



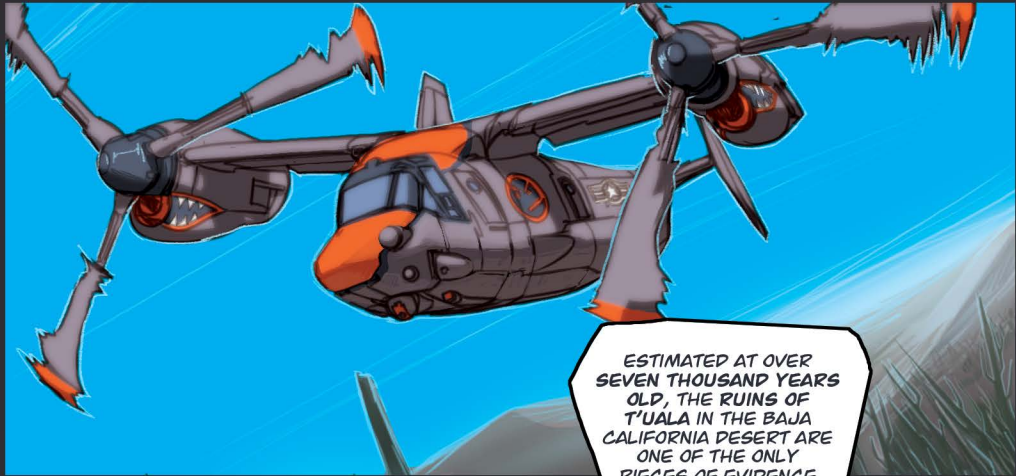
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FRED PERRY



DECEMBER 2008



ESTIMATED AT OVER SEVEN THOUSAND YEARS OLD, THE RUINS OF T'UALA IN THE BAJA CALIFORNIA DESERT ARE ONE OF THE ONLY PIECES OF EVIDENCE OF EARTH'S LOST AGE!



OUR PROFESSOR, GINA DIGGERS, CALLS THAT PERIOD, "THE AGE OF WONDERS."

An accurate title, Alena.

THANKS TO ARCHAEOLOGY, THE ANCIENT WORLD OF MAGIC IS RISING AGAIN.

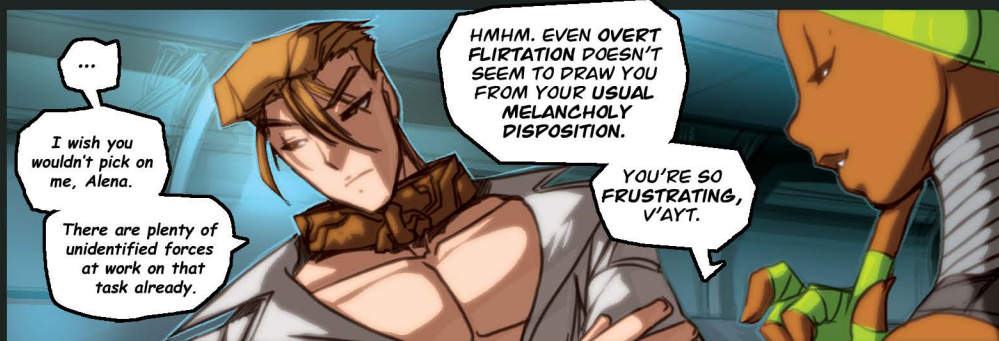
ONE ENCHANTED POT SHARD AT A TIME.

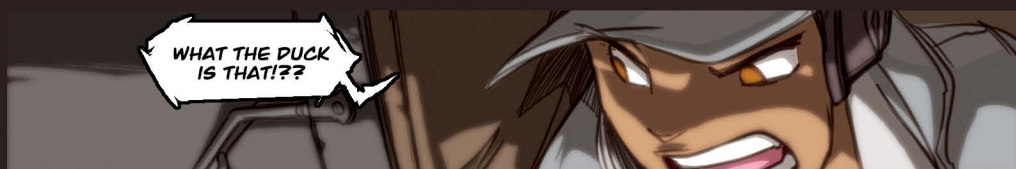
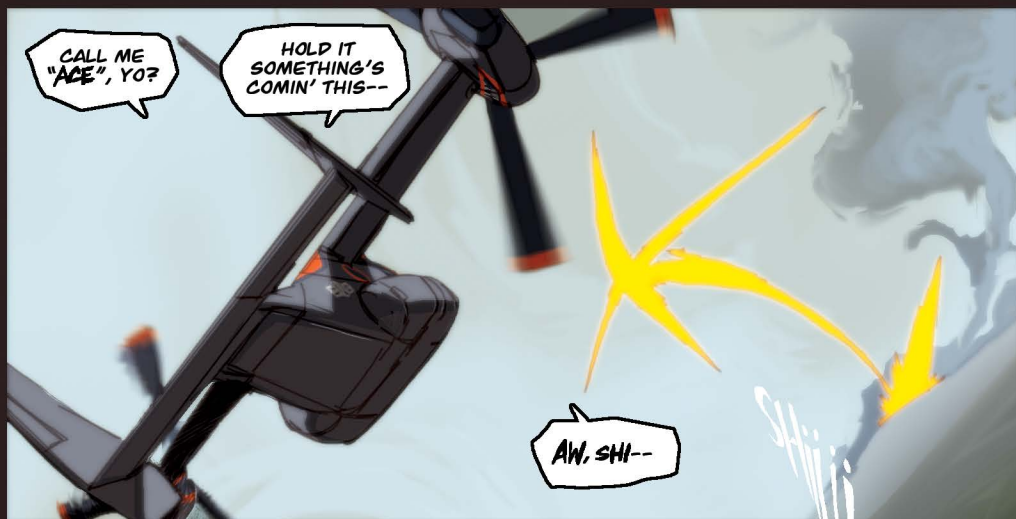
ONE UNRAVELLED MYSTERY AT A TIME.



