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LOW™

#1
image®

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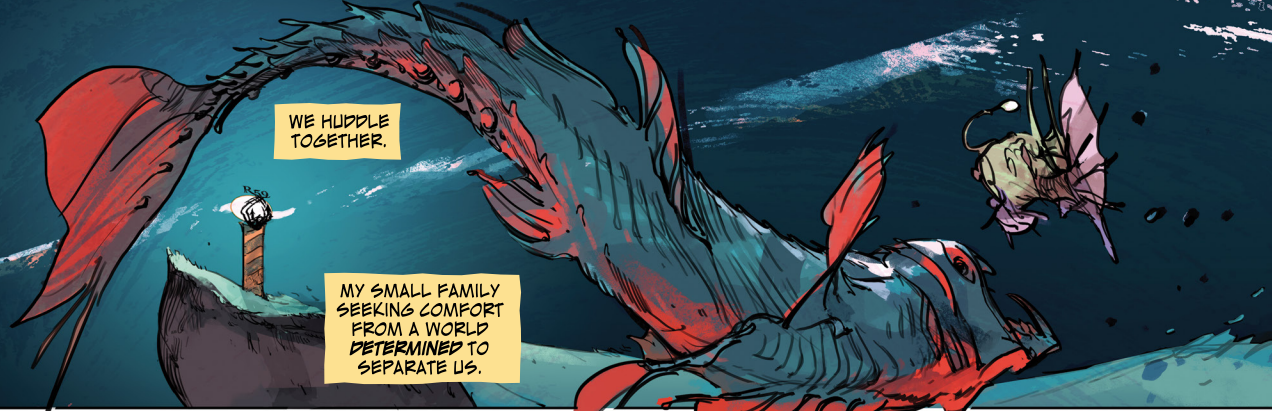
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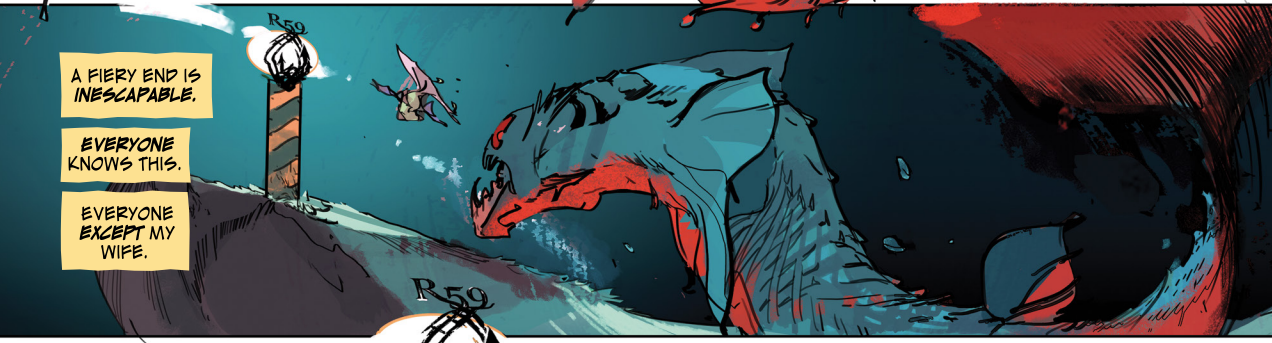


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WE HUDDLE TOGETHER.

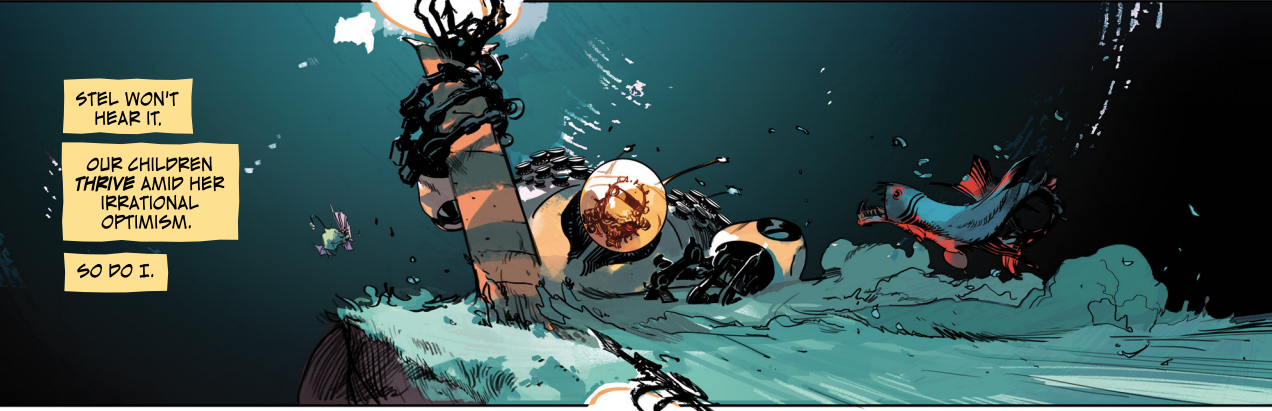
MY SMALL FAMILY SEEKING COMFORT FROM A WORLD DETERMINED TO SEPARATE US.



A FIERY END IS INESCAPABLE.

EVERYONE KNOWS THIS.

EVERYONE EXCEPT MY WIFE.



STEL WON'T HEAR IT.

OUR CHILDREN THRIVE AMID HER IRRATIONAL OPTIMISM.

SO DO I.



STEL KNOWS WHAT NO ONE ELSE DARES TRUST.

THAT THERE IS HOPE.

PFSSHH



SHHHHHH

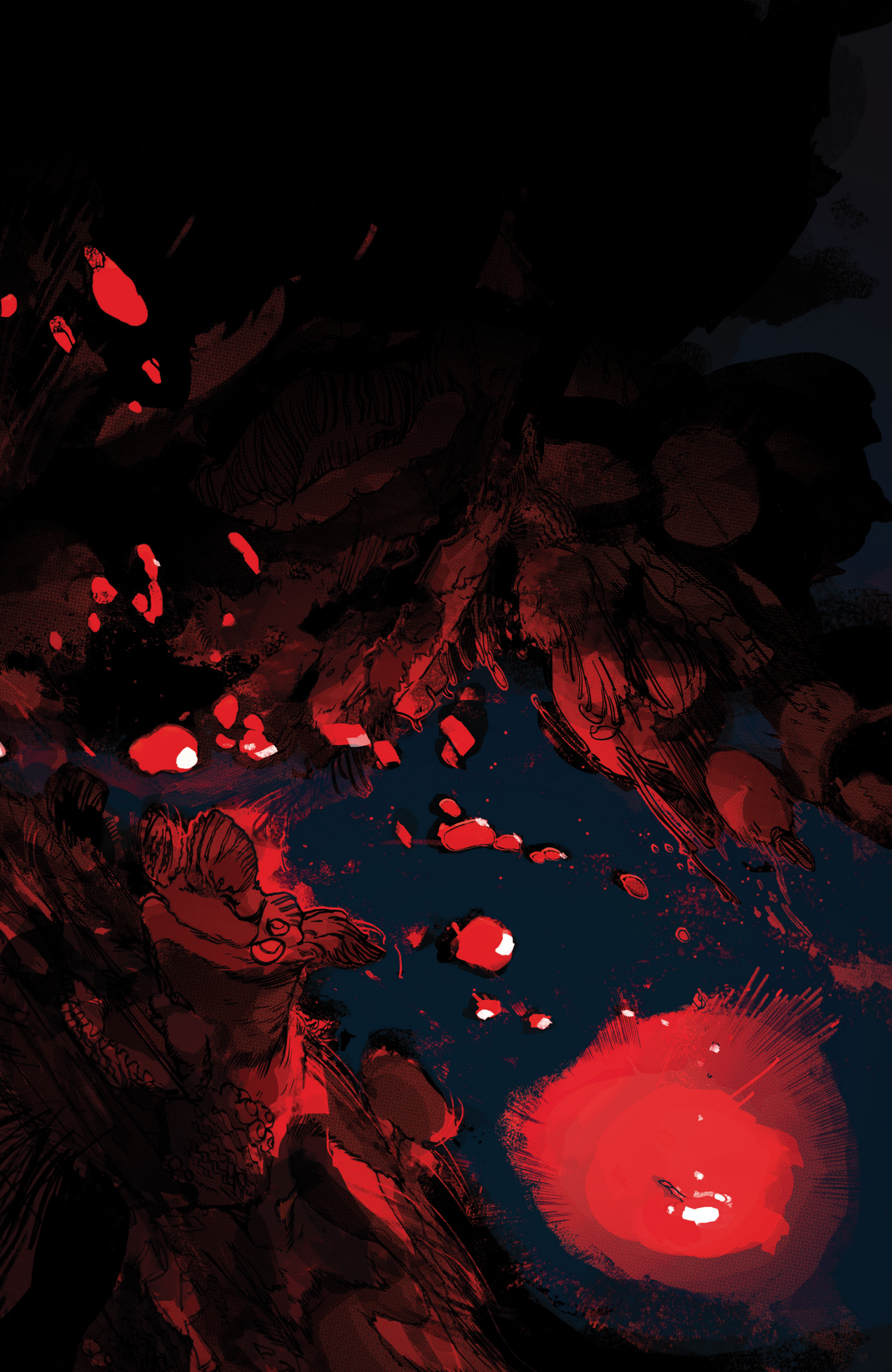
THAT, PROVIDED WE BELIEVE IT...

