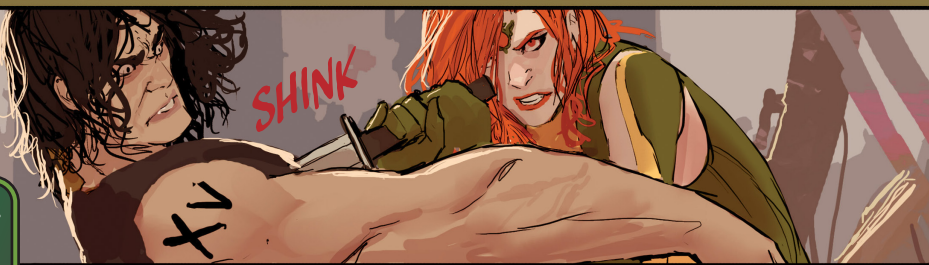




TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO THIS WAS SPEROS CITY, THE CAPITAL CITY OF A CYBORG RACE, WHOSE POPULATION WAS REDISTRIBUTED INTO NINE UNIQUE CITY-STATES, RULED OVER BY THEIR NEW IXTH GENERATION OVERLORDS.

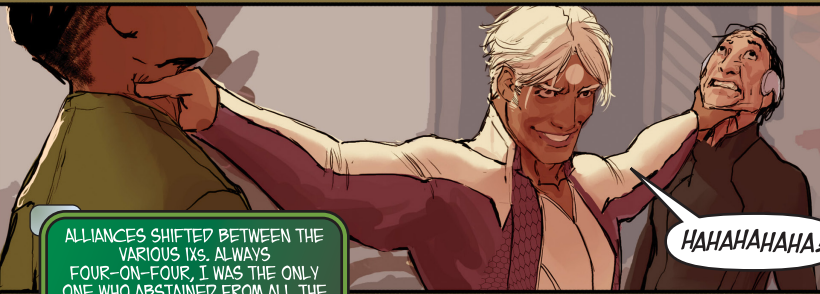
THE ONCE-PROUD CYBORGS HAD BEEN RELEGATED TO A WORKER CASTE KEPT IN LINE BY THE WARRIOR CASTE OF SYNTHETIC XVS, WHO CARRIED THE LIKENESS OF THEIR MASTERS.



THE NINE FREEDOMS GREW AND DEVELOPED A PERSONALITY MOPELED AND NAMED AFTER THEIR IX. I CHOSE THE NORTHERNMOST ONE FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS, AND TRIED TO MAKE THE SOMEWHAT ISOLATED "APHRODITE" A HARMONIOUS, PEACEFUL LAND.



THE FIRST DECADE WAS QUIET, AND I WAS HOPEFUL FOR OUR BURGEONING UTOPIA. ULTIMATELY IT WAS ONLY IDEAL FOR THE NINE OF US IN POWER.



DURING THE SECOND DECADE A FEW SKIRMISHES BROKE OUT, BUT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS IT'S BEEN ENDLESS WAR BETWEEN THEM ALL.

ALLIANCES SHIFTED BETWEEN THE VARIOUS IXS. ALWAYS FOUR-ON-FOUR, I WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO ABSTAINED FROM ALL THE NONSENSE. A LUXURY PERHAPS OF MY CHOOSING A SECLUDED REGION NO ONE ELSE DESIRED.

HAHAHAHAHA!



IT WAS ALL A GAME TO THEM. IF ONE OF THEM DIED, THEIR CONSCIOUSNESS AND MEMORIES WOULD BE DOWNLOADED INTO A CLONED BODY, AND THEY WOULD ENTER THE FRAY ANEW.



DEATH HAD LOST ITS STING.

HADES AND I WERE THE ONLY TWO WHO RETAINED OUR ORIGINAL BODIES, AND SHE TOOK GREAT PRIDE IN THAT.

THE OTHERS STILL LOOKED AND ACTED LIKE THE CHILDREN I WAS FOSTERED ALONGSIDE, BUT I WONDERED IF THEY WERE MERELY CRUEL FACSIMILES.

MY RECENT DECISION TO JOIN THE ACTION WAS AN ATTEMPT TO PUT A STOP TO ALL THE MEANINGLESS VIOLENCE.

