

SIMON SPURRIER CHRIS WILDGOOSE ANDRÉ MAY

ALIENATED™



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and one of my favorite writers."

BRIAN K. VAUGHAN

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
WRITER OF *SAGA* & *PAPER GIRLS*

ALIENATED™

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ALIENATED™

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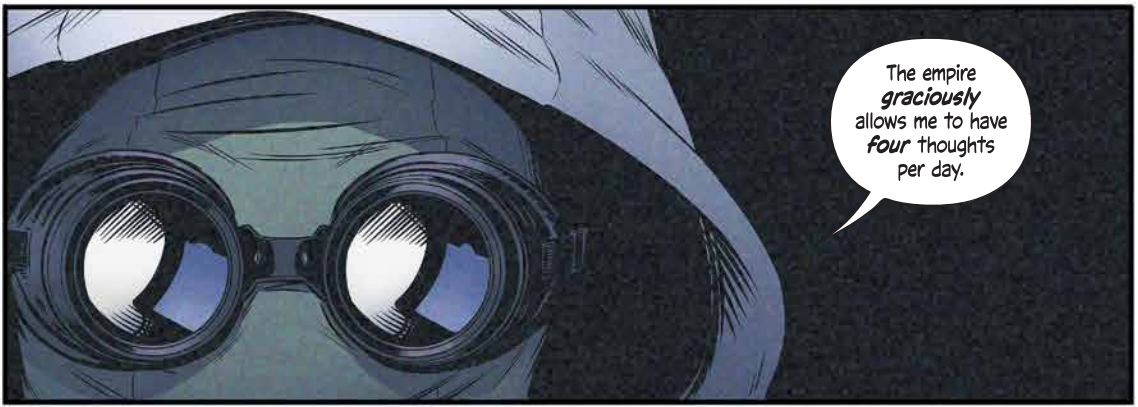
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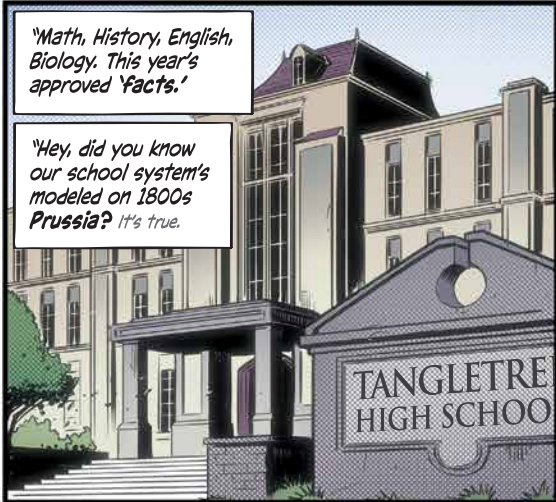
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CHAPTER ONE





The empire *graciously* allows me to have *four* thoughts per day.



"Math, History, English, Biology. This year's approved 'facts.'"

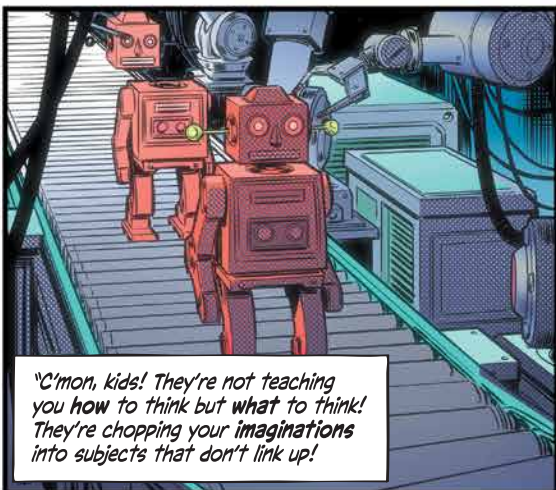
"Hey, did you know our school system's modeled on 1800s Prussia? It's true."

TANGETRE HIGH SCHOOL



"You think those guys wanted to nurture unique minds?"

"Or did they want a generation of robots to go fight Napoleon?"



"C'mon, kids! They're not teaching you *how* to think but *what* to think! They're chopping your imaginations into subjects that don't link up!"



"They're filing off anything *different* so you come off the line *singin'* 'O Say Can You See' with your *cow eyes* fixed on the ground."

"Another happy little drone, grateful for the chance to be *obedient*."

"Well, not anymore."



It's *our* future, not *theirs*. It's time to *wake up!* It's time to *rage and roar* and *take back* the world!

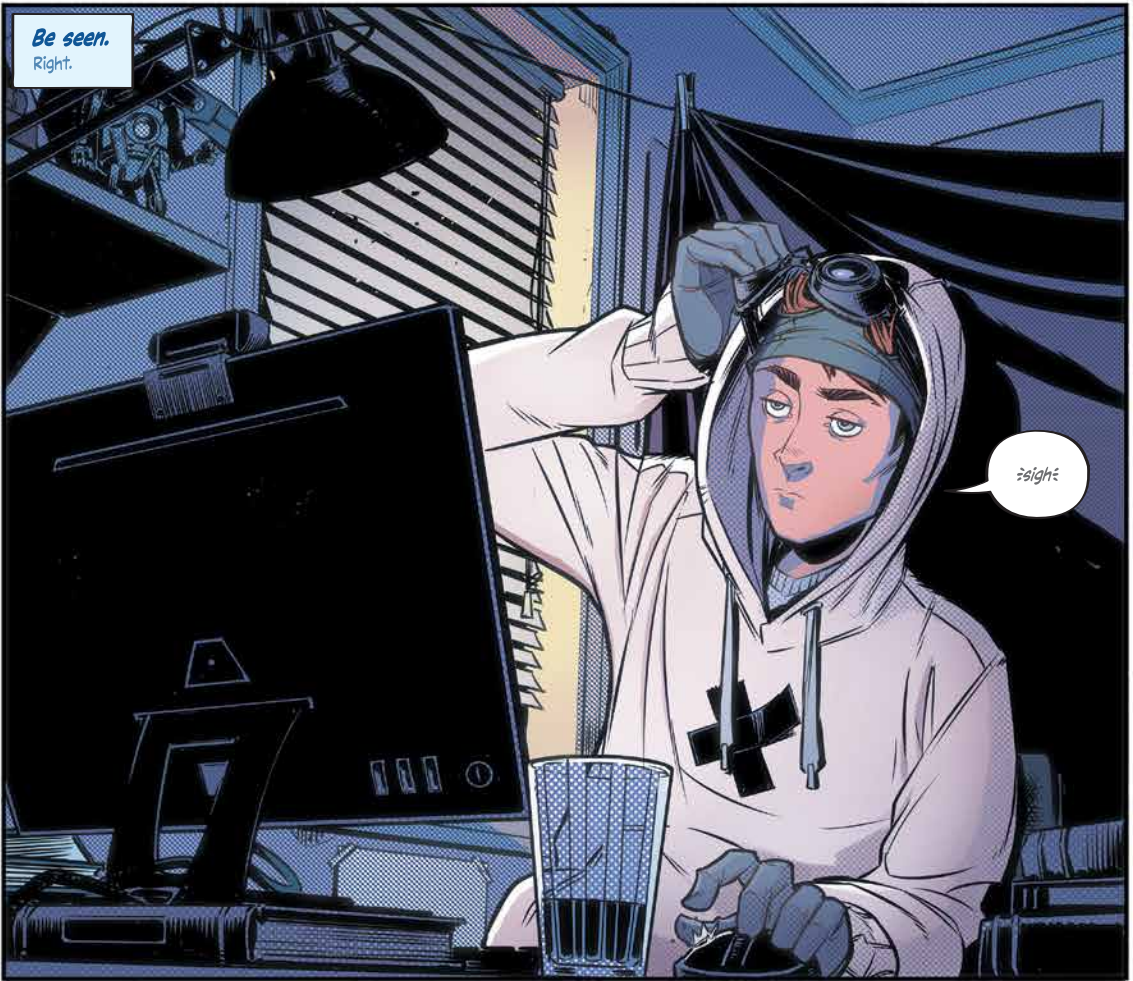
It's *time--*



--to be *seen*.



Be seen.
Right.



Weekly average of *forty-three* views.
Not exactly *world-shaking*, huh?



Got a couple new *subscribers*,
though--*that's* cool. Better a
few inquiring minds than a
billion dumb clickers.

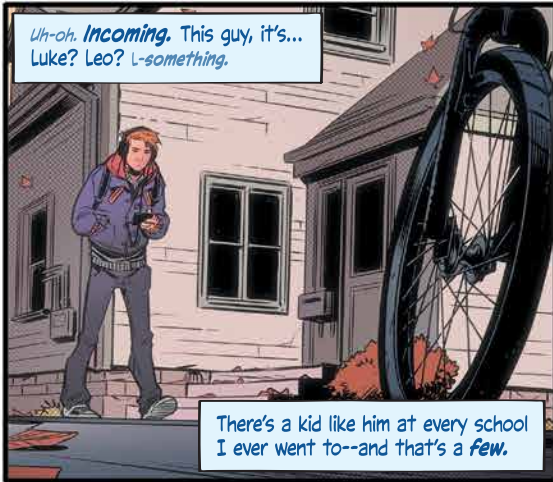
...what's the
alternative?



*"Factions speak
louder than herds"--*
that's one of the
golden rules.

The others are
*"Don't read the
comments"*
and
*"Keep the
damn content
flowing, dummy."*

Because...c'mon.



Probably got a shopping list of *small arms* in the pocket of his favorite trenchcoat. One of *those* guys.

Just my luck he's the only one so far who even *noticed* me.



S A M U E L

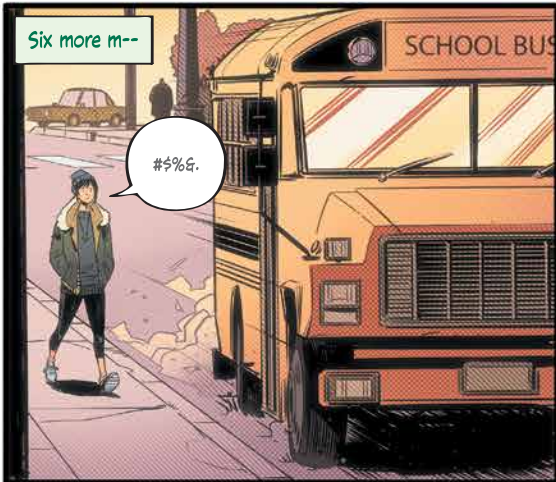




Six more months.

College. New state.
New crowd.

Six more months.



Six more m--

##\$%&.



Hey--
uh, L-Leon?
It's **Leon**,
right?

C-could you tell the
driver to *wait*? I had to
walk the neighbor's *dog*
and I'm running
la--

You talkin'
to *me*,
princess?



It rhymes with
"shore."

That's
the last
one, pal.
Nobody else
comin'.

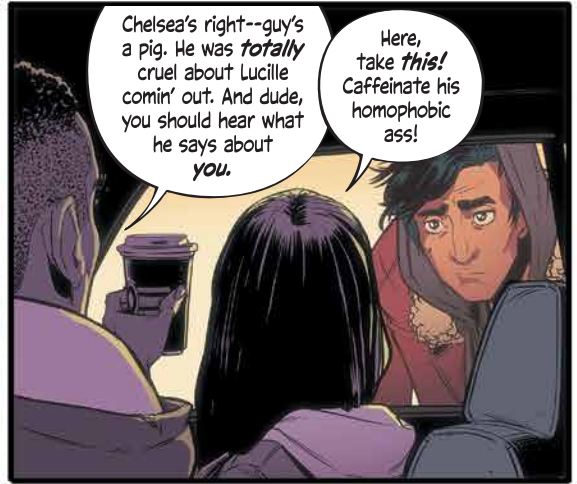
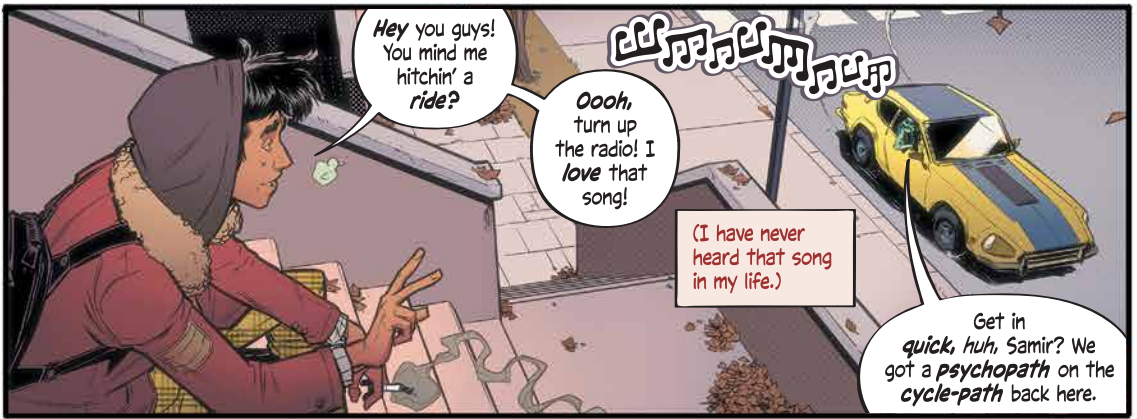
He slows the bike
and he says that's
the first time I ever
said his name.

I'm about to
apologize for that
--I'm blushing, even--
when he meets my eye
and says a *word*.

S A M A N T H A



Six more months.



Okay. Okay, sure. I will caffeinate his homophobic ass. **NBD.**

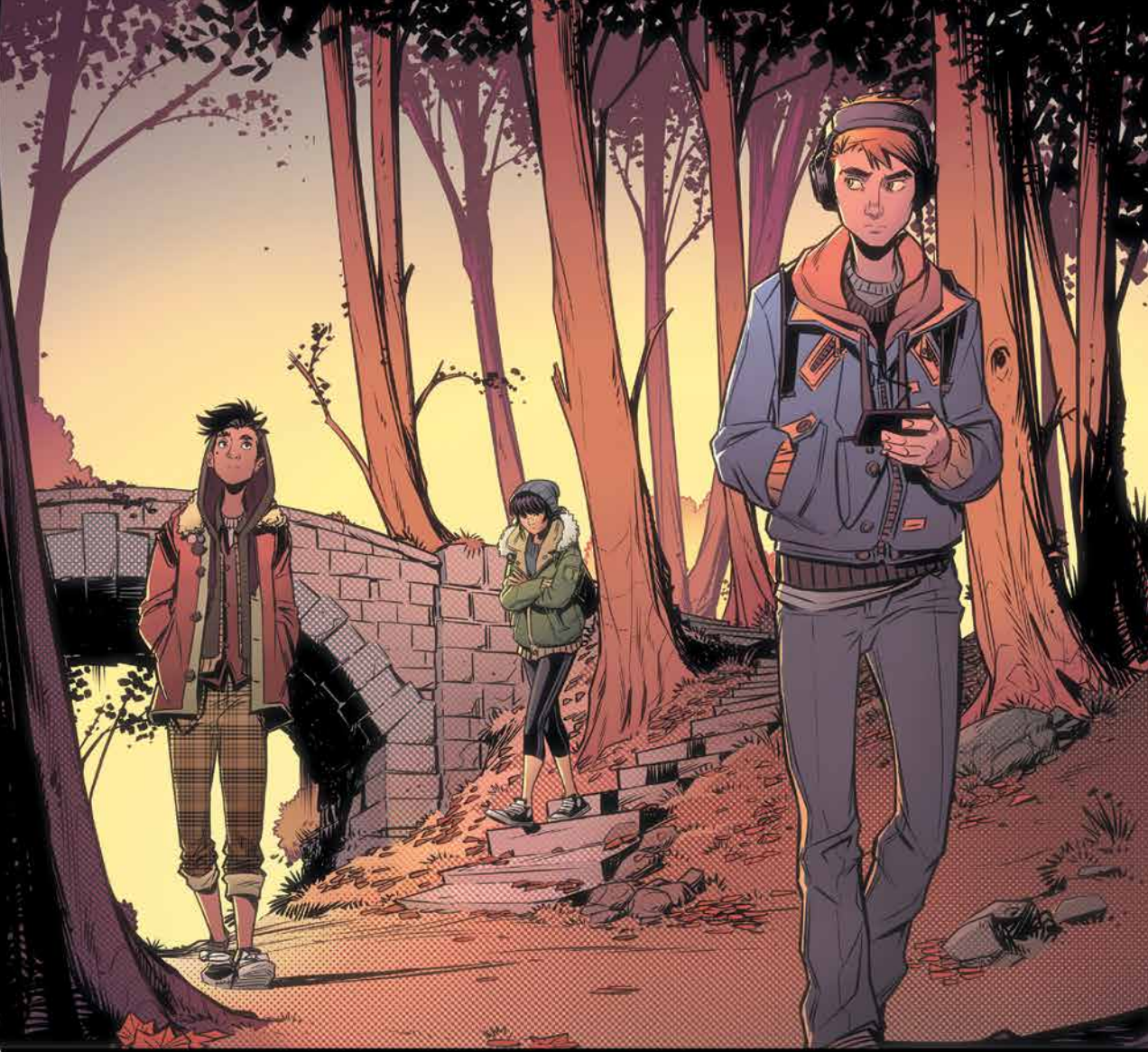
I don't need to be nice to Leon. **Everybody** hates him. I'll--what? I'll shout "you want whip with that?" and I'll throw it at his head. Yeah.

I don't *have* to be, y'know. **Liked.** Not by *everybody.*



S A M I R





Chapter 1: THREE KIDS CALLED SAM GO WALKING IN THE WOODS





You're the *new* kid, right?

It's been four weeks.

Yeah but *we* didn't talk yet, so you're only *really* arriving now.



Okay. Hi. And-- who's--

Uh-uh-uh-- Samantha doesn't wanna be your pal. Don't take it *personally*.



Actually, she used to be the *life and soul*, but--well. *Stuff*. It's *tragic*, really. Or *funny*. Depends who you ask.

Whatcha watching?



It's, *uh*. It's *Waxy*, you know? "*The Hooded Hellion*." Prankster, poet, pundit...

He just uploaded his latest *thing*.

Six million subscribers and counting.

I'm not jealous.



Awesome--hey, can I get an ear? I *love* Waxy!

(I have never watched Waxy in my life.)



All right, *sssh*, we're *ready*. Here we go...

Setup *is*, some kid wrote in to say her *biology professor* keeps handing out, y'know, *religious* junk, instead of teaching *evolution*.

"We're *miracles not monkeys*"--that sorta thing.



Colin... Wilkinson...

Wh-who's there?

You *know* who, my child. Hast thou not awaited this day thy whole life?



Wuh-wuh-wuh--

Come forth, my son, for greatly am I pleased with thy works. Step into the light--and behold!



Thy LORD and SAVIOR.

Ook?



And that's how you make a monkey out of a monomaniac.

B-b-b-blasphemy! WICKEDNESS!

Remember, kids--it's *our* future, not *theirs*. Nobody's gonna hold 'em to account if we don't.

So--til next time! *Be smart, be brave, be counted!*

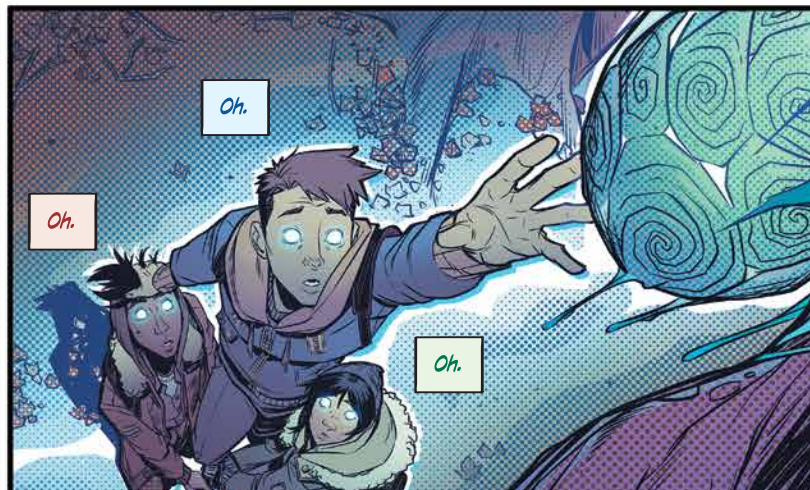
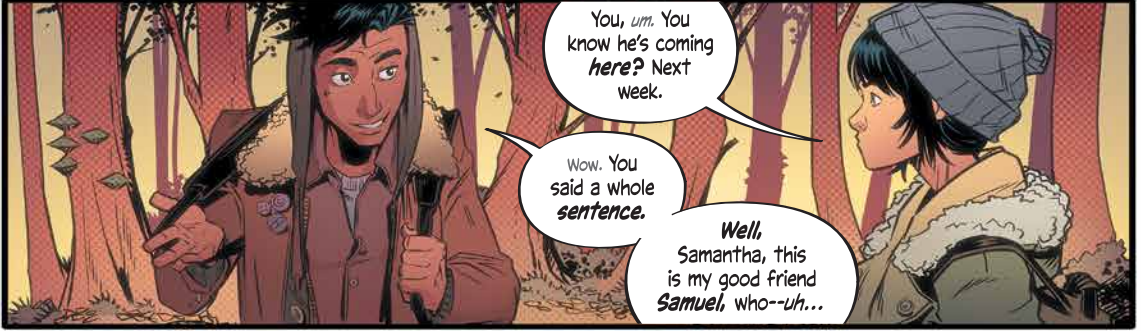
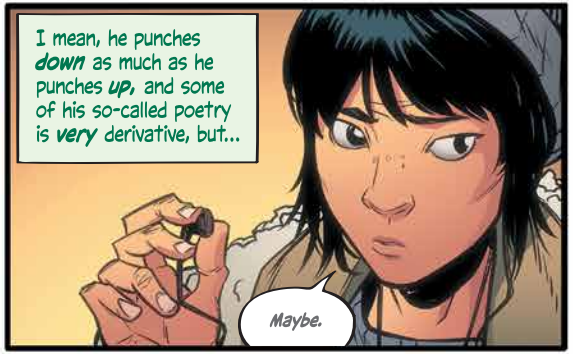


Heh heh heh. That is awesome!

I guess. I hate that dumb catchphrase-- It's totally contrived.



Hmm-hmm-hmm!



ix million subscribers...I
deserve six million subsc

ve some pride in your heritage, he says.
How was I s'posed to do that when
my only link to it was a coldblooded ba

anny. Or Ben. Or Tommy. He
looked like a Tommy. I wish
I'd held him just a minute m

ould take the mask off,
but--what if people
hate me? What if th

god, his little
face, th-th-those
blue eyes, they

nly thing you ever gave
me, Dad, and that's
a hole in my life, so





Wh-whose *thoughts* are these?

