

**SLEEPER SQUAD**

SERENITY WANTS TO BE THE "GOOD" ZONE OF THE FRAGMENTED A4.

ITS PUBLIC AND CONNECTING SPACES ARE CLEAN, PLEASANT, AND SAFE. NO BACK ALLEYS AND DARK CORNERS HERE.

BUT IT DOES HAVE A FEW PARTS THAT ARE A BIT MORE DECREPIT, A LITTLE MORE RUNDOWN THAN THE REST.

THESE ARE THE PARTS WHERE JEX IS LEARNING SHE IS MOST COMFORTABLE.



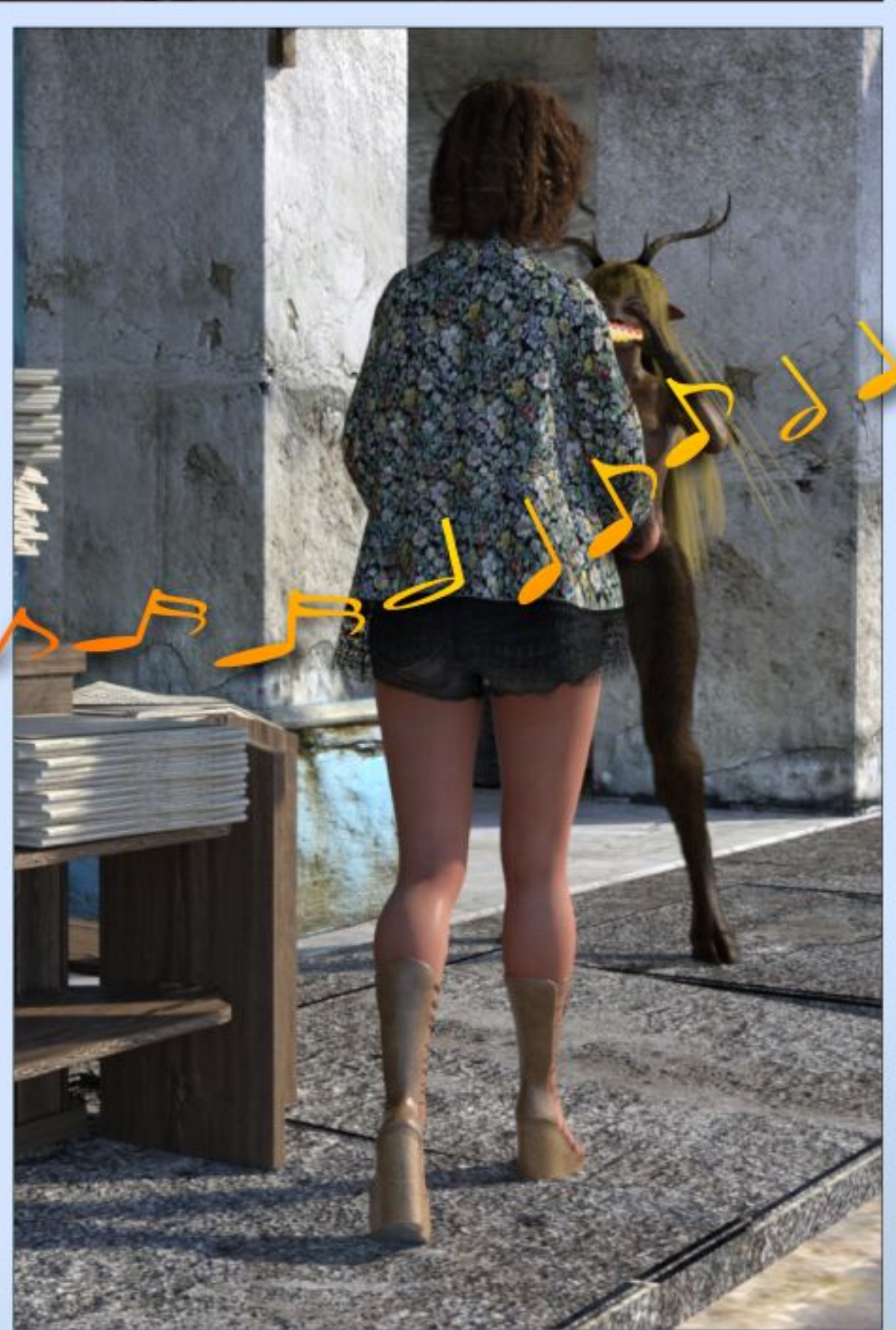
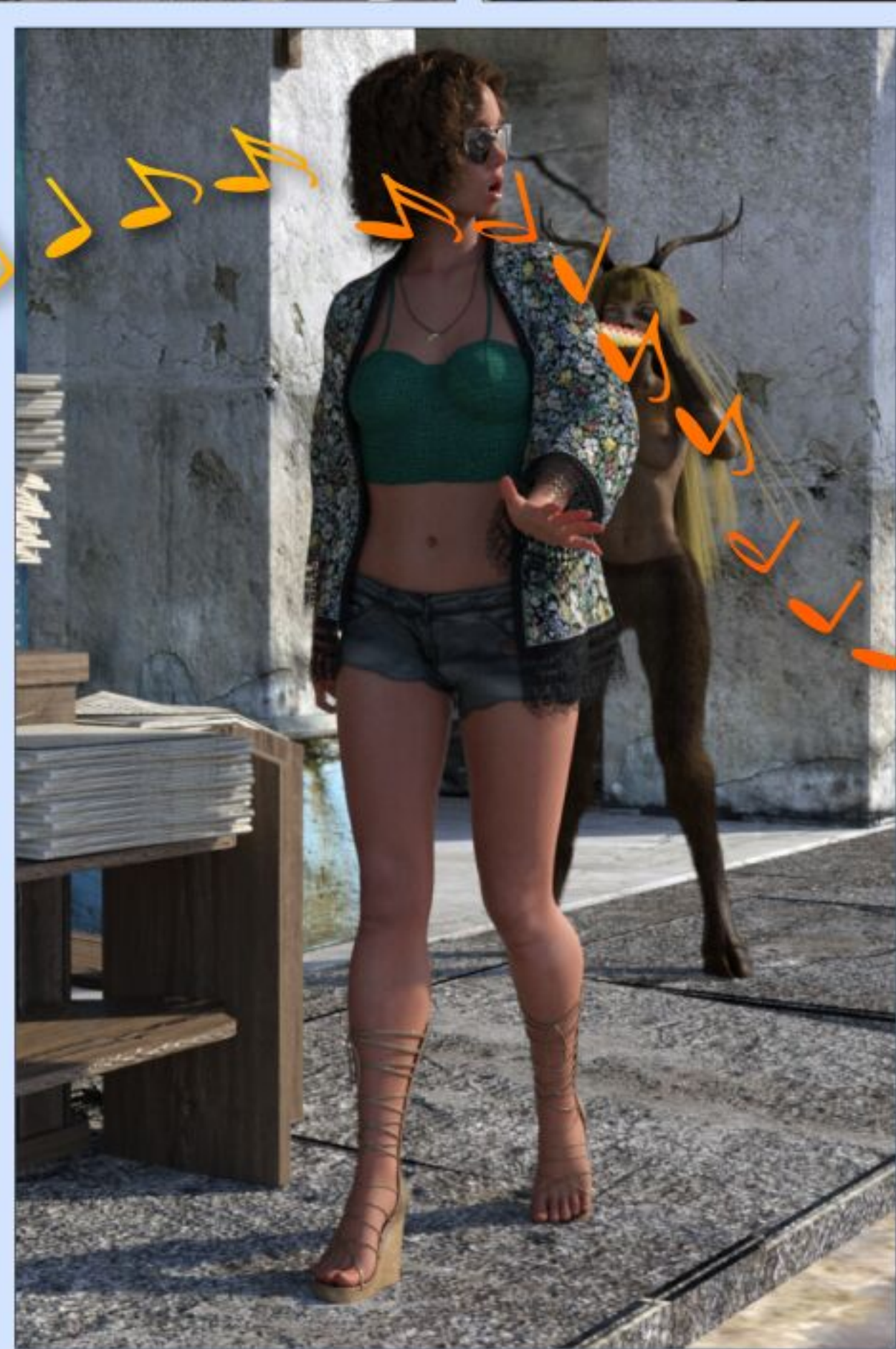
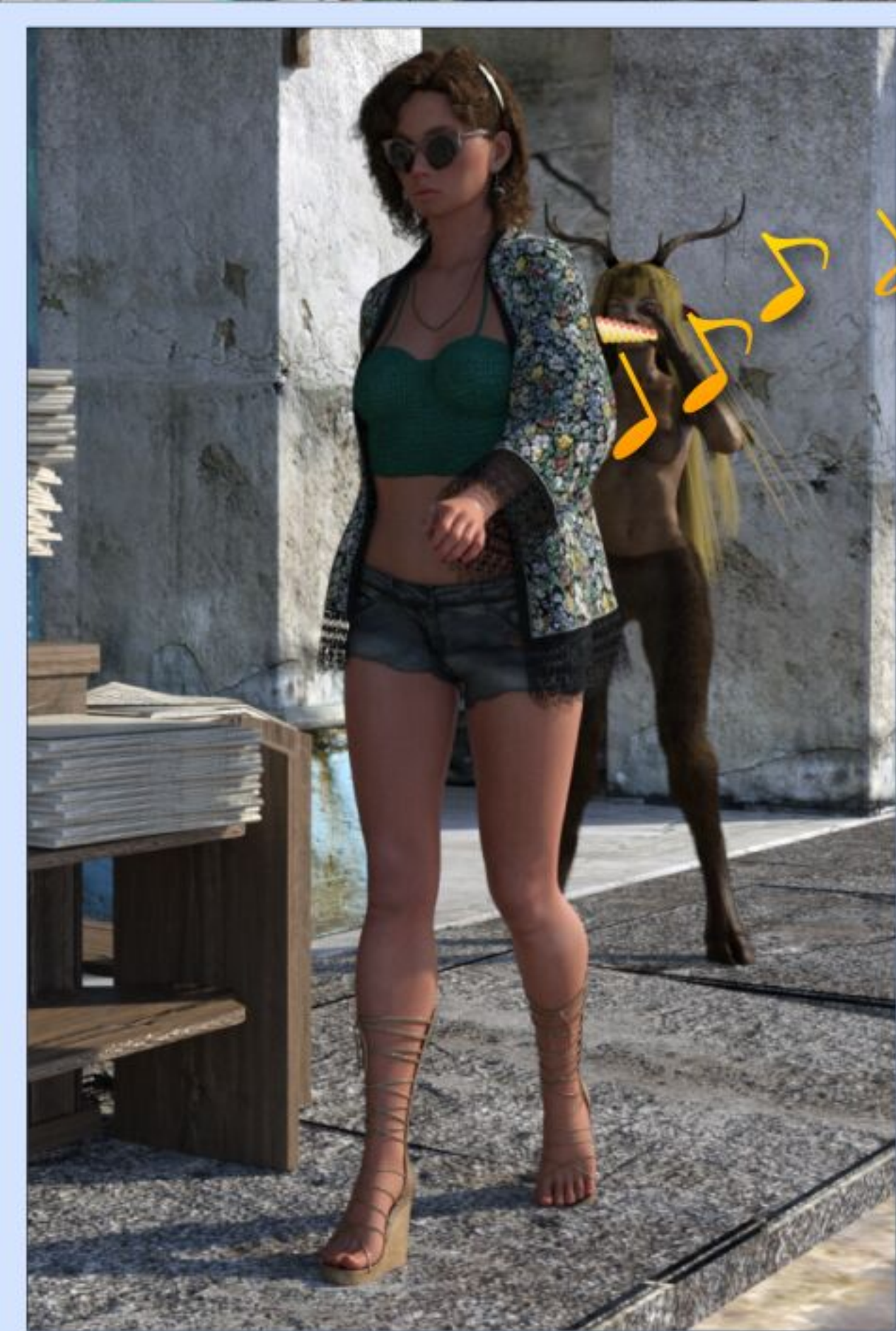
Aright. Ruby says s'just mind is all ... "you just have to picture what you want strongly enough" ... So why an't I got clear? Where's gone slide?