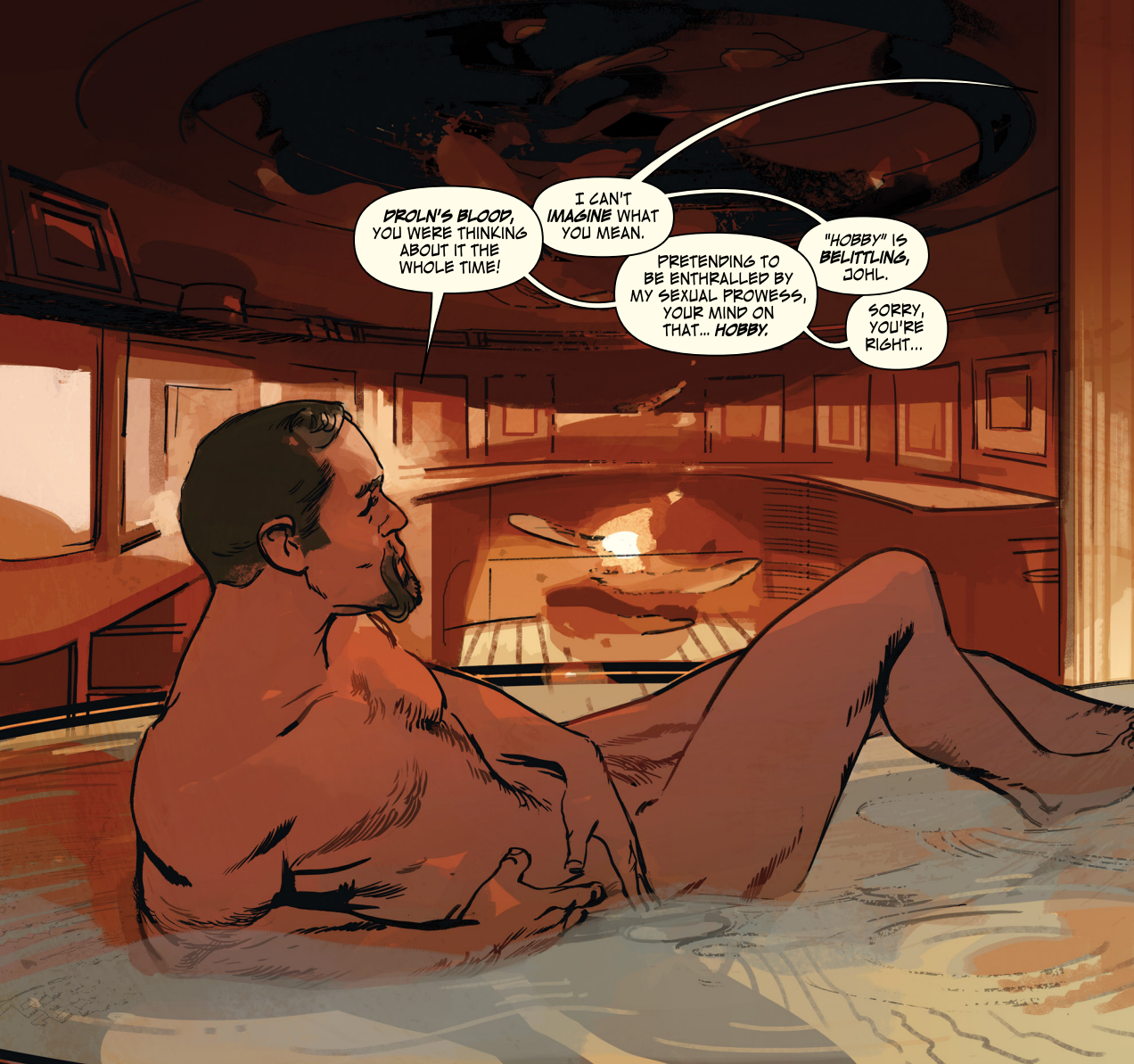
...WE WILL
RISE AGAIN.

REMEMBER • TOCCHINI • WOOSTON • GIBNER

LOW

CHAPTER ONE
THE DELIRIUM OF HOPE





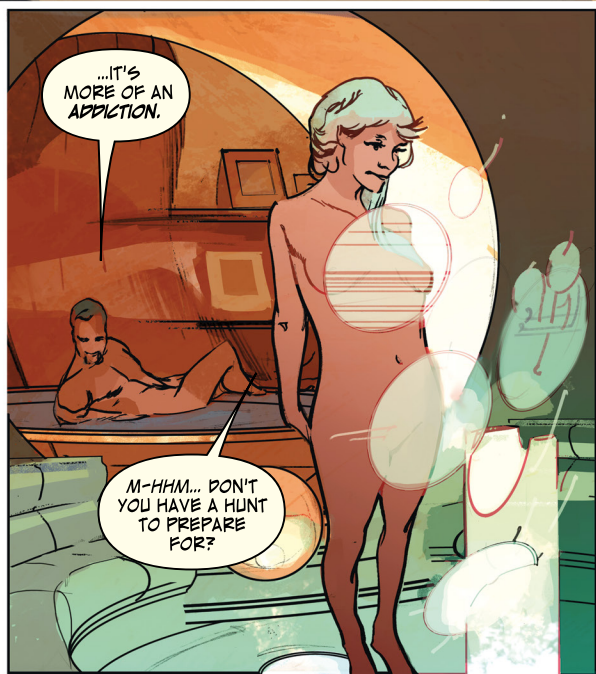
PROLN'S BLOOD,
YOU WERE THINKING
ABOUT IT THE
WHOLE TIME!

I CAN'T
IMAGINE WHAT
YOU MEAN.

PRETENDING TO
BE ENTHRALLED BY
MY SEXUAL PROWESS,
YOUR MIND ON
THAT... HOBBY.

"HOBBY" IS
BELITTLING,
JOHL.

SORRY,
YOU'RE
RIGHT...



...IT'S
MORE OF AN
ADDICTION.

M-HHM... DON'T
YOU HAVE A HUNT
TO PREPARE
FOR?



YES.

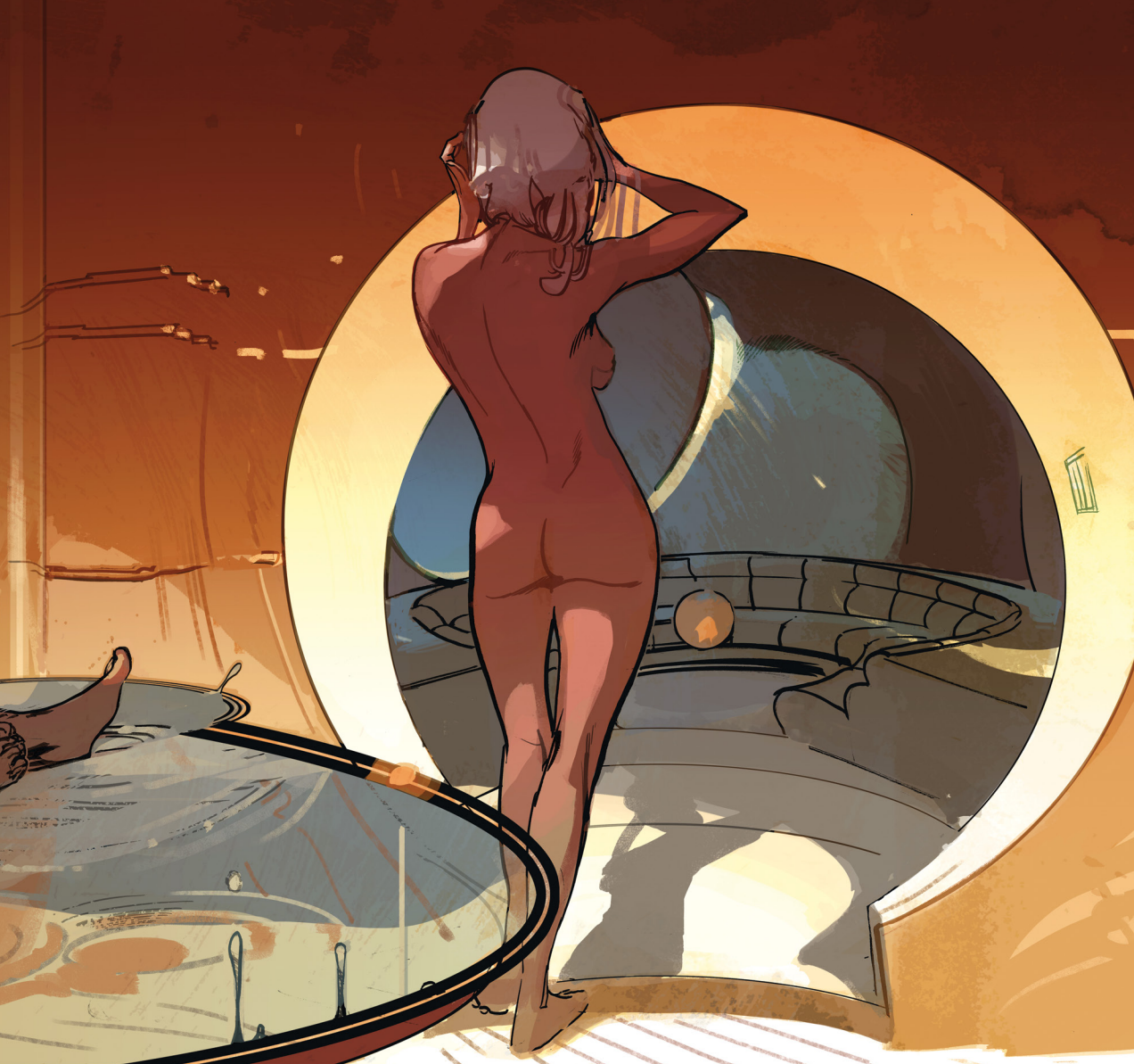
A REAL
HUNT.

ONE
THAT BEARS
FRUIT.

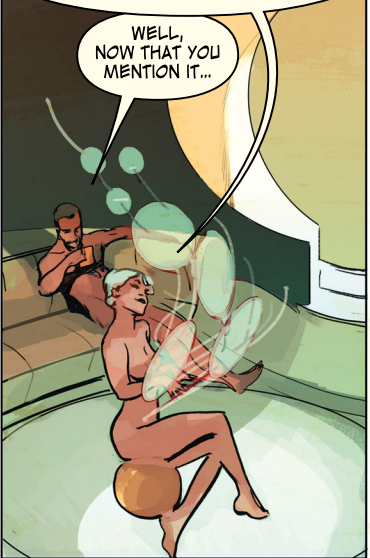


UNLIKE HUNTING ANCIENT
RATTLETRAPS WHEN YOU
SHOULD BE FOCUSED
ON THE TASK
AT HAND.

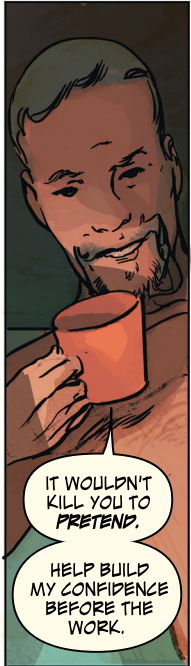
THE TASK
AT HAND IS
YOUR JOB, MY
DEAR.



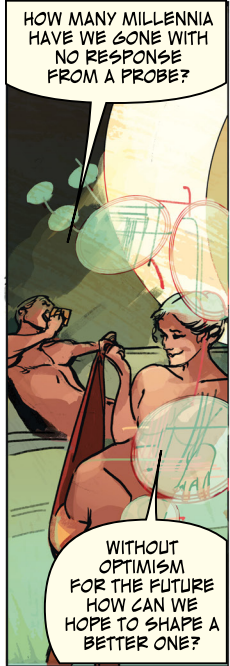
PERHAPS THE LAST GREAT HELMSMAN OF SALUS IS SIMPLY DISTRAUGHT TO SEE HIS WIFE MANAGE TO STAND AFTER A BOUGHT OF HIS FAMOUSLY POTENT LOVEMAKING...



WELL, NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT...



