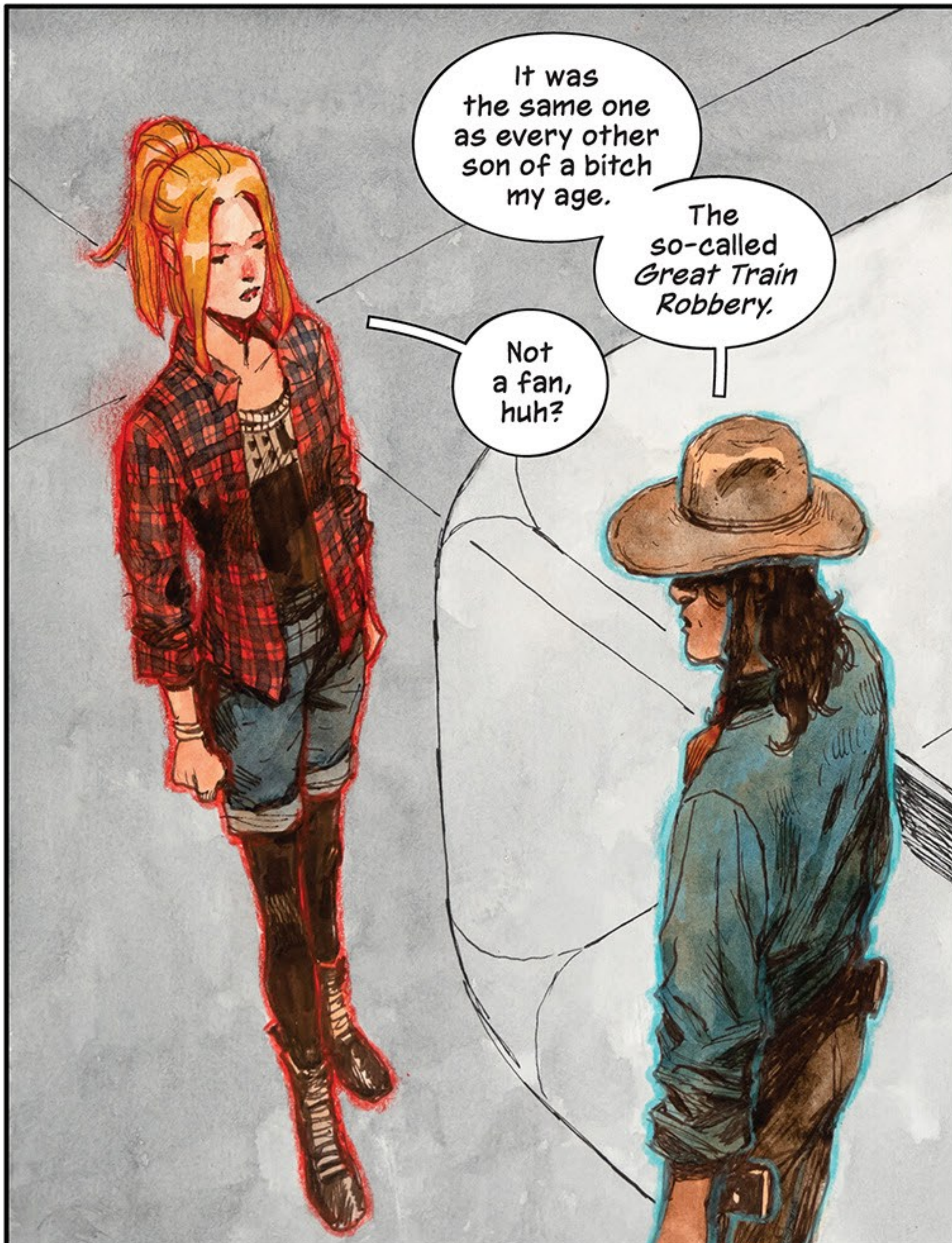
When you finally saw somebody get... you know?

*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.

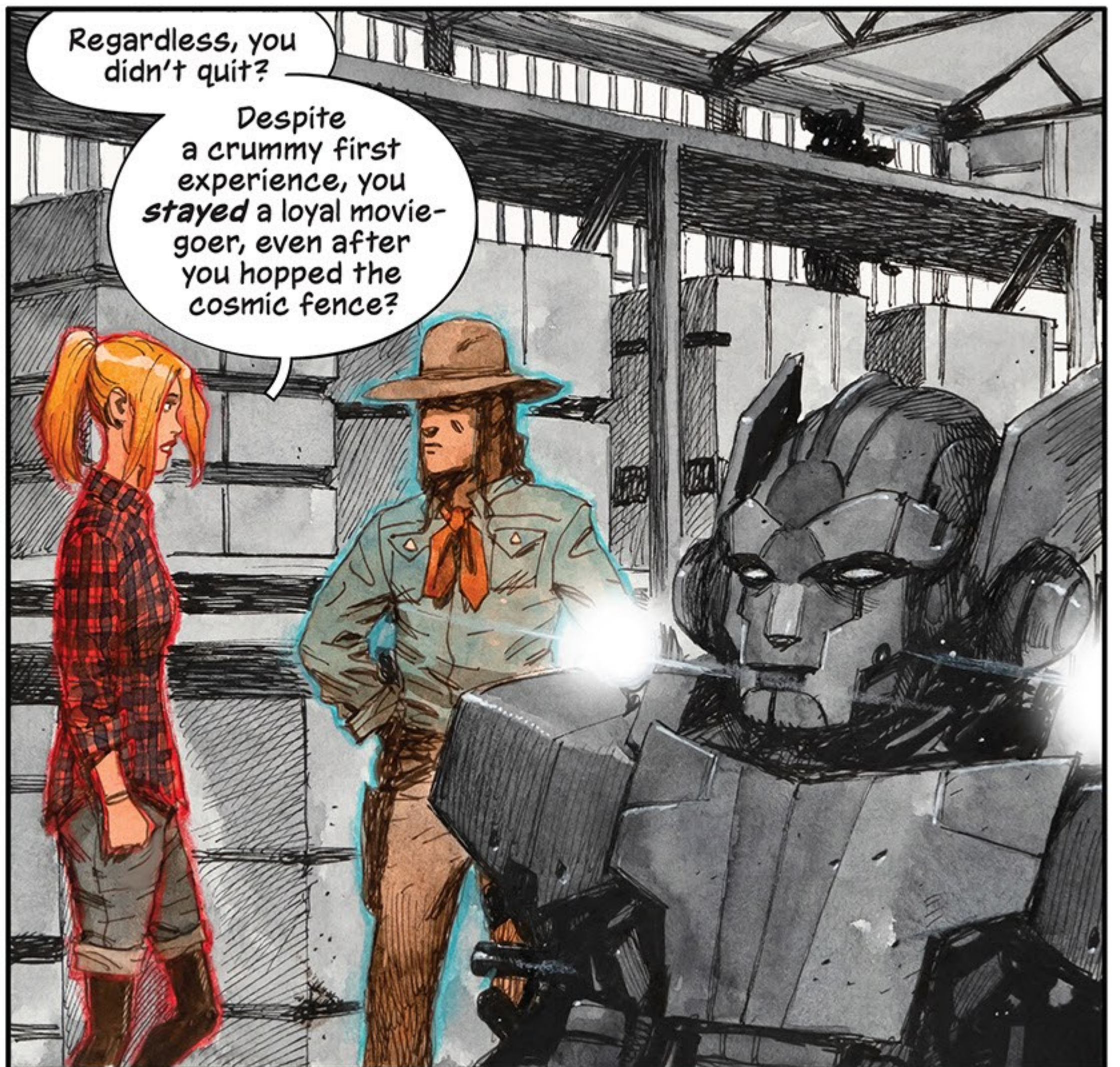
It was cheap back in your day, and it was still cheap when Scorsese aped it for the end of *Goodfellas*.

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



For real?

That's... refreshing.



Regardless, you didn't quit?

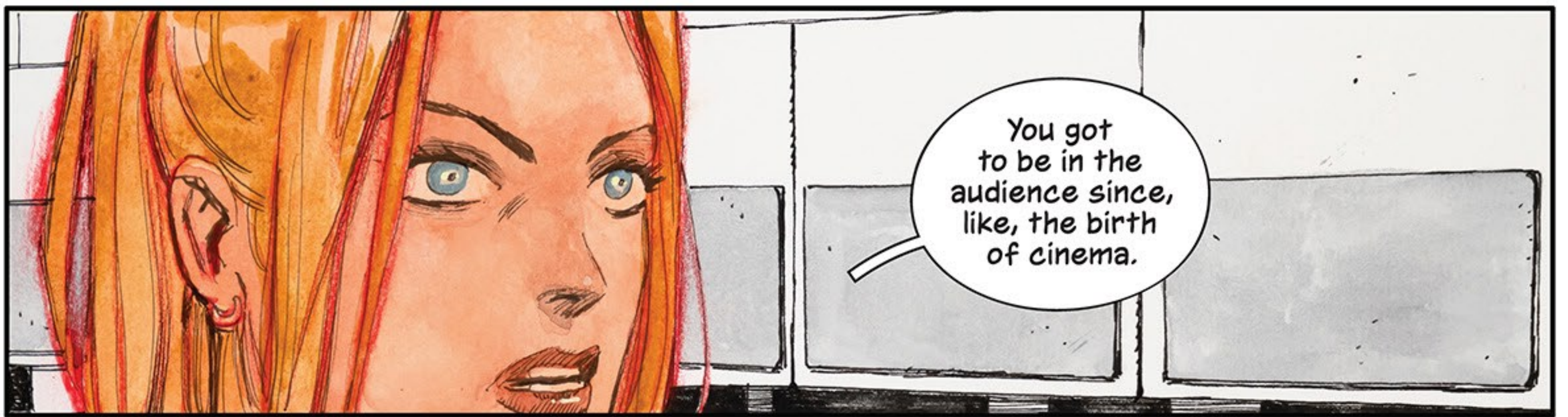
Despite a crummy first experience, you *stayed* a loyal movie-goer, even after you hopped the cosmic fence?