Han't made an eppn thing yet ... Maybe I an't got the juice ... tha'd be My luck ...

Gettin' real hazzed 'bout it tho. An't even got so I can Make My own damn clothes ...

Huh?



That an't style for sure ...

Shit. What do I do?



EPPn portal.

Prob real cho, Jex ...

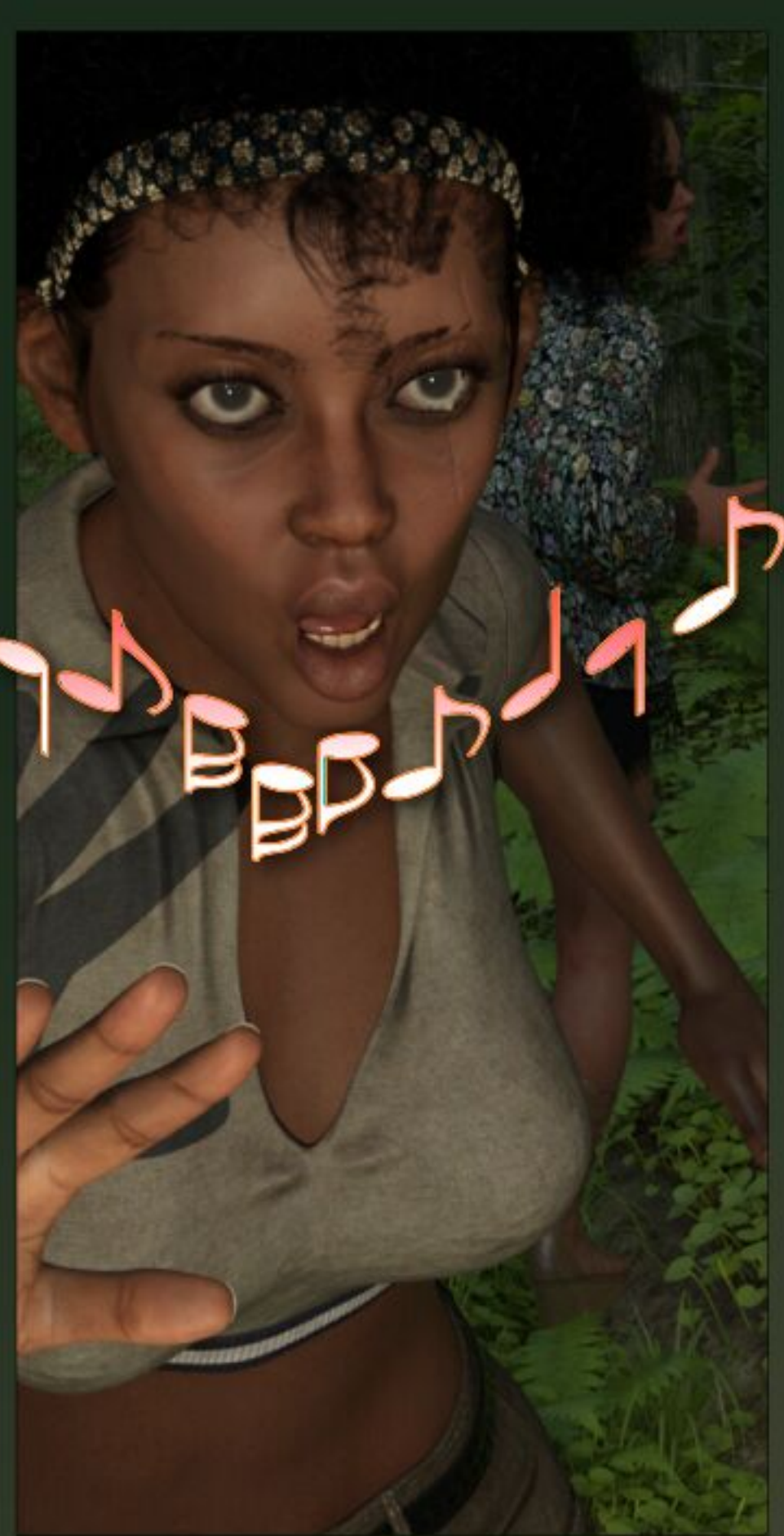
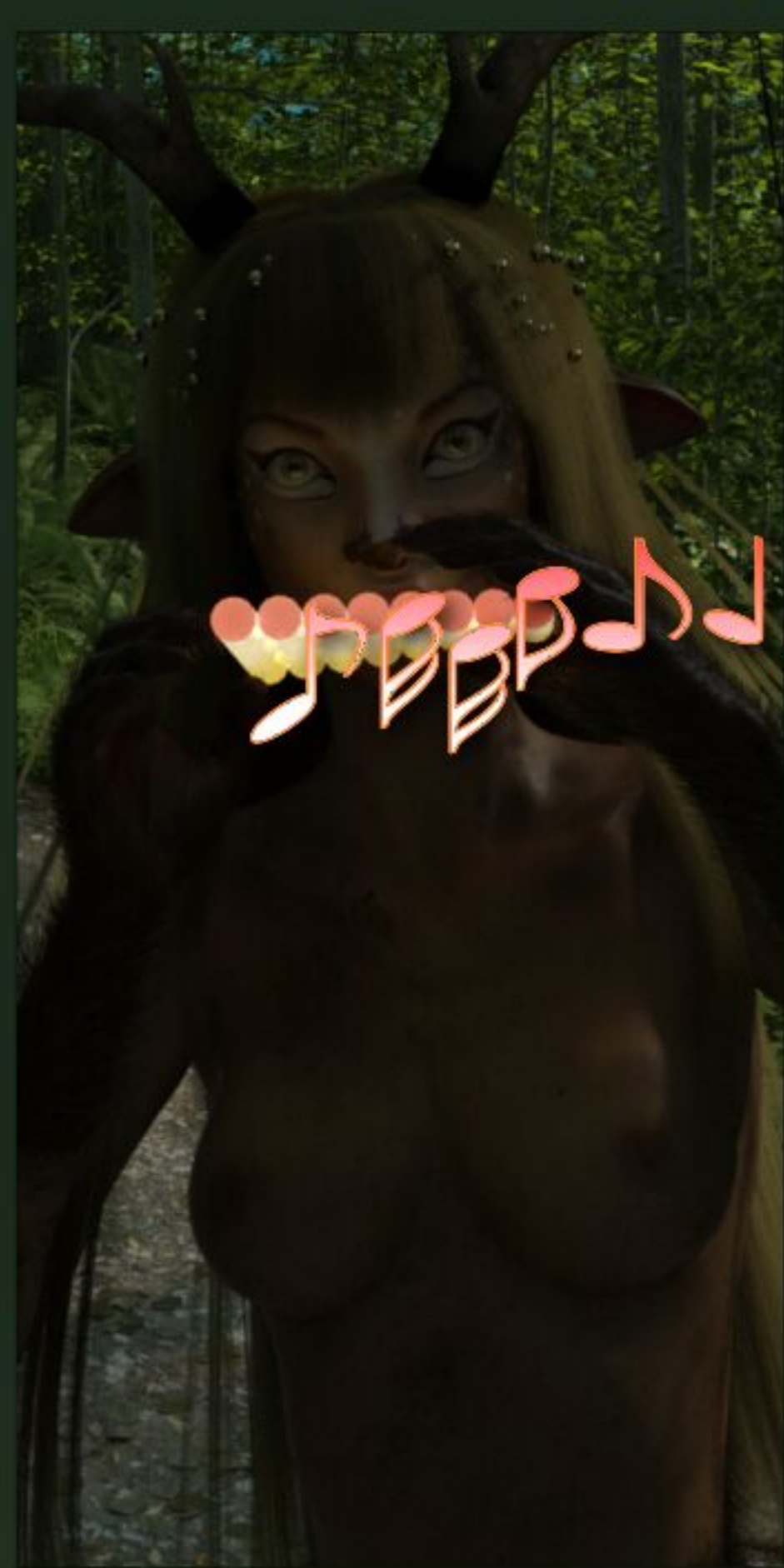


... Uh-huh. Real cho.



Skel still rightup on it ... if she saw Me she an't care ...

Oyo!



Hoy! What's this?

All kinds of strange things coming out of the woods these days.

What's your business here, human?

... Hail? Do you speak?



Hexed.

Definitely.

I can fix that.



Hah!



--spit--  
Skel! Why'd you--

Oh. Aright.

All better? Who'd you cross, a Fairy or a Faun?



Han't know those. Woman with rosh legs and horns, and some music thing.

Faun. Not that it matters. Nobody in the woods is any good.

Except the bears, and they wouldn't have anything to do with your kind.

And we don't either! You need to leave.

No fuss, selah. Woods a cho move. Faun can do whatever. Going back to portal and get gone now.

Thanks for the bath. B'sin.



Hoy!  
You can't toss her out! Sun's almost down.

She's not clan, Kala ...

So? I wouldn't send my worst enemy into the woods after dark.

Come on, give her a corner somewhere till dawn ...

Kala, Jiya won't ...



Oh, I might. But it's not for me to decide.

Kala, you know the rules. Nobody here but clan and clan friends.

If she wants to stay, she'll have to be a clan friend.

And since you're the one who wants her to stay, you should be the one to make the challenge.



Challenge?

Yes.  
... How do you feel about a fight?



Don't worry. Everyone knows you can't win. We just expect you to fight like you mean it.

Make me break a sweat. Then we'll know something.



Double my weight, built like a wall. Could be real bad.

She can't move as fast tho. Takes her while to haul those tits around.



Nope.

Wan't even near.

Huh. Nothing with her block arm ... opp-balance after punch ... Feet bad ...

This cho an't know how to fight! She got power but no idea ... Bet she can't never been Awake ...



--Whuff!--

Gon cost you, cho. Sorry.



This were street, now, I'd back your face ... but I an't know when's good to stop here ...

You gon call it, cho? Broke a sweat yet?



yow! Aright then.

That's the rules, then that's the rules.



--Uhh--



Yield! I yield!!



Ale!!

Ale Por the victor!

And Por the loser too, Por Mercy's sake!

