



Power and Social Vulnerability in *Black Cloak* and *The Power Fantasy*

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Black Cloak: Kelly Thompson and
Meredith McClaren, 2023-2025, 11 issues

The Power Fantasy: Kieron Gillen and
Caspar Wijngaard, 2024-2025, 10 issues





- Power from social status
- Power from decisions/actions that affect others—both in the name of justice and oppression

Phaedra Essex

Banished from the Elf palace of Kiros, the last city in the world, because she is secretly biracial; her secret father is one of the most powerful Dracona in the city.

Despite these powerful family connections she becomes a working-class Black Cloak, or cop.

BLACK CLOAK





The world Phaedra lives in has extensive racial tensions, with Elves and Dracona on top, Humans below, and Trolls, (Mer)Maids, and others at the bottom.



Racial tensions are strongly felt and potentially violent. Multiracial backgrounds are not acceptable.



Races at the bottom of the hierarchy face stereotypes and direct negative consequences:
Maids lay fallow in bar aquariums and Bellweathers are considered inappropriate for Black Cloaks.

THE TREES.

AT LEAST
THE TREES ARE ONE
OF THE SAFEST PLACES
WE COULD GO. VERY
FEW CITIZENS GOING TO
CALL ANYTHING IN,
NO MATTER WHAT
THEY SEE.

TESTAMENT TO
WHAT FAILURES
WE ARE.



There are also
class and
geographic
tensions.

The Trees are
an under-
policed ghetto
for certain
lower races.



UGH.
NO.

THAT'S
DIRECTED
AT US?

OF
COURSE
IT IS!

OFF TO A
GREAT START
THEN.



UGH!

OH.
COZY. SORTA
STICKY.

JUST DON'T
THINK ABOUT IT
TOO MUCH.

TOO
LATE.

Being an exotic dancer has the same
connotations as in our world.

As Renna says, "some people have
power and others don't...which do I
appear to be to you?"

WELL,
IT'S HARD TO
BREATHE WITH A
BOOT ON YOUR
NECK.

I'M SURE IT
HASN'T ESCAPED YOUR
KEEN-EYED ATTENTION THAT
THINGS ARE PRETTY FUCKED,
DETECTIVE. SOME PEOPLE
HAVE POWER AND OTHERS
DON'T...WHICH DO I
APPEAR TO BE TO
YOU?



Black Cloaks are feared and disdained by the old forms of power (the Elf ruling class) who they can technically police, and the underclasses who are suspicious of their power.





Decision #1:

Phaedra breaks up with Freyal, the Elf crown prince, after her Dracona wings start to grow and her biracial background is no longer possible to hide.





Decision #2: The Taka. Cute furry creatures thought to be extinct. Actually, the Elf Queen has been violently absorbing their magic, which she uses to keep the magic city working. They turn into Wraiths, which people think are just a rat-like infestation of the city.



PERHAPS
"FALL" IS TOO EXTREME.
BUT JUST IMAGINE IT FOR
A MOMENT...THIS CITY
WITHOUT ENOUGH
MAGIC.

WHAT DO YOU
THINK THAT LOOKS
LIKE, DETECTIVE? HOW
MANY MECHANISMS WILL
FAIL? HOW MANY FIGHTS
WILL BREAK OUT WHEN NO
ONE SPEAKS THE SAME
LANGUAGE? HOW MANY
STRUCTURES WILL
COLLAPSE?

WHERE
DOES **YOUR**
FAMILY LIVE,
DETECTIVE?



PAX, DON'T
LISTEN TO
HER!

**SHE'S
LYING!**

THERE HAS
TO BE ANOTHER
WAY, ESSEX! THIS
CITY NEEDS MAGIC
TO SURVIVE! IF WE
CUT OFF ACCESS TO
THAT MAGIC...SO
MANY PEOPLE
WILL DIE.



PHAEDRA.
KIROS IS THE LAST
CITY IN THE KNOWN
WORLD...IF YOU BRING
IT DOWN HERE TODAY,
THERE WILL BE
NOTHING LEFT.

IF WE CAN'T
SURVIVE WITHOUT
KILLING THE INNOCENT
THEN **NOTHING** IS
EXACTLY WHAT WE
DESERVE.



The queen says that while it is a terrible process, this is the only way to keep the city running, and it saves the lives of the sentient races.

The most vulnerable people in the city would be affected by this loss of magic.

Phaedra sees the Taka as innocent beings and believes it is an unacceptable moral sin to base everyone's comfort on their sacrifice.



