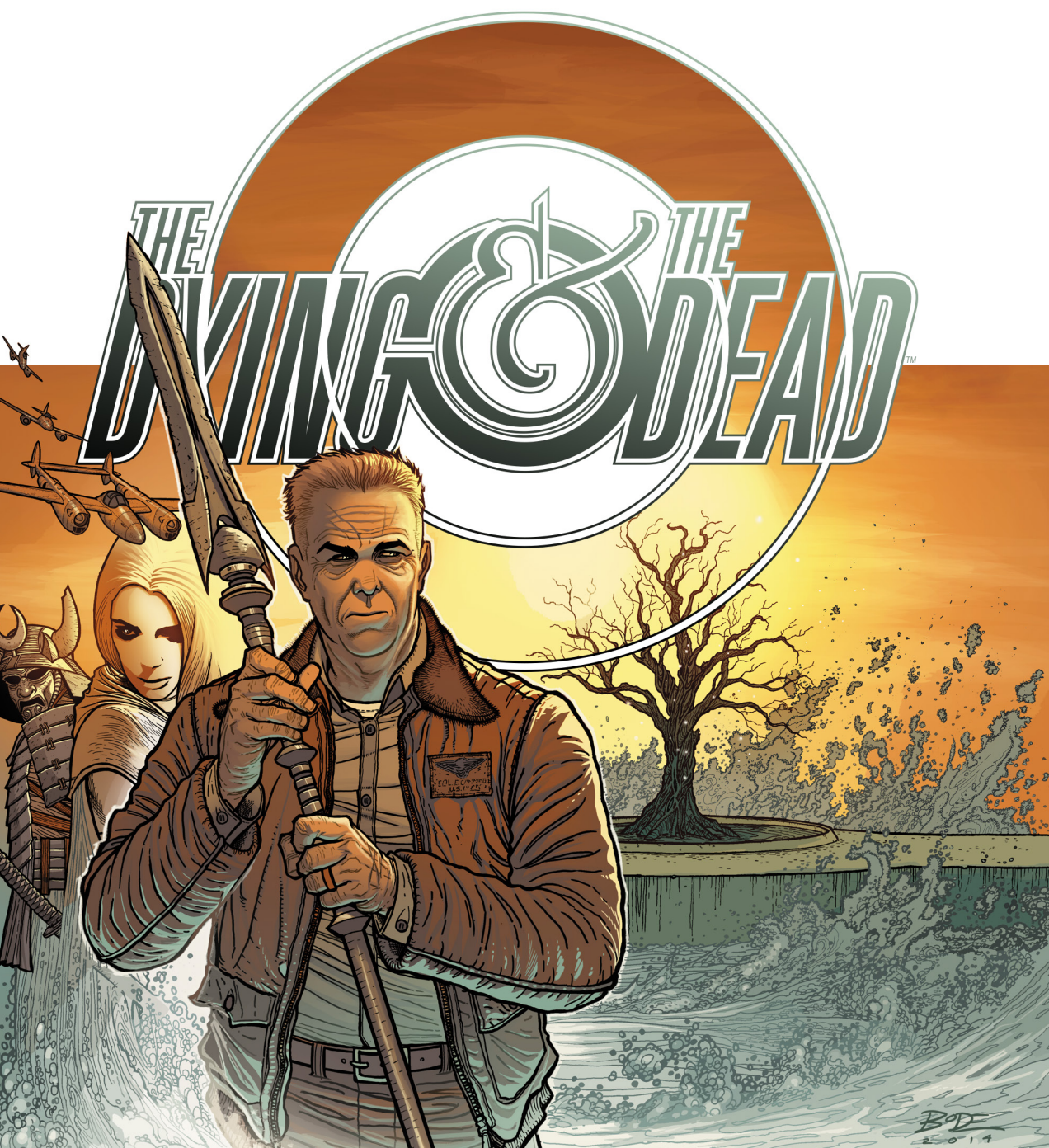
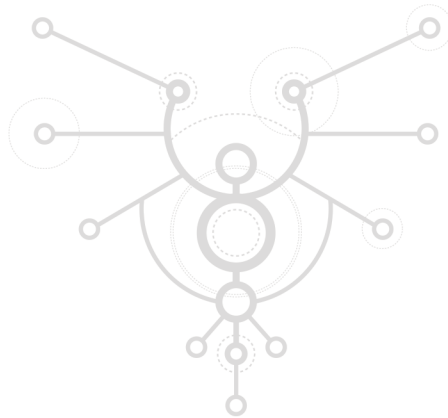




HICKMAN / BODENHEIM

1





JONATHAN HICKMAN

WRITER

RYAN BODENHEIM

ARTIST

MICHAEL GARLAND

COLORS

RUS WOOTON

LETTERS

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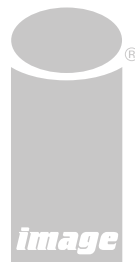
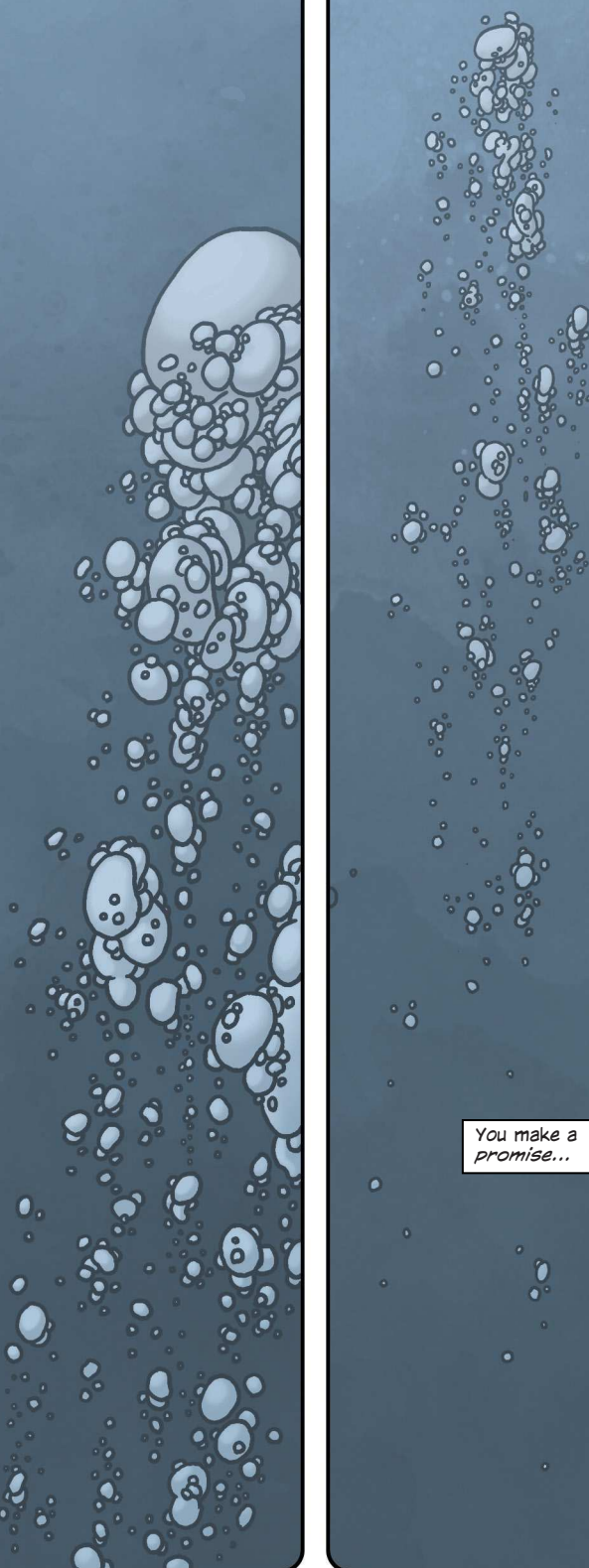


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The Greek isle,
Skorpidi.



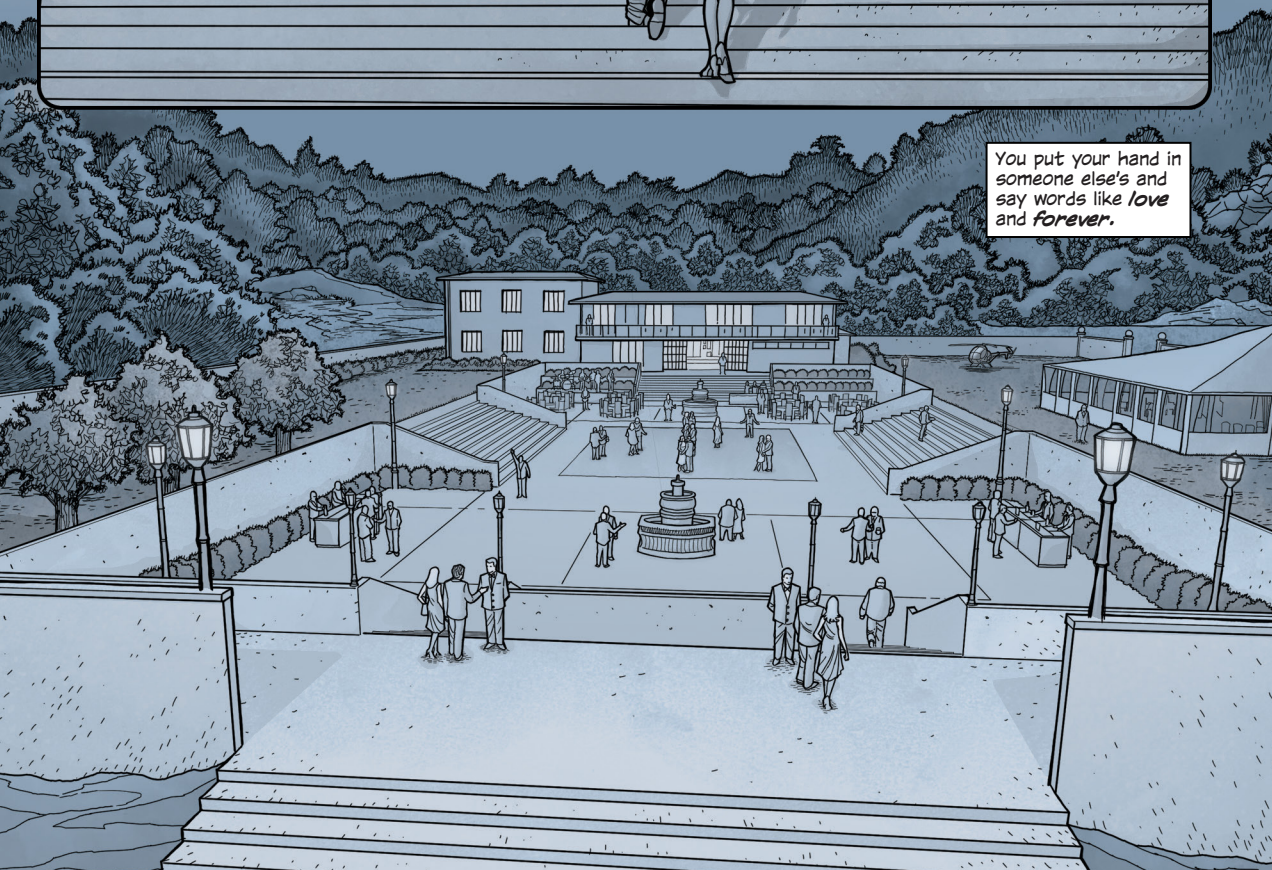
You make a
promise...

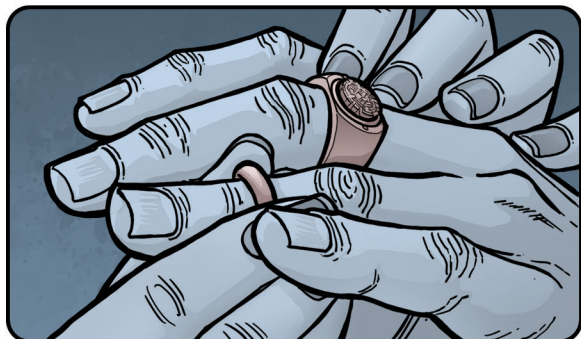
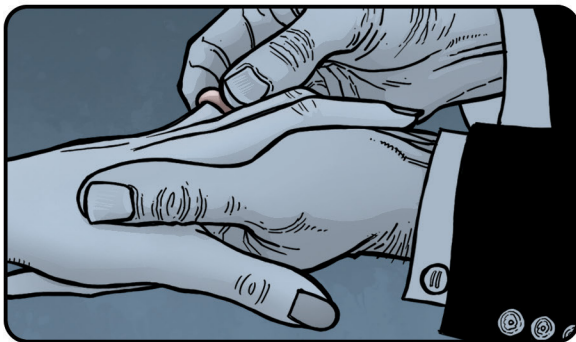
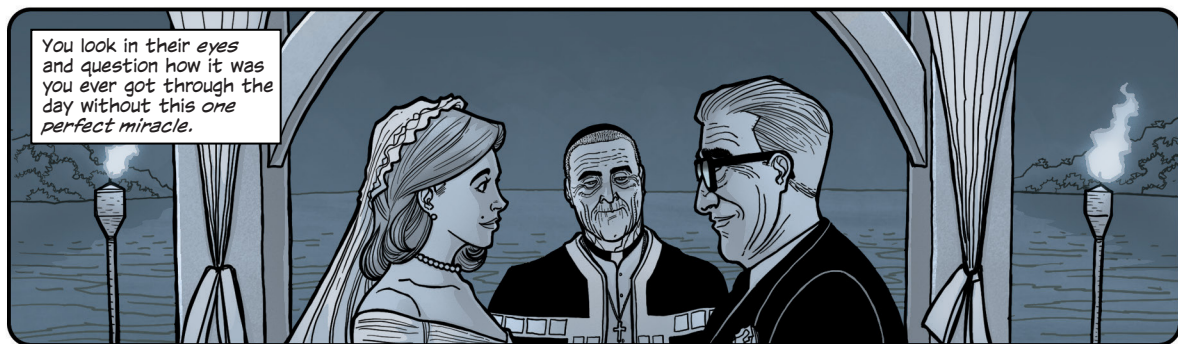


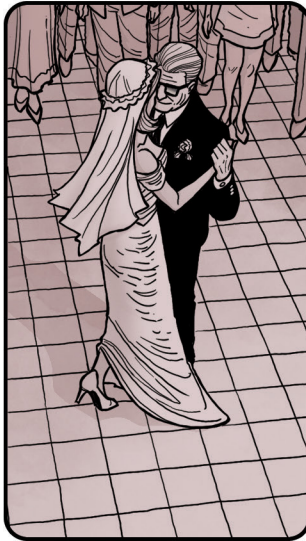
And then *another*.



You put your hand in
someone else's and
say words like *love*
and *forever*.





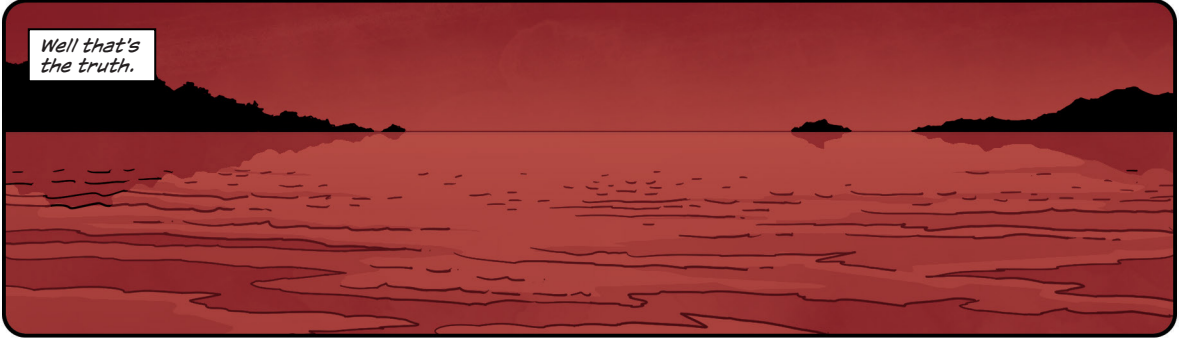


It becomes *dependant*.





They say symbiosis is just a fancy way of sayin' without each other you die...



Well that's the truth.



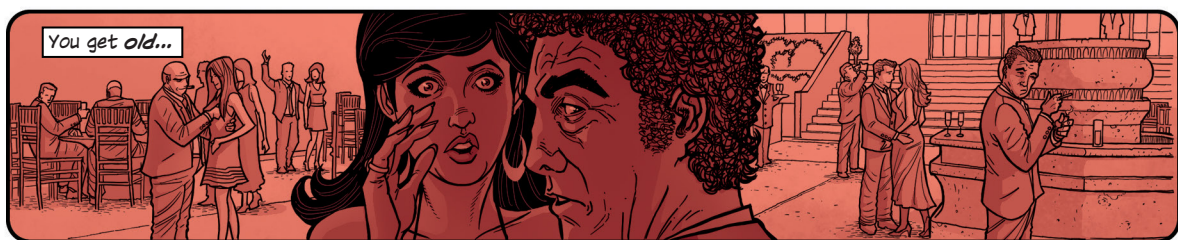
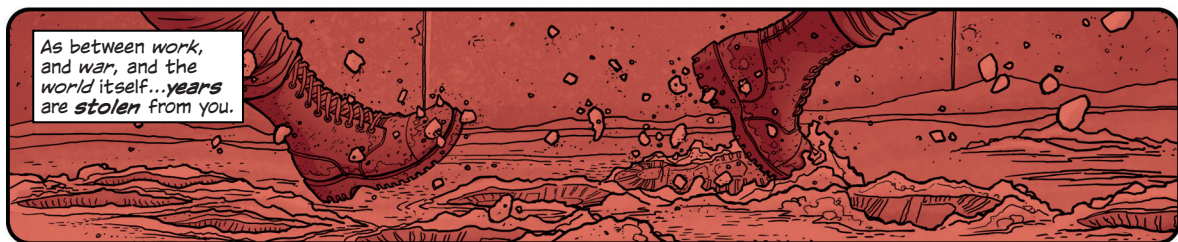
It's the fertile ground in which you both flourish.

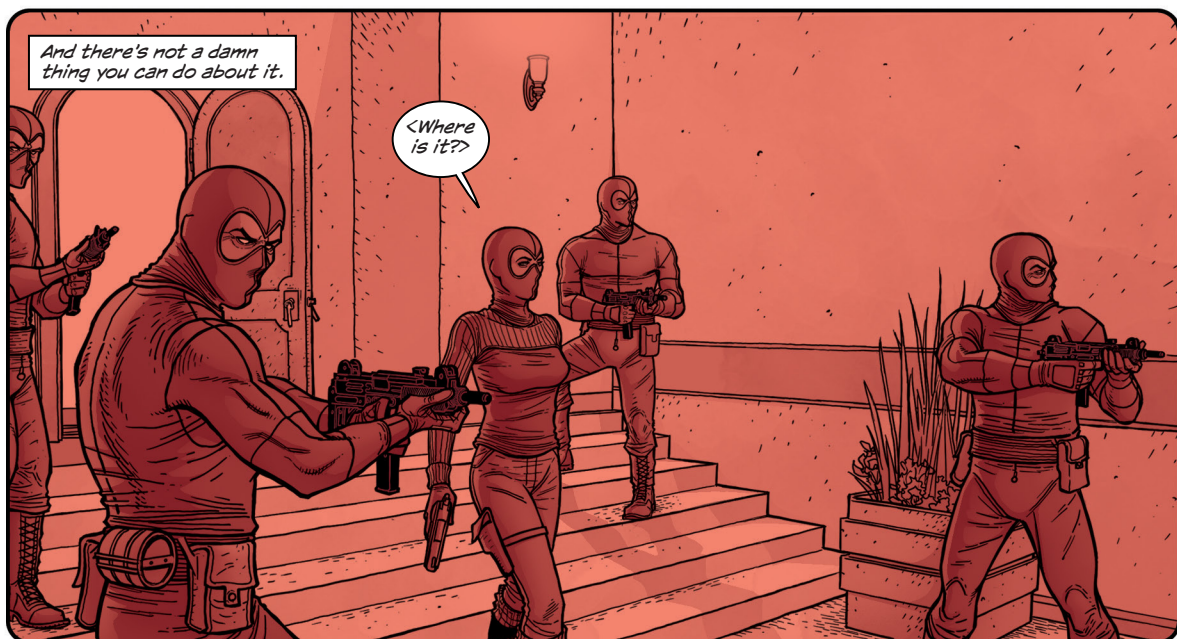
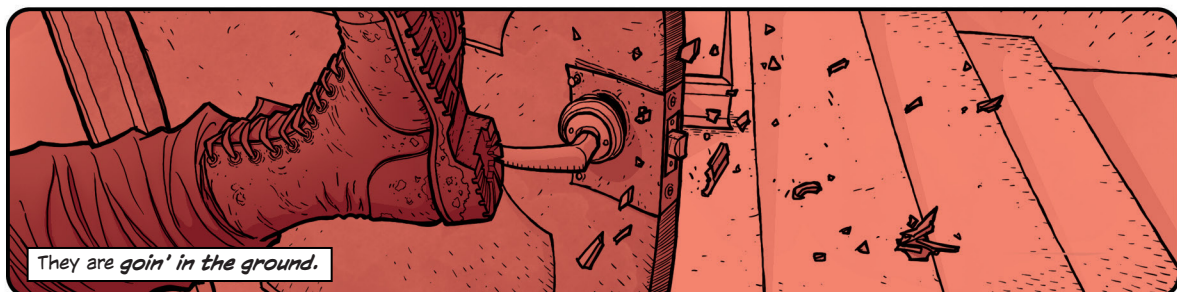


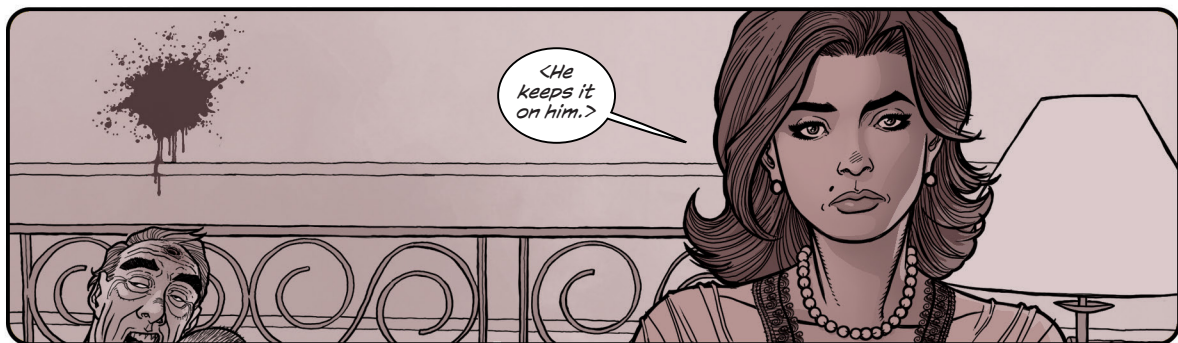
The problem is, it only stays like that for a season...