BUT WHAT I TRULY FIND CURIOUS, V'AYT... ARE THE ENCHANTED RELICS OF ANCIENT EARTH HIDING RIGHT UNDER OUR NOSES.

THE ONES WHO STUBBORNLY CONCEAL THEIR SECRETS WITH TANTALIZING, TIGHTLY SEALED LIPS.







THERE'S THE
EXPEDITION
CAMPSITE!

BUT WHERE
IS EVERYONE,
V'AYT?

DID OUR CLASS
HAVE TO EVACUATE
THE AREA BECAUSE
OF THAT CROSSBOW
FORTRESS?

I THINK I SEE A
SPOT TO LAND!

I JUST NEED
TO BANK AROUND
FOR--

AW SNAP!

CHECK THE
WEIRD WATER-
GHOSTS HOLDIN' UP
THEM MEDIEVAL
"NO-PARKIN'"
SIGNS!

M-MOST LIKELY IN
DEFENSE OF THE
BALLISTA STRUCTURE
THAT JUST SURFACED,
MR. KO-- &f, ACE!

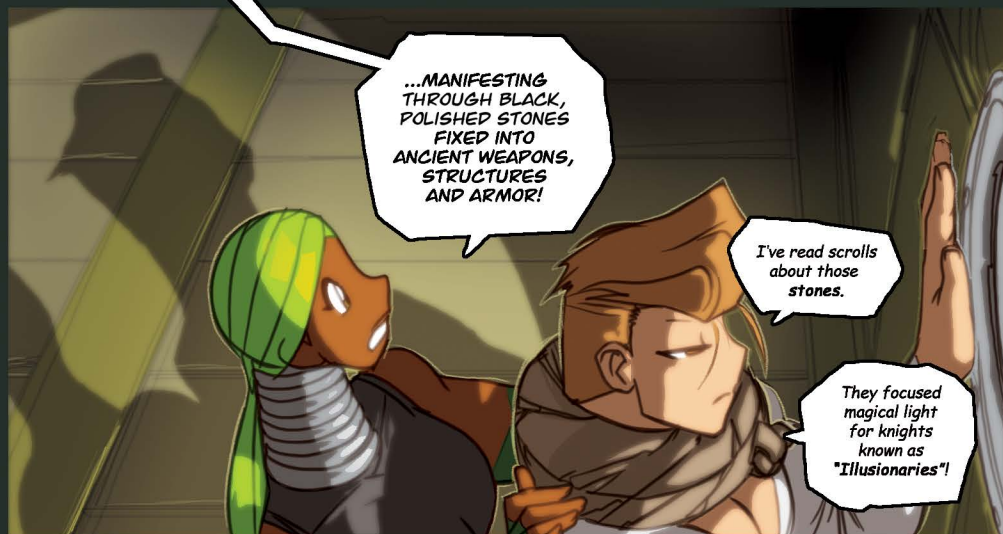
PHANTOM
WARRIORS...

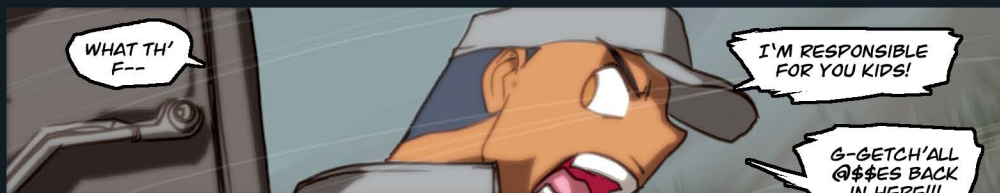


...MANIFESTING
THROUGH BLACK,
POLISHED STONES
FIXED INTO
ANCIENT WEAPONS,
STRUCTURES
AND ARMOR!