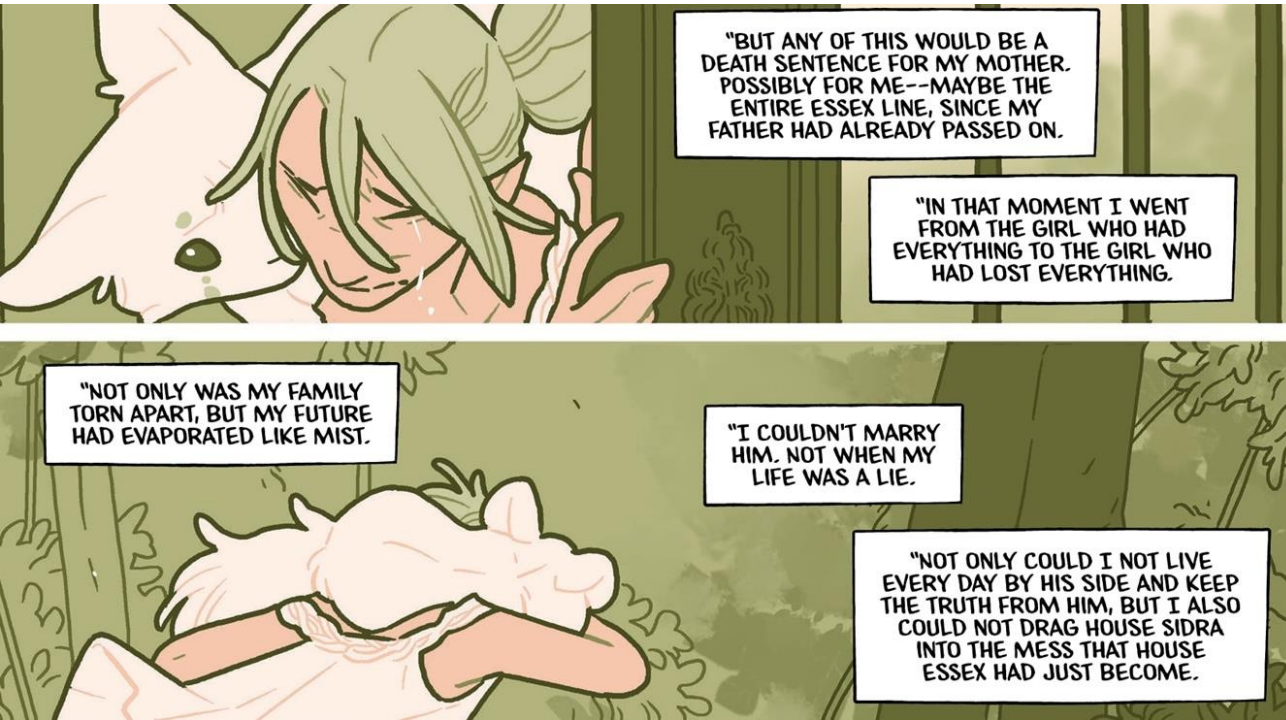
Phaestra explicitly says she is willing for some people to die in order to rectify the city's actions against the Taka.

Her partner, Theron, disagrees. He doesn't want the Taka to be hurt but would prioritize the lives of the sentient people of the city.

They both say they are trying to save the lives of "innocents."

Note that even though Phaestra has significant family, class, and racial privileges, and is enmeshed in a world where those things are paramount, her power here comes not from those privileges, or even from her identity as a Black Cloak, but from being in the right place at the right time, with the *physical* power to stop the machine.





Even though he is the crown prince, Freyal is the one who is vulnerable and hurt by Phaedra's breakup with him. He is heartbroken and ends up anchorless.

Phaedra moves on to a queer relationship with a woman (unlike tensions over race and class, same-sex relationships seem to be normalized in Kiros) and takes on a strong anti-elite and anti-racist perspective.

What vulnerabilities are connected to these decisions, and where does the power to cause these vulnerabilities stem from?



Because of the breakup, Freyal drifts away from his royal mores and starts secretly exploring the life of the underclasses. He finds out about the Taka.

Once again, he is the vulnerable one. The queen, his mother, kills him to cover up the secret of the Taka. Freyal's Elf girlfriend and a Maid end up being killed as follow-ups to Freyal's death.

