



THE YARDS. SOMEWHERE IN THE GRASSLANDS, BARELY DAWN.

THE CAMPSITE OF THE ROVERS, A PERIPATETIC BAND OF ADVENTURERS.



... Lilac?

hmm?



So, you're off, then?

Yes. I thought it'd be best to leave before everyone woke up. I loaded the simulation horse so no one thinks one's gone missing.

Where are you headed?

I have no idea. I'm just going to play it by ear.

I'll probably head toward Graytower, but beyond that ...



You know, there's a chance you'll be recognized. That could cause you some problems ... I don't think Pauline Barker has too many enemies, but ...

Got a solution for that all ready to go.



What do you think?

Looks good ... but it might not be enough. It looks like a younger version of you, honestly.

Well, it basically is ...
hmm ...
I had thought about adjusting my complexion anyway ...



There. That'll help.

I'm travelling as "Peri," not that it'll help you find me. If you need me, you'll want to recall and send me a message.

I'll try to remember to go check them.



Lilac ... I'm not coming back anytime soon, I don't think.

I'm not worried about you, not with you and Emmy doing so well ... I'm very happy for you ...

And it's not personal ... it's just ... time for me to do something else for a while.

I understand.

Honestly, sometimes I've wondered why you didn't get bored with it ages ago.

I'm happy here -- the Rovers are my family now -- but you've got to be happy too. That's important.



Take care of yourself.

Take care of Emmy too.



Hey! Someone's coming!



It's Lis!

How long's she been riding? She's half asleep!

Get her off there before she falls off.



trouble ...

Hold there, Lis. You need sleep.

... no, listen ...

... trouble ..

... Graytower ...



I begin to suspect Nasty has misled us, Tri.

I concede it is a possibility, Rhi.

Nasty, this is where you said it would be. In fact, it seems very much as if we've gone past where you said it would be.

You're not being deceitful, now, are you?



Mno! no! Mmnasty not have map, no, Mnh, only in head, yes!

But you'd been there?

no, Mnever! not supposed to ... each sister her own, Mnh ...

You didn't tell us that!

not ask! Mmnasty head bad ... things go ... not ask!



you Mmake Mmnasty head bad! Mmbad to Mmnasty!

sisters find Mmnasty! save Mnaaaasty! Mmmake --

MMMAAA --
MMMMRRR!



Oh, dear. Well, we knew it was overdue to happen. Filthy only managed to keep her tongue for three days.

But do we keep looking, Tri? That is the issue at hand.

I don't see why not, Rhi. We can spare a while longer.

MMMMRRR!

MMMAAR!



You know, Nasty has presented us with a contradiction.

First she said that all of her kind keep to themselves. Then she said others of her kind will come looking for her.

Which do you suppose is correct, Tri?

That's a very interesting question, Rhi.



SEVERAL DAYS EARLIER



... the centaurs. They undid all my working, and put me in this ...

How long have you been in here?

I ... I'm not sure. It was hard to tell ...

But ... that's not doctrine, we're not supposed to ...

I am doctrine. If I say it's acceptable, it is.

This may well be an emergency.

All right. Get your things. We're going to visit some of the others.



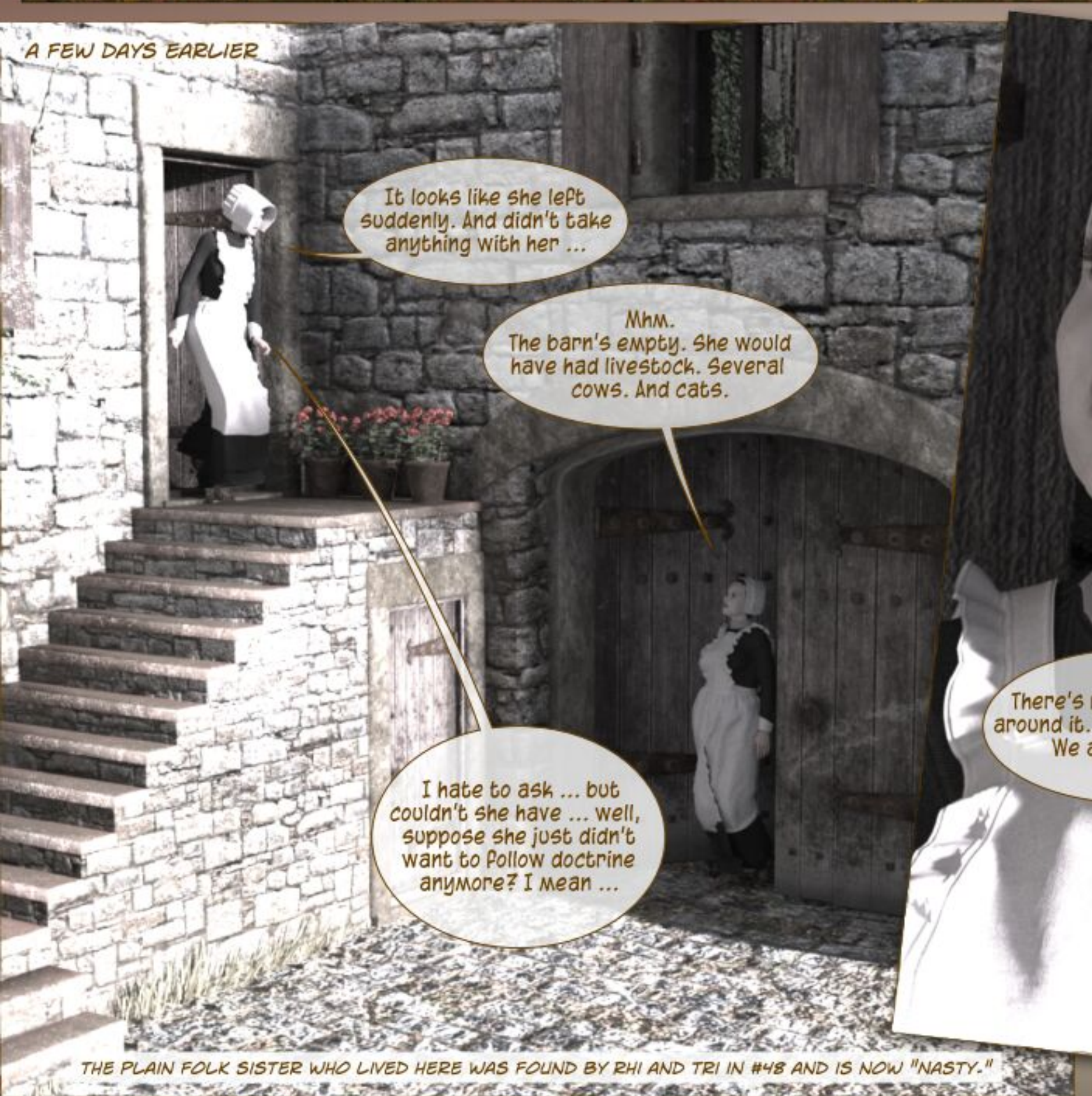
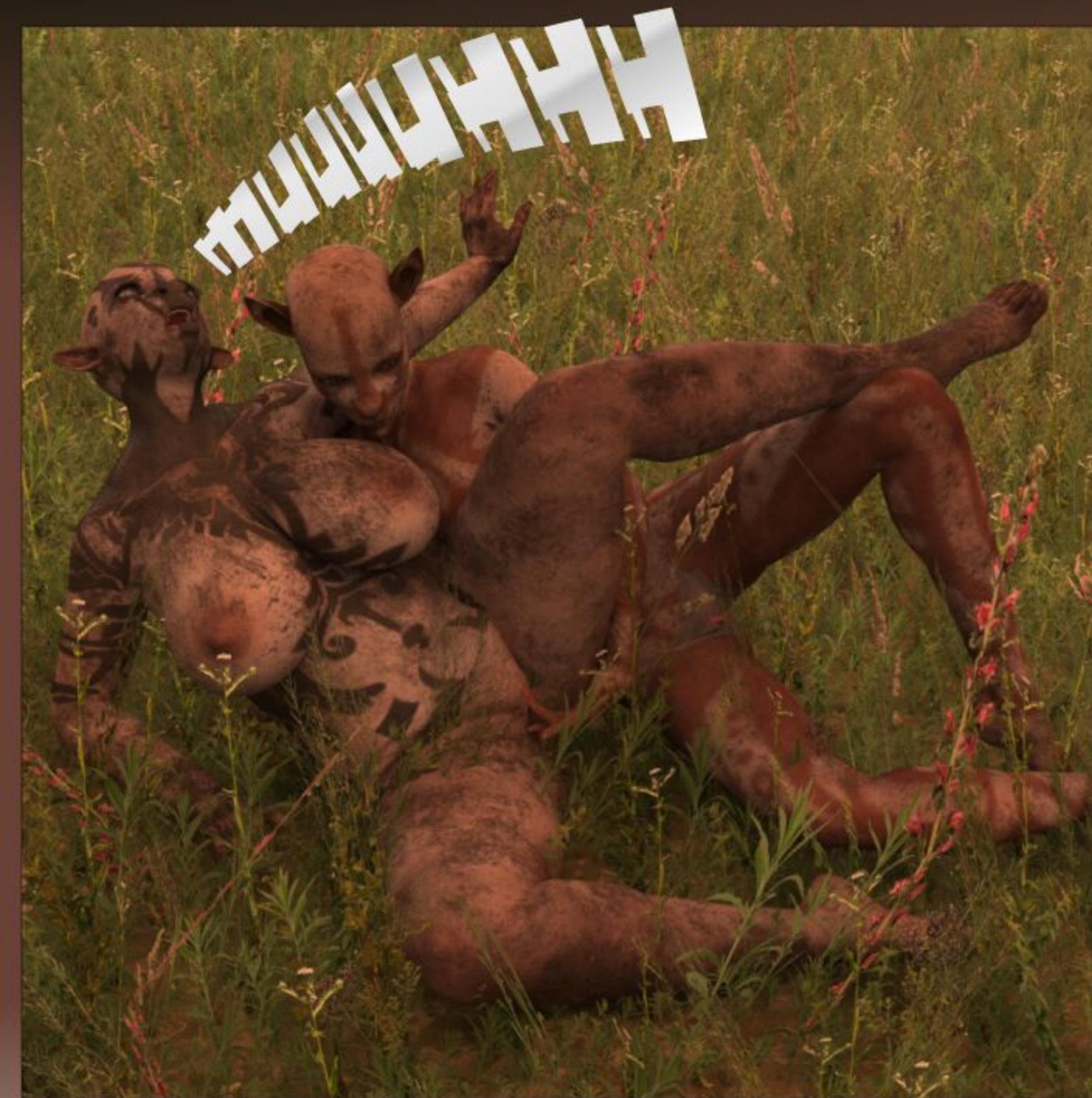
Our sister in the eastern hills has disappeared. Her farmstead is abandoned.

