

IF YOU'RE CONFUSED ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON IN THIS ISSUE OF SLEEPER SQUAD

DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT; RUBY DOESN'T KNOW EITHER.

LAST WE SAW HER, SHE WAS STARING INTO A "FOCUS CRYSTAL" IN HER LIVING ROOM. NOW SHE'S ... SOMEWHERE ELSE.

But where the hell is that?

Recall doesn't seem to work ... great.

No paths, no river to follow, no signs of civilization ... I could be wandering around in here a long time.



Yiii!

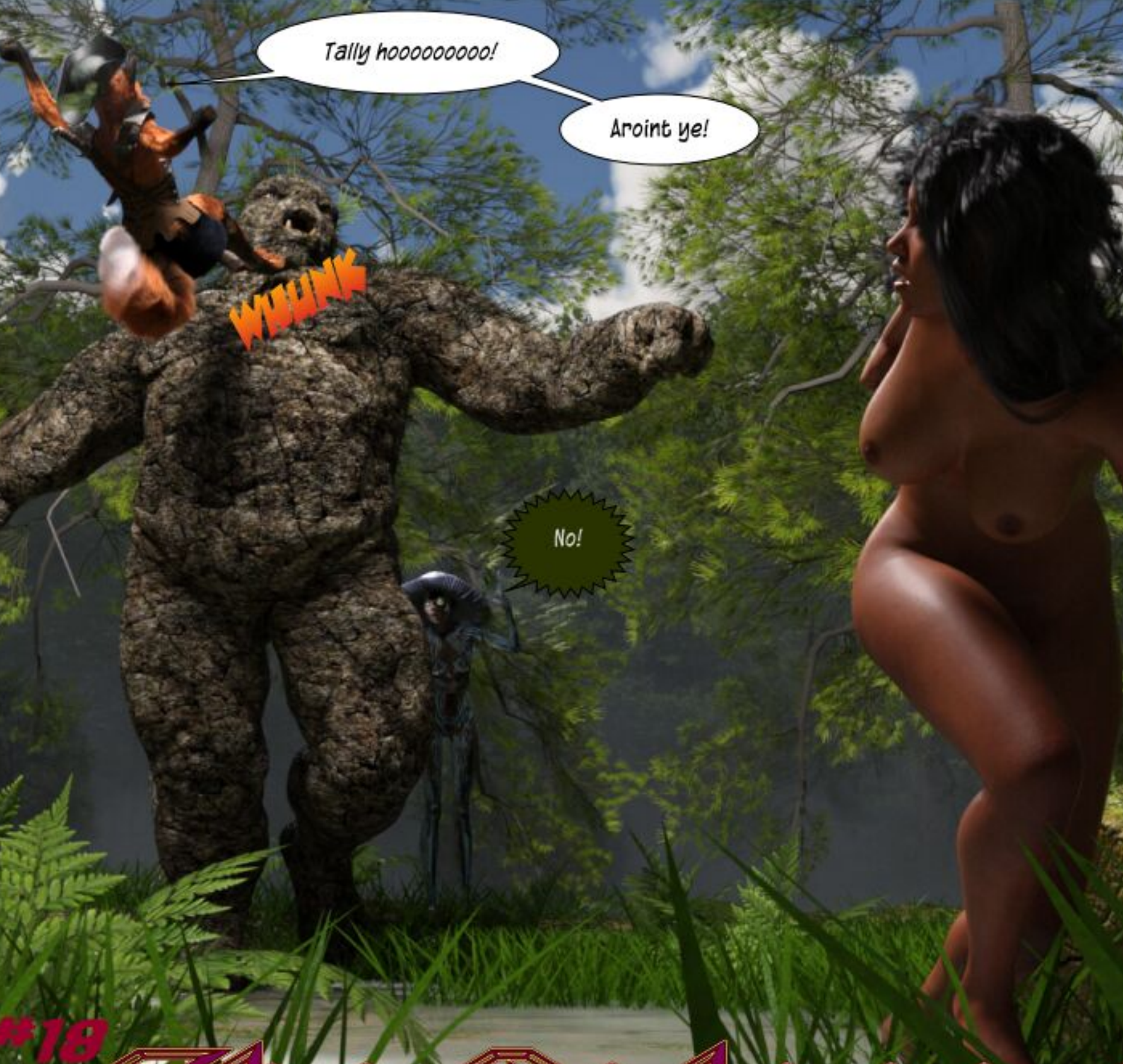


Catch her, you idiot!

Move your rocks!

RARRRR!

I hope it's as slow as it looks ...



Tally hoooooooooooo!

Aroint ye!

No!



OK, I guess I've just lost my mind.

No problem.

#18 The Palace of Rubies PART ONE

WORDS AND IMAGES BY TRILBY



Knock, knock!

S'aught in yer dull head but stone?

THOMP THOMP

Gie o'er the field, lump!

RAAAA?



Meddlesome creatures! I'll have her rip your--

Aaagh!



Move, you useless thing!

You plee about as well as you fight!



Lass, these woods be unsafe to travel.

More so an ye hae no weapon ...

... nor a stitch on yer frame.

I agree. Know anywhere around here where I could get those things?



Aye. We can take ye there.

We dinna travel with strangers, though.

Red is what they clepe me. The dark one there be Hurley, and that be Slant behind us.

Now, who might ye be?



I'm ...

... my name is ...

oh, no.

I can't remember! I can't remember my name!

Ach! It'll come back to ye, I wager.

Come along now and dinna fret. A pint will do wonders, surely.



There now! I knew Glint would hae aught for ye.

I'm amazed she had anything in my size.

Shame about the shoes, but I'll take what I can get.

Aye, not much call for those in these parts.

Found ye a sword too, eh?

Or a large knife, anyway.

Let's be on. Hurley and Slant are like to be a pint down by now.



... the green witch. Some clepe her the green bitch, but we deem that a slander on bitches, ye ken?