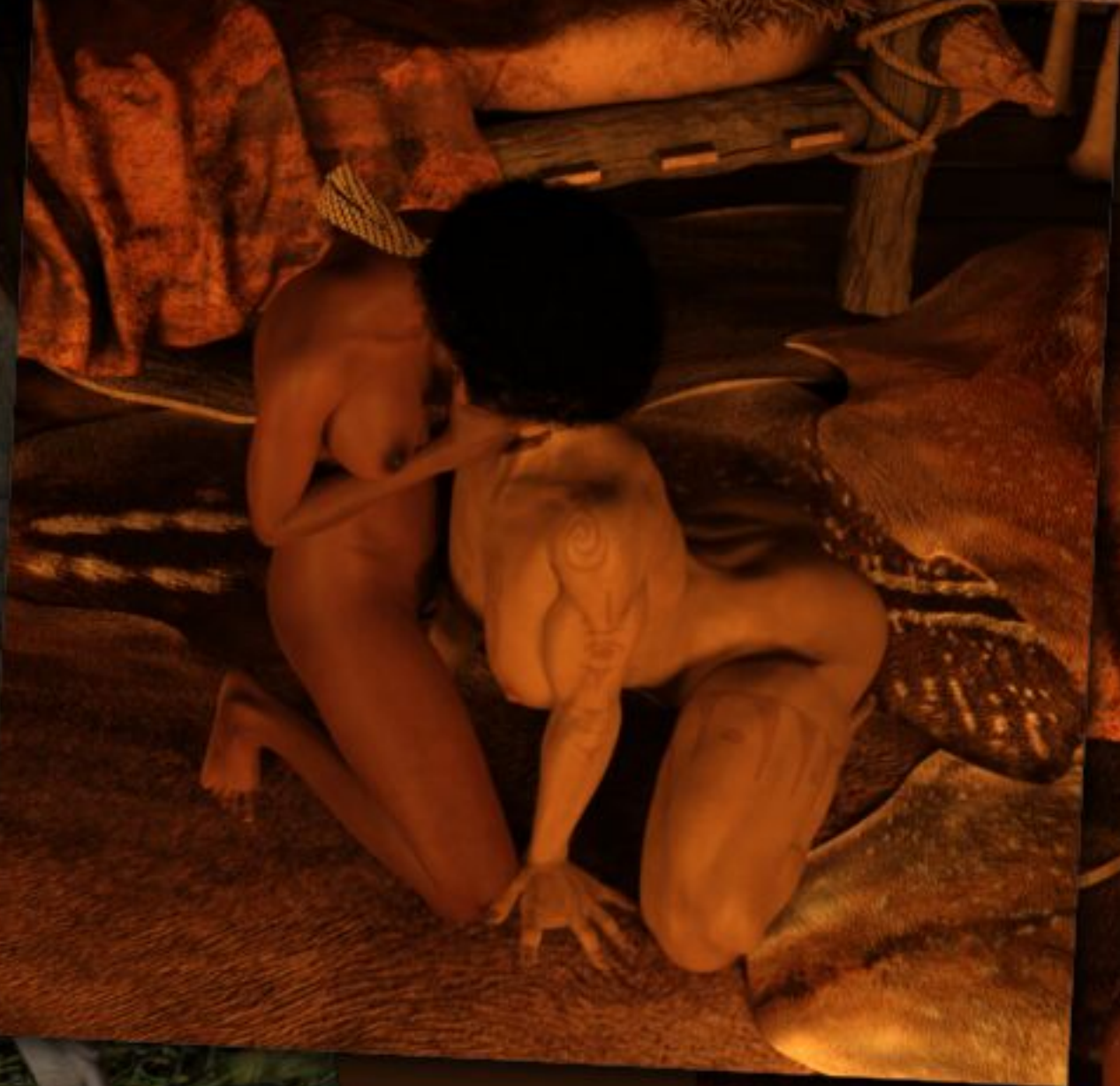


--Ooh-- Kinda tacked ...

Cool air's good, tho--hot in there ...

Sweat han't dry Por hours ...

Waste oP time drying oFF anyway. I'm just going to make you sweat again.



You should stay. You're Pun. You'd make a good orc.

An't think so, but thanks Por saying. You're Pun too.



Just follow the path. The portal's not too far into the woods.

You'll always be welcomed by the Bear-Friend clan. Come back sometime!



Might been cho ... should brought her along to help.

Ruby showed me how these hazzing things work, but ...



Yii! Haul oPP, skel! An't want none!

You lost me my other! When I had to stop you, she broke thral! Now I have no one to bring ...

Han't you dare, you--



THEY WALK FOR HOURS, DEEP INTO THE WOODS.



-- giggle --



ooooohwhattawe got here?

Got yourself a lil thrall, huh, goatPeet? Fun!



Back off, bugFace!

She's mine!

ooh, no, Pinders keepers! How about a goat brain to match your Peet? Baaaaah! --giggle-- Then we get to play with your toy!

Don't touch her! I need her for a--

Baah, baah, baaa! Don't care! Hold still, now ...



!!!

Get away!

OW! OK, just for that I'm going to make you all goat! Baaaaah!



Fence? Here?

Think I see Polk moving back there ...



Oyo! Need a lock, big!

Got skels out here tryin mess me up!



This is a bear village.

Only bears are allowed in here.

Go away, human.

But--



ooh, no, the bears are no Pun, sweetness. They won't play with us either!

You'll just have to play with me instead.

I had a human once! I made her littlelitttle and pushed her up inside me. She wiggled! A lot!

I don't know if she had Pun, but I sure did!



No ePpN way!