Possibly what happened to you is unrelated. But I have a concern. We'll check on the others.

Go make yourself decent. We've a long journey ahead and mustn't waste time.

THE PLAIN FOLK SISTER IN THE CAGE WAS PUT THERE IN #32. THE ONE IN THE EAST HILLS WAS IN #44 AND WAS FOUND BY RHI AND TRI AT THE END OF THAT ISSUE. NOW SHE IS "FILTHY." IF YOU'RE A NEW READER WHO DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT THE PLAIN FOLK, YOU MIGHT WANT TO GO BACK TO THOSE ISSUES AND CATCH UP.

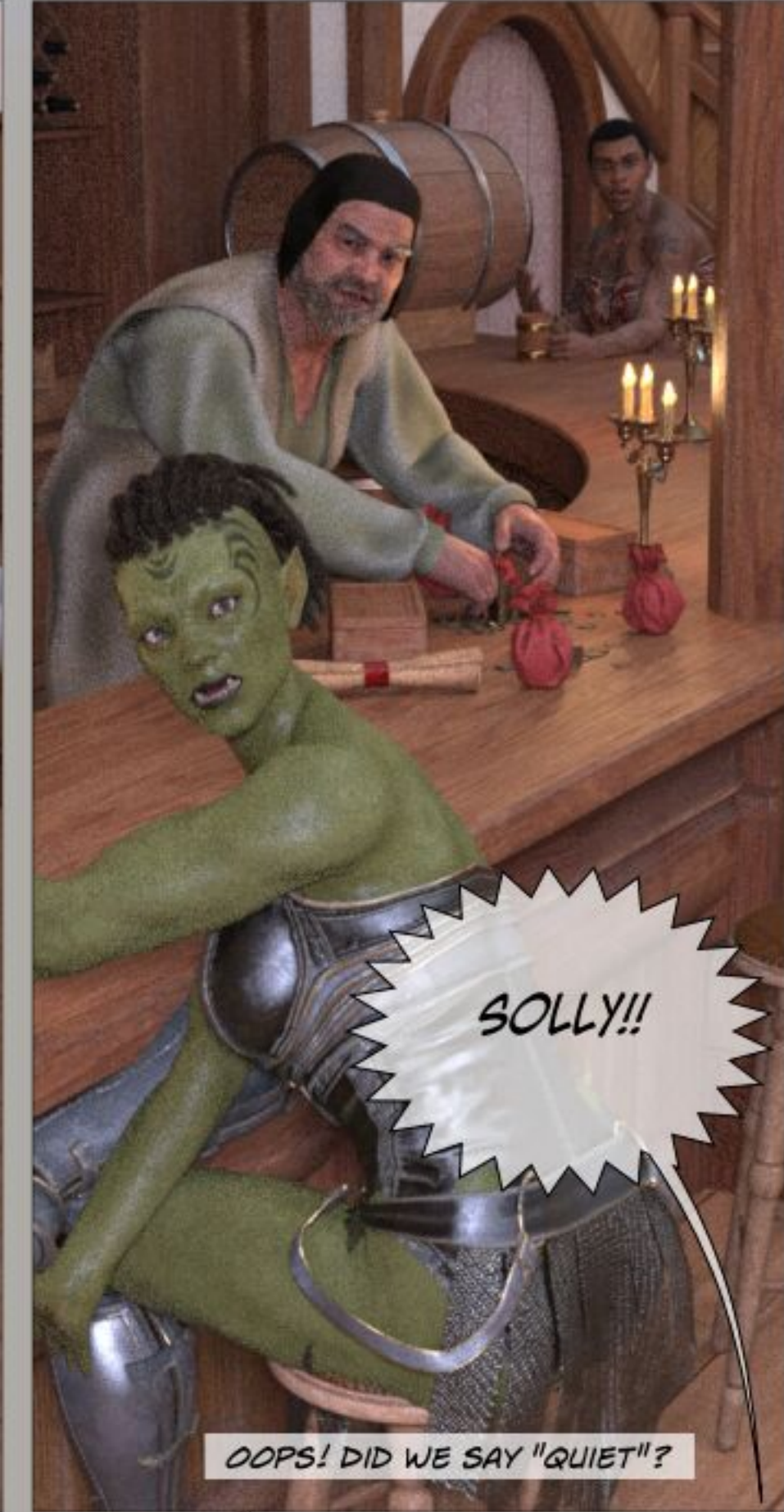




DAWN BREAKS.



GRAYTOWER.





INTERLUDE.