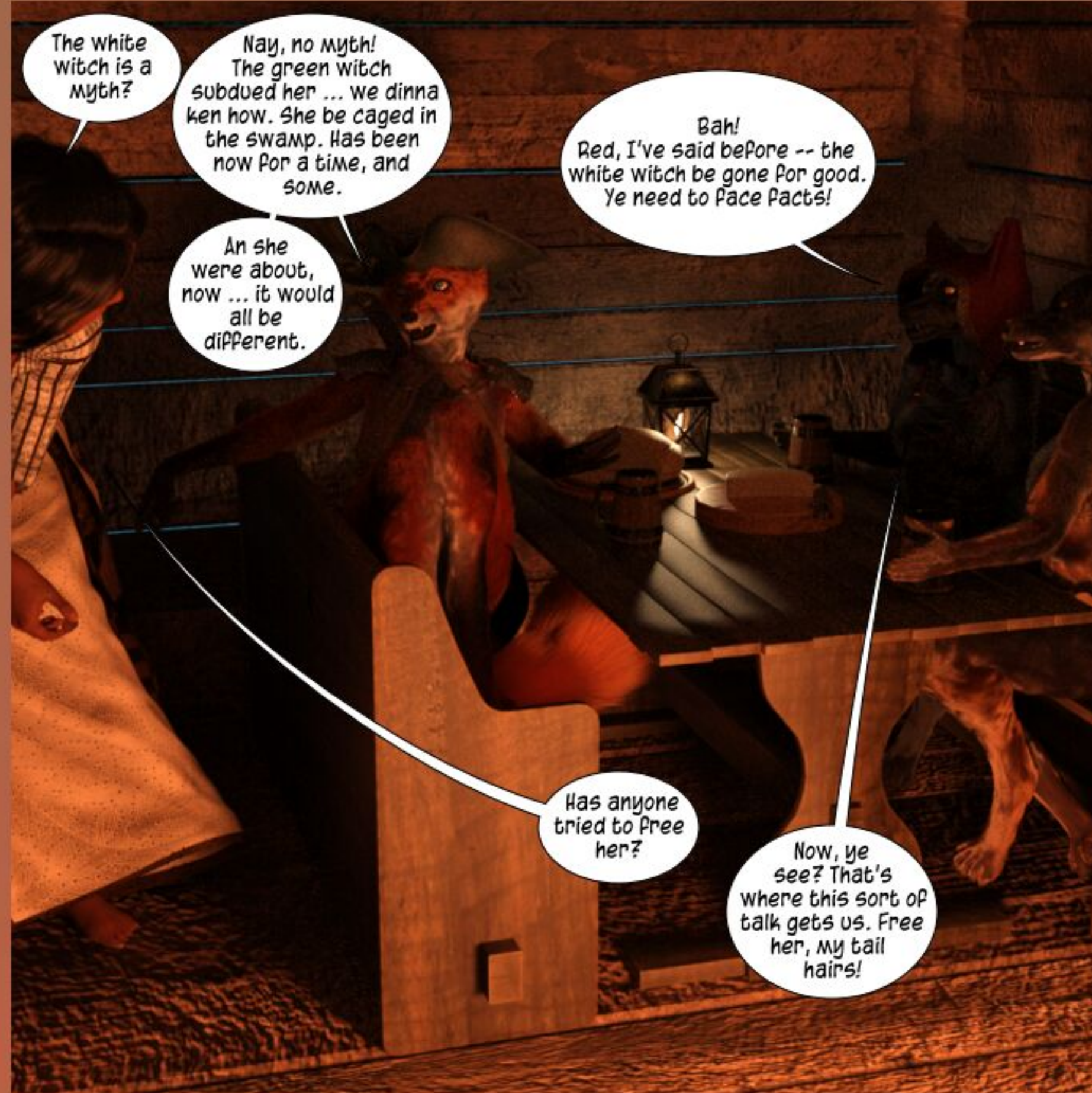
'Tis she that makes the trolls and the Pungals. She'd dearly love to see us all dead and gone.

And she's just allowed to make trouble? No one can stop her?

Nay. We can stave opp a troll, now and again, as ye saw, but she be strong. None who've tried have returned.

An the white witch were about, now ...

Ach! Goin' on with yer tales about the white witch again!



The white witch is a myth?

Nay, no myth! The green witch subdued her ... we dinna ken how. She be caged in the swamp. Has been now for a time, and some.

An she were about, now ... it would all be different.

Bah! I've said before -- the white witch be gone for good. Ye need to Pace Facts!

Has anyone tried to free her?

Now, ye see? That's where this sort of talk gets us. Free her, my tail hairs!



Lass, there be another witch Red doesnae mention in her wee tales. The swamp witch.

I lost my way a time back and went in that swamp without meanin'. I will hae discuss wha' I saw yon. I thanked a' my stars when I made my way out.

Sure, it'd be grand to bring her back, but it be certain death. And there be few enough of us left as is.

So ye'll just let the trolls take us, then?

Red, now --! At least we know we can hold our own 'gainst the trolls!



Dreg has a place ye can sleep, up above.

Oh, aye. It'll be chill up there for a hairless lass like yerself. I'll fetch ye a blanket. Two.

Thank you.



Red, I need to get my memory back. Do you think this white witch could help me?

Canna say. But I'd wager she be yer best chance.

But ye canna go find her alone, lass. That be suicide.

... I'm open to suggestions.

Ach! Let me hae a wee chat with the others. When they be sober. Hurley doesna always mean wha' she says, most of all when she's had three pints.

THE NEXT DAY.



I still say this be a daft idea.

Take care, now, lass. I dinna ken whether ye can use that cheeseknife, but it canna do aught to a troll, e'en so.



What is the strategy for trolls?

Be elsewhere.

Ye canna let them hit ye ... or seize ye ... or charge at ye ... ach, it's best to nae be in front of 'em at all.

An ye can get onto them, or behind them, then mayhap --

Hush! Listen.



CRACKKRRR
SHKLOPP
PHNMP

The one yesterday didn't make any noise ...

Aye. In clear ground they can be verra quiet.

This one is movin' in the brush. She'll just push through aught in her way. It Prets Me.

Why?

She's lookin' for summat, lass.

Let's hope it's nae ye.



ugh ...

Aye. I dinna remember these here afore. Busy things, they are.

Be there aught other way?

Aye, an ye want three extra days' journey.



O'er that way?