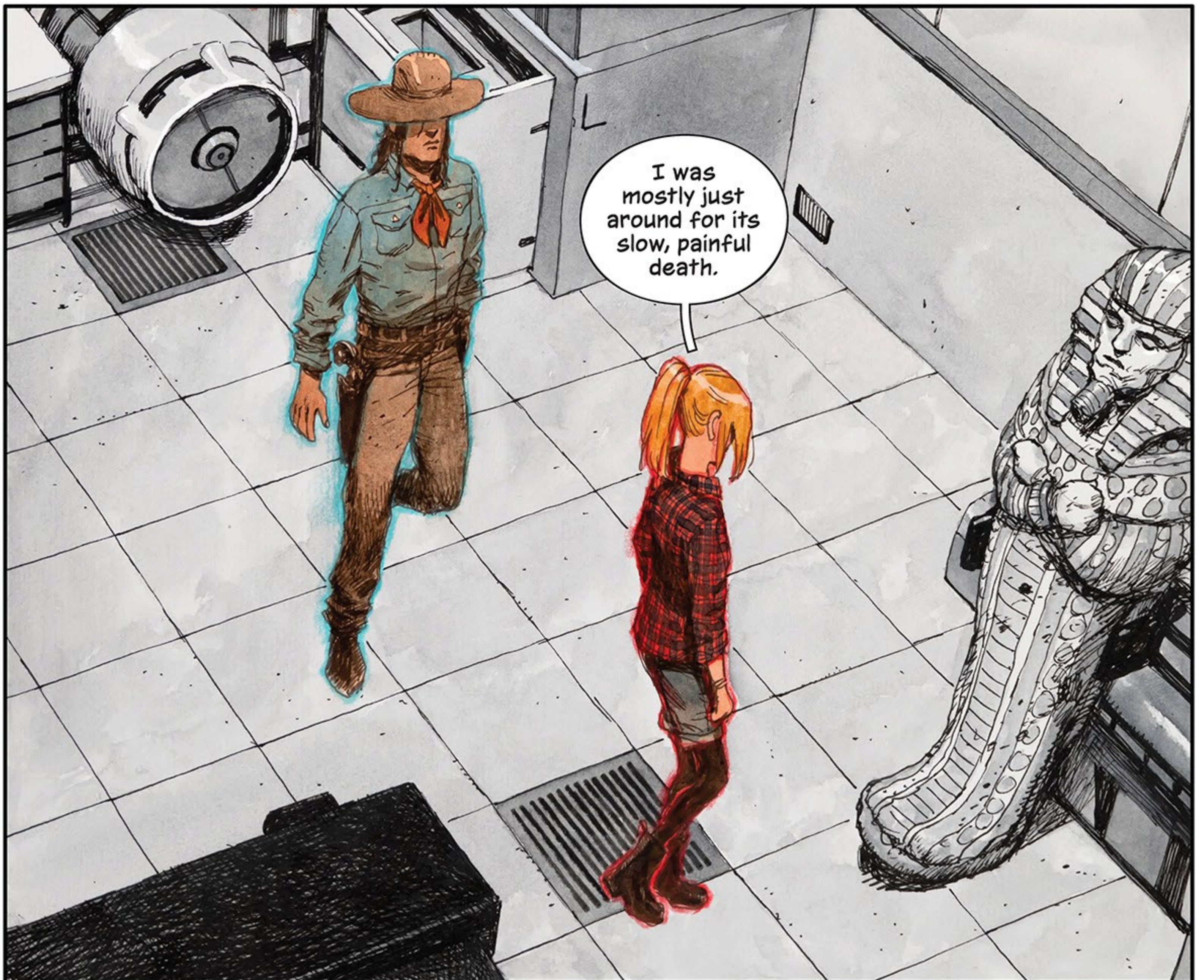


Caught my fair share of matinees over the centuries, if that's how you mean.

I'm so fucking jealous.



You got to be in the audience since, like, the birth of cinema.



I was mostly just around for its slow, painful death.



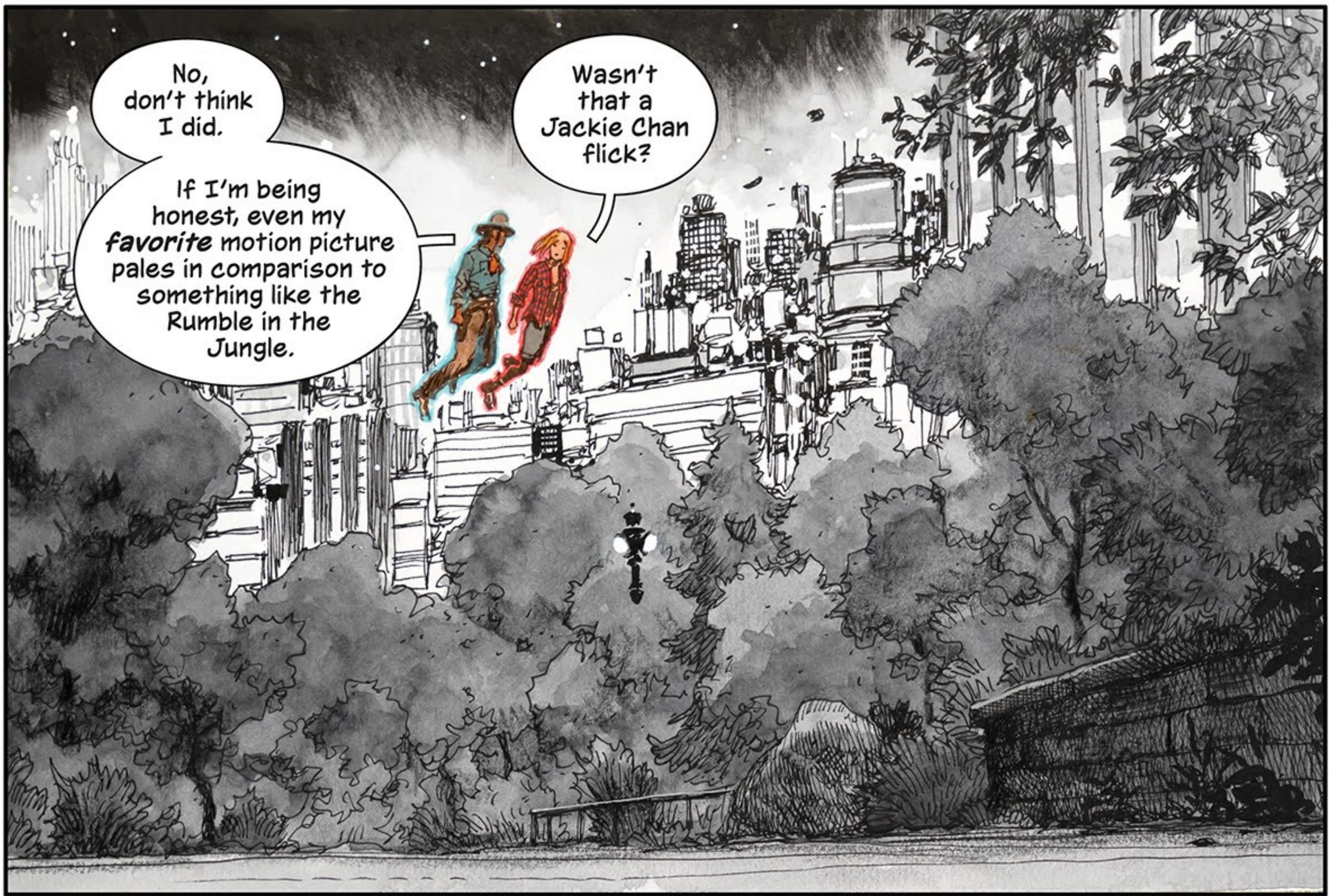






You didn't miss much.

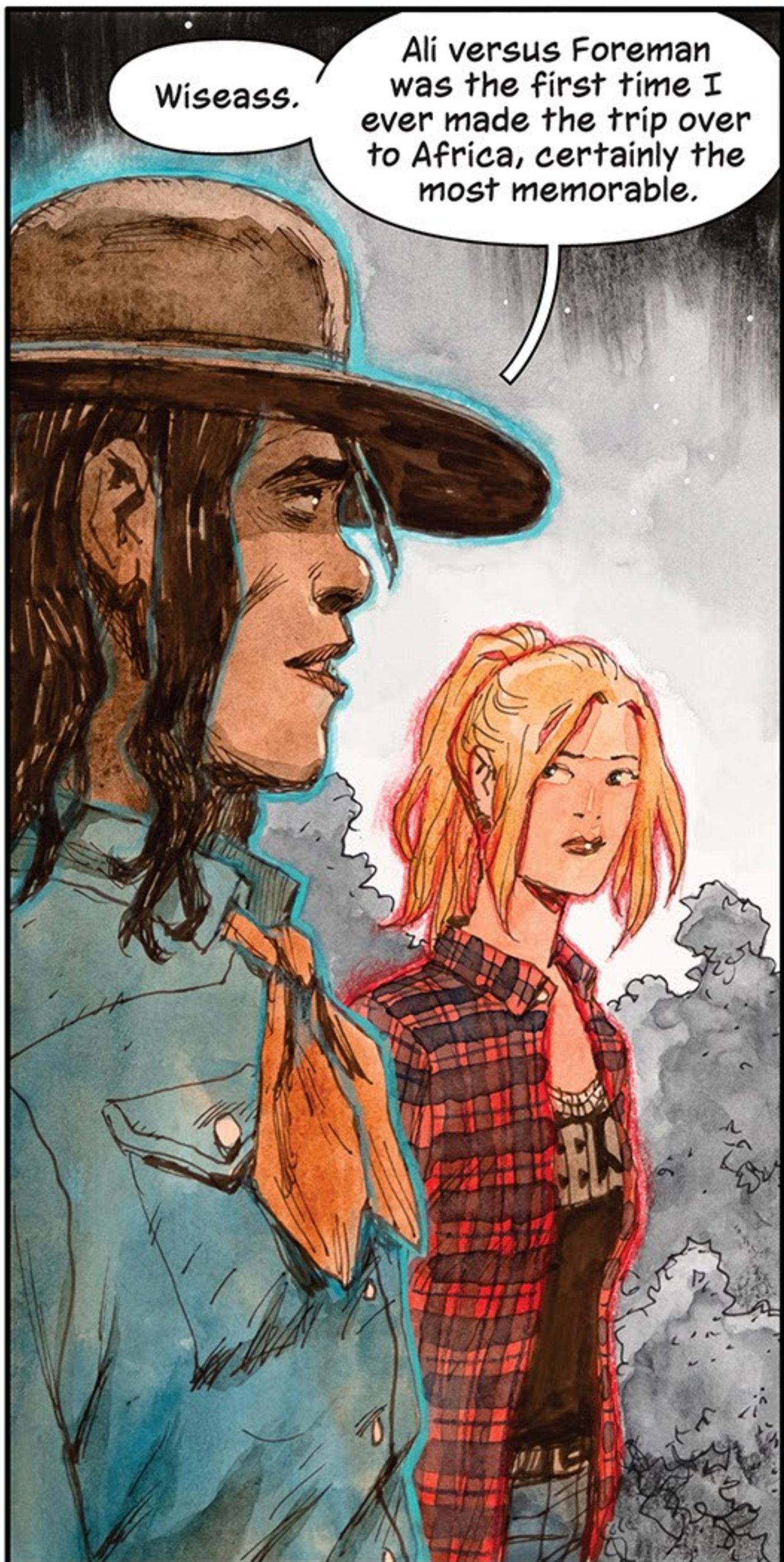




No, don't think I did.

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.