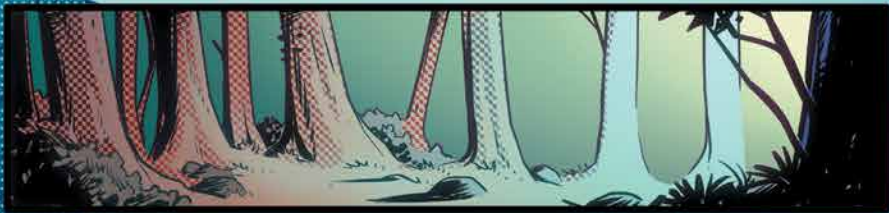
Wait--d-does this mean--c-can you guys hear what *I'm* th--

stop it get *out* get *out* can't be *happening*

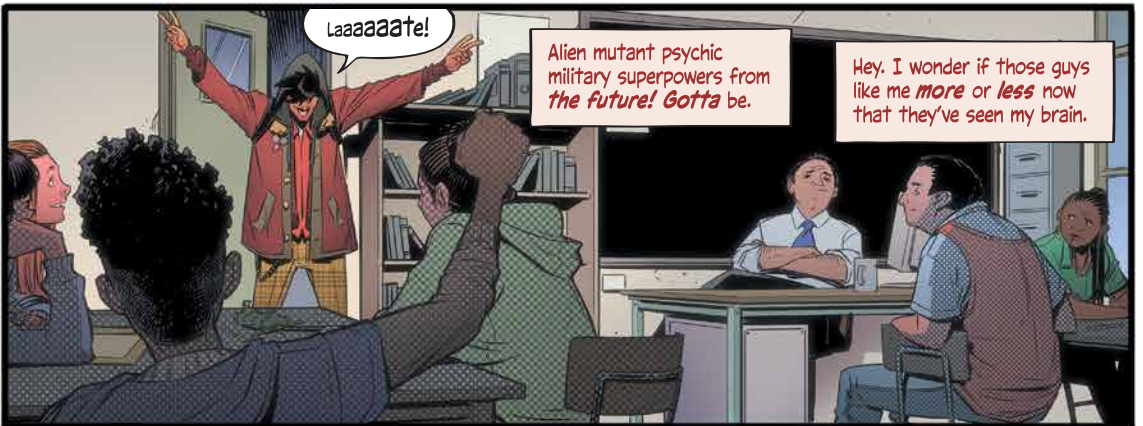
but it *is* it *is* oh *damn* you're both

both staring straight into

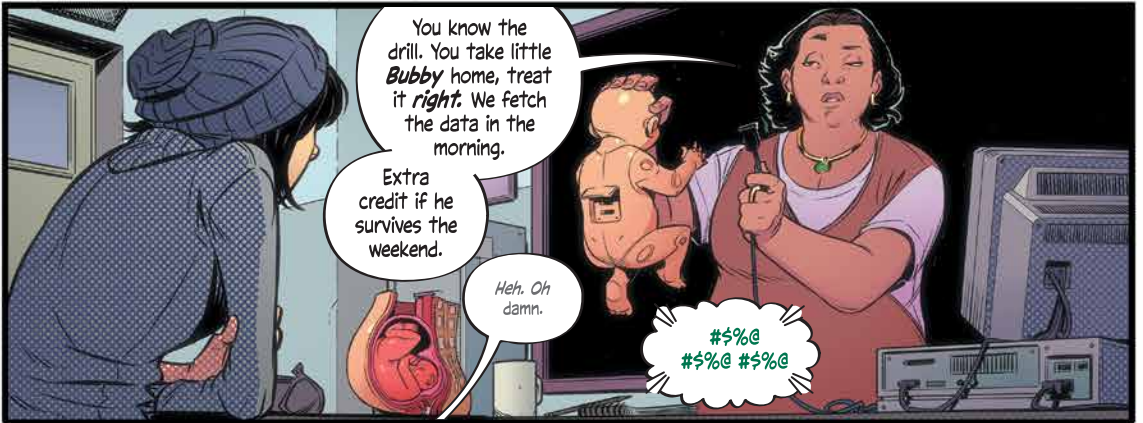
my head



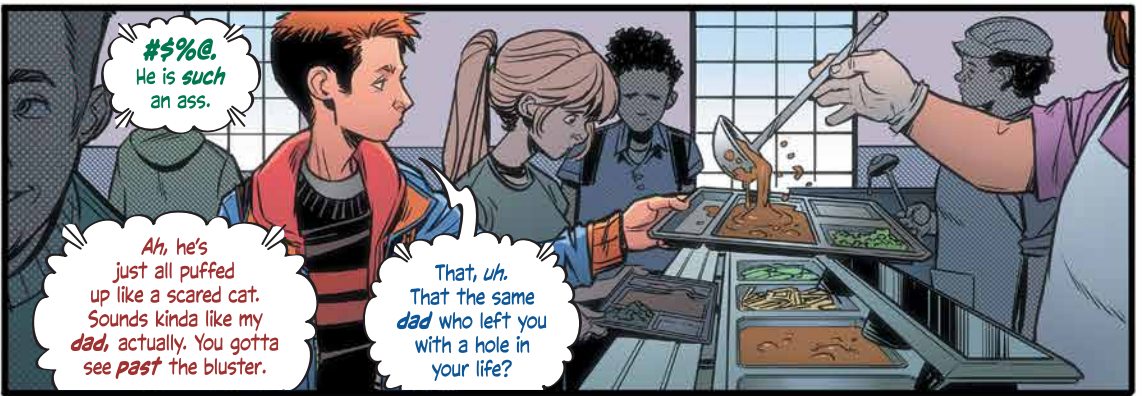
FIRST PERIOD



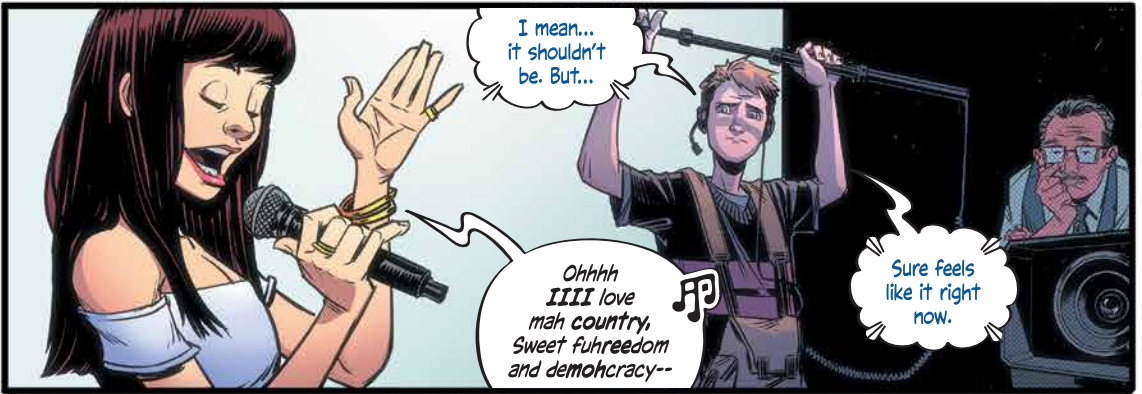
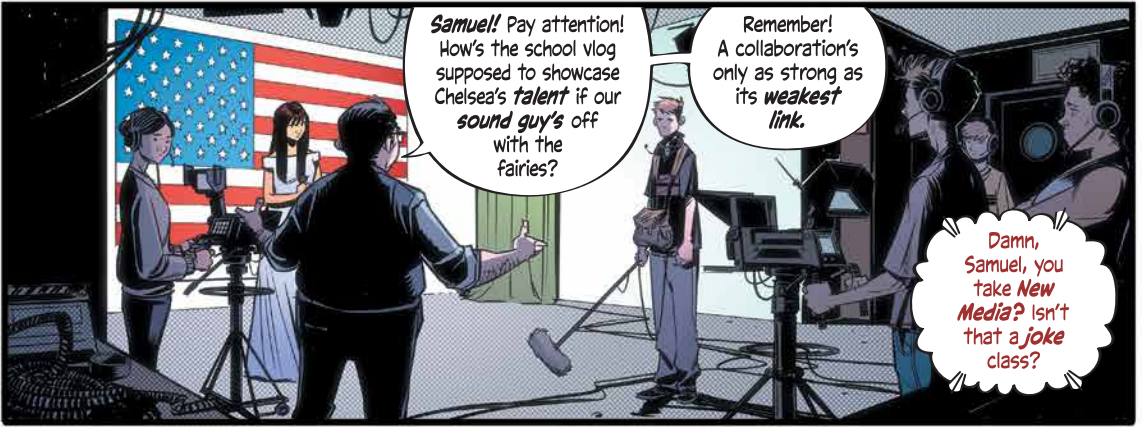
SECOND PERIOD



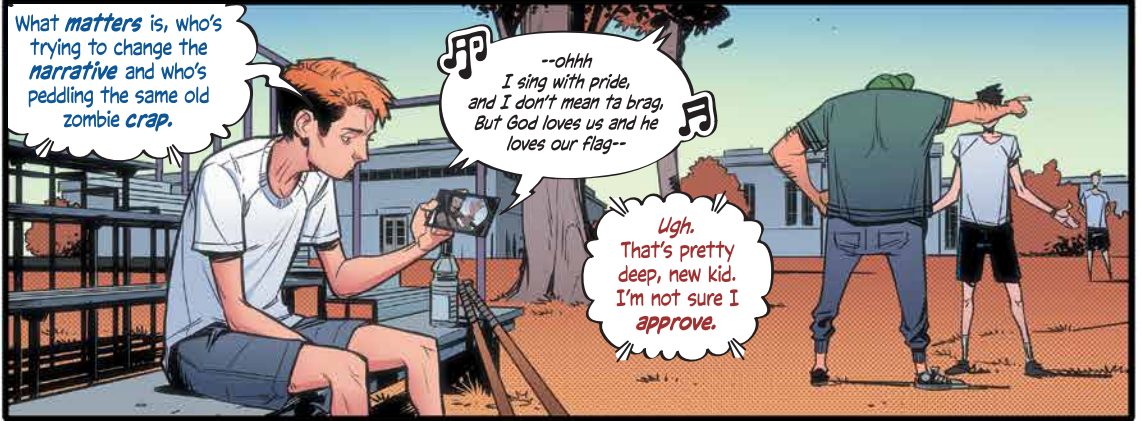
LUNCH BREAK



THIRD PERIOD



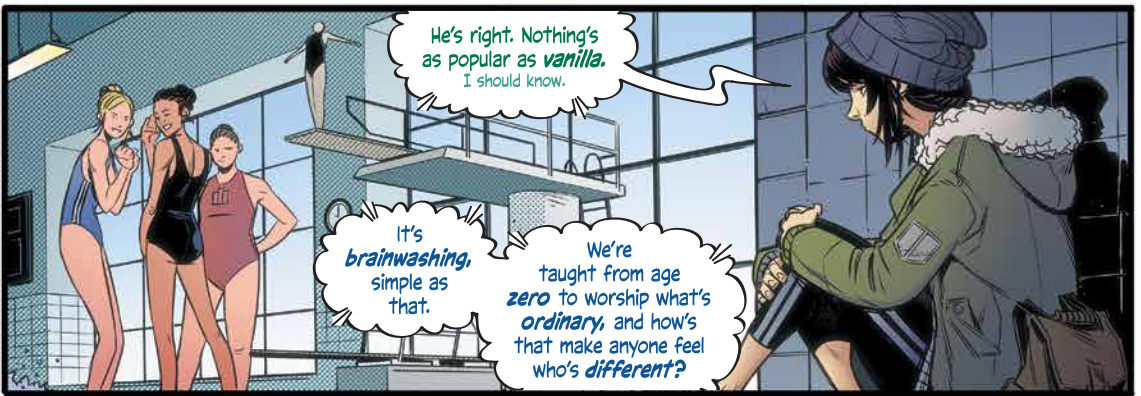
FOURTH PERIOD



What *matters* is, who's trying to change the *narrative* and who's peddling the same old *zombie crap*.

♪ --ohhh
I sing with pride,
and I don't mean ta brag,
But God loves us and he
loves our flag--

Ugh.
That's pretty
deep, new kid.
I'm not sure I
approve.



He's right. Nothing's
as popular as *vanilla*.
I should know.

It's
brainwashing,
simple as
that.

We're
taught from age
zero to worship what's
ordinary, and how's
that make anyone feel
who's *different*?



Invisible.

Exactly.

ಽಽಽಽ I'm
not invisible,
losers.



Everyone
sees me.

We
need to go
back to the
woods.



Whatever this *is*, i-it's *amazing*, but--

Alien mutant psychic military superpowers from the future.

--but I don't want you in my head.



No #\$\$%. You spent all day *wishing away* the rest of your senior year. Why're you so hot to get *outta* here?

None of your business. And that's the *point*. It's not like I wanna be in *your* heads either.

What's *wrong* with my head?



It's #\$\$%ing *empty*, that's what! You're too busy making everyone *like* you to have a single thought of your *own*!

And he's-- ...I don't know *what* he is.

Eh, he wants to be *seen* but he's scared of being *known*. Pretty common, actually.

#\$\$% you!



Jerks.

Jerks.

Jerks.



All right, let's just--find that weird *thing* and get it *switched off*, okay?



Switch it *off*?



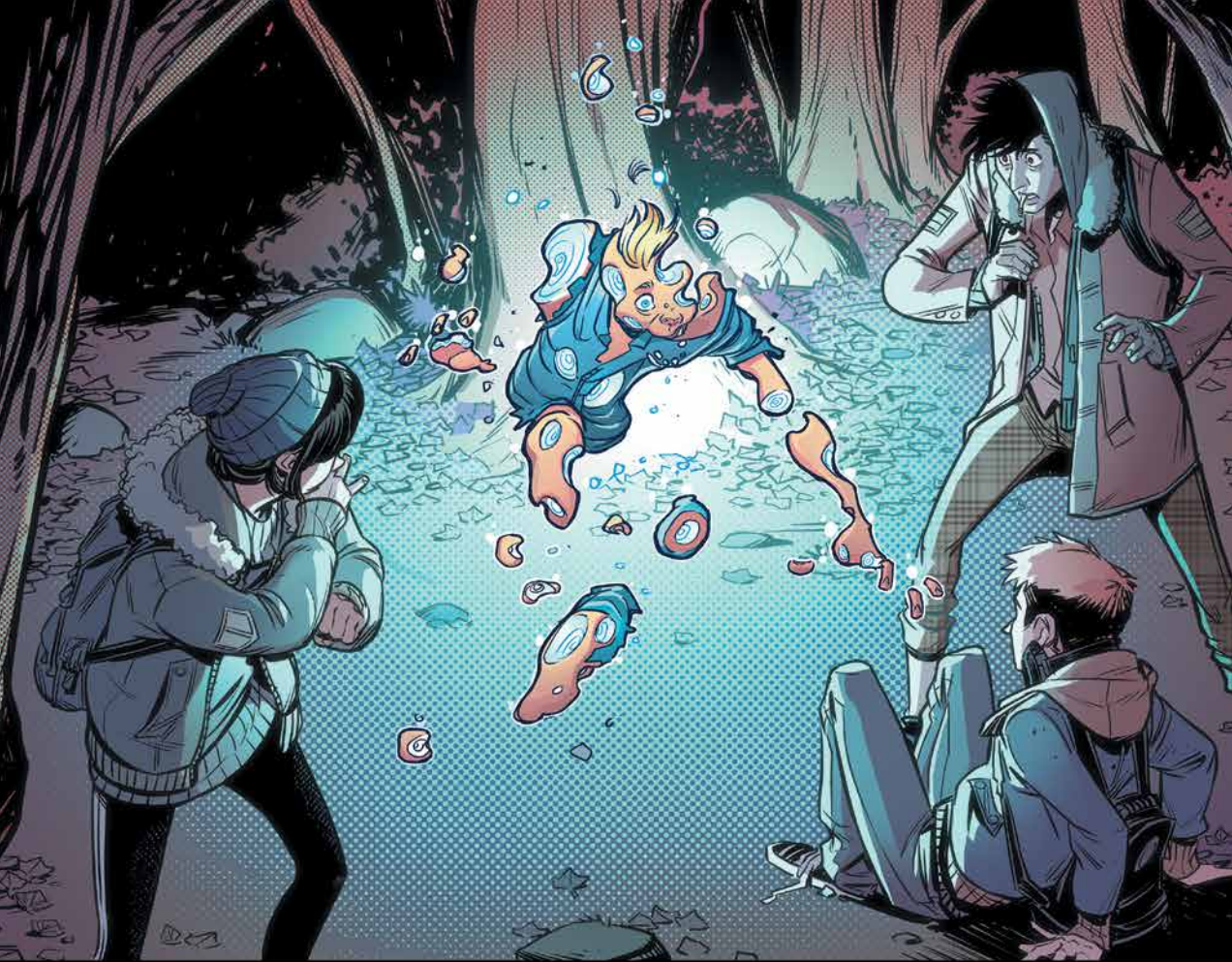


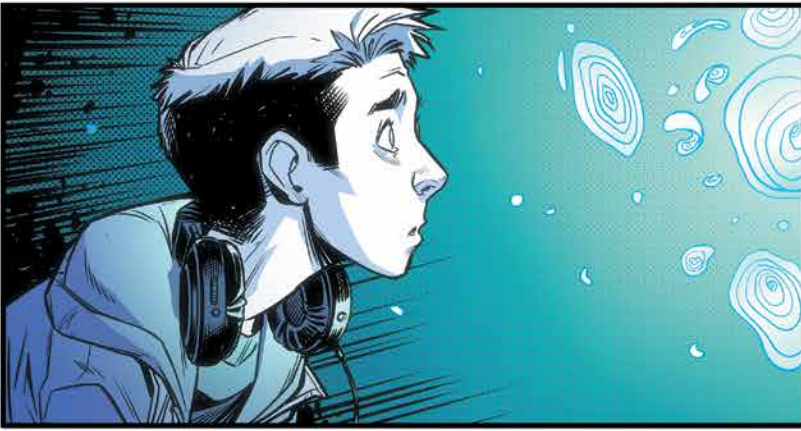
STOP



GO AWAY







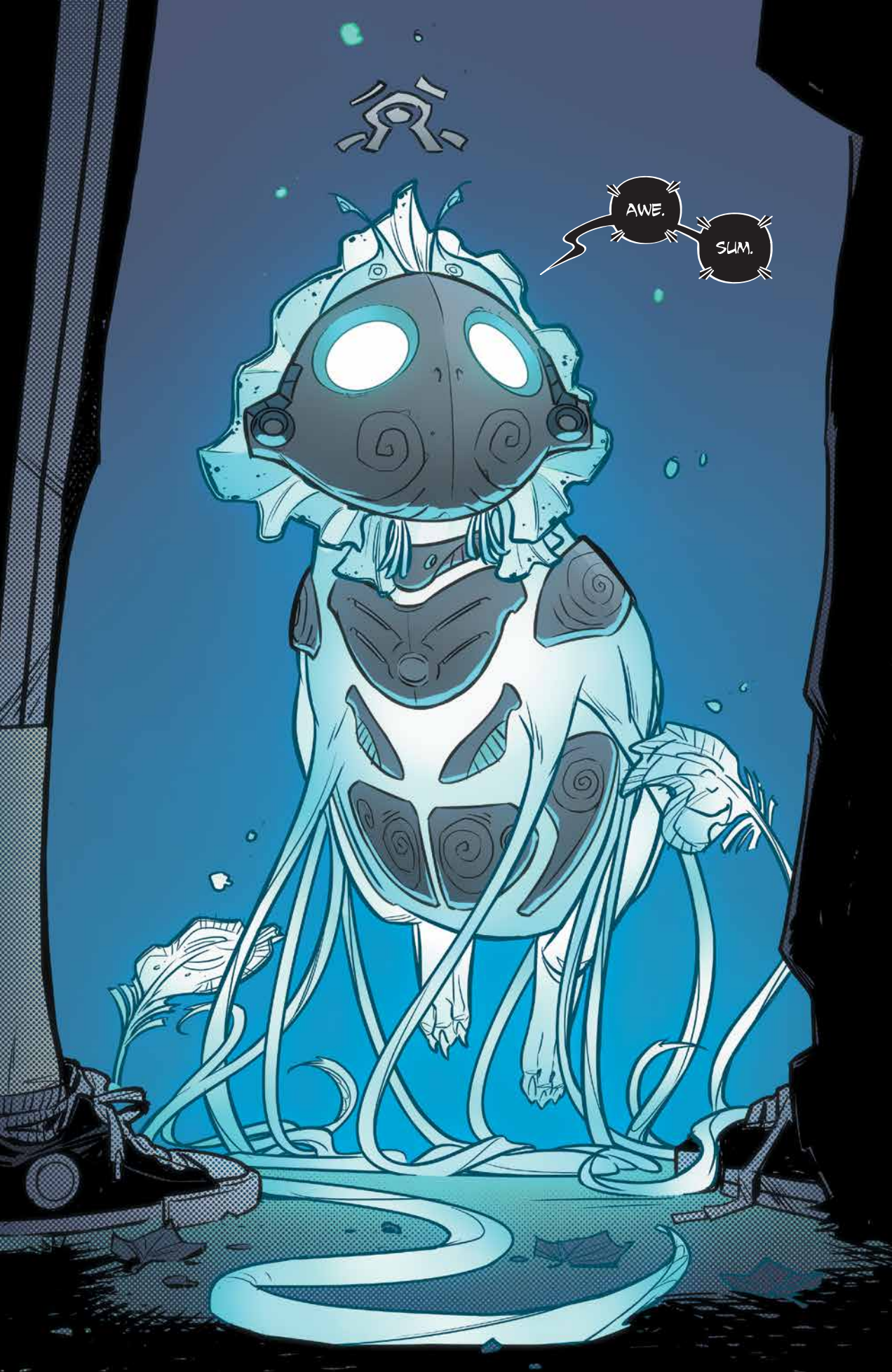
dead
he's dead
he's gone
oh oh oh
but this is,
this is...



no no **NO**
not possible
(six more months)
just stay out of it
(six more months)
except
except *ohhh*
this is...



I knew it
I *knew* it
aliens or *mutants* or
military secrets or or
something
oh god I'm gonna *puke*
except,
except this is...
this is *actually*
kind of...



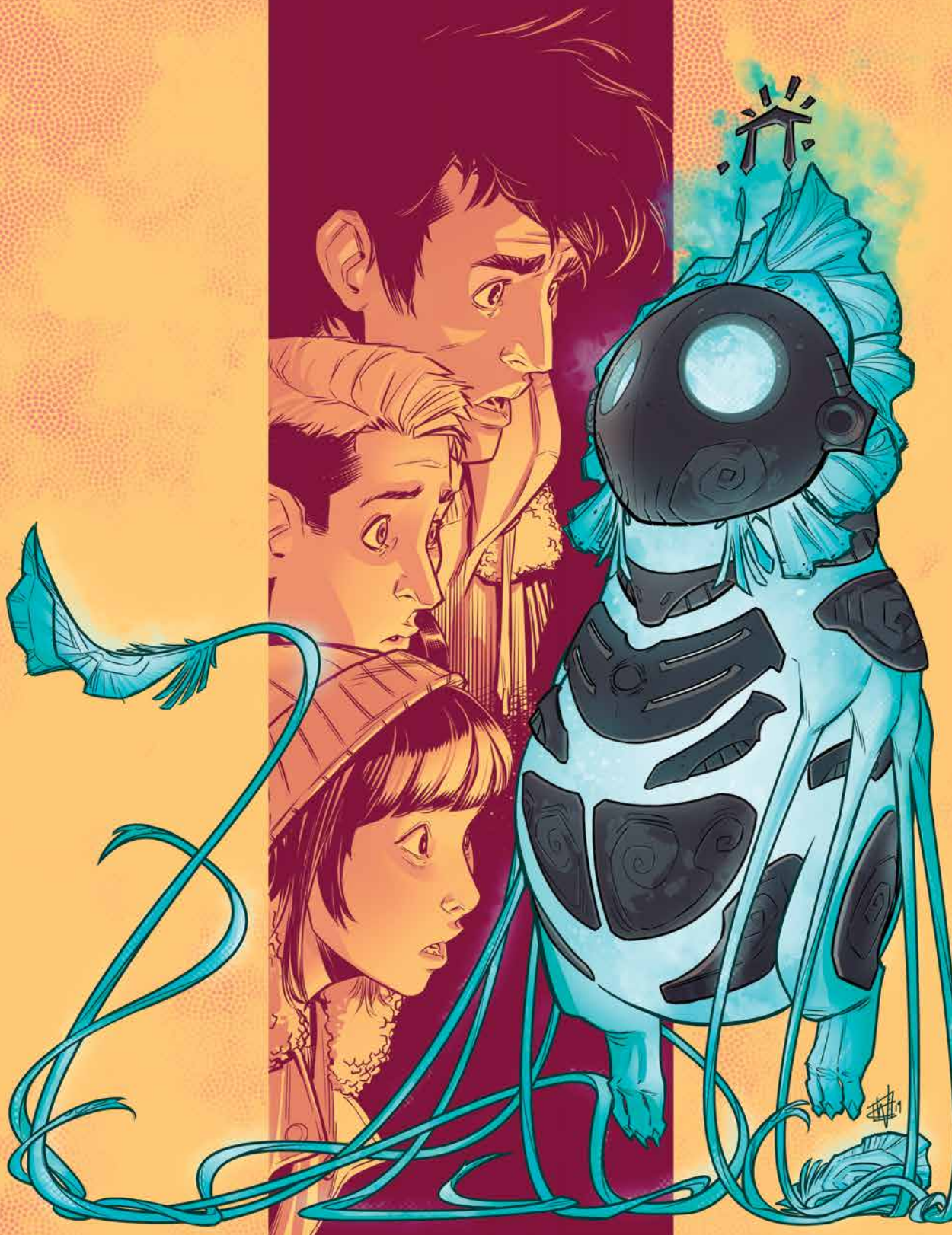
𐄂

AWE.

SLM.



CHAPTER TWO





Look at them.

The smirks. The sneers.



All so busy bein'--bein' mindful and #\$\$%&in' woke, they never even tried to know me.

Whatever happens next? It's their fault.

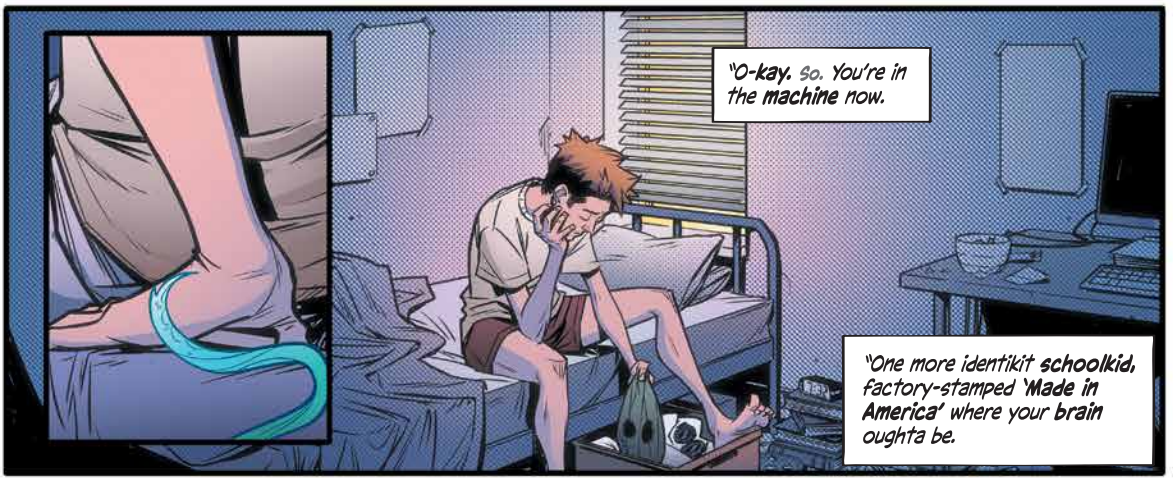
I deserve to be liked.



But being noticed'll do.

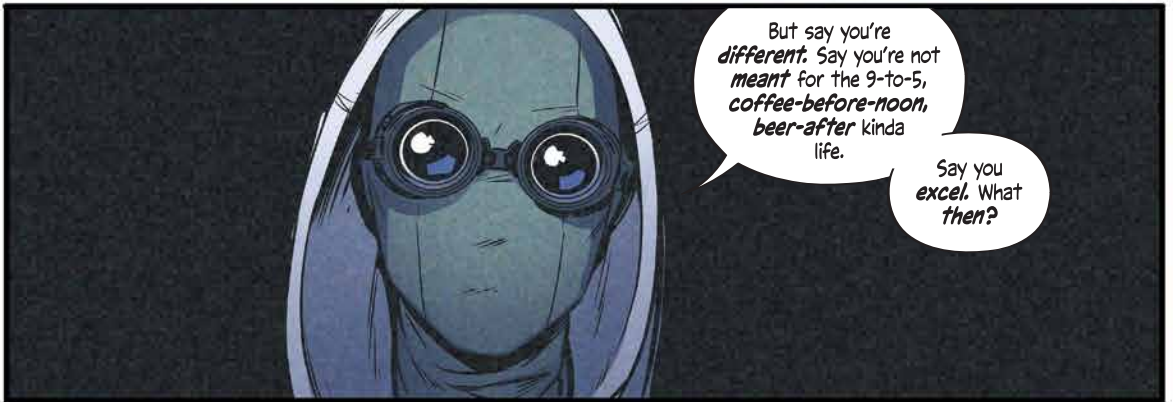


Huhhh--!



'O-kay. So. You're in the machine now.

"One more identikit schoolkid, factory-stamped 'Made in America' where your brain oughta be.



But say you're *different*. Say you're not *meant* for the 9-to-5, *coffee-before-noon*, *beer-after* kinda life.