-agh-



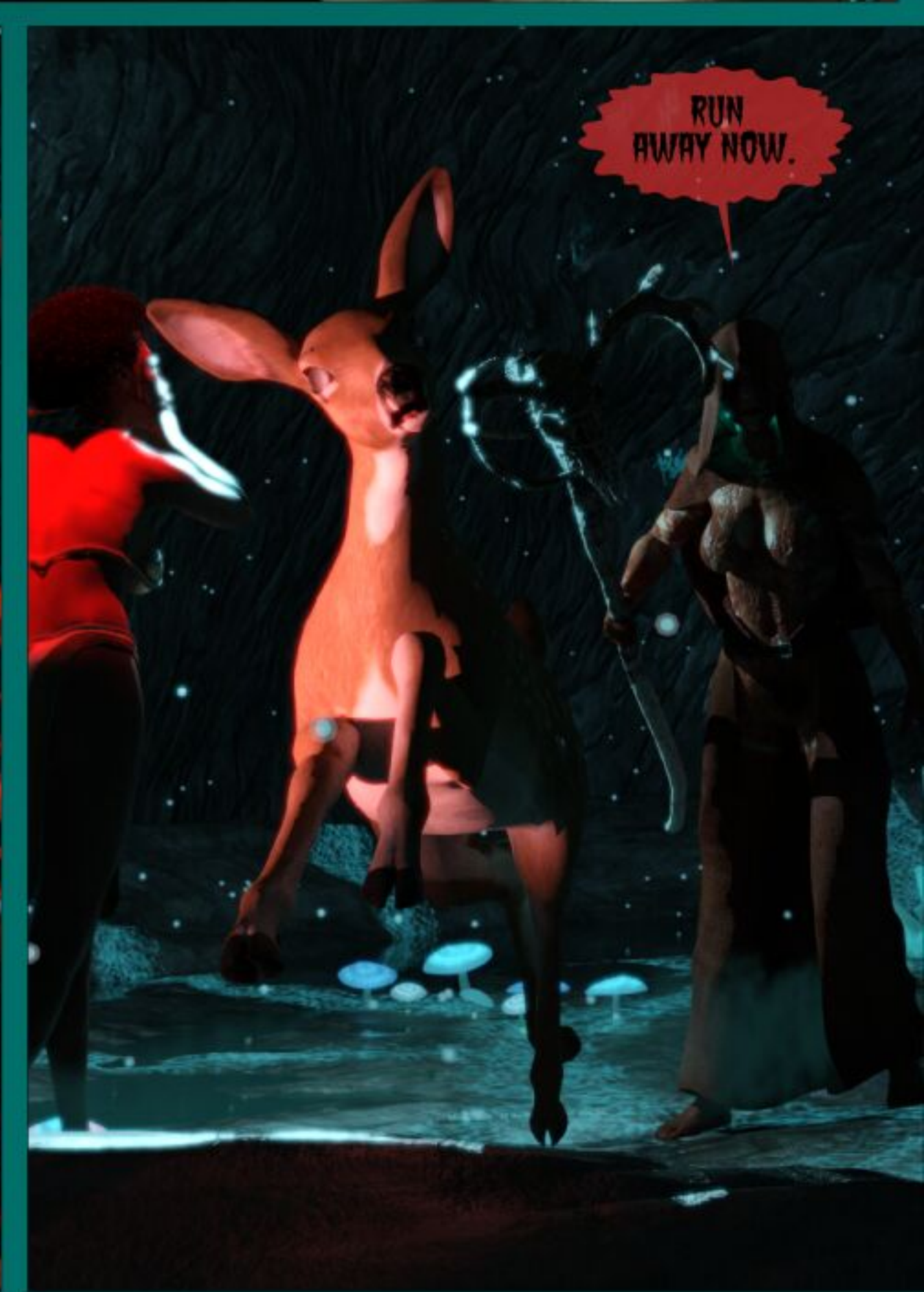
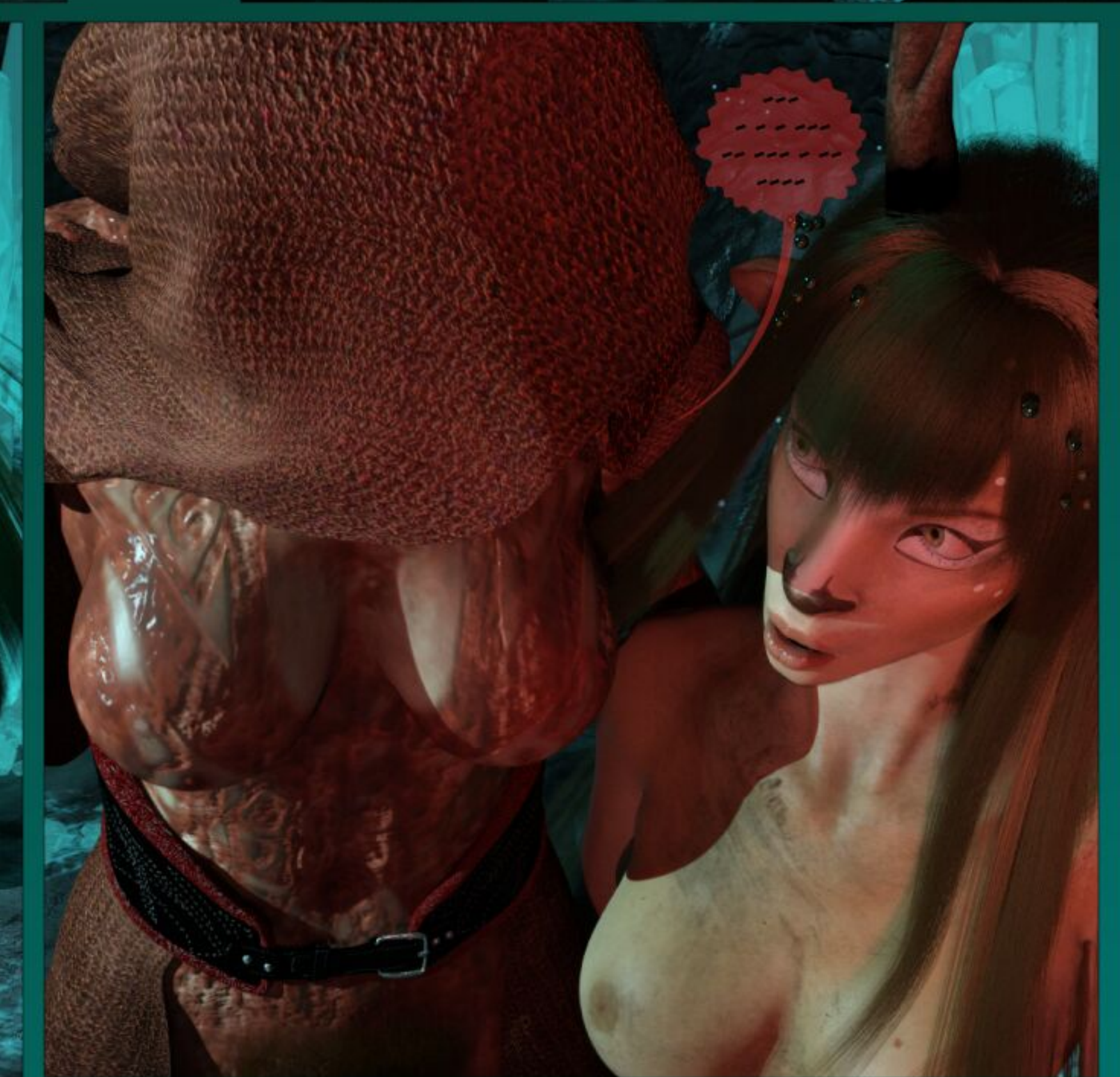
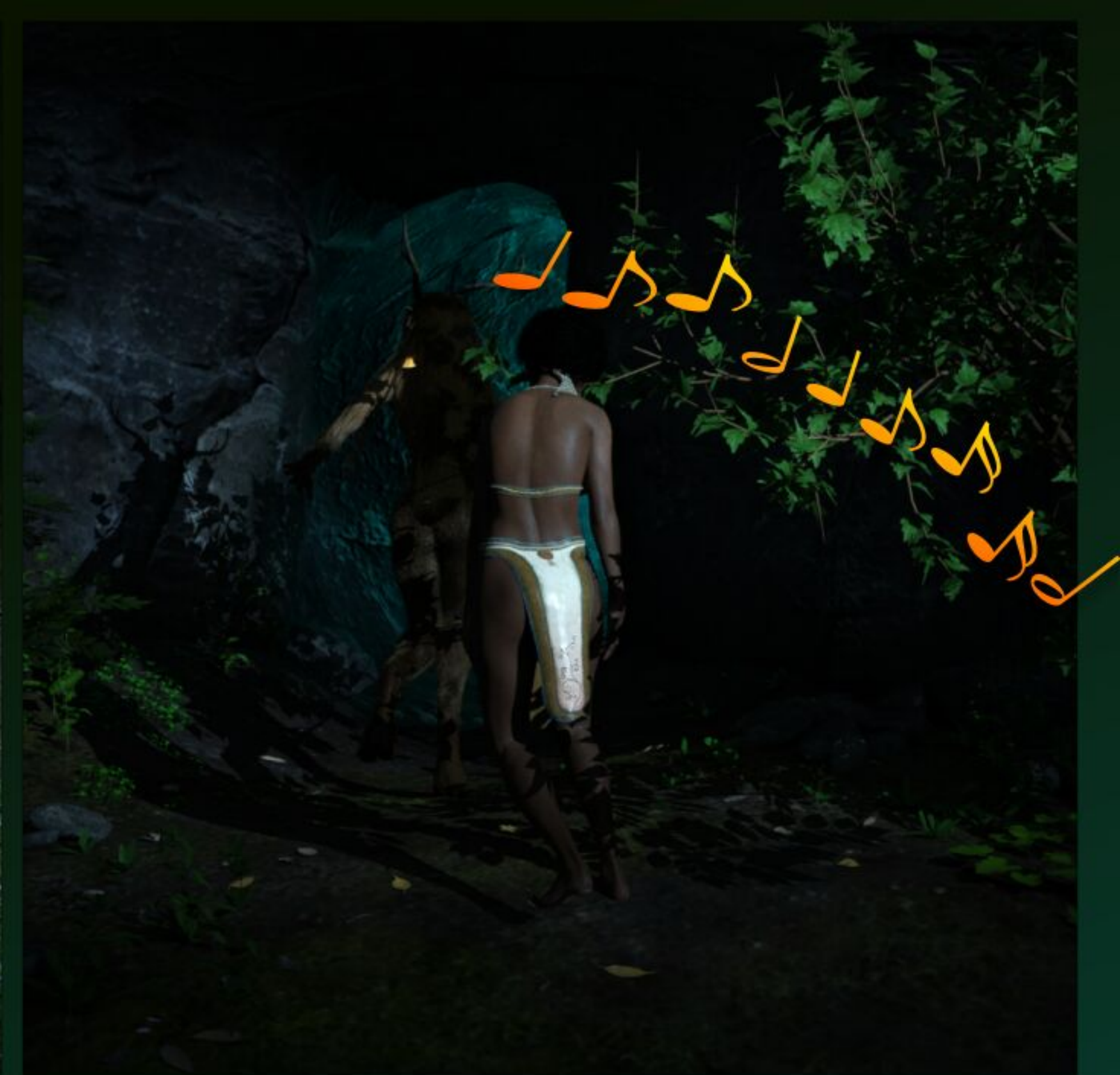
An't nobody here han't want to mess my head.