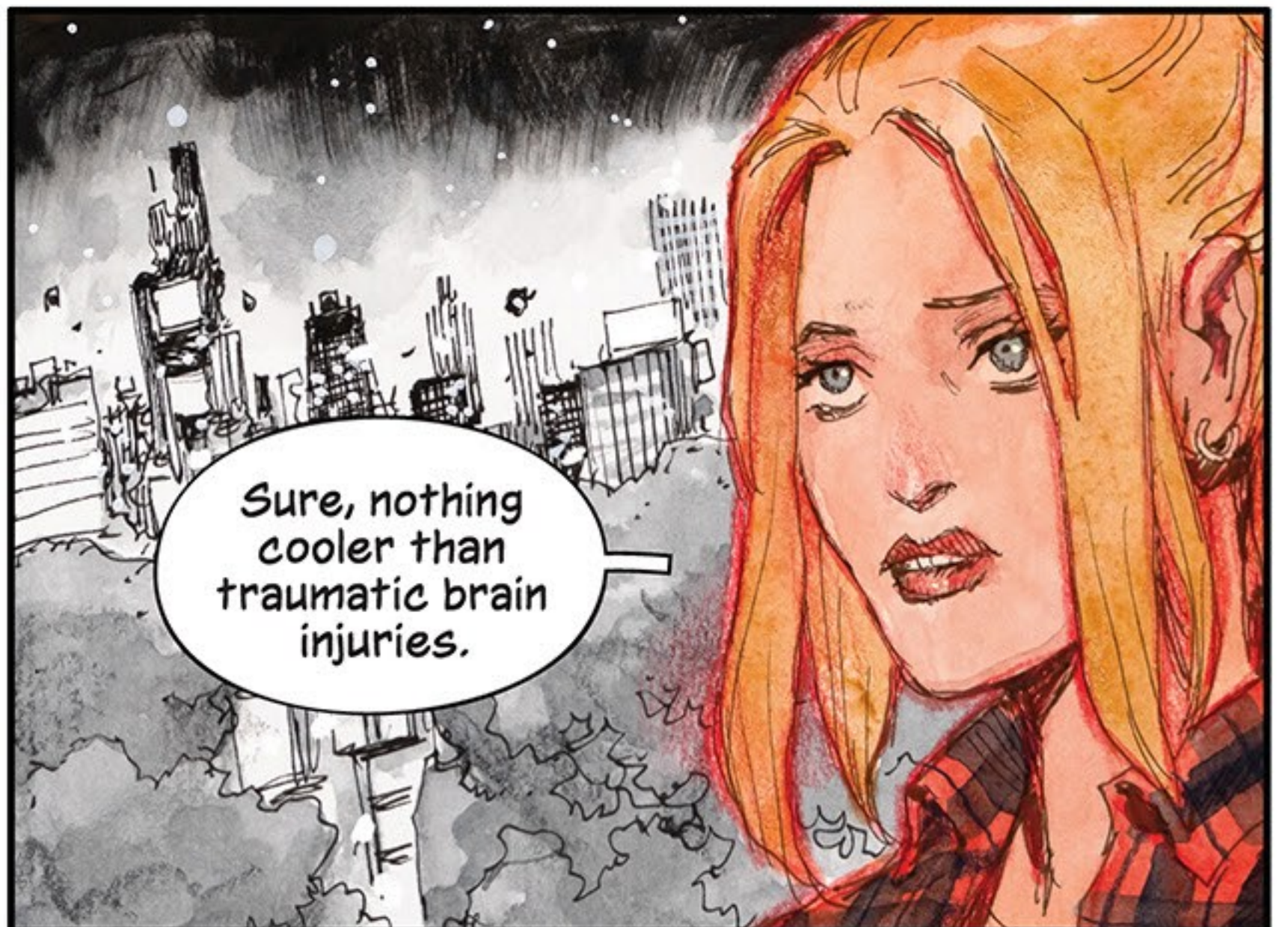
Wiseass.

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.

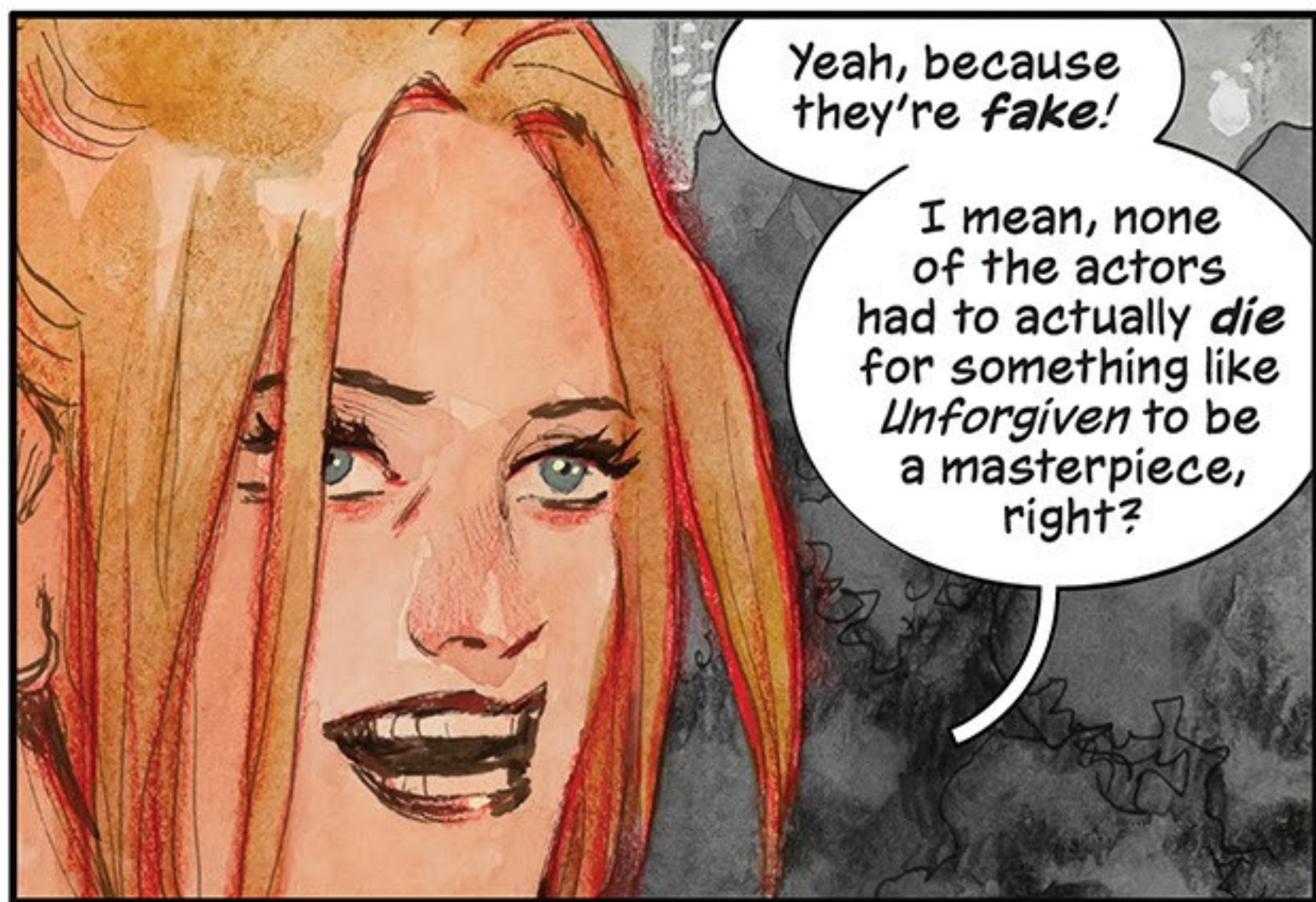
I met a former NFL player a few years back, and even though he lived into his eighties, he had just about zero memories of anything after he retired in his *twenties*.



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.

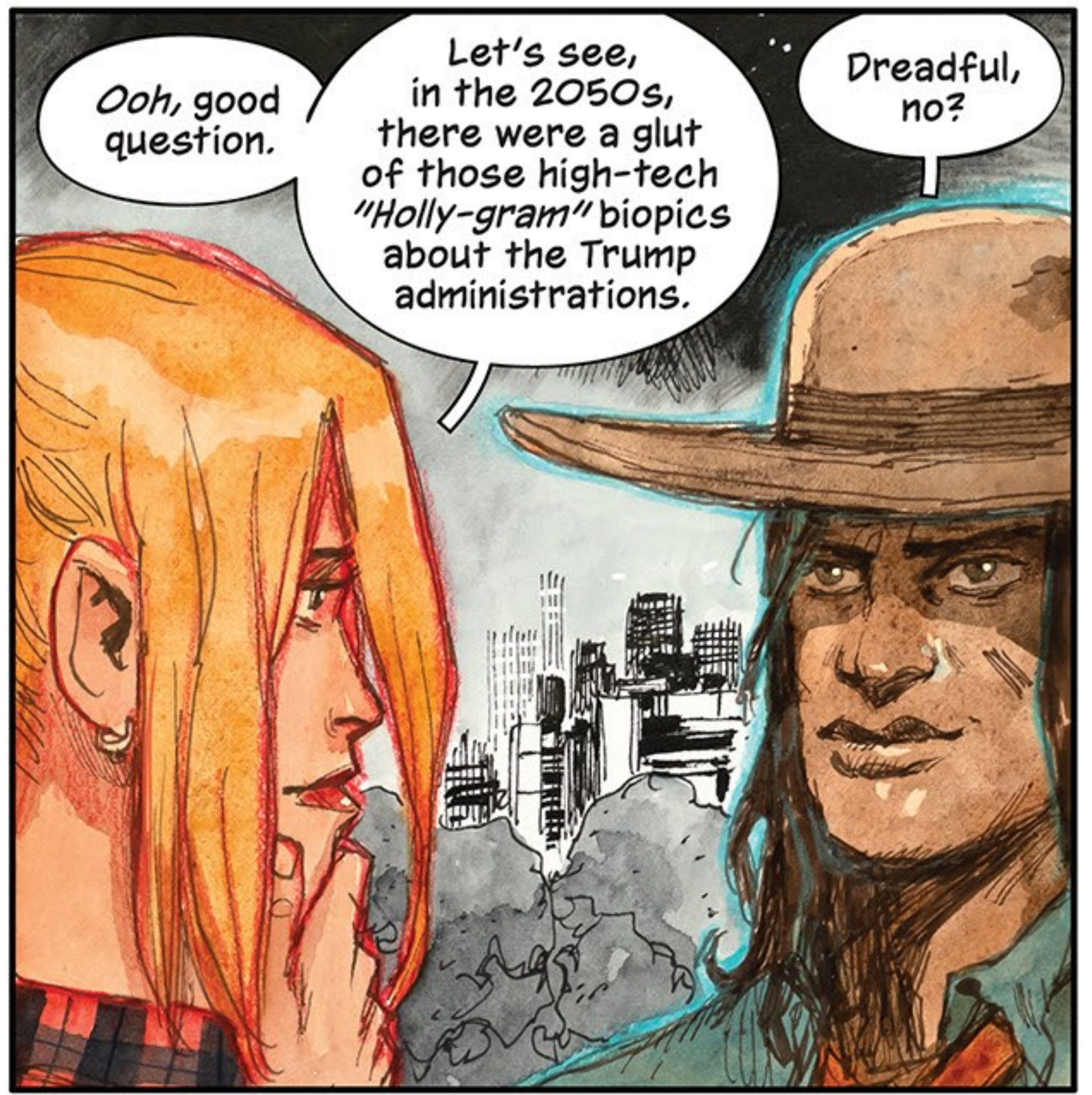
Like every "western," I thought that one was a bucket of loose horse-shit.





Bite your tongue, sir.

Val, did you ever try watching something set back in whatever epoch *you* hail from?



Ooh, good question.

Let's see, in the 2050s, there were a glut of those high-tech "Holly-gram" biopics about the Trump administrations.

Dreadful, no?



They were... weird.

The costumes and locations were usually spot-on, but for some reason, all the actors had that severe eyeliner older men didn't start wearing until the 2040s.

Multiply that gaffe by about a thousand, and you'll have some sense how I feel watching any Clint Eastwood claptrap.



That's why I tend to gravitate to stories in the science-fictional manner.





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.