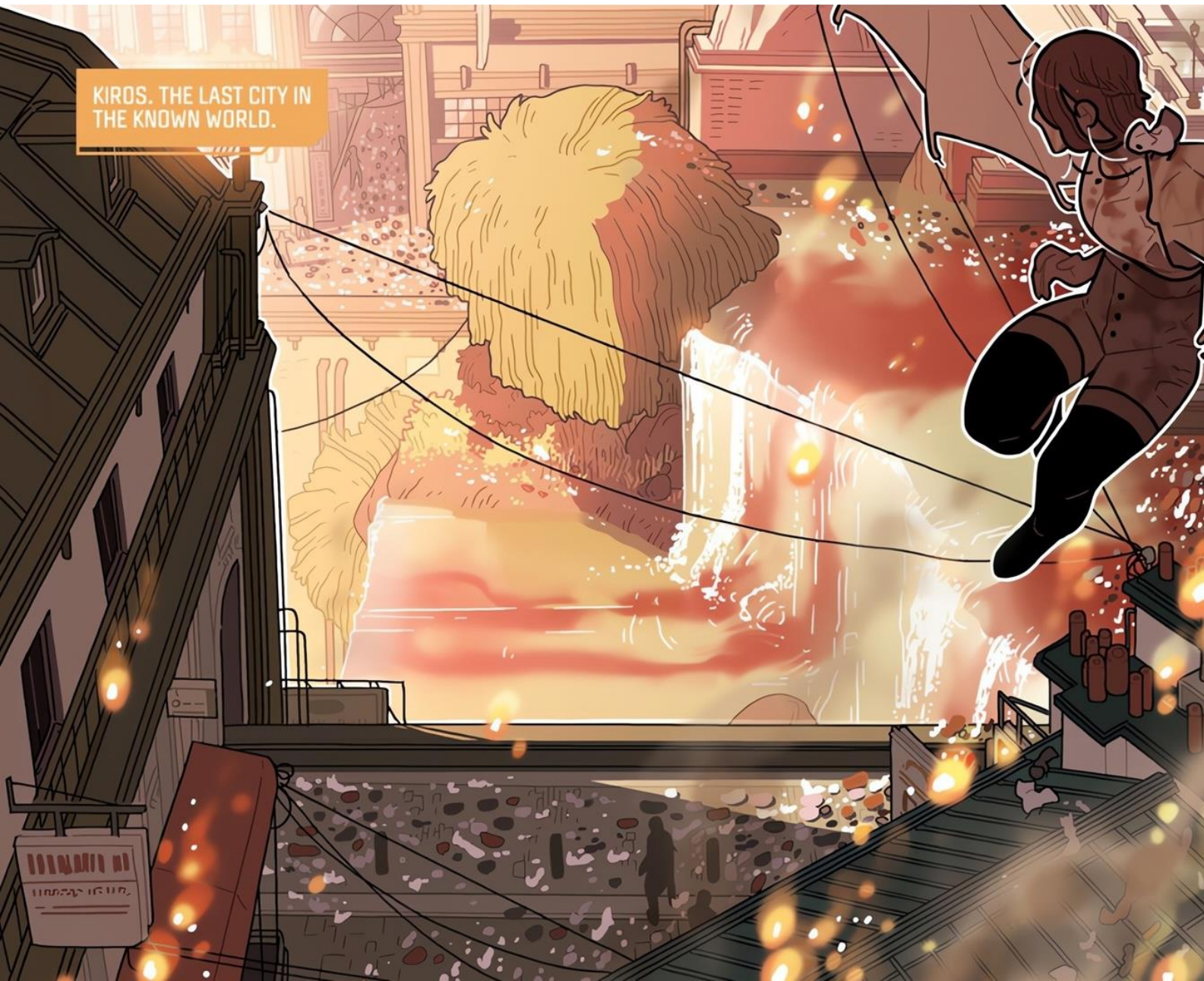


These deaths are attributable to the queen's power as an Elf and a member of the ruling elite.

She is also able to turn the power of the state against Phaedra and Theron.

Power will do what is necessary to keep its secrets, no matter who the victim is.

The city is beset by flood and fire, as the queen predicted.



The most vulnerable sections of town are affected, including The Narrows, which is completely flooded.

Many members of the underclasses still live in the affected areas for lack of any other options.





A kid, Iona, who gave Phaedra some information that helped her figure out what happened to Freyal and the Taka, feels guilty for helping destroy her own neighborhood.



This is an example of someone clearly below Phaedra in social and practical influence, who Phaedra “used” without thinking about it.



Phaedra's relationships with her girlfriend, Nida, and her Black Cloak partner, Theron, end.

They can't accept Phaedra's decision to hurt the most vulnerable among the city's population.





In addition to widespread, seemingly faceless damage, Phaedra learns that people close to her are hurt by the fires as well. Theron's daughter loses her wings.

Before the fire, mech wings were seen as a way for privileged Elves to mimic the abilities of lower flying races—a form of cultural appropriation.

Phaedra achieves some small redemption when she gives her old mech wings to Theron's daughter.





Some groups are positively affected by Phaedra's decision.

The Taka flourish, spreading across the city.

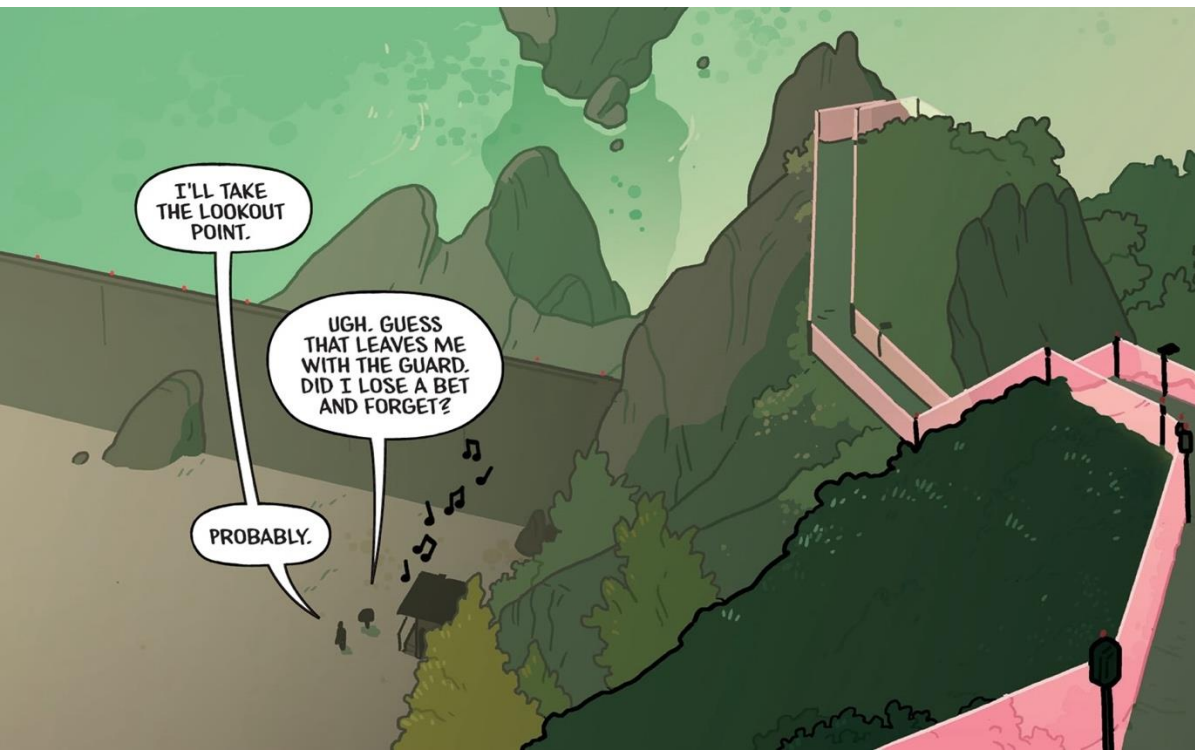
Other species perhaps benefit from the consideration of seeing Taka as sentient.