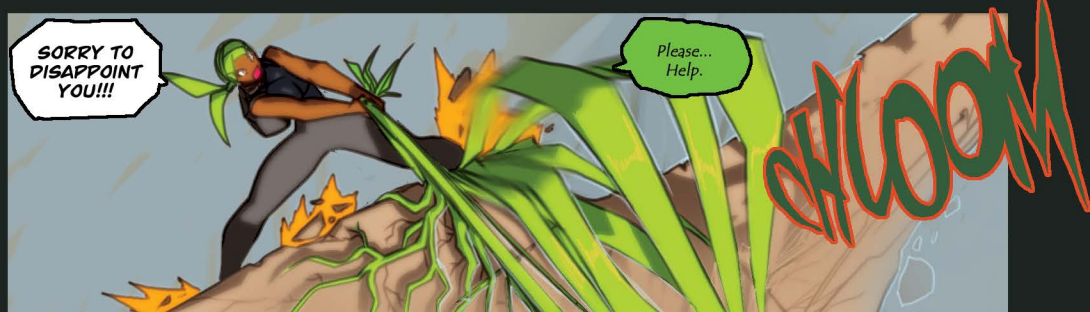
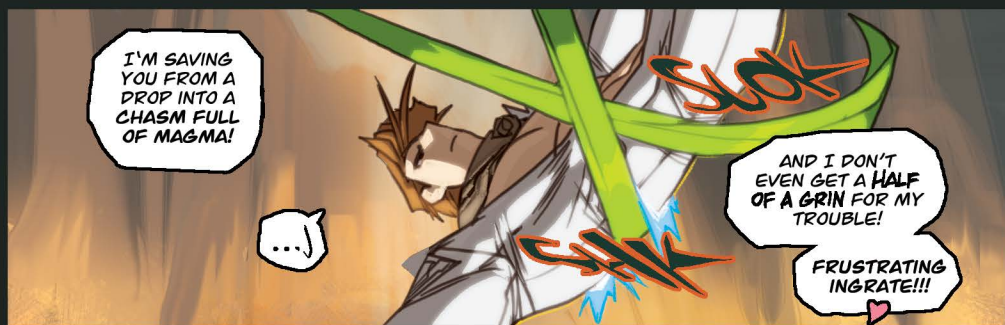
I've read scrolls
about those
stones.

They focused
magical light
for knights
known as
"Illusionaries"!











LOOK OUT!!!
A-ANOTHER
VOLLEY!!!

But not
truly aimed
at us,
Alena.

The Illusionaries'
archers were precise
marksmen!



These are
merely phantoms
of defenders
aiming at targets
they spotted
eons ago!



By coming into
the line of sight
of armed and
waiting magical
weapons, we--

???



A-A CHAIN REACTION?

Yes.

They all detonated, just as an unattended ammunition depot would.

Without a controller, explosive magic is as much a hazard to the weapon as it is to the target...

...or so suggests my expertise on the arcane!



N-now hurry, Alena.

Secure an entrance into the stronghold.

See if you can locate a sign of our professor's class.

Go now. I-I'll look for clues here... Hurry, please.

OH!

OH, NO! ARE YOU INJURED, V'AYT?



H-hurry. Th-there's little time... to lose.

Please... Go!

YOU'RE HURT, AREN'T YOU! LET ME SEE! I'LL GROW AN ALOE LEAF TO HELP HEA--
HAHAH!

DEAR ME!

THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR WEARING TIGHT, FLIMSY, FORM-FITTING CLOTHING WITHOUT UNDERGARMENTS!

AAAAHHH!

NEVER FEAR! I HAVE THE SOLUTION!



Alena, I wish you wouldn't--

YOU'RE SO FRUSTRATING, V'AYT! AND CARELESS!

AND NAUGHTY!

BUT THIS TIME YOU'RE LUCKY!

THERE! A NICE, COMFORTABLE, WOVEN PAIR OF--

V'AYT?



"D-DON'T
WORRY, V'AYT!!!
I-I'LL USE
CPR!!!"

AW, YEAH! GOT THE
DELUXE CHERRY
SLURPY! GOT THE
DELUXE CHILI-DOG
WITH EXTRA
ONIONS!

WHAT'D YOU
SCORE, KYLIE!

A HUGE-
GULP!