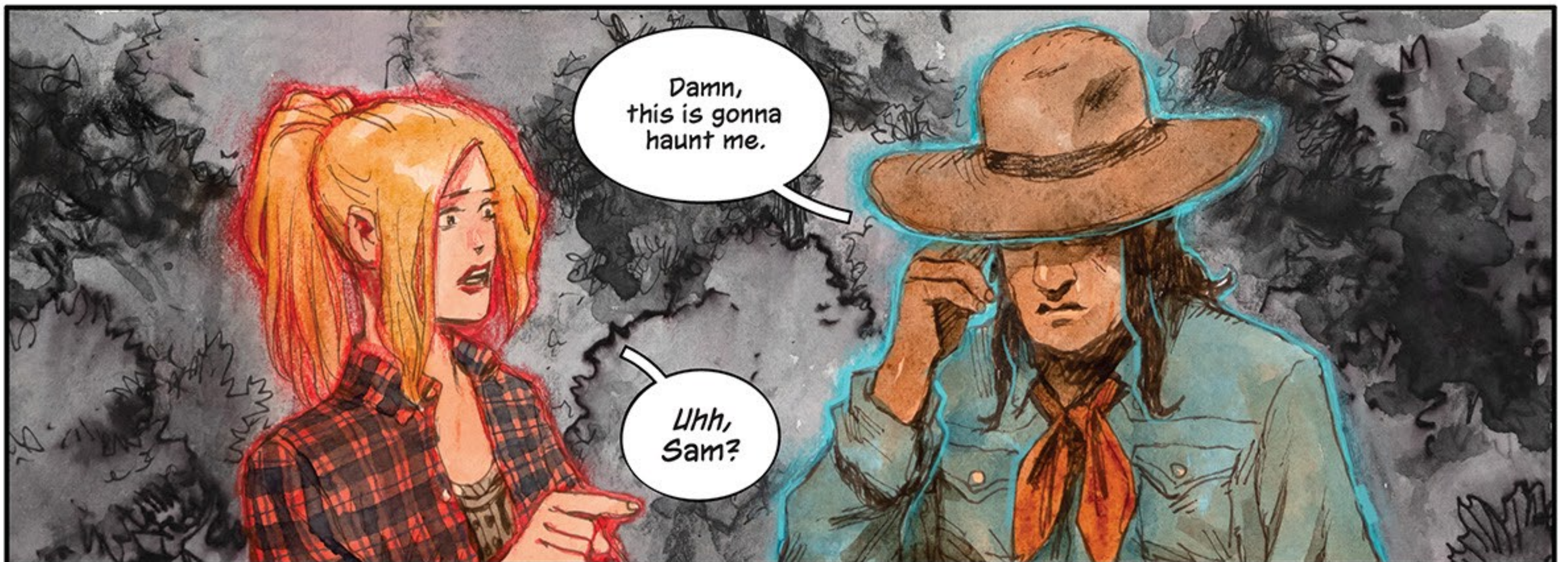
No, I'd say my absolute favorite motion picture would have to be *Enemy Mine*.



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?



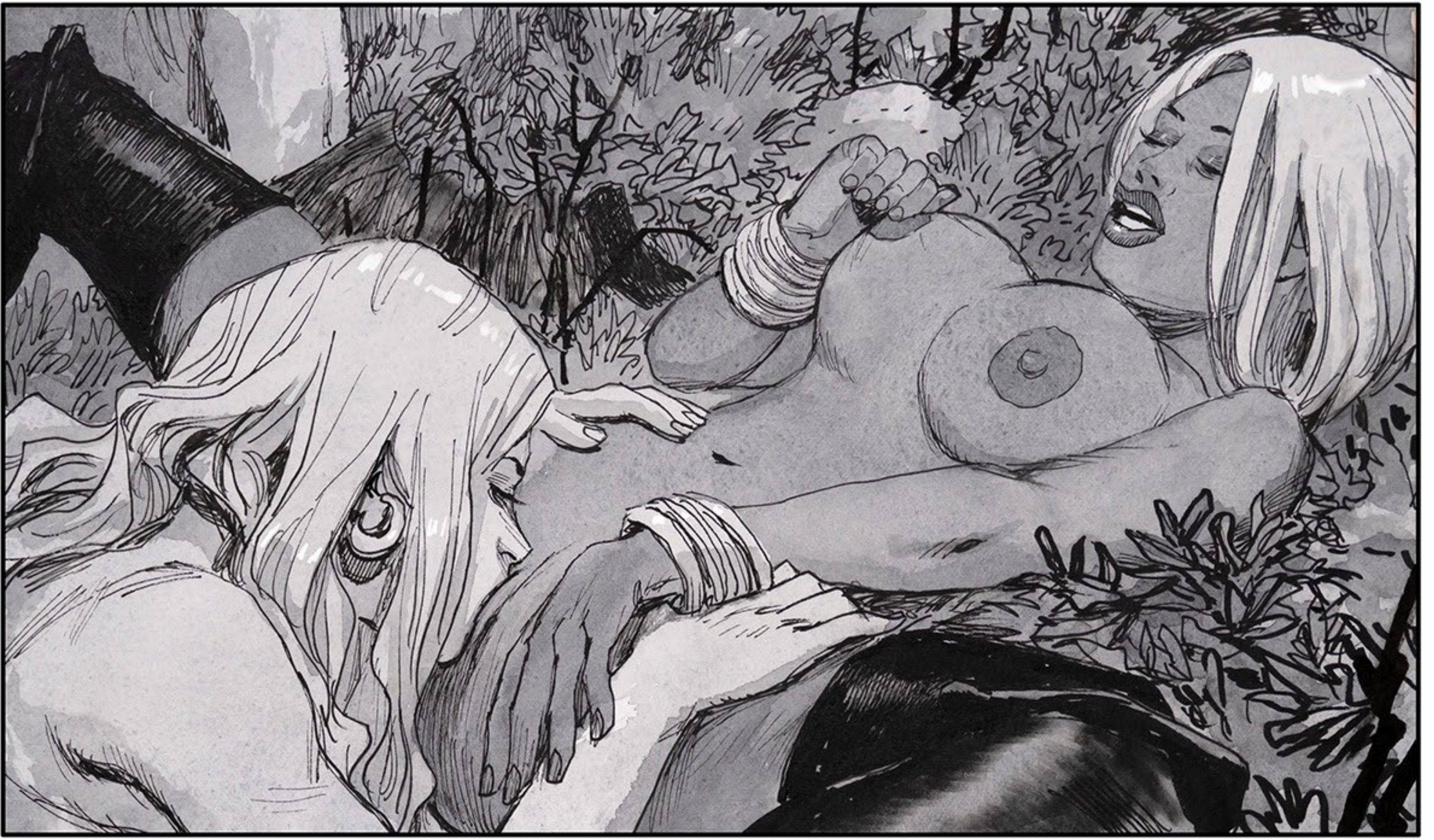
Damn, this is gonna haunt me.

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?