Aye. Yon breach in the trees. See't?

Something isn't right here ...



Lass, wait!



uh-oh.



How about let's not.



That's got your ass--

Hieeaaa!!
--huh?



Aagh!

Hae at ye, ye o'engrown toadstools!
Step up an' Meet My blades!



Aaaaa!



What ...

... Peel so ... slow ... what's she doing ... to me ...?



... need to ...

-- uhhp --



That's right, Plee, ye miserable rots!

I didn't expect to actually take half her arm off!

No bones ... just like slicing through a mushroom ...

... I'd run too. Red looked ready to cut 'em up for stew.



So, lass, ye proved ye can take care o'yerseif. That's grand. But an ye had nae changed in, there wouldna been a need.

I know, Hurley, I'm sorry. But there's something wrong about these two mushrooms.

Watch for more of those vines while I try something, OK?



Ach! That's nae mushroom!



But they taste nasty though.

Spin!!

The other must be Curl, then!

... uh ...?



Ach, it's good ta see the both o' ye. We thought ye were done Por!

We have to keep on. The two o' ye go back home, quick as ye can. And stay away from mushrooms!



Lass, we owe ye thanks ... and I owe ye an apology.

An ye can do summat like that, mayhap Preein' the white witch is nae such a daft idea.

-- ahem --
On we go, then.

ON THEY GO.



I guess this must be the swamp.

Aye. Ye can tell 'coz the ground be all squashy.

It doesn't look pleasant.

Sun's almost down. We're not going in there in the dark, are we?

Nay, lass. That be a Pine way to drown.

It will nae look any better in the mornin', though.

THE NEXT DAY, AFTER SEVERAL HOURS OF TRAVEL AND WET FEET ...



We should be comin' Pair near tae the center o'the swamp ...

-- pft --



Hurley, yer lost, just admit it.

I am nae lost! I ken exactly where I be.

We've passed some o'these trees so many times, I'm thinkin' I'll gie 'em names.

That big one, yon, with all the knees, I'll clepe him George.



If ye're so clever, then ye can just go on and do the steerin', then, and we'll be lost for sure.

I might ha' done, if ye hadnae insisted ye knew the swamp like the back o'yer hand ... how long did it take ye to find yer way out aPore? A Portnight?



You two! Stop it!

The swamp's getting to all o' us. Can't ye Peel it?

This place wants us at each other's throats.

Now listen good, ye whelp ...

Listenin' to ye be the problem, Hurley!

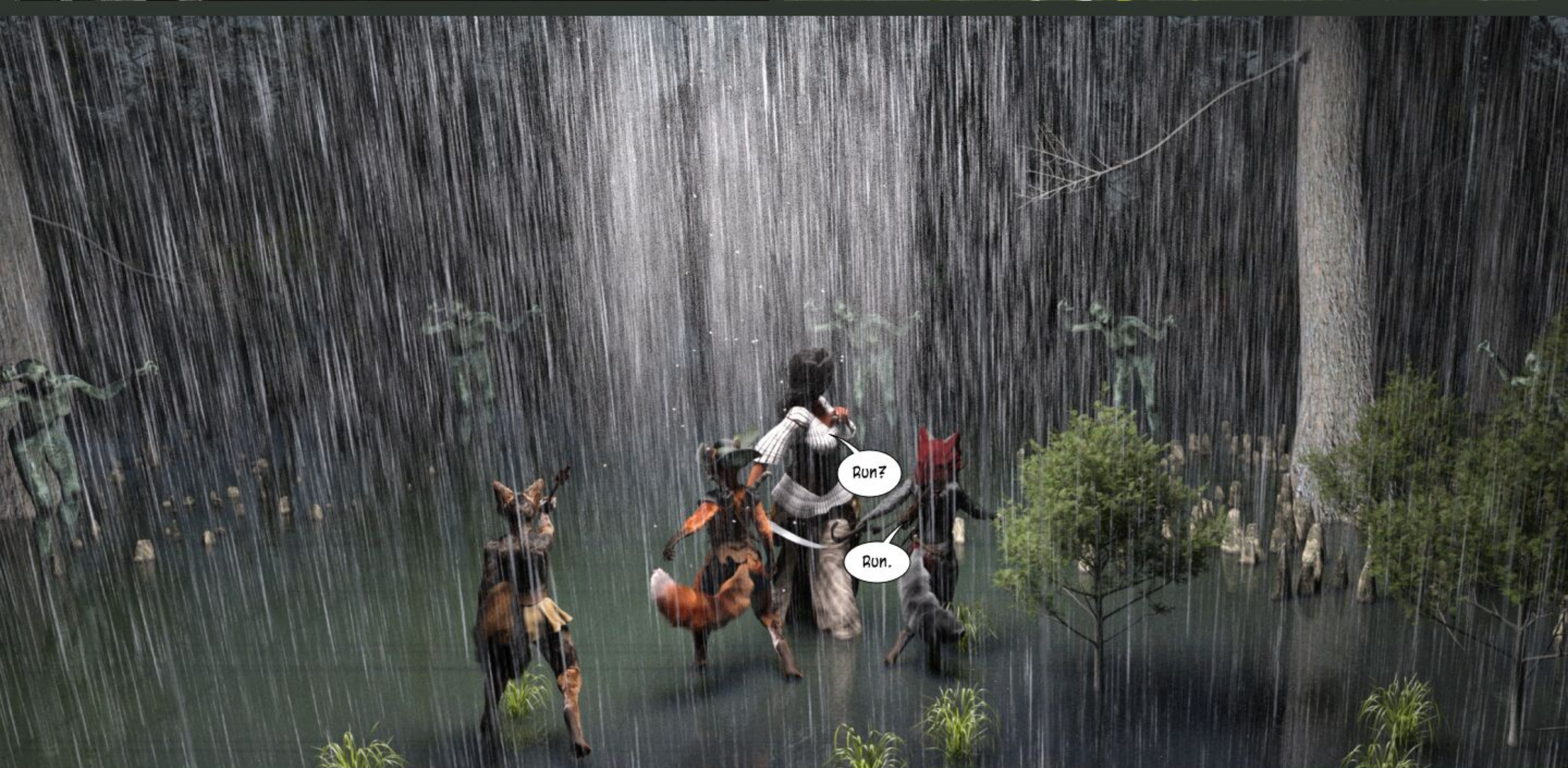
Ye want a scrap, now, be that it?