HADES WAS THE STRONGEST OF THE OTHER FIGHT, AND I KNEW IF I COULD GET TO HER, THE OTHERS WOULD LISTEN.

PIFF

PIFF

THOK

THOK

WTF? THOSE WERE MY BEST XVS!

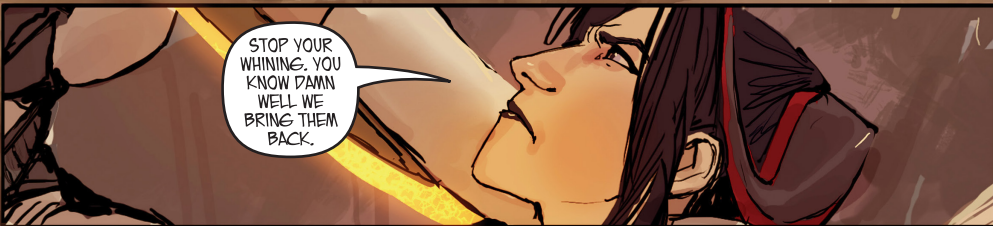




GREEN?
WHAT GIVES?
THOUGHT YOU
LOOKED DOWN
ON OUR
GAMES.



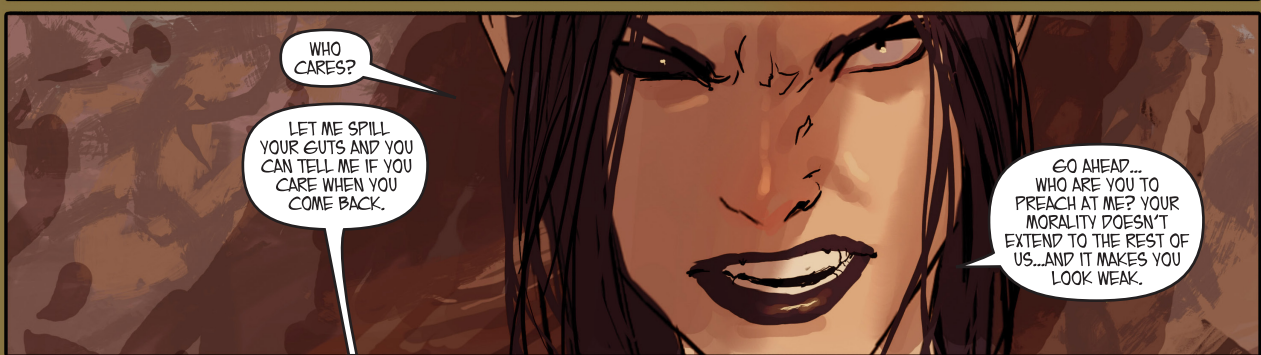
YOU CALL
THIS A GAME? HOW
MANY INNOCENT
CYBORGES HAVE BEEN
SLAUGHTERED HERE
TODAY ALONE?



STOP YOUR
WHINING. YOU
KNOW DAMN
WELL WE
BRING THEM
BACK.



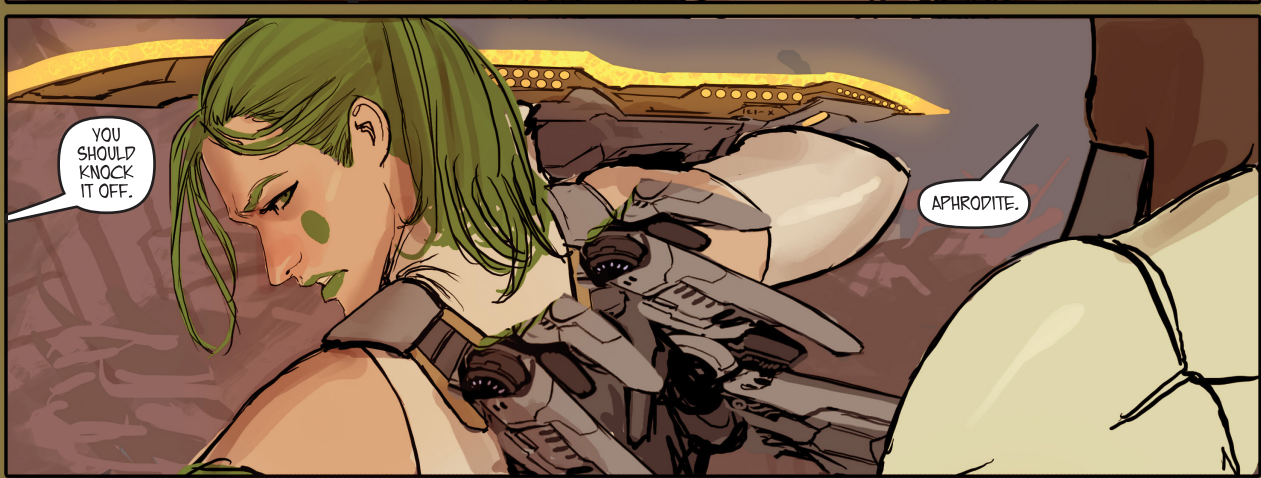
THIS RESURRECTION... HOW DO YOU KNOW IT'S THE SAME BEING THAT WAKES UP AND NOT A COPY?