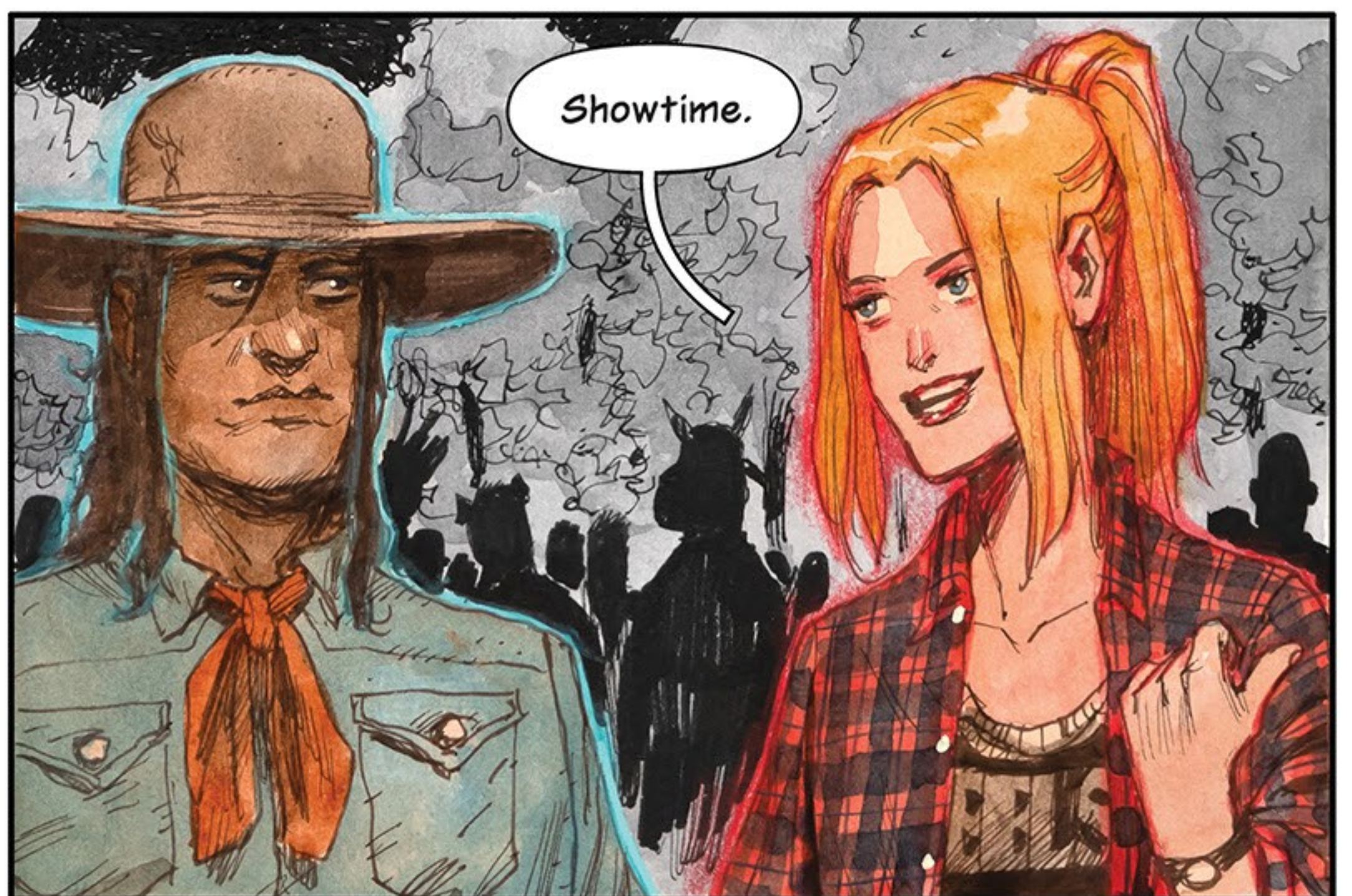




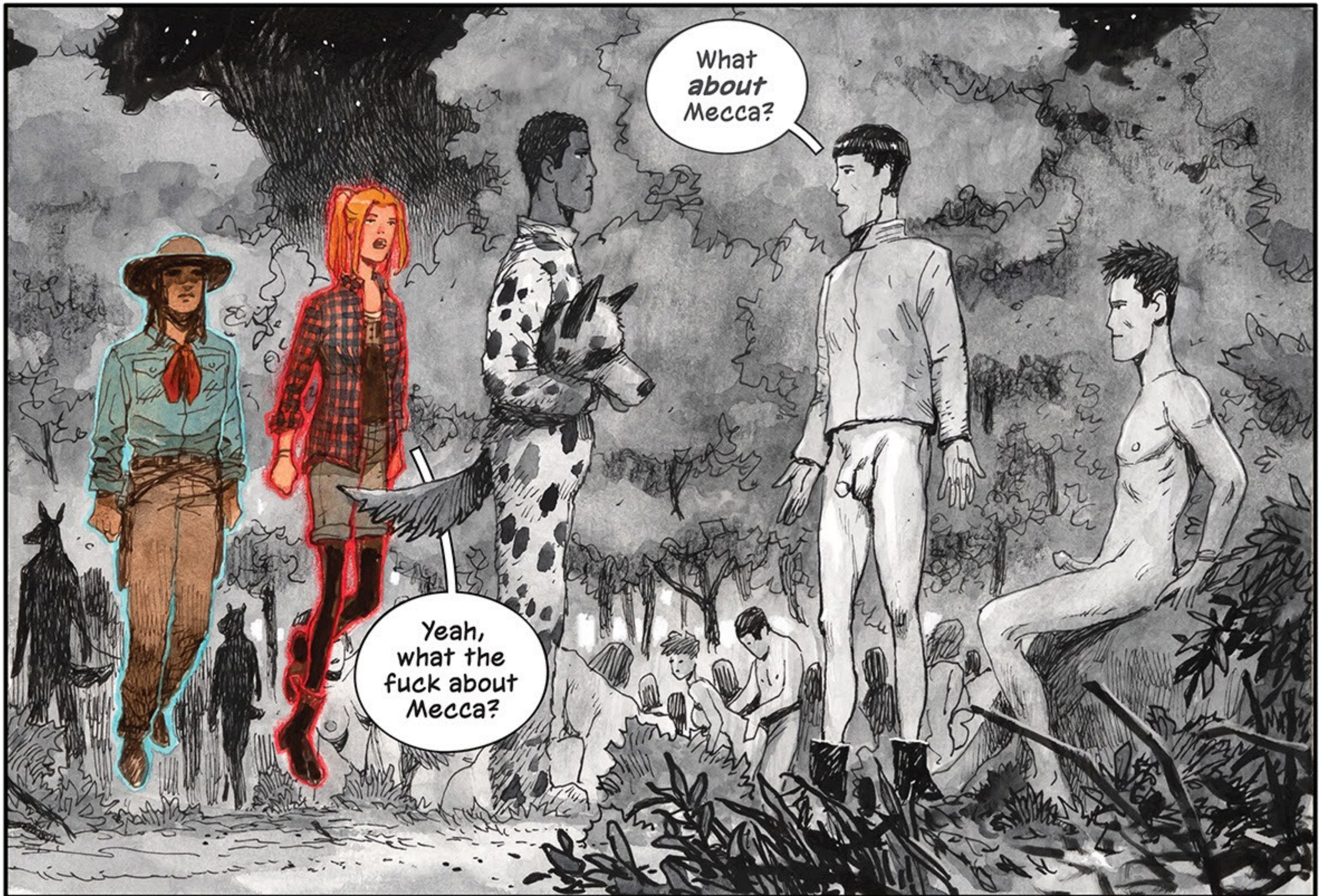
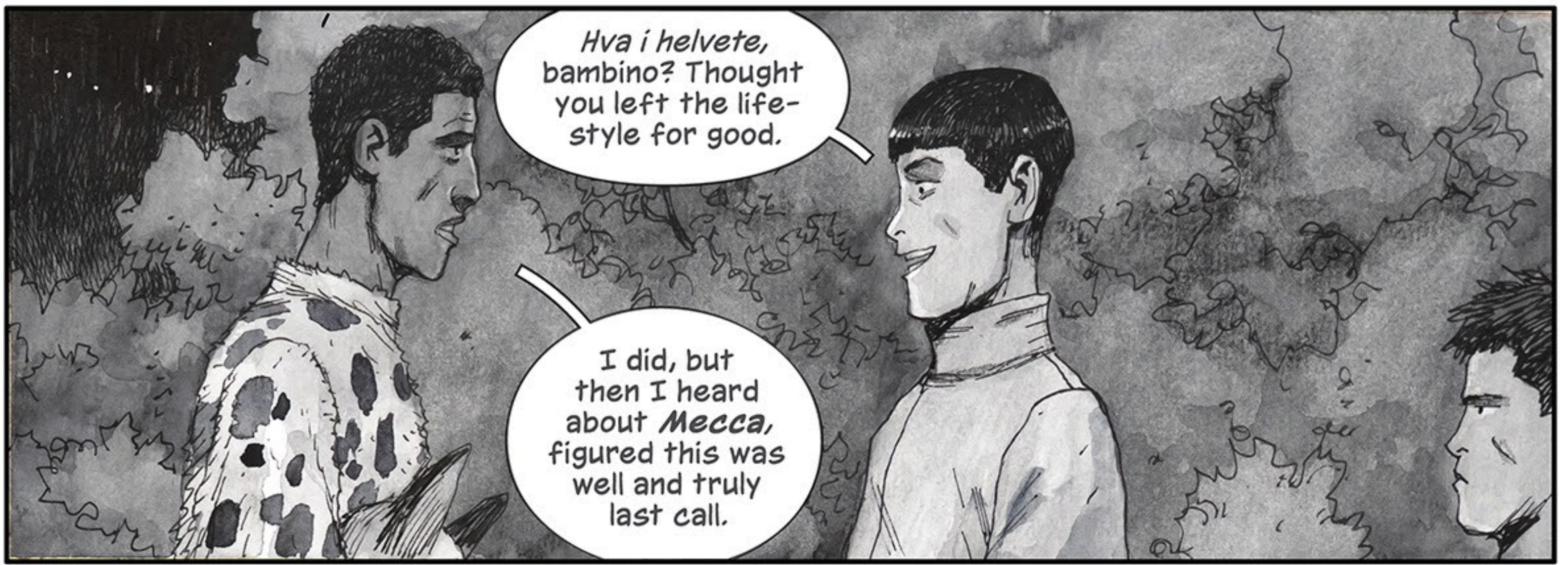


*Get your last  
pearl necklaces  
before you walk  
through those  
pearly gates!*

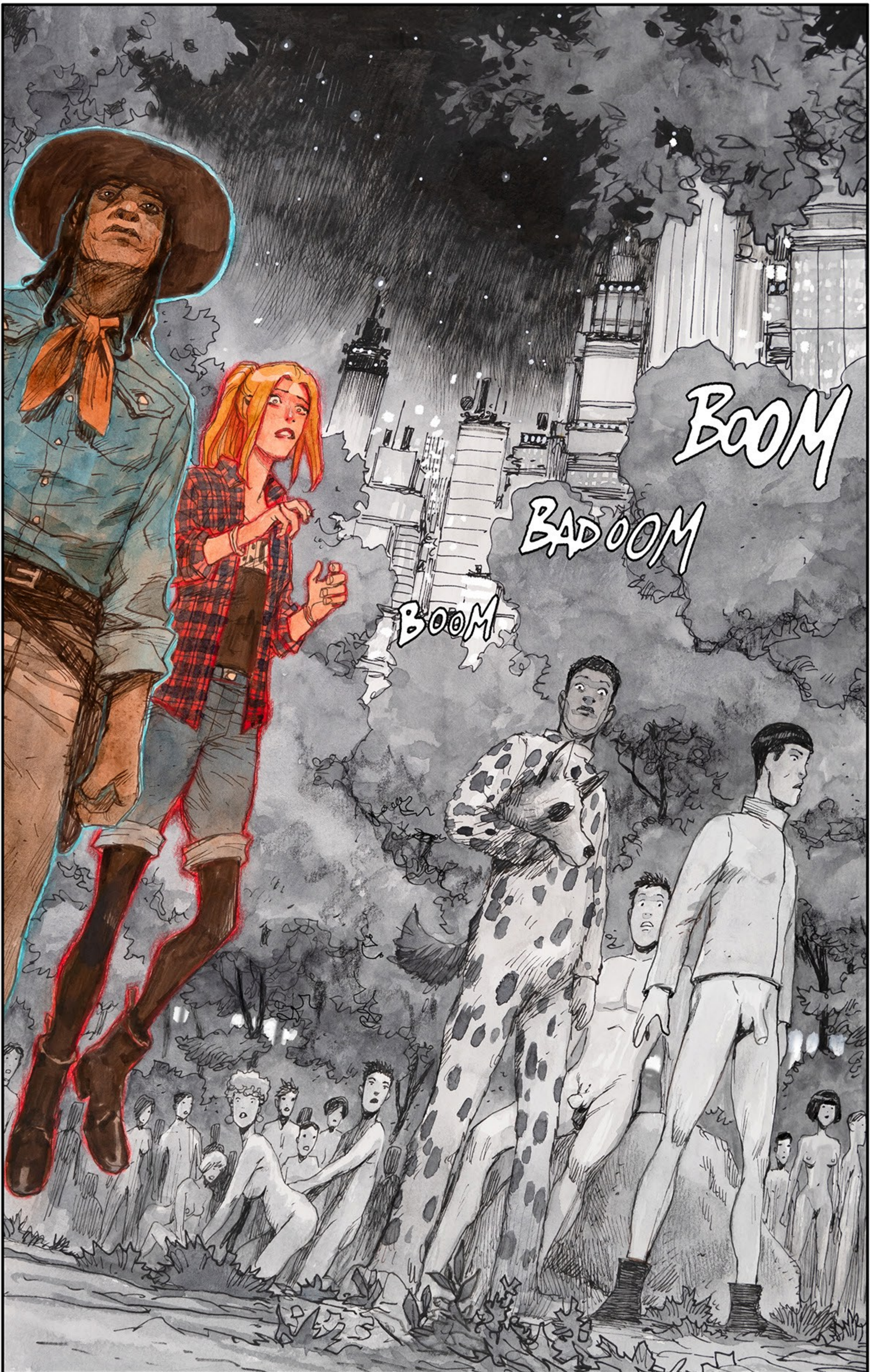












BOOM

BAD OOM

BOOM









Calm yourselves, littles.

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



I don't know, your majesty.