Anytime ye Peel up to it!



Look!
What in blazes
be those?

Oh,
great.



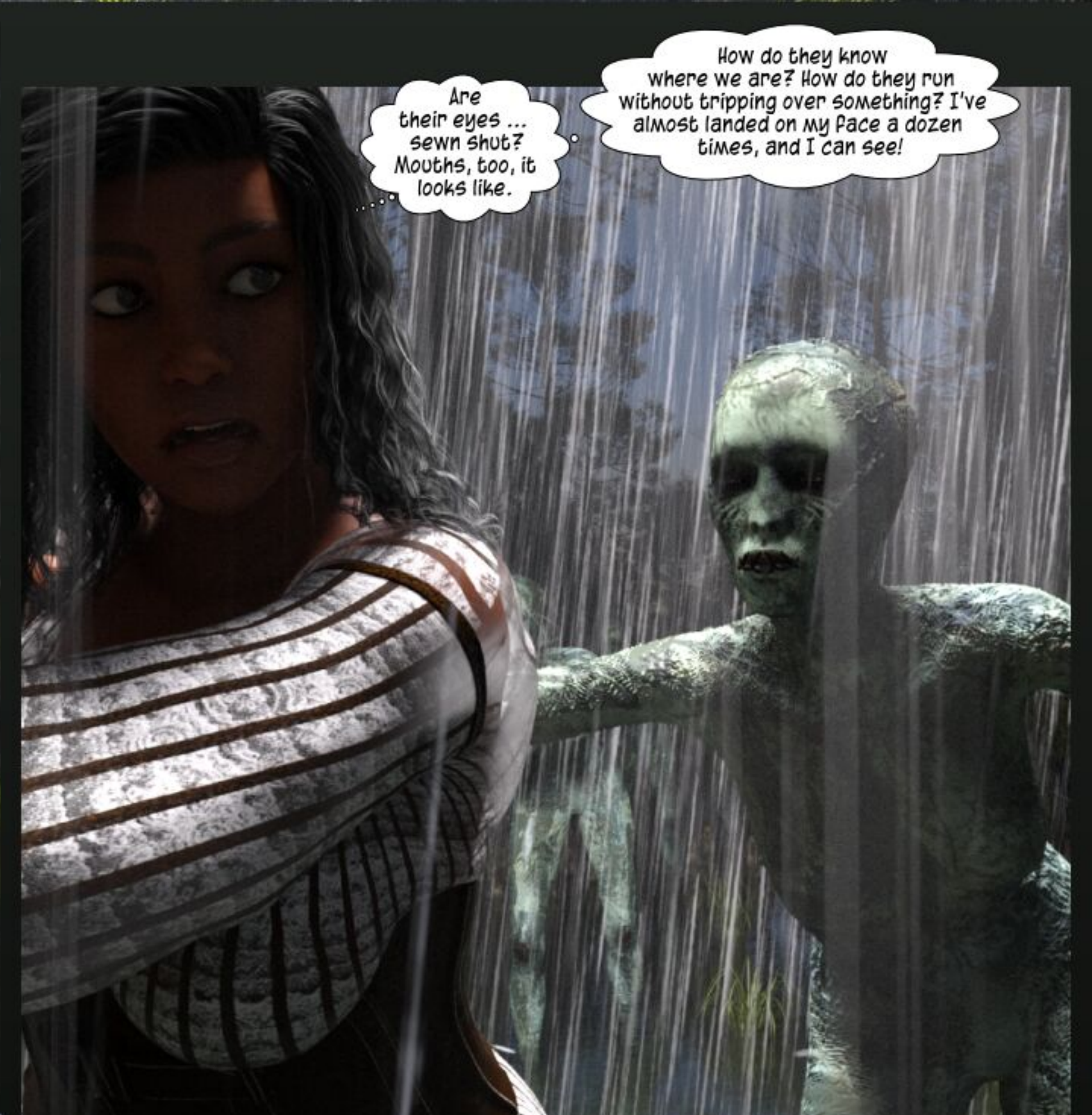
Run?

Run.



We be
runnin'
deeper in!

D'ye
like the
other ways
better?



Are
their eyes ...
sewn shut?
Mouths, too, it
looks like.

How do they know
where we are? How do they run
without tripping over something? I've
almost landed on my face a dozen
times, and I can see!



Back off!

Lass!
Climb up
here!



They're nae
Pollowin' us.
Good.

That's
bad, Red.

'Tis?

Aye.
They dinna like
what we're runnin'
toward.
We will nae care for
it verra much
either.

AS THE RAIN COMES TO AN END, THE PARTY APPROACHES A GROUP OF RICKETY BUILDINGS ON PILINGS.