Mermaids, or Maids, are originally seen as mindless, people-eating horrors with insanity-inducing screams. They are kept behind a fence with guards and sonic deterrents.

After the floods, they spread freely through the new underwater sections of the city. Now that they are free, their cries are no longer dangerous.

As Phaedra says, “maybe the mistake was treating them like mindless monsters in the first place?”

A similar thing happens with the creatures known as Dragyern, who originally can’t be conceived of as “citizens” but whose intelligence is later appreciated to a greater degree.



Later, Phaedra, Theron, and a resistance group comprised of members of the underclasses as well as children of some of the ruling classes manage to stop another attempt by the elite to control magic in the city.



They give this new synthetic magic to Phaedra's Dracona father, who is now the Prime Minister. He uses it to restore many of the magical processes that failed after Phaedra's destruction of the Taka-absorbing process.

The question is, what would happen if Phaedra faced the same decision again, having seen the consequences of her actions?

THE POWER FANTASY



Valentina
and Etienne



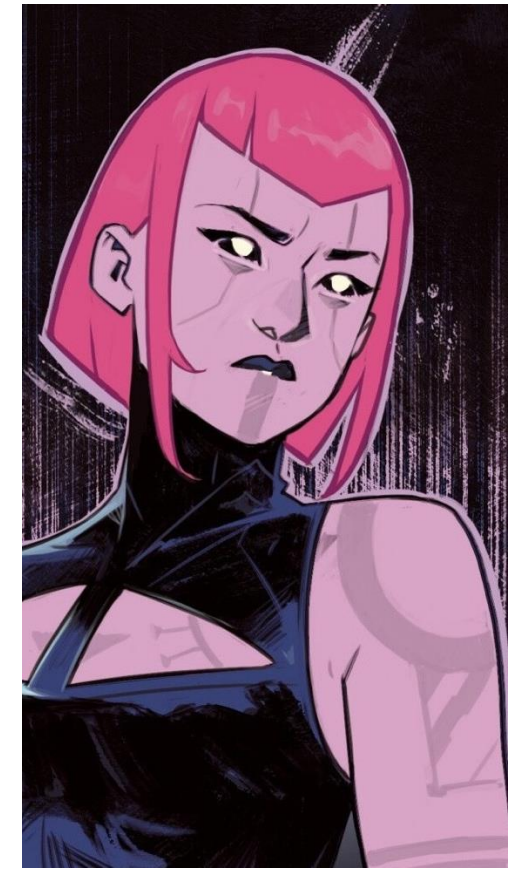
Magus



Heavy



Masumi



Eliza

Six people in the world have powers at the level of a nuclear state. Their existence makes the powers of nations functionally irrelevant and the entire population of the world become vulnerable to the Superpowers' decisions.

The two Superpowers at the center of the story are Etienne, who follows rigid ethical guidelines based on what most benefits the most people, and Valentina, who is heaven-sent and purely moral, making decisions based on immutable categories of right and wrong.



Etienne tells Valentina that, given the Superpowers' status, they have two options: Rule the world as benevolent dictators or engage in a constant balancing act among themselves and the jealous nations. Although he thinks the former is better, she insists on the latter, resulting in decades of perilous tension.