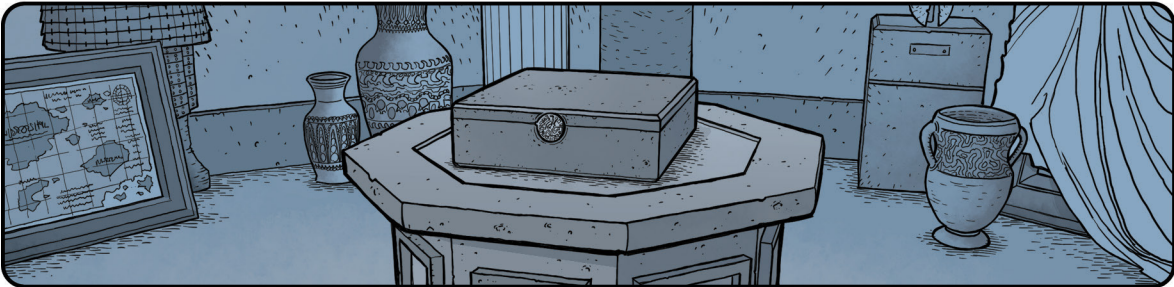
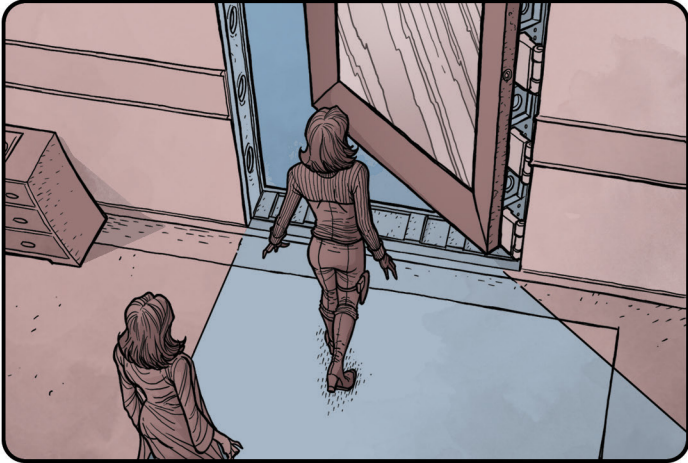
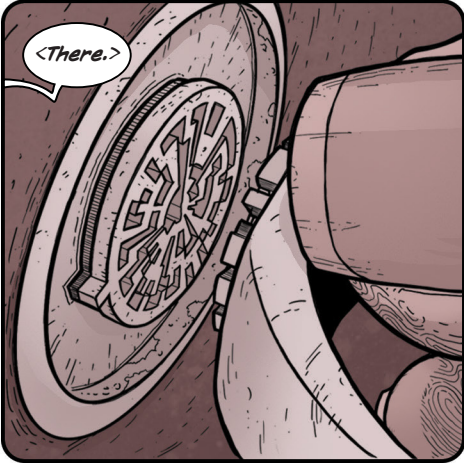
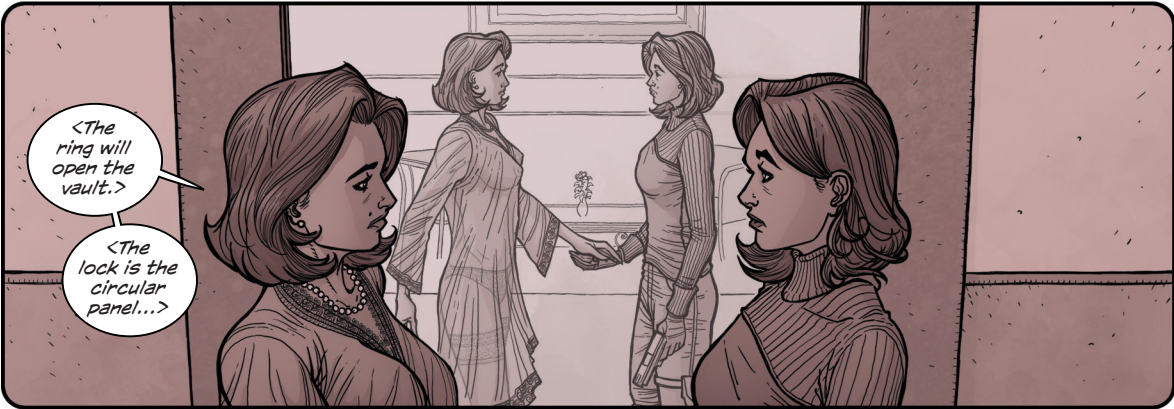


For what seems like too short a time.











Bah
al'Sharur.



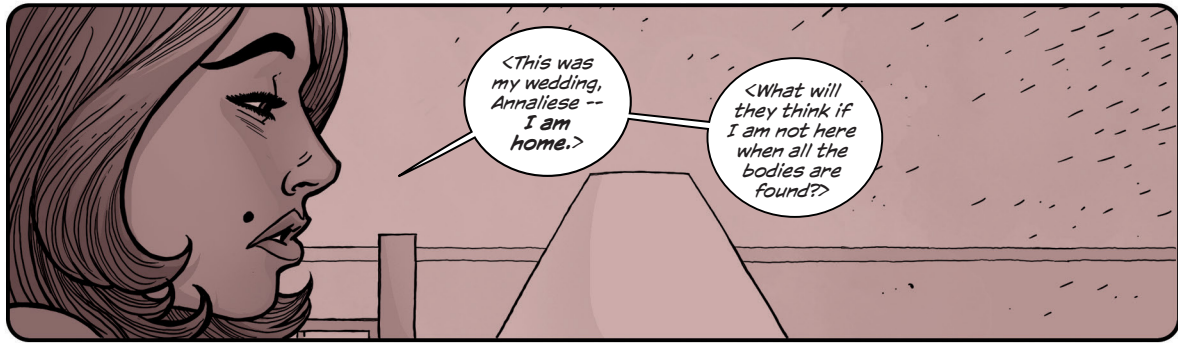
<It's here.
We have it.>

<I want the
entire team
off the island in
ten minutes.>



<As
for you,
Andrea...>

<It's
time to
come
home.>



<This was
my wedding,
Annaliese --
I am
home.>

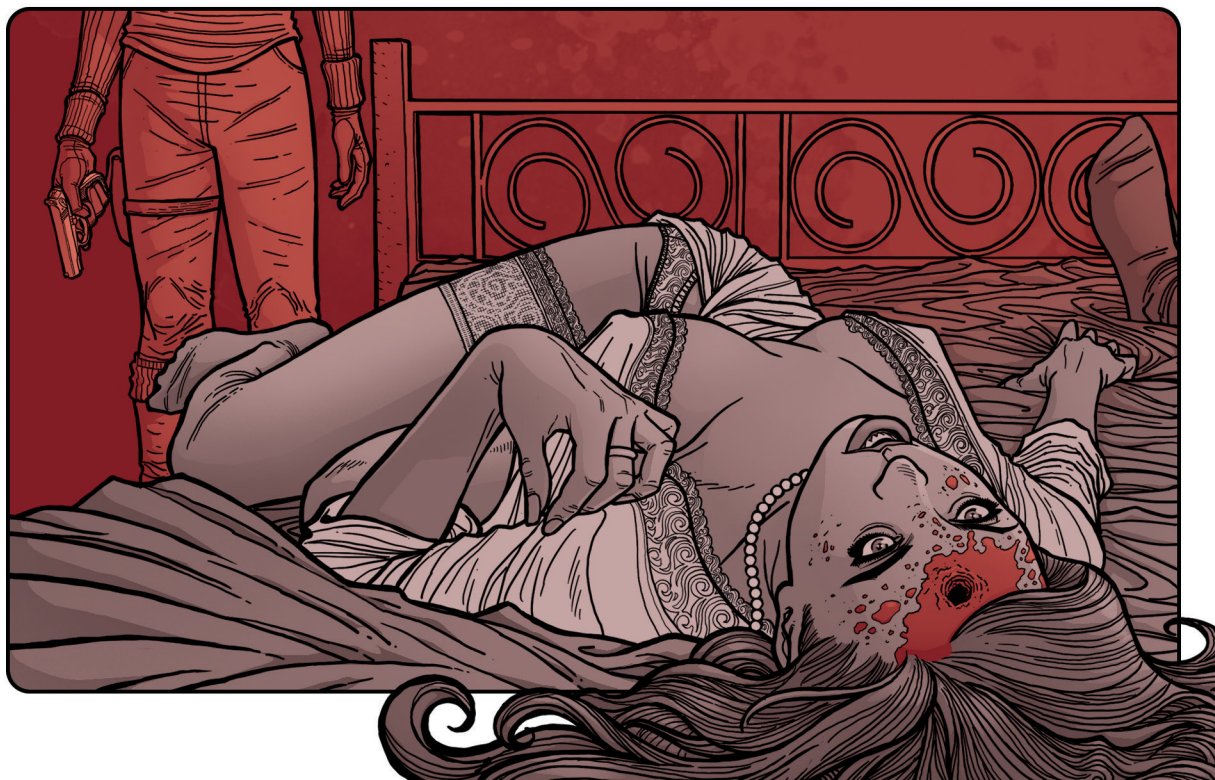
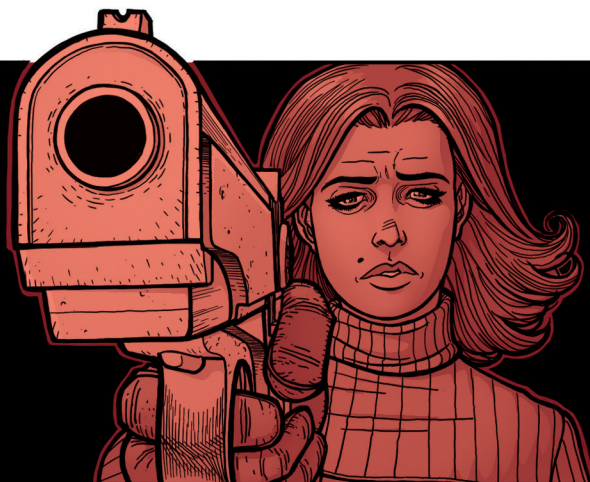
<What will
they think if
I am not here
when all the
bodies are
found?>