Say you *excel*. What *then*?



I'll tell ya. The bigwigs pull a lever and you're off on the *monomath* track.

University, doctorates, *tenure*-- they narrow down your options and your viewpoints over and over--

--because the one thing they love more than a *drone*?



Is an *expert* without a single original thought.



Come *on*, America! They're filling our heads with *their* junk on *their* terms until...until...



hrm:

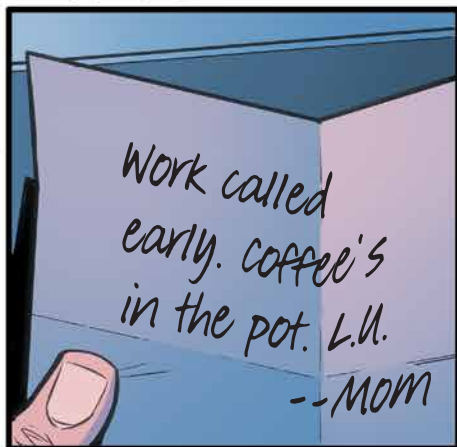


--u-until all we can do is find someone else to blame.

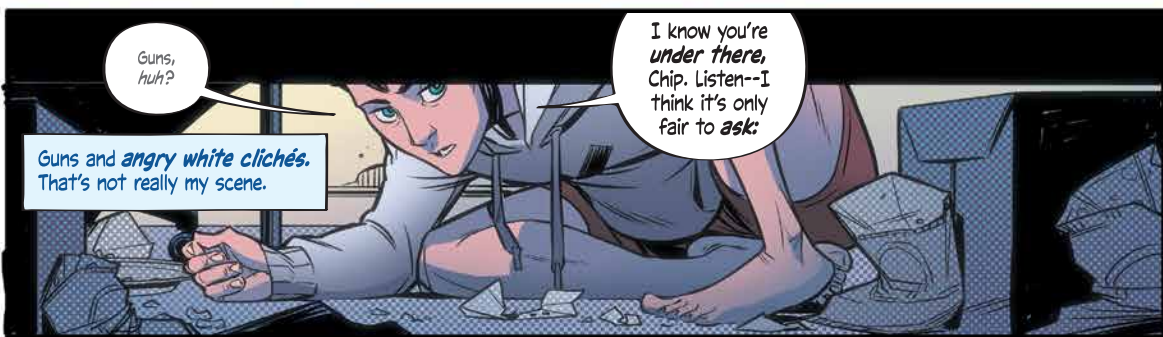


sigh: Until next time, etcetera etcetera.

Insert pithy motto here.



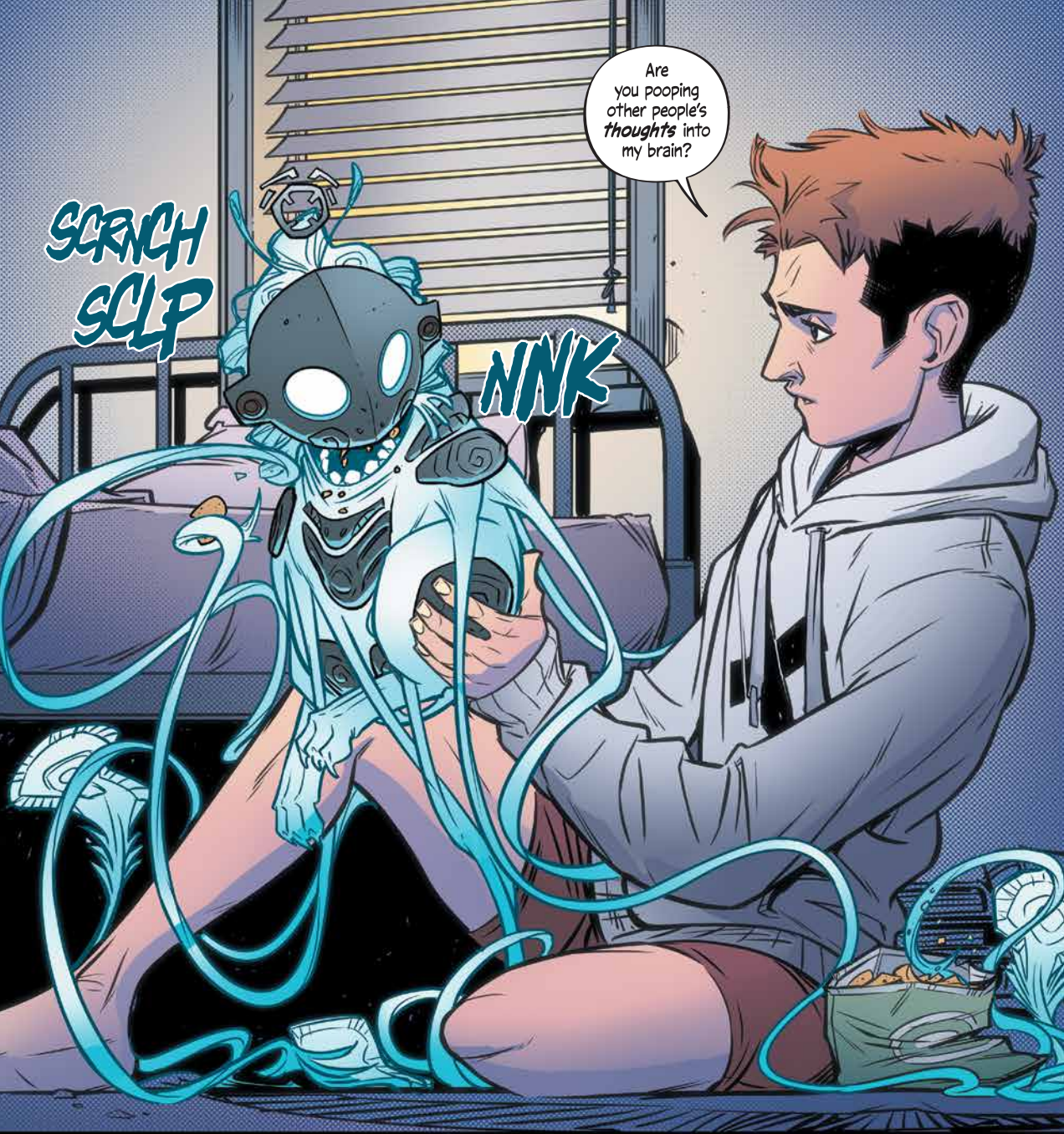
Work called early. coffee's in the pot. L.U.
--MOM



Guns, huh?

Guns and *angry white clichés*. That's not really my scene.

I know you're *under there*, Chip. Listen--I think it's only fair to *ask*:



Are you pooping other people's *thoughts* into my brain?

SCRNCH
SCLP

NNK



Two days ago something *impossible* happened.

Nmfz
Dammit.

Two days ago an @#\\$hole got *vanished* and a pair of perfect strangers started a *groupchat* in my brain.



I guess we coulda spent the time since then *freaking out* about that--

WANT.
SAM-SAM-SAM!
WANT!

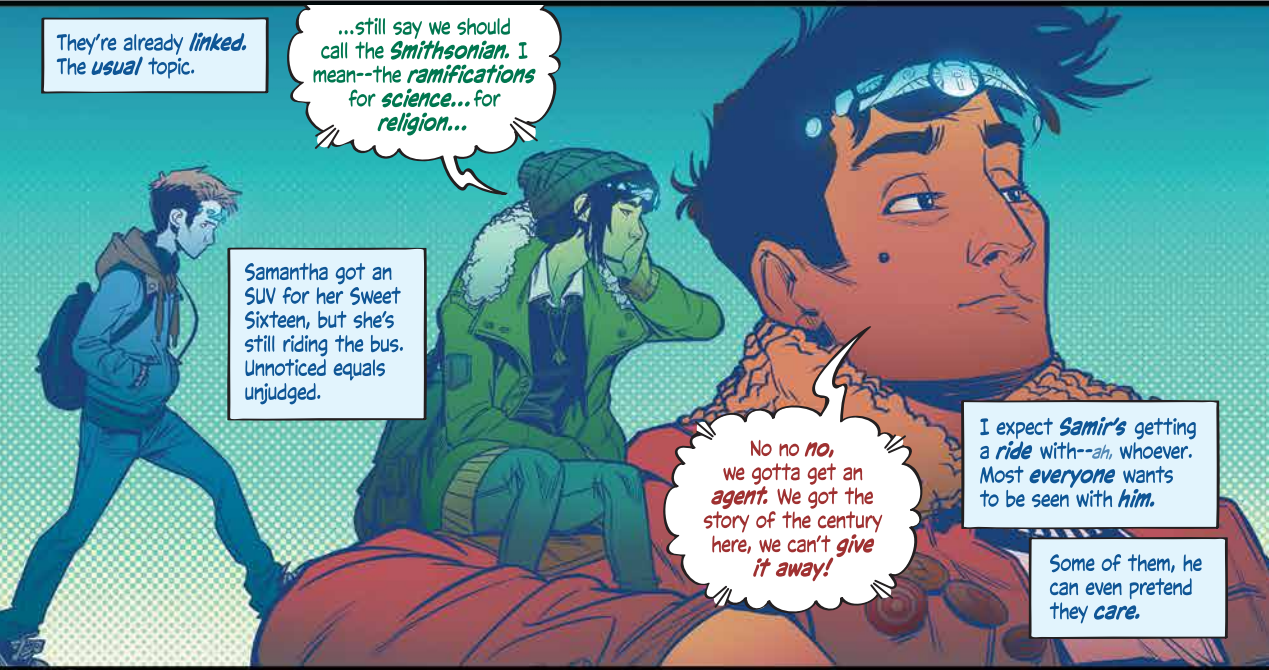
Hey--calm down already!
I'm tuning in.



--but mostly we've just been working on our *privacy* settings.

It's amazing how fast things stop seeming amazing.

Guys?
It's *me*--
I'm coming in.
Stay outta my memories!



They're already *linked*.
The *usual* topic.

...still say we should call the *Smithsonian*. I mean--the *ramifications* for *science*...for *religion*...

Samantha got an SUV for her Sweet Sixteen, but she's still riding the bus. Unnoticed equals unjudged.

No no *no*, we gotta get an *agent*. We got the story of the century here, we can't *give it away!*

I expect *Samir's* getting a *ride* with--*ah*, whoever. Most *everyone* wants to be seen with *him*.

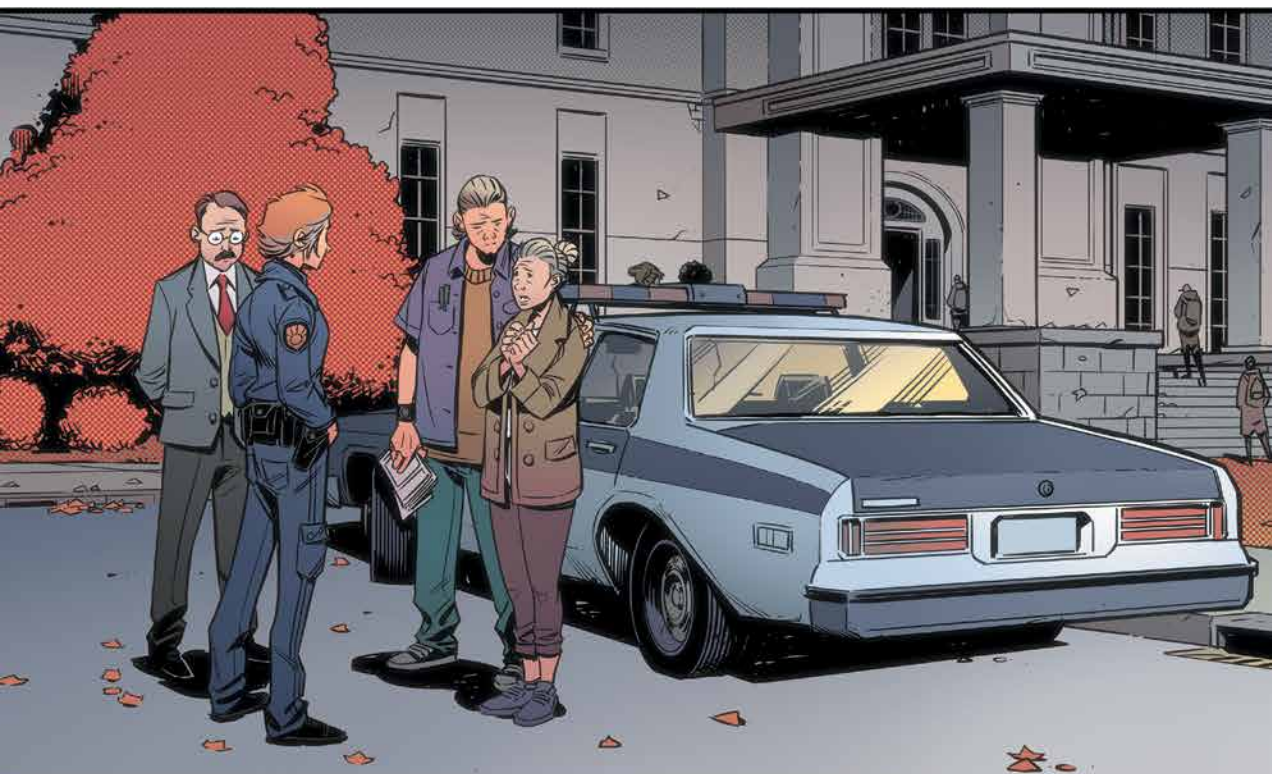
Some of them, he can even pretend they *care*.

And then there's me.



We can't tell anyone.





Chapter 2: WE NEED TO TALK



Feels *nice*, in a weird kinda way.

All of us tutting and rolling our eyes together, like good little outcasts.







Listen you guys, this is tough for *all* of us. Leon's left a hole in our lives. A *hole* that's ~~shf?~~ that's right...

Oh-- I promised myself I wouldn't lose it...



Right here.



S--so I spoke with the *school counselor* and--she *agreed* it'd be a real *comfort* to just--*share* our pain.

So this morning we're gonna *hug it out*. Okay? Who's *first*?



Samir! C'mere.

Uh...sure, Chel--but--listen...

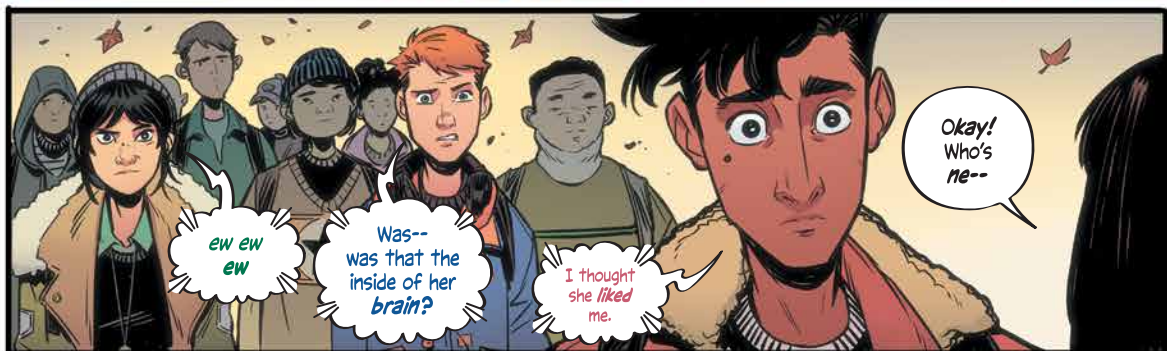
I thought you totally *despised* that g--



Leon will *always* be in our prayers.

Huh. Say. Did you put on some *weight*?







Look, see? I *told* you he's growing fast. I can't keep hiding him from my *mom*.

Well *I* can't take it home. The apartment's *tiny*.



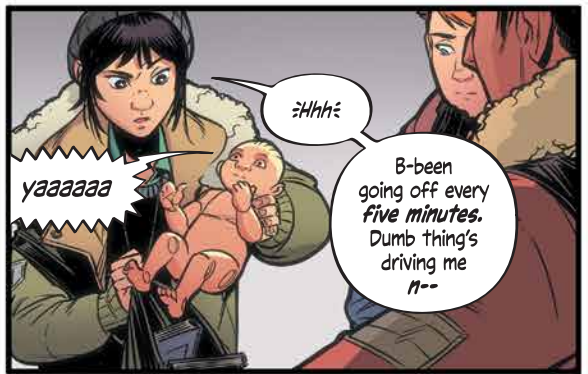
Hey. Don't put him in there. You're *scaring* him.

Samantha, it's an alien mutant *squidbaby*. How d'you know it even *feels* fear?



Everything feels f--

yaaaaaa



yaaaaaa

~Hhh~

B-been going off every *five minutes*. Dumb thing's driving me *m--*



Okay, *weird*.

~giggle~

You, *uh*. You want me to take the *squid* back? I got a *study period*, and I know you'd never miss *Math*.



It's... y'know, actually, it's *fine*.

I'll skip it.



...and we miss you more and more each day, we want ya home-- to Gaaahd we pray

For your safe return, so ya gotta know: Wherever you are...

We won't

Leeeet

Go.

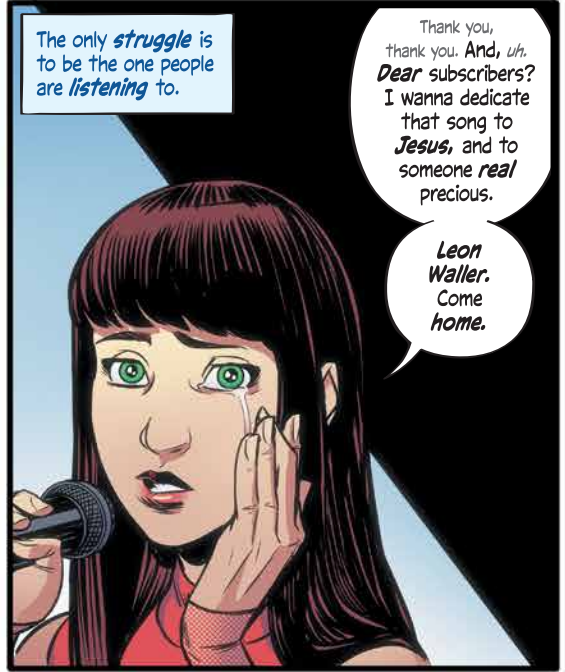
#\$%&.

I should be grateful the school even *has* this kit. Most *don't*.

I mean, hell, everything in this studio'll be obsolete in a couple years. But the *principle's* sound: there are no *middlemen* anymore.

No gatekeepers, no publishers--just *content creators* and *consumers*. This is stuff actually *worth* learning.

We are *all influencers* in waiting.



The only *struggle* is to be the one people are *listening* to.

Thank you, thank you. And, *uh*. Dear subscribers? I wanna dedicate that song to *Jesus*, and to someone *real* precious.

Leon Waller. Come home.



Aaand *cut*. That was lovely, Chelsea. And so heartfelt--*thank* you.

Huh. Look.

So *heartfelt* she's already checking the *viewer stats*.

Waxy. She wants the slot on *Waxy*.

Waxy's--well. *"Popular."*
I guess. But never *pop*.

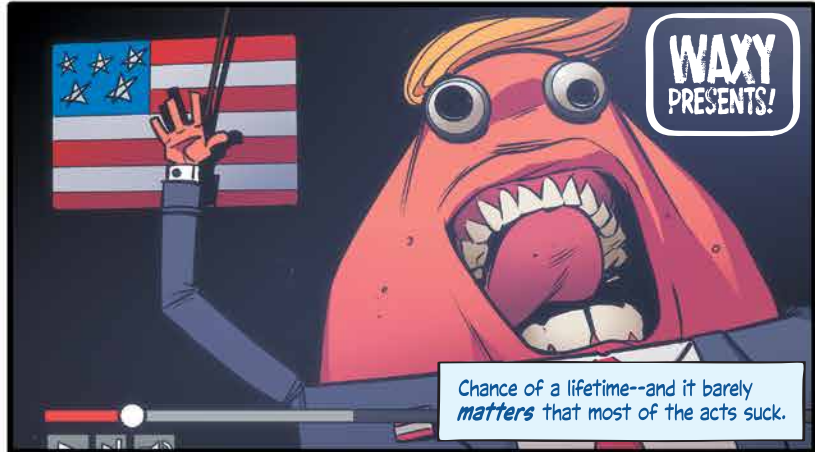


He's *angry* and *raw*, and whether you think he's speaking *truth to power* or just being *obnoxious*--

--at least he's raising *young voices* in an *old world*.

And *part* of that?
Part of the *appeal*?

In every show he gives ten minutes to a *young broadcaster*, in whatever cruddy little *county* he's touring that week.



Chance of a lifetime--and it barely *matters* that most of the acts suck.

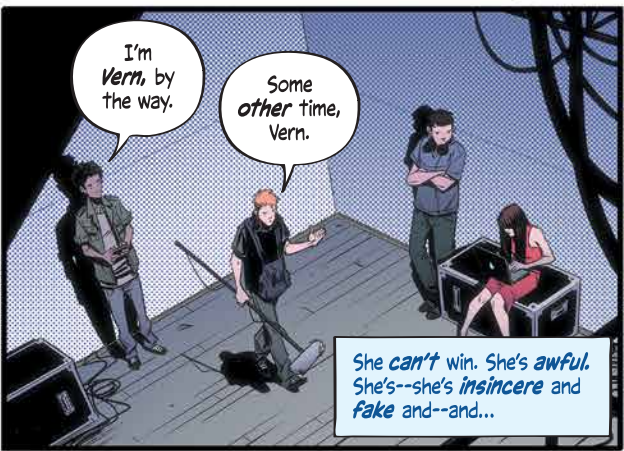


Because *mine* sure as hell won't.



Waxy's coming through town real soon, huh? I bet Chelsea's not the *only one* gettin' *sweaty* about that slot.

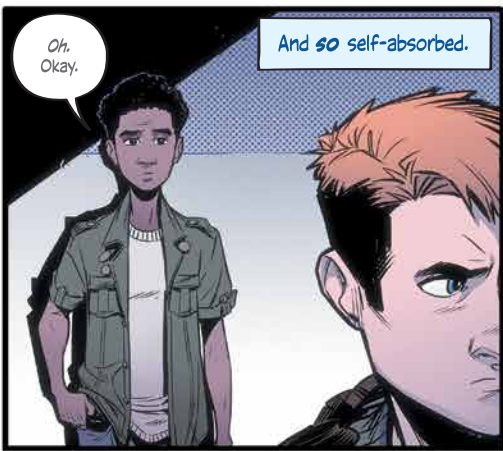
A-actually, I got this little, sorta, *documentary* of my own. You, uh, you wanna see it?



I'm *Vern*, by the way.

Some *other* time, Vern.

She *can't* win. She's *awful*. She's--she's *insincere* and *fake* and--and...



Oh. Okay.

And *so* self-absorbed.



Bad day at the office?

Just... thinking.

We need a plan.

Hey, I already said I can't hide him at h--

No-- I mean...in general. Like, what can this little guy do? What can he really do?

For instance.

And I show them.

It's easy when you concentrate.



To *dance* through their defenses. To *share* minds.

Ours--and his.

#\$%@!
Is that--
Leon?!

(They're so busy *reeling* from him--from his *dreams*--I don't think they even notice mine, muddled in down at the *bottom*.)

(Poor little Sammy, leaving behind another bunch of friends, because Mom's job *has* to come first.)

Privacy settings.
Privacy settings.

What the hell?
What the hell?!

I think...
I think Chip sort of--*absorbed* Leon's mind. I think it's been *leaking out* in my dreams.

He's...it's...
That thing's *dangerous*!

Not to us.

Attagirl, Samantha.

Okay--
listen. All I ever *wanted* was to make a difference. To--do some *good*, you know?

(And, hey, maybe even get *thanked* for it someday.)

Maybe Leon didn't *deserve* what happened, I dunno. But--you've seen what he was *thinking*. What he was *planning*.

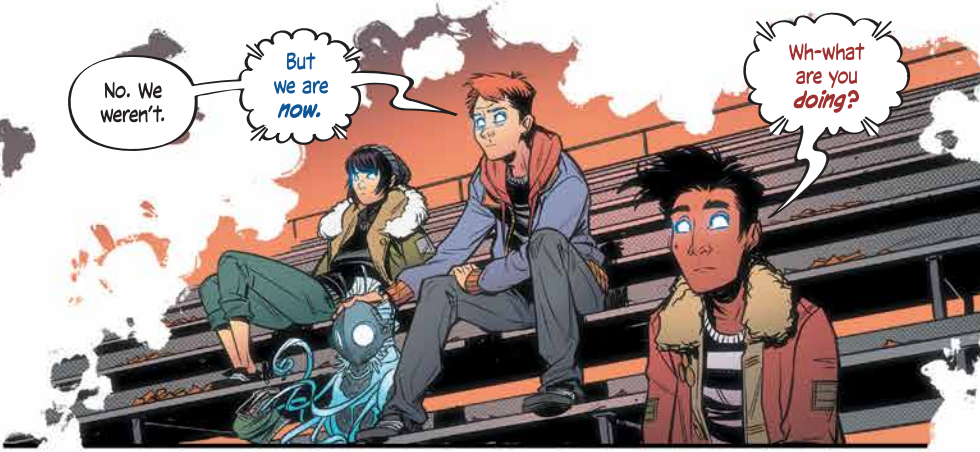
I think maybe he deserved *something*.

I--it was an *accident*! W--we weren't in control!

No. We weren't.

But we are **now**.

Wh-what are you **doing**?



I dunno. Maybe--like--a **test**. Something to...try it **out** on.

Cut the crap and say what you **mean**, Samuel.

You want a **target** to experiment on.



W-w-w-what target?

Oh come **on**, Samir. It's not **me** doing this. It's **all** of us. Don't pretend you're not **into** it.

Look.



Aw. Hey--guys. Don't **hurt** her.

We won't. We're just--having some fun, okay? She wants to be **holier-than-thou**--I say we **let** her.