IT WOULDN'T KILL YOU TO PRETEND.
HELP BUILD MY CONFIDENCE BEFORE THE WORK.



HOW MANY MILLENNIA HAVE WE GONE WITH NO RESPONSE FROM A PROBE?

WITHOUT OPTIMISM FOR THE FUTURE HOW CAN WE HOPE TO SHAPE A BETTER ONE?



YOU SHOULD BE LOOKING FOR THE THIRD CITY.

THAT'S NO SOLUTION.

IT'S THE ONLY SOLUTION. OPERATIONAL VENTILATION FILTERS-- CLEAN AIR.

THE THIRD CITY IS A MYTH. EVEN IF IT WAS STILL OUT THERE, IT'S A STOP&GAP.

THE SUN EXPANDS, THE RADIATION SPREADS...

WE NEED A NEW PLANET.

YOU KNOW WHAT MY REAL PROBLEM IS?

WHEN SOMEONE SAYS THAT, THEY NEVER ACTUALLY KNOW WHAT THEIR REAL PROBLEM IS.

I WAS FOCUSED ON LOOKING AT THE ORIGINATOR PROBES.

WHY NOT ONE OF THE THOUSANDS THAT WERE SENT OUT FROM THE VAOLKOVIC EMPIRE?

LOOK--THIS ONE WENT SILENT THIRTEEN THOUSAND YEARS AGO, ITS COMMUNICATOR IS BURNT OUT...

...BUT IT'S LOCKED INTO AN ORBIT.

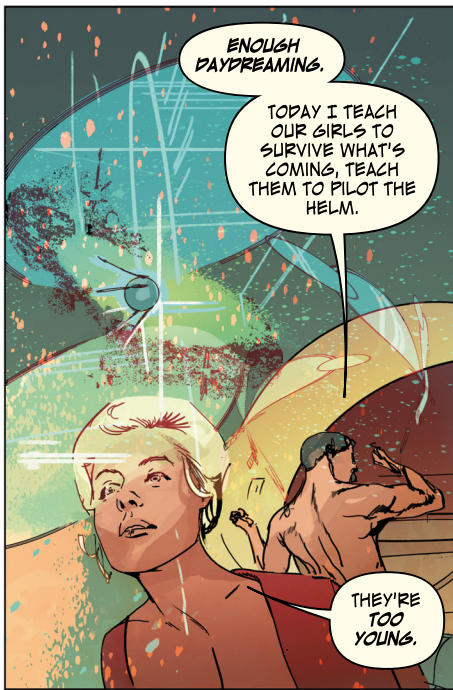
THAT'S BECAUSE IT'S A **BROKEN** PIECE OF SHIT.

OR IT LOCKED ONTO AN INHABITABLE WORLD AND IS BROADCASTING THE LOCATION THROUGH A CRASHED COMMUNICATOR.

I'M CALLING IT BACK TO EARTH.

GOOD. THAT'LL ONLY TAKE A THOUSAND YEARS.

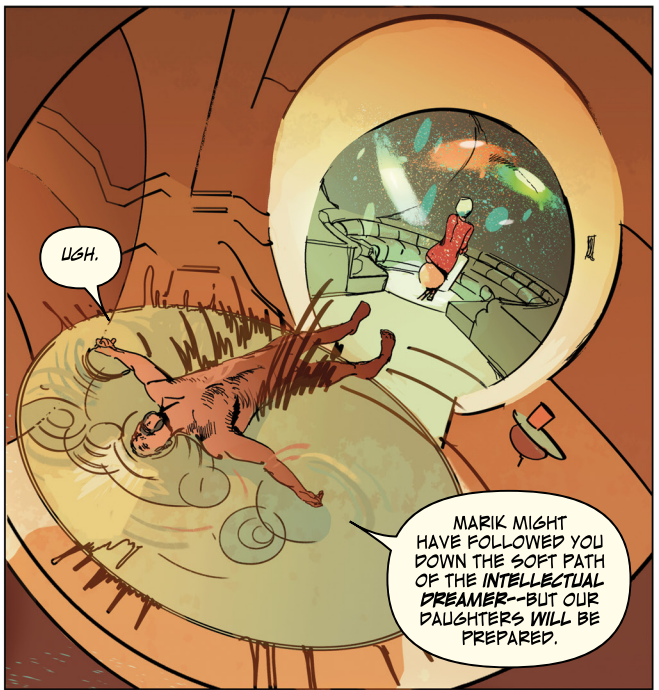
TEN YEARS.



ENOUGH DAYDREAMING.

TODAY I TEACH OUR GIRLS TO SURVIVE WHAT'S COMING, TEACH THEM TO PILOT THE HELM.

THEY'RE TOO YOUNG.



USH.

MARIK MIGHT HAVE FOLLOWED YOU DOWN THE SOFT PATH OF THE INTELLECTUAL DREAMER--BUT OUR DAUGHTERS WILL BE PREPARED.



NO.

THEY ARE TOO YOUNG TO LEAVE THE CITY LIMITS.

TOO YOUNG TO BOND WITH A HELM.



THEY WILL ALWAYS BE TOO YOUNG IN YOUR EYES!

I WAS ALSO TEN WHEN I BEGAN TRAINING--



AND IT LEFT YOU INFLEXIBLE IN YOUR THINKING.

WHILE YOU FOCUS ON PREPARING OUR CHILDREN TO FLEE THE CITY, WHAT OF YOUR OATH AND DUTY?



EVEN TRAINED WITH THE HELM SUIT.

EVEN IF, THROUGH YOUR PREPARATIONS, SOMEHOW OUR CHILDREN SURVIVE AN EXODUS--

...WHAT OF THE
OTHER TWO
MILLION CITIZENS
WITHIN THE DOME
OF SALUS?

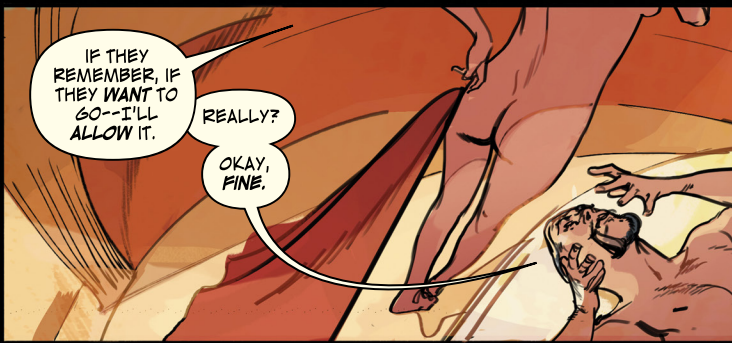




I'VE ALREADY PROMISED THEM WE'D BEGIN TRAINING TODAY.

YOU DON'T WANT TO MAKE A LIAR OUT OF ME, DO YOU?

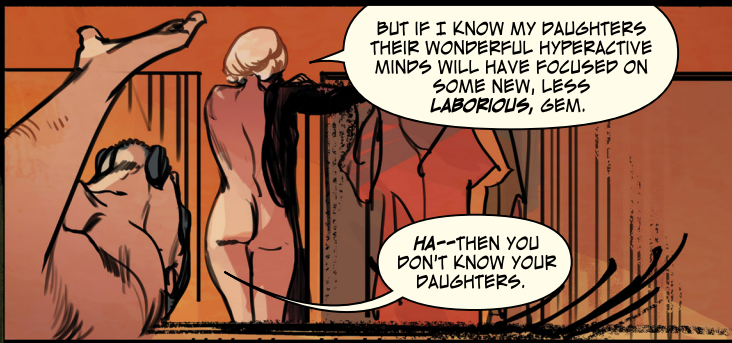
I'LL MAKE YOU A DEAL.



IF THEY REMEMBER, IF THEY WANT TO GO--I'LL ALLOW IT.

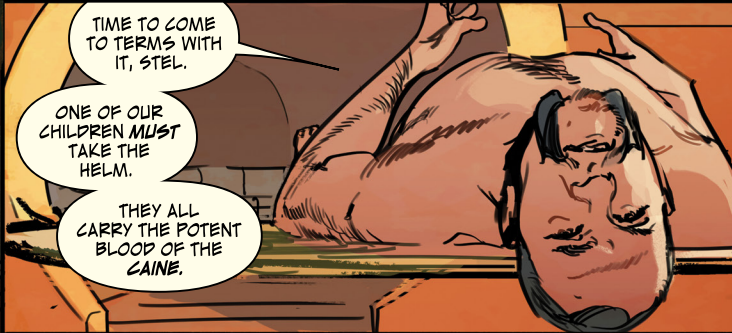
REALLY?

OKAY, FINE.



BUT IF I KNOW MY DAUGHTERS THEIR WONDERFUL HYPERACTIVE MINDS WILL HAVE FOCUSED ON SOME NEW, LESS LABORIOUS, GEM.

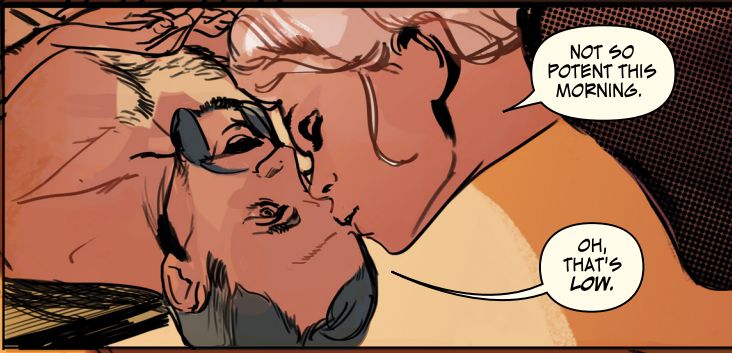
HA--THEN YOU DON'T KNOW YOUR DAUGHTERS.



TIME TO COME TO TERMS WITH IT, STEL.

ONE OF OUR CHILDREN MUST TAKE THE HELM.

THEY ALL CARRY THE POTENT BLOOD OF THE CAINE.



NOT SO POTENT THIS MORNING.

OH, THAT'S LOW.



QUOTA JUST CAME IN. IT'S BEYOND IMPOSSIBLE.

THE NEEDS OF SO MANY ON MY SHOULDERS--THE ANXIETY OF NOT BEING ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH IT ALL--

WE CAN ONLY DO OUR BEST.

CATCH WHAT WE CAN.

WE'LL MORE THAN FILL THE CITY'S NEEDS-- PROVIDED YOU LOSE THE PESSIMISM.



ALL WHILE TRAINING PELLA AND TAJO.

WHO WON'T BE THERE.

THEY AREN'T HUNTERS.

THEY HAVE THE BLUE BLOOD OF THEIR MOTHER--

-DEEP-



IS IT TIME? I'M RUNNING THE MIND RIFLES! I CALLED IT!

WE STAYED UP ALL NIGHT REREADING THE REGULATIONS. WELL, I DID ANYWAY.