<This is
not just your
decision to
make, sister.>

<Oh, Anna...
it's really not
my decision
at all...>

<It's
yours.>



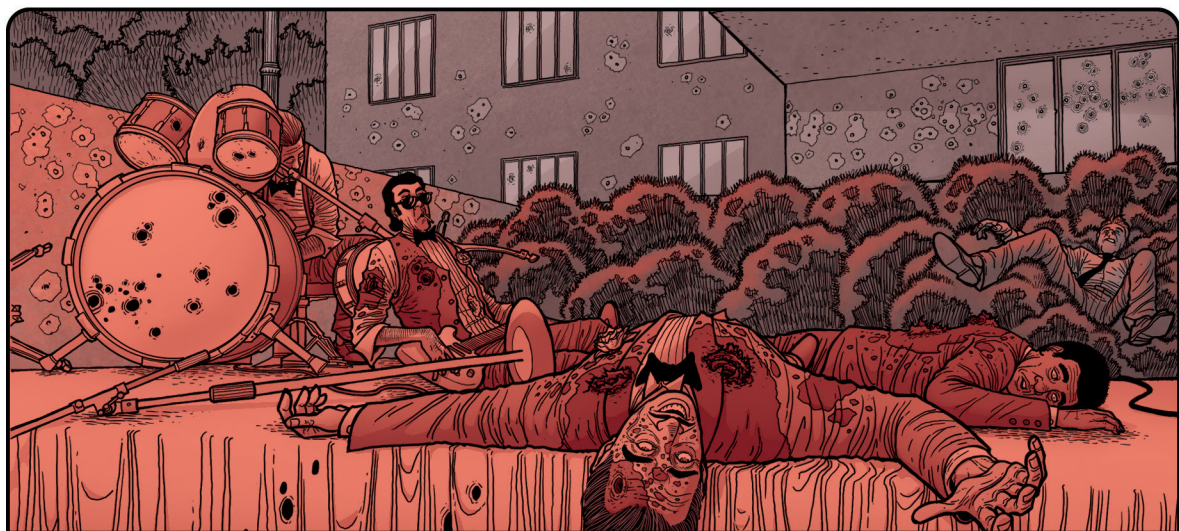


WRITTEN BY: JONATHAN HICKMAN

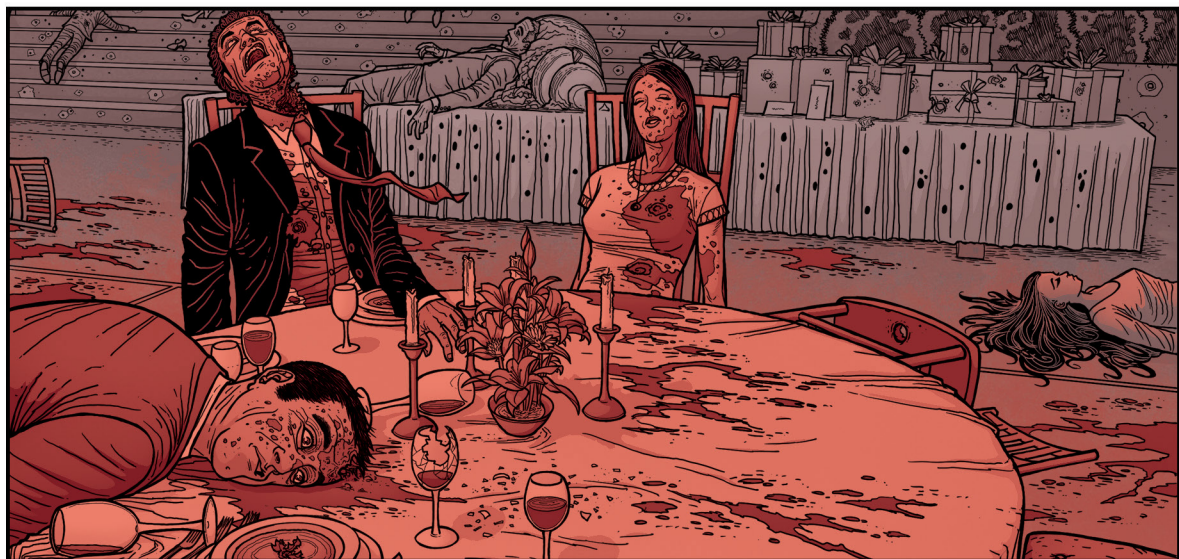


ART BY: RYAN BODENHEIM

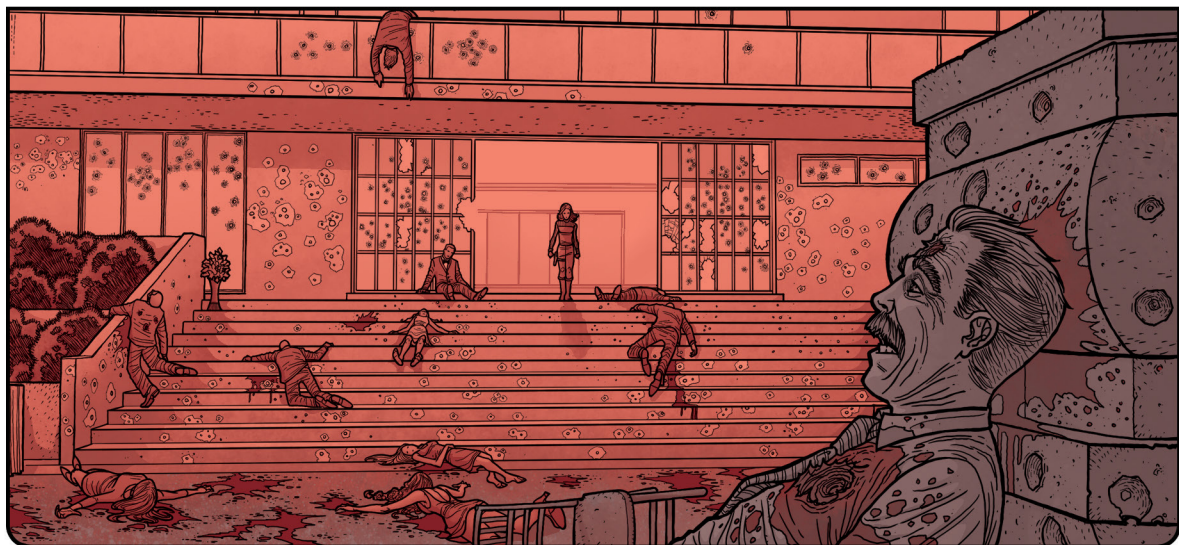




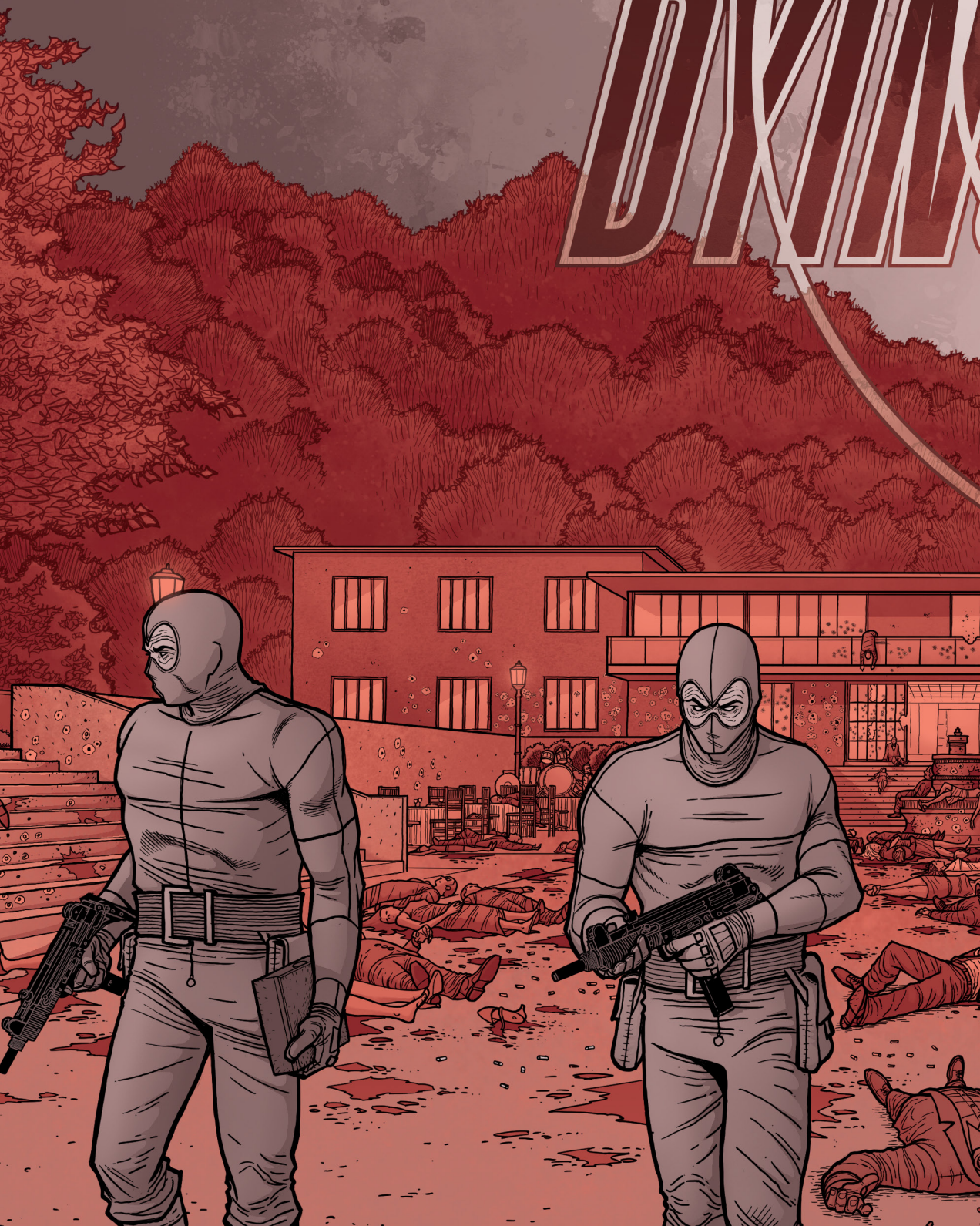
COLORS BY: MICHAEL GARLAND



LETTERS BY: RUS WOOTON



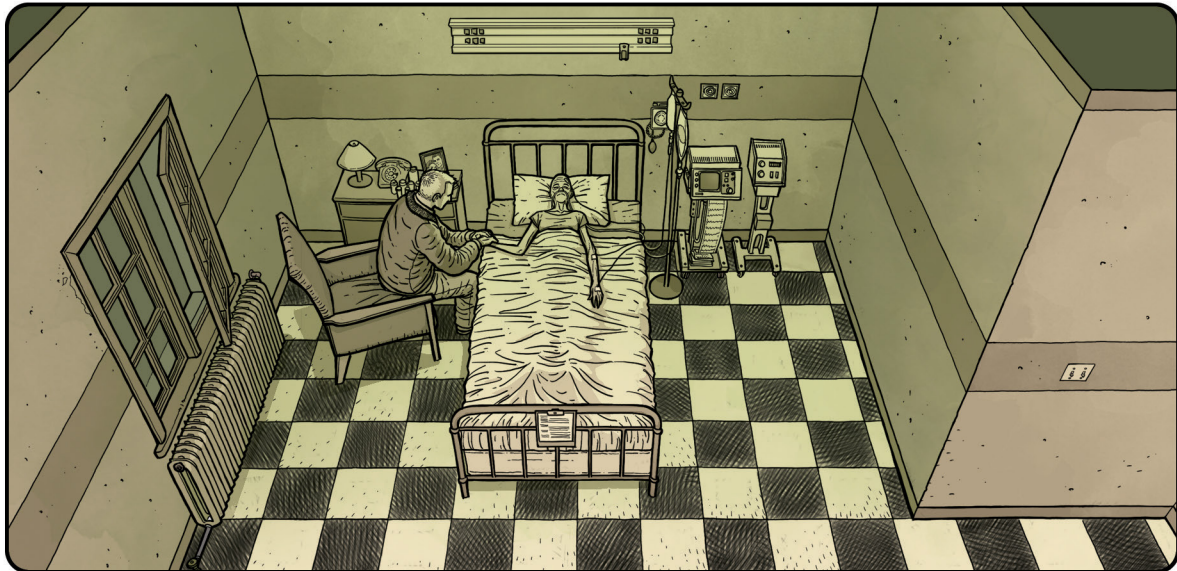
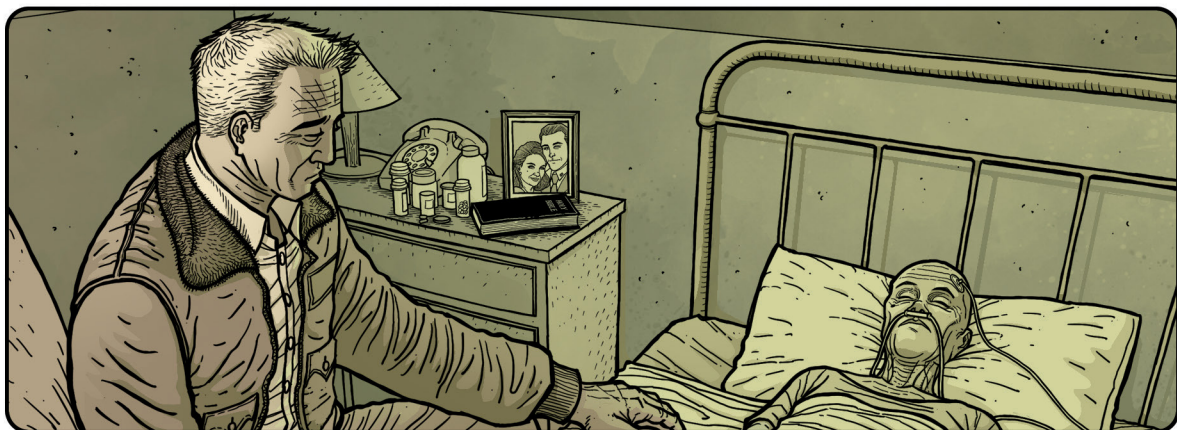
THE DIVINE





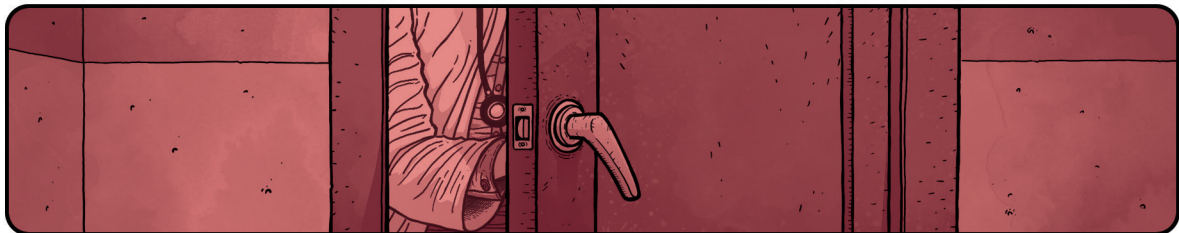
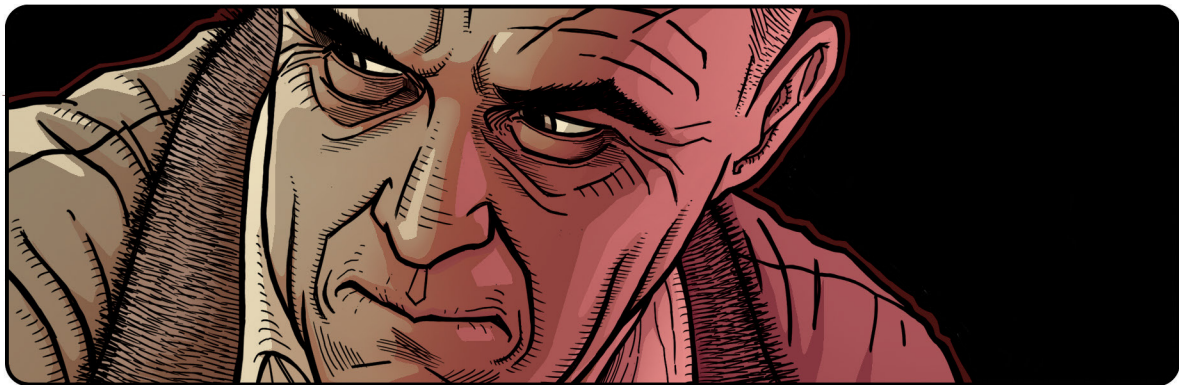
RO & THE DEAD

Two weeks later.
Providence Medical.
Santa Fe, New Mexico.





I'm-sorry-Colonel-there-is-nothing-we-can-do-we-can-try-to-make-her-comfortable-manage-her-pain-but-she's-beyond-our-abilities-now-Clair-was-a-wonderful-woman-but-it's-time-to-start-thinking-about-letting-go.



How're we doing today?

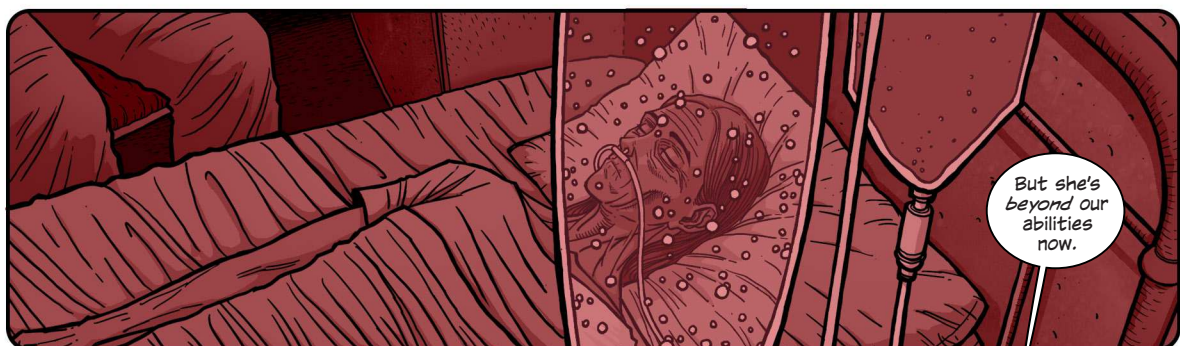
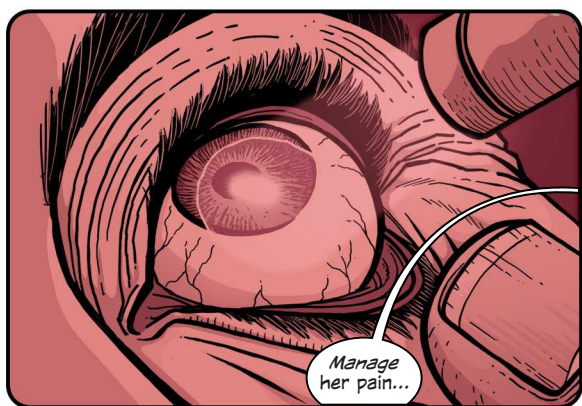
Oh. Hey, Doc...

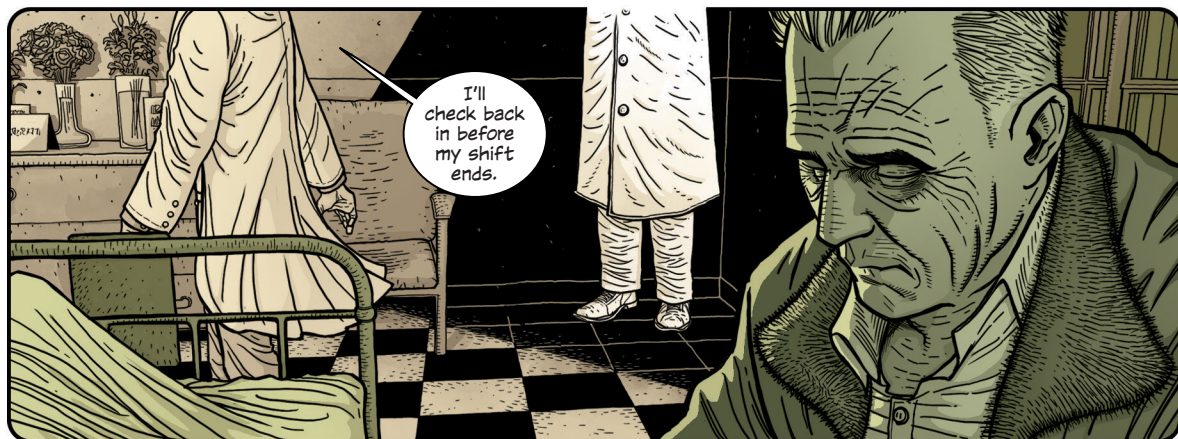
Better, I think.



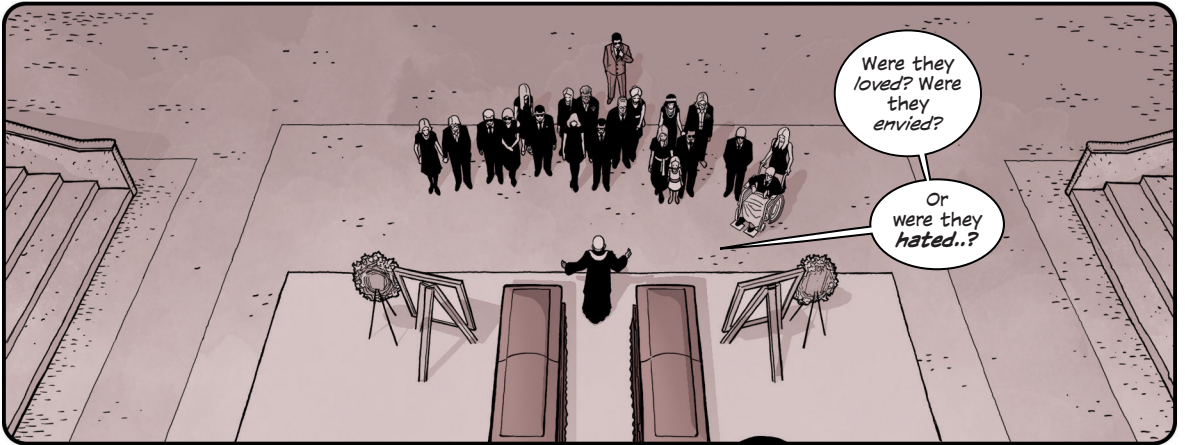
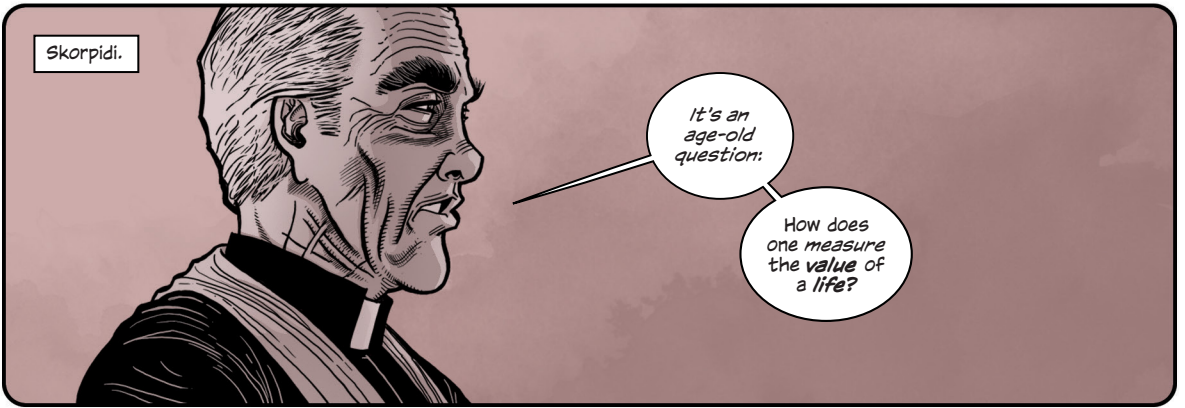
She seemed to sleep well last night, and her breathin' seems stronger.

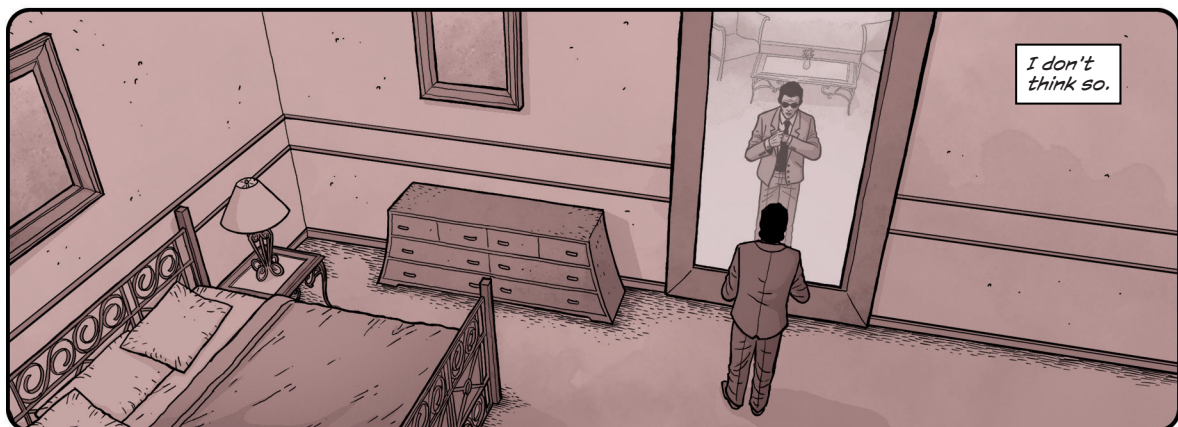
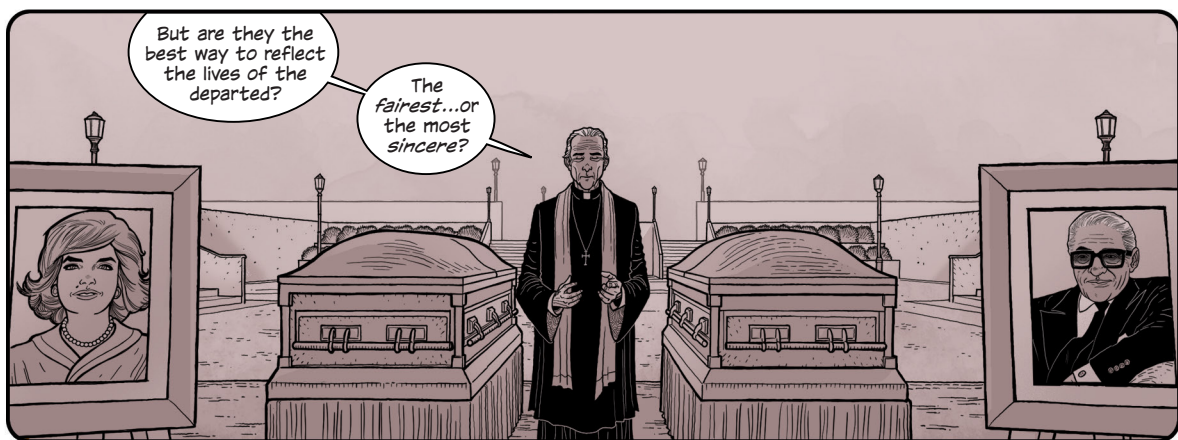
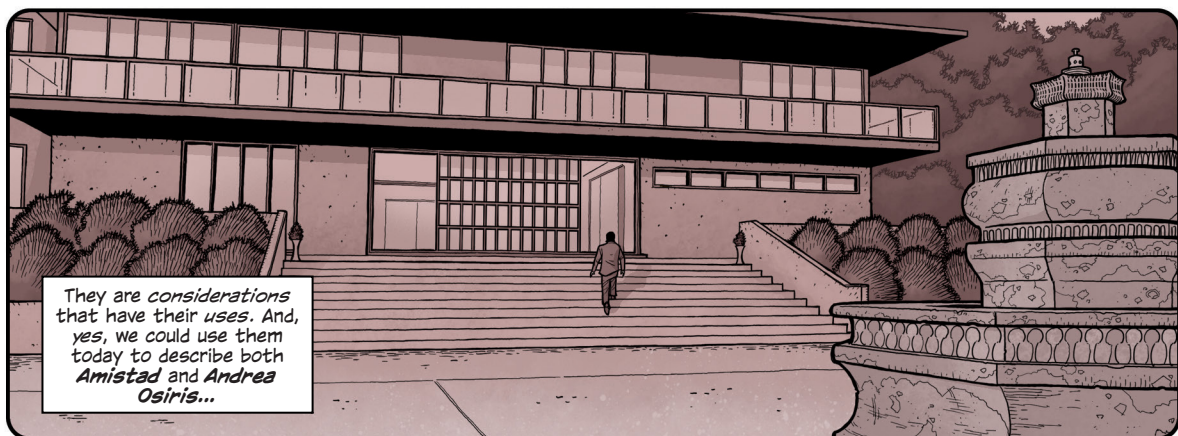
And I'm not sure, but I think her color has improved.