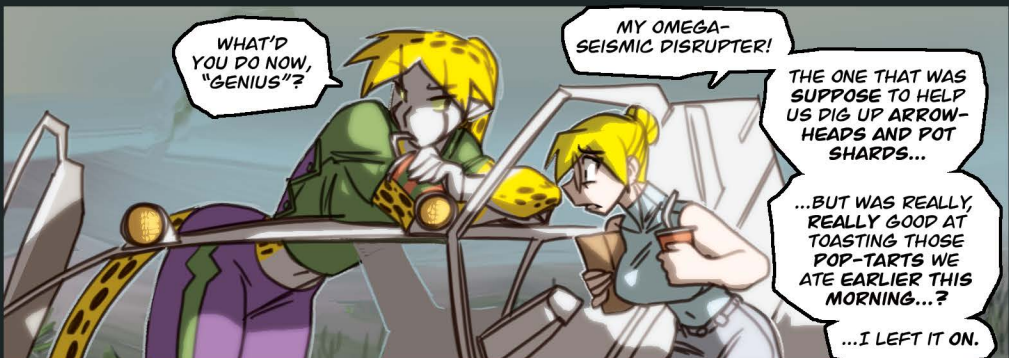
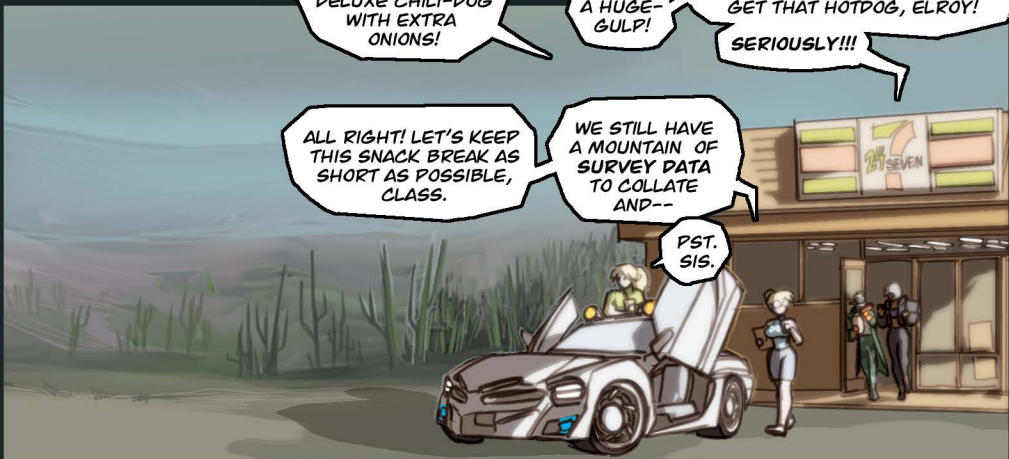
BUT I BROUGHT SOME ECLIPSE
APOCALYPSE-STOPPER BREATH
MINTS FOR YOU WHEN I SAW YOU
GET THAT HOTDOG, ELROY!

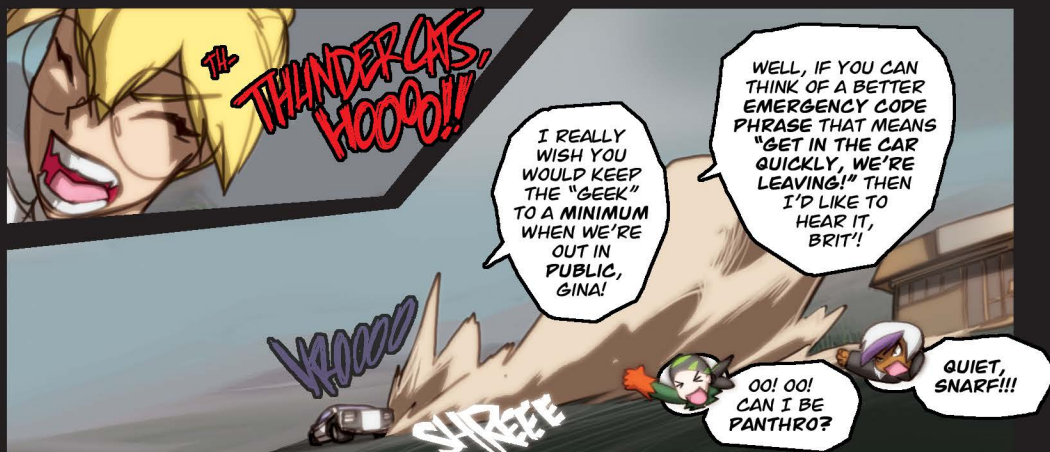
SERIOUSLY!!!