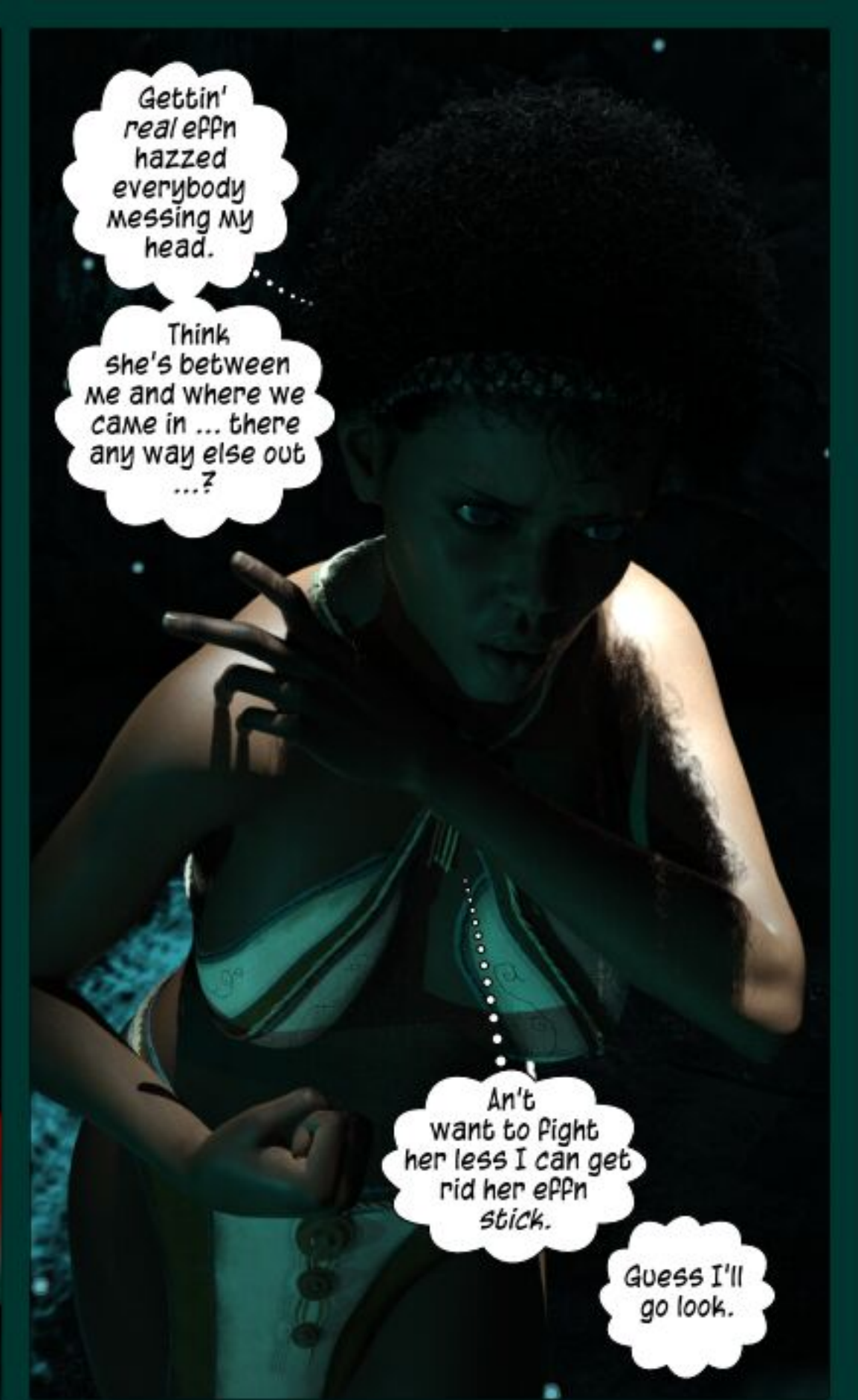
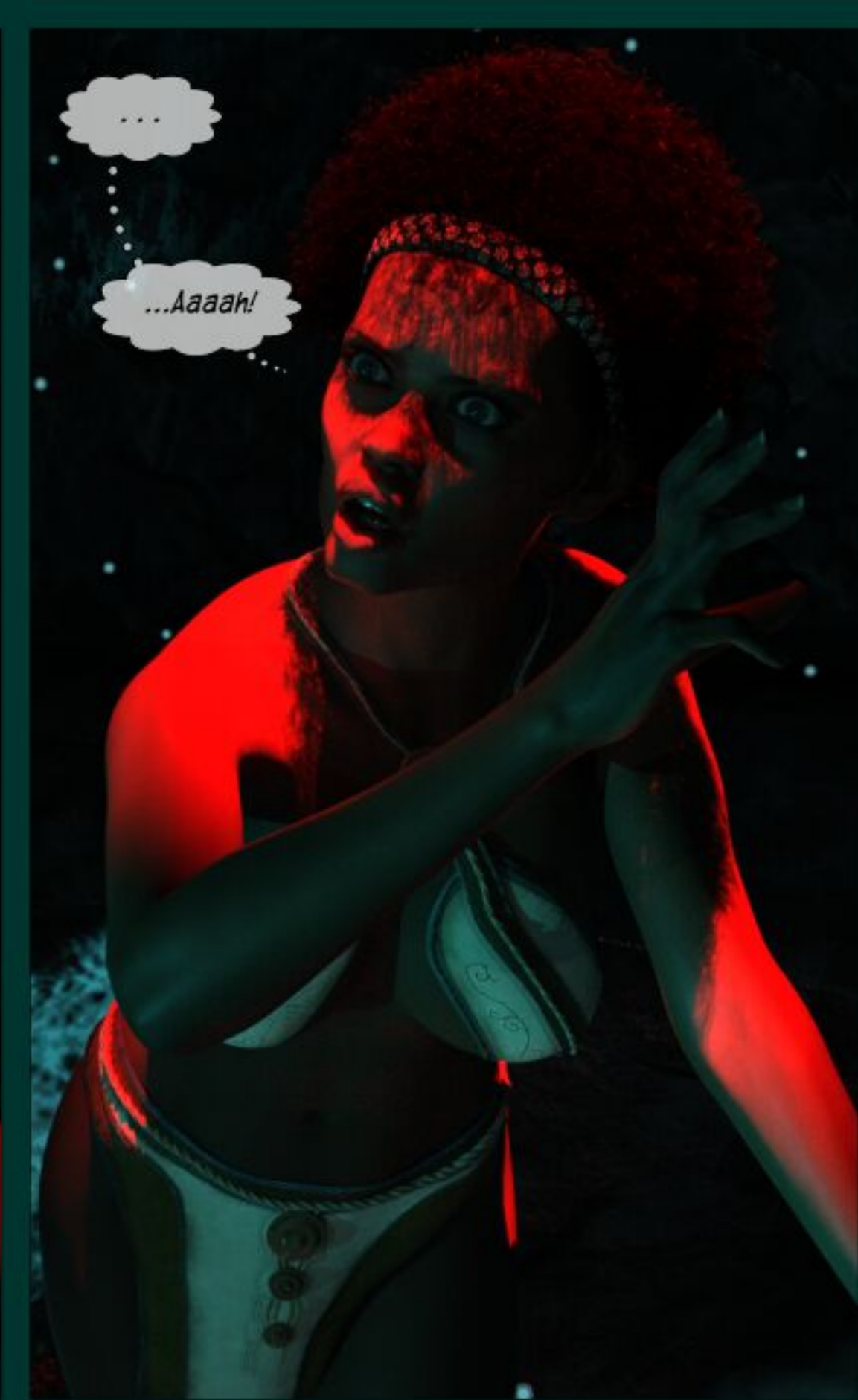
And Kala said an't want to be in here when gets dark ...

Hope can at least find a path by then. Or somewhere to hole up ...



Shit.





DON'T MOVE.  
HEH.

...