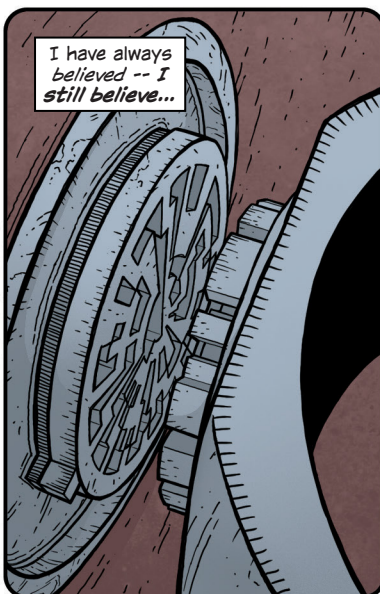




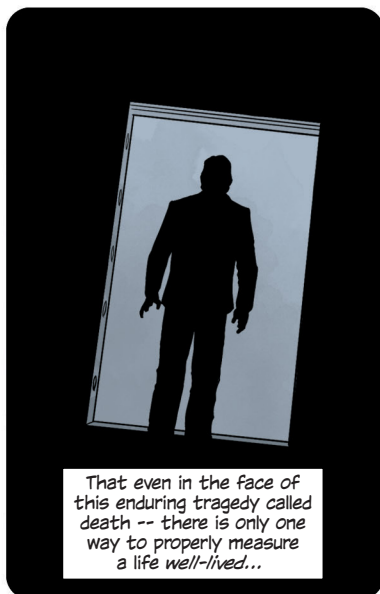








I have always
believed -- I
still believe...



That even in the face of
this enduring tragedy called
death -- there is only one
way to properly measure
a life well-lived...



And it is *this*:

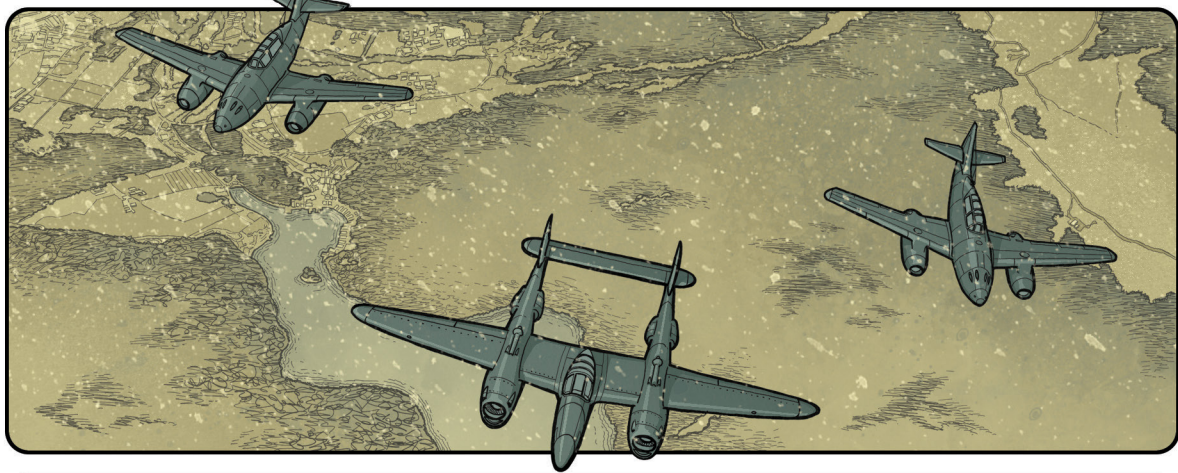


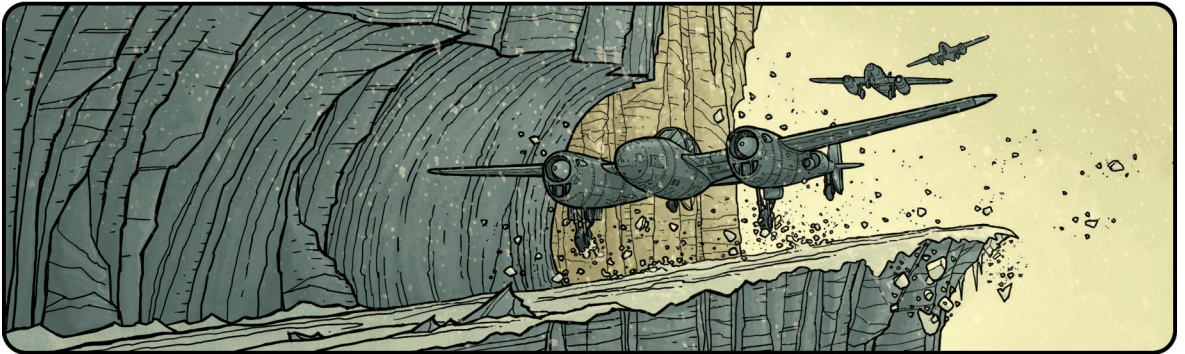
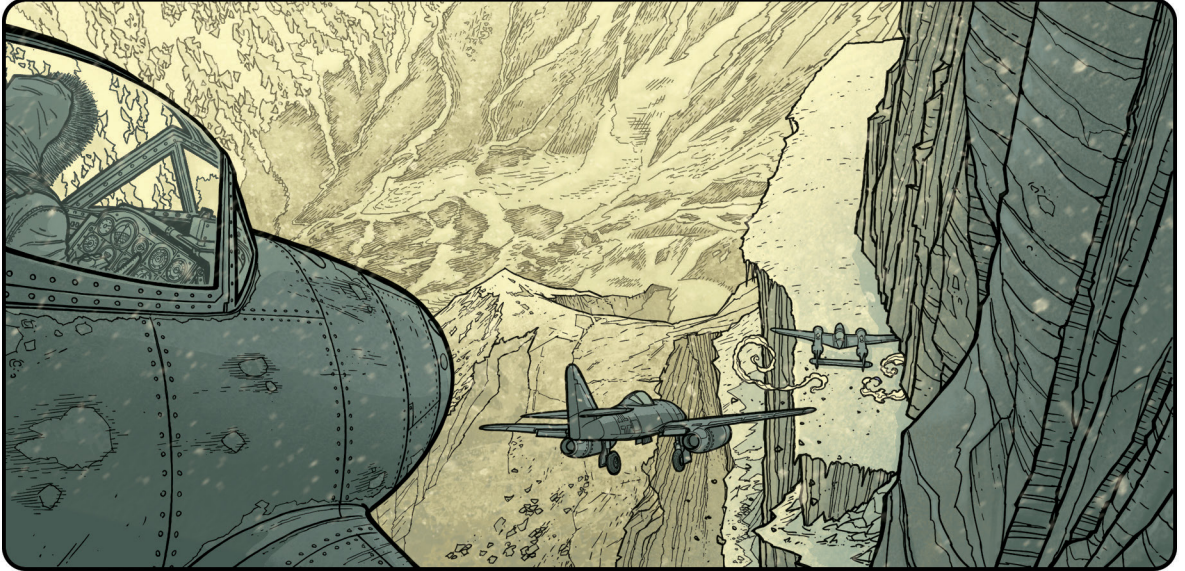
Did you die surrounded
by those you called
friend, and even better,
family?



Or did you
die *alone*?

Berchtesgaden,
Germany.







<Finally,
we are
home!>

<Adversaries
and complications
may have delayed our
return, but there
is good news,
Anna...>

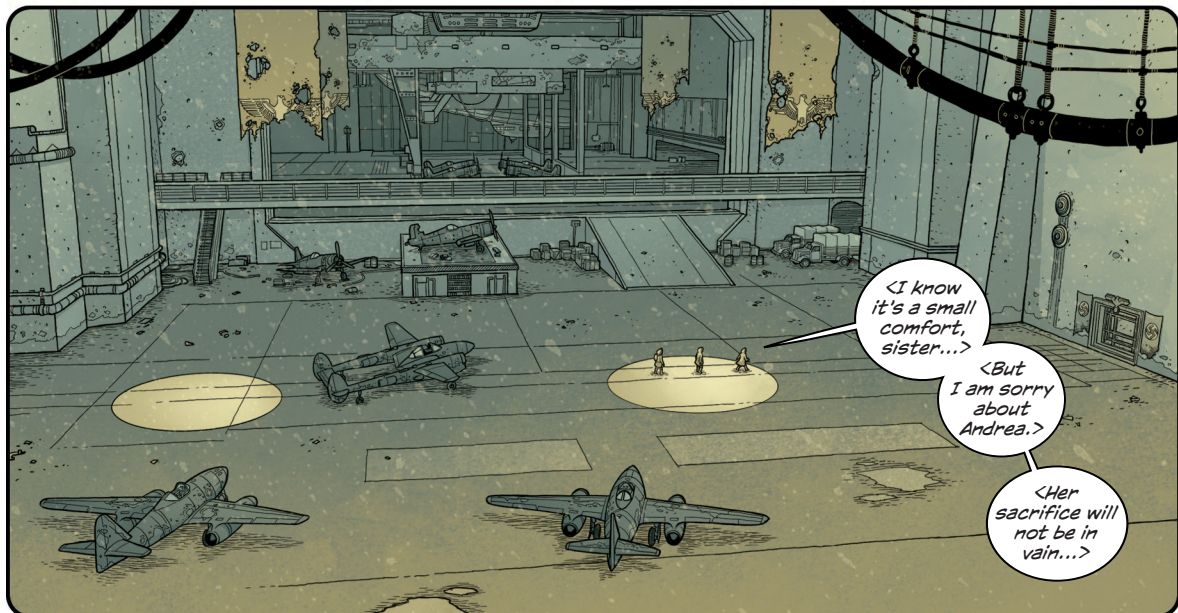
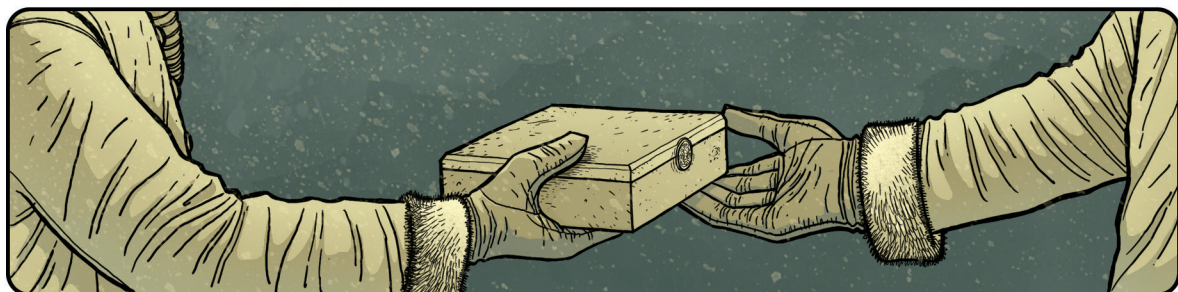
<The Children
are all here --
assembled and
waiting for
us.>



<Of course
they are
waiting,
Albrecht --like
us, they've
been waiting
their entire
lives.>

<Let's
not make
them wait any
longer.>

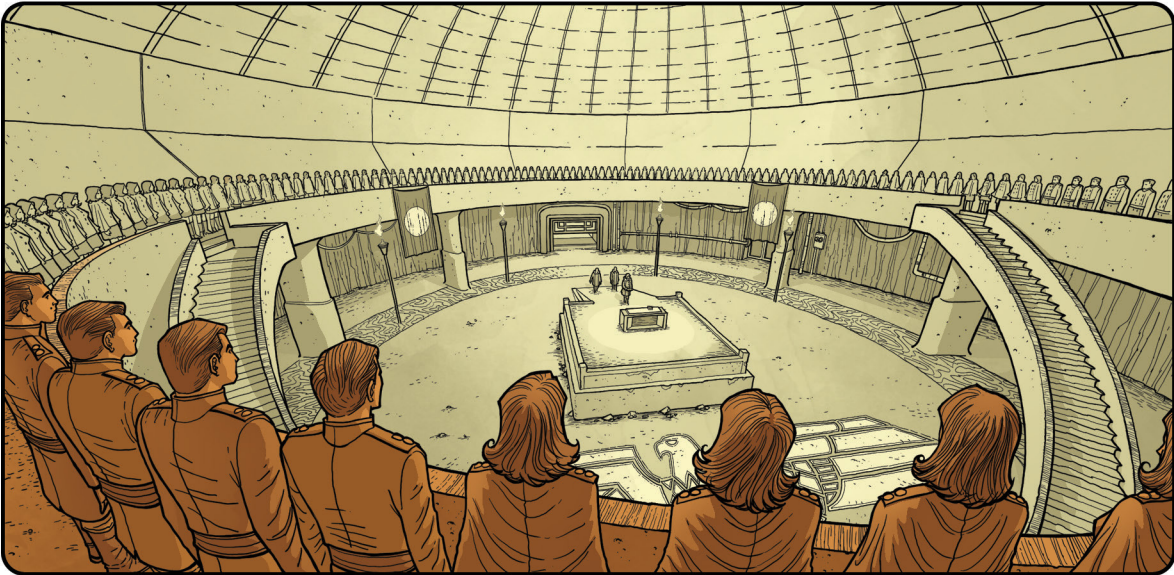
<The
box?>

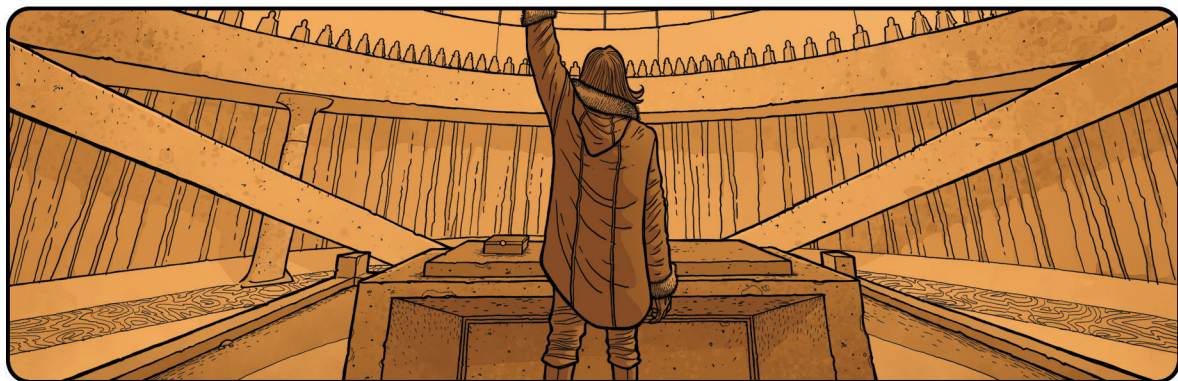
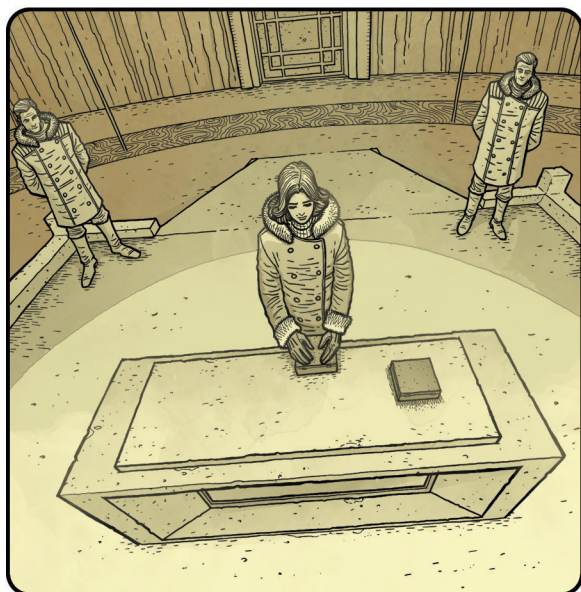


<I know
it's a small
comfort,
sister...>

<But
I am sorry
about
Andrea.>

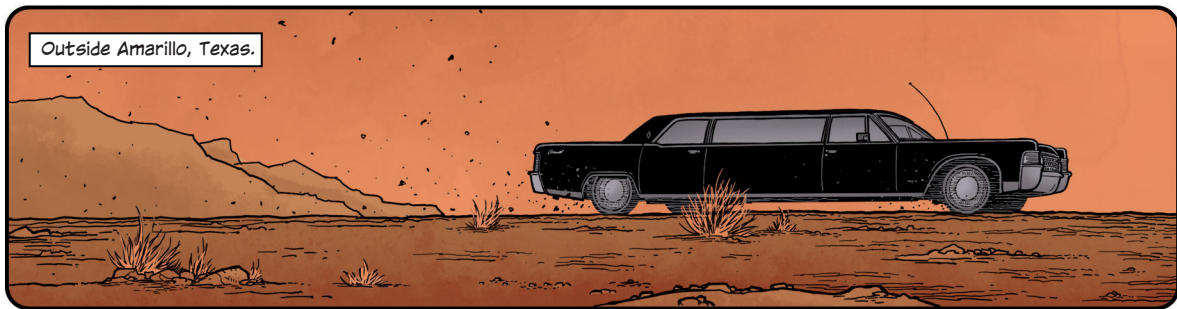
<Her
sacrifice will
not be in
vain...>



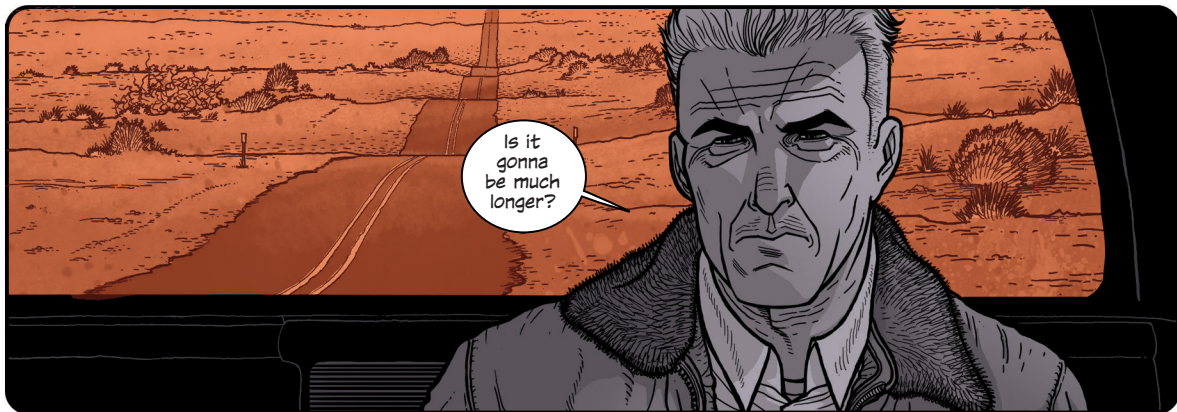




Outside Amarillo, Texas.



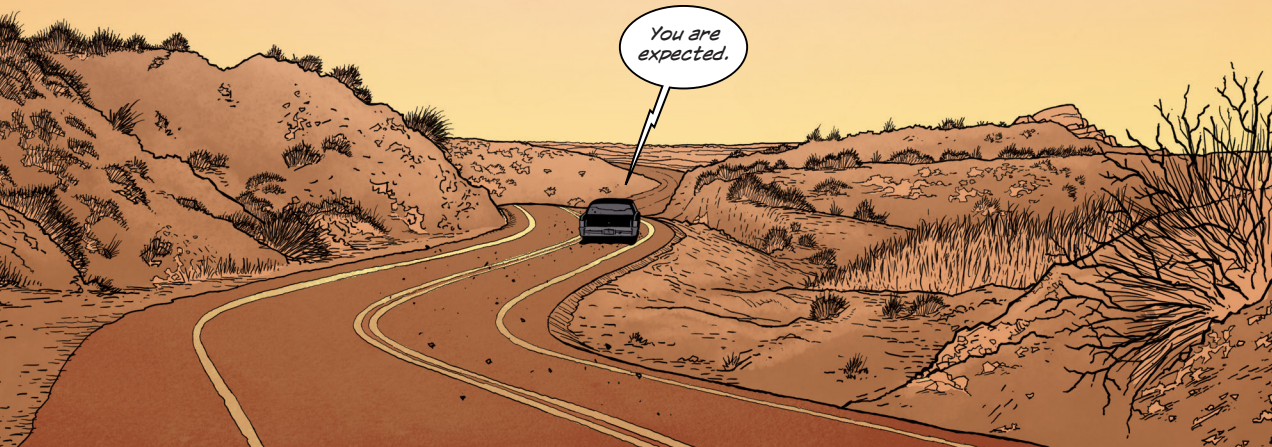
Is it gonna be much longer?

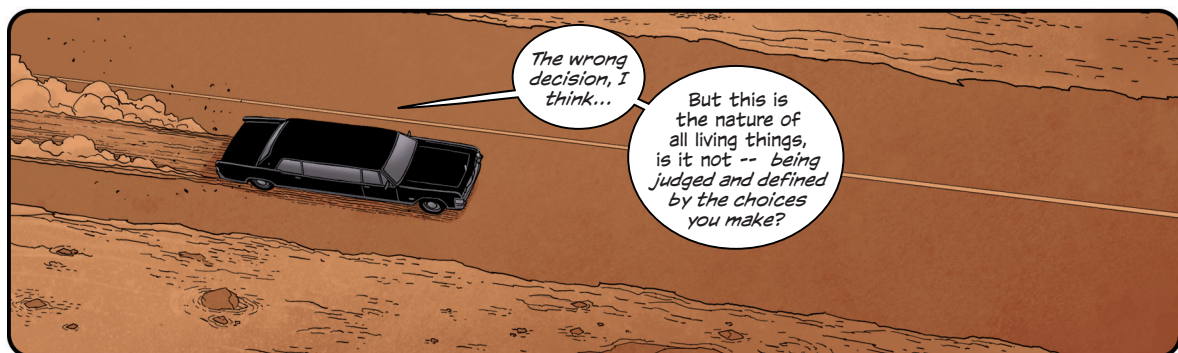
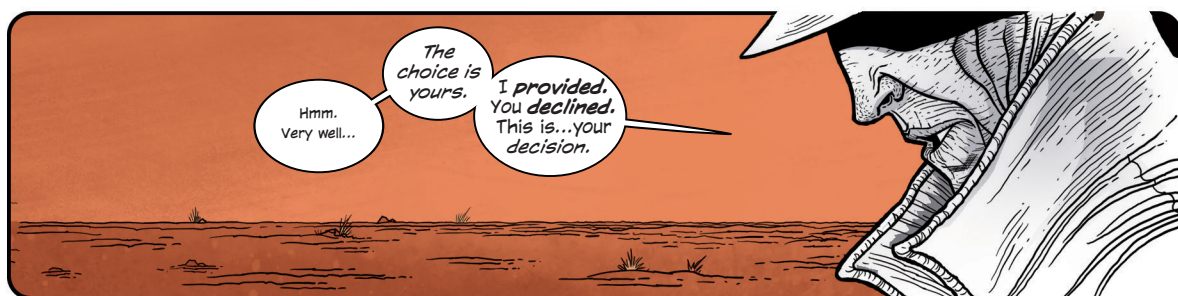


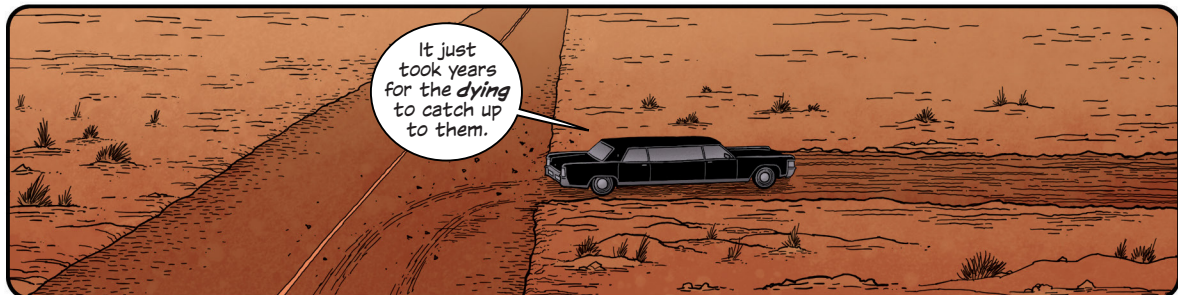
Soon. Hours not days, minutes not hours. I have signaled your arrival.



You are expected.









As I am
not a *judge*...
but one that
has *been*
judged.

Long ago I
made my own
choice -- a *costly*
one -- and to this
day I pay
interest on it.



You see, Colonel,
once I was something
more, and now I am *less*
-- one of the *cast out*.
Reduced to being
a *courier* for my
bettors.

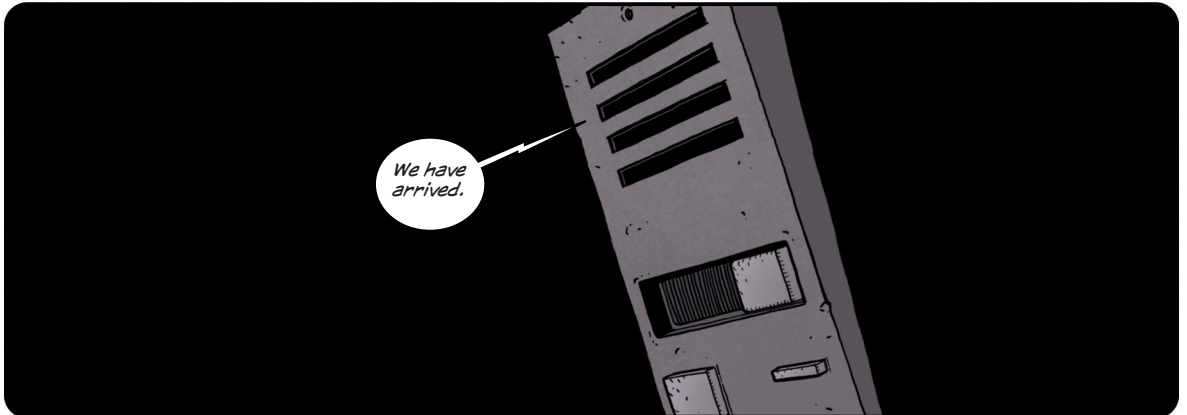
Is it
fair? Is it
right?



Of course
not. But the
choice was *mine*
and so I live
with it.

Who
knows...

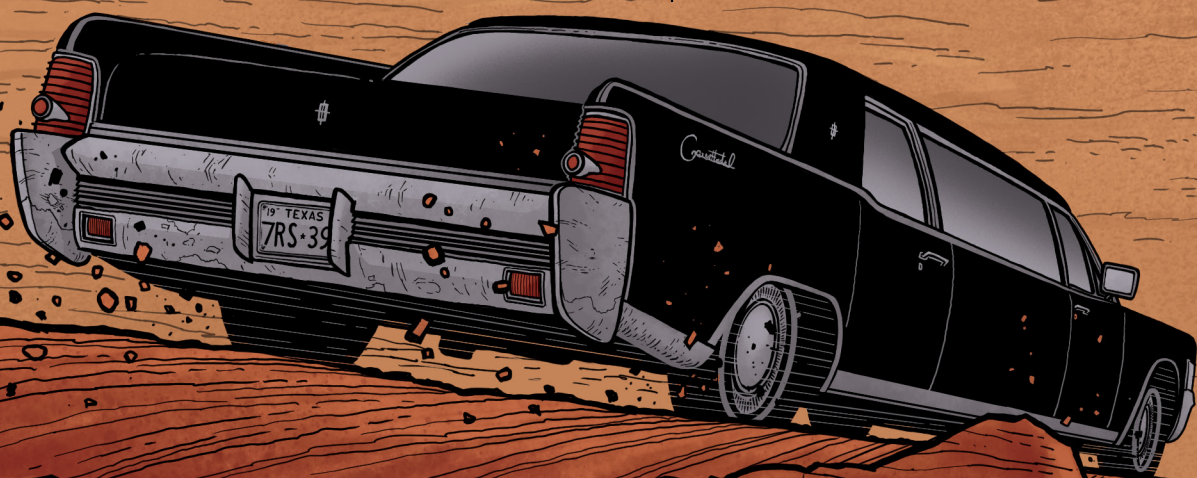
Perhaps that's
what really
causes cancer?
Bad choices.

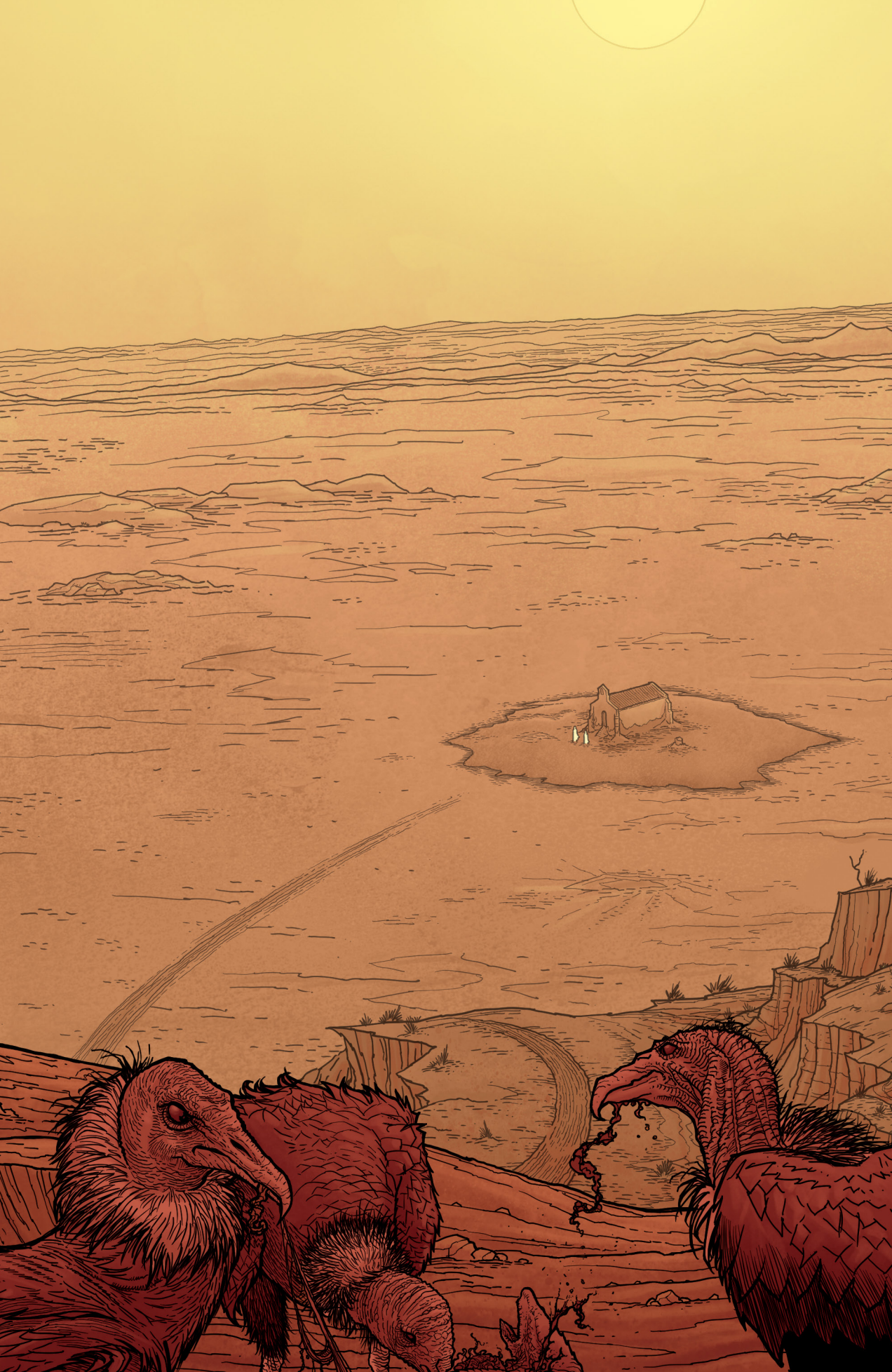


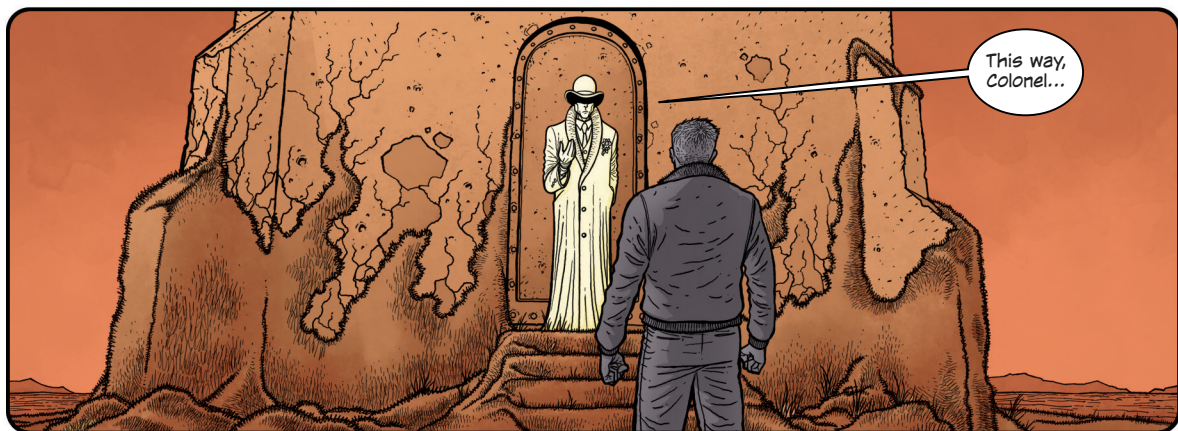
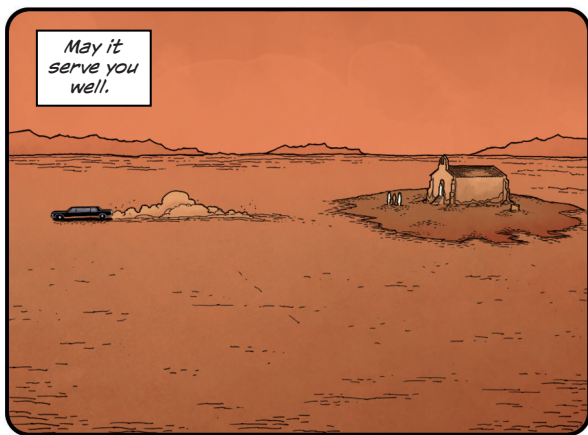
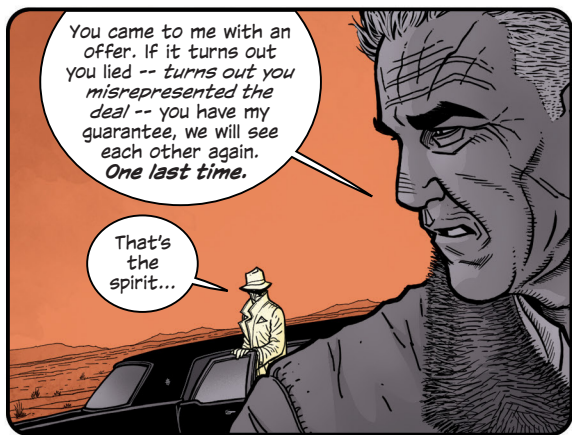
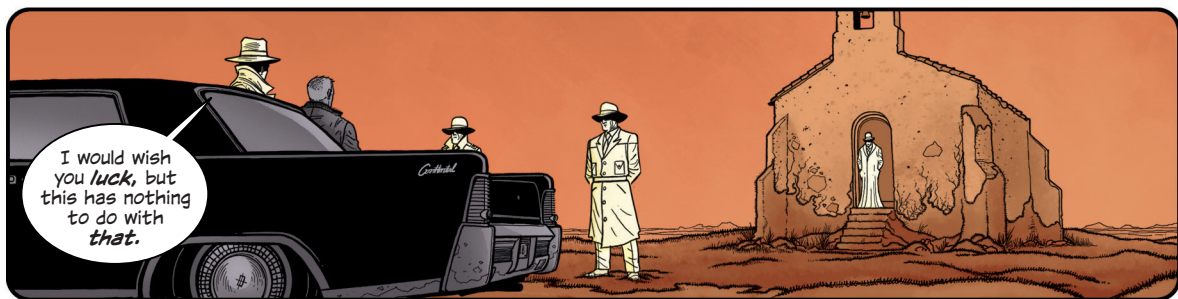
We have
arrived.

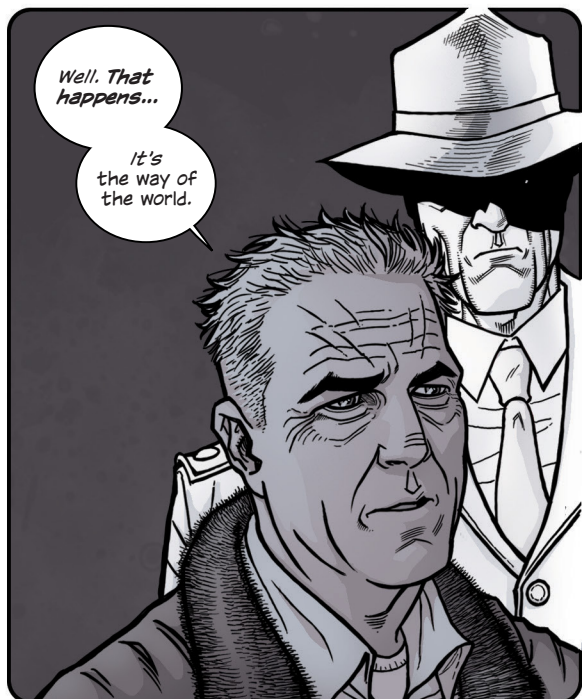
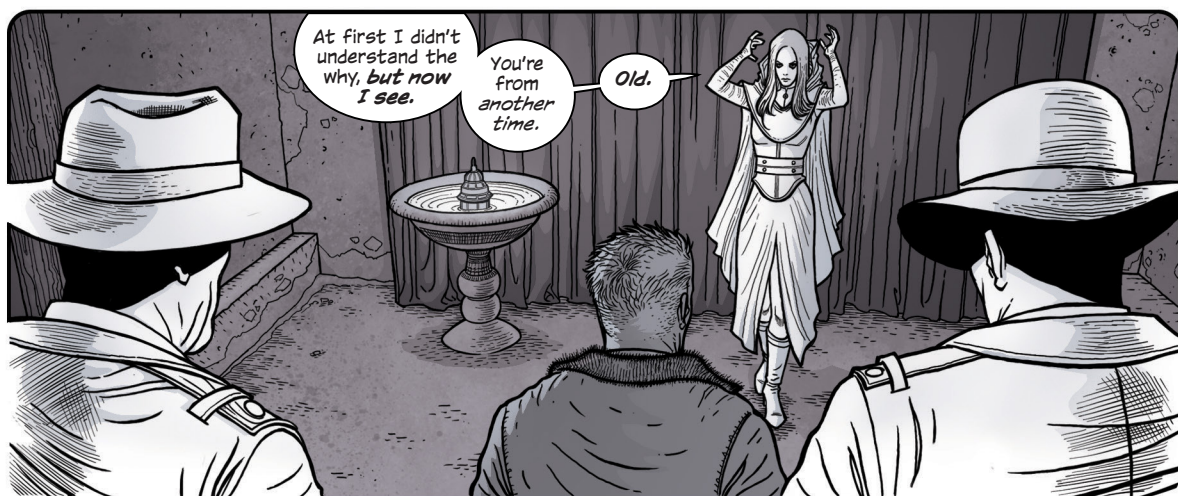
End of
the road,
Colonel...

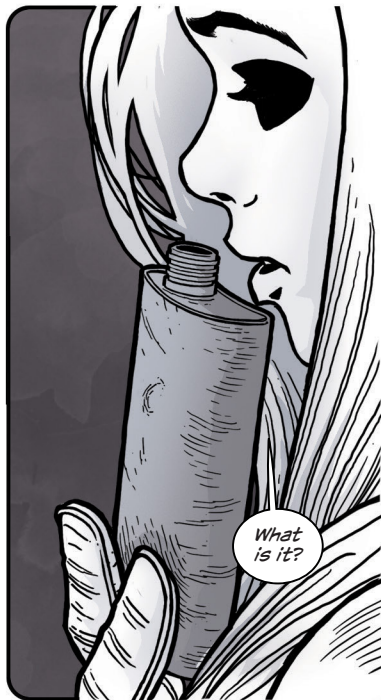
Now *you*
have your
own *choice*
to make...

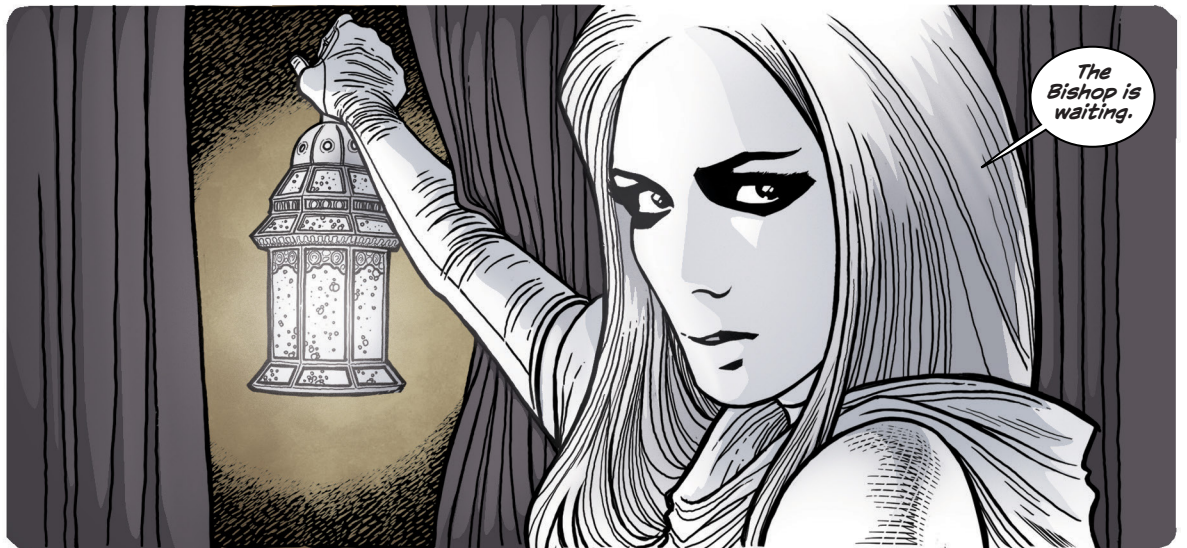


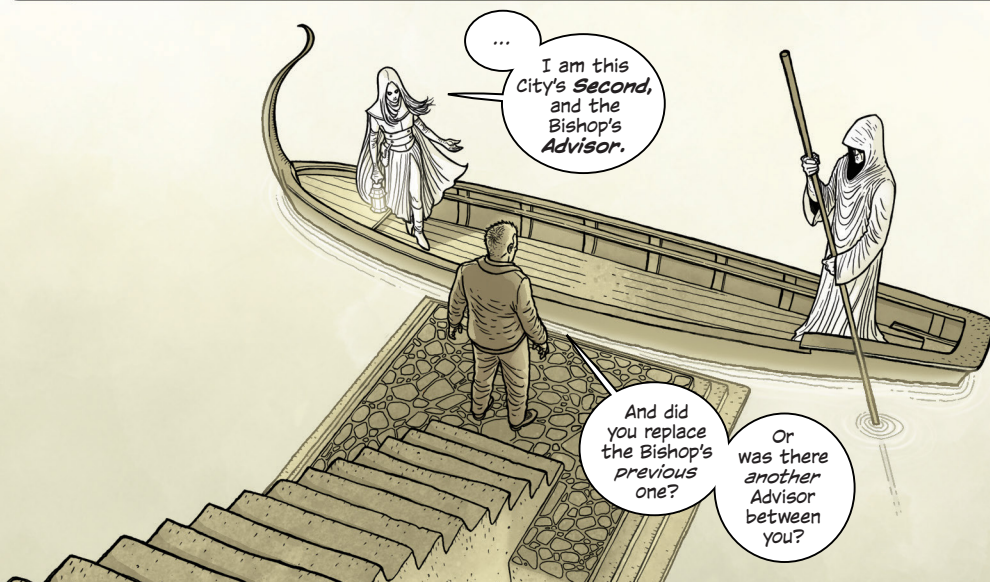
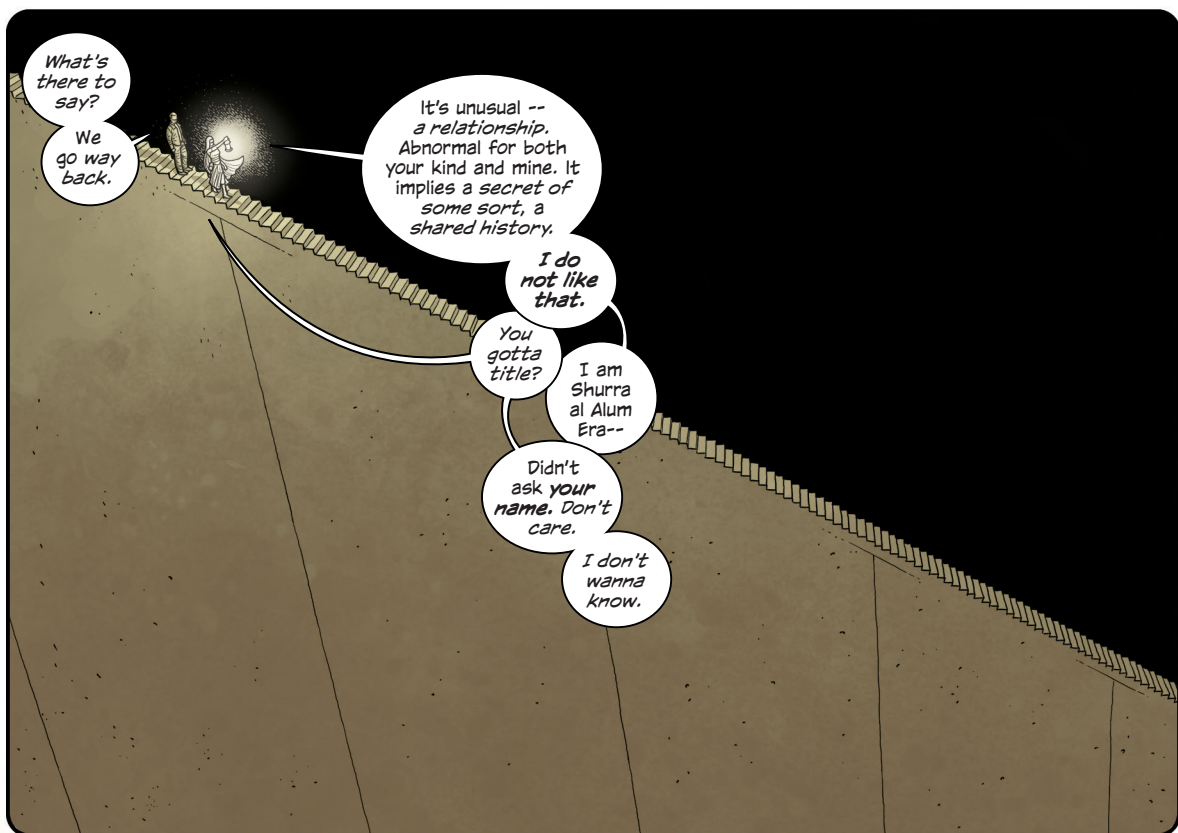
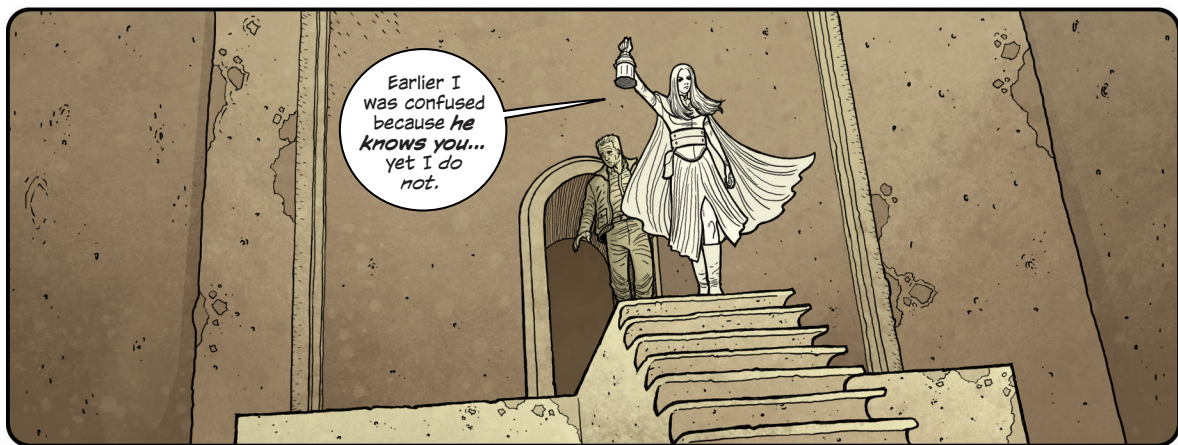


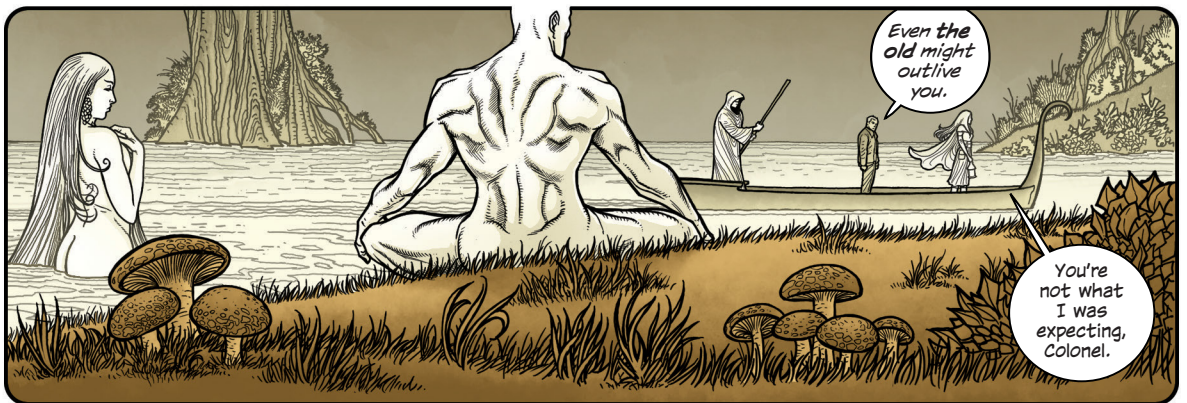
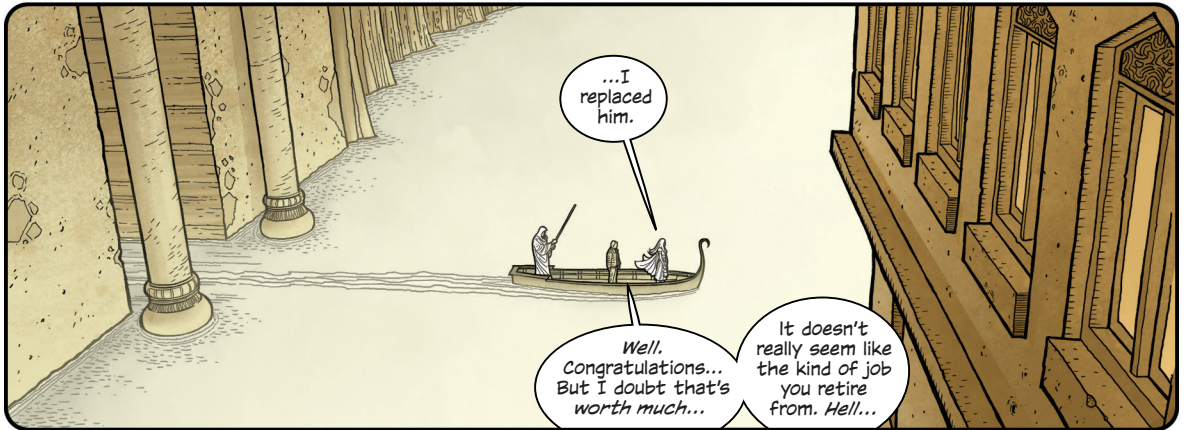
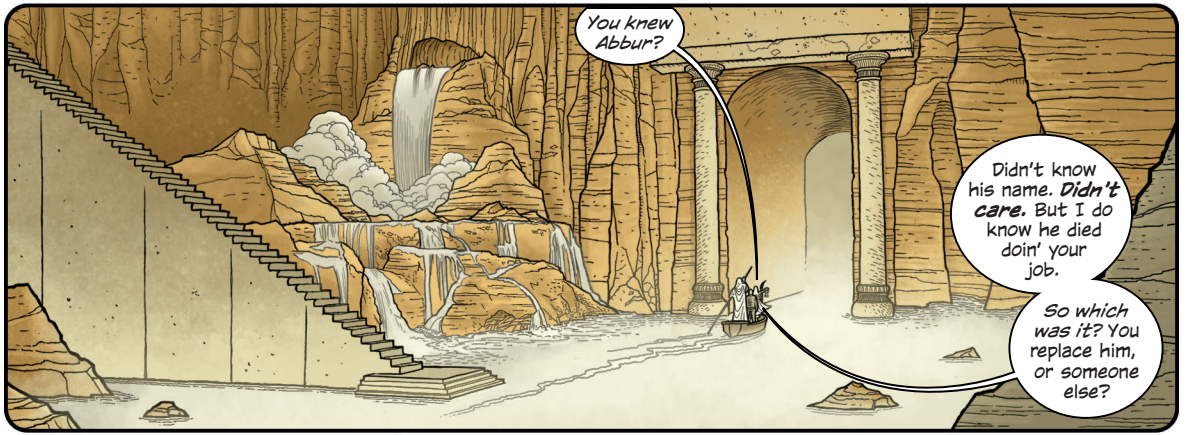


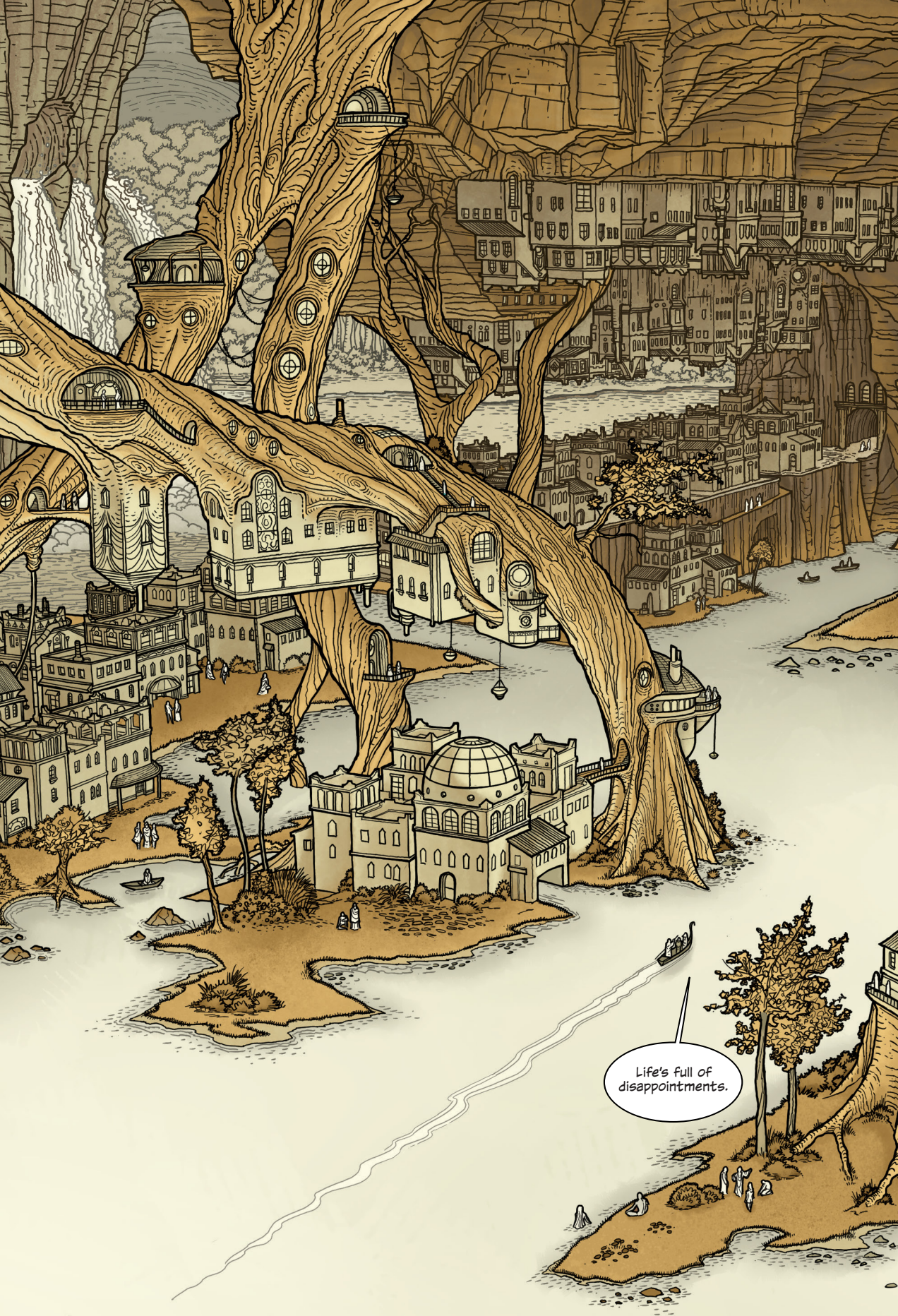




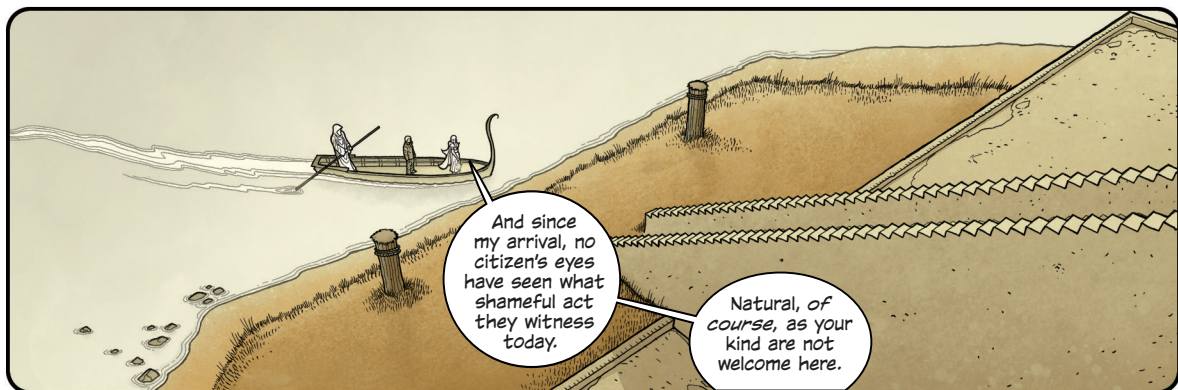
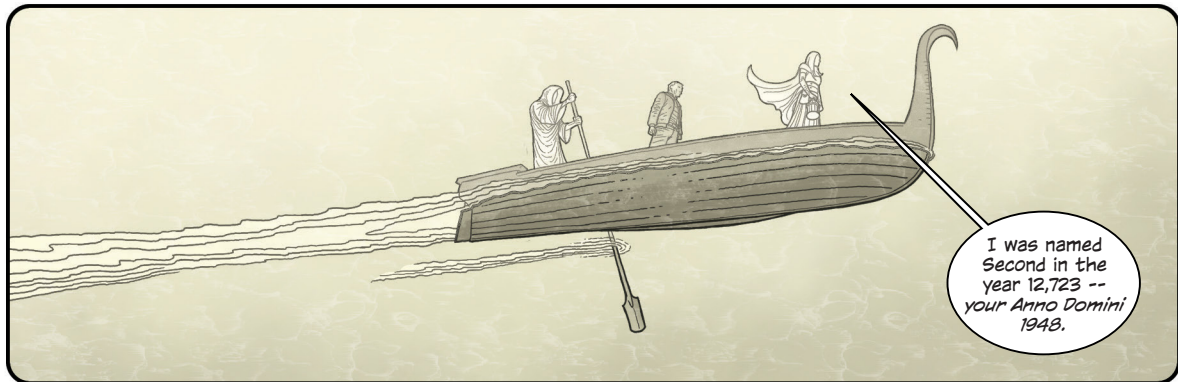
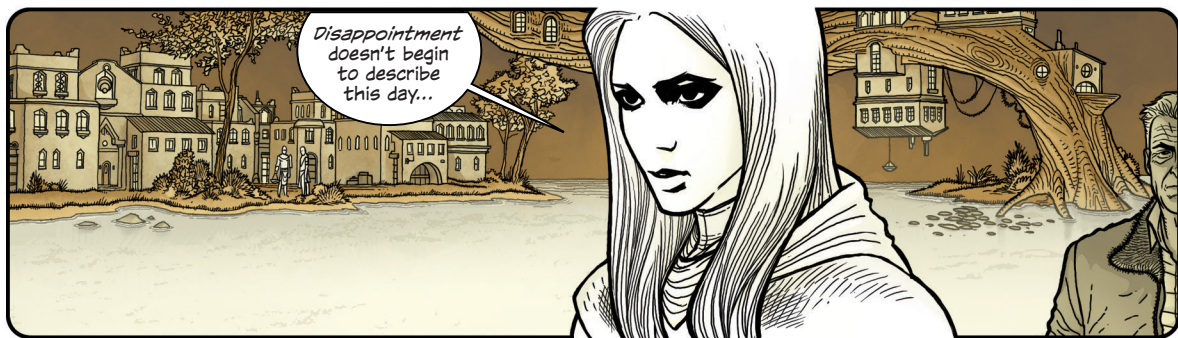


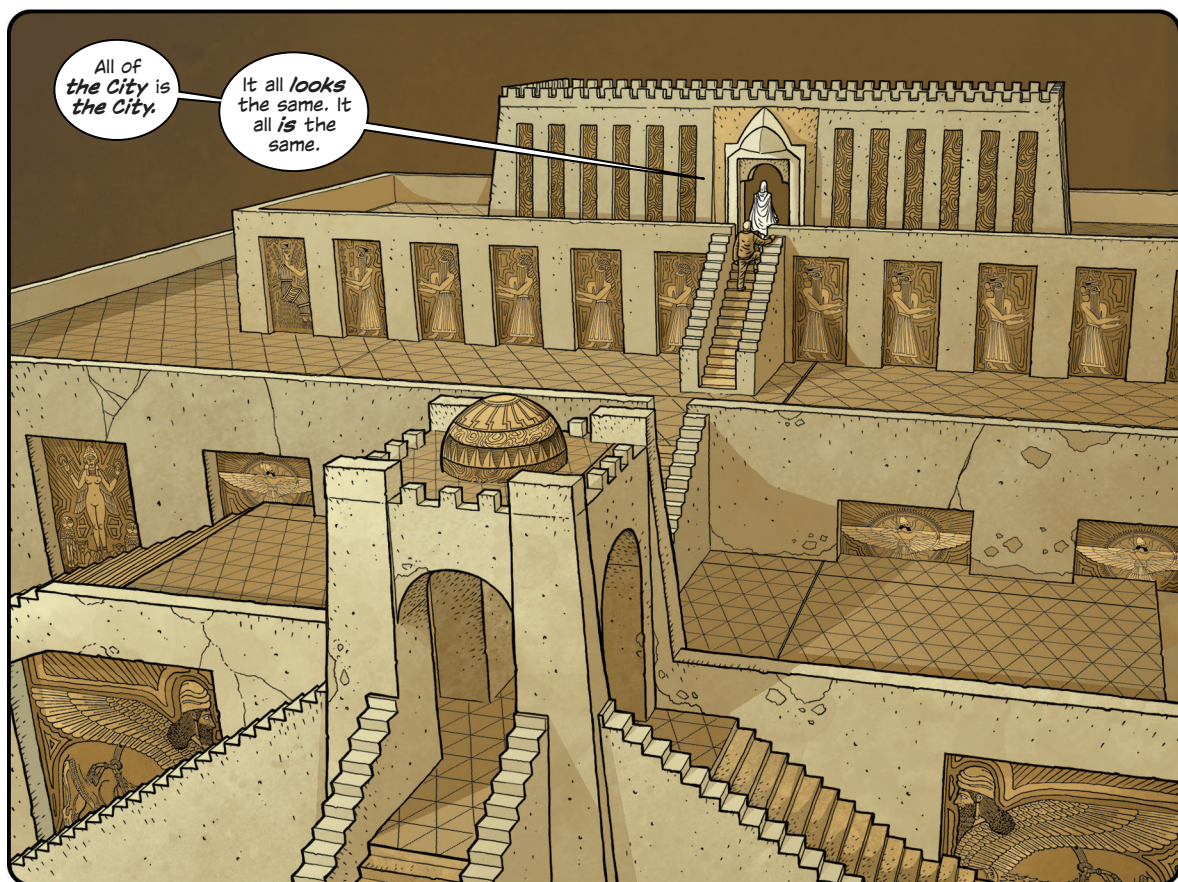


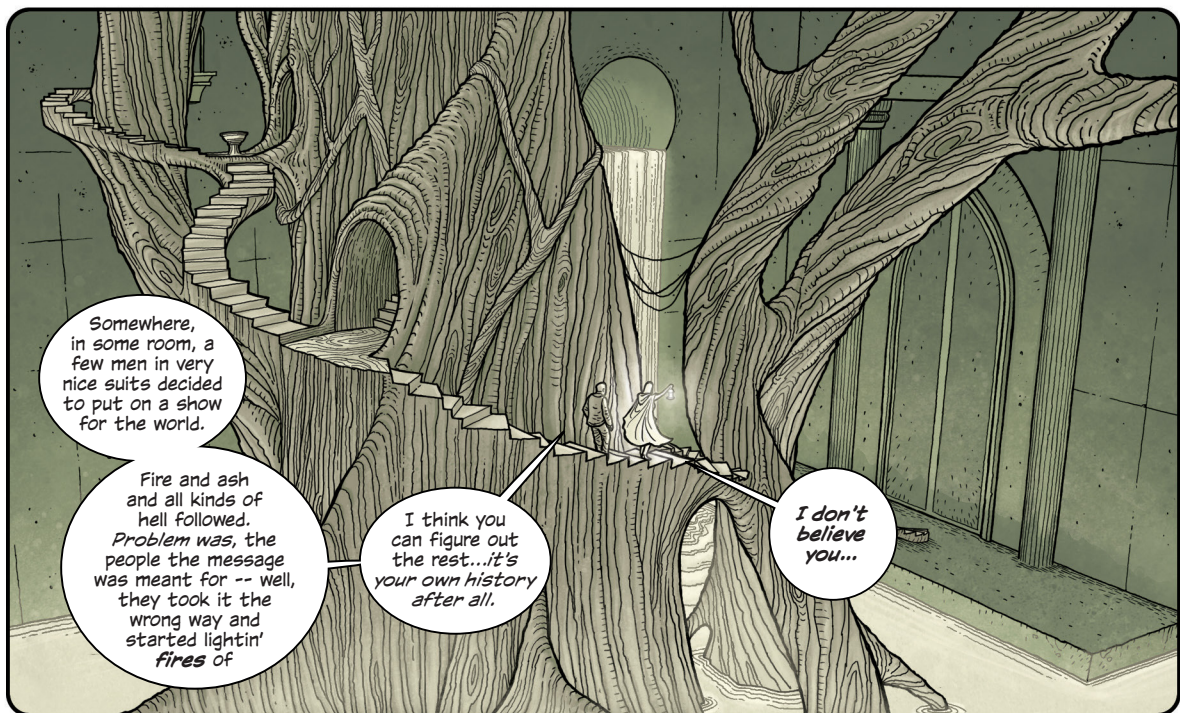










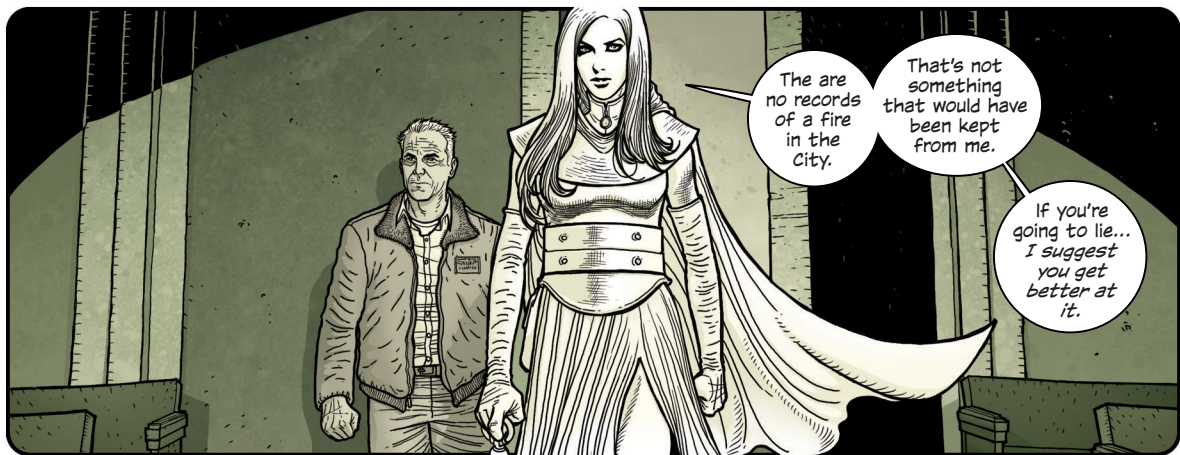


Somewhere, in some room, a few men in very nice suits decided to put on a show for the world.

Fire and ash and all kinds of hell followed. Problem was, the people the message was meant for -- well, they took it the wrong way and started lightin' fires of

I think you can figure out the rest...it's your own history after all.

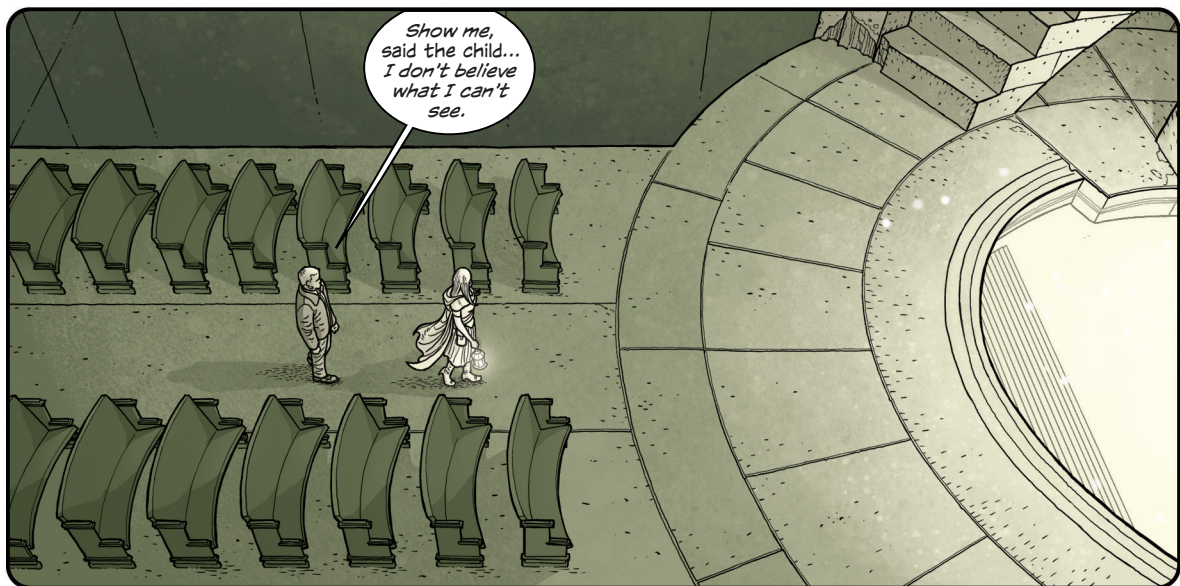
I don't believe you...



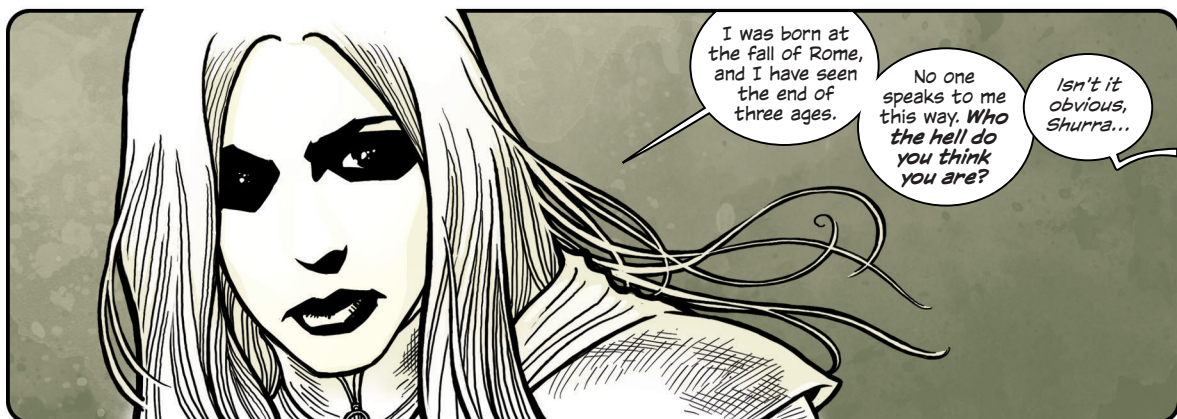
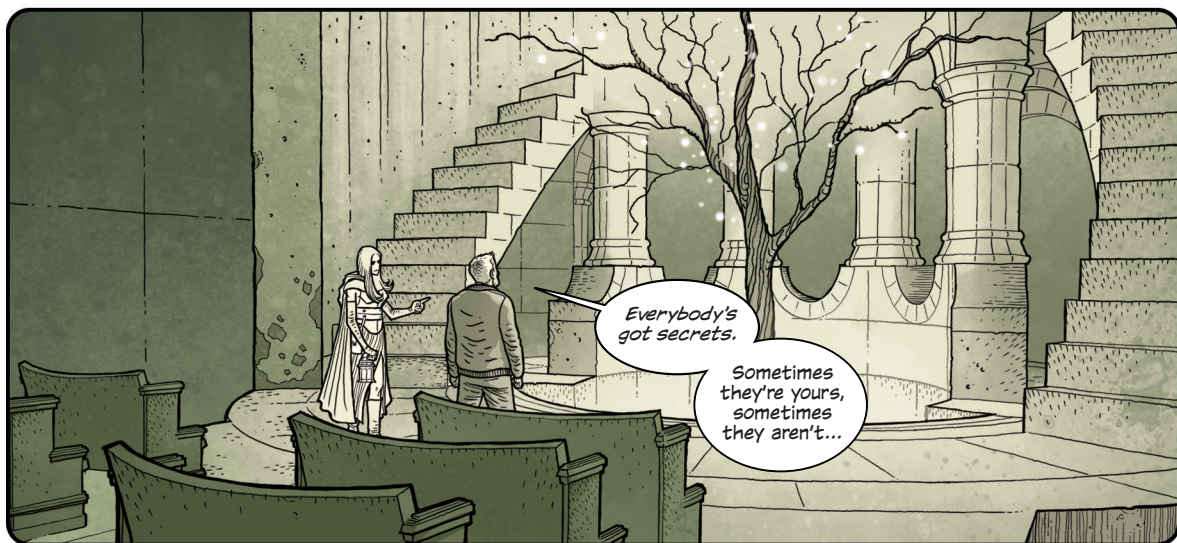
There are no records of a fire in the City.

That's not something that would have been kept from me.

If you're going to lie... I suggest you get better at it.

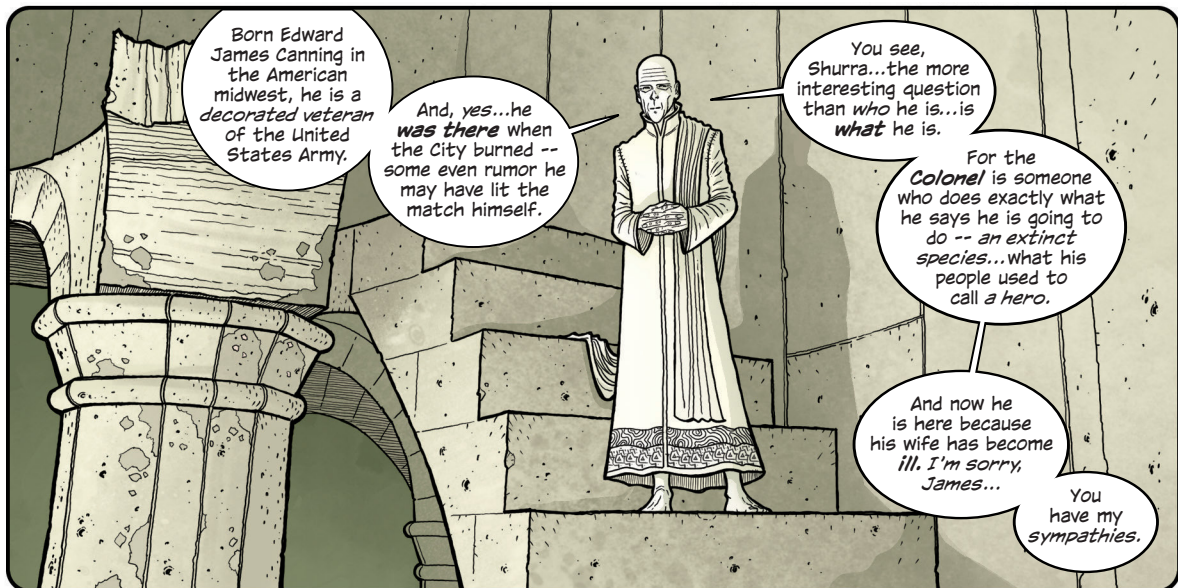


Show me, said the child... I don't believe what I can't see.





He is
man.



Born Edward James Canning in the American midwest, he is a decorated veteran of the United States Army.

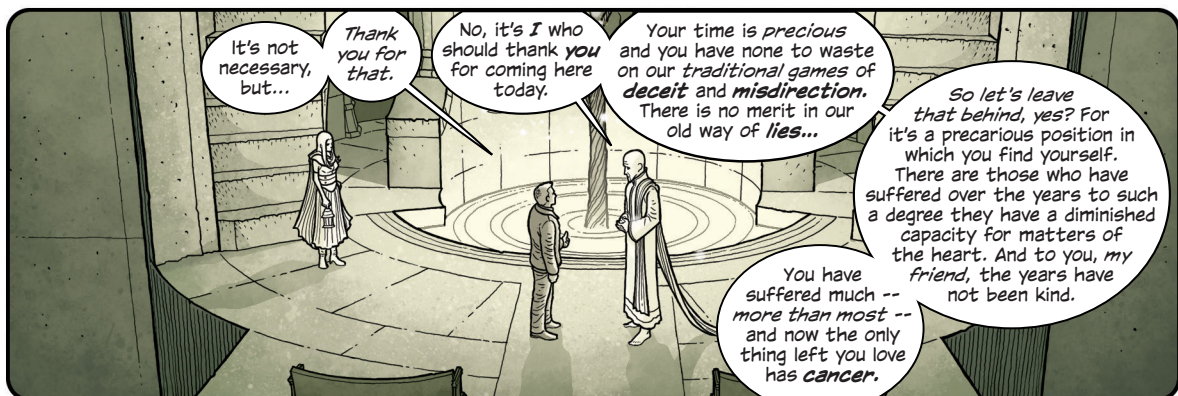
And, yes...he *was there* when the City burned -- some even rumor he may have lit the match himself.

You see, Shurra...the more interesting question than *who* he is...is *what* he is.

For the *Colonel* is someone who does exactly what he says he is going to do -- an *extinct* species...what his people used to call a *hero*.

And now he is here because his wife has become ill. I'm sorry, James...

You have my sympathies.



It's not necessary, but...

Thank you for that.

No, it's *I* who should thank *you* for coming here today.

Your time is *precious* and you have none to waste on our traditional games of *deceit* and *misdirection*. There is no merit in our old way of *lies*...

So let's leave that behind, yes? For it's a precarious position in which you find yourself. There are those who have suffered over the years to such a degree they have a diminished capacity for matters of the heart. And to you, *my friend*, the years have not been kind.

You have suffered much -- *more than most* -- and now the only thing left you love has *cancer*.



Well, I won't lie to you either... This is a very nice tree you have here.

Yes. It's a *Tree of Life*.

Now, please... sit with me.



Pretty sure it's called *the* Tree of Life.

Singular.

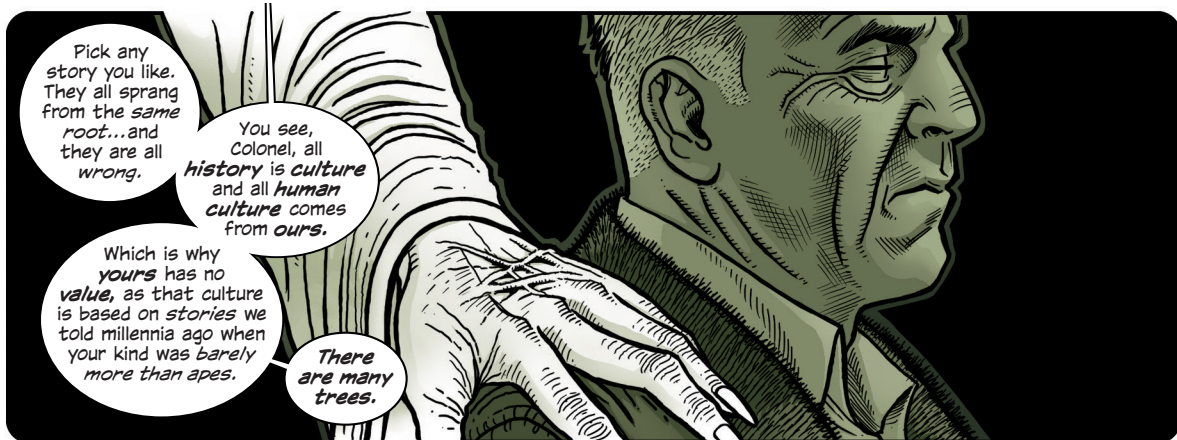
As in there's only *one* of 'em. *Real* as that might be.



And you believe that why?

Because you read it in one of your holy books? Because, when you were a boy someone told you a story about a *tree* in a *garden*?

Was it *Eden*? Or was it *Iusaaset's* tree from which grew Aset and Usir? Perhaps it was the World Tree, *Yggdrasil*, or even *Etz Chaim*?

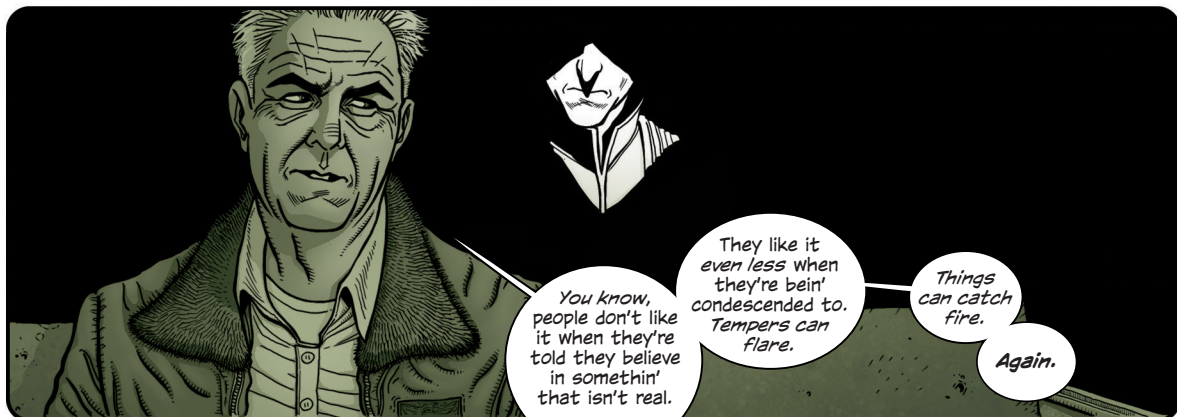


Pick any story you like. They all sprang from the *same* root...and they are all *wrong*.

You see, Colonel, all *history* is *culture* and all *human* *culture* comes from *ours*.

Which is why *yours* has no *value*, as that culture is based on *stories* we told millennia ago when your kind was *barely* more than apes.

There are many *trees*.

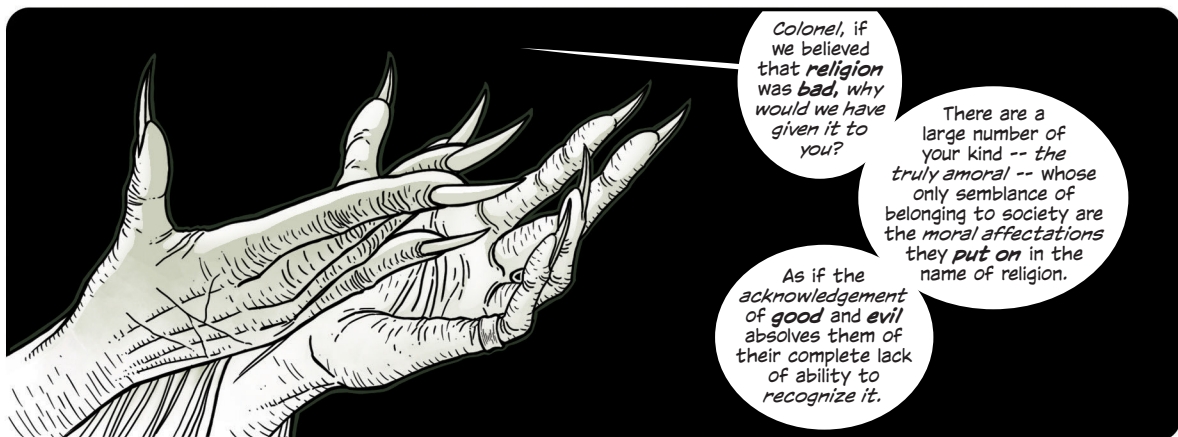


You know, people don't like it when they're told they believe in somethin' that isn't real.

They like it *even less* when they're bein' condescended to. *Tempers* can flare.

Things can catch fire.

Again.



Colonel, if we believed that **religion** was **bad**, why would we have given it to you?

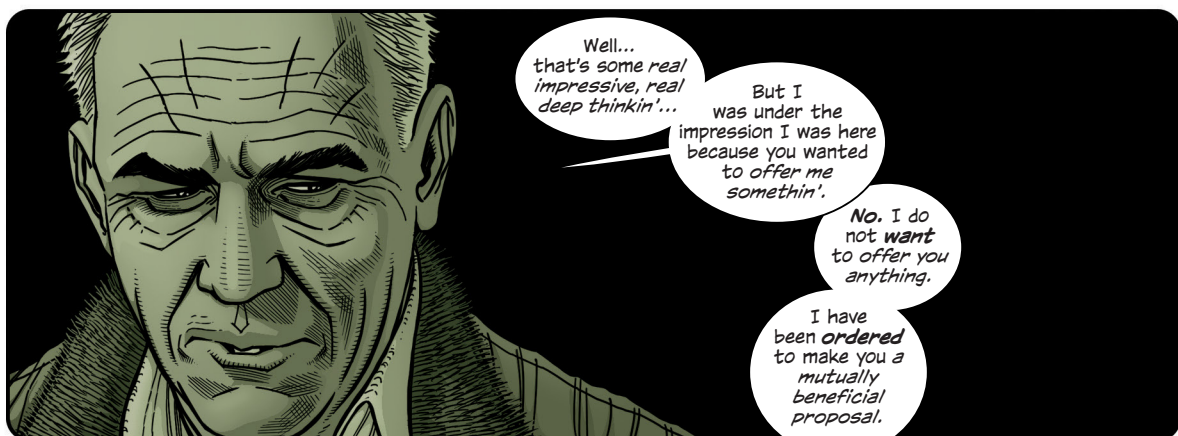
There are a large number of your kind -- *the truly amoral* -- whose only semblance of belonging to society are the *moral affectations* they **put on** in the name of religion.

As if the acknowledgement of **good** and **evil** absolves them of their complete lack of ability to recognize it.



It's very possible that without this *pretense of morality* that large numbers of you humans would start to realize *what you really are*.

Now, I ask you...*would that be any kind of world to live in?*



Well... that's some *real impressive, real deep thinkin'*...

But I was under the impression I was here because you wanted to offer me *some thin'*.

No. I do not *want* to offer you anything.

I have been **ordered** to make you a *mutually beneficial proposal*.



A deal?



Yes.

A deal.



You see, my friend, there is something loose in the world -- *Bah al'Sharur* -- and its very nature prevents one of my kind from... addressing the problem.

So we require...a proxy.



You need one bad?

We do.



Then maybe you should overcome your fear -- be brave -- take care of your *own damn business* for once.



Be brave?

Bravery is *folly*. What you call bravery is in actuality the collapse of evolution.

The regression of the evolved back to animal. From *intellect* to *instinct*.



Why would any of my kind debase themselves when what we really need is someone better equipped to handle the task.

It's time for you to hunt again, Colonel.

And in return for providing such simple service, we will save your wife and cure her inner decay.



...

How do I know I can trust you?

You can't. Just as I cannot trust you.

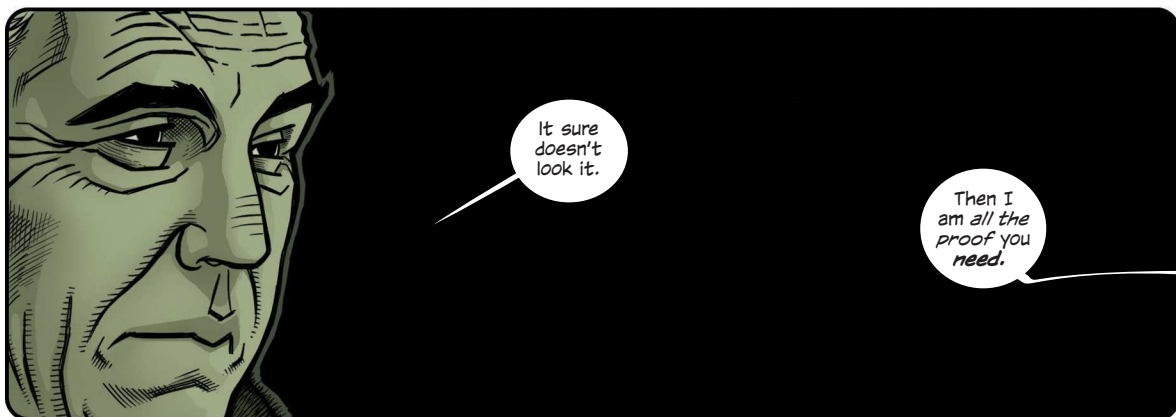
But my people's current position *is* as precarious as *your own*...

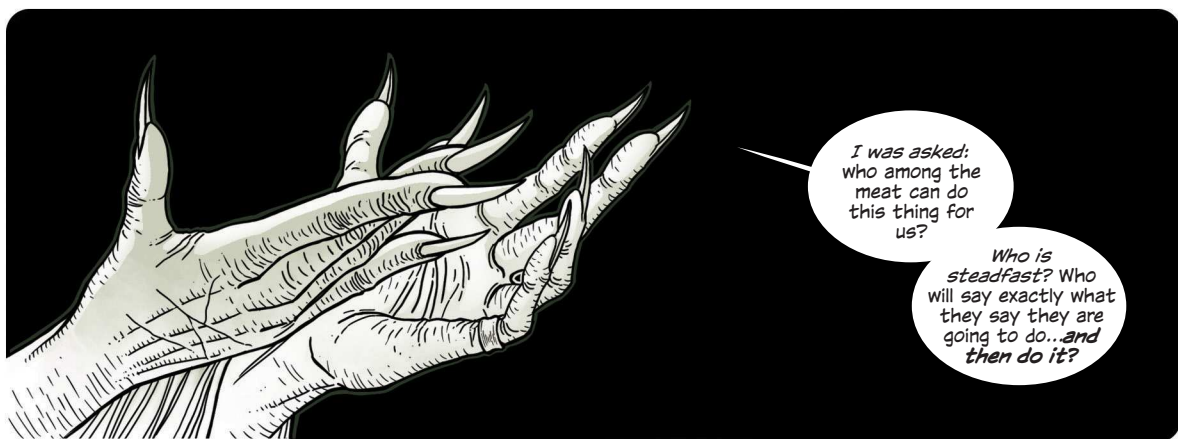
That's worth something similar to trust.



And how do I know you can do what you say?

I have not aged one day from when we first met forty years ago, have I, Colonel?





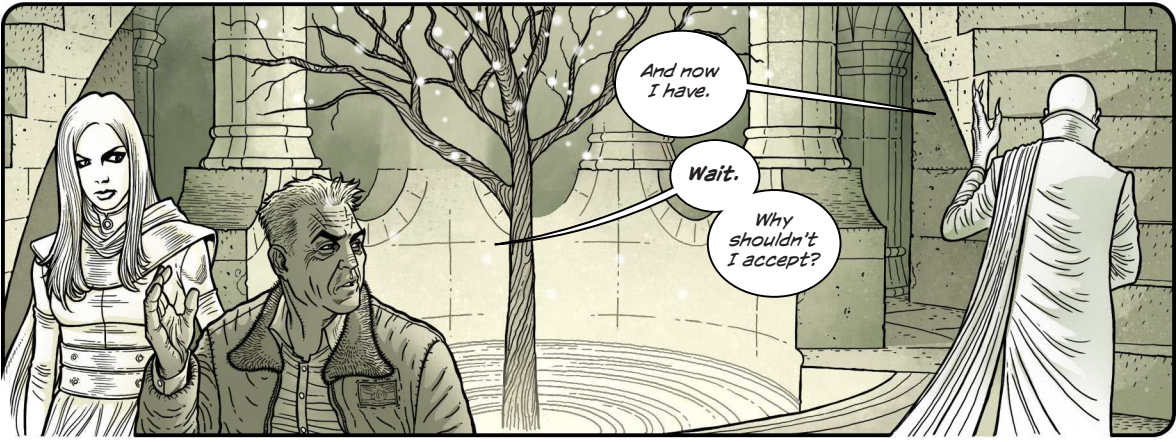


I told
them *you*.

The *only*
of your kind I've
encountered that
didn't...*disappoint*
so easily.



I was then
ordered to
make you this
offer...



And now
I have.

Wait.

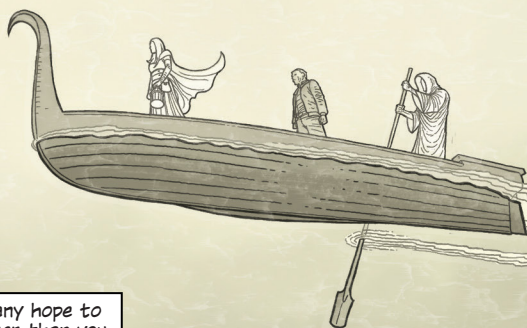
Why
shouldn't
I accept?



Because,
Colonel...



Then you'll be
just like *all*
of them...

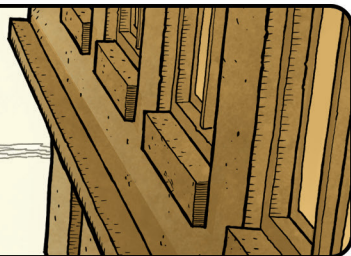


Clawing at any hope to hang on longer than you were ever meant to.



You tryin' to convince me that givin' up is the only way to go?

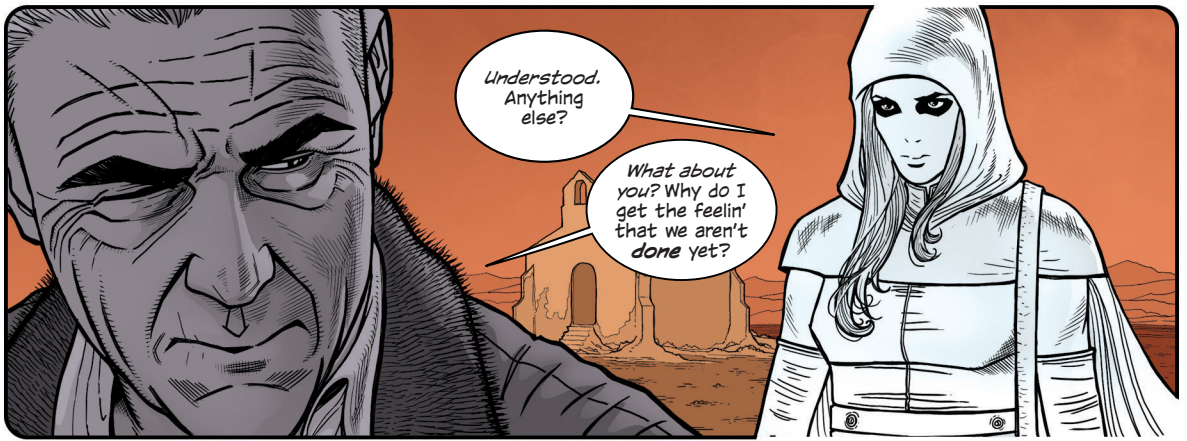
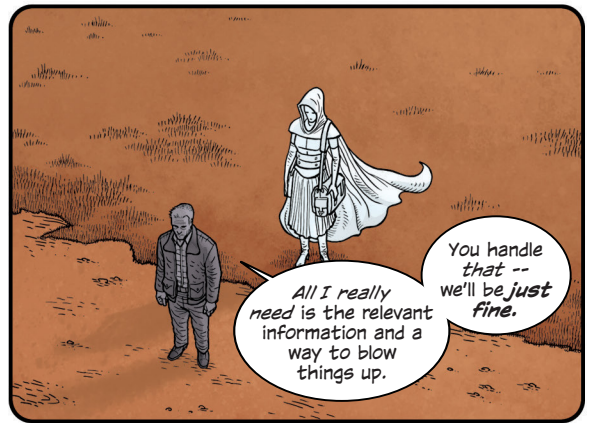
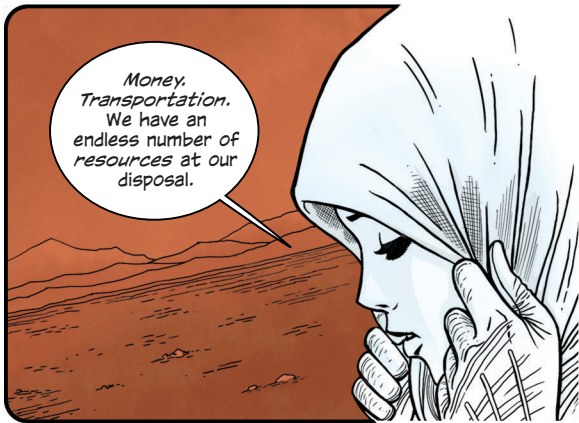
No. I'm telling you dying with some semblance of self-respect and honor is.

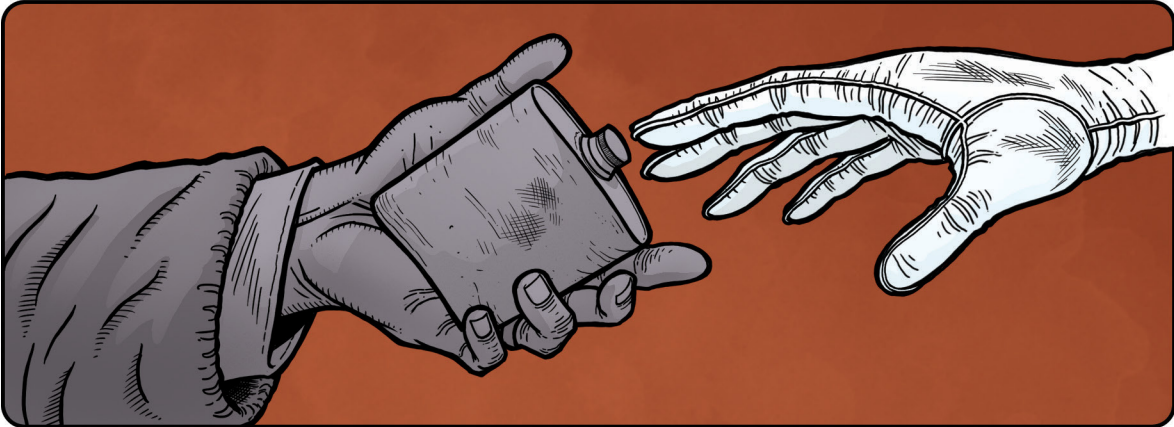


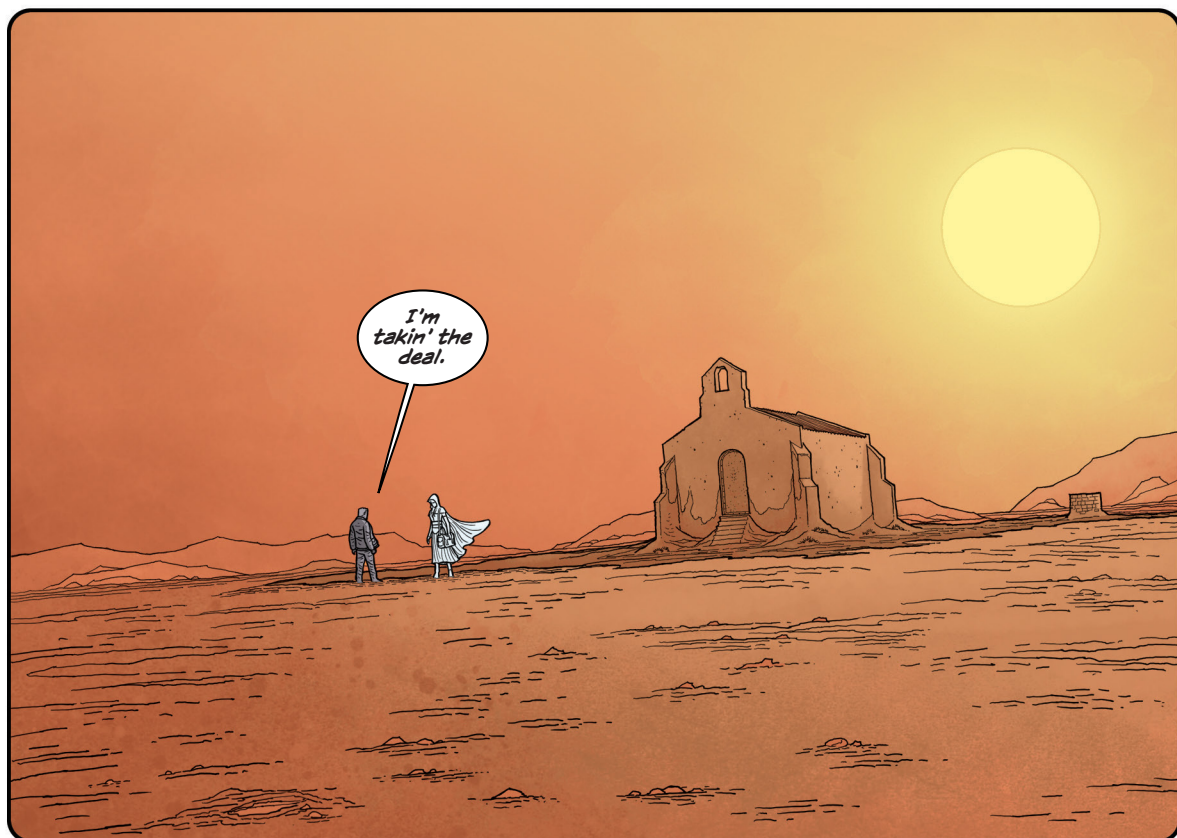
But now you've heard both my advice and my offer, and the choice is yours. Go. Make your decision...



And regardless of how you choose, I wish you well.









COMING THIS FEBRUARY

THE EMPTY

JIMMIE ROBINSON

image[®]

Shadowline[®]

NOTHING IS REAL.

NAMELESS™

GRANT MORRISON

CHRIS BURNHAM



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