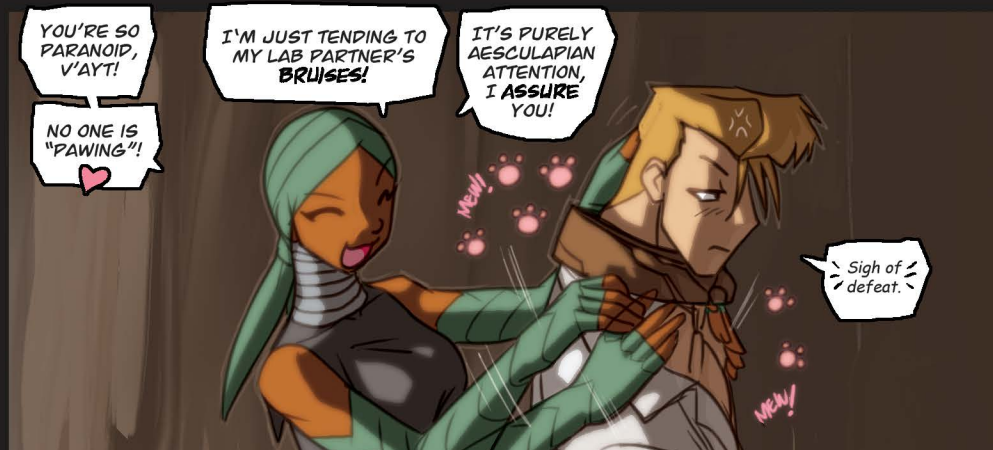
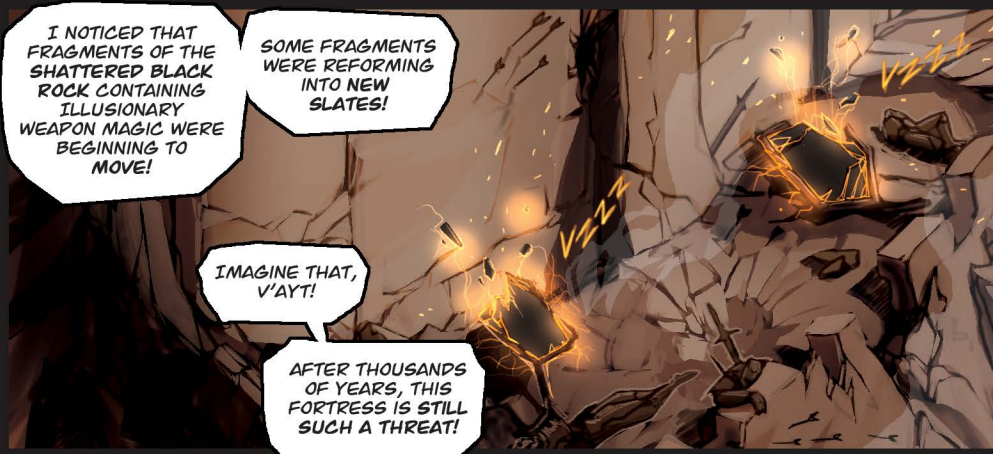
ALL RIGHT! LET'S KEEP
THIS SNACK BREAK AS
SHORT AS POSSIBLE,
CLASS.

WE STILL HAVE
A MOUNTAIN OF
SURVEY DATA
TO COLLATE
AND--

PST.
SIS.

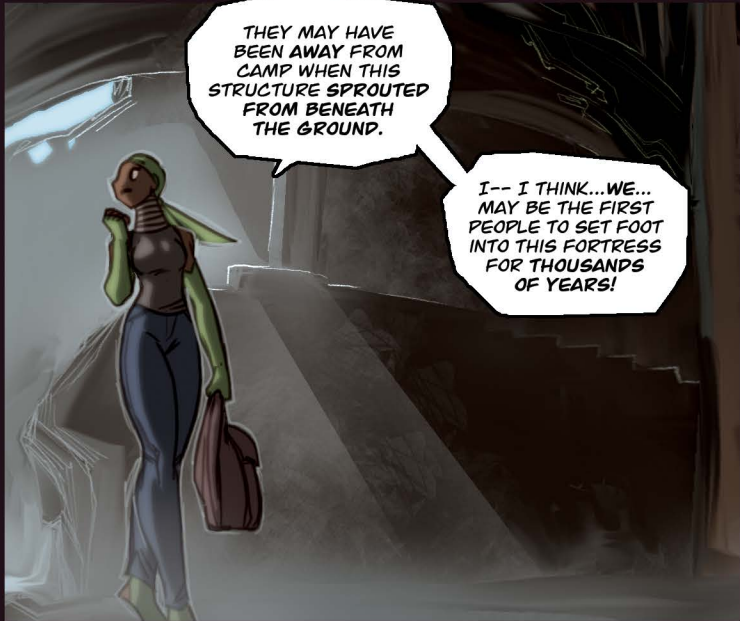








NO SIGN OF PROFESSOR DIGGERS OR OUR OTHER CLASSMATES, HOWEVER.



THEY MAY HAVE BEEN AWAY FROM CAMP WHEN THIS STRUCTURE SPROUTED FROM BENEATH THE GROUND.

I-- I THINK...WE... MAY BE THE FIRST PEOPLE TO SET FOOT INTO THIS FORTRESS FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS!



A WONDER OF THE ANCIENT WORLD!

AND WE DISCOVERED IT!

Indeed.

I can hardly contain my excitement.

...

YOU'RE SO FRUSTRATING, V'AYT.



IF YOU'RE THRILLED, ACT THRILLED! CHEER!

Uhm... Woot?

S-squee?

GUH. NEVER MIND.

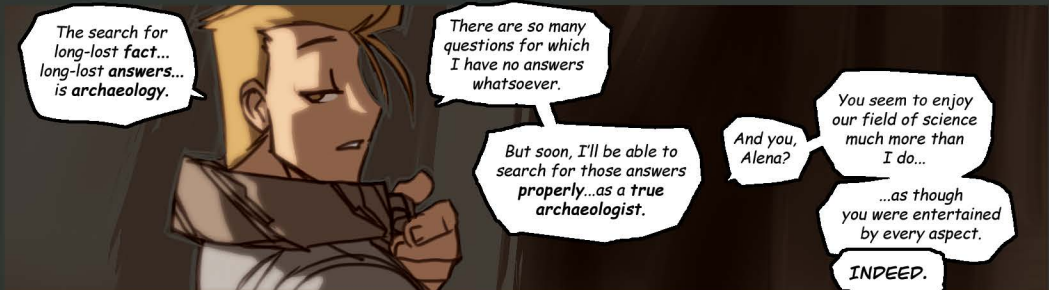


W-well...