WHO CARES?

LET ME SPILL YOUR GUTS AND YOU CAN TELL ME IF YOU CARE WHEN YOU COME BACK.

GO AHEAD... WHO ARE YOU TO PREACH AT ME? YOUR MORALITY DOESN'T EXTEND TO THE REST OF US...AND IT MAKES YOU LOOK WEAK.



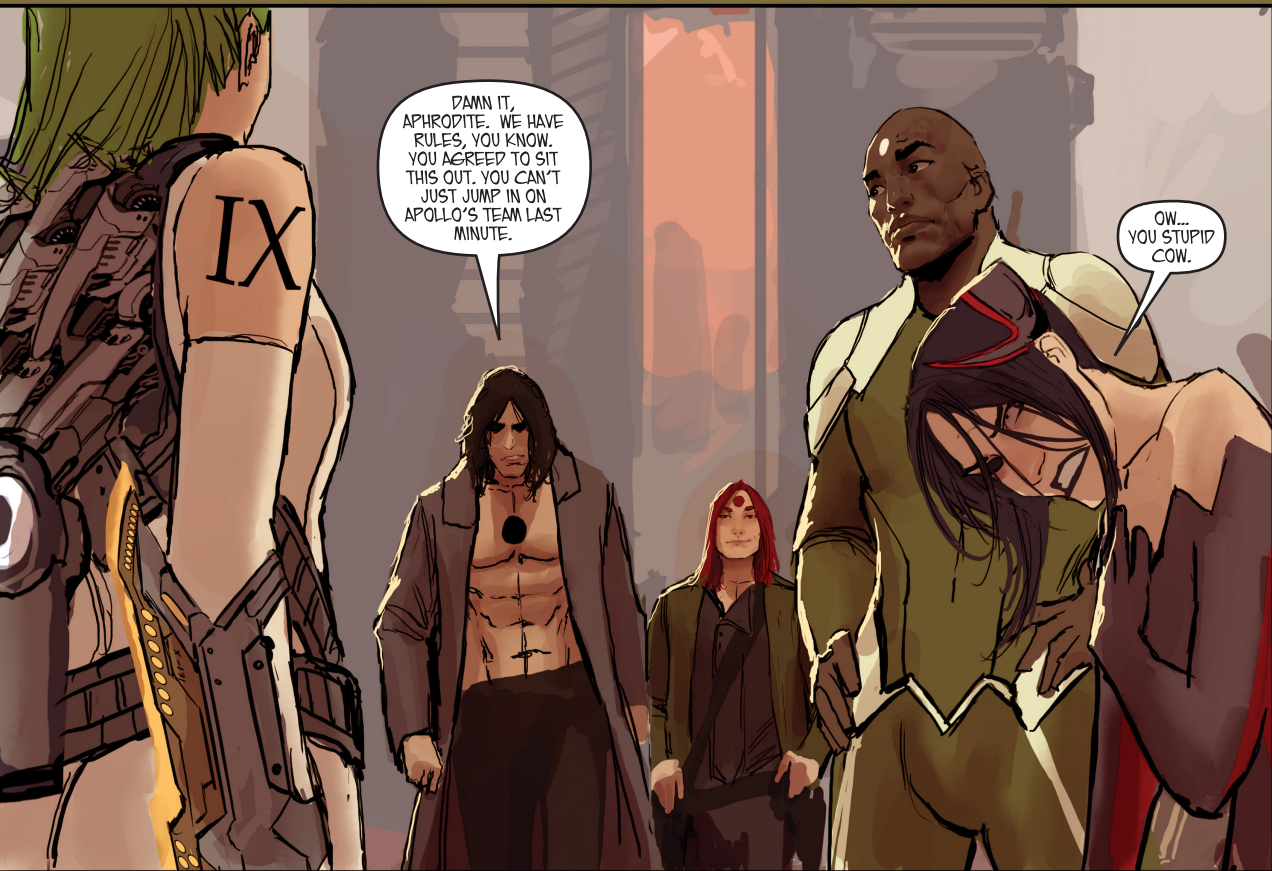
YOU SHOULD KNOCK IT OFF.