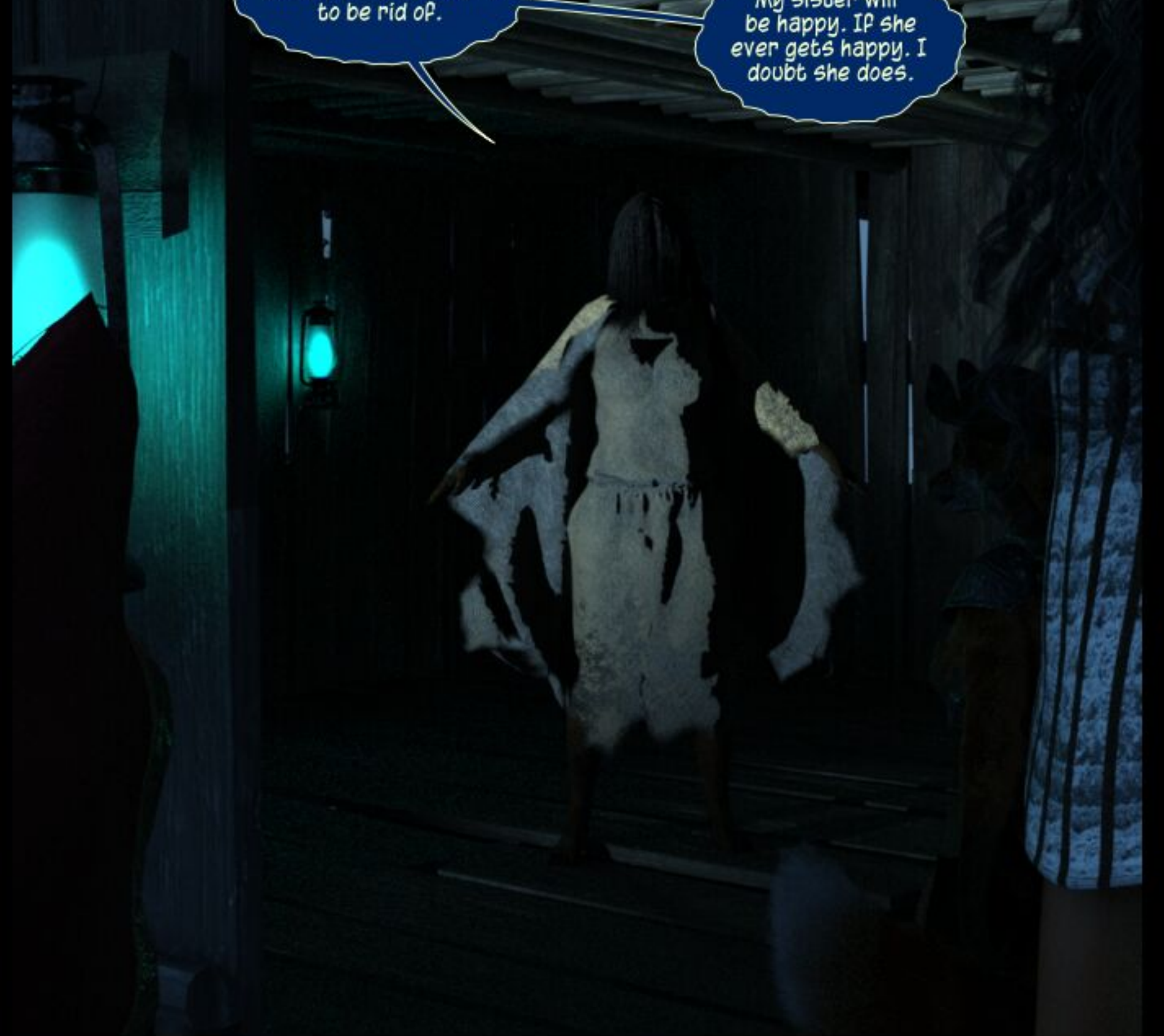


Good thing there's nothing ominous about this place.

Heh. I did warn ye.

There's nobody here ... This is usually the part where something leaps out and attacks.

Aye. The big shack at the end will be where we find trouble, I wager.



A stranger. And three more vixens to be rid of.

My sister will be happy. If she ever gets happy. I doubt she does.



Deal with them.

Ach! -- splat --

Wha'--?

Red!!

Aaaa! Get it opp! Get it opp!

Ye'd like an arrow in yer eye, would ye now, creature?

I be -- aagh!!

help ...



You!

Call them off and get my friends out of that, or I'm going to gut you like a fish!

Aaaa!

Faugh! What is this? It burns ..!

Don't be ridiculous.



A lot of energy. You haven't learned what a waste of time it is.

What? -- cough --



There's no point to any of it. You can't accomplish anything. No one can. Nothing gets better. Nothing changes. Nothing matters.

The best thing you can do for yourself and everyone else is to crawl away somewhere and give up.



nnn!

nnn!

Your little friends are still fighting. They still don't understand. But they will, and when they stop fighting, they'll become like my helpers.

They have to give up in order to have any kind of purpose. You see?



You're filling with despair. That's good.

Now I'll stitch up your eyes and mouth so it can't get out.

Then you can wander the swamp with the others.



No!



hrrrrr!

Yeee



rrrr!

rrrr!

Get ... oPP Me ... you little ... Monster!



-- uUP --

ieeee



Go ahead. Try it. I dare you.

I'm in a real bad mood now.

... rrrr?



... and they're oPP. Good.

Please be OK. Please be OK ...



Ach! All My things be ruint!

My poor wee hat!

I'm just happy you're all right.

You wouldn't have wanted to be one of those creatures, trust me.

-- urh? --



Huh! Lass, did ye do this wi' just yer Pistb?

I also knocked her into a wall.

We'll done!

Thanks. But she's going to come to sooner or later, and we need to find the white witch before that. IP she's even here.

Just let Me finish cutting slant loose.



Here!

It's certainly a person in a cage ... doesn't look much like a white witch ... but doesn't look like trouble either ...

Be ready anyway, I guess.



THE GROUP TAKES A MOMENT TO REGROUP.



So do you think this green witch, whoever she is, did all this? Broke up Amber, changed Sapphire, locked you up?

Um. Maybe not exactly? I'm not real sure. But we're gonna have to go find her to know.

Anyway, I know she did some of it.

And is she your sister like these two? You are all sisters, right?

Kinda! And yeah, she'd have to be. But I don't know which one!

Oh, yeah, that's better.

Don't you want to put on something a little ... nicer?

No.



Do you know the way?

Amber does!

I can get us out of the swamp before it gets completely dark. Then we'll find a place to camp. We shouldn't travel in the woods at night, but I also don't want to spend the night here.

So, uh, can we trust Sapphire now that she's herself?

Oh, sure! She's not mean or anything, she's just sad all the time and no fun.

I can hear you, you know.

THE NEXT DAY.



So this green witch ... how rough are we talking? Is she going to try to kill us all?

She won't kill us. She'll control us. We'll all end up under her influence.

You're a bundle of joy.

She can outwait you. You have to attack. Make the move, try to take her down ... but all she has to do is catch you off guard once.

Hmph. Are you with us, or not?

I'm here, aren't I? I don't want to be the swamp witch again.

But I don't think we can beat her.



Stairs. Wonderful.

Gotta get up here some way! It's either this or go rock climbing ...



Don't let her grab you, Di!