...actually...this is my first field expedition... I'm not sure how I should react.

F-for as long as I can remember, I've been indoors with books.

Longing to travel. To explore.





SO, V'AYT...
LET'S COMPARE
NOTES.

WHAT DOES
YOUR ARCAINE
EXPERTISE TELL
YOU ABOUT
THIS FORTRESS?

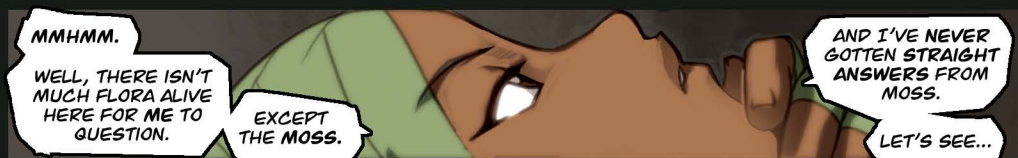
I sense violent
magic. Potent.
Waiting.

A stockpile held
in check even after
all this time.

Explosive
magic.
Displacement
magic.
Illusionary
magic.

In the "Age of
Wonders", this
fortress could
teleport to
locations across
the world to
unleash its
weapons.

And yet it
was utterly
conquered and
entombed
beneath the
earth.



MMHMM.

WELL, THERE ISN'T
MUCH FLORA ALIVE
HERE FOR ME TO
QUESTION.

EXCEPT
THE MOSS.

AND I'VE NEVER
GOTTEN STRAIGHT
ANSWERS FROM
MOSS.

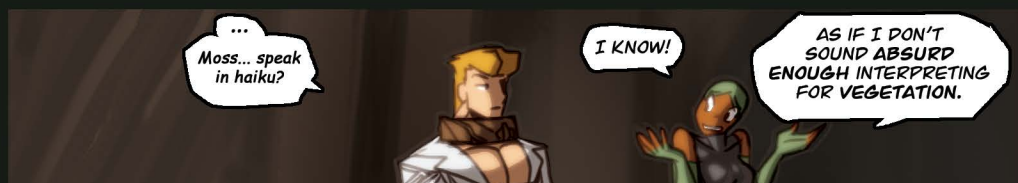
LET'S SEE...



THEY SAY...

"A FLEXIBLE STONE...
WAITS FOR A MOMENT LONG PASSED...
TREMBLING IN THE DARK."

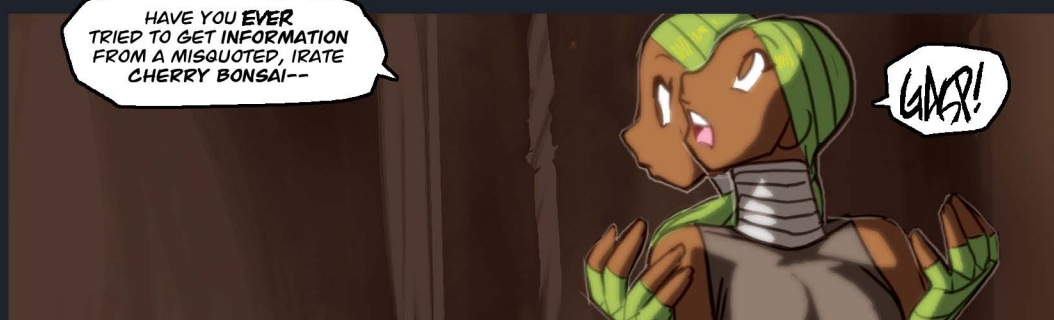
"THE HEART OF THESE WALLS...
MOURNS ITS VICTORIOUS FOE...
YET DENIES DEFEAT."



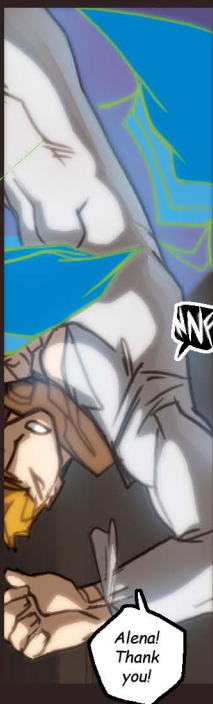
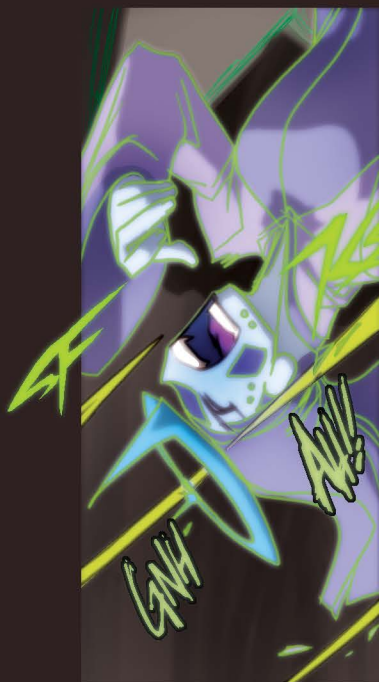
...
Moss... speak
in haiku?