PERHAPS TAJO WOULD RATHER STAY HERE AND WORK ON HER GARDEN.

NO! I READ IT! I'M COMING WITH!

CAINED BLOOD, POTENT.



SO BE IT.

ALL RIGHT YOU LITTLE SHIP RATS, TODAY'S YOUR FIRST DAY OF BECOMING TRUE CAINES! A LONG LINE OF HUNTERS THAT HAVE PROVIDED--

USH.

PLEASE TELL ME WE'RE NOT DOING THE WHOLE HISTORY LESSON.



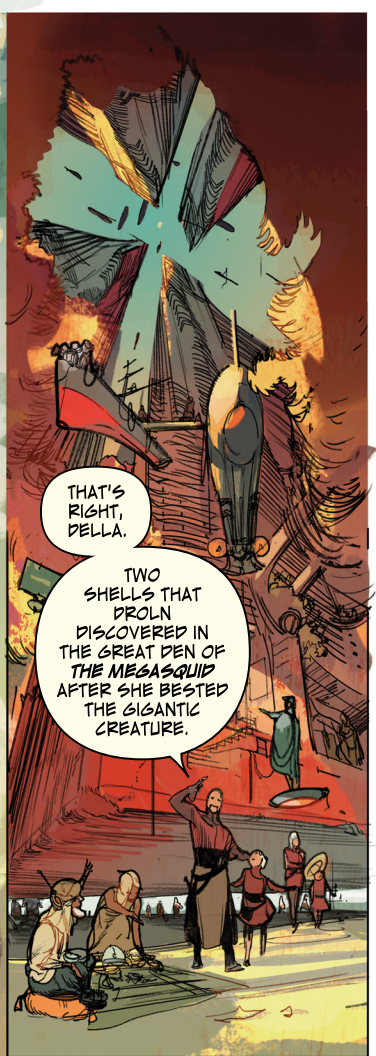
"HEAVENS NO!"

--AND OVER THERE, THE TOWER OF DROLN!

BUILT BY YOUR ANCESTOR DROLN CAINE, A HELMSWOMAN WHO LEAD THE BRIGADE WITH...

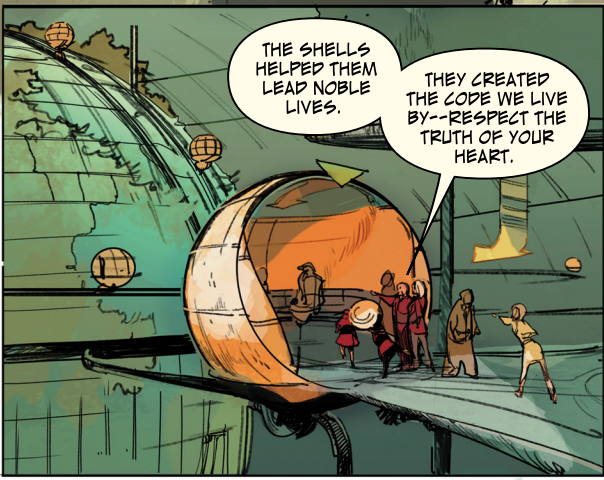
...TWO SHELLS THAT COULD READ THE TRUTH OF A PERSON'S HEART.

WE KNOW, DAD.



THAT'S RIGHT, DELLA.

TWO SHELLS THAT DROLN DISCOVERED IN THE GREAT DEN OF THE MESASQUID AFTER SHE BESTED THE SIGANTIC CREATURE.



THE SHELLS HELPED THEM LEAD NOBLE LIVES.

THEY CREATED THE CODE WE LIVE BY--RESPECT THE TRUTH OF YOUR HEART.



AND JUST AS DROLN PASSED THE SHELLS DOWN TO HER DAUGHTERS ON THEIR FIRST HUNT...



SO TOO WILL I.

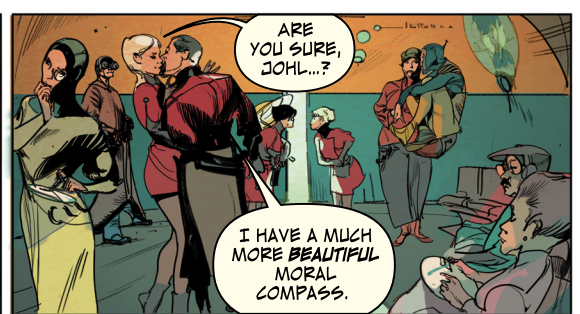
AS LONG AS THEY GLOW YOU ARE BEING TRUE TO YOURSELF.



IF THEY SHOULD EVER GO DARK--

THAT'S BAD.

WE GOT IT, DAD.



ARE YOU SURE, JOHL...?

I HAVE A MUCH MORE BEAUTIFUL MORAL COMPASS.

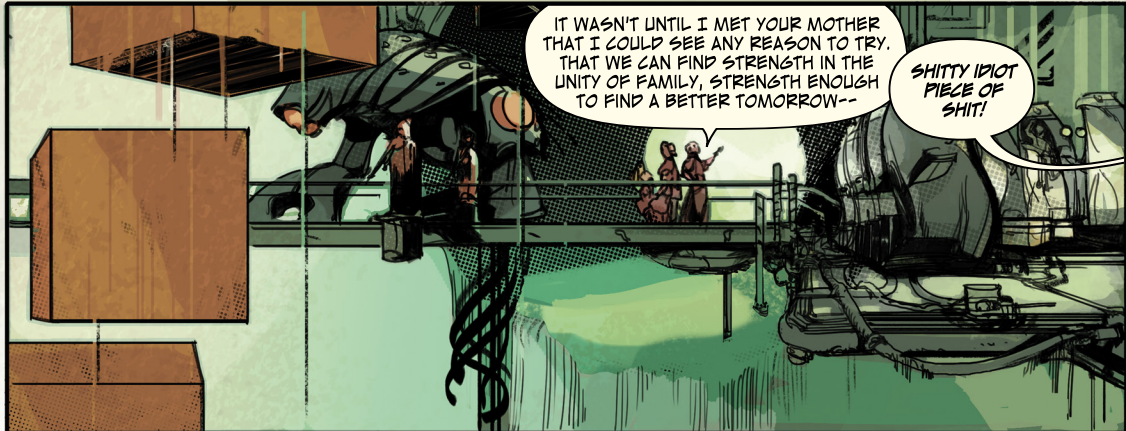


I REMEMBER WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE, FINDING OUT THAT OUR WORLD WILL ONE DAY BE CONSUMED BY THE SUN.

WHAT A WASTE OF TIME THIS ALL IS, IT SEEMED TO ME.

NO MATTER WHAT WE BUILD, NO MATTER WHAT WE DO, NO MATTER WHAT, THE SUN WILL CONTINUE TO EXPAND, AND EVENTUALLY CONSUME IT ALL.

I FELT LIKE A POWERLESS OBSERVER OF THE END OF MY SPECIES.



IT WASN'T UNTIL I MET YOUR MOTHER THAT I COULD SEE ANY REASON TO TRY. THAT WE CAN FIND STRENGTH IN THE UNITY OF FAMILY, STRENGTH ENOUGH TO FIND A BETTER TOMORROW--

SHITTY IDIOT PIECE OF SHIT!



STUPID FUCKING PRESSURE INVERTER!

NICE LANGUAGE, MARK.

WELL, HE GOT AT LEAST ONE THING FROM ME.



GRAVITY SPONGES IN THE SUB WERE SHOT, DAD.

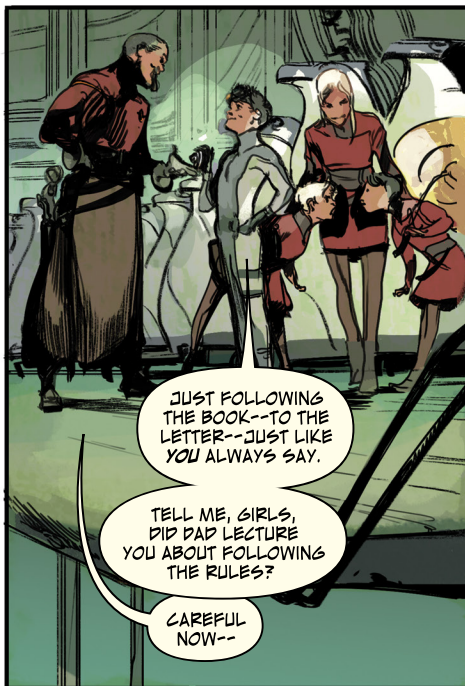
HOW MANY YEARS SINCE YOU CHANGED THEM?



MANUAL SAYS THEY HAVE TO BE SWAPPED EVERY THREE WEEKS.

THANK YOU, MARK.

HE IS ORDERLY.



JUST FOLLOWING THE BOOK--TO THE LETTER--JUST LIKE YOU ALWAYS SAY.

TELL ME, GIRLS, DID DAD LECTURE YOU ABOUT FOLLOWING THE RULES?

CAREFUL NOW--



OR I MIGHT RECONSIDER ALLOWING YOU TO STAY BEHIND!

HA--



I'M SO EXCITED FOR YOU. I WANT TO HEAR WHAT IT'S LIKE OUT THERE.

I WISH YOU WERE COMING, MARK.



HUNTING, KILLING--NOT MY THING.

LISTEN TO DAD.



BETWEEN ALL HIS LONGWINDED STORIES HE CAN SAY SOME SMART STUFF.

I'LL TAKE YOUR WORD FOR IT.



HERE IT IS--
THE LAST
HELM SUIT OF
SALUS.

WOW.
IT'S SO
BIG.

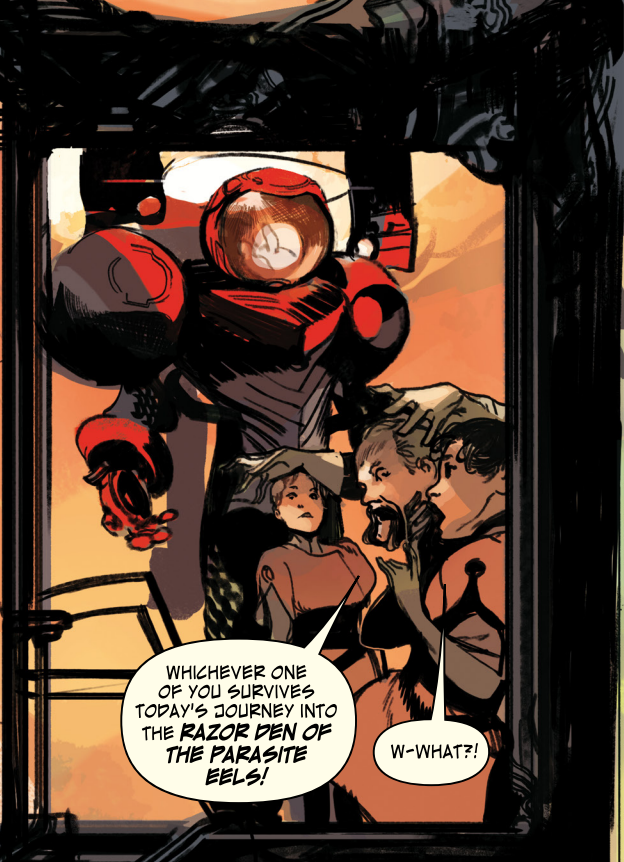
W-WE'RE NOT
GOING TO HAVE
TO GET INSIDE OF
THAT TODAY,
ARE WE?