-- hpp --

out

have to



get out
-- hhh --

have to
get out

have to --



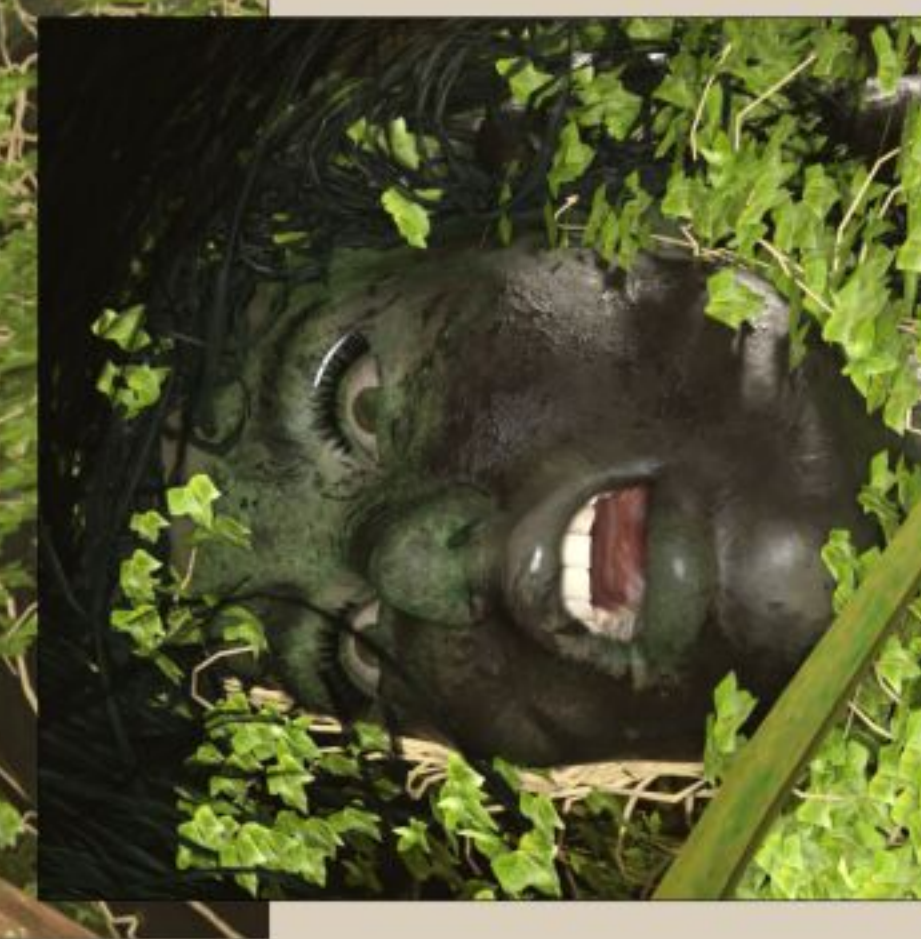
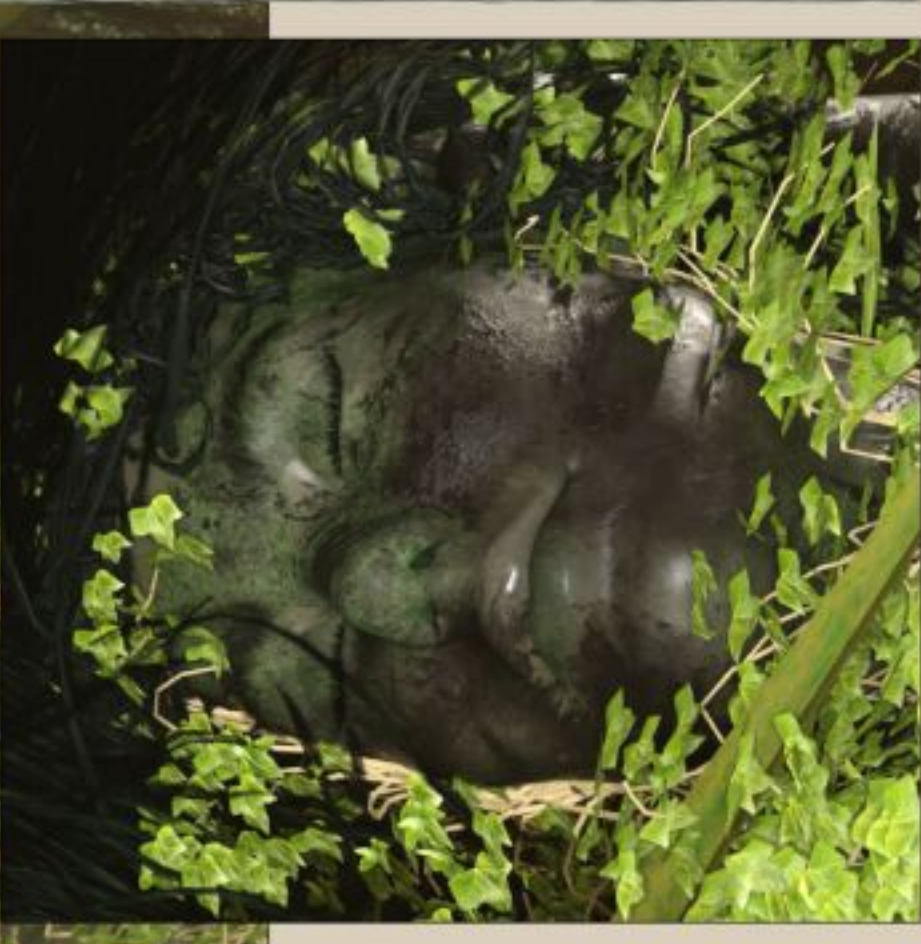
-- sob --

SOMETIMES WHEN YOU'RE STUCK IN A MENTAL LOOP, YOU NEED ASSISTANCE TO GET OUT OF IT. A DISRUPTION. A FRIEND. THERAPY. SOMETHING.

BUT SOMETIMES YOU JUST ... GET OUT. ONE DAY SOMETHING CHANGES. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT, BUT EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT.



PSST! ISSUE #37 IF YOU WANT A HINT.



An actual town! With more than two buildings!

Hey, now, don't be a snob.

I'm not! But if we've passed anything it's been a Parmhouse. I was hoping for an inn. I'm hot and dry and I want to rest a minute with a cool drink.



Though ... does this place feel awfully empty?

If it's mostly Farmers, then they're out Farming right now.

But I agree. This looks like a town of people who do business with Farmers. Shopkeepers and such.

Maybe they're all staying indoors. It is hot out today.



I bet there'll be someone in here.

How come?

With that sign, it's either a tavern or a wine merchant.

And this town's too small to have a wine merchant.



Hey there! The road's thirsty today. Set us up with some ale?

Ale? But ... ah ...

Uh .. sure! Take a seat. Coming right up.



I might have to ... Uh ... it'll take me a second. I don't have any kegs ... open.



Why, Emil!

What are you thinking, serving two lovely ladies like this some of that stale old stock?

Give them some of the special ale, for pity's sake!



Two of the Pairest travellers I've seen in many a day! What brings you to our little hamlet?

We need to go. Now.

Emil! Honestly, man, have you got hands?

Excuse me a moment, ladies. I'll have your ale straight away.



Uh ... I think you should stay and have some ale --



-- hoogh! --



Stop!!

Go! Go!! Fast as you can get her to move!

I'm trying!

If we're lucky, we'll be so far gone by the time they remember to get out their horses that they won't bother chasing.



All right, what was that about?

They weren't townsfolk. I don't know what their game is, or what they did with the actual people of this town, but if we'd had that special ale, I don't want to think about where we'd have woken up.

But that's horrible! And we're just going to leave it like that?

What would you do? There are four of them, and just because I can make the youngest, skinniest one sing tenor doesn't mean we can take on the others.

They shouldn't be able to get away with that! Aren't there any ... I don't know ... sheriffs? Marshals? Somebody to handle this kind of thing?

Ah ... not to the best of my knowledge.

Well, there should be.



... yes, there should.



Aha!

Did you get it?

Probably.

But before we talk about that, I want to know more about what it is I may or may not have just stolen.

And why you want it.

THERE ARE NO ACTUAL NOBLE TITLES IN GRAYTOWER, OR ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE YARDS FOR THAT MATTER. SO IF PEOPLE CALL YOU BY A TITLE, THEY THINK YOU'RE POWERFUL ENOUGH TO CLAIM IT ... OR, IF YOU CLAIM IT FOR YOURSELF, YOU'D BETTER BE POWERFUL ENOUGH TO MAKE IT STICK.

WHICH IS TO SAY, DON'T MAKE THE MISTAKE OF UNDERESTIMATING THE BARONESS HALLWELL.



Seems to me you should have asked me all that before taking the job.

It's for anti-arcane imbueement. You use it to make things magic-proof. Or to make things to dispel magic.

It doesn't do anything by itself, which is probably why Barlo couldn't make anything of it and tossed it in a chest.

I want it so I can equip a real City Watch. Some people to take care of any problems in the city ... such as the Fake City Watch, who are terrorizing everyone.



Barlo never tried to use it. He gets things like that sometimes from the people he extorts, and he just piles it all up in his strongroom.

Honestly, that might be a better approach.

You know, there are a lot of us who don't want any City Watch. Yours or anybody's.