I KNOW!

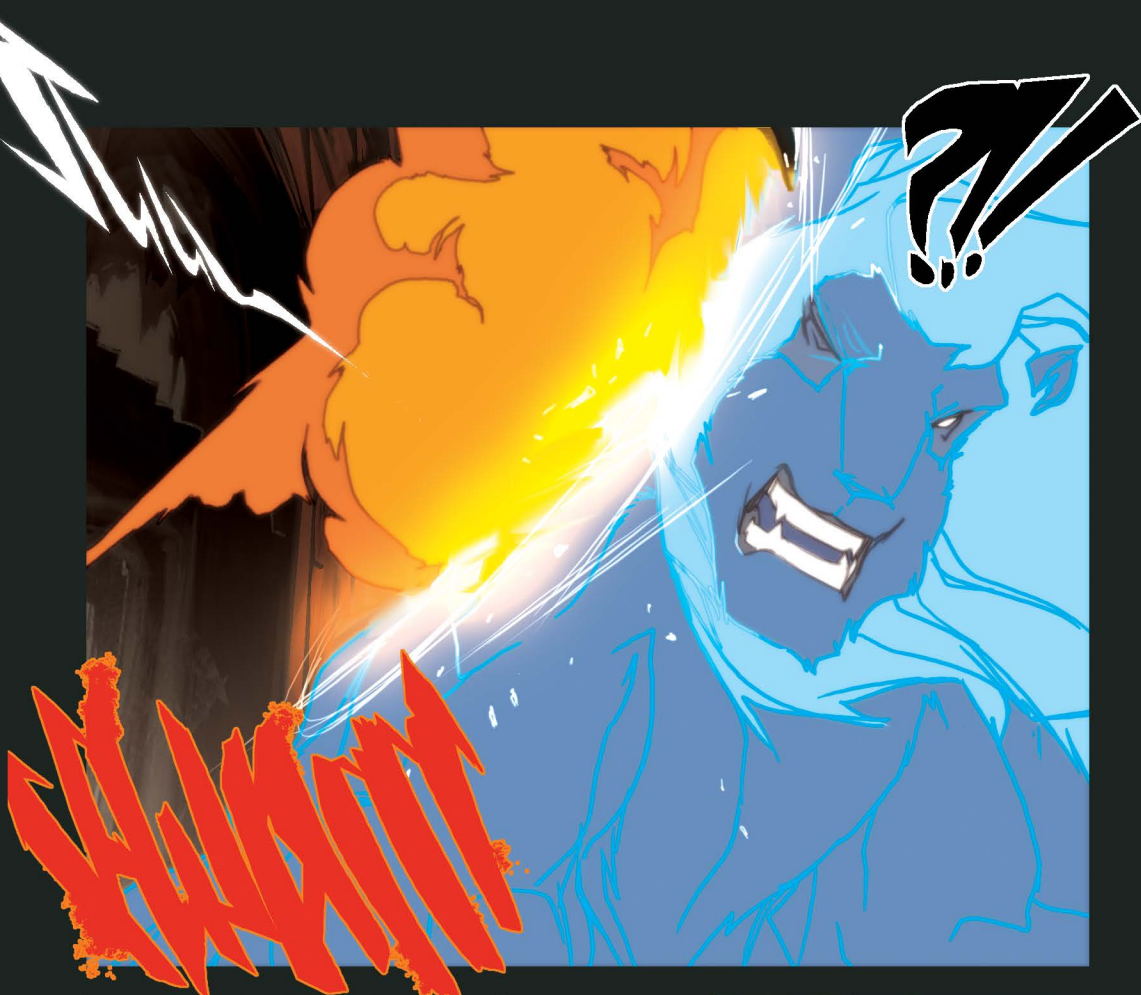
AS IF I DON'T
SOUND ABSURD
ENOUGH INTERPRETING
FOR VEGETATION.













REINFORCEMENTS!?

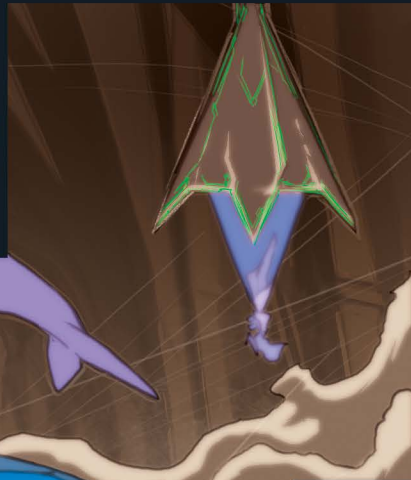
GALARIDA!
INTERCEPT!

MY BROTHER
MUST NOT
ESCAPE!



Nn!

Fuup



C-COME ON,
V'ATT!
Save
yourself,
Alena!