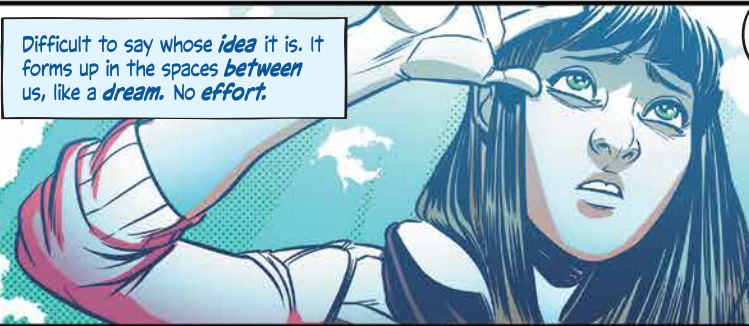
CHELLSSSEEAAA

Difficult to say whose **idea** it is. It forms up in the spaces **between** us, like a **dream**. No **effort**.

You have been **chosennnnn...** by God!

Wuh-- Wuh--

Will you **step** into the **light**...?



For a second the others *resist*. They're like: *Is this too much? How far is too far?*

But good *grief*--she is just *awful*. You can *smell* the entitlement.

M-M-My Lord! Is that *you*? I *knew* this would happen! I *knew* I'd be *rewarded* someday!

No more *hesitations*, after that.

Yeah, us *angels* know all about *you*, honey. we, *uh*--we've *witnessed* your deeds.

A-angels?

Come. Let us *guide* you unto divinity...

Say--did you put on weight?

Wh-what?

It's only *now* I realize this whole *thing* is just a copy of Waxy's *prank*. The ape in the *Jesus* suit, remember? Damn.

"An expert without a single original thought." My own words, coming at me.

But it's *too late* for doubt. Too late to come up with something *else*.

Kneel! *Kneel* for your God!

We want her to *know*. This *empty* little saint. We want her to *learn*.

Understand *this*, child:

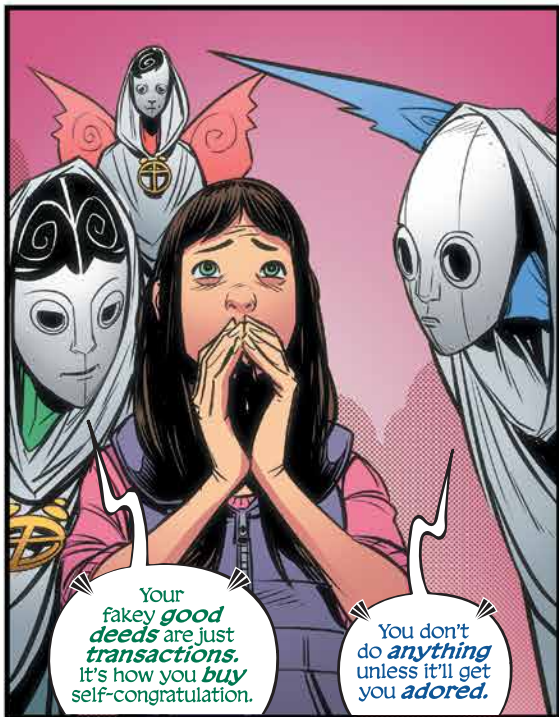


God is blind.

He doesn't even know you exist.

Th-that's God?!

(We are all influencers in waiting.)



Your fakey good deeds are just transactions. It's how you buy self-congratulation.

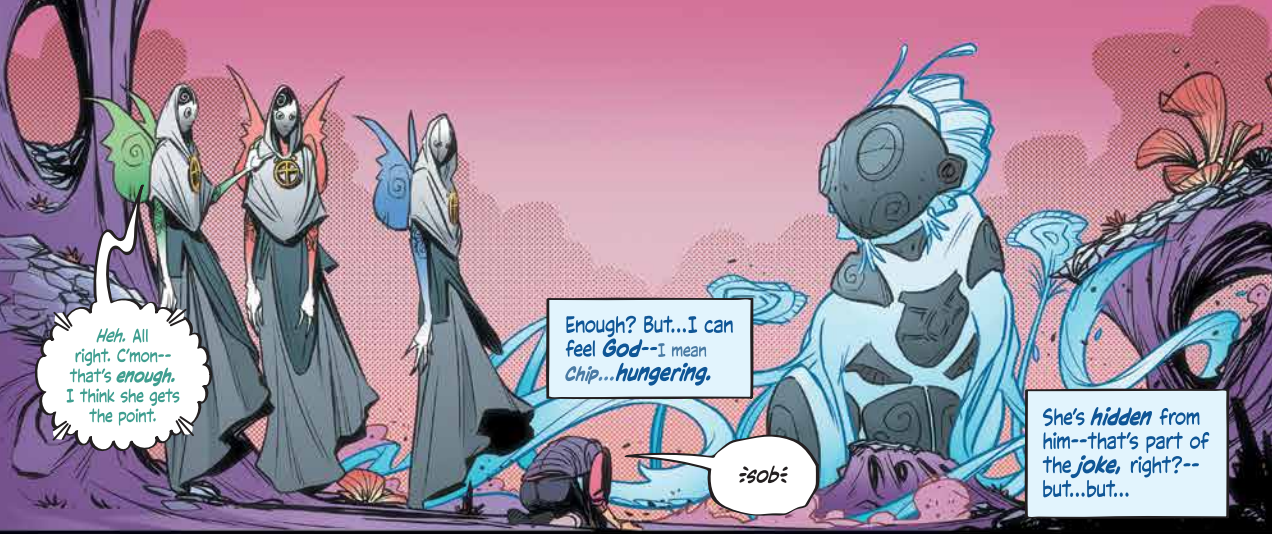
You don't do anything unless it'll get you adored.



It's time you learned, Chel. You're not better than anyone!

You're just more visible. But, uh...sorry, honey:

The universe. Doesn't. Care.

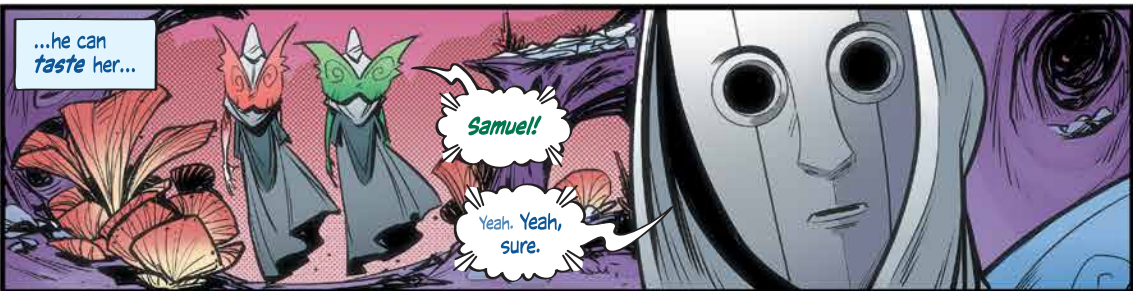


Heh. All right. C'mon-- that's *enough*. I think she gets the point.

Enough? But...I can feel *God*--I mean *Chip*...*hungering*.

She's *hidden* from him--that's part of the *joke*, right?--but...but...

:(sob:(



...he can *taste* her...

Samuel!

Yeah. Yeah, sure.



Coming.

I'm *sorry!* I'm *sorry!* B-b-b-but... *please!* If you are God, y-you gotta *understand*...



I'll do *anything*...

I'll--I'll find *Leon* myself!

I'll *make* Waxy gimme that slot! I'll--I'll *sing* and *praise* your name! I'll be *humble!* I'll *never* stop! Please!



...I deserve be *noticed*.

Damn.



The *privacy* barrier goes up. The others don't even *realize*.

This is--what? *Envy?* *Pity?* I don't *know*. All I know is: she'll never *change*.

She'll never change and, hey, Chip's hungry, so...

You want to be *seen*, Chelsea?

snap

So be
seen.

It's amazing how
fast things stop
seeming amazing.

Chel?

Hey--
Chel?

kkh

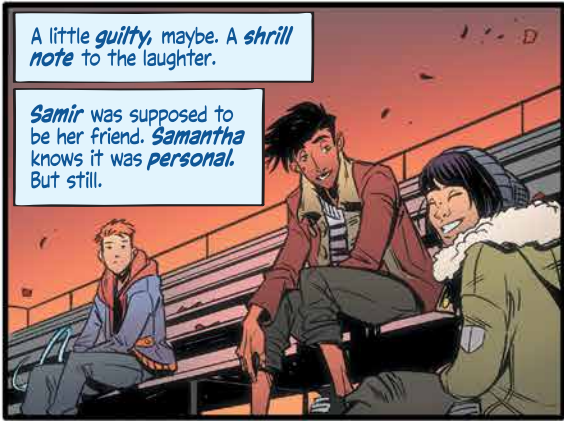
A dozen bags
of chips and one
human psyche.
*Breakfast of
champions.*



They're laughing as I come out.

--totally showed her. That stuck-up little *piranha!* Ha!

Let's hope it *sticks*. Bit of *humility* might even make her *likeable* again.



A little *guilty*, maybe. A *shrill note* to the laughter.

Samir was supposed to be her friend. *Samantha* knows it was *personal*. But still.



No *real* harm done.

YAAAA



CUDDLES!

≡UUUUURP≡

Did he get *bigger* again?

He's *definitely* not gonna go under the damn bed now.



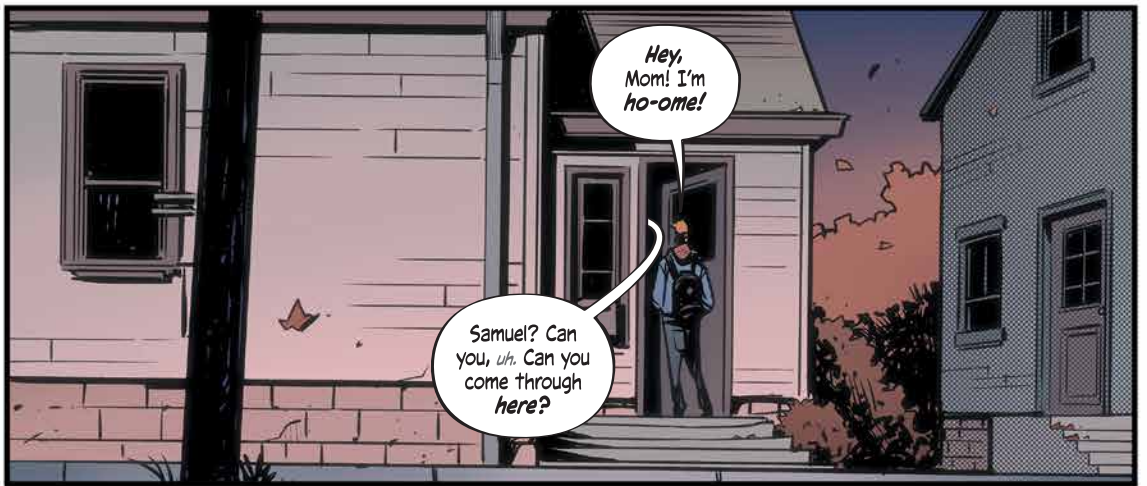
I'll take him. I got space.

But, listen--we oughta think about what we do *next*. It, *uh*. It feels *good*, you know?



It feels *good*, doing good.

...





CHAPTER THREE





Dear The System: we see you.

Whoa. That's gotta be his most pretentious opener yet.

This guy's been posting videos a while now. They're tagged like he's *local*, but he uses *voice distortion*--could be *anyone*.

Mostly it's just rants--*teen shouts at cloud*--but at least he's *earnest*.

Sometimes he even has half a *point*.



We see you ignore this disaffected generation. We see you focus on angry white boys with grudges and guns.

We hear you shrill about mental illness and ignore the privilege that turned your heirs into monsters.



We won't let them eclipse our righteous anger. We disappear them. They are not us.

Hey. Hey, wait a minute...



We see you fill our minds with the urge to conform and a craving to be loved.

We see you converting us into copies of you: ignorant and needy.



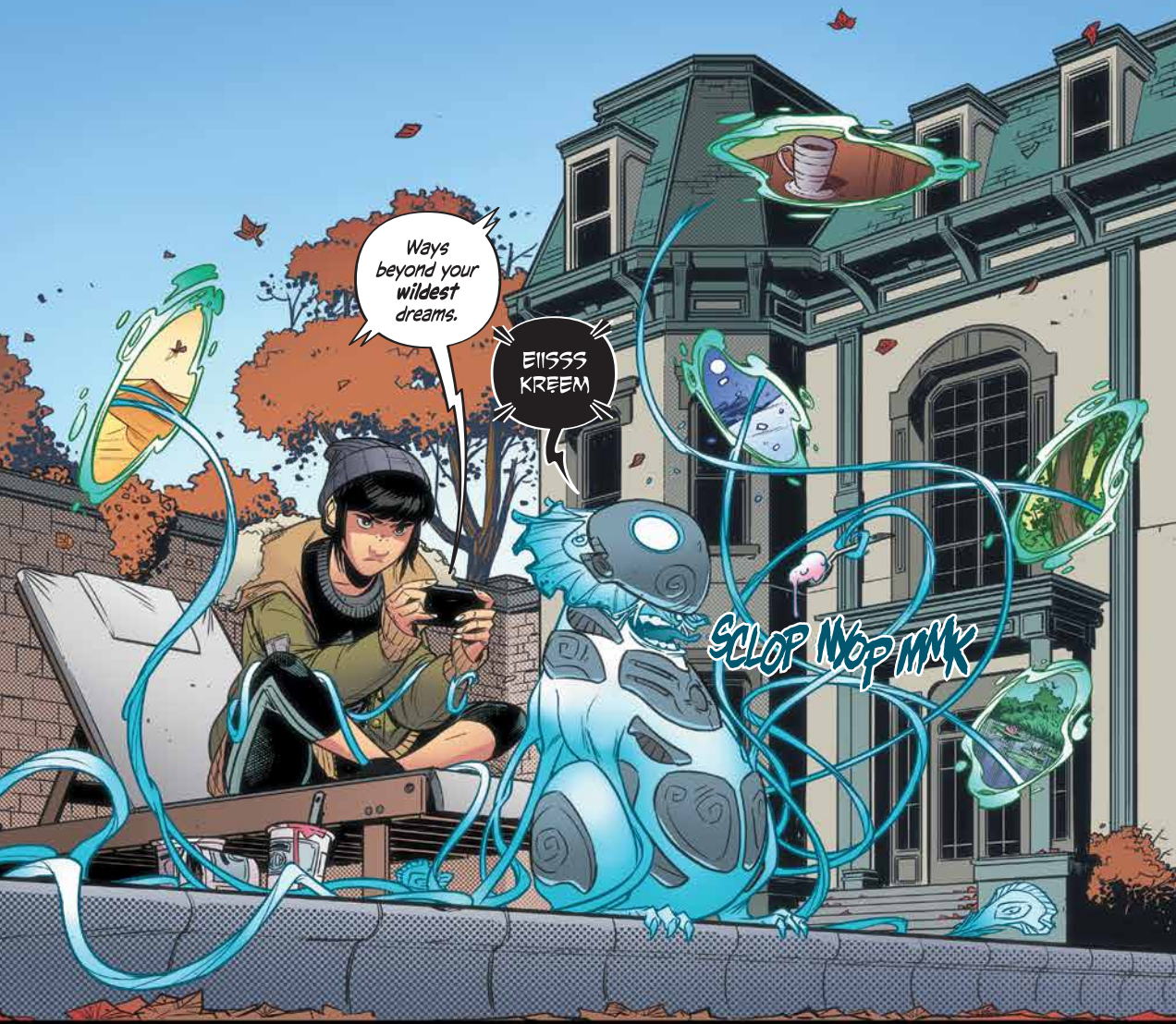
We will not tolerate insincerity. We will abandon your clones to their slumber. They are not us.

Hey...he's...he's talking about...



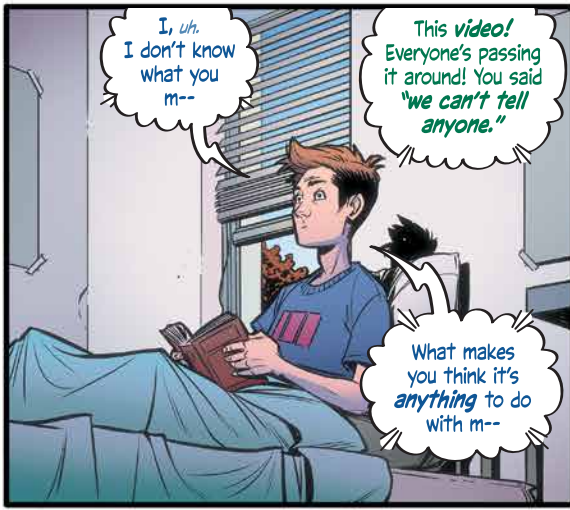
We are your children. We are tomorrow, and we are unimpressed with your management.

We will inherit the Earth. And if you won't hand it over nice? Well. We have ways of taking it.



Chapter 3: THINGS TO DO, PEOPLE TO SEE





I, uh, I don't know what you m--

This video! Everyone's passing it around! You said "we can't tell anyone."

What makes you think it's anything to do with m--



Because you take *New Media* class and you're the only idiot with footage of Leon in the woods!

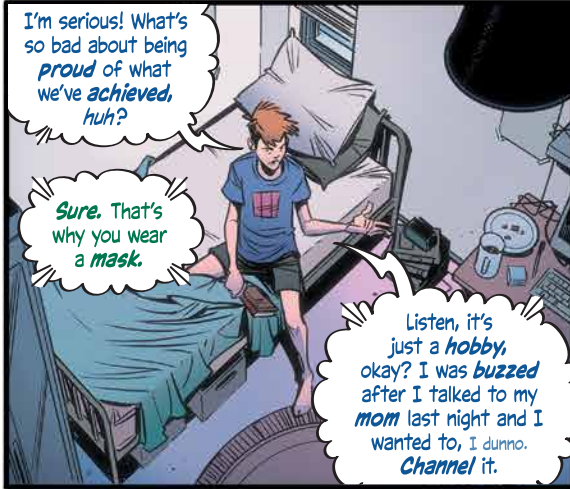
Catching up now. Cool goggles.



Look, guys--*okay*. You got me. I'm the Hooded Hierophant. So what?

The hooded whatnow?

Good boy, Chip. A *white squirrel*. Now find me, *uhm...* an icicle shaped like a *rocket*.



I'm serious! What's so bad about being proud of what we've achieved, huh?

Sure. That's why you wear a *mask*.

Listen, it's just a *hobby*, okay? I was *buzzed* after I talked to my *mom* last night and I wanted to, I dunno. *Channel* it.



That would be your mom, *the cop*--right? Who is *literally* investigating our *crime*.

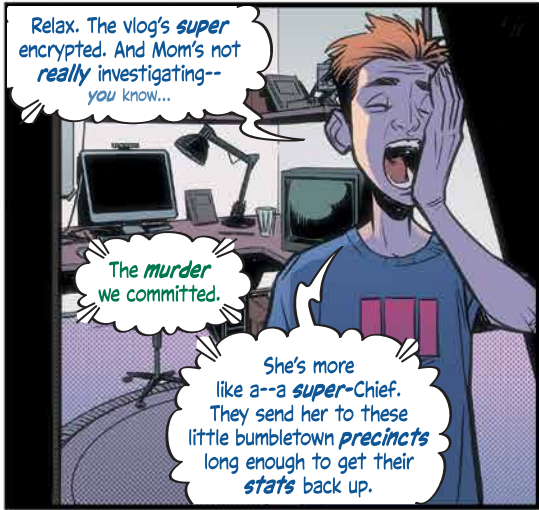
Yeah, but-- *no*, look, I *told* you! That's not what she wanted to *talk* about!



She was *worried*, is all. Wants me to walk a different *route* to school. They found Leon's *bike*.

Yeah--in *the woods*, genius! As seen in your *dumb video*!

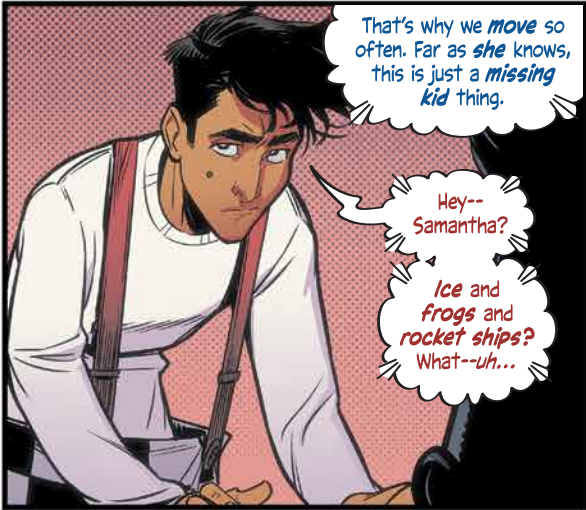
Good. That's *great*--thank you. Now get me, *whhhh...* get me a *coffeepot* full of *frogs*.



Relax. The vlog's *super* encrypted. And Mom's not *really* investigating-- you know...

The *murder* we committed.

She's more like a--a *super-Chief*. They send her to these little bumblertown *precincts* long enough to get their *stats* back up.



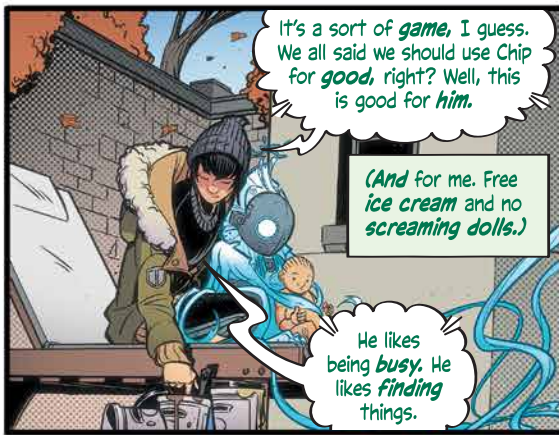
That's why we *move* so often. Far as *she* knows, this is just a *missing kid* thing.

Hey-- Samantha?
Ice and frogs and rocket ships?
What--uh...



Whatcha *doing?*

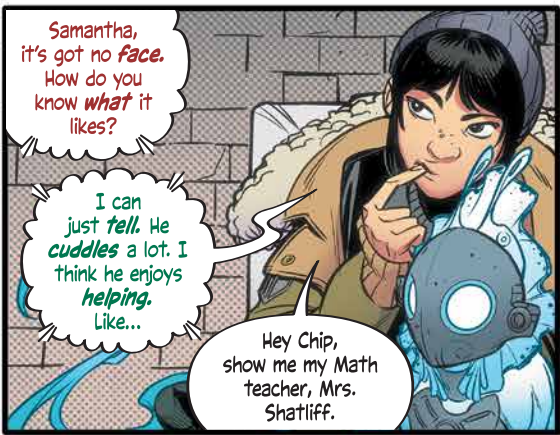
~giggle~



It's a sort of *game*, I guess. We all said we should use Chip for *good*, right? Well, this is good for *him*.

(And for me. Free ice cream and no screaming dolls.)

He likes being *busy*. He likes *finding* things.



Samantha, it's got no *face*. How do you know *what* it likes?

I can just *tell*. He *cuddles* a lot. I think he enjoys *helping*. Like...

Hey Chip, show me my Math teacher, Mrs. Shatliff.



Whoa.

That's *her*, all right. I mean, *jeez*, we *figured* she had a *problem* but--c'mon, *11 a.m.*? Have some *self-respect*, lady.

Show me *Samir*.



Heh! What's that about *self-respect*, pal?

I-it's... *dammit*, it's a *Saturday Job*, all right? Listen, nobody can *know*!

Show me *Samuel*.

No no, wait, don't--

Ha!

Heh... and--uh-oh, *whaddayaknow--* I think I gotta blow my *nose*, Chip.



What's he--oh, c'mon! I *need* that.

Why *thank you*, sweetie.

Look, it's just keeping him *distracted*, okay? He's difficult enough to *hide* as it is, without getting *bored*.

Otherwise he starts *digging around* for whatever's in my m



No.
No
no
no



Who's *that* kid? Isn't he on the *basketball* team or something?

That's, *uh...* That's *Craig*. H-he's the guy who--



Yaaaaa--!

NnnneeeeOW

Guys. I, *uhm*.



I need some **privacy**.

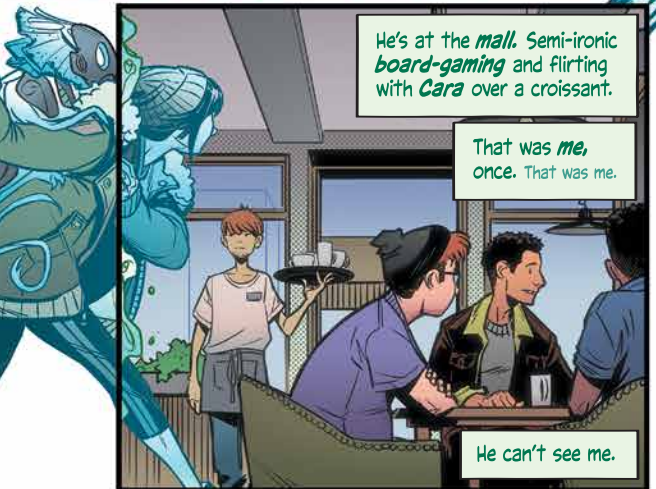


He can't see me.



He can't see me.

I tell myself I'm just going to **watch**. Just for a **little** while. I'm lying.



He's at the **mall**. Semi-ironic **board-gaming** and flirting with **Cara** over a croissant.

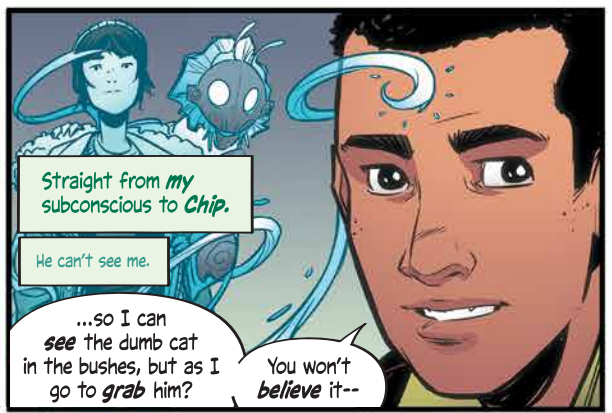
That was **me**, once. That was me.

He can't see me.



He can't see me and this is **so easy**.

It happens so fast and, sure, I'm **driving** it--I **guess**. But... there's no **thought**.



Straight from **my** subconscious to **Chip**.

He can't see me.

...so I can **see** the dumb cat in the bushes, but as I go to **grab** him?

You won't **believe** it--



Suddenly I--

Hey-- you guys think I should change my hair?

Anyone seen the latest *Waxy*? It's pretty funny. He's coming here this week, right?

Listen, whose *turn* even *is* it? I lost track.



Uh.
G-guys?



You know what I see, Craig?



Guys, what *gives*? You're freaking me out h--

You said you'd be there *forever*.



Wh-who's th--

You #%@ing liar.

So easy.
No thought.

Twenty-eight weeks. That's the **day** that stands out. The second **ultrasound scan**.

Too late to change my **mind**, y'know?

"I waited, Craig. You said you'd meet me there.

"I waited hours."

M-Mikey!
Darcy, help m--

Huh...

You **hear** something?

From **that** day?
For...for every damn day **after...**? You just...

Didn't see me.

Guys!
Guuuu--

Not ever again.

"And--it's funny. Whatever it was that made me invisible to you?"

"I guess it must have been contagious."

Well...
I think maybe there's a way you **have** to see me, Craig. I think maybe we've just gotta--take away the **distractions**.

I think you need to step **outside** everything you know, until all that's left...?

Is
you and
me.

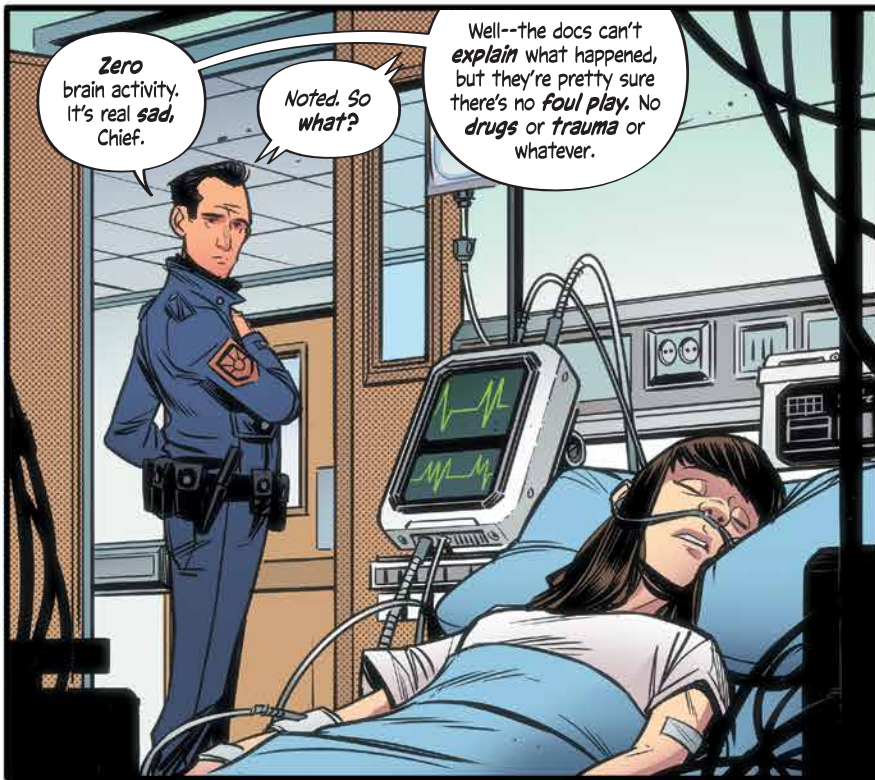
Alone
in the
invisible
places.



With
the echoes
of our
baby.







Zero brain activity. It's real *sad*, Chief.

Noted. So what?

Well--the docs can't explain what happened, but they're pretty sure there's no *foul play*. No *drugs* or *trauma* or whatever.



You couldn't tell me this in the office?

Sure I could, i-it's just...



There's this kid here. One *Vernon Heath*.

He keeps rattlin' on about these, uh--whaddatheycalled--*vlogs*. Little *videos* the kids're all makin' these days.

So?

So he says one of these vlogs got *uploaded* yesterday, sayin' this same girl would be, uh--"abandoned to her slumber"...



...and that's before we got the report she was *comatose*.

And this kid? He says that same vlog keeps goin' on about your *missing boy* havin' a *gun*.



That mean anything to you?



Please...please, y-y-you're hurting m--

You have no idea what *hurt* is.



All my friends. Friends for *years*, Craig. Suddenly I'm a *ghost*.

Only, it's *weird*. I guess people can kinda *sense* ghosts, because they'd say something-- "*slut*" or "*whore*" or whatever-- *after* I left the room.

I bet you never got that, *huh?*



And you know what's worse? The only one who ever *did* see me? Th-the only one who--wh-who still made *eye contact?*



"I... I h-had to... t-to give away."

It's time. C'mon, honey. You signed the forms. It's for the best.

You know that.



We couldn't *cope*. P-people said that from the start--you remember?

We didn't care. We were *strong*, right? We'd manage *together*.

But... w-without you?



"No chance."

It's like a *storm*.

The *loss*. The *pain*.
And--worst, by far--the
what ifs.

Fused together and
ground down to a
sharp edge.



Hard to say who's
controlling this
now--me or Chip.

Harder to say
if I *care*.



He's *hungry*. My little
angel. My little *devil*.

He's hungry and angry, and he
feels what I feel and it *scares*
him--*ohh*, he barely understands
any of this--but mostly?



He just wants to
help.

(He likes to
find things.)

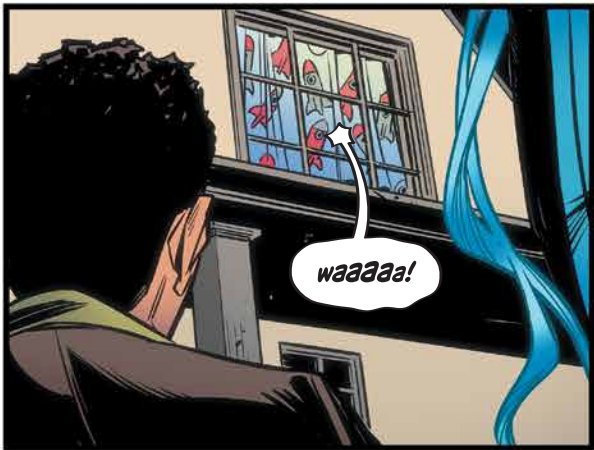
FWOMP



Wh-wh-where's *this*? Where are w--

You *know* where.

Listen.



waaaaa!



oh.

N-no, Sam, c'mon, I--I don't wanna *see*, I don't w--

You'll do *more* than see.



You will come *with me* into this house.

Y-you'll... you'll *acknowledge* what you *did*. You'll *acknowledge* what you *are* to...to our...



To *him*.



B-because if you *don't*?

I won't just make you *invisible*, Craig. I won't just make everyone *forget* you.

I will make it... so that you...

Never.

Existed.

Chip could *do* it. It would *hurt* him, sure. All this pain, all this anger. It would hurt him *bad*... But he wants to *help*. He has his *ways*.

Ways beyond your wildest dreams.

The idiot makes his *excuses*. All *snotty face* and wobbling *lips*.

(I thought I loved him, once. I wonder *why*.)

He says his *folks* threatened to cut him off.

He says his *friends* begged him not to throw his life away.

He says he *wanted* to stand by me. Wanted to come see the *scan*. He says he felt so, *so* bad, turning his back.

But still. What it comes down to, when you cut away all the crap?
Is this:

I...I deserve a *normal* life, don't I?

I deserve to be *happy!*

So *let go*, Samantha.
Let go and *enjoy* it.

(God, it's been
pent up for
so long.)



Somewhere out there I can feel the *others*.
Trying to *watch, excited* by the drama.

Catching little *echoes* of Chip's
hunger, like the *smell* of a free meal.



I lost control before. Just once.
Too many beers at a house party.

A *kiss* and an empty *bedroom* and
oh god--the cost...

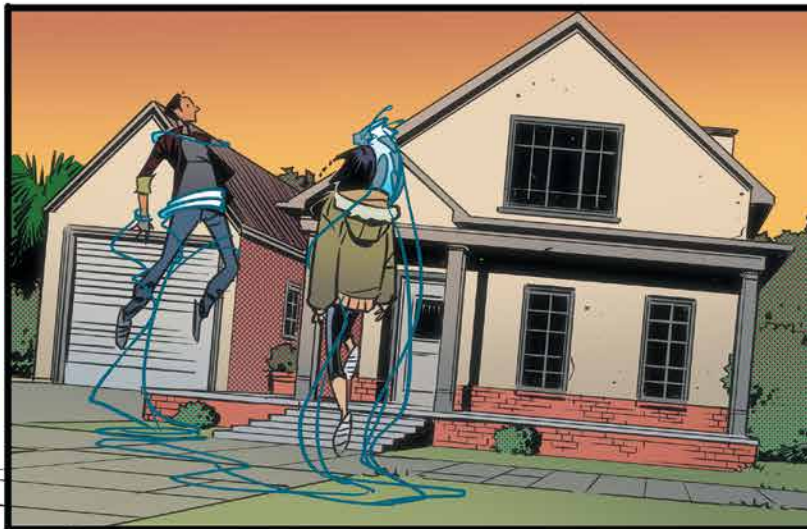
I lost myself. I have been *waiting*.
Waiting to get out of this town and
this school. Waiting to hit *reset* and
pretend it never happened.

But I *can't*. I can't and I *won't*, and
however you cut it--you cannot deny:

It feels *good*
to go *too far*.



≡giggle≡





heeeheeeheee



I.

I wasn't ready.

That's all.



And there it is.

Neither was I.
Neither am I.

And he? Our...
our beautiful
little boy.



He deserves to be happy.

Ssshh.
It's okay. I'm
sorry. I didn't
mean to hurt
you.

We're
better
than this.

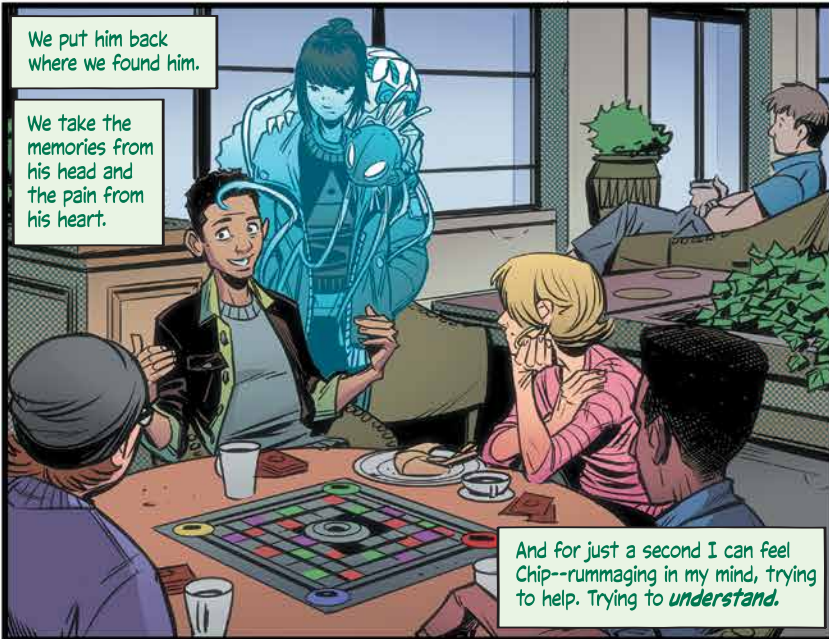
Too far is too far.

snap



We put him back where we found him.

We take the memories from his head and the pain from his heart.



And for just a second I can feel Chip--rummaging in my mind, trying to help. Trying to *understand*.

He's so *different*. So--well--so *alien*, I guess. So *beyond* anything we'll ever really *know*. But, oh, he's trying so *hard*.

I think he's offering...h-he's offering me... what...?

MEWP?

Oh.

Ohhhh, you're so kind.

But... No. No, thank you.



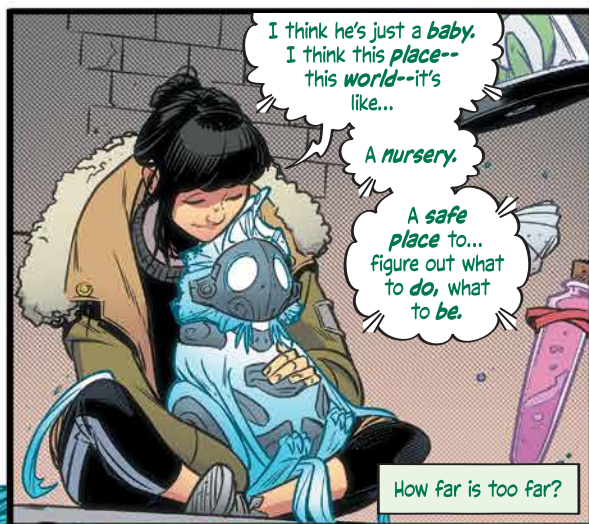
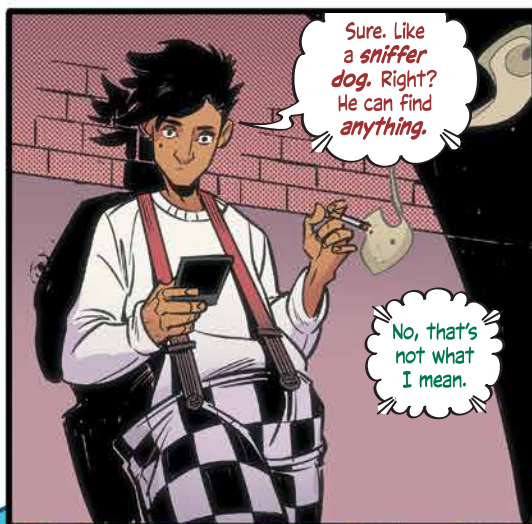
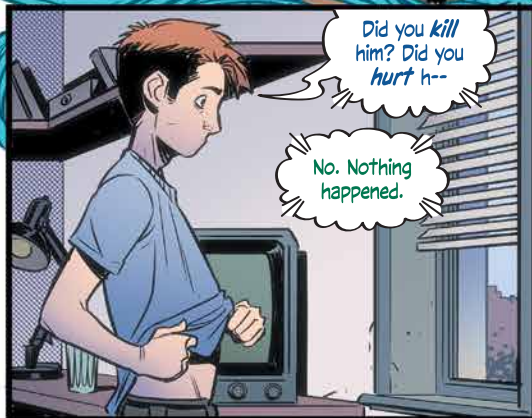
I don't want to forget.

They're *waiting*.

She's back!
Y-you're
back!

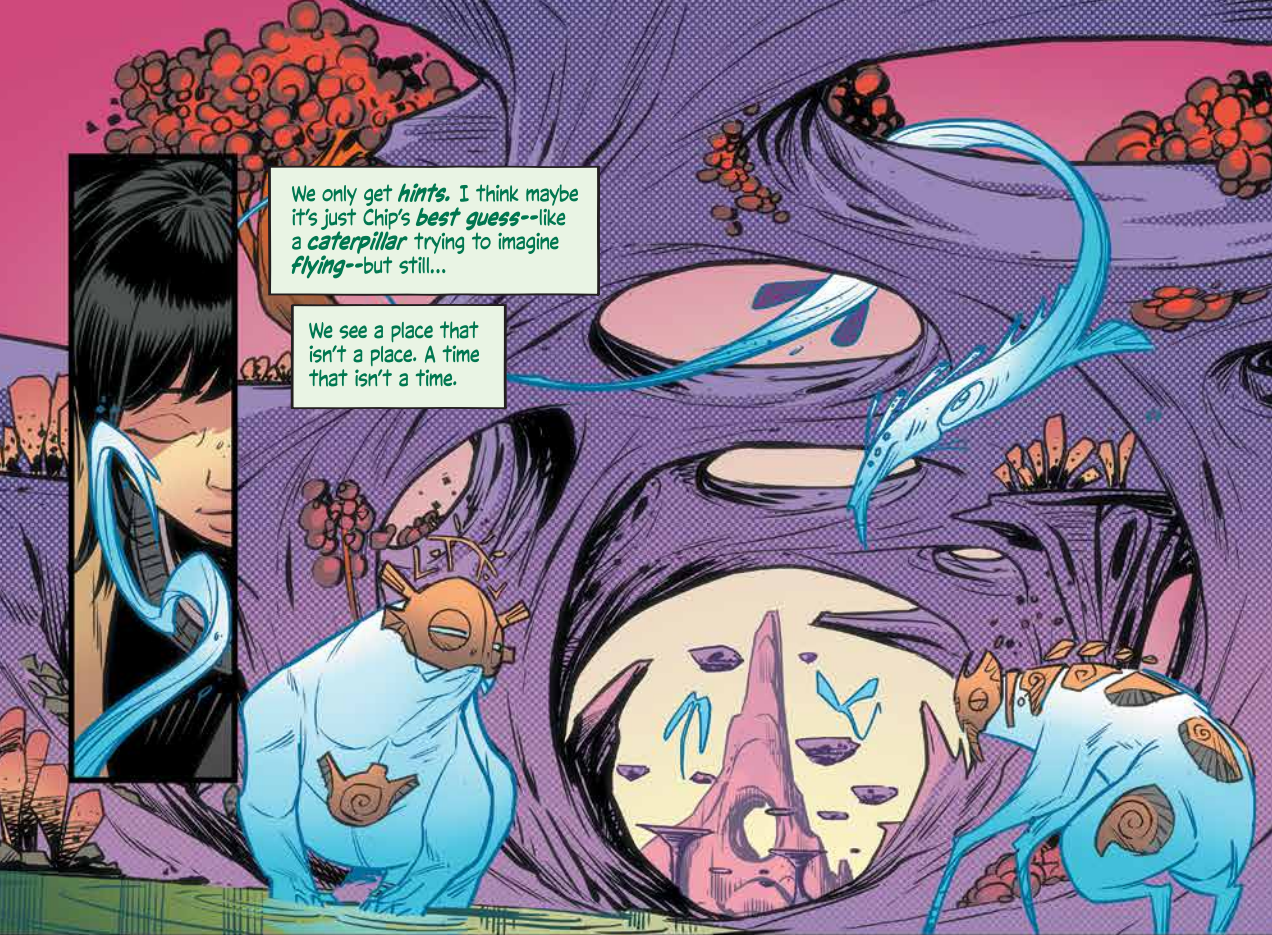
What
happened?

There's something kinda *icky*
about how *buzzed* they are.



Somewhere to--to *grow up*, I guess. Before *moving on*.

Move on to *where?*



We only get *hints*. I think maybe it's just Chip's *best guess*--like a *caterpillar* trying to imagine *flying*--but still...

We see a place that isn't a place. A time that isn't a time.



#%&@...

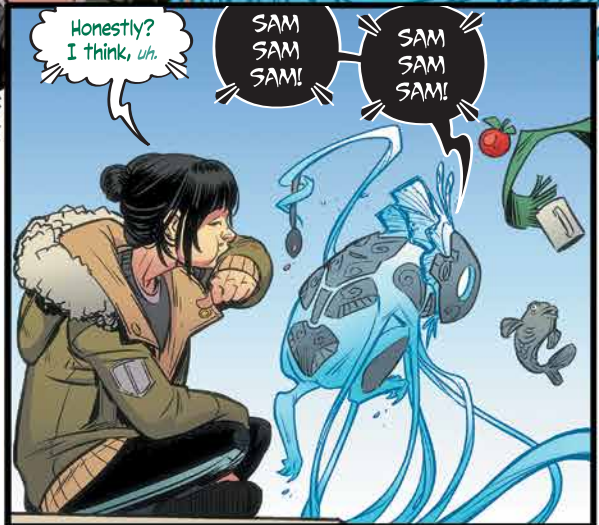
Y-y-you, uh. You still got that TP...?



Hey, Samantha? How, um. How long d'you think we've got before he...y'know. *Moves on?*

A-a-and what's *keeping* him here, anyway?

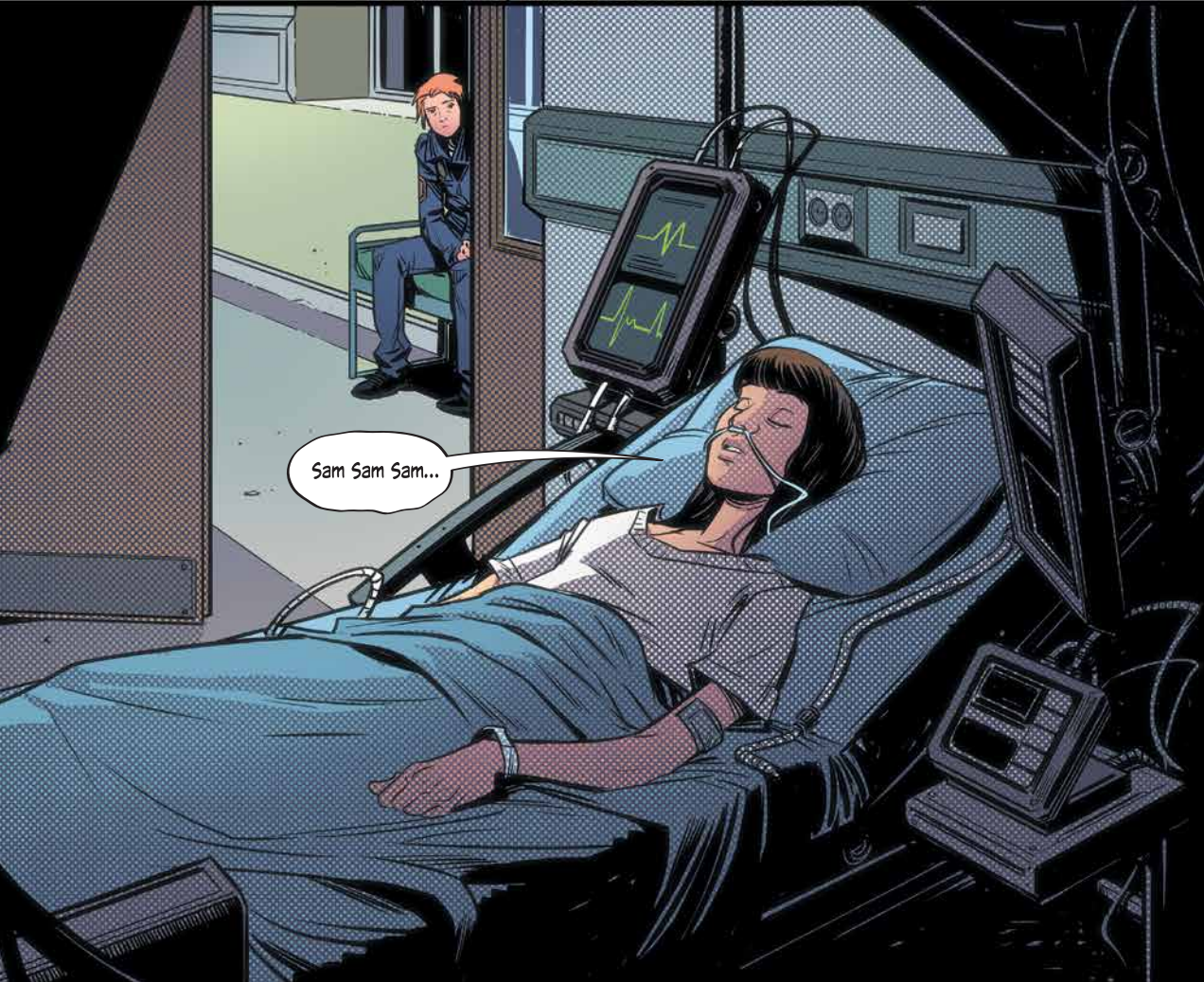
EIISSS KREEM!

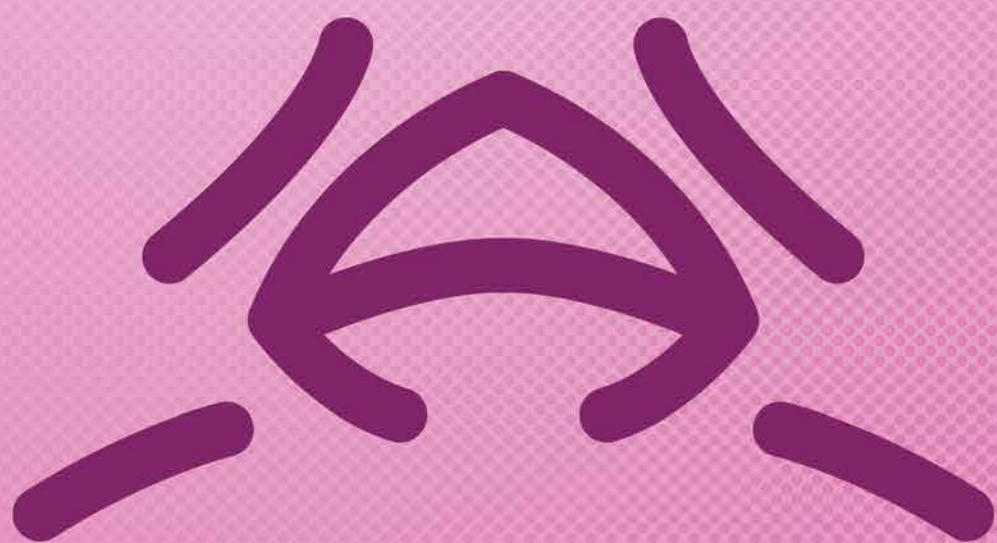


Honestly? I think, uh.

SAM SAM SAM!