APHRODITE.



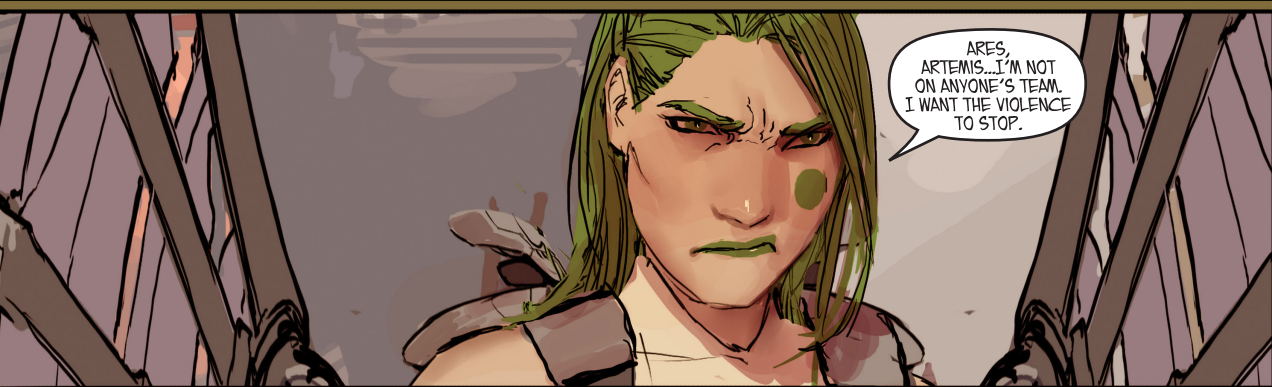
HEPHAESTUS?

YES, IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU. IT'S BEEN A FEW YEARS.

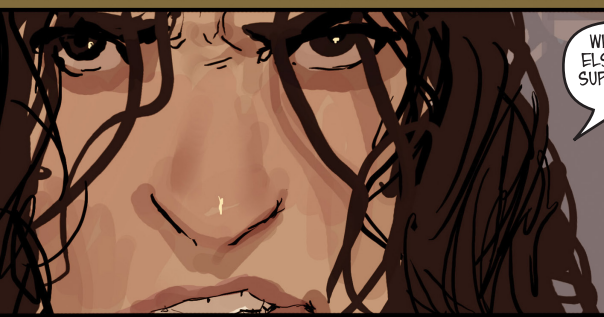


DAMN IT, APHRODITE. WE HAVE RULES, YOU KNOW. YOU AGREED TO SIT THIS OUT. YOU CAN'T JUST JUMP IN ON APOLLO'S TEAM LAST MINUTE.

OW... YOU STUPID COW.



ARES, ARTEMIS... I'M NOT ON ANYONE'S TEAM. I WANT THE VIOLENCE TO STOP.



WHY? WHAT ELSE ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO?



YEAH, SWEETHEART, COME ON. YOU WERE THE ONE WHO SAID WE NEEDED TO MAINTAIN OUR SKILLS.



THAT WAS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, RIGHT AFTER WE SAW THAT THING THAT KILLED THE REAL HEPHAESTUS.* WE HAVEN'T SEEN IT SINCE.



I... I'M REAL. WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT?

In the landmark Aphrodite IX #1!