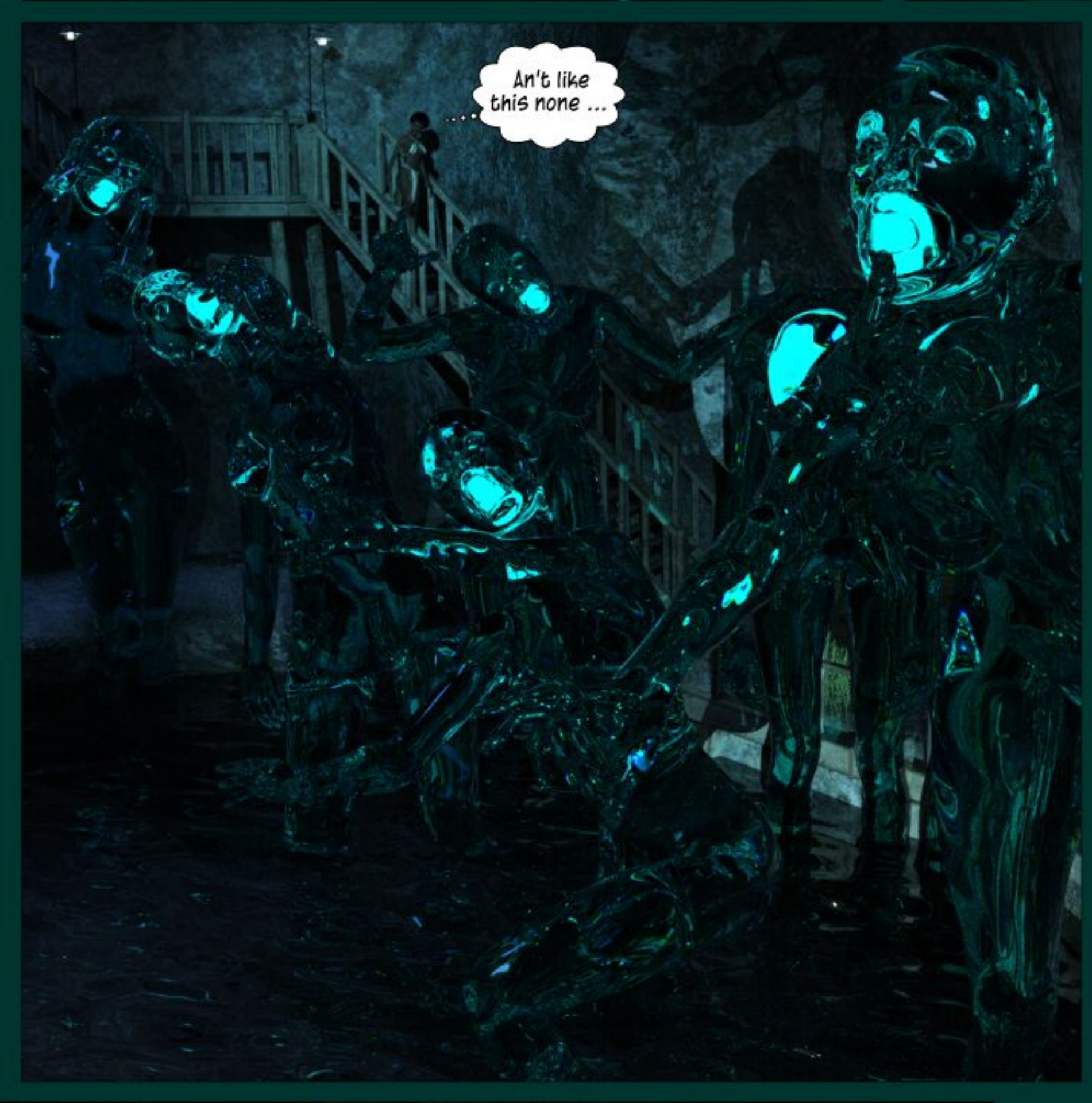
...Aaaah!

Gettin' real eppn hazzed everybody messing my head.

Think she's between me and where we came in ... there any way else out ...?

An't want to fight her less I can get rid her eppn stick.

Guess I'll go look.



An't like this none ...

Skel got some rightup rosh shit.



Small ones now ... guess it's a thing ... an't how I'd decorate, Pon sure ...

... Ice?

Hear somebody in there ...

Got bolt open ... but door's stuck ... need to find something hack this ice--

Maybe not selah ... but prob not selah red skel either, if she locked them up ...

They got push with red skel, I'll help ...



... You're not her! Who are you?

No, and if she's looking for you that's going to make her hard to get past.

But I have a better idea anyway.

First I need to find where she put my stuff, though.

Tryin' get shut of red skel lady is all! There another way out?

You want to find better clothes? You look cold ...

Wan't before ...

Yaaahhh!



Oyo, skel.

Nah!  
Try harder.



AAAAHH!



When we leave, we'll need to get some distance in a hurry. As soon as I move too far from her, she'll start to thaw.



--oof--  
What--?

Stop!  
Wait!



Where'd they come from?

When I Proze the Russet Lady, any effects she was maintaining were broken. All her magic in here is undone until she recovers.

Oh! The statues. Alright. I get it. Hauling while they can. Good for them.

Yes and no. If I'd been able to stop them I'd have told them to recall instead.

Now they'll be taking their chances in the woods.



... Recall. Yeahhhhh.

Forgot? Don't Peel bad. It happens a lot. Too easy to get caught up in what's going on.

Prob han't use it even if remembered. An't need it yet. Like to see things out.

What about you? In that room ...

The same. I had business here to finish.

I'd have gotten out of the cell eventually. That was new. She's never caught me before. Usually I surprise her first.



Done this before? You cho or what?

I come every few months. She doesn't even quit, you know. She thinks she's making art. She'd rather work on humans, so she gets people to bring them to her. I come in and undo it all. Can't make her stop, so it's the next best thing.

Let's get out of here.





Oh.

We don't want to travel through the woods in the dark. I'd recall, but it'll actually take me longer to get back to where I'm going if I do. You might want to--

An't got place to go just now.

All right. Then let's get over this ridge, out of view, and I'll make us a safe haven for the night.



There! Shelter and shield. Nothing gets in or out of the snow globe.

What do you think?



I --th-th-th-th-th--

Oh no! Hold on, I can help with that.



Drink it all at once.

There's two approaches to the problem, actually, but I think you'll prefer this one.



Aaaauh!

So ... hot!

Feels nice, though, doesn't it? They tell me it does.

Anyway, that'll last you until morning.



Keep those around just case Polk have to hide in snowball with you?

No. I keep those around in case someone I like decides they want to touch my bare skin without freezing.



Ah ... that's not meant to imply any obligation.

Of course, if you do want to, that's good too.



You know, we never did bother to get each others' names ...

I'm Rime.

Jex.



--MMM--  
Pleased to meet you.

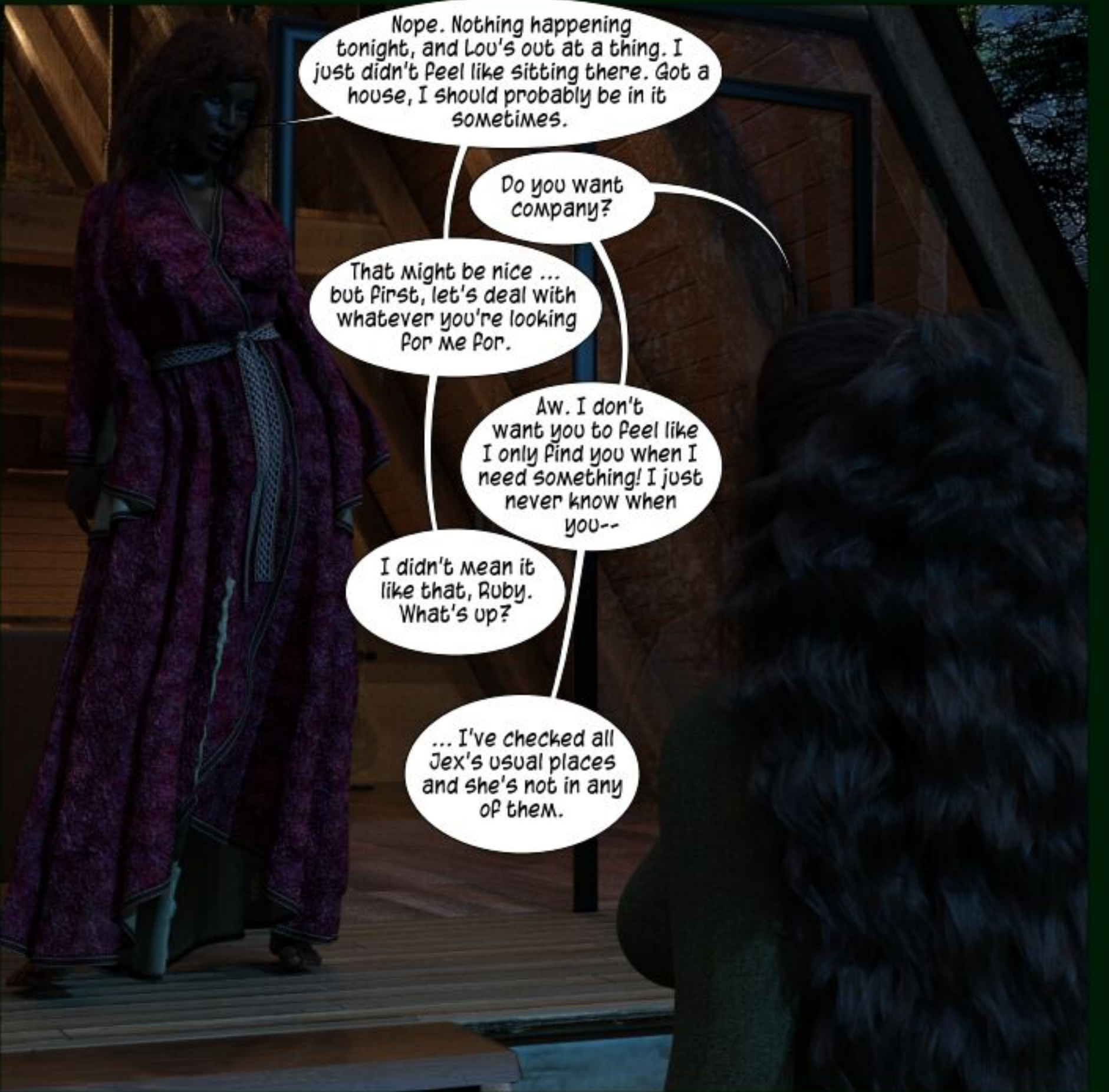


Hey.

Hey.

Sorry to drop by without warning. I looked for you in the ops room first.

If I'm interrupting something ...



Nope. Nothing happening tonight, and Lou's out at a thing. I just didn't Peel like sitting there. Got a house, I should probably be in it sometimes.

Do you want company?

That might be nice ... but first, let's deal with whatever you're looking for me for.

Aw. I don't want you to Peel like I only find you when I need something! I just never know when you--

I didn't mean it like that, Ruby. What's up?

... I've checked all Jex's usual places and she's not in any of them.



You know, this is the third time you've asked in two months.

I have an obligation to respect her privacy. What if she doesn't want to be found?

Well, if I thought she was hiding, I wouldn't ask. I mean, I don't want to get in her face.

I don't think it's that, though. You know she still hasn't set up a personal space?

Sometimes she stays in a hotel, when she wants a shower, but mostly she just sleeps out in the open wherever she can find. I don't get it. And she never recalls to check messages.

We were supposed to do some manifestation practice today.



I don't want to ask you to haul back to ops just to check on her, though ...

No need. I can check from here. I added her to the special monitoring list about a week ago.

Huh.



So all that about privacy was just you yanking my chain.

No, I'm still very concerned about it. With great power comes great responsibility.

But I can read the writing on the wall. Especially if she's going to be part of the team sooner or later ...

Hmm.

Well, she's not in Serenity.

Can you tell where she is? I don't mean exactly, obviously ...

Maybe. I'm checking the other blocks, but you know I can't get much from the ones that have hostile data.

I hope she wouldn't be somewhere with hostile data.

I mean, she wouldn't go back to Highpoint. Not on purpose, anyway.



She's in the Yards.

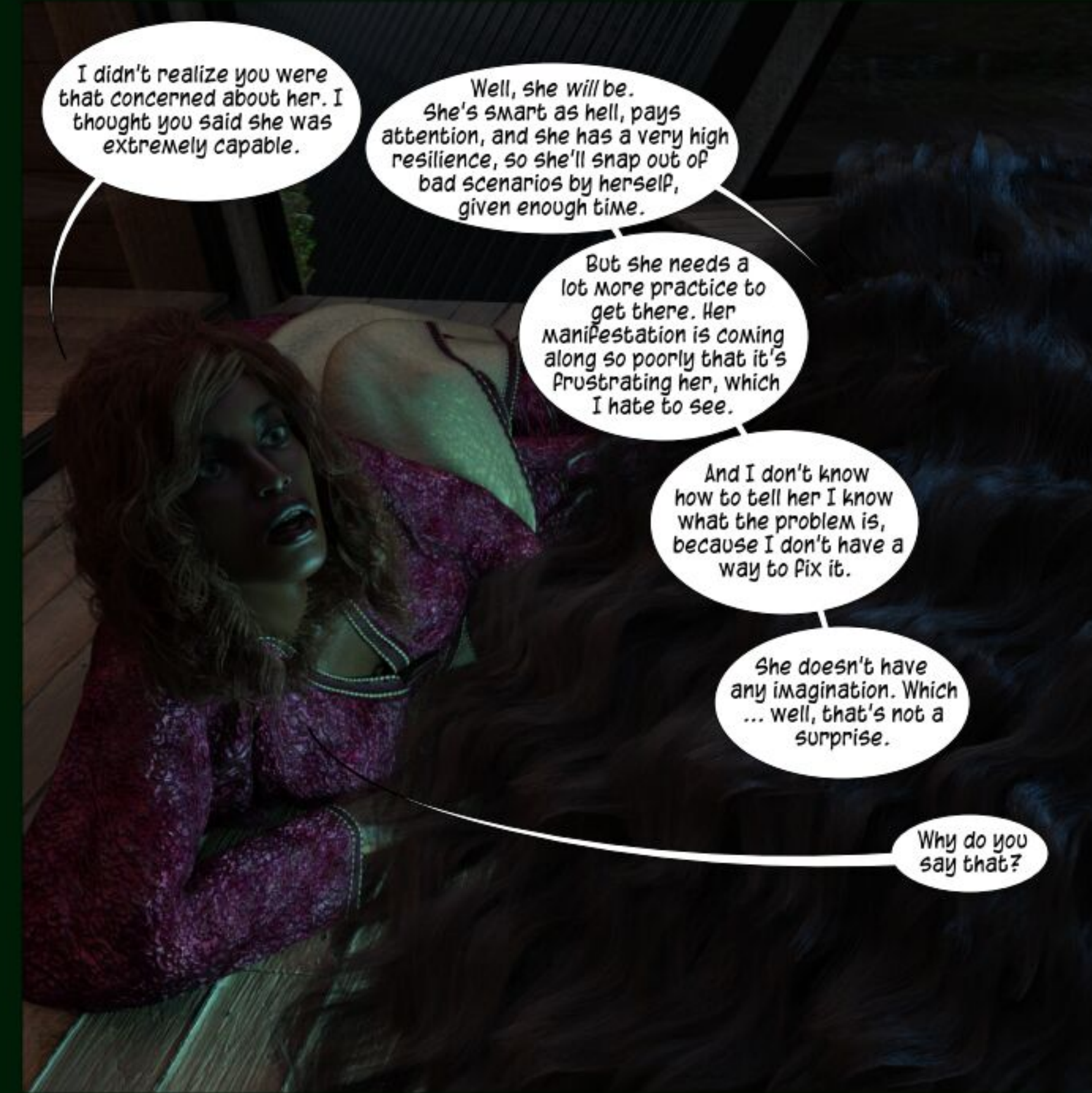
Can't tell you any more than that. It's almost impossible to locate someone in there even with full access.



The Yards? Oh, boy ...

That is absolutely the worst place for her. Why'd she wander in there?

I hope she's not in over her head.



I didn't realize you were that concerned about her. I thought you said she was extremely capable.