Hiiii

GGROAR

BOOM!

I-I'm caught!
a-and I can't
find the--the
strength to
pull free!



How?

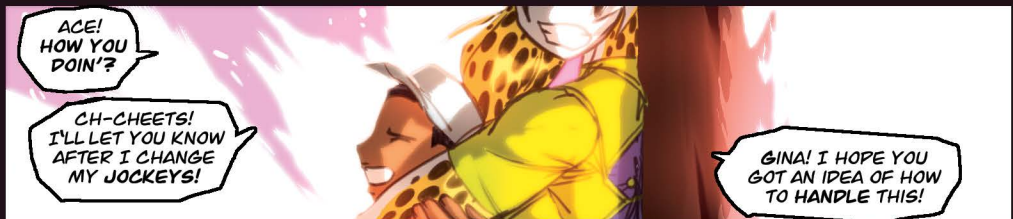
How did
you get
out?

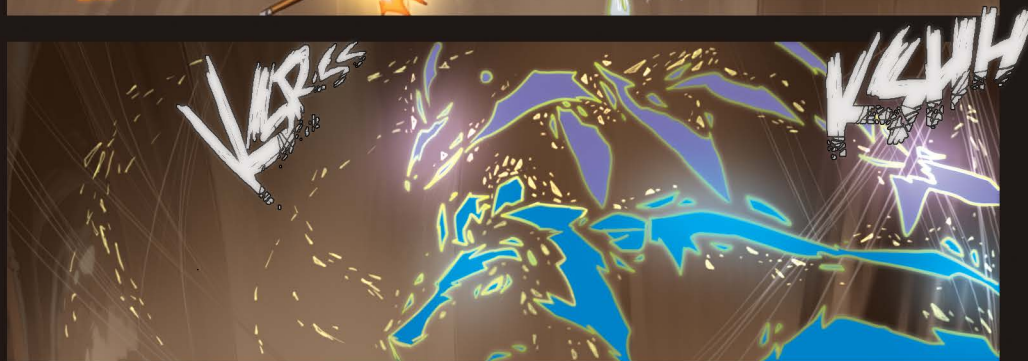
YOU HAVE THE
ABSOLUTE WORST
LUCK, V'ATT!!

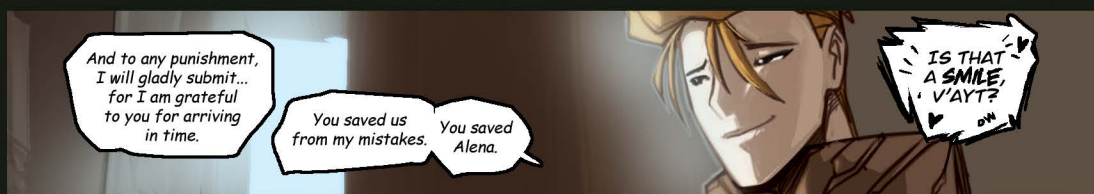


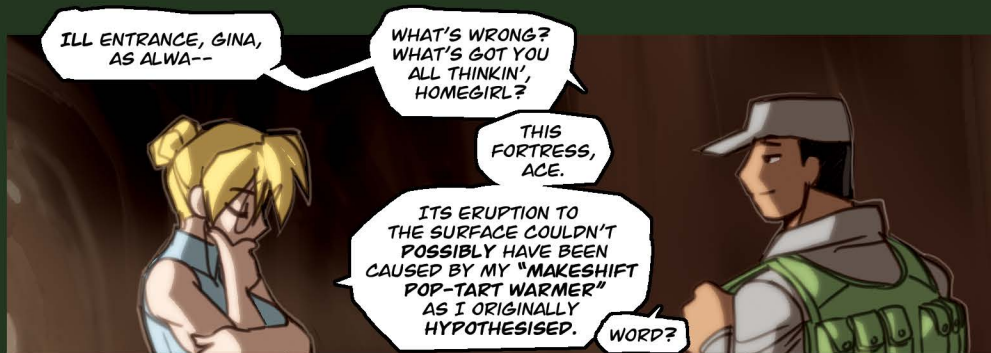
ZHAAAA

BROTHER...
FAREWELL.









THE TRIAL YOU
RELEASED TO
THE SURFACE
WAS SO EASILY
CONQUERED!

WHY DO YOU
STILL DOUBT,
PRINCE
RATHALON?

WHY DO
YOU STILL
HESITATE?

BEFORE YOU IS
THE CHAMPION
YOU'VE BEEN
WAITING FOR
EONS TO
COME!

DARE... DARE,
MY PRINCE!

POOR MERKLIA
IS FREE OF MY
CURSED POWER...
I AM GLAD
FOR HER.

BUT I MUST
BE CERTAIN.

I MUST BE
CAUTIOUS, OR
ALL THAT I HAVE
FOUGHT AND
SUFFERED FOR
IS LOST.

BEFORE I TAKE
MY FINAL RISK...

...I MUST DEVISE
ANOTHER TRIAL!