HEAVENS
NO, BUT ONE
DAY ONE OF
YOU WILL,
TAJO.



ONLY A CAINE
CAN USE IT, AND
YOU ARE THE LAST
OF THE CAINES.

WHICH OF
US WILL
WEAR IT?



WHICHEVER ONE
OF YOU SURVIVES
TODAY'S JOURNEY
INTO THE RAZOR
PEN OF
THE PARASITE
EELS!

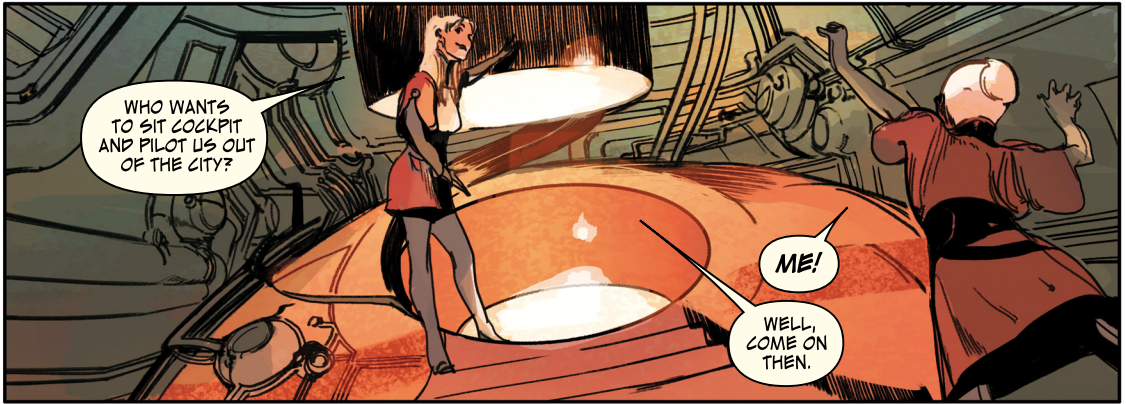
W-WHAT?!



HE'S KIDDING, SCAREY SHRIMP.

I'LL WEAR IT, DADDY. I'LL BE THE BEST HELMSWOMAN SALUS HAS EVER SEEN!

YOU'LL DO GREAT AS WELL, TAJO. I KNOW IT.



WHO WANTS TO SIT COCKPIT AND PILOT US OUT OF THE CITY?

ME!

WELL, COME ON THEN.



THIS IS TREMENDOUS, MOM!

COME, SIT. PILOT US OUT, BELLA.

SONAR REPORTS ZONE IS CLEAR OF ANY TRESPASSERS.

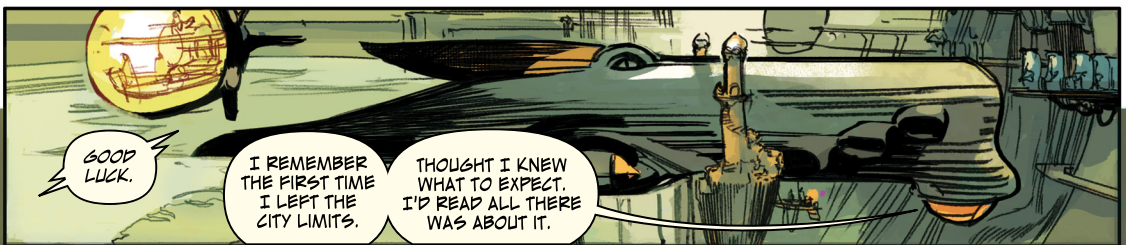
LOOKS TO BE A NICE DAY OUT.



OKAY, SET THE PIT LOG FORWARD STERN 25 KNOTS.

WATCH THE DOPPLER SHIFT.

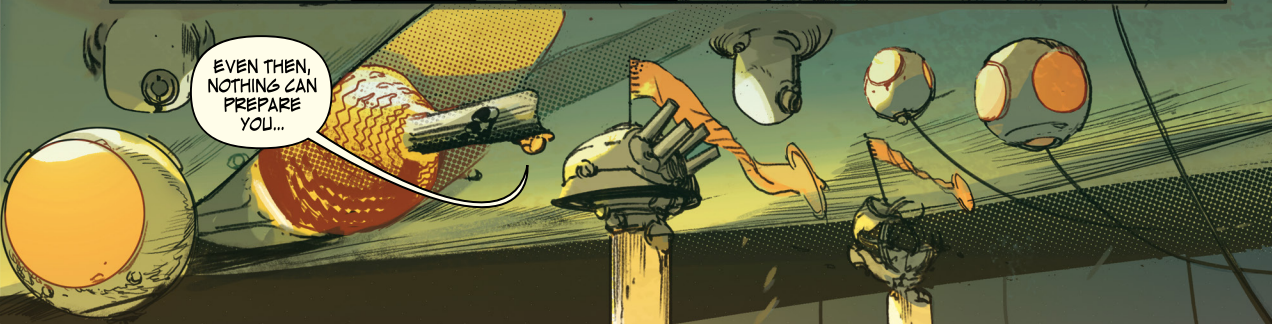
MONARCH SUBMARCH, OKAYED TO LAUNCH.



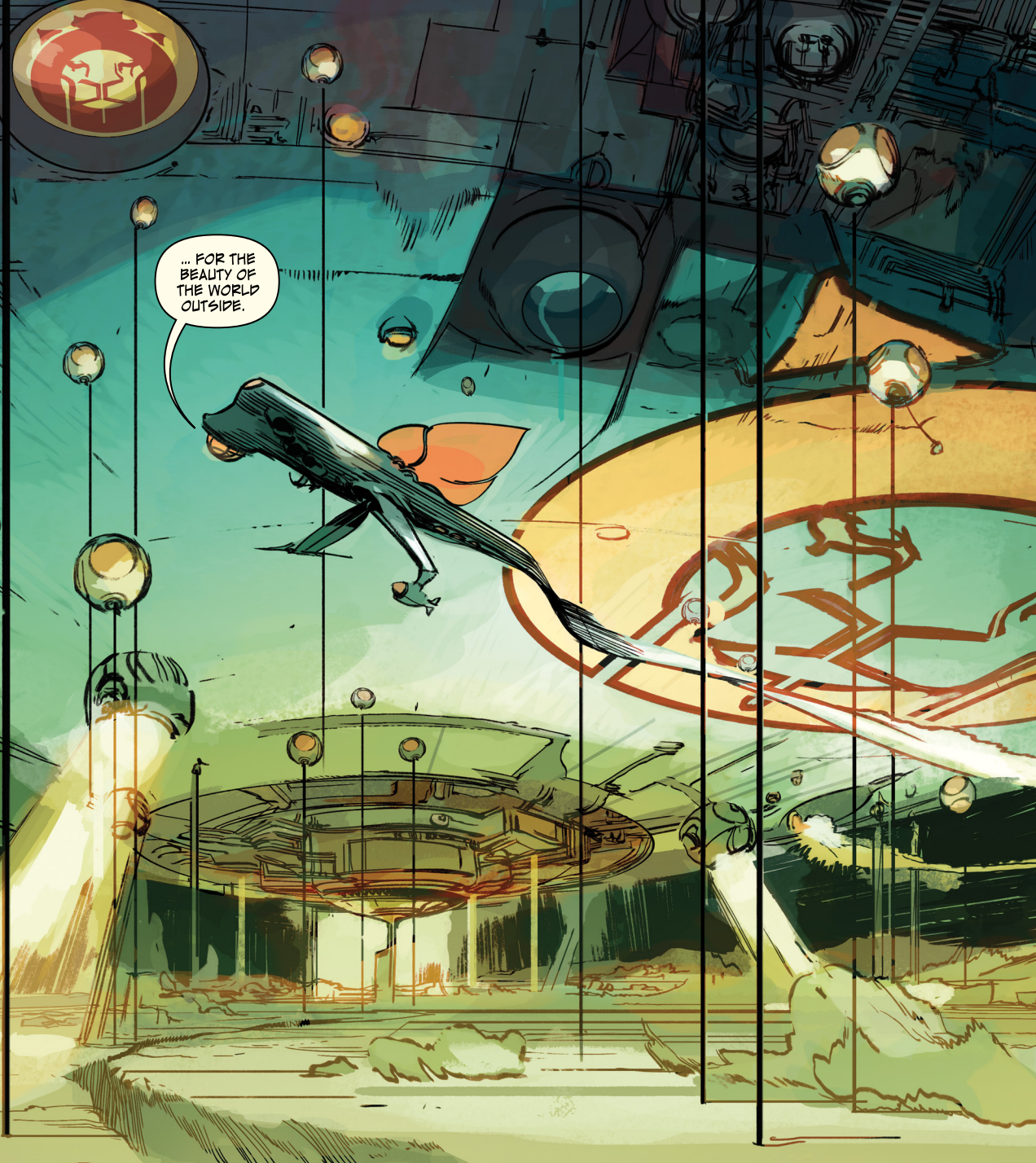
GOOD LUCK.

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I LEFT THE CITY LIMITS.

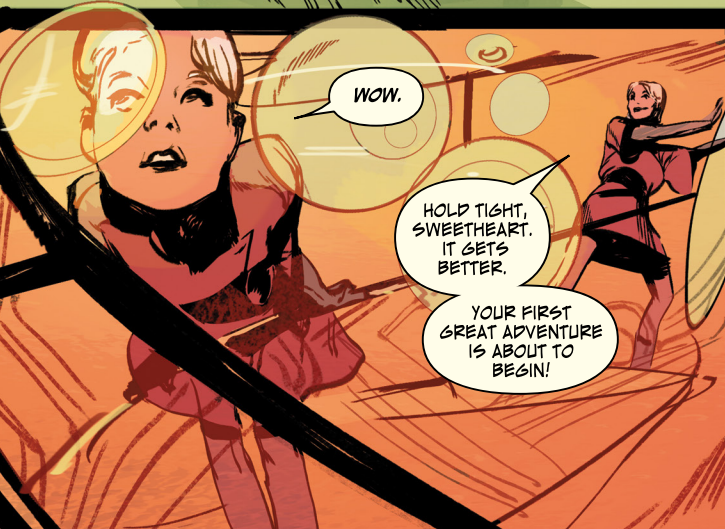
THOUGHT I KNEW WHAT TO EXPECT. I'D READ ALL THERE WAS ABOUT IT.