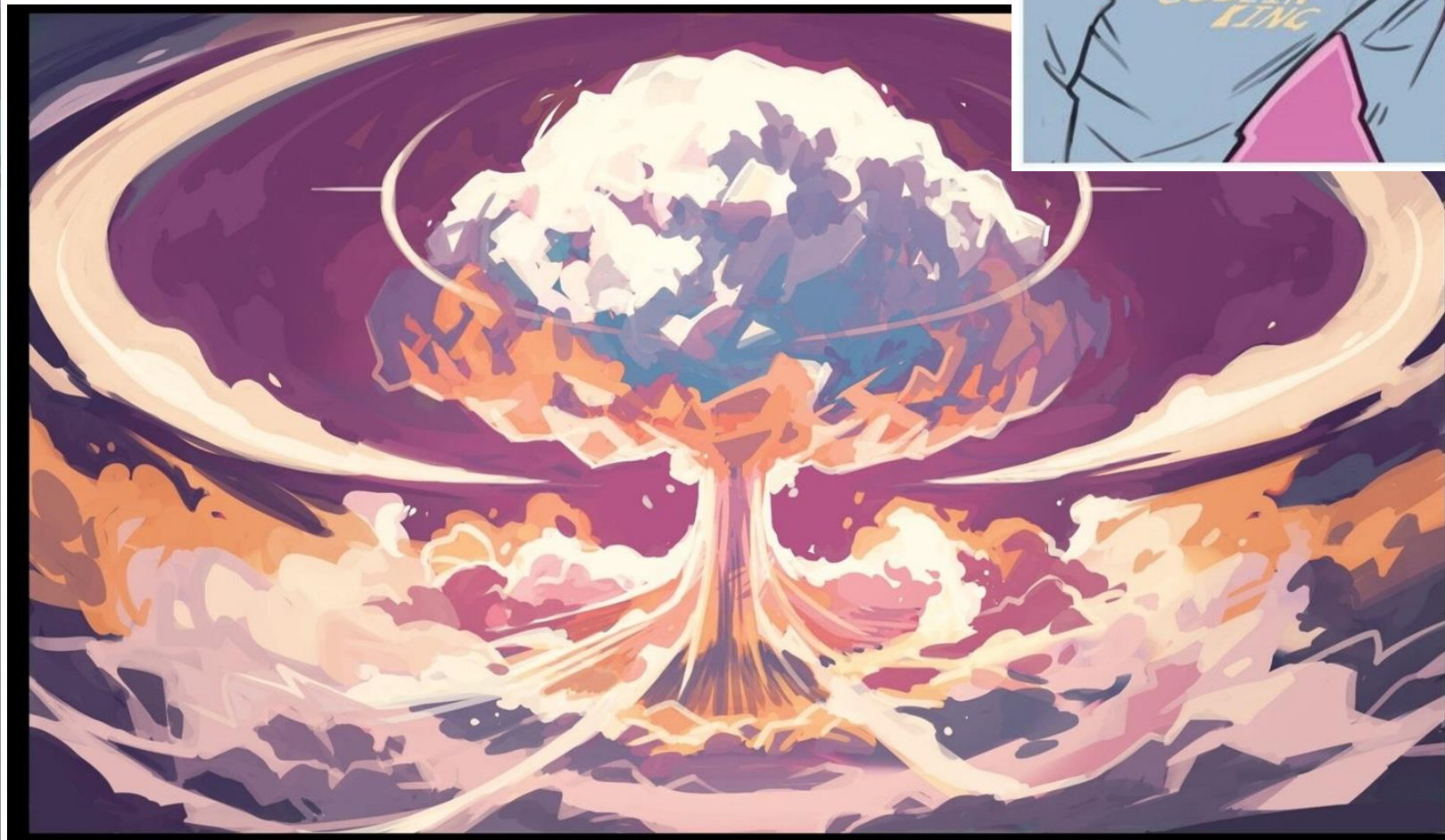


Each of the Superpowers insists they are “good people” and that it is appropriate for them to have this power, but they are suspicious of the foundations of the others’ morals.





Despite, or because of, their lesser power, the world states make a number of reckless moves, including attacking Valentina with a nuclear bomb at a peace festival. The Superpower Magus understands that they do this partly out of necessity, because their citizens feel vulnerable and need the countries to do *something*.



You've got a problem, New Mr. President.

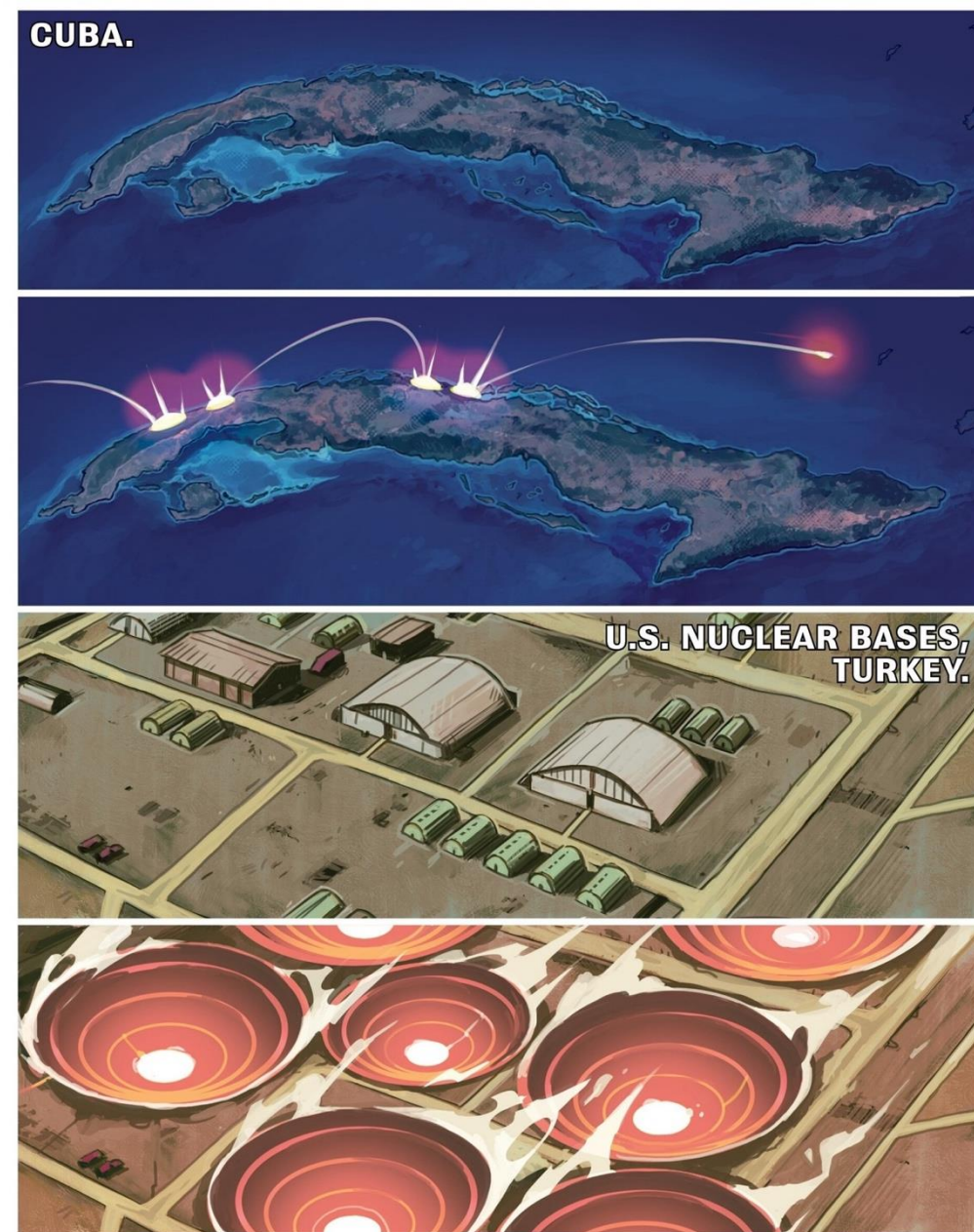
All those voters know, for certain, there's nothing you can do to protect them against us.

The U.S. needs one of *us*.



The nations of the world are not imagining their vulnerability or secondary status.

Valentina solves the Bay of Pigs by destroying all of the US and USSR's nuclear weapons.





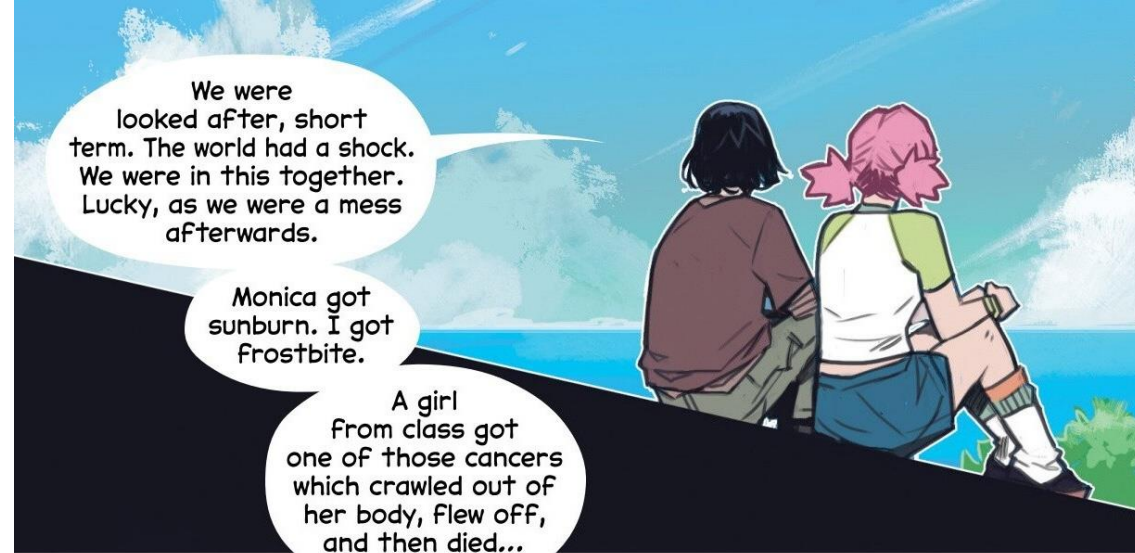
When the US tries to kill him, Etienne has to kill all the people involved in the US operation in order to placate Heavy, who otherwise wants to throw Texas into orbit.

Tonya, a reporter, points out that Heavy's actions wouldn't just hurt the military elite, they would hurt the everyday people that Heavy in theory wants to support. His bravado makes people more vulnerable, not less. As Magus says, "Heavy will keep on rolling dice until they turn up bad."

Not all Superpower interventions are so carefully considered.

Heavy brings his floating city, Haven, over the US border as an intentional provocation to show the Superpowers' superiority.





Everyday people can't handle being so vulnerable to the whims of the Superpowers. They are thankful to some Superpowers for saving them from some evils.



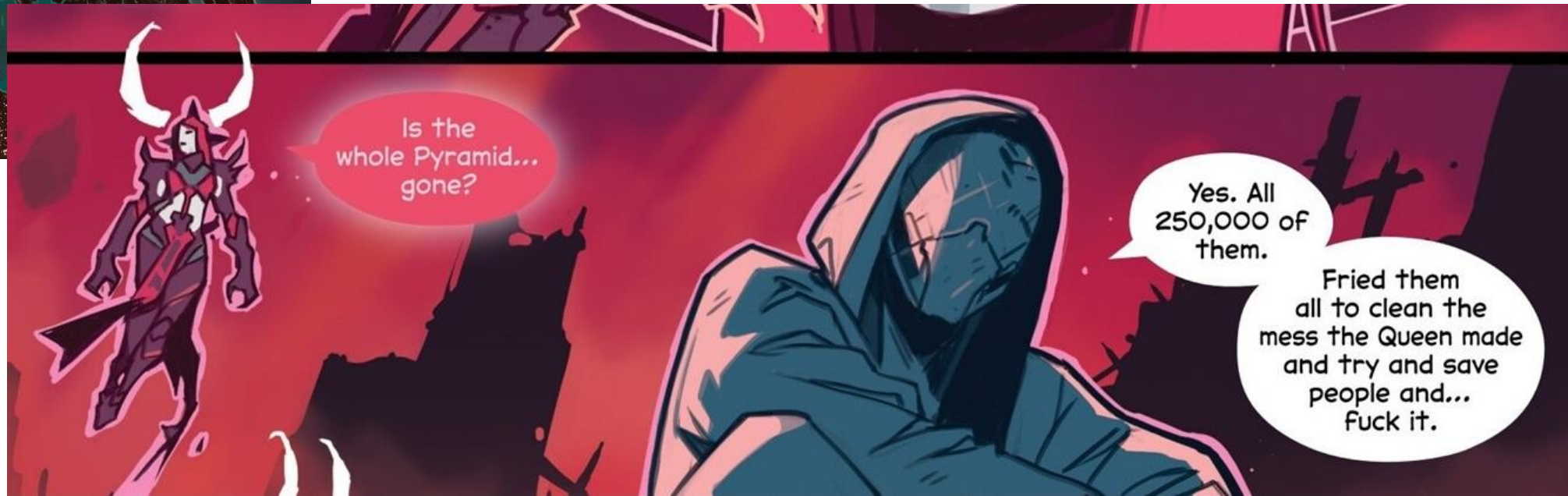
Meanwhile they live in horror at the actions of other Superpowers. The vulnerability of life feels random. Nothing they do matters.