Eeeeeee!!



Tally hoooooooooooo!



RAAAAA!

Hey, rockhead! How would you like a Pinger in your eye?



'Bye now, lomp!

Guess I know where the vixens got it.

Amber's not scared of anything!



No Pungals? An unescorted troll?

That means we're close. A lot of them wander around where the witch lives.

Great.



-- Whew --
No more stains? Good.

Yeah, looks like now we go in here. I'll call up a lantern.

Oh, a cave! Even worse!



I guess this is it ... this sure isn't a cave wall ...

A hallway? Can't see the end, it's too dark.

Be careful, Amber. Who knows what's waiting up there.

THE CAVE ENDS IN AN OPEN COURTYARD, OR CANYON -- IT'S HARD TO TELL -- WITH MORE PASSAGES ON THE FAR SIDE.



Ahh! Move! Move!

Some kind of ruins? This carving ...



Her! Get her!



dragon dragon dragon oh My god dragon

And of course it's me it chases ...



Yes! The nemesis of all dragons: a door it can't fit through.

And I don't hear it trying to break it down.

-- Whew --

Now, where am I? I hear voices nearby ...







The strange thing is, I love plants. But here I am in a stone palace, and none of the rooms lets in enough light to grow anything.

Take a swim, if you'd like. The water's warm and refreshing.

I don't think so.



What am I going to do about you? You know, it took me a while to figure out who you were. It's so ridiculous! Of course Diamond knew immediately. It's unfair, just like everything else.

I don't think I can change you by force, and I don't think I can fight you ... so why not come over and talk? At least hear me out.



Of course what I'd really like is for you to come lick me between my legs. Emerald didn't get all the lust, y'know.

That's ... ah ... that's not gonna happen either ... I ...

... I need to sit down.



Aw. Are you all right? You look a little ... green.

It's too hot ... I feel sweaty ... dizzy ...

That'd be the steam. It's special.

You know what your problem is? You still believe that good wins. It never does, because everything is rigged. The only way to win is to be on the team that cheats.

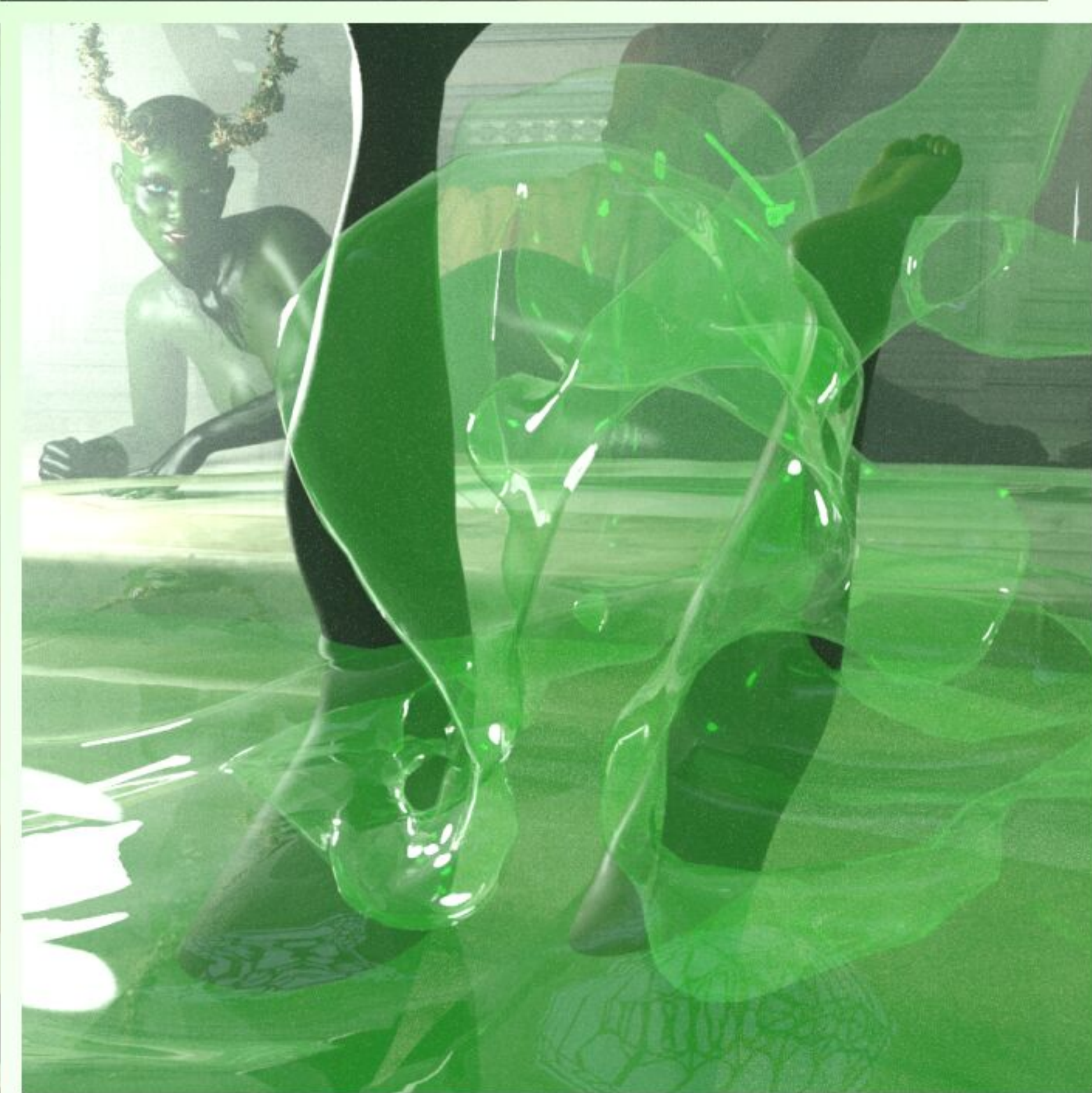


No ... that's not how it ...

... uuhh ...

You know what you need? You need to get into the water for a bit.

You'll feel much better after a swim. I promise.



There, see, isn't that better?

-- MMM! --

Now come over here.





Amber?
Sapphire?
Where did you go?