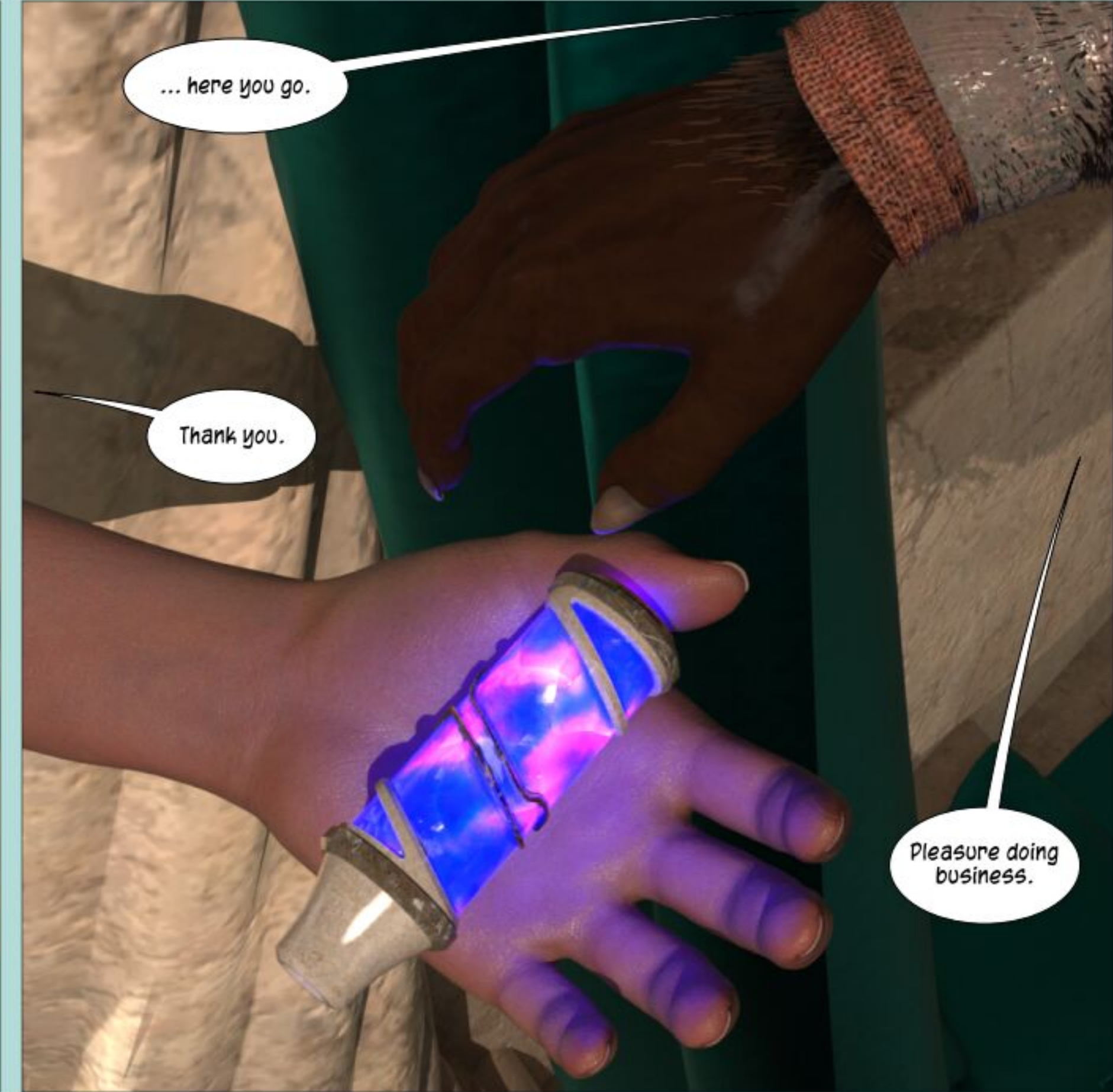
I'm not interested in going after people like you, Jenée. You steal things. Big deal. You're not a threat to public safety.

I'm talking about big problems. When they happen. And they do happen.

Mishrah and her "City Watch" are disappearing people, Jenée. People like you. And you know it.

They've got to be stopped. And then the next Mishrah will come along and she'll need to be stopped too.

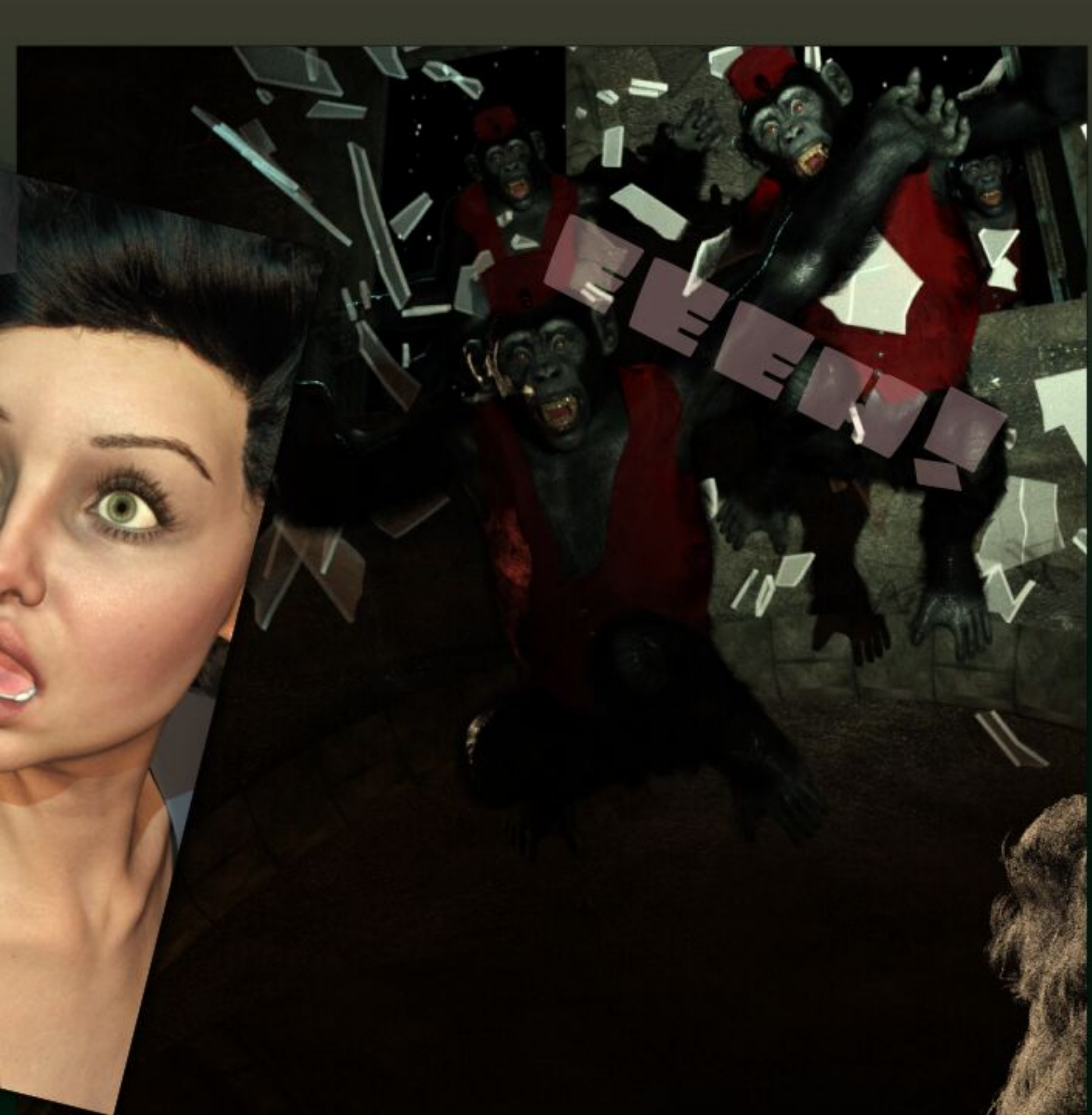
We've got no defenses against that sort of thing right now. We need to have something.



... here you go.

Thank you.

Pleasure doing business.



THE NEXT AFTERNOON.



SAME AFTERNOON. THE SUN IS SETTING ON THE SECOND DAY OF PERI AND TAM'S TRAVELS TOGETHER.





NEXT MORNING.



REGULAR READERS WERE PROBABLY WONDERING IF CRES WAS EVER GOING TO SHOW UP IN THIS STORY.





RHYS EXPLAINS.

... and that was it! Next thing, we were all standing around grazing.

There's not a lot of grass here.

Mhm. And they did that without waiting for any of the information they wanted? Didn't even try to get anything else out of your leader before they sheeped him?

They didn't, maybe, hear you all deciding to capture them and sell them, like you did everybody in this town?

Now, hang on!



That was all Mace and Donnie's idea! I didn't have anything to do with it! I only --

Please! I don't want to be a sheep! It's really boring! I -- Mbeeeehh!!

See, the thing is, I don't care whose idea it was. You went along with it.

It's going to be a real pain in the ass to rescue all the people you sold, you know. You've made a big mess.

I came here to take you all out of commission. To keep you from making more messes. Honestly, I can't come up with a better way to do that than this.



Only time the Plain Folk have ever done anything useful.

behhhhh!

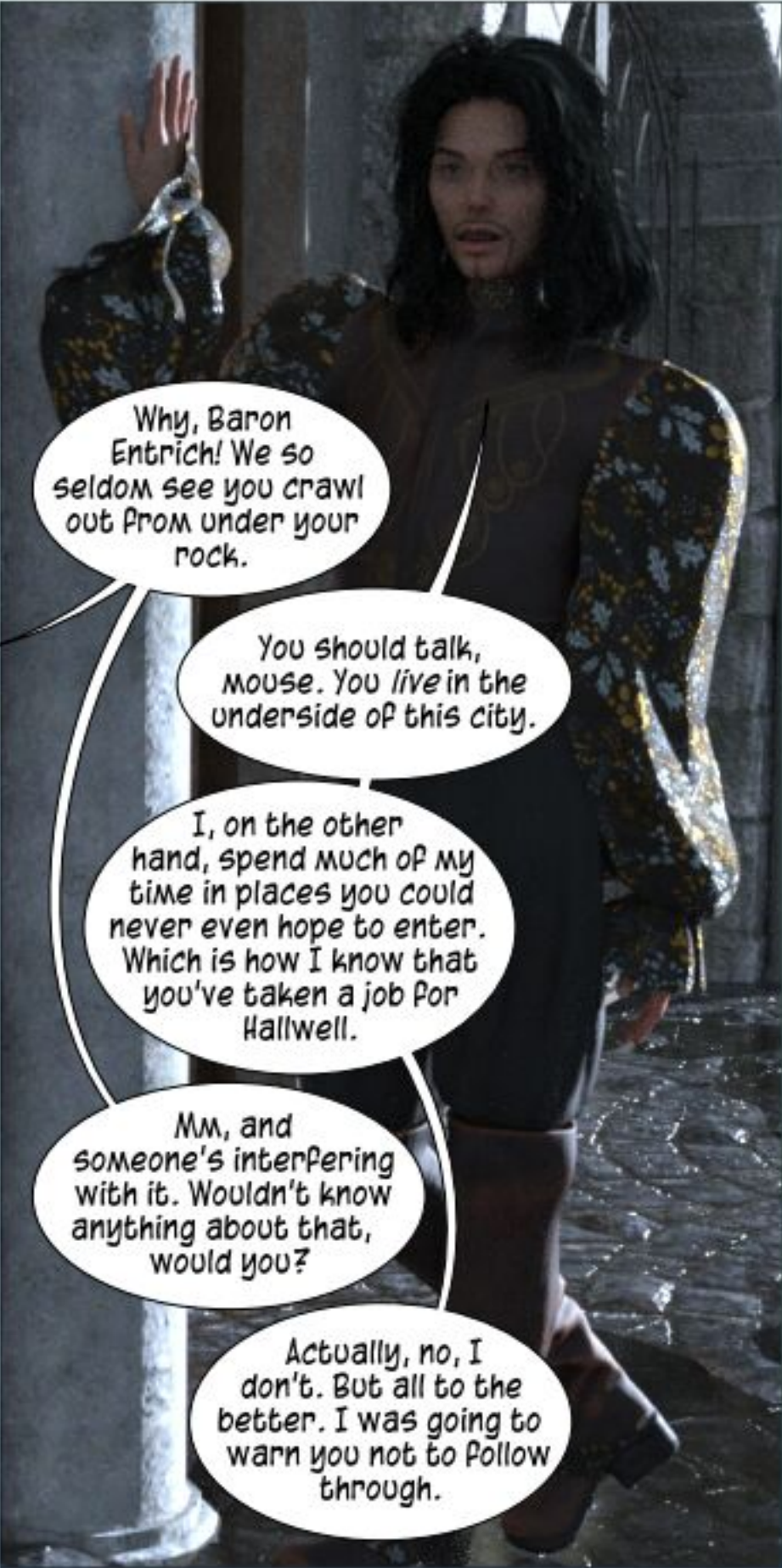
Still, if they're lurking in the area, I'd better go check on them.

The idea of Plain Folk on the move is disturbing all by itself.



This is getting ridiculous. Nobody knows anything. And I'm running out of people to ask.

-- ahem --



Why, Baron Entrick! We so seldom see you crawl out from under your rock.

You should talk, mouse. You live in the underside of this city.

I, on the other hand, spend much of my time in places you could never even hope to enter. Which is how I know that you've taken a job for Hallwell.

Mm, and someone's interfering with it. Wouldn't know anything about that, would you?

Actually, no, I don't. But all to the better. I was going to warn you not to follow through.



Why are you so desperate to get on the Baroness' bad list? Did she steal your lover or something?

I don't imagine we have anything like the same taste in lovers.

The Baroness wants to replace the City Watch with a force of her own. As I'm sure she's told you.

You want to keep the City Watch?

Oh, heavens, no! They're disgusting. I want to do away with them and that horrible woman who runs them. But I don't want to replace them with anything that would be just as bad.

OK, but so far only the Baroness has had a real idea for getting rid of them ...



You don't really believe that, do you?

Don't you worry. I'm cooking something up. They won't be a problem soon.

But in the meantime, Hallwell must not succeed.

You want to talk about bad lists? If you help her, you will definitely be on mine.



INTERLUDE.



THE RUSSET LADY LIVES IN A HUGE CAVE COMPLEX IN THE NORTH PART OF THE BIG FOREST. SHE LIKES TO TURN HUMANS INTO ART, AND SHE HAS STRANGE IDEAS ABOUT ART.

RIME COMES DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINS EVERY SO OFTEN TO DISRUPT THE RUSSET LADY AND UNDO HER WORK. HER MOTIVATIONS ARE UNCLEAR. TODAY IS ONE OF THOSE PERIODIC VISITS.



SHE FINDS SEVERAL PIECES OF "ART," THOUGH NOT AS MANY AS SHE'D EXPECTED ...



... BUT THOUGH SHE SEARCHES THE ENTIRE PLACE THOROUGHLY ...

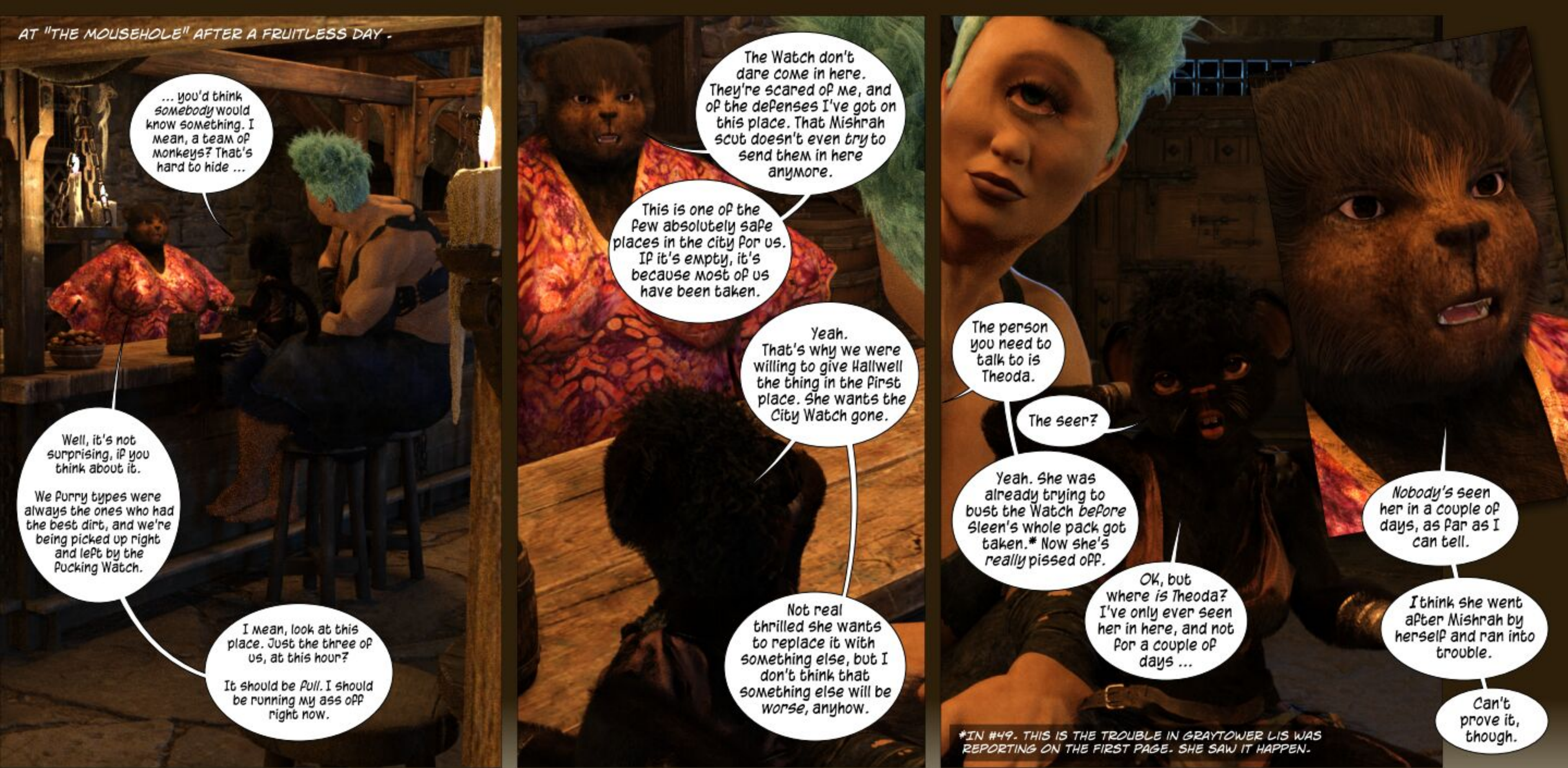


... INCLUDING SOME AREAS SHE WOULD HAVE PREFERRED NOT TO REVISIT ...



... SHE DOES NOT FIND THE RUSSET LADY, NOR ANY SIGN OF HER PRESENCE.

WE MET RIME AND THE RUSSET LADY IN #32.





A SHORT WHILE LATER, AFTER SEVERAL PEOPLE HAVE BEEN DE-FOWLED AND UNCOOPED, AND A LOT OF EGGS HAVE BEEN DESTROYED ...





Good, Cheat was right.

Nobody in the assembly hall at this hour. There'll probably be some in the barracks over there, but they wouldn't keep somebody captive there anyway.

And Cheat says they don't have a jail, so ... let's try upstairs.



Actually, maybe you should wait here and keep watch.

If you find trouble, make a noise. If I make a noise, come find me.



Nothing.

Except ...

hmm.



sqrk

ssh!

You're a strange bird, aren't you?

Don't worry. I think I'm going to let you out.

Just let me deal with this lock ...



No, I'm not going in there.

sqrk?

You'll have to come out on your own.



There you go. That's right.



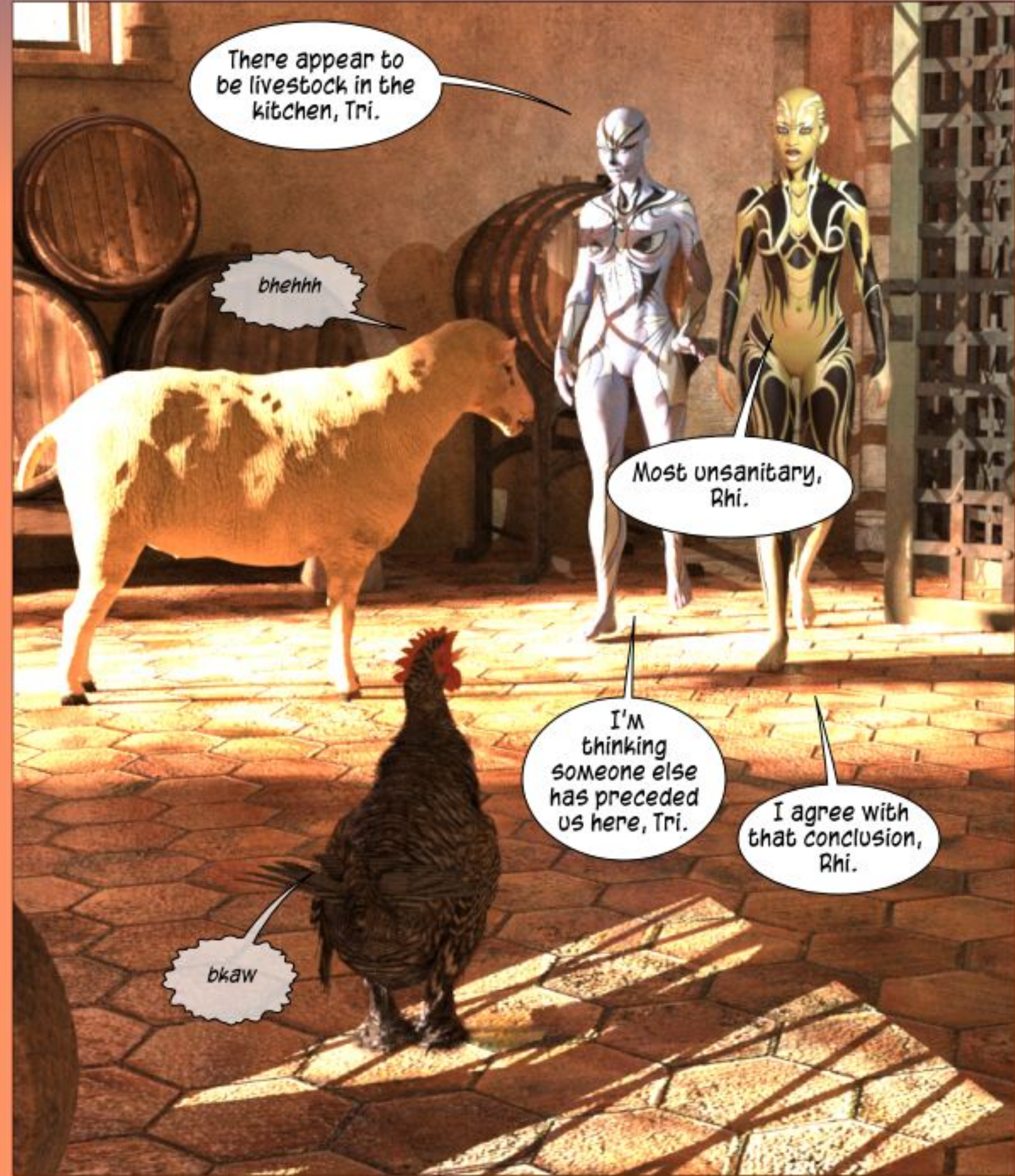
Thought so.

Hi, Theoda.

Let's get out of here ... and then we need to talk.



Anyone in here?



There appear to be livestock in the kitchen, Tri.

bhehhh

Most unsanitary, Rhi.

I'm thinking someone else has preceded us here, Tri.

I agree with that conclusion, Rhi.

bkaw

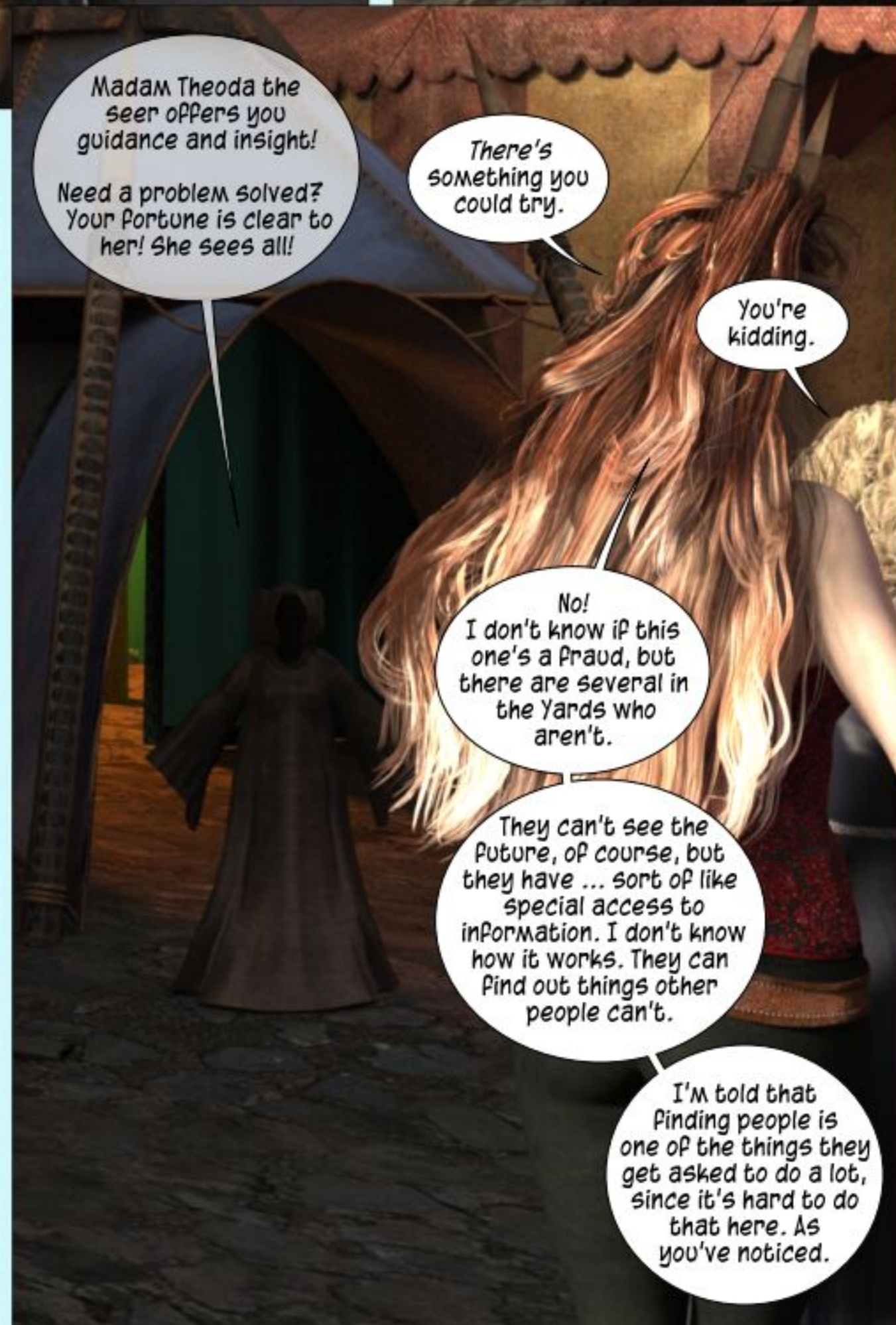


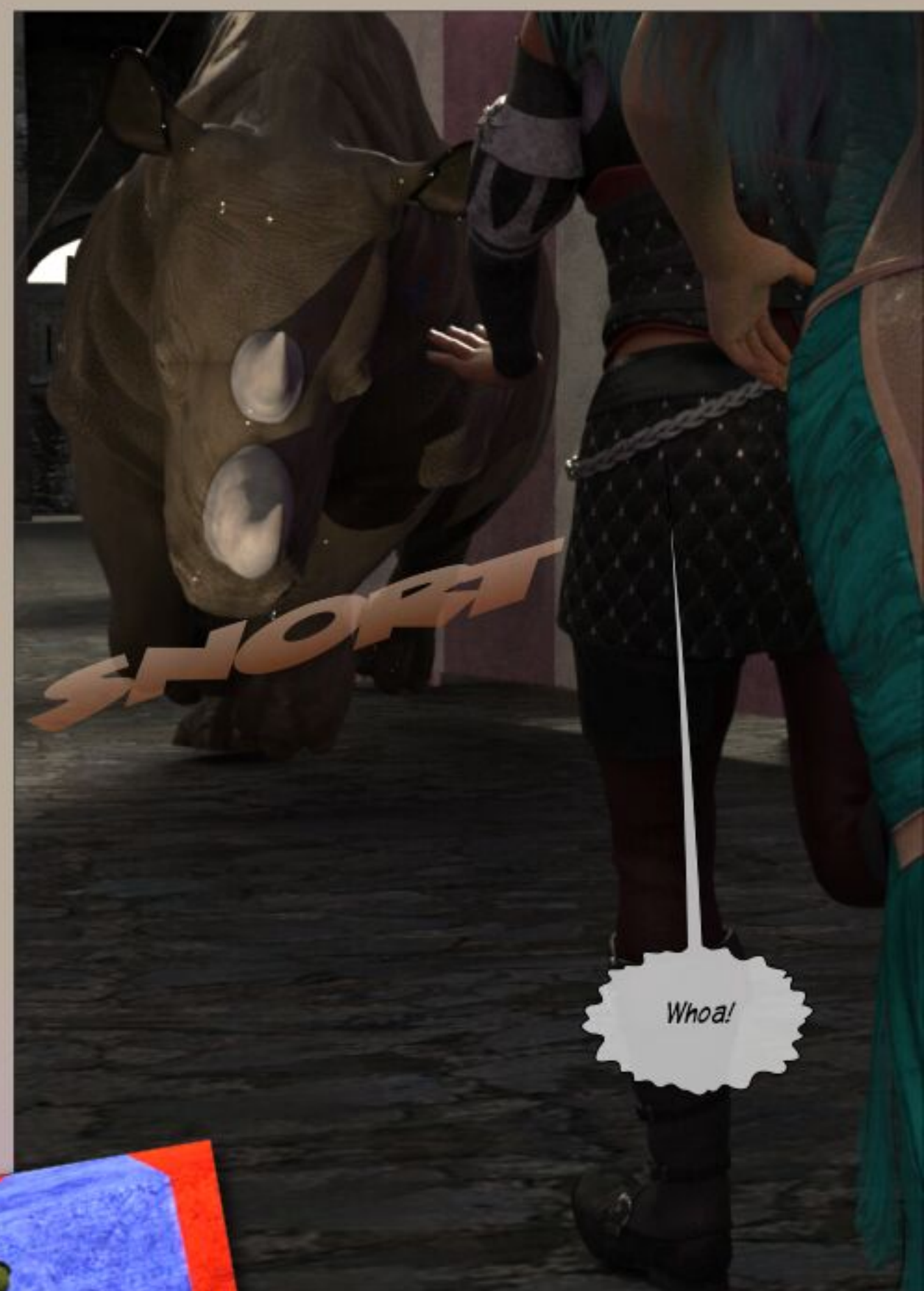
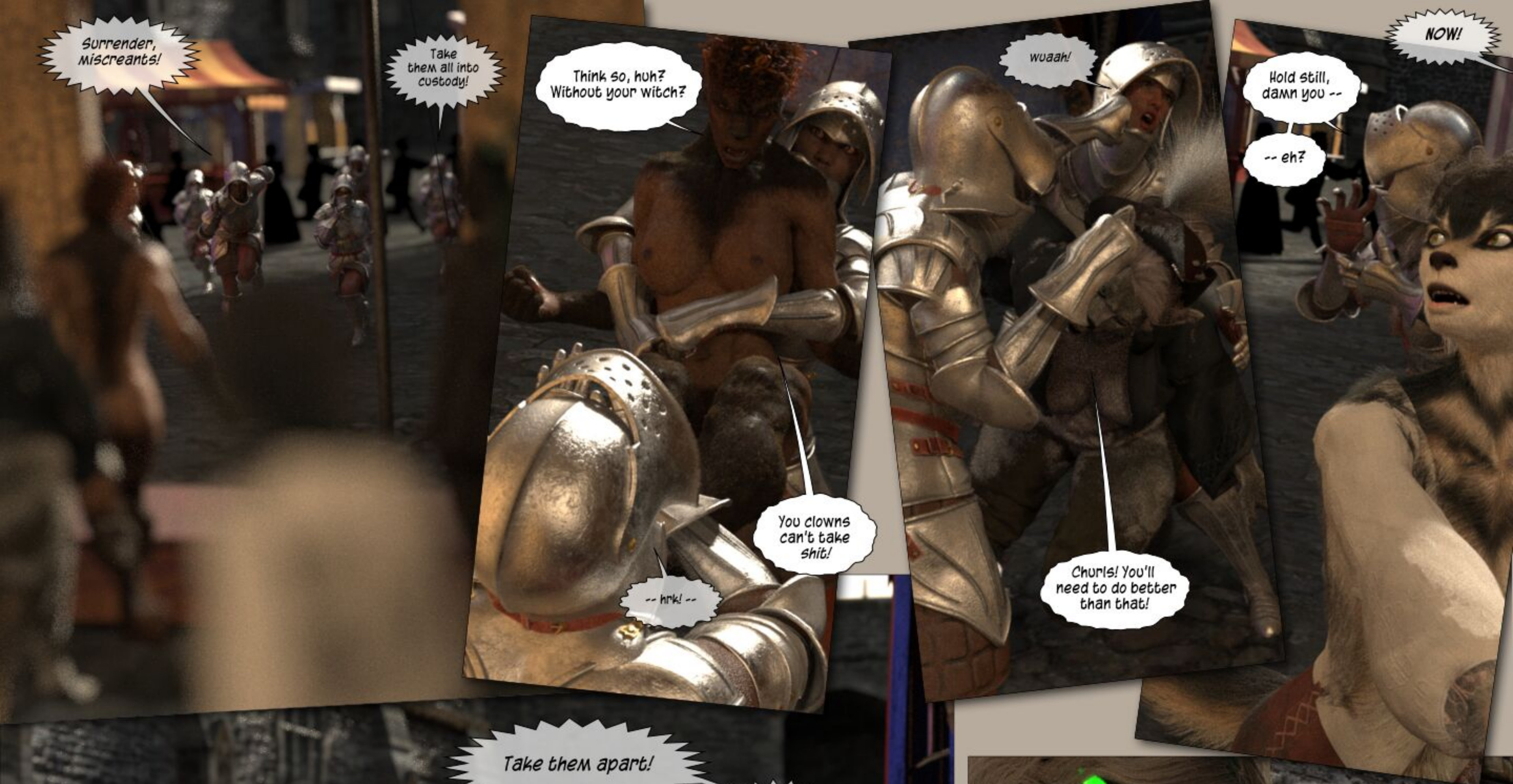
You two had better come with us.

It's for the best.



TWO DAYS LATER.







That's right! Trolls, animals -- anything that looks like it needs reverting!

No penalty for guessing wrong!

Well, well.



Now listen.

These people, and the others like them I've yet to recruit -- they are the new city watch. They'll see to it that Graytower is safe and peaceful. For everyone. Including anthros, arcanes, and anyone else.

Mishrah's policies are not acceptable. She is no longer wanted in this city. Anybody who stands with her is also no longer wanted, and will be thrown out.

Do you want me to throw you out?

No, ma'am!

All right. Then take off that armor and behave yourselves.

And spread the word.



That was your big idea for getting rid of the Watch? Turn random people into trolls and hope they mostly hit the right targets?

...

... it wasn't the real plan! I didn't have time! This was the right moment to deal with the Watch and it couldn't wait!



And I don't owe you any explanations! I warned you not to help Hallwell and you did anyway, and now look what's happened! Nobody else is going to have a leg to stand on around here!

You might as well have made her queen!

And I promise you, as soon as I figure out something appropriate to do, I'm going to make you suffer so badly --

No, you aren't.



First, you can't push us around.

Second, if you try anything like that, we'll make sure everyone knows whose really bad idea it was to turn people into trolls.

Uh ...

er.

Perhaps a truce?



So you gave Hallwell the keys to the city.

Do you think it'll be a problem?

There are worse choices. I think she's sincere. Maybe a little naive.

And clearly somebody needs to do it.

But she'll bear watching. Sometimes power has a way of wrecking good intentions.



There's one little piece of housekeeping we shouldn't wait for Hallwell to get to.

I could use you two as backup.

In the interests of a safe and peaceful city, and all that.

Actually, if you have any suggestions, I could use those as well.

Tell us on the way.



I'm sorry to come so late ... I saw you at the Fair today and checked and people told me you were the real thing ...

It's not late yet.

I assume you're not looking to have your fortune told.

No. I'm trying to find a person. She's somewhere in the Yards, and that's all I know ...

Why are you looking for her?

That's ... Uh ... it's personal.



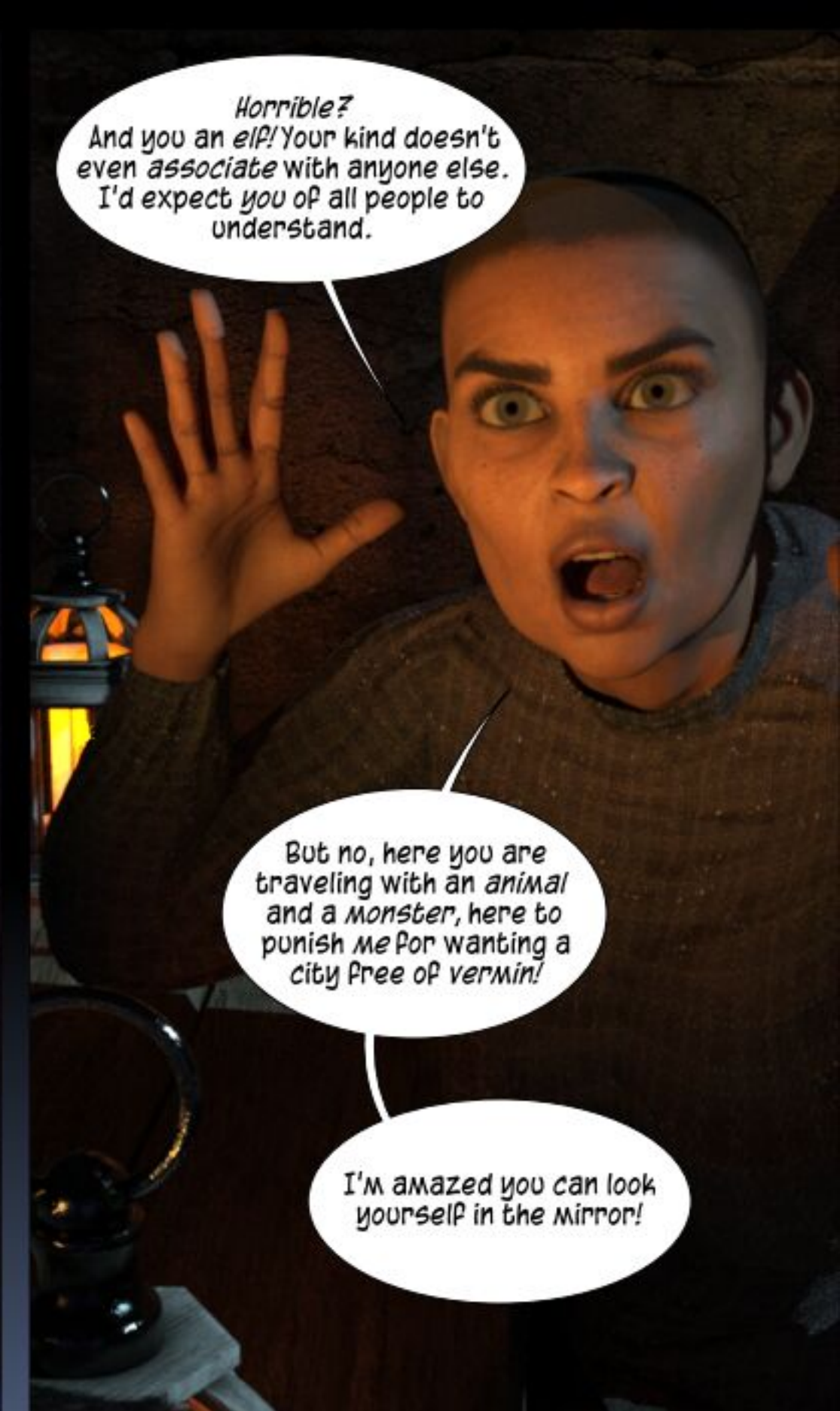
In my trade, everything is personal. Personal is part of the price of admission.

I don't need to be a seer to know you're not being honest with me. If I look, I might find out things you don't want me to know.

And if you don't like what you find, you won't tell me anything?

Oh, I might. It depends. But I should warn you.

Things like this never work out the way you think they will. Never. Whatever plan it is you have.



NEXT: SHAKIN' ALL OVER