EVEN THEN, NOTHING CAN PREPARE YOU...



... FOR THE BEAUTY OF THE WORLD OUTSIDE.



WOW.

HOLD TIGHT, SWEETHEART. IT GETS BETTER.

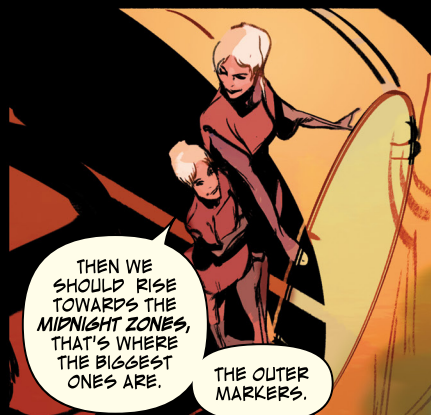
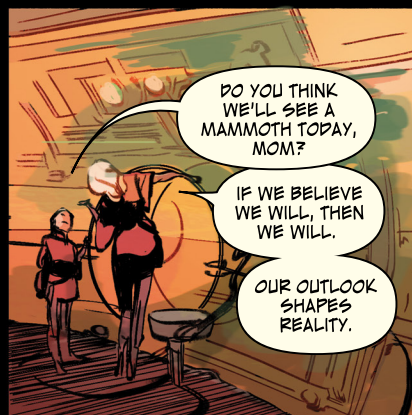
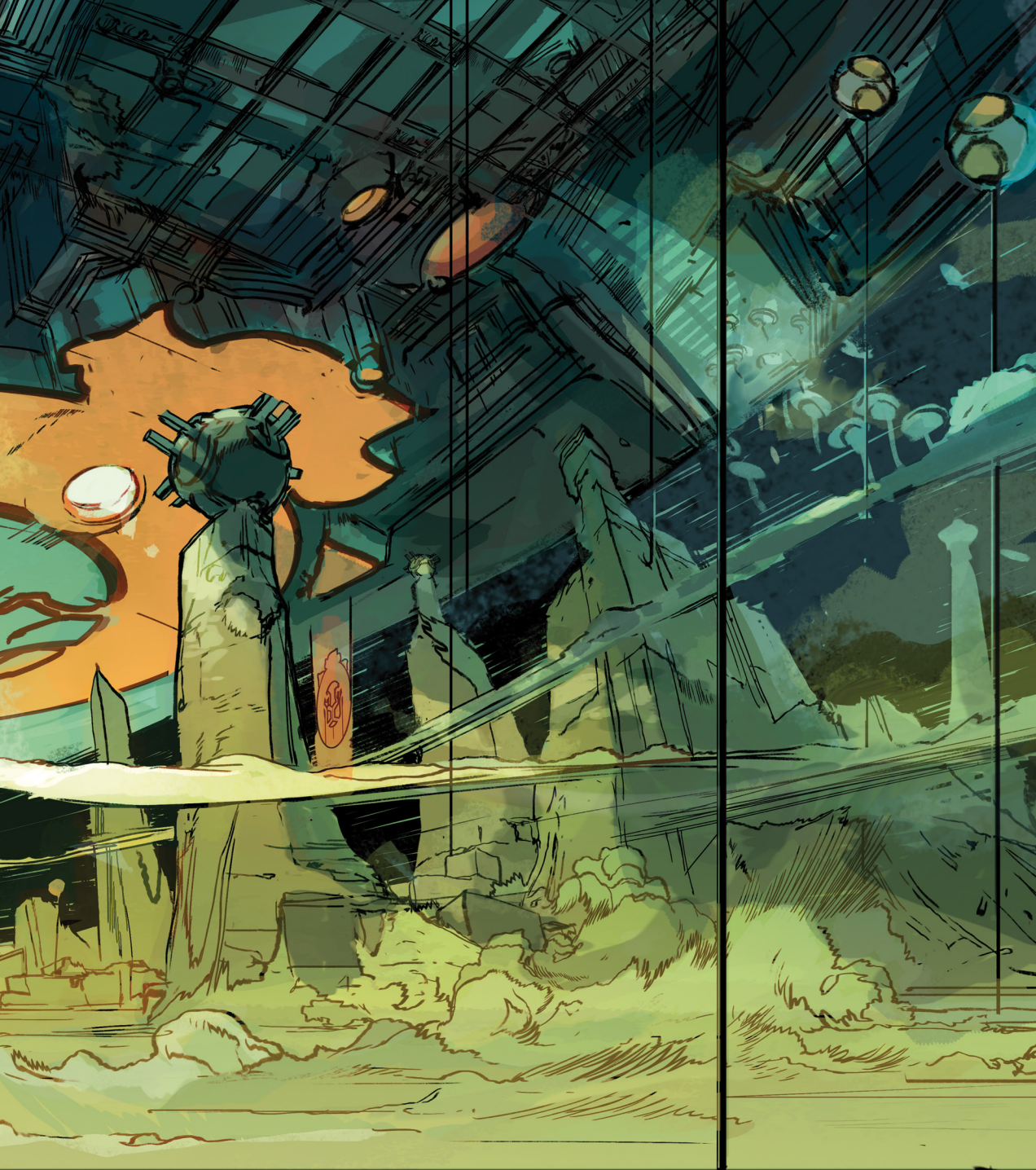
YOUR FIRST GREAT ADVENTURE IS ABOUT TO BEGIN!



WHAT ARE THOSE ORBS, DADDY?

DEPTH CHARGES.

THEY KEEP THE SCURVIES AWAY.





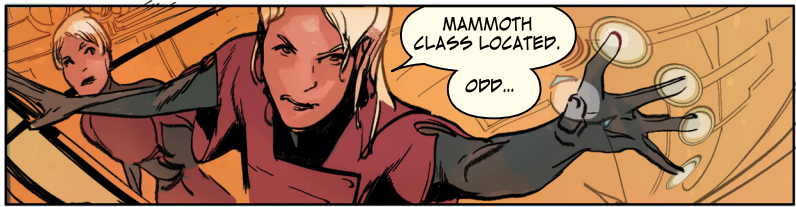
BEING OPTIMISTIC DOESN'T MEAN YOU HAVE TO IGNORE THE REALITIES AROUND YOU.

WE CAN'T GO TO THOSE ZONES, NOT IF WE WANT TO AVOID THE OMEGA MAMMOTHS OR WORSE STILL...



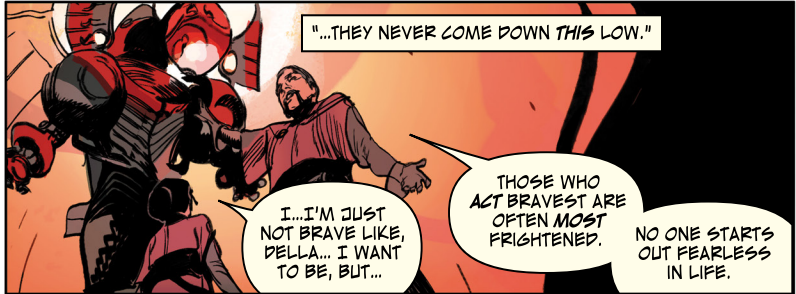
"...THE SCURVY HORDE."

"BUT YOU MIGHT JUST GET YOUR WISH AFTER ALL."



MAMMOTH CLASS LOCATED.

ODD...



"...THEY NEVER COME DOWN THIS LOW."

I...I'M JUST NOT BRAVE LIKE, DELLA... I WANT TO BE, BUT...

THOSE WHO ACT BRAVEST ARE OFTEN MOST FRIGHTENED.

NO ONE STARTS OUT FEARLESS IN LIFE.



WE START OFF TERRIFIED AND EARN OUR CONFIDENCE.

JOHL, I FOUND A MAMMOTH.

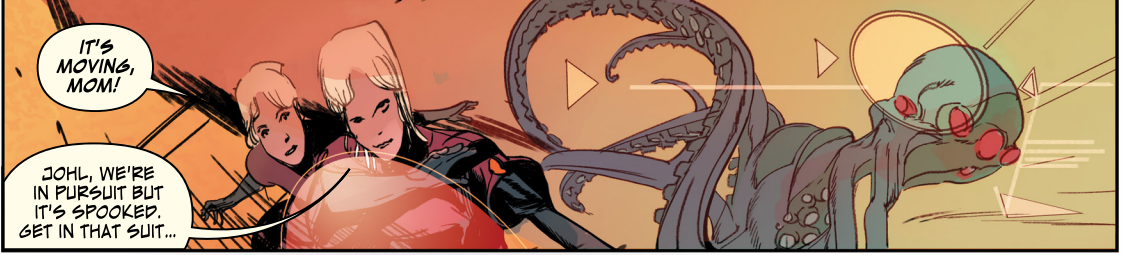
DOWN HERE?

YUP. GET GEARED UP...



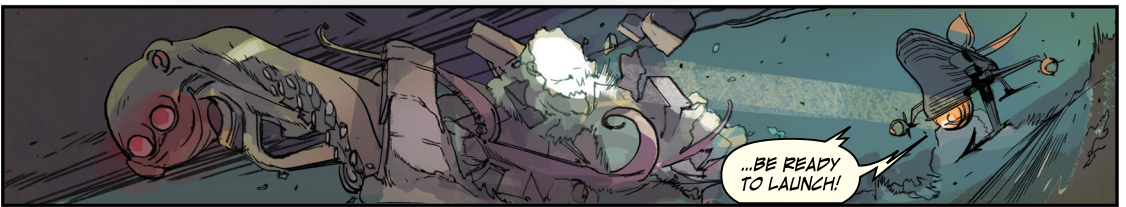
...THIS BABY IS THE BIGGEST ONE I'VE EVER SEEN.

BIG ENOUGH TO FILL OUR IMPOSSIBLE QUOTA.



IT'S MOVING, MOM!

JOHL, WE'RE IN PURSUIT BUT IT'S SPOOKED. GET IN THAT SUIT...



...BE READY TO LAUNCH!



HOLD ON-- IT INKED!



I'M LOST, REAPOLTS ARE DEAD--NEVER SEEN INK LIKE THIS--

BIO-MAGNETIC CLOAKING!



NEVER SEEN ONE SO DELIBERATE.

SO CALCULATED.

WHY ARE WE STOPPING?



HANG ONTO SOMETHING, JOHL. WE'RE MAKING A HARD REVERSE--



WHY?! STEL, WHAT'S GOING ON UP THERE?