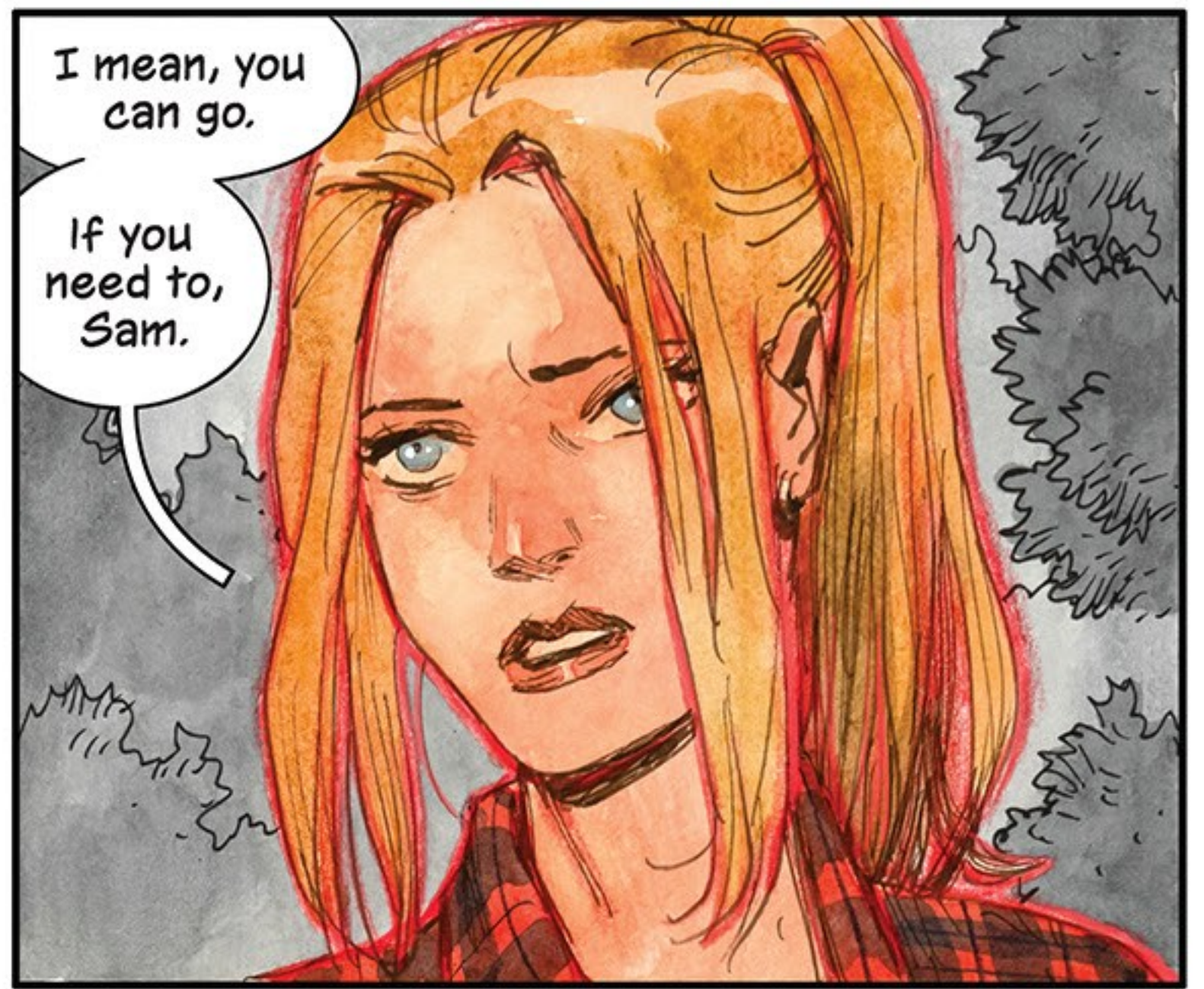
OutDoor's been mostly scat-bots since the bombing, and I heard--



¿A quién le importa?

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







#LEADERBOARD.

I'm here to help!







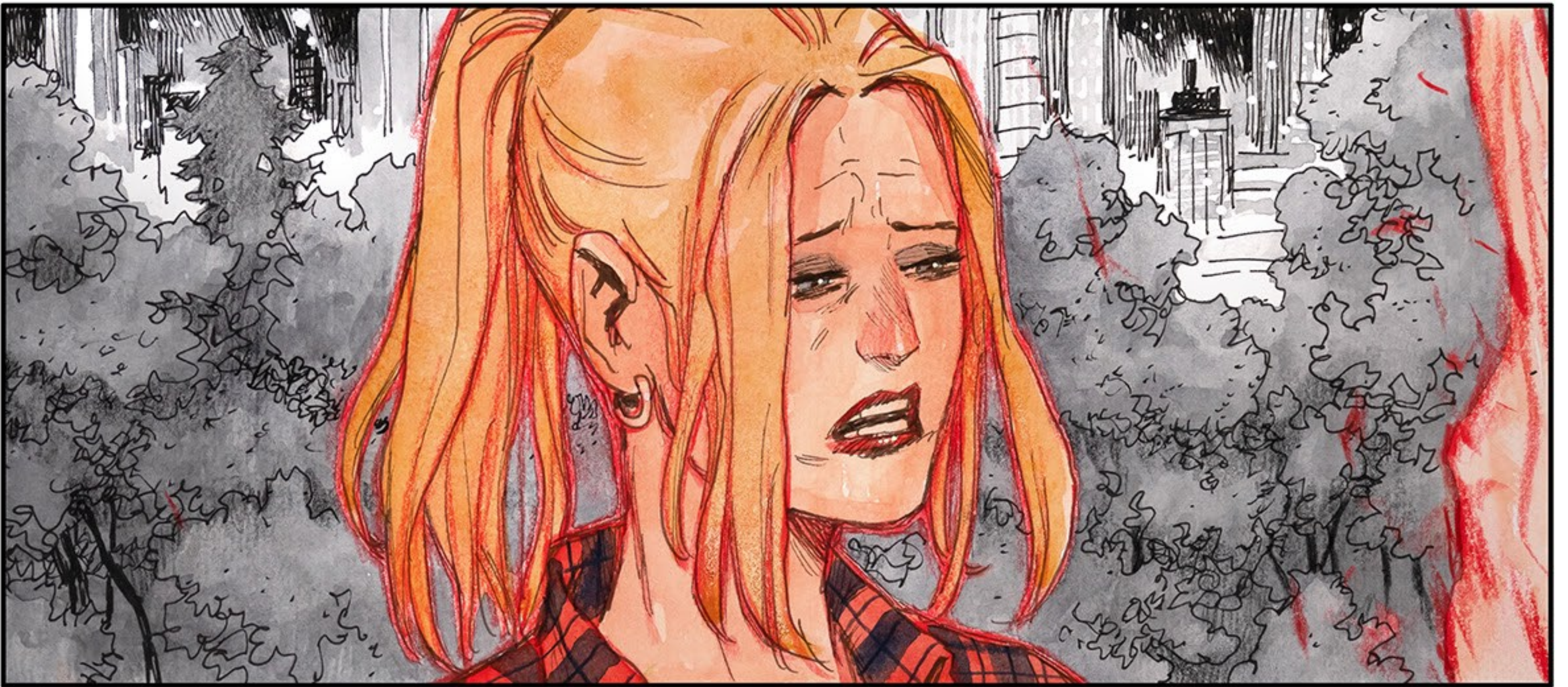




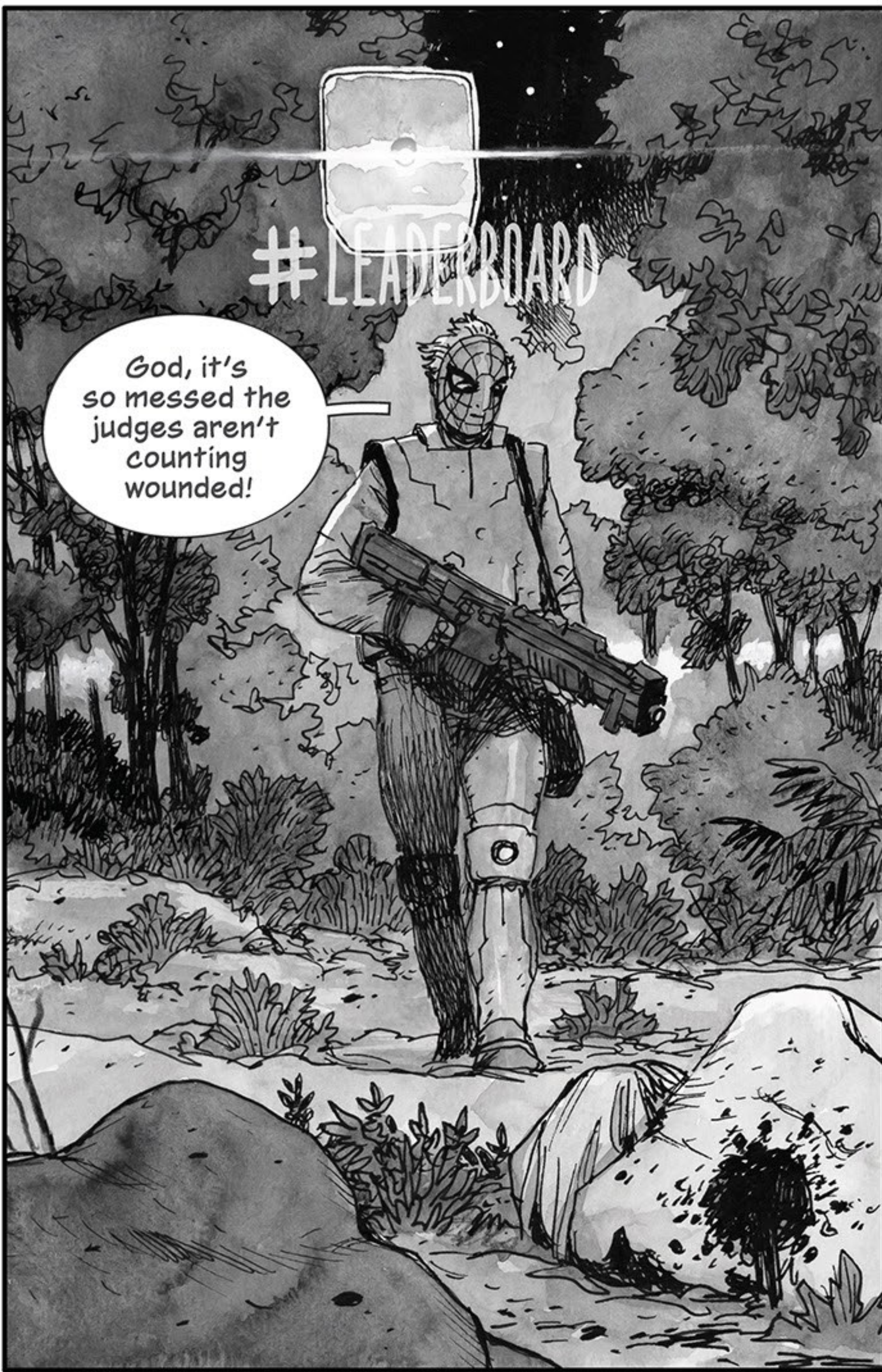
















Final tally of that forgotten masterpiece was *twenty-one*, not counting one unborn little angel and of course our hero.



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.





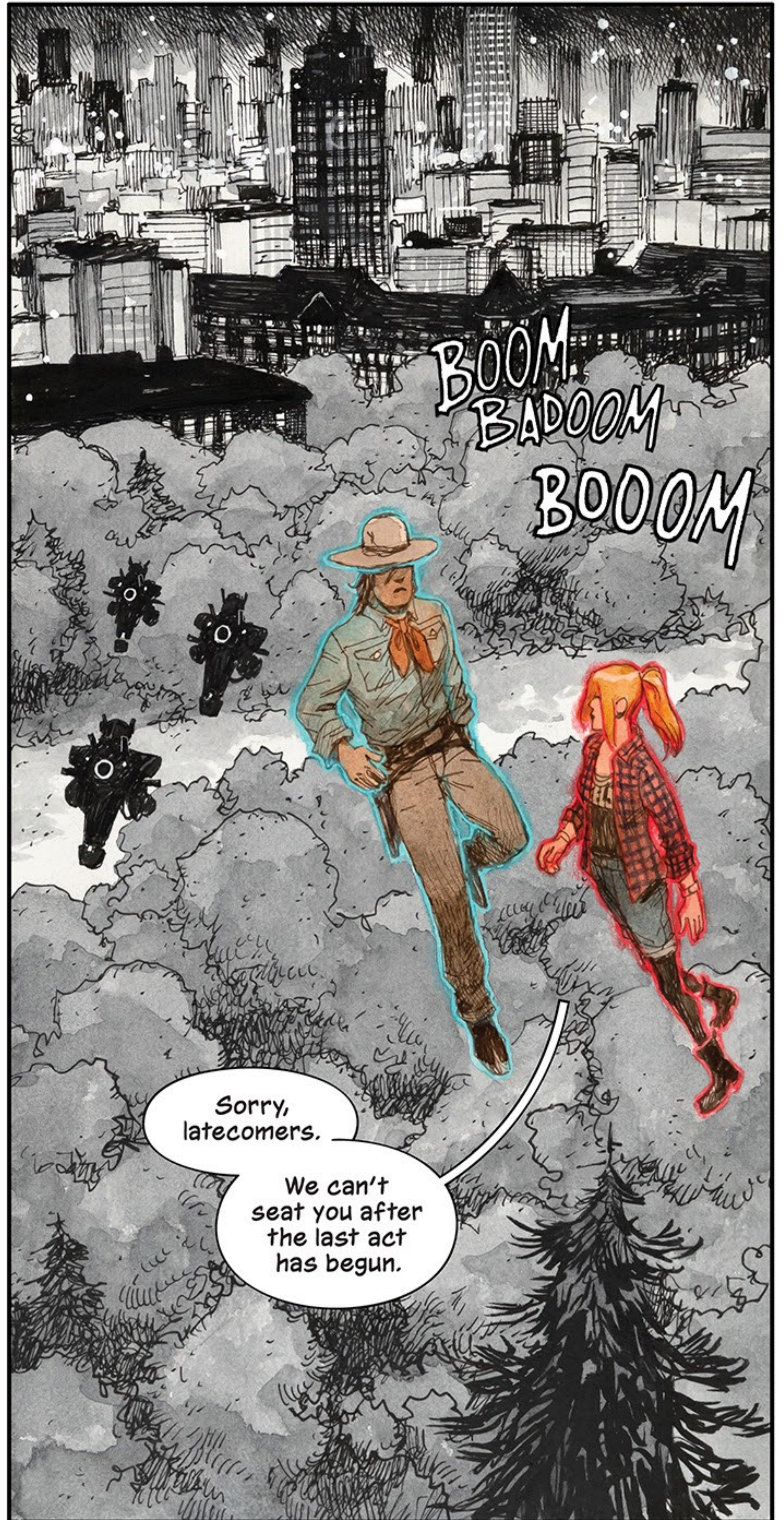
No sign of any fresh immigrants to our side.

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.

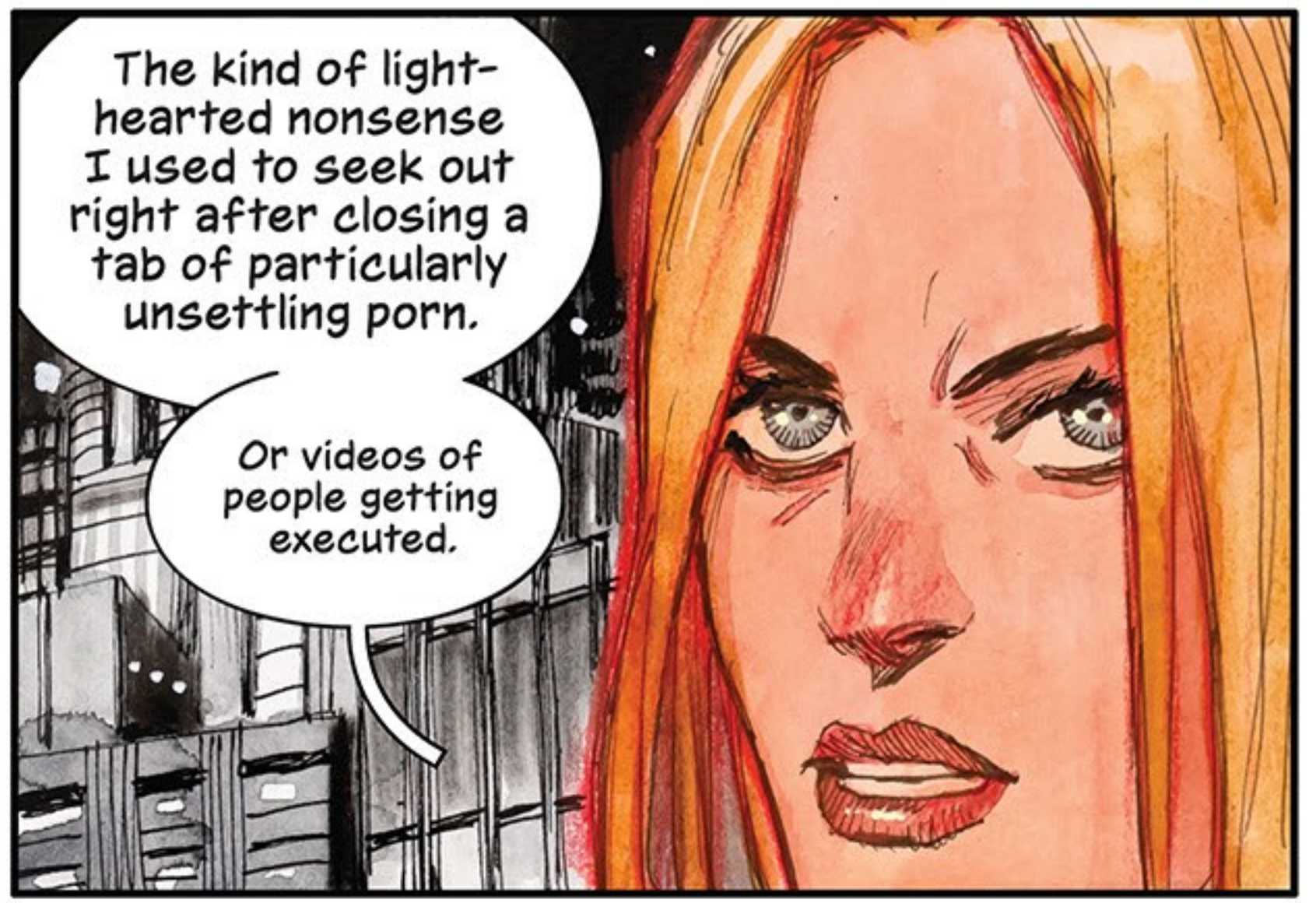




Need a break?

I'll be okay, thanks.

But I could really use a *palate cleanser*.



The kind of light-hearted nonsense I used to seek out right after closing a tab of particularly unsettling porn.

Or videos of people getting executed.



You watched that shit?

Never at the same time, like snuff or whatever.

But back in the aughts, I stumbled onto footage of that journalist getting his head cut off.



I remember it played after an ad for Mountain Dew.

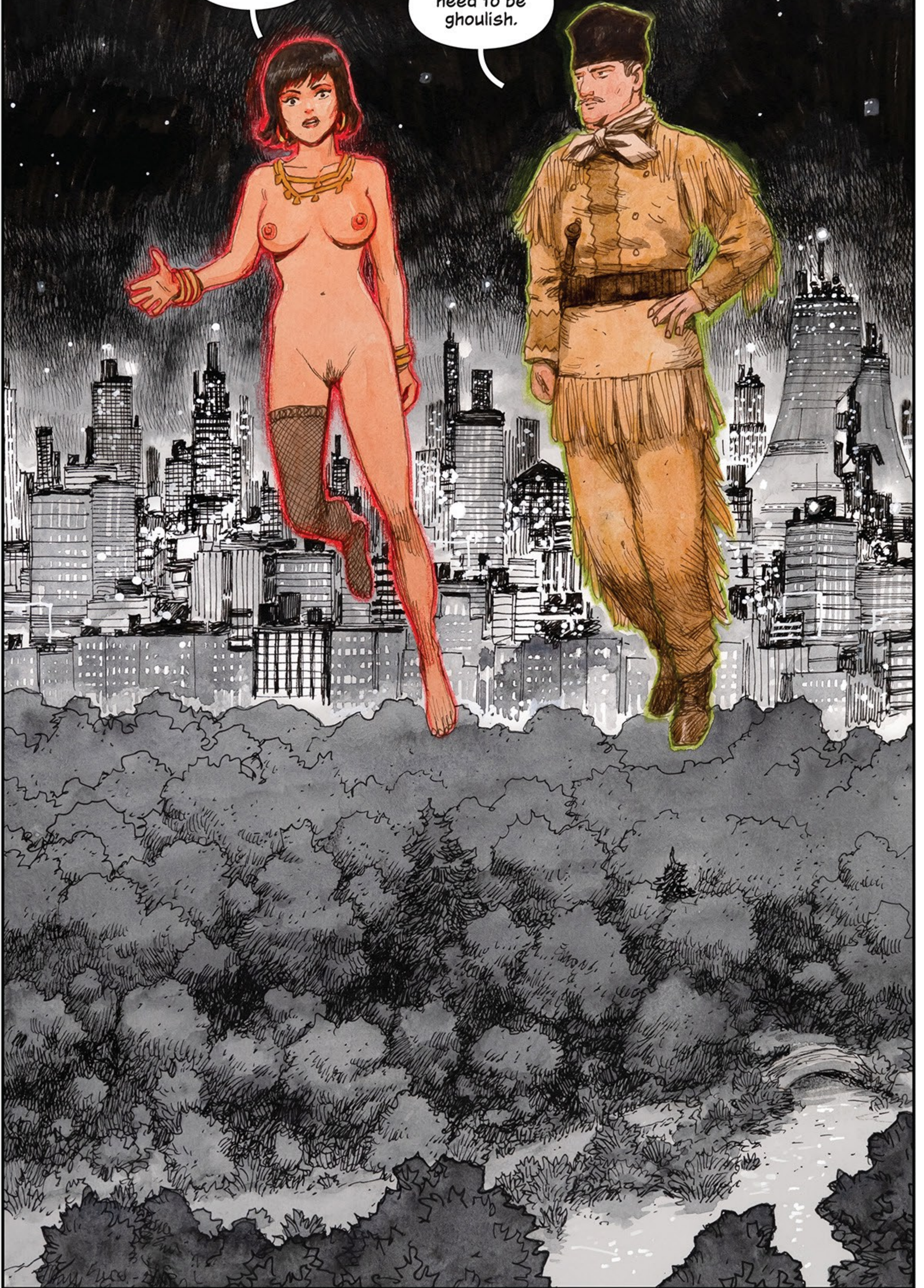
Is that Val?



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?

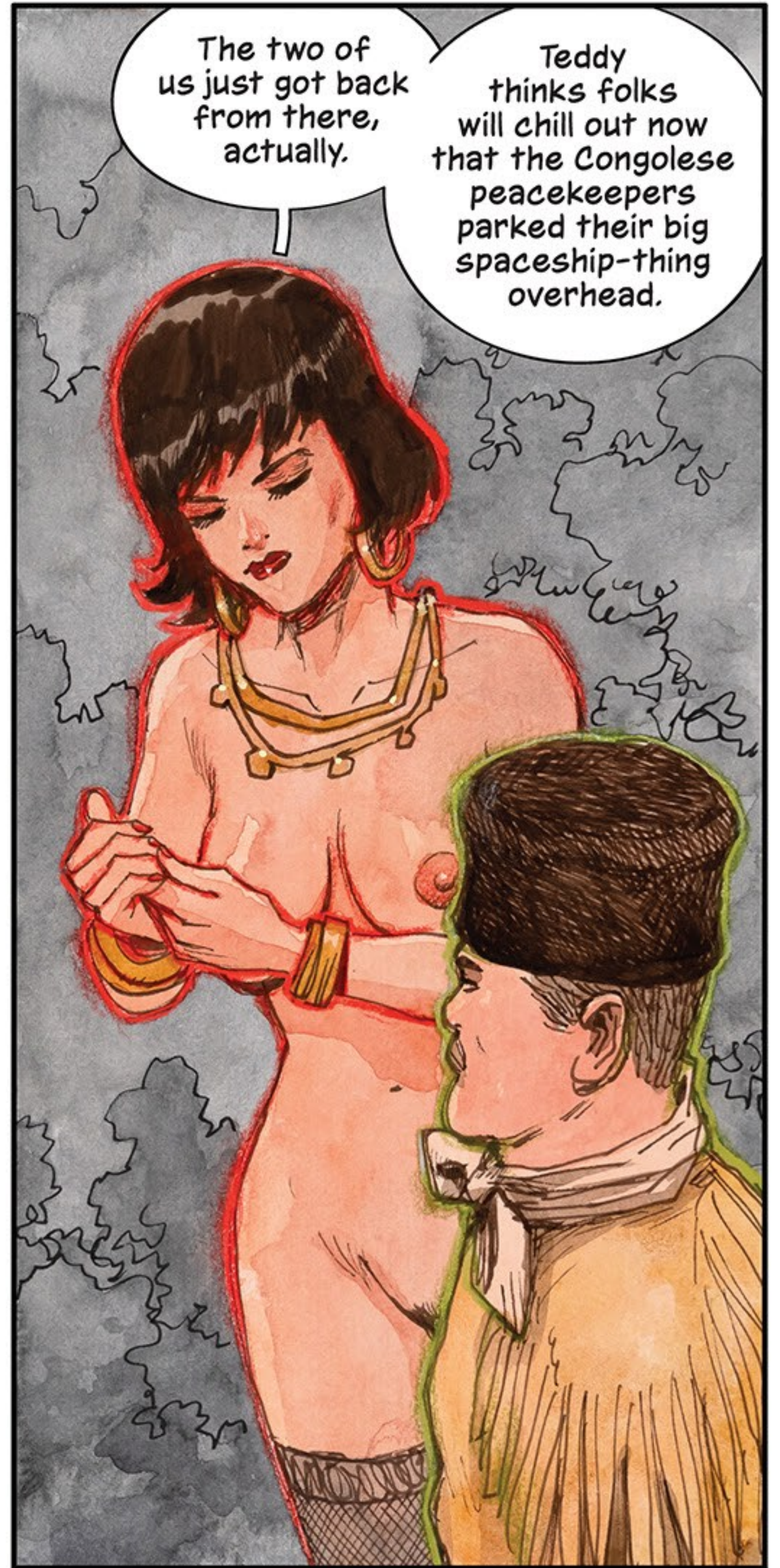
The end of everything?



*Pshaw.*

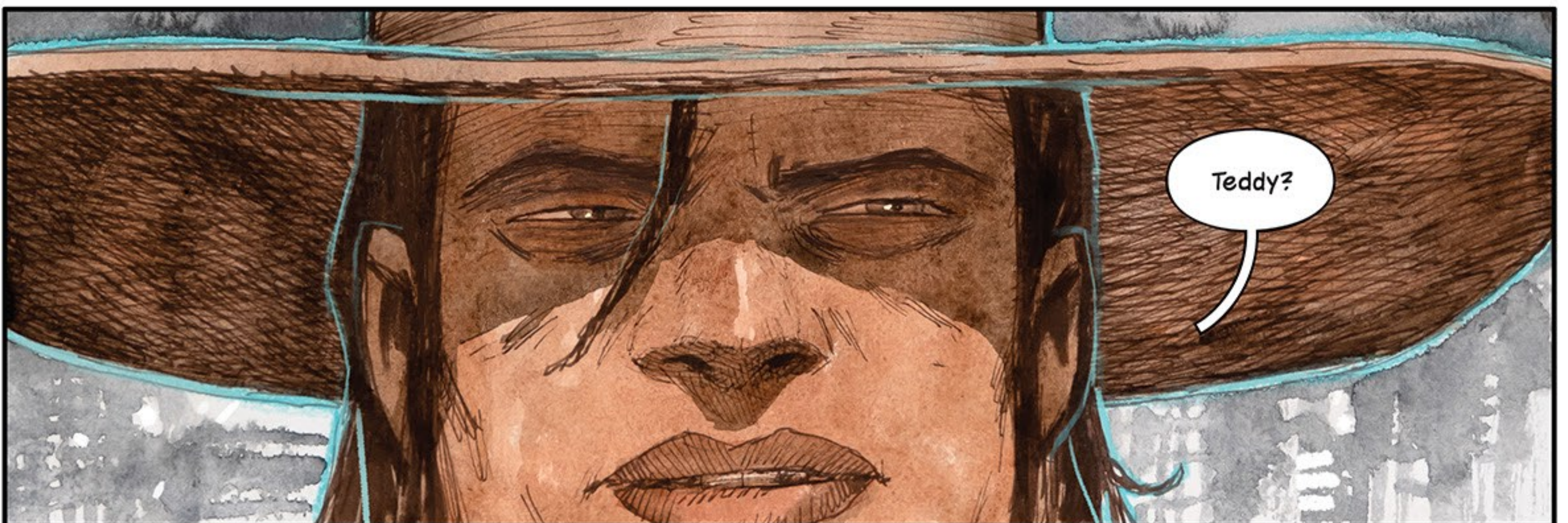
The situation is certainly grim, but this old world has survived far worse than what a few dozen emasculated nihilists can dish out.

We heard the entire Middle East is on fire!



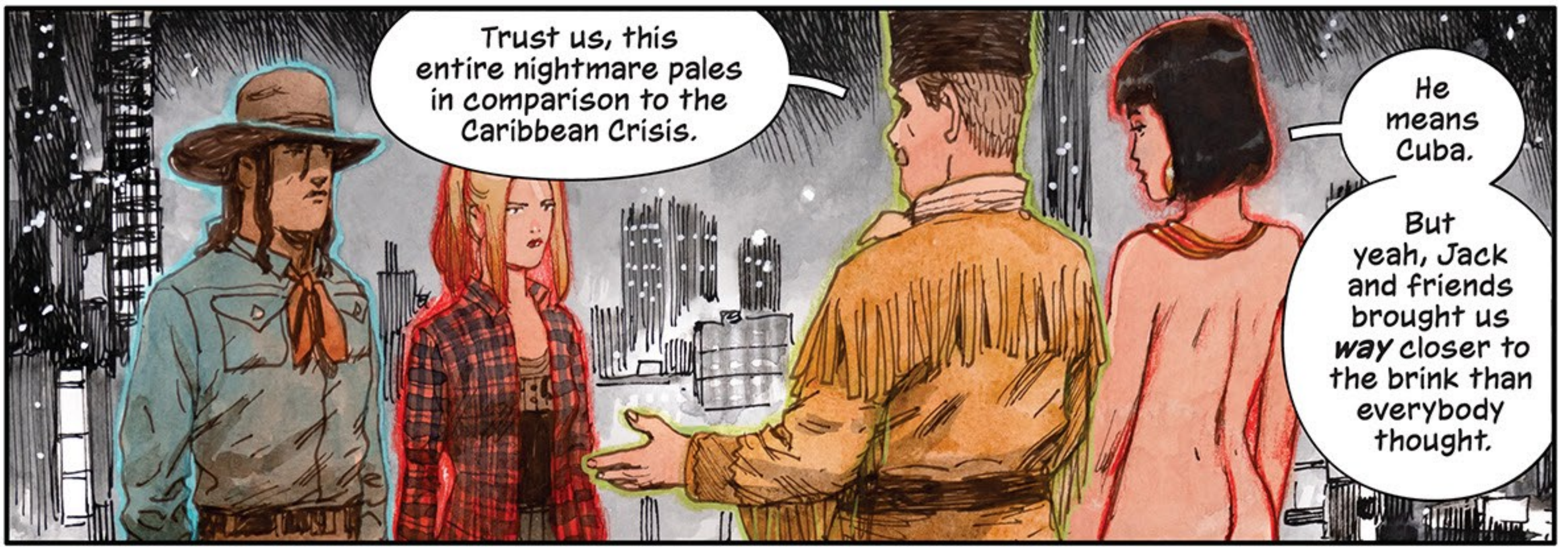
The two of us just got back from there, actually.

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



Teddy?

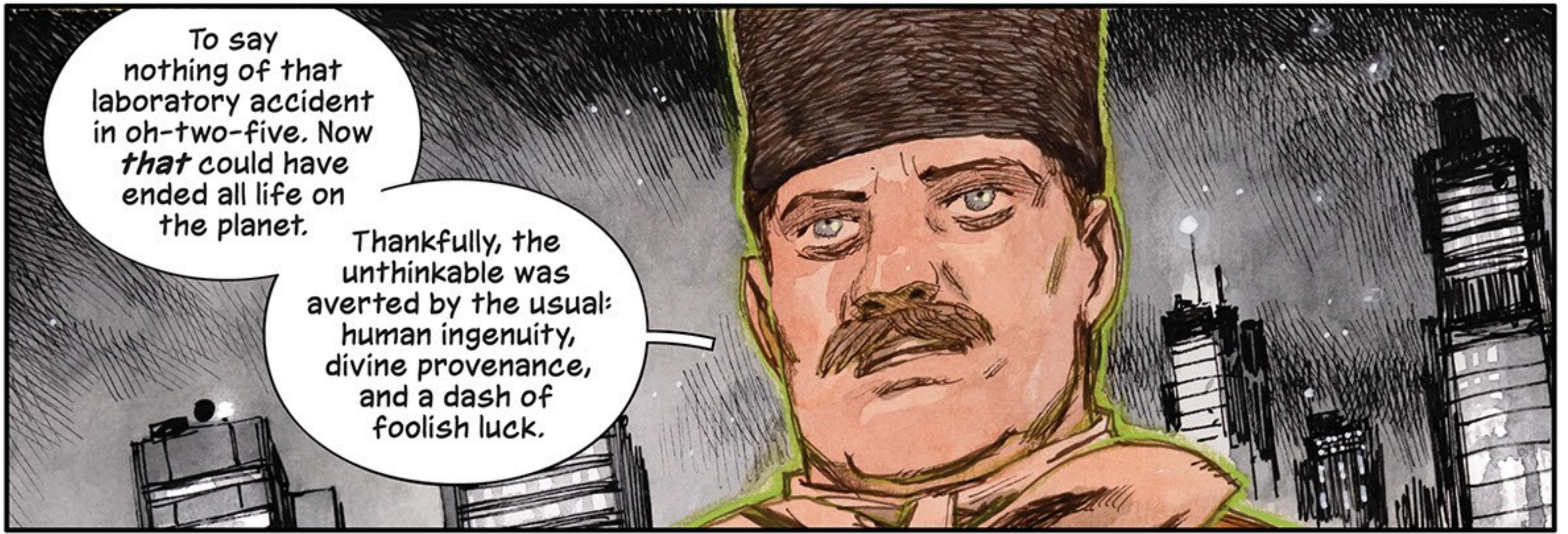




Trust us, this entire nightmare pales in comparison to the Caribbean Crisis.

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.