The effects of the Superpowers are extreme.

When one, the Queen, goes crazy, she destroys Europe in a fight with Valentina.

Humans who have signed up to help the Superpowers are still completely at the whim of those Superpowers. Magus sacrifices 250,000 of his own followers to fight the Queen.



The Power Fantasy also follows the lives of some individual normal people.

Tonya, a reporter, finds herself in friendly proximity to Etienne and Heavy. However, she feels extremely vulnerable to them as well as to the state, which attempts to persecute her for her relationship with them.

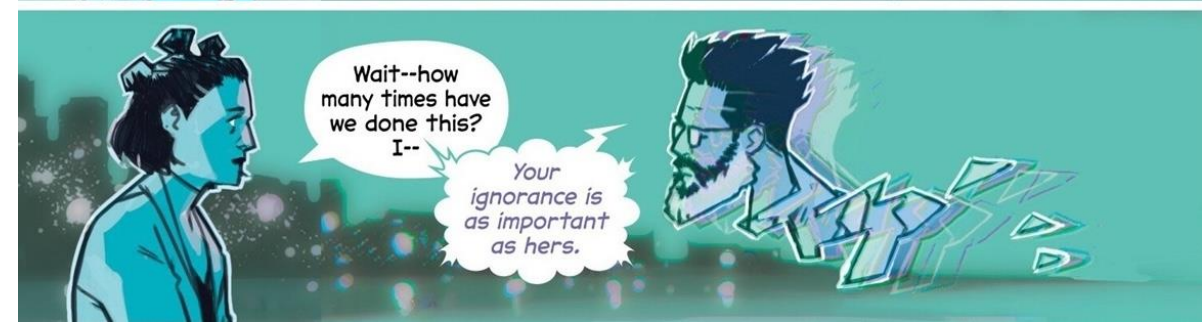
She is very aware that even though Etienne and Heavy protect her from the state, that protection could easily be overturned if she was critical of them.



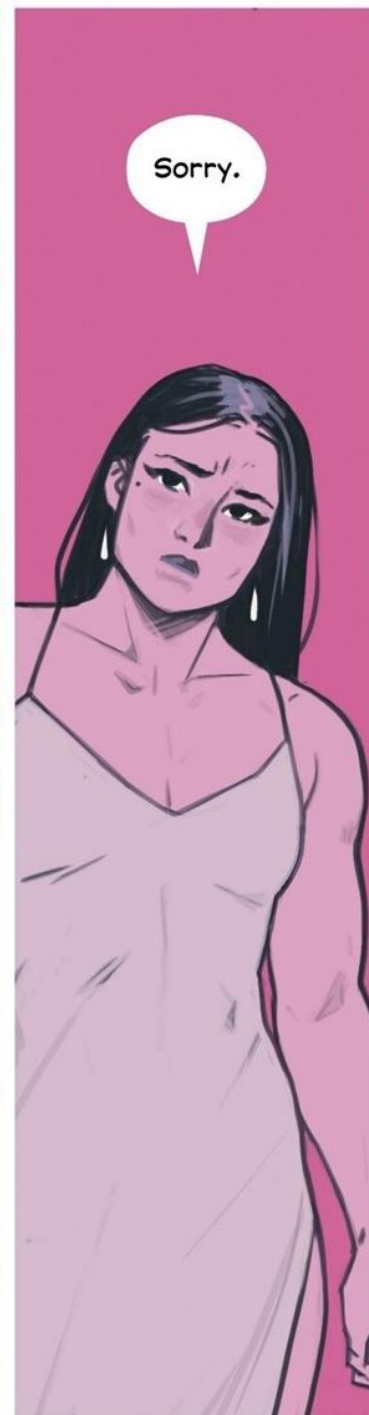


The Superpower Masumi can summon a world-destroying monster if she becomes emotionally unbalanced.

Her girlfriend, Isabella, ends up hating their relationship because she has to walk on eggshells all the time. She even has Etienne psychically drug her so she can endure the emotional pain of the situation.



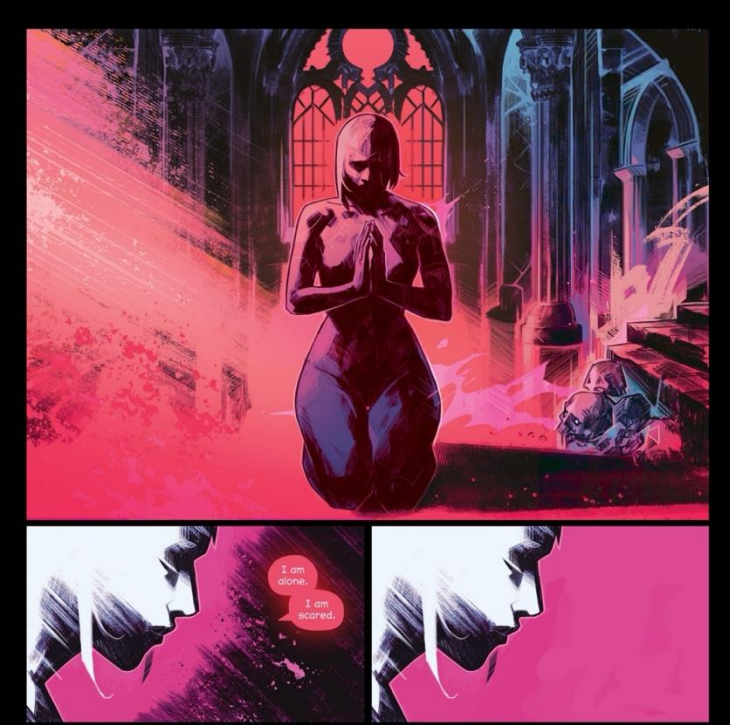
The Superpowers are also vulnerable to each other. They all fear Masumi's monster and constantly appease and apologize to her to keep her emotionally stable.





Eliza was a vulnerable human who sold her soul to Hell to become a Superpower and defeat the Queen. She did so knowing that this made her soul vulnerable to hellish torment. Her power, and temporal invulnerability, comes directly from her eternal vulnerability.



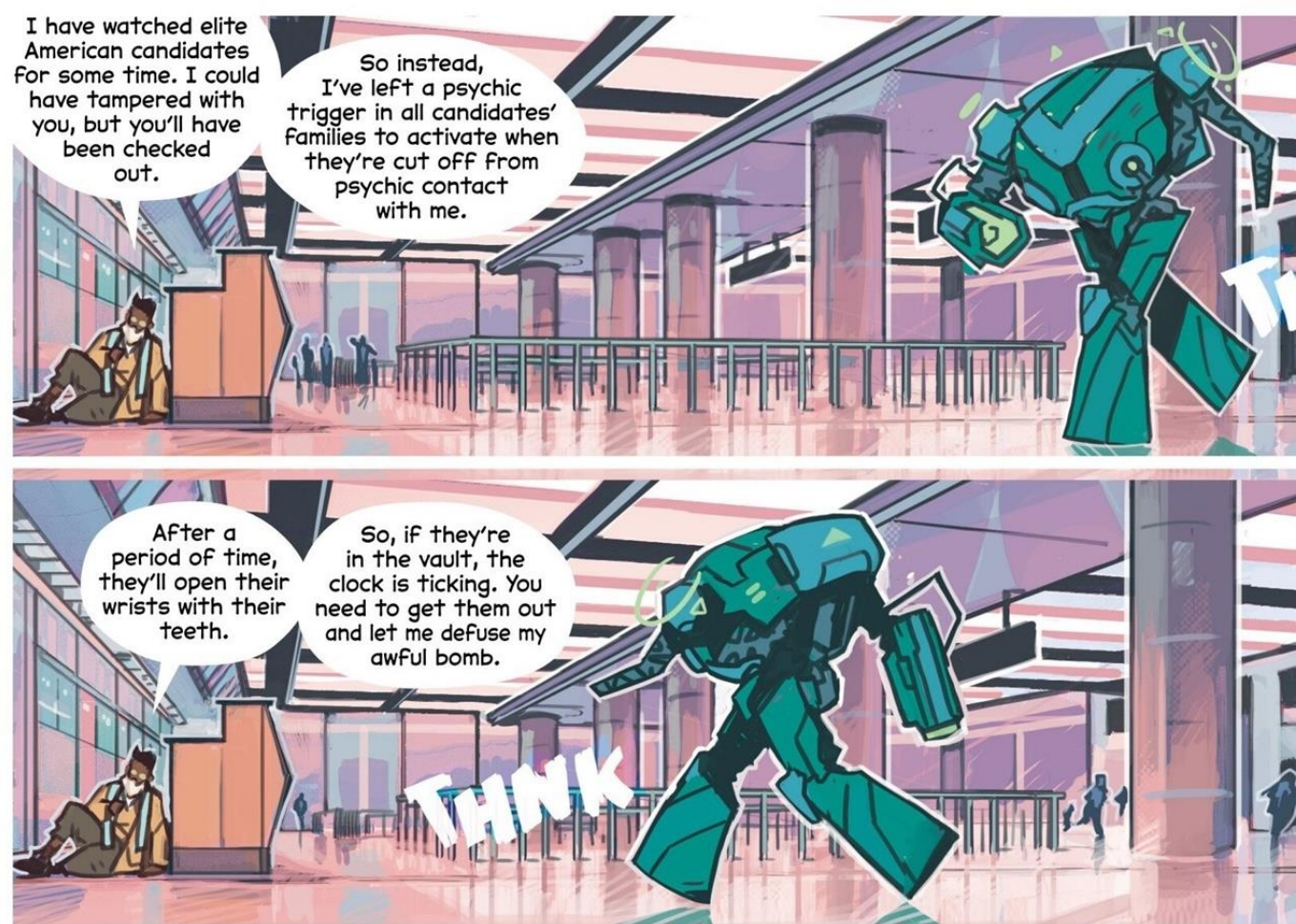


You are not alone.



One of the key dynamics in the series is that almost everyone is vulnerable to Etienne.

Despite, or because of, his ethics to do what is best for the most people, he kills thousands of police and military for Heavy, threatens soldiers' families, makes Eliza think God speaks to her, psychically makes Tonya spy on Heavy, meddles with Masumi's girlfriend's mind, makes an art critic change her review of Masumi's art, and forces Magus to always wear a mask to protect himself.



Etienne symbolizes the degree to which power imbalances mean vulnerabilities, and any vulnerabilities *will* be taken advantage of by someone, so they might as well be taken by someone in the name of justice.



Two questions exist in both comics:

When is it ok to harm a smaller group if it helps a larger group?

Can those with power ever be trusted to make decisions that affect the most vulnerable?

For Etienne, the answers are *always* and *never*.
For Phaedra, the answers are unsettled.