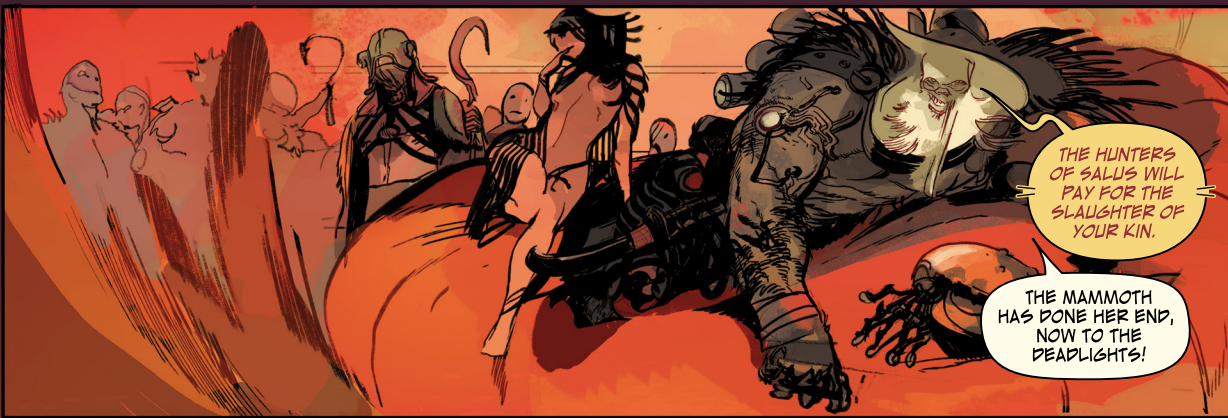
WHAT IS IT?!

LIGHTS PRESERVE US...

"...IT'S A TRAP."

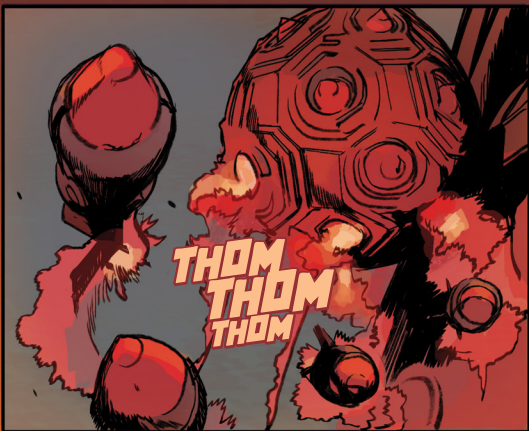


YOU'VE DONE WELL, MY BEAUTIFUL SISTER.

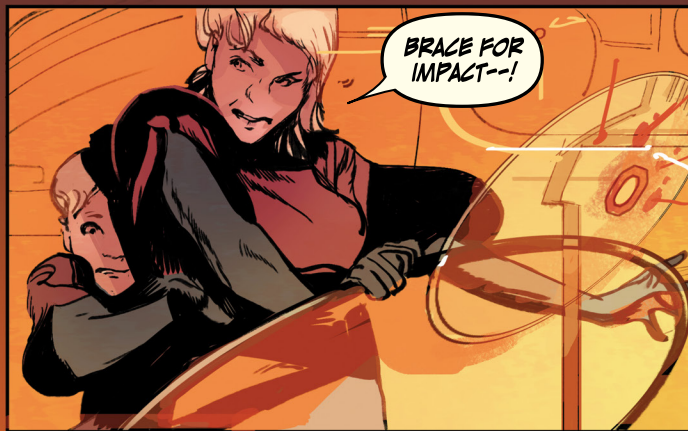


THE HUNTERS OF SALUS WILL PAY FOR THE SLAUGHTER OF YOUR KIN.

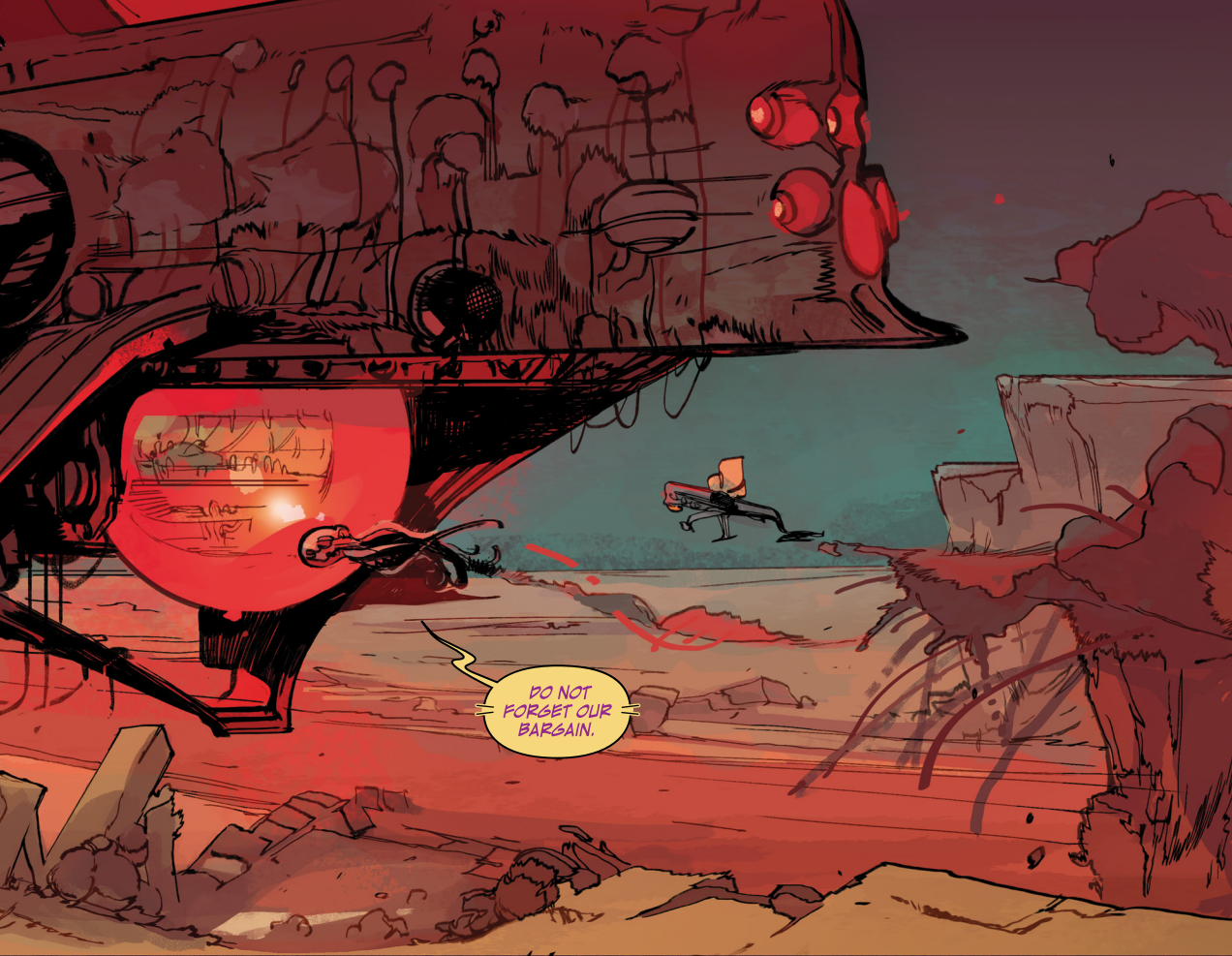
THE MAMMOTH HAS DONE HER END, NOW TO THE DEADLIGHTS!



THOM
THOM
THOM



BRACE FOR IMPACT--!



DO NOT FORGET OUR BARGAIN.



FIRE THE FUCKIN' COFFINS!



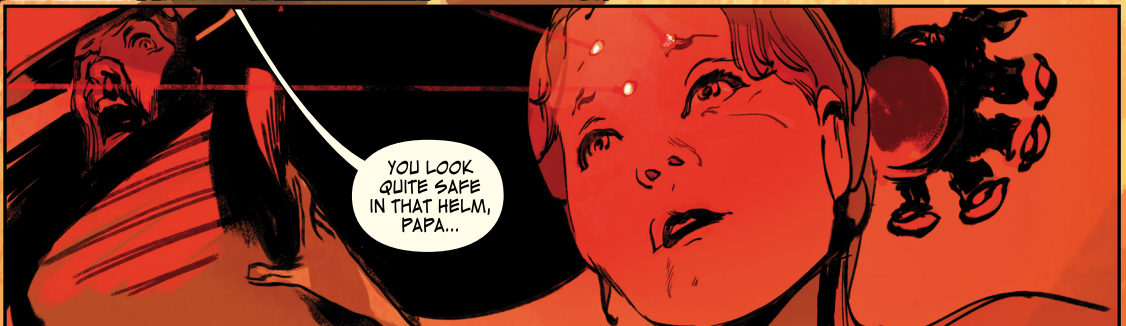
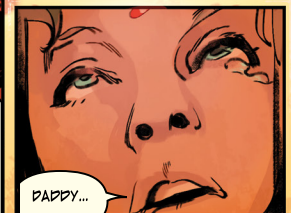
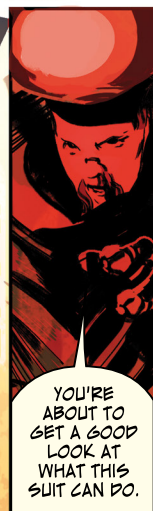
--WE'RE BEING BOARDED!



KUNG
KUNG
KUNG



OOF--!



TOO BAD THERE WASN'T A SECOND ONE FOR THE GIRL.

SINGLE TWITCH, SHE FUCKING DIE!

SINGLE TWITCH!

THERE IS NO HOPE, SALLUSIAN PIG...



"...YOUR SHIP IS SURROUNDED."

ROLN! THEY'RE NOT SLOWING DOWN...

MOVE--!



SHRASHH--!

THEY'RE RAMMING!



HOLD THE YOKE, KEEP IT FULL THROTTLE ASTERN-- STOP FOR NOTHING!

O-O-KAY, MOM...



OPEN THIS HATCH FOR NO ONE!



DON'T MOVE, YOU SAVAGE BASTARD.



SAVAGE PERHAPS, BUT MY PARENTS WERE WED.

DEEPLY IN LOVE UNTIL THE DAY YOUR HELMSMAN KILLED THEM, PRETTY PIE.



HELMSDOGS WE HUNTED--



OOF--!

HELMSDOGS WE KILL!



IT'S TRUE. WE'VE KILLED SO MANY. AND WHILE IT MAKES ME FEEL HAPPY...

DESTROYING SUCH SPECTACULAR WEAPONS DOES NOT.

SO MANY SLEEPLESS NIGHTS PONDERING, IF ONLY I COULD TAKE ONE FOR MY OWN.



Y-YOU CAN'T USE IT... ONLY MY FAMILY CAN!

QUIET, TAZO!