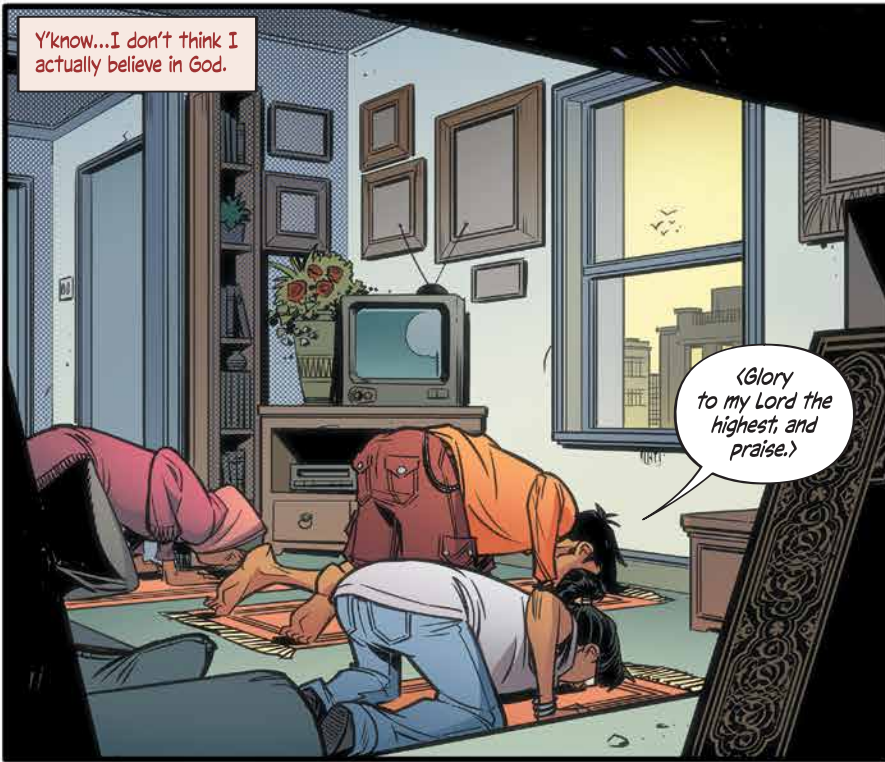
SAM SAM SAM!





CHAPTER FOUR





Y'know...I don't think I actually believe in God.

<Glory to my Lord the highest, and praise.>

I try not to *think* about it much, anyways.

Mom likes to do the *salah* as a *family*, and I guess...I guess keeping her *happy's* as close to bein' *holy* as I can *imagine*.

Ooof. Deep thoughts. No *thank* you.



Tell you this: it's a *lot* easier to self-distract since I hooked up my brain to a couple *others*.

Though, sad to say, they got their *own* dumb notions of *holiness*.



With great power comes great responsibility?
Sure, whatever.

But when the world's going to *hell*, it's the *responsibility* of the powerless to *rise up!*

Samuel. *Take* The self-righteousness just *farts* outta him.

Dude's like a *preacher* without a *god*.



And Samantha? *Dutiful* to the *Sunday service* 'cause you won't get *noticed* if you go with the flow.

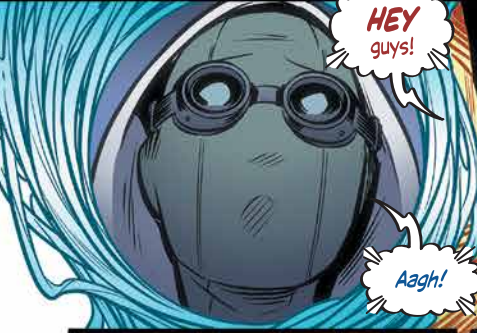
She's not listening to the words. She's thinking...let's see...

Heh! She's thinking it's *tough* to care about a 2000-year old *god on a stick--*

--when there's a *baby one* sitting right next to you--



--practicing its *invisibility* and snacking on the *daydreams* of the *congregation*.



HEY guys!

Aagh!



Aaaah!



Listen, I am *totally* bored. You wanna get *coffee* later?

K-kinda *busy* here, Samir.

Yeah. *Some* of us got more *important* things to do.



Sure, sure. I was just thinking, you know. We could *talk*.

Finally figure out what we oughta do with *Chip*, maybe.



It starts right away, of course.

How many *times*? There's nothing to figure out! It's *obvious*!

(Arguments are a *lot* more interesting when you can see inside people's *brains*.)



We gotta think **big!** Change everything!

The **environment, the government, education!** We got the chance to **save the world** here!

Oh sure, and P.S., let's **film it all** to bump the subscribers on your dumb **vlog.**

Listen, Chip's a **sentient being**, okay? Only thing we **have** to do is help him **move on** to... to **wherever** he's going.

Oh, quit projecting your **crap** onto the ineffable **alien, Samantha!** It's not **him** who needs to **move on.**

Screw you! Just because **you** got no @#%ing **heart** doesn't mean the r--

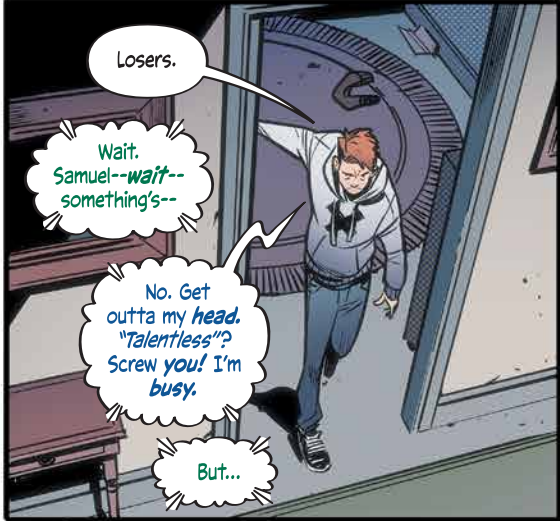
It's not about **heart!** It's about **opportunity!**

You'd **see** that if you weren't desperately trying to swap **one** baby for another!

You take that **BACK,** you talentless piece of-- of--



Uh.



Losers.

Wait. Samuel--wait--something's--

No. Get outta my **head.** "Talentless"? Screw you! I'm **busy.**

But...



Where's Chip?

Y'know, I may not be the *deepest* thinker, but...whether it's aimed at *myself* or someone *else*?

I'm the freakin' *best* at *distractions*.



And you better *believe* I know how to get my way.



Hey pal.

I heard you can find just about *anything*. Right?



Chapter 4: MEET THY MAKER



Goin' out, Mom.



CLNK

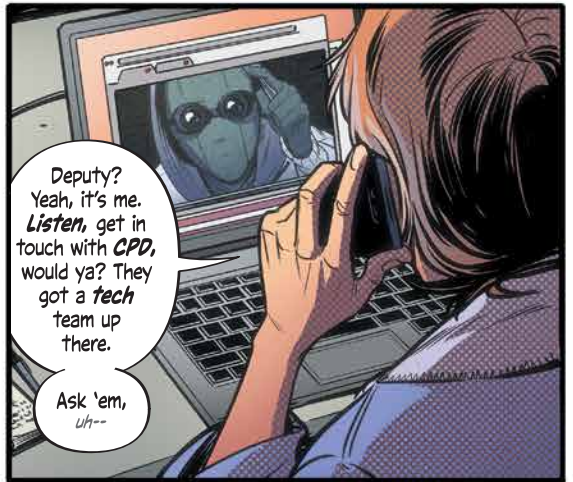


Hm? Oh, sure.

Sure, honey. You, uh.



You be safe out there.



Deputy? Yeah, it's me. Listen, get in touch with CPD, would ya? They got a tech team up there.

Ask 'em, Uh--



Ask 'em if they can trace back a video to where it got made.

And--oh, while I got ya? Get a list of student names from TT High, okay?



SAM, SAM, SAM??

Just the ones startin' with 'S.'

TV shows.

Hair styles.



Last night's game.

Special edition sneakers.

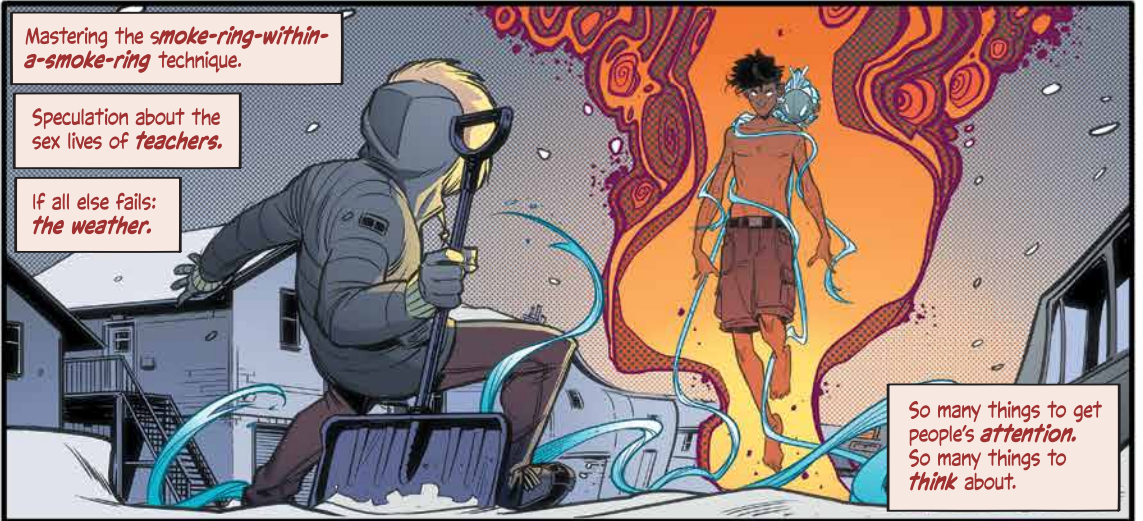
Risqué jokes.



Mastering the *smoke-ring-within-a-smoke-ring* technique.

Speculation about the sex lives of *teachers*.

If all else fails: *the weather*.



So many things to get people's *attention*. So many things to *think* about.

Y'know--*sometimes*? If you're like, *rrrrreally* good at changing *gears*?



Sometimes whole *days* can pass without thinking of *anything* at all.

It's easier that way.

S-Samir? Little *Samir*, i-i-is that you?

Be quiet, Dad. This is *tricky*.

Wh-where *is* this? Wh-what's happening?

EEEEEE!
SAM-SAM-SAM!

Listen, *squid*, don't start. I know it--
nnnnf!

I know it *hurts*. D-d-doesn't matter. Stop trying to--*nn*--to get help.

"They're locked out. They're not invited, okay?"

Aaaaow!

Nnnnn!

"There's not enough room, where we're going..."

Samir. Y-you...you got so *big*. Am I dead? Is that wh--

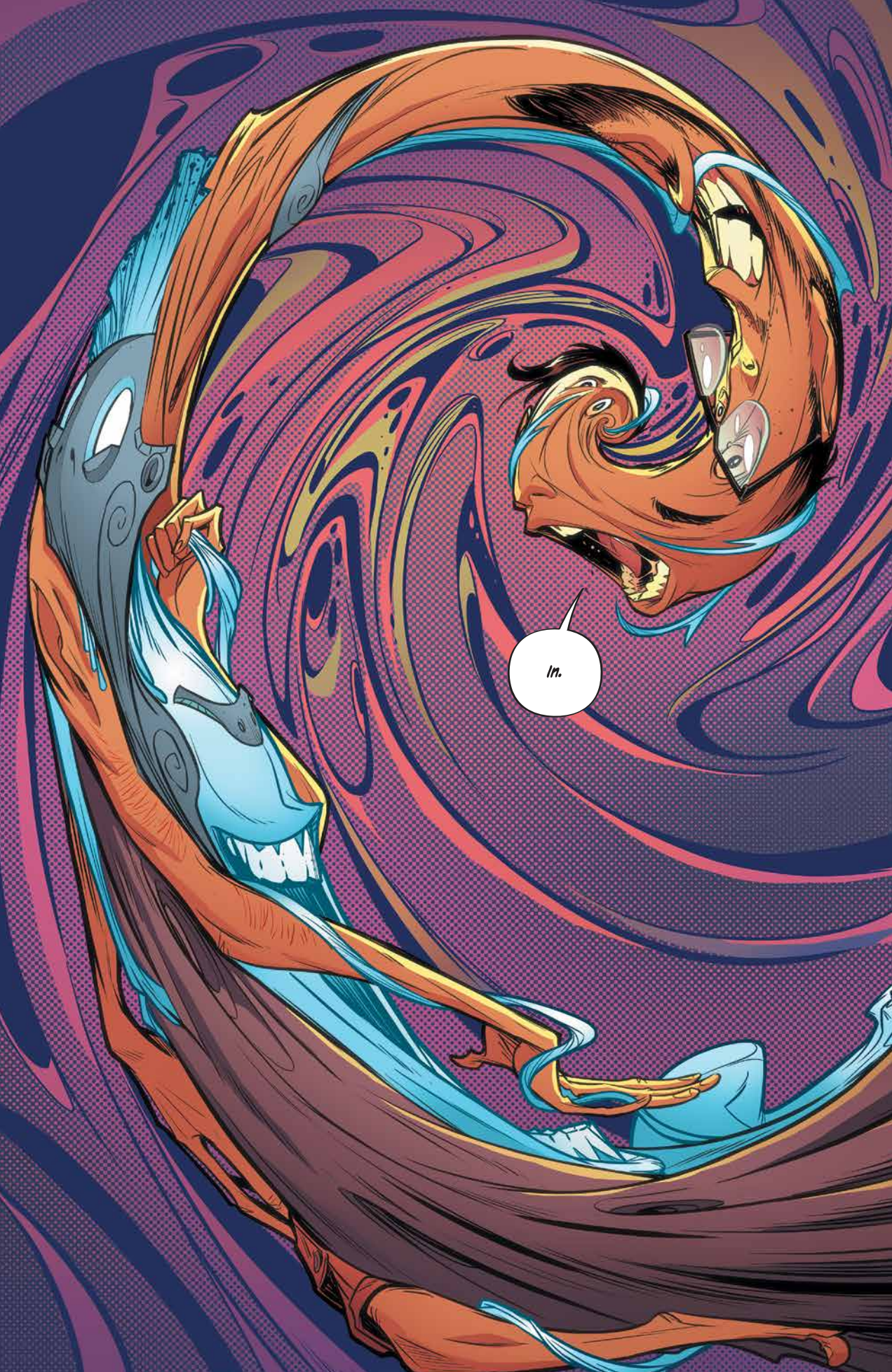
EEEEEE
HURTS
HURTS
EEEEEE

Wh-what's happening? I--I want to leave! I want to get *out* of here!

I know you can *do* it. Rrrrr. I know you can...

Sure thing, Dad--you can *leave*. Matter of fact, we're *all* leaving.

But, *uh*. Not *out*.



In.

So.

Wh-wh-
wh--

Years spent
trying to be a
good **son**.

Years,
Dad. That's what
you're seeing. All the
years since you
left.

Trying not to
speculate.

(What drove
you out the
door? What
broke our
family?)

(Was it the way
I dress? The way
I screwed up
the **Fatiha**?)

(Was it because I yawned
when you talked about the
Old Country?)

(Or was it **Jack**
from next door?)

Aaaow
god, he's...he's
so **sad**...

Nnnf. I...I
don't have **time**
for this...

Years
playing the
clown.

(The **rulebreaker**. The
couldn't-give-a-damn.)

(The **smiling idiot**
who'll do **anything**
you **dare** him.)

(**Anything**
to be liked.)

(**Anything** to
not think.)

Years.
Years trying to be
everything for
everybody.

(The *skin-deep smiles* and the
dumb distractions and *never*
a spare second to stop.)

(To wonder which face
is the *real* one.)

EEEE! EEEE!
EEEEEE!

Sssh,
little monster.
I *know* it
hurts.

It's
good that
it hurts.

S-Samir,
I--

Years,
Dad.

Years
knowing--deep *down*,
behind *aaaall* the
distractions--

--that
things would be
better for Mom,
for *Fatima*,
for you. For
everyone.

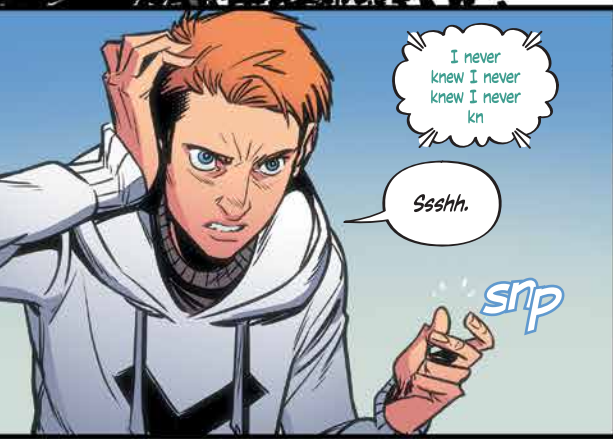
If I just...
y'know.

Wasn't.



I never
knew

I never
kn





Listen, *confession* to make. I mighta set the *cops* to sniffing about. Got *spooked* by that footage of *Leon*.
Sorry.

Honestly? I wouldn't have said anything if I'd known it was *you*. Whatever happened--Leon had it coming.

Fact is, I *like* your stuff.

...Oh yeah?



Sure! That energy! The *anger!* You can't *fake* that.

Actually, I was *thinking*. Whatever happens with *Waxy?*

We oughta *collaborate*.



Did you, *uh*. Did you check out *my* work?

Uh. No.

Okay-- that's *cool*. I just sorta...*reflect* on stuff. It's *okay*, I think? But *together?* We could do something really... I don't know.

Something *different*. Something *important!*



Meaning: my stuff's *not?*

What?



Not *important*. Not *different*.

Dude, that's not what I'm--

Whatever. They'll announce the *guest slot* by end of *today*.



Let's see who's feeling important *then*, huh?

Huh. *Strange*.
That's a *cold*
wind.

It's *Samuel*, I think,
bleeding *bitterness*
through the barriers.
So much for *privacy*.

HURTS!
HURTS!



I guess--*yeah*.
Samantha feels
it *too*.

What a weird
kid *he* turned
out to be.

He's so *angry*. So...
determined to
play the outcast.

I mean, *seriously*. Dude just
got the biggest compliment of
his creepy ranty *career*, and
he's already managed to spin it
into something he can *resent*.

...think I give
a @#%\$ what *you* think,
Vern? Just another
vanilla bully, that's
all, and--

Samantha's on her
way *here*. Poor girl.
Swimming through
Samuel's *spite* to
come *stop* me.

To come
save me.

She has a *headache*. We all
do, I guess. Pain in the brain,
hurt in the heart. (Man, when
did this all get so *toxic*?)



Doesn't
matter.

I'm *lucky*.
I've got a
skill they
don't.

I'm an *expert*
at distractions.





Hottest new *album*.

S-Samir--
please. Why
did you *bring*
me here?
What's this
about?

Video games.



Waiting for the
Pumpkin Spice
Latte to come
back.

S-same as
always, Dad.
I just, *uh*.

D&D, Wednesday
nights.

I wanted
you to *see*
me.

I wanted
someone to
really
really
see
me.



A-and
maybe, *uhm*.
Hhh, god.

Karaoke.

M-maybe
just...sorta...
slightly... hoping...



Beer pong. Best sushi.
Pool parties. Bubblegum.



Screw/marry/kill.
Comic books.
Vintage pornos.
Lipstick.

Hoping
you might
forgive
me.

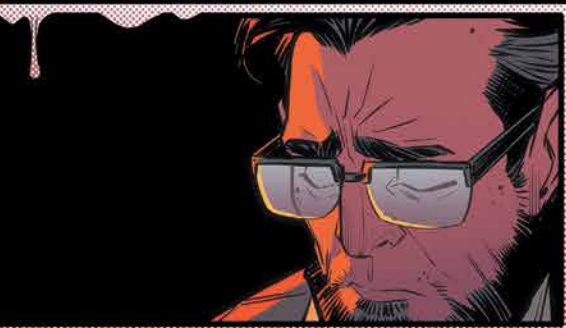




Me.
Forgive you.



For being a garbage son.
A garbage Muslim.
Garbage Pakistani.
Garbage everything.



I met a woman.



W...what?
I started another family. I...I don't even pray anymore.



I play squash. I like craft beer...
What.
Samir, me leaving... It...



It was nothing to do with you.



Chip's *screaming*. Does this *hurt* him?
Or is he just tangled up in *my* pain?

Who knows?
Who *cares*?



What matters is,
there's a *rush*.

The rush of *one thing* leaving,
and another *pouring in* to
fill the gap.



I guess even
emptiness
leaves a hole.

Even *dumbness*. Even
pointlessness. Even *me*.

You take it all *away* and what's left is a
big angry *vacuum*, itching to be filled.





And *fury's* so much easier than forgiveness.

S-stop it! Samir, you're--you're hurting yourself!

Don't care.



You're--you're killing him!

Don't care.

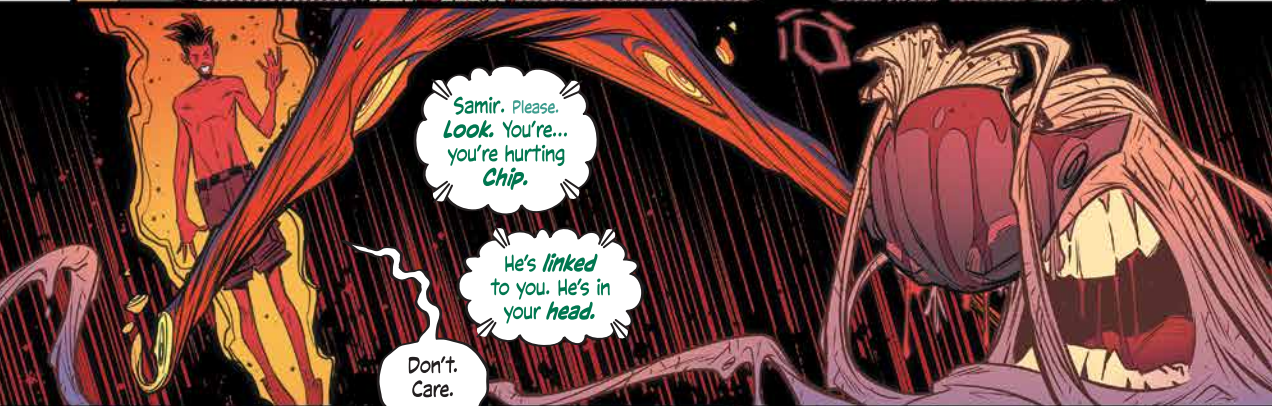
You #&%ing will you stupid ass!



You'll regret it, Samir! I know.

You go *too far*, there's--there's no way back!

Don't care.



Samir. Please. Look. You're... you're hurting *Chip*.

He's linked to you. He's in your head.

Don't. Care.



H-he's just a *kid*, Samir.

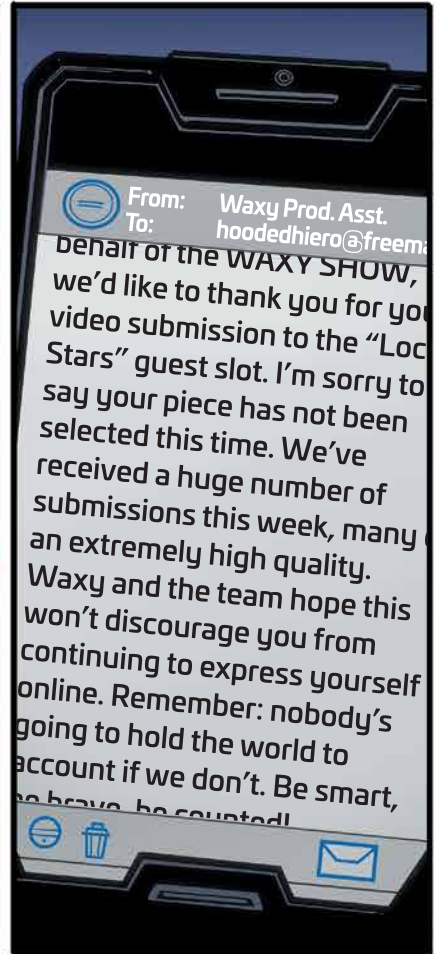
Don't c

You're doing to *him* what your *dad* did to you.





Rise up.





That's.

Not.

Fair.



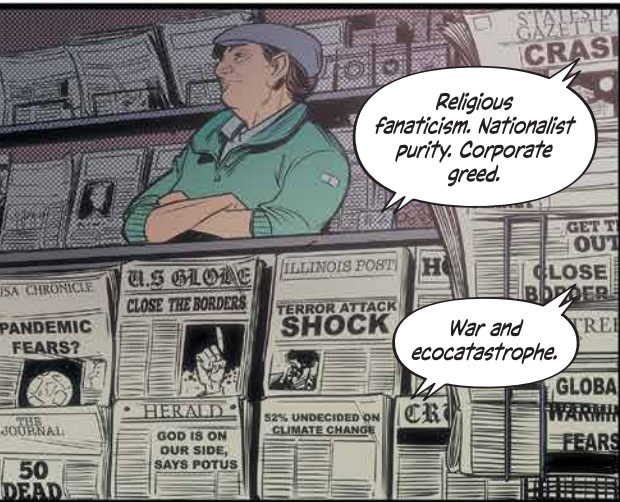
CHAPTER FIVE





The world's gone to hell.

I mean-- that's obvious, isn't it?



Religious fanaticism. Nationalist purity. Corporate greed.

War and ecocatastrophe.



But, uh, you know what I saw this week?

I'd like to show you.



I saw a lady enjoying the quiet by the creek, stop to pick up someone else's trash.



I saw a guy in a shirt so patched it was basically a net, give his last quarter to charity.



I saw kids laugh and kiss and live--despite what the world's got in store.

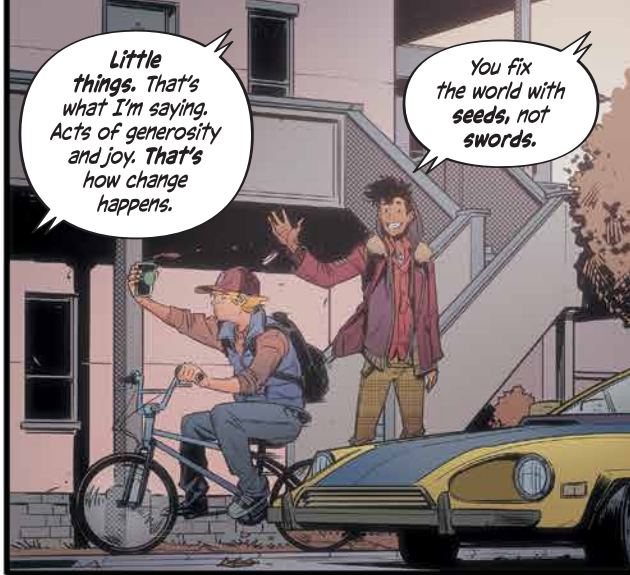
Does that make them dumb? Are they--are they just ignoring the bad stuff?

I don't think so. Because... you know what never works? Not ever?



Shouting. Stamping your feet. Throwin' a tantrum.

You don't grow a flower by burning down the forest; know what I mean?



Little things. That's what I'm saying. Acts of generosity and joy. That's how change happens.

You fix the world with seeds, not swords.



Me? I think there's still wonder. Uncynical, unironic.

I think there's still hope. And I think...all we gotta do, really? Is stop trying so hard to be seen...



...and start looking around us.

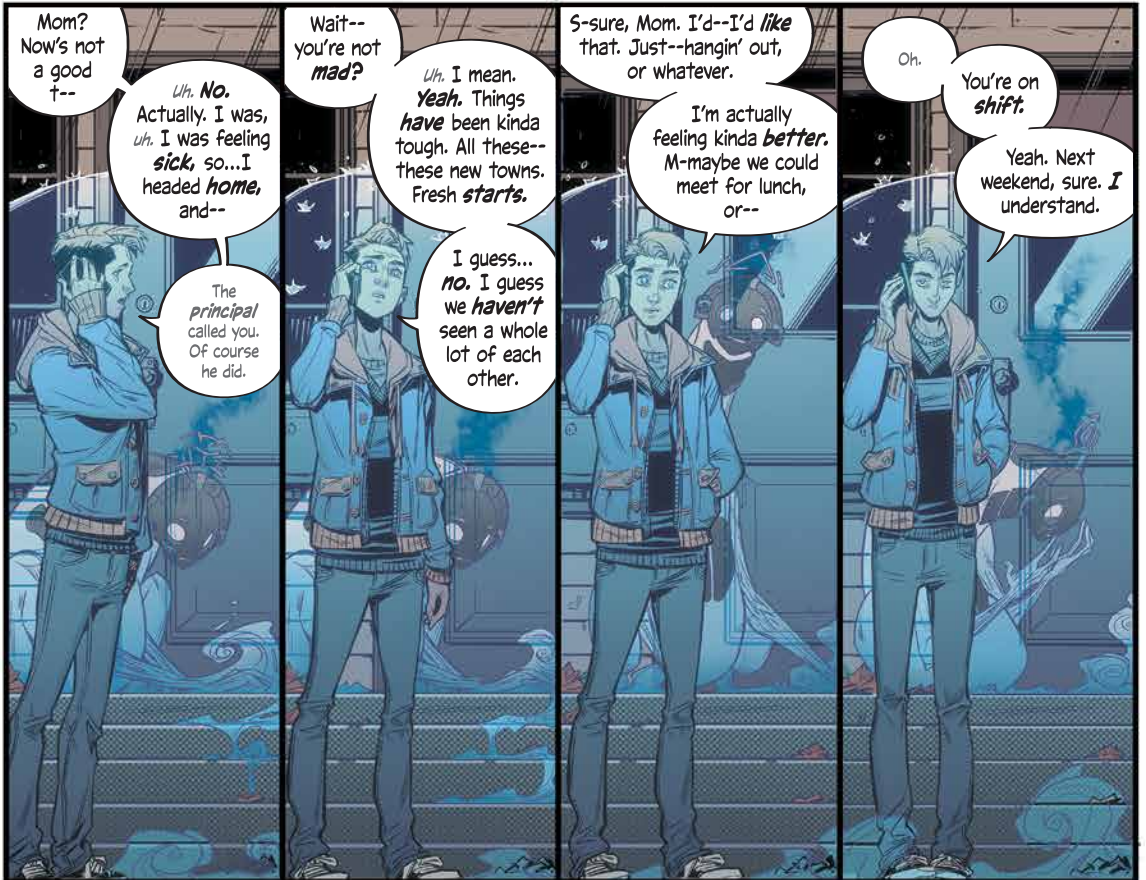


I'm Vern Heath. I couldn't be prouder to be picked for Waxy for the guest slot on his show, here in Tangletree, Illinois.

And I'd like to show you my world.

This piece is:
Pedestrian.
Unambitious.
Sophomoric.
Sentimental.

Totally
#\$\$&ing
pointless.





Chapter 5: DUTY FIRST



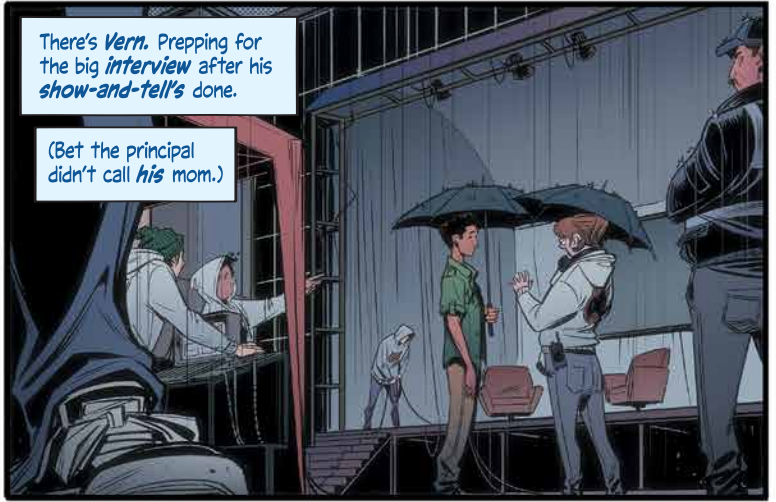
Waxy streams *live*, every Monday.
New *town*, new guest slot.

"Keep the content flowing"--
remember? Golden rule.



There's *Vern*. Prepping for
the big *interview* after his
show-and-tell's done.

(Bet the principal
didn't call *his* mom.)



Hey.
Hey, *kid*,
what're
y--

It's not *fair*, and
that's the long and
short of it. It's not
right. None of this.

Somewhere, like a whisper, Samir's in
pain. Samantha's *scared*. And Chip?

♫♫ I don't know. I guess--maybe he
feels what *we* feel? Something like
that. It's all I can do to *control* him.



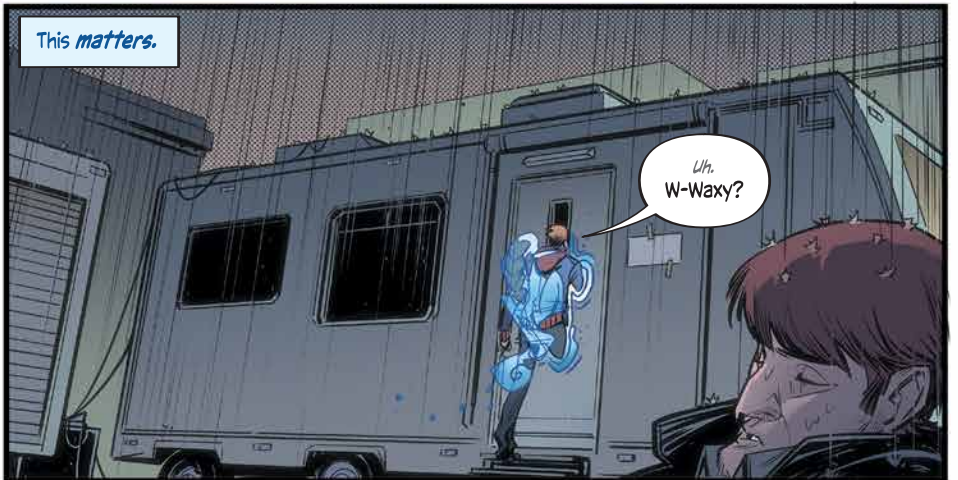
I mean--for god's
sake. Is it too much
to ask that
everyone's just *on*
message for a
second?

Don't they
understand this is
bigger than all their
selfish crap? This
is bigger than--
y'know.

Feelings.

This *matters*.

Uh.
W-Waxy?





L-listen, *dude*, I...uh--b-big fan, you know? A-and I don't mean to be a...

There's been a *mistake*. My *video* must've been missed, or--or the file was corrupted or...

W-would you take a look?



Yeah. Yeah, *sure*, lay it on me.

Oh my god, *thank* you. You won't regret it. Seriously, I think this could *really* be valuable to our--y'know. Our whole *generation*.



I said I *hear* ya, Jerry, would you quit *shoutin'*?

What? *No*, I'm not drinking already, #5%hole.

Look, just tell the 5%&in' *sponsors* to quit 5%&ing around and add an extra *zero*, or we go suckle the *network teat*--okay?

Whuh.



5%&re you lookin' at, kid?



hurts

angry
angry
hurting me
stop



let me
go

want
to *leave* want
to go *up* hurts he
hates me hurts
hurts

...weird.



samsamsam



...Wh...
what...?



Samantha?
That *you*?

Uh. Y-yeah. Yeah,
how, uh... How you
doin'?



Never
better.





Like a *slap*. Like falling *forever*.
Bitter and broken and needy.

(Lotta that
going *around*.)

"Come back when
you're something
special." @\$\$hole.
@\$\$hole.

I *fall*. I fall *sideways* and
ohhh. I'm lost in *Chip*. It's
effortless, same as ever.
Only, *this* time?

This time I guess *Chip*'s kinda
lost in *me*, too. So much for
the big bad *alien*.

The others don't get a
look in. Just me and him,
on autopilot. *Entangled*
through *Tangletree*.

You wanna
leave us.

Look at 'em. *Lapping* it up. Little steps!
Good intentions! Joy and wonder!

That's what it *all* boils down to,
isn't it? Kids becoming adults.
Rites of \$\$\$damn passage.

How. \$\$\$ging.
Predictable.

You
wanna leave...
but you need
us to let you
go...



And *stranger* spheres.

Y'know, I think I *get* it now. All this *shrieking...* all this *whining...* This is your *home*, isn't it?

This is where *you things* go when you're all grown up...



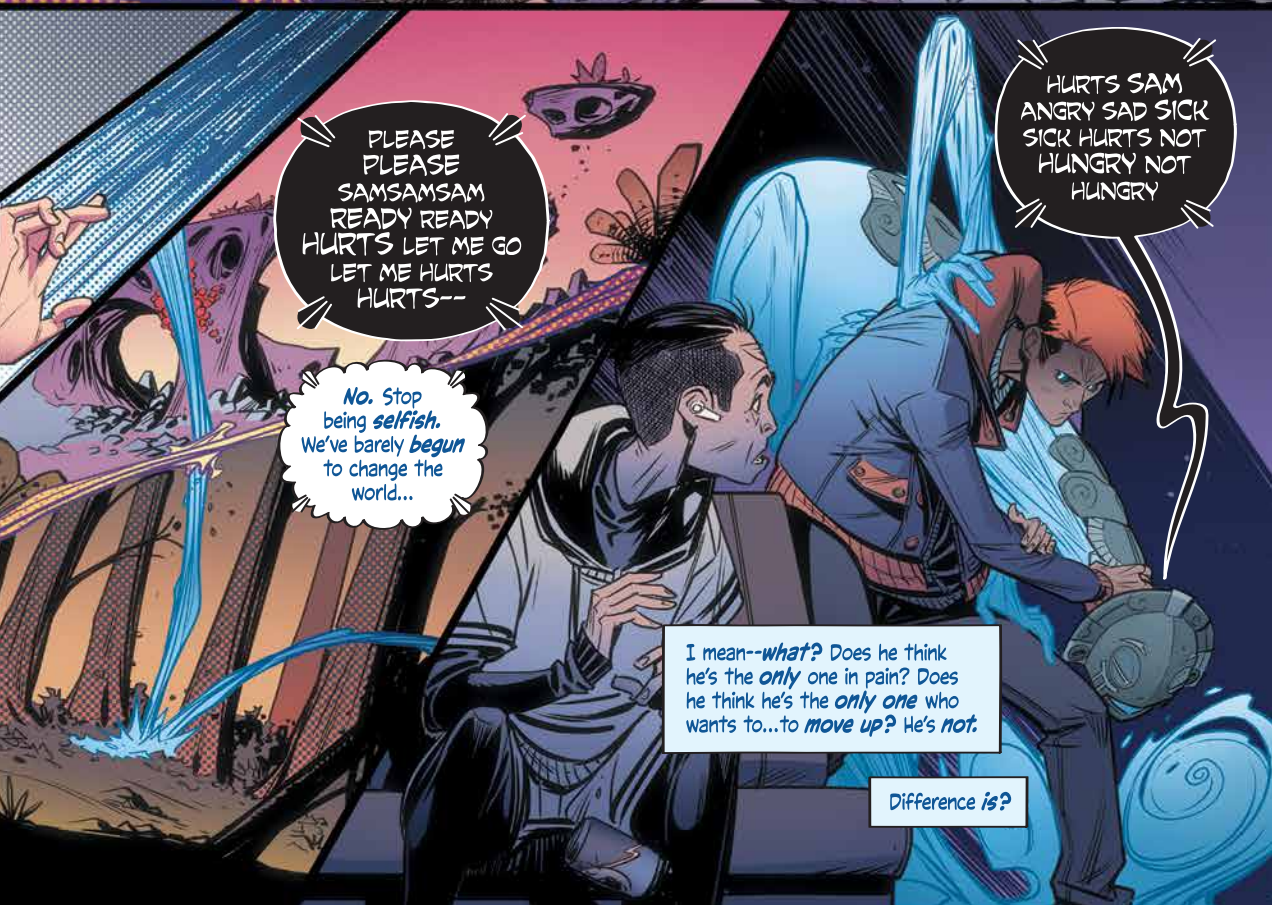
PLEASE PLEASE SAMSAMSAM READY READY HURTS LET ME GO LET ME HURTS HURTS--

No. Stop being *selfish*. We've barely *begun* to change the world...

HURTS SAM ANGRY SAD SICK SICK HURTS NOT HUNGRY NOT HUNGRY

I mean--*what*? Does he think he's the *only* one in pain? Does he think he's the *only one* who wants to...to *move up*? He's *not*.

Difference *is*?



I deserve this.

Later,
Waxy.



Come back
when you're
something
special.





nrrrrrfff!

I-it's *Samuel*. What the hell's he doing?



I don't know. He's...He's too *angry*. I think he's blocking us.

God. Poor Chip.



W-we should talk to him. *Samuel*, I mean. W-we might still be able to--

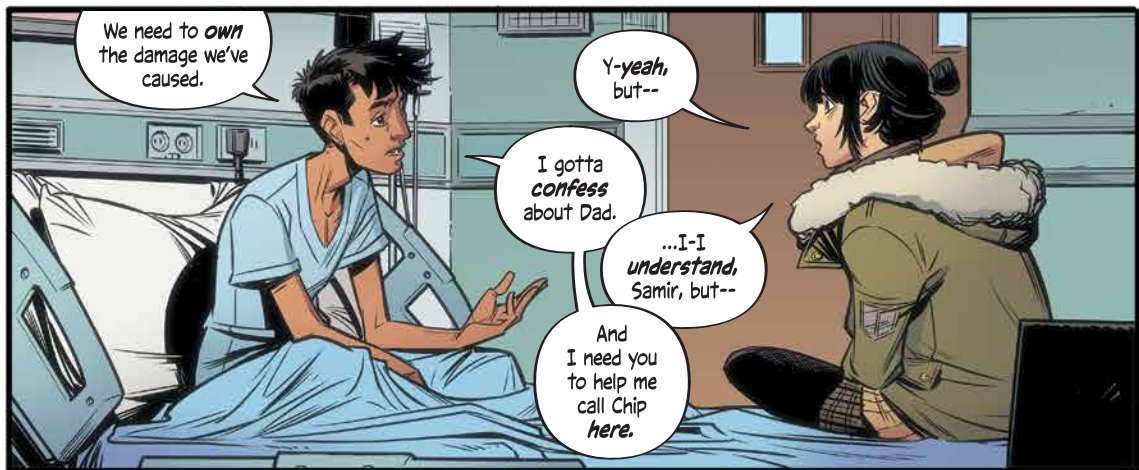
Bull\$#!%. All he can see is what Chip can *do* for him--not what *we* shoulda been doing for Chip all along.



Y-you mean-- keeping him *safe*? N-nurturing h--

No.

Look, it was one thing when he was just a little hungry monster who didn't *understand*. But *now*?



We need to *own* the damage we've caused.

Y-yeah, but--

I gotta *confess* about Dad.

...I-I *understand*, Samir, but--

And I need you to help me call Chip *here*.



Look-- I know you don't want him to *go*, Samantha, but...



He deserves to be set free.



And that's why I believe... I truly believe... the future's bright.



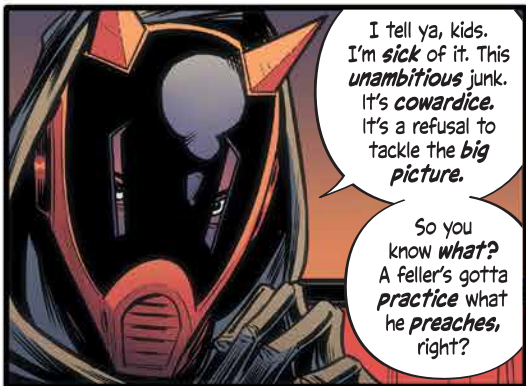
Well how about *that*, huh? Round of applause, kids!

Round of applause for Vern!



Round of applause for his steaming pile of dull, indulgent, lazy-ass *crap*.

Wait-- what?



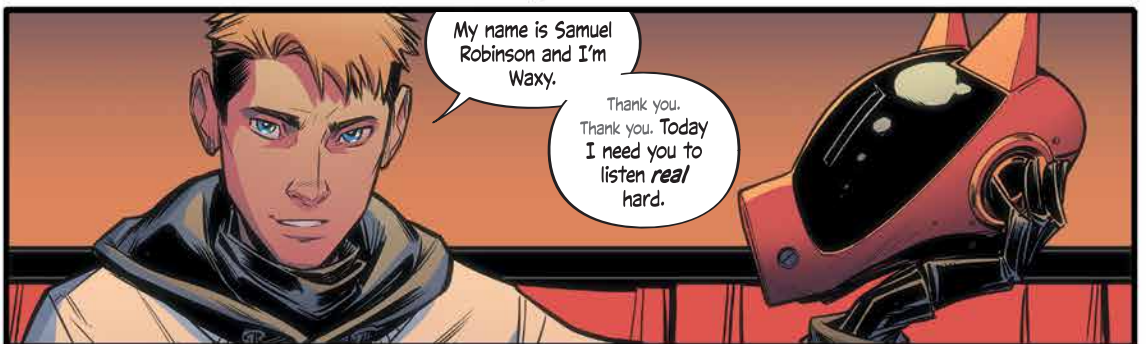
I tell ya, kids. I'm *sick* of it. This *unambitious* junk. It's *cowardice*. It's a refusal to tackle the *big picture*.

So you know *what*? A feller's gotta *practice* what he *preaches*, right?



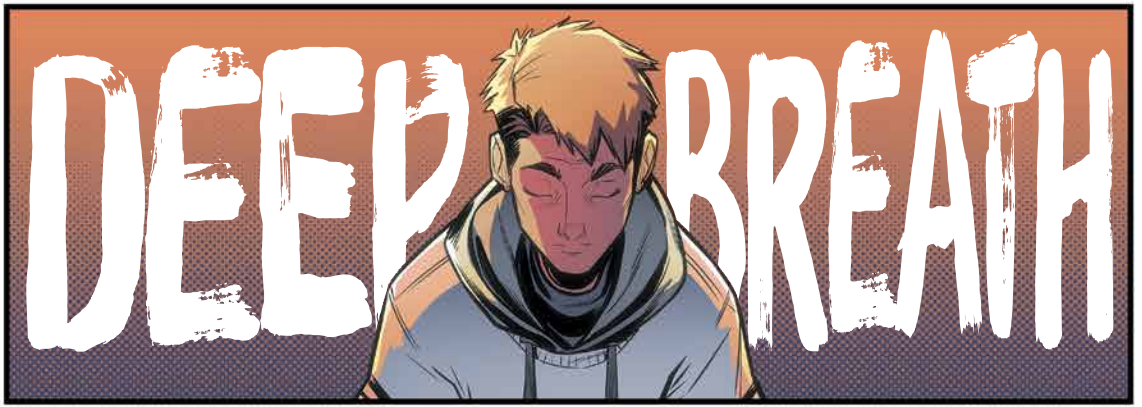
Pranks. Poetry. It's been fun, folks. But. It's time to *put away childish things*.

It's time to be *seen*.



My name is Samuel Robinson and I'm Waxy.

Thank you. Thank you. Today I need you to listen *real hard*.



It's like this.

And oh. Oh.

I. Am. Perfect.



This *rage--*god, it's beautiful. It's *infectious*.

Look. *Look* at me. Snarling at the *zombie cruelty* of old white guys in power. The selfish blindness of *MeFirst America*.

I *scream* at our *excuse* for an *education*. I beg them all to *think*, to *invent*, to *create*.



That *loser*, Vern--he keeps saying my name.

Tries to cut me off a couple times, even. Doesn't matter.

Once begun, a *revolution* can't be stopped.



Right now? I don't *need* Chip.

##%& him. Lurking *back-stage* like some irrelevant *ghost*. Go ahead, pal. Cut the cord, I don't care.

This is youth. *This* is energy.

This matters.

I tell them how it is.
The *Man*.
The *Machine*.
The *Monsters* who guide us all.



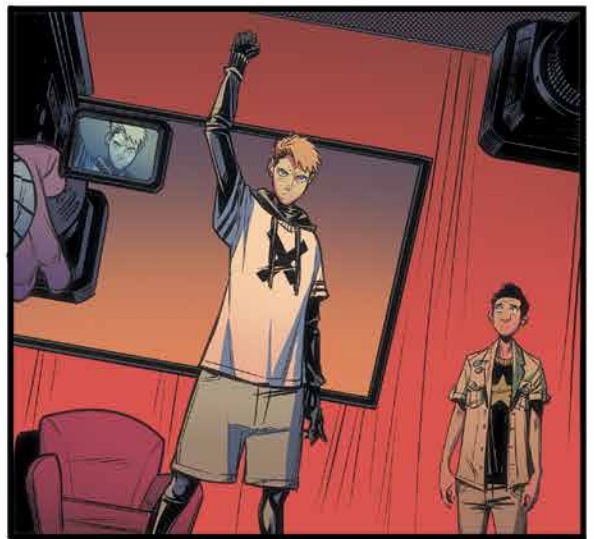
This is my time.

...until
...at last

We!

RISE!

UP!



Is this one of Ted's stunts? None of this #5%&'s on the *shot list*, guys. I can't believe corporate *authorized* this crap.

We're down, like, 94 percent of streams here.

What d'you expect? It's been a *dead line* for two minutes.

W-what?



Dude. I was trying to *tell* you. Like--aren't you supposed to be a *sound guy*? What were you *thinking*?

The microphone's in the *helmet*, man.



Wh

Wh

You got *seen*, sure...



But nobody was listening.



THAT'S



Chip. Chip-- come here. We'll...

We'll show them. We'll show them special.

NOT



CHIP. Chip! We-- we will RAGE.

We will BURN and-- HOWL and-- and--

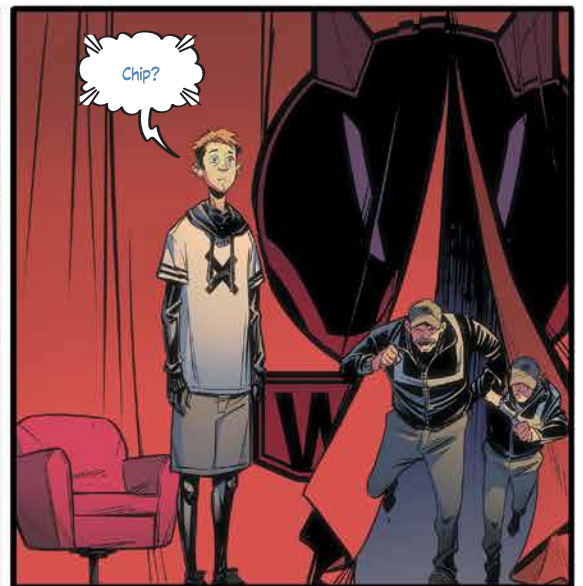
FAIR



Who even is this little weirdo?

I swear, if this is Teddy's idea of a #\$\$%& you to the sponsors, it's in really bad taste.

Hey! S--somebody get that kid!



Chip?



I'm *sorry*, pal. I didn't mean to use you.

I, uh. I guess I was pretty rough, huh?



You deserve *better*.

NOK NOK NOK



You got my *call*, then?

S-Samir, what's--

I did. How did you *know* what I found in Leon's room?

What's this about?



I, uh. I guess I got some stuff I need to get offa my *chest*, ma'am.

Get him outta here, Samantha. Keep him hidden. You gotta set him *free*, okay?

S-sure.



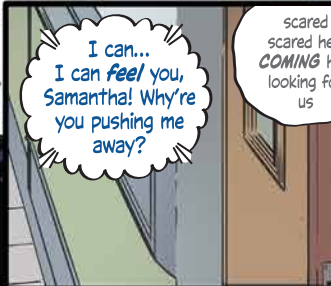
Sigh

Sure.



Ch-Chip...?

S-Samantha?
Samir? Where are
you guys...?



I can...
I can *feel* you,
Samantha! Why're
you pushing me
away?

scared
scared he's
COMING he's
looking for
us



Why won't
you let me *talk*
to him?! I *need*
him!

Ssshhh...
It's okay, Chip...
It's okay...



Guys--
p-please. I've had
a rough day. Don't cut
me *out*, okay?
I...I just...

Look,
I *deserve* to be
heard, don't I? What
are you *hiding*?
Where's...

SNFFF

Where's
Samir...?



...c-can't
really make you
understand *how*,
ma'am, but--it's
all our fault.

Leon,
Chelsea, my dad.
We're *responsible*.
We're responsible
for *all* of it.

A confession...?



Aaaa--!

S-stop!

You're hurting him!
You're hurting h--

BETRAYAL
ALL ALONE

RAGE

Chip?!
Wh...where did
you...where did
you g...

hurts
HURTS no no
DON'T MAKE
ME hurts

"The world's
gone to hell."

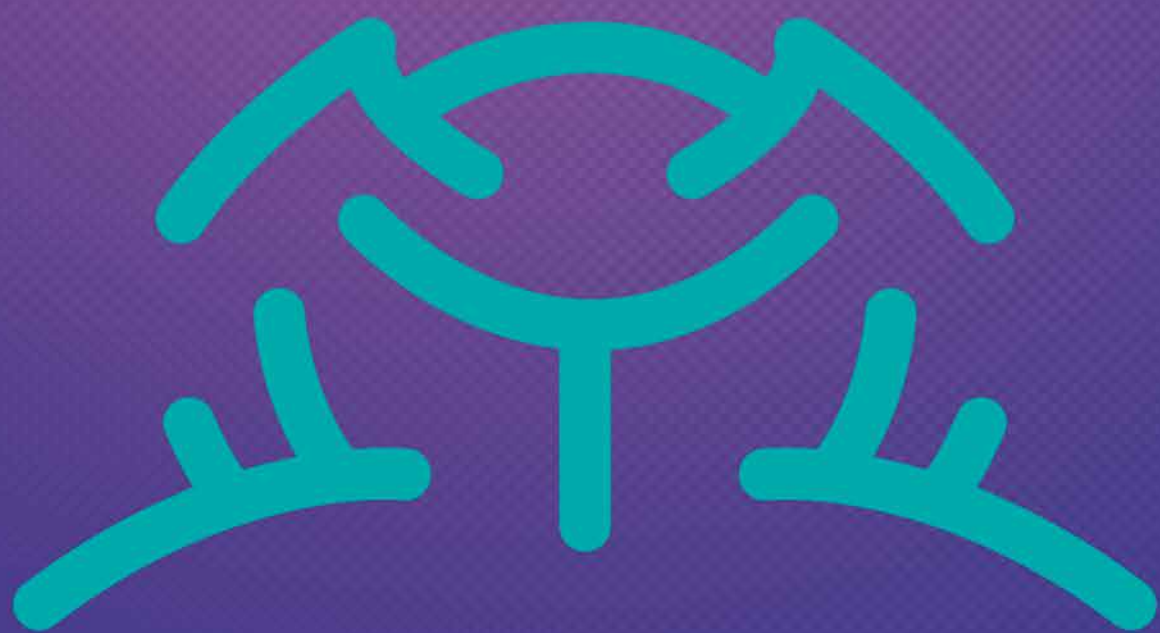
HURT
HURRRRTS
DON'T DON'T
PLEASE
DON'T

I mean--that's
obvious, isn't it?

S-Samuel...
S-Samuel,
Wh...

W-what
did you
do?





CHAPTER SIX





The revolution has begun.



a-shuh:



Sh-shots fired. Damage done.

L-lives lost.



nn--snf:



This--this little town. It's seen some weird stuff lately. R-right? Like, disappearances. Comas.

Explosions.



People will say it was a gas leak at the hospital. Th-they'll say when a superstar Vlogger and a Cop Chief disappear-- same day?

Coincidence.

Everyone'll go right back to sleep because-- because that's easy.



B-but it's not a coincidence. It's not a gas leak.

snf:

And nobody's gonna sleep tonight.



Chapter 6:
AND ON PURPOSE TOO



Yeah. I'm *crying*. W-what do you expect? All that loss. It breaks my %\$\$#ing heart, okay? I'm only human.

But it's *war*. It's the--the *price* of change.

(She's dead.)



You can't *dislodge* tyrants...you can't build a *new world*. You can't--

:hrf:

--you can't give a *worthwhile* #\$\$damn *future* to an entire *generation*--

--w-without a show of force.

(Mom's *dead* and Samir's *dead* and Wax's *dead* and Leon's *dead* and it's *my fault* me I *did it* oh god oh god oh)



I will free you from *small town thinking*. I will break your *addiction* to *triviality*. I will record every moment.

So you can *see*. So you *understand*.



You can't judge a--a *savior*--according to *conventional morali*--

Samuel.

You killed our %\$\$#ing *friend*. You killed your %\$\$#ing *mom*.



It's time to stop.



I had to. Th-this much power, the--the things we can achieve. I had to protect it, or--

Nuh-uh. You threw a tantrum. That's all.



Just another entitled jerk acting persecuted when the world doesn't give you special attention.

You're no different from Leon.



D...Don't you talk to me like that. I'm nothing like him!

I'm doing this for the world! I'm making things be--

It's not too late.



It is. It is. It is.

Even Samir. W-what happened with his dad. He was trying to make it right.



You went too far. Big \$\$\$ deal. That's called being a kid.

It's never too late, Samuel.

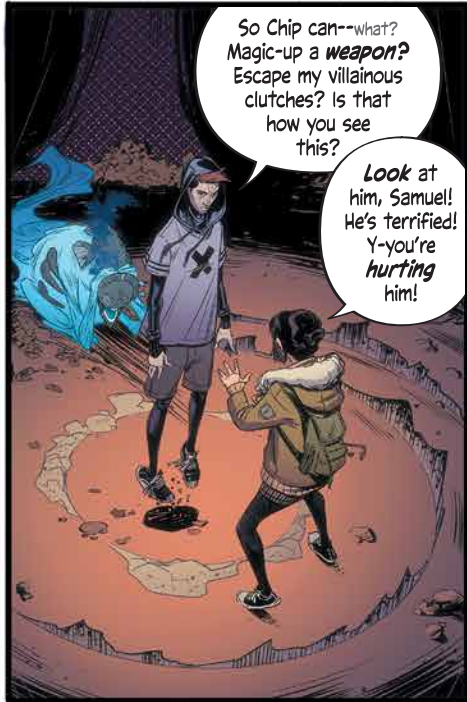


You just have to **own** it.



sigh

A **distraction.**
Cute.



So Chip can--what? Magic-up a **weapon**? Escape my villainous clutches? Is that how you see this?

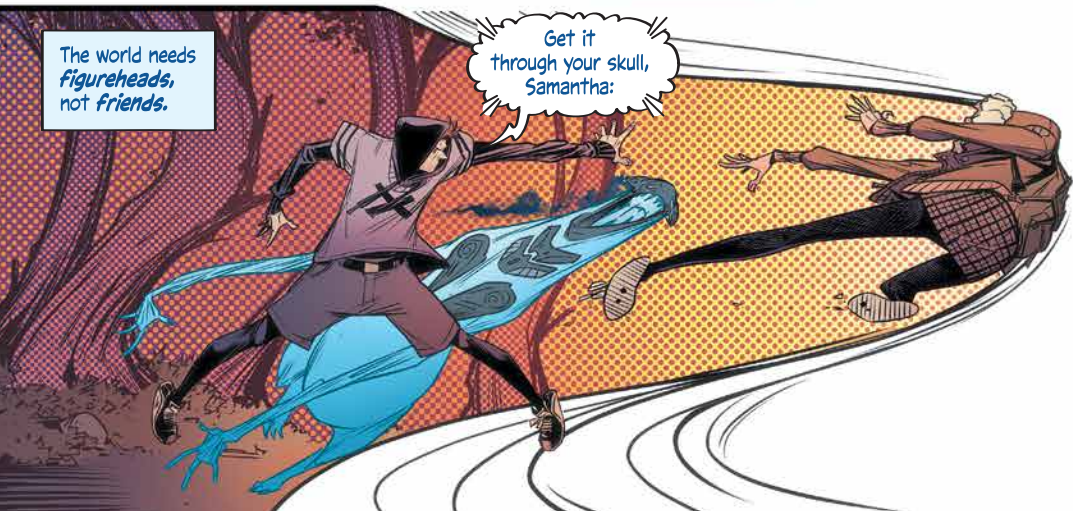
Look at him, Samuel! He's terrified! Y-you're **hurting** him!

Just one more **rejection.**

One more **betrayal.**

Doesn't matter.

Doesn't matter.



The world needs **figureheads,** not **friends.**

Get it through your skull, **Samantha:**



He's *mine*. I found him. I bonded to him the most. All he did for you was fetch %\$&#ing ice cream!

He's *nobody's!* He's *his!* He--he doesn't want this!



Oh please. He *ate* what we gave him! He killed Leon, not us!

He *started* this!



SAM SAM SAAAAAM

He was *young!* He was hungry and stupid and he didn't know better!

He's--he's *learned!*



Why won't *yoaaaAAAAAhhh--*



shhhhhh
Look, you've... You've *got* him. I can't *fight* you, Samuel... but...Please.

It hurts him when we *disagree*. I-it hurts him when we're *guilty*. Please. You *know* what he wants.



Let him go.

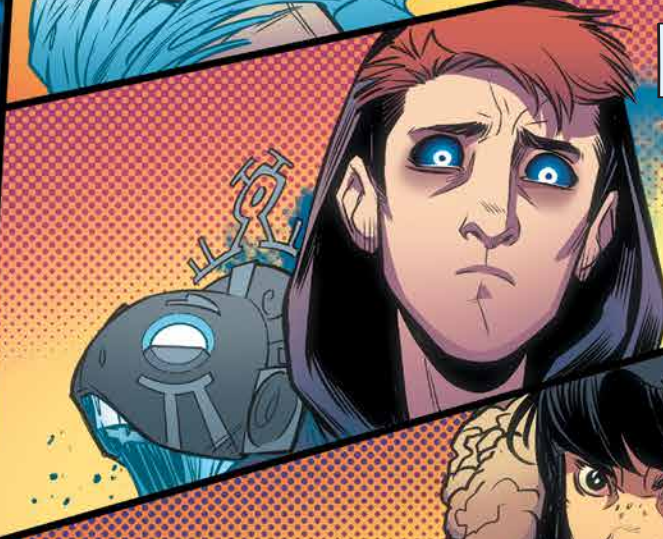


No. It's too *important*. The things he can do. It's too *big* for--for petty wants.

Bull\$#!%. What about *your* wants, Samuel? That's *all* this is!

Ah ohhh, the *certainty* settles like *water*:

This isn't about *me*. It's about the *world*. I can't stop. I *mustn't* stop.



You can see it *slither* across him. The *decision*.

This isn't about the world. It's about *him*. He won't stop. He doesn't *dare*.



If I turn back *now*, it's all been for nothing.

If he turned back now, he'd have to *live* with what he's done.



He's *mine*.





...

Can I at least say goodbye?



O-of course.

I'm-- I'm not a *cruel* person. I'm not the #\$\$damn *bad guy*, okay? Of *course* you can say goodbye!



SAM-SAM-SAM!

I know. I'm *sorry*.

I'm so *sorry*.

And... *Chip?*



...for a...
if...
...
...

Hey.
What are you *saying* to h--



DO IT NOW!



Ch-Chip?
Please.

Please,
you've got to
stop h--

Shut up.
I gave you a
chance, Samantha.
We coulda done
this the *easy*
way.



This is on you.



No NO NO

Quiet.



Everyone just...

Just be quiet.



Where was I?



The rules have **changed**.
And it's **your** fault.



You don't **listen**.
You watch your **idiot** shows. You sing your **idiot songs** and salute your **idiot flags**. You hate who they tell you to hate then give your vote to **worse**.



Enough. Enough thinking **small**.
Enough **angry kids** who never get off their asses. Enough **words**.



Enough **little towns** full of **little people** who



Don't.
See.
Me.



I will show you what can be **done**. You'll say it's **cruel** and **senseless**. But you will **react** all the same.

And **then?** Then we'll see how fast **real** change can happen.



Remember. This is **your** fault.
I...I **deserve** to be respected, don't I?



I deserve to be liked.

"...but being noticed'll do."







shrm

Any minute now. Cops and tanks and bombs.

Any minute.

Let them come.



Fine!

If--if the *oppressors* will not face us, we will take the message to *them*.



Washington! Capitol Hill! The White House!

Let the *old world* tremble! Let the *tyrants* be cast down!



I will save this planet from--

From its--



Uh.



But...
But I just *came* from here.

What's...



Hey.

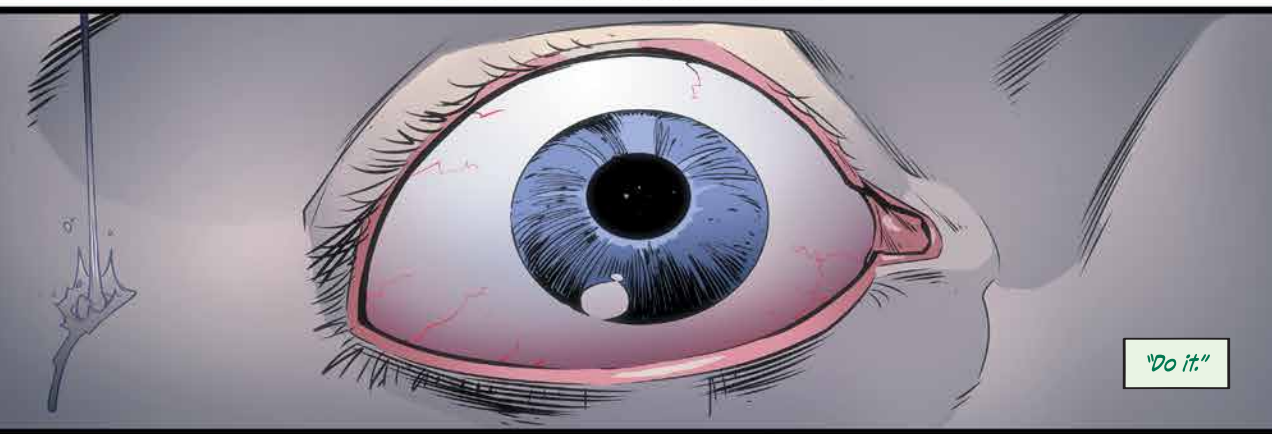
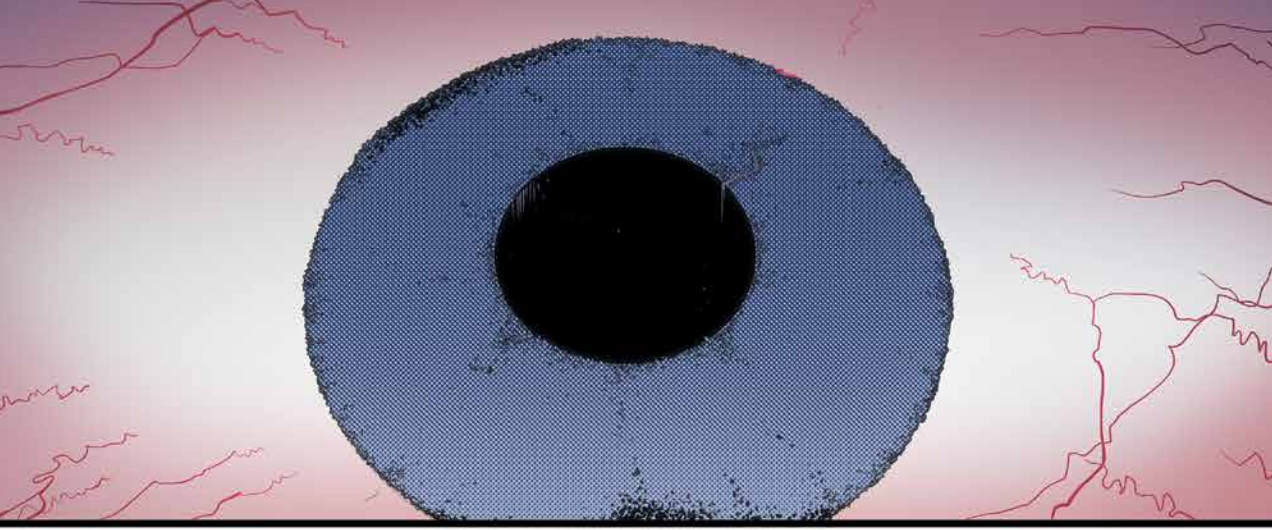
Chip?
What the hell's g...



Chip?



Chip?



"Do it."



"Do it"
I said.



And Chip
did.



SAMSAMSAM

I know. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry we weren't better.



We're, uh, We're young.

That's the only excuse I've got.



Thank you for choosing here.



AIIIIS-CREEM?
CUDDLES?
SAMSAMSAM?

Ha. No, dummy. You're free now.

But listen, travel *safe*. Always wear clean *underwear*. Don't forget to *write*. And, uh.



Rise up.



yaaaaa



yaaaaaa

hm.



Five more months.

College. New state. New crowd.

Five more months.



Five more m--

#\$%&.



Hey! Hey WAITAMI--

Wanna ride?



Chelsea. I *heard* she woke up.

I heard she broke up with Denny. I heard she cut her hair and redid her look. *Big changes*, y'know? Lessons learned, fresh start--*that's* what she's signaling. *My* guess?

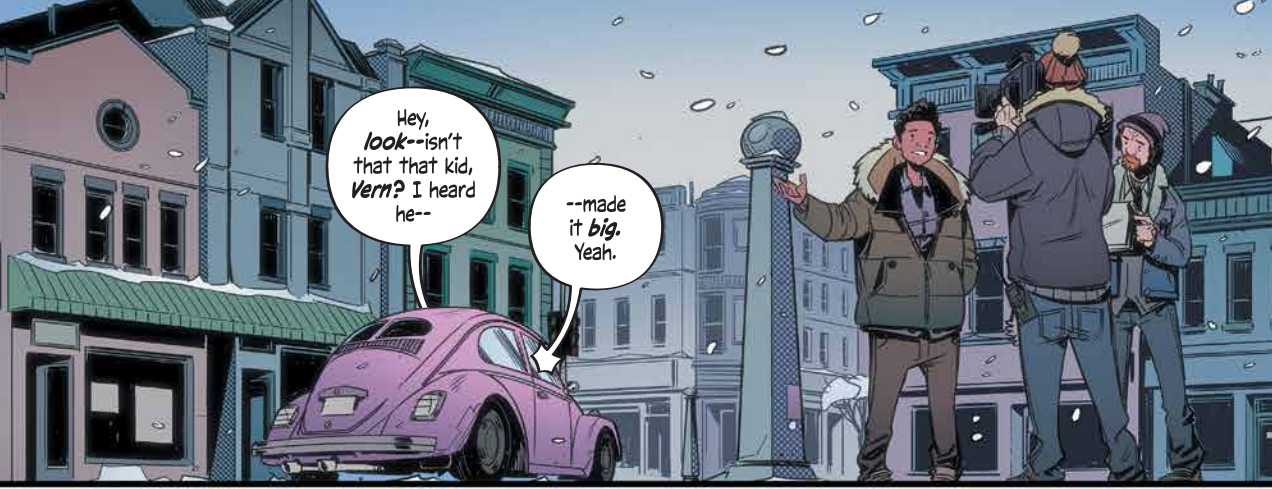
Auditioning for the *Talk Show Circuit*.

Still. It's either getting in, or...

The woods.

Epilogue





Hey, look--isn't that that kid, Vern? I heard he--

--made it big. Yeah.

All the money behind *Waxy* just...shifted towards him. Path of least resistance.

Kid got a big *check* to make a big *documentary* about all the mysterious crap that's been going on around here.

He won't find any *answers*, but I bet it'll be *pretty*.



People will love it.

What's this about, Chelsea? You haven't said *two words* to me all year.

I, uh...well, I-I had a *dream* about you, is all. While I was--y'know.

Comatose. Yeah. Hhhh. Let me guess: an *angel* with my voice, acting all *pissy*. Listen, there's something you should kn--

No.



I dreamed how we used to pretend we were *mermaids*. You remember that?

Holding our breaths in the *pool* and rescuing shipwrecked *teddies*.



We, uh. We nearly drowned from laughing, one time.

I miss being a *kid*, Sam.

And I miss nearly drowning with my friends.

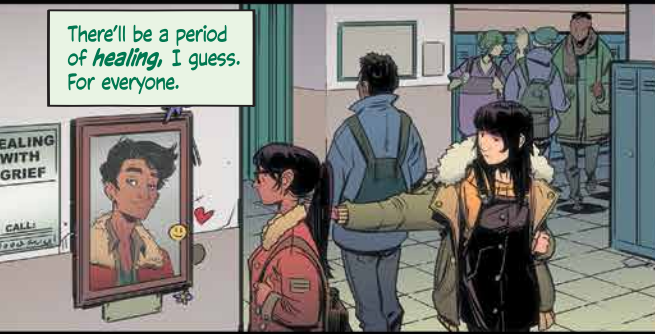


Things are said. Tears are shed. *Coffee dates* are set.

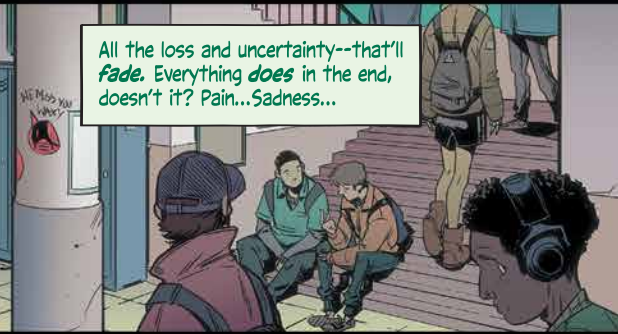


Nobody is recording.

There'll be a period of *healing*, I guess. For everyone.



All the loss and uncertainty--that'll *fade*. Everything *does* in the end, doesn't it? Pain...Sadness...



...and *youth*. God, youth most of all.



I'm *disappointed* in you, Samantha. I've never *seen* such lousy *welfare scores* from one of these things. You get an *F*.

Ha. No #&%&.

I wasn't ready. Not last *year*, not *now*. I wasn't ready and that's *okay*.



Oh, not just for *babies*--for *anything*. For *everything*.

Being a kid's the only time you'll *ever* get an *excuse* for getting it wrong.



Aiis.

Creem.

I think--maybe? Nobody ever *is* ready. Not really. We just...*muddle through*.

But you know *what*?

Five more months.

Five more months.

Better make
the most of it.





COVER GALLERY

19



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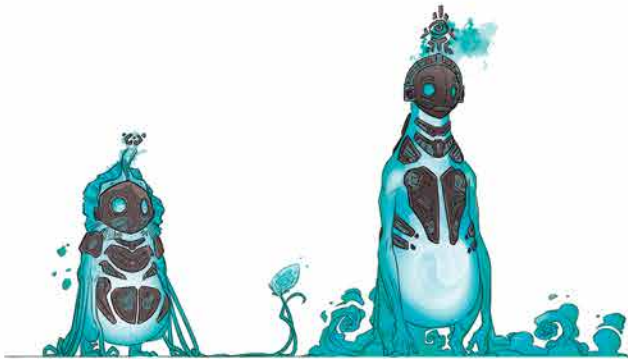
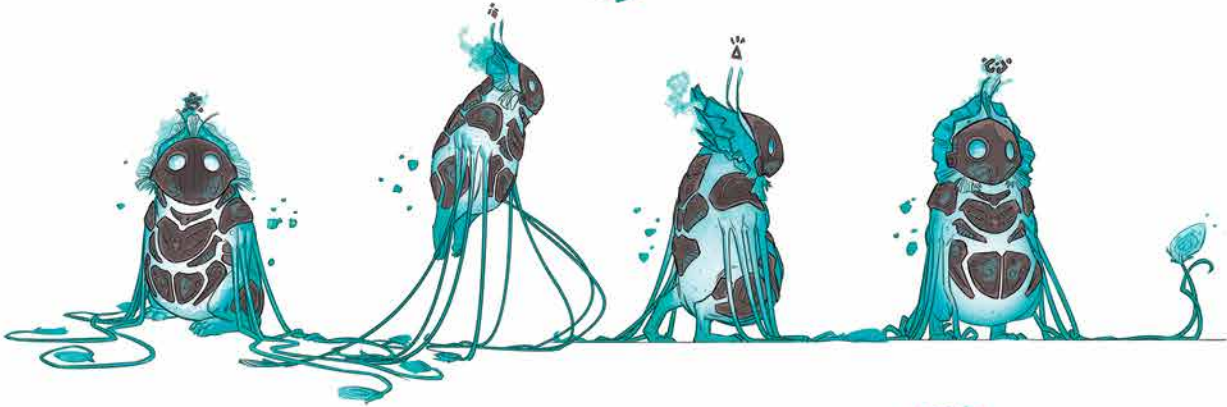
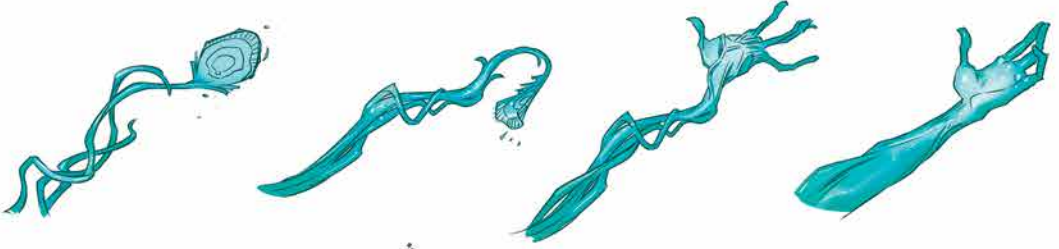


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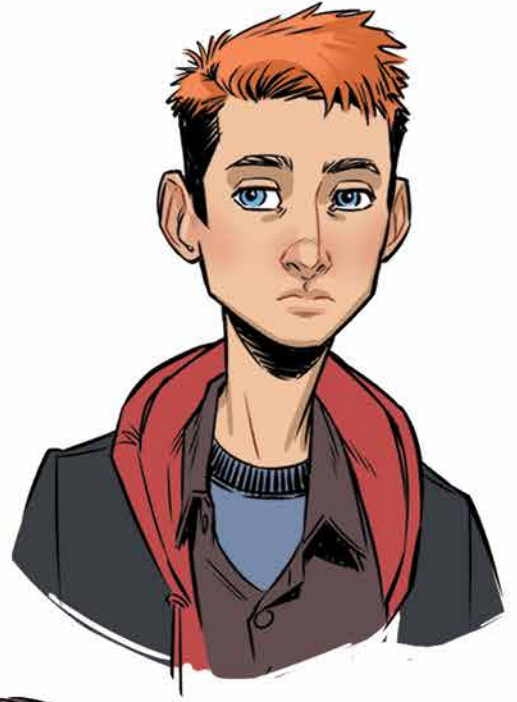
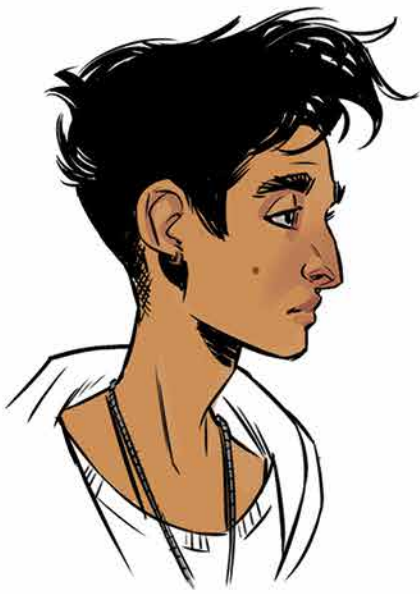


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