Huh?
Mph!



Mph!
Mph!
Mphmm!
Oh no!
Where are your swords? I'll cut you loose ...



Di ... it's a trap ...!

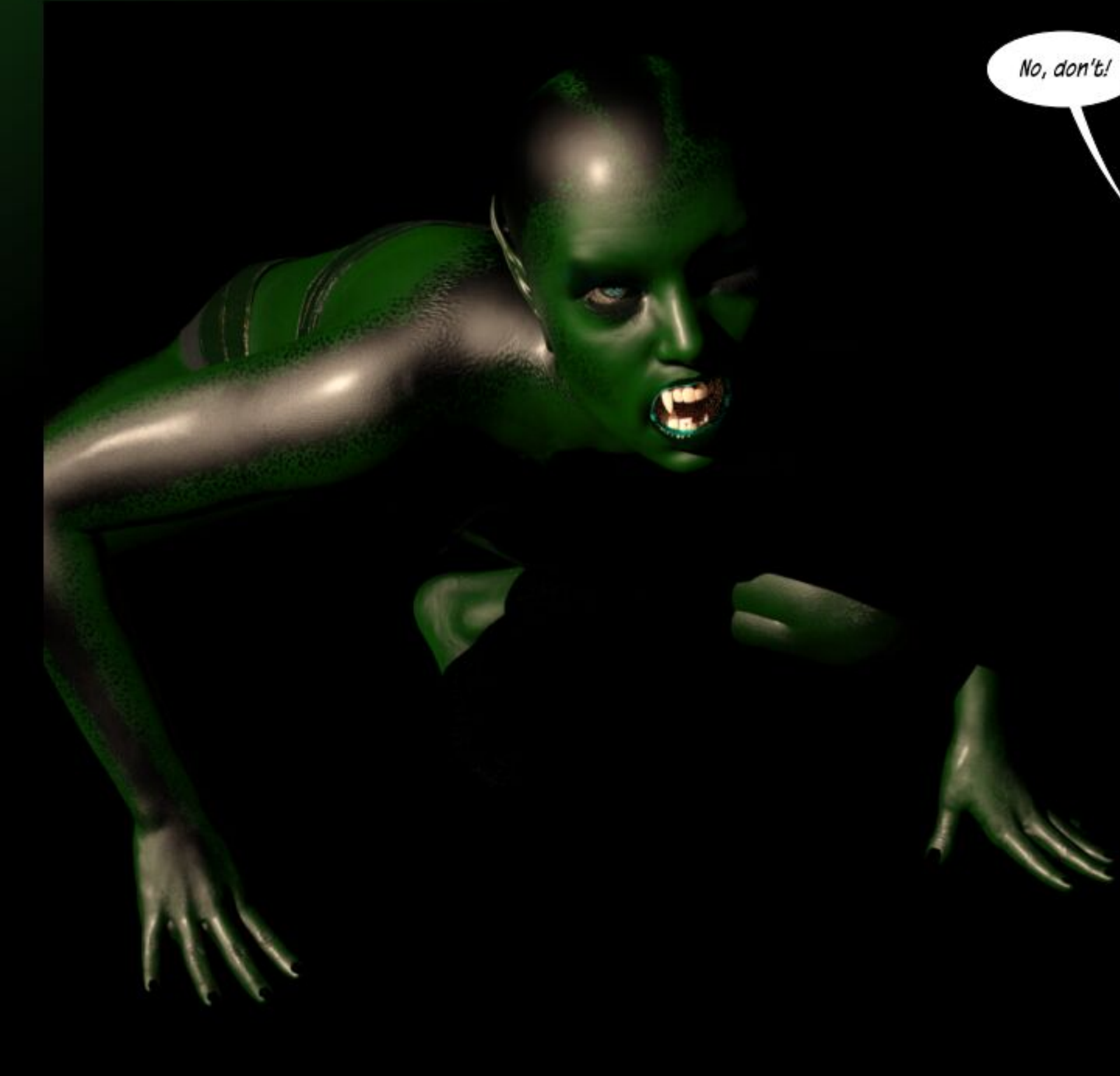


She's right, you know.
You're so hard to get.

... RUN!



-- hisssss --



No, don't!
You've gotta remember!
You've gotta remember who you are!



Oh, I knew you'd be useful.

Bring her over here.

No!!



She's such a pain in the ass. Can't alter her, I tried before. Resilient little brat. I'm going to have to find a place to put her that no one can get to ...



Now!

aagh!



That was fun!

Right?

See if you can get the others free while I say a few more things to her.

Don't touch me, you treacherous bitch!



Oh, no, you don't!

Wow, these are hard to break! What happened to your swords?

I don't know, Di. Same thing that happened to my clothes ...



Did you get her? Where is she?

-- sigh --

I chased her around a corner and suddenly the damned dragon was in my face. I backed up, and nothing. When I went around the corner again, they were both gone. I got Paked out.

Hey, do you think this dragon is a fragment of the green witch --

Jade.

Oh, is that her name? OK. Do you think the dragon's a chunk of her, or is it someone else?

Dunno! I never got close enough to tell.

Hang on, Sapphire, I think I'm getting somewhere ...



For a minute I really did think she had gotten to you.

She had.

Then Ruby remembered who she was!

Oh, neat! About time.

Hey, you try starting without your memory and see how easy it is ...

Have you figured out the rest of it too?



Well, there were some things Jade said ...

I almost don't want to say it, it's just too ridiculous, but ...

Am I ... am I inside my own head? Are all of you, like ... parts of me? Pieces of my personality, or something?



Yay!!!

I knew you could figure it out!



I hope I can get myself back to normal ... I mean, it looks hot, but I don't want anyone to think I'm Jade's snake pet ...

Let me see what I can do. I'm not Turquoise, but I'm pretty good at it.

You know, if this is the room Ruby followed them into ... It doesn't have any other doors ... you think ...?