SIGH

NO SHIT, KID. DNA CLOPED BY THE MAKERS.

BLOODLINE PROTECTION, THE GREAT EGOTISM OF THE MAKERS.

THAT'S ALL I WANT TO DO IS PROTECT MY FAMILY--THE HELM IS OF NO USE TO YOU!

I'LL COME WITH YOU--



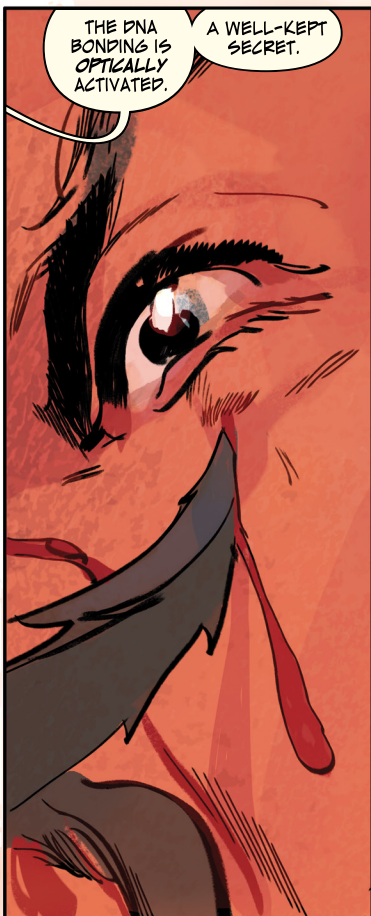
SIMPLY BECAUSE WE WERE BORN OUTSIDE OF THE CITY WALLS, DO NOT PRESUME WE ARE ALL PULL.

I AM A LITERATE MAN.



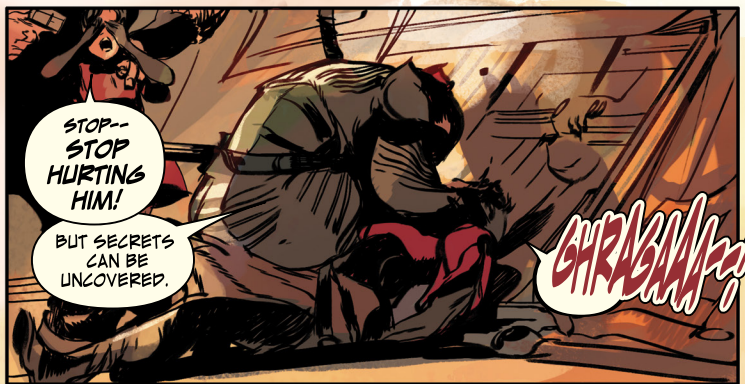
IN FACT I RECENTLY READ AN ANCIENT BOOK, WRITTEN ON THE SIEGE ON DRESSAROLUS.

THE INVADING LOLINITES FOUND SOMETHING QUITE OUTSTANDING ABOUT HELM SUITS.



THE DNA BONDING IS OPTICALLY ACTIVATED.

A WELL-KEPT SECRET.



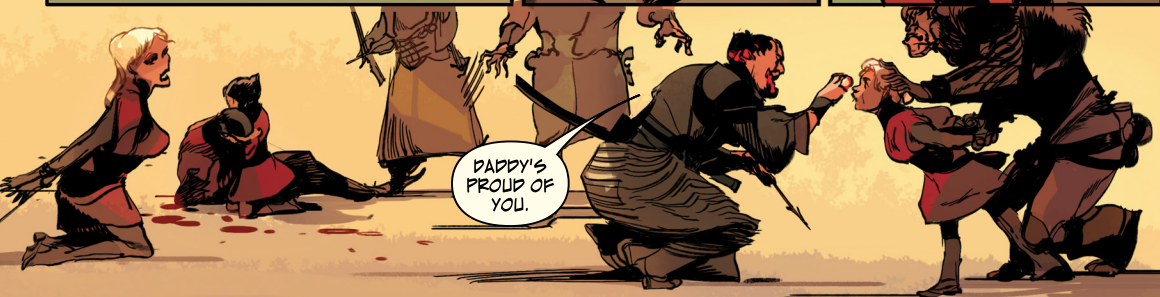
STOP-- STOP HURTING HIM!

BUT SECRETS CAN BE UNCOVERED.

GHRAGAAA!!



YOU JUST HAVE TO KNOW WHERE TO LOOK.





ALL RIGHT, ME SCURVIES,
BACK TO THE DREADED GALLEON
WITH MY NEW HELM.

LEAVE THESE
GOOD PEOPLE TO
GO ABOUT THEIR
BUSINESS.



BUT
LET'S TAKE THE
CHILDREN.



NO!

MOMMY--!



SON OF A
BITCH, I'LL
KILL--



OOP!

KRAUK

JOHL--!



IT'S HARD.
I GET IT.

BUT THIS
CHANGES
EVERYTHING
FOR US.

PLEASE
PONT--!

**DON'T
TAKE MY
BABIES!**



YOU NEEDN'T WORRY
FOR THEIR SAFETY,
MOMMY.

A HELMSMAN'S
BLOOD IS QUITE
PRECIOUS.

DOOLEEP

ACTIVATED.

AND YOUR CHILDREN'S BLOOD WILL ENSURE I KEEP THIS SUIT PILOTED LONG ENOUGH TO TAKE SALUS FOR MY PEOPLE.



MOMMY--!

I'LL FIND YOU! BOTH OF YOU--



I PROMISE.

NEVER LOSE HOPE. MOMMY WILL FIND YOU!



IT HURTS SO BADLY, DEARY. I FEEL EMPATHY, I CAN IMAGINE.

BUT LOOK AT THE UPSIDE--



--NOT FOR MUCH LONGER NOW.





A FIERY END IS
INESCAPABLE.

EVERYONE
KNOWS THIS.

EVERYONE
EXCEPT MY
WIFE.

STEL WON'T
HEAR IT.

OUR CHILDREN
THRIVE AMID HER
IRRATIONAL
OPTIMISM.

SO DO I.

STEL KNOWS WHAT NO
ONE ELSE DARES TRUST.

THAT THERE
IS HOPE.

THAT, PROVIDED
WE BELIEVE IT...

...WE WILL RISE AGAIN.

AFTERWORD.

One day the sun will expand on its way to going supernova and engulf the entire world. If you're anything like me, then the first time you learned this it sat with you for a bit. No matter how far off into the future it is, its finality is heavy-duty.

It's true. I was 7 or 8 years old when I first learned this and it was my first taste of nihilism.

I remember thinking, "*Jesus, what a ... waste of time this all is, then. It's all so futile. No matter what we build, no matter what we create, no matter what we accomplish, the sun's going to eat it all up.*" I had just, sort of, processed the concept of dying not too many years before, but this was too much. It was hard enough to get my head around my own mortality, but the entire planet? Fuck.

Fast-forward to 2010, when I'd just finished *Last Days of American Crime* with Greg Tocchini, and we started looking for our next project together. We both wanted to do something Sci-Fi, but it had to be unique. Had to be different than anything either of us had ever done or even seen. I spent months writing ideas, but nothing really excited me. I was already doing sci-fi in *Fear Agent* and hadn't found a big hook. Something that was different enough to be worthy of Greg's super powers and jive-ass skills.

Then, one fateful afternoon, while reading *National Geographic*, I hit on an article

about the timeline of when the sun actually is expected to expand and consume our little solar system. It reminded me of my youthful fascination with the concept and got me thinking: That's a great ticking time bomb, and it's a real ticking time bomb. It was interesting on a universal level, as it affected everyone, all of us, which is usually the first ingredient of "home run material upon which to build a story."

I filled a notebook with ideas: How would mankind survive? What would we do? I guess we could move to the bottom of the ocean to escape the radiation while they're looking for a new planet. But what if they were down there for too long? What if no probe ever found an inhabitable world? Tens of thousands of years pass and now there's just these few cities left. My world building brain kicked into gear and I began creating the setting for LOW.

During the developing years of this book I began therapy, and in therapy the biggest hurdle for me to overcome was learning to develop positive thinking habits. Being a pessimist by nature, this was a challenge. The workbook my therapist had me doing was all about optimism, and reminded me of a book an old friend gave me, *Illusions* by Richard Bach. When I was about 25 years old, and thinking of leaving my job at 20th Century Fox Animation to go do comics, this book's ideas about optimism and how conscious thought can shape reality compelled me to

just quit and give it a try.

Now I've realized that in fifteen years I've never once written an optimistic lead character.

This led me to develop Stel Caine, the eternal optimist who holds out hope against all odds. A perfect fit for this far future tale of humanity at its lowest point. A perfect character to examine the notion that it's not what happens in life that defines us, but how we choose to deal with it.

And it was perfect timing as during the production of LOW I began to find my way to a more optimistic state of mind, which has made my life better in almost every regard. I've been more productive, found more time for exercise, more time for family, and increased my workload considerably. Writing Stel's adventures and what she endures and how she endures it became incredibly cathartic.

LOW is a story about one woman's eternal optimism, to burden the sorrows and the crushing weight of a world without hope.

I finally feel like I am ready to tell this story.

See you in 30.

RR

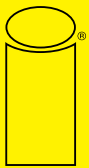
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NEXT ISSUE

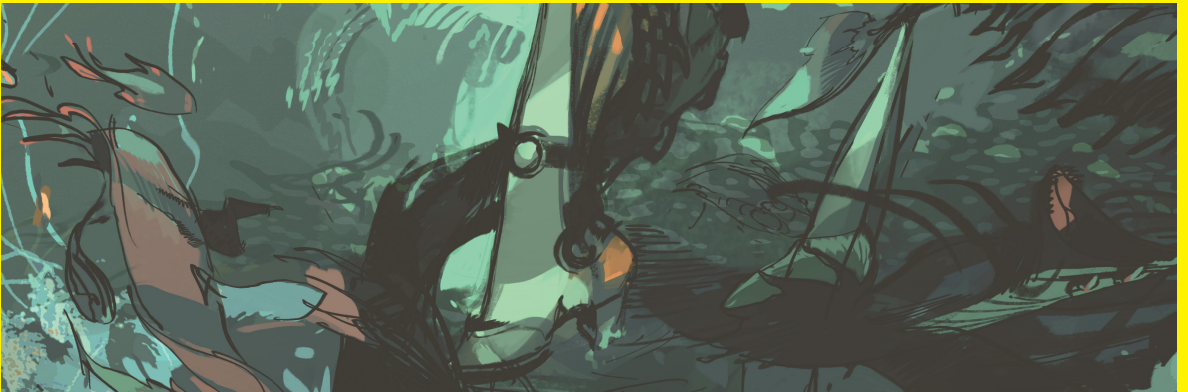


REMEMBER - TOCCHINI

LOW



IS FOR IMMERSIVE



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LOW