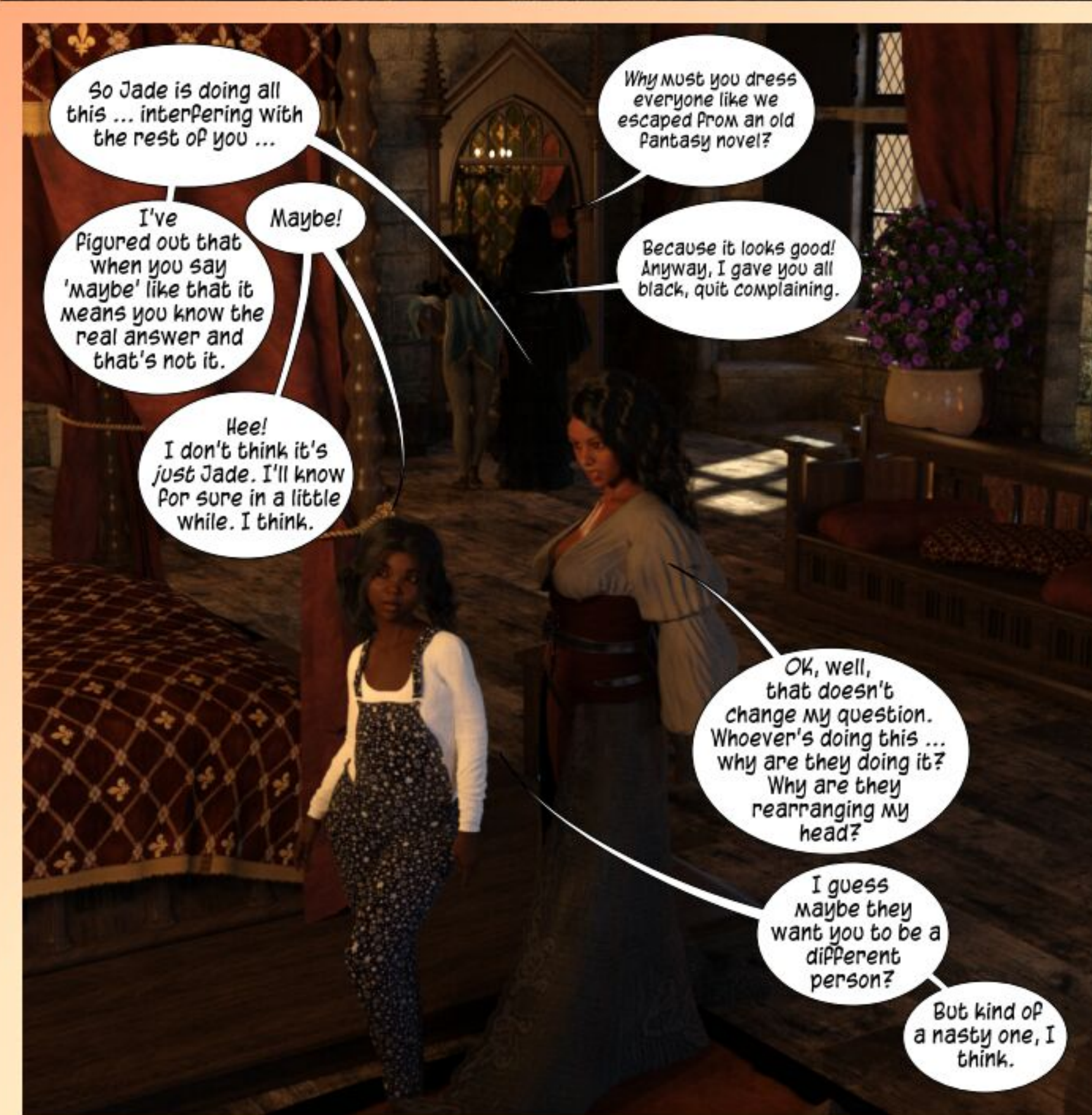
Uh-huh! Wanna look for it?

It would be like Jade to hide it.



Found it! Behind this curtain.

She didn't even try hard.



So Jade is doing all this ... interfering with the rest of you ...

Why must you dress everyone like we escaped from an old Fantasy novel?

I've figured out that when you say 'maybe' like that it means you know the real answer and that's not it.

Maybe!

Hee! I don't think it's just Jade. I'll know for sure in a little while. I think.

Because it looks good! Anyway, I gave you all black, quit complaining.

OK, well, that doesn't change my question. Whoever's doing this ... why are they doing it? Why are they rearranging my head?

I guess maybe they want you to be a different person?

But kind of a nasty one, I think.



This is a lot of doors ... how many of you ... of me ... are there?

Twelve.

Twelve??

Yup! Amber, me, Emerald, Turquoise, Opal, and Pearl on this side over here; Sapphire, Jade, Onyx, Topaz, Garnet, and Amethyst on that side.

What are the doors down at the end?

Meeting room.

OK ... Emerald, Opal, Pearl, Onyx, Garnet, Topaz ...

What's the list?

Not in their room and we haven't seen them ... and ... no, wait, Turquoise is in her room!



Oh wow, it's really you! I didn't think we'd ever meet like this!

While you're here, I have to show you what I came up with for that scenario next week, the one with the guy who can't figure out yet that he's a sub?

You're gonna love it!



Turquoise ... have you been in here the whole time?

What do you mean?

Me getting fragmented, Sapphire changed, Di locked in a cage ... Jade making all kinds of trouble ... you missed all that?

So it's Amethyst, then?

Guess so!

And you knew that already.

Kinda! I wasn't sure, but ... Amethyst is like that.

Oh! You know, Amethyst tried to get me to ... hm, something about doing everything here a better way or some political thing ...

MEANWHILE ...



I just don't think it'll do any good!

Di already can't be touched, and Ruby can shake off anything we put on her ... between the two of them it hardly matters if we get the others ...

And it is her mind ... ultimately, she gets to decide who controls it, Amethyst, you can't change that ...



Like hell I can't!

I may not be able to transform her, subdue her ... I may not be able to lock her away ...

So then I'll just have to convince her.

Things need to happen my way, and I'm going to make her admit it.

I am going to be Ruby. And if that means the existing Ruby has to go away, so be it.

YOU WON'T WANT TO MISS THE CONCLUSION OF THIS TWO-PART PSYCHOLOGICAL MAHYEM! WATCH THIS SPACE FOR OUR NEXT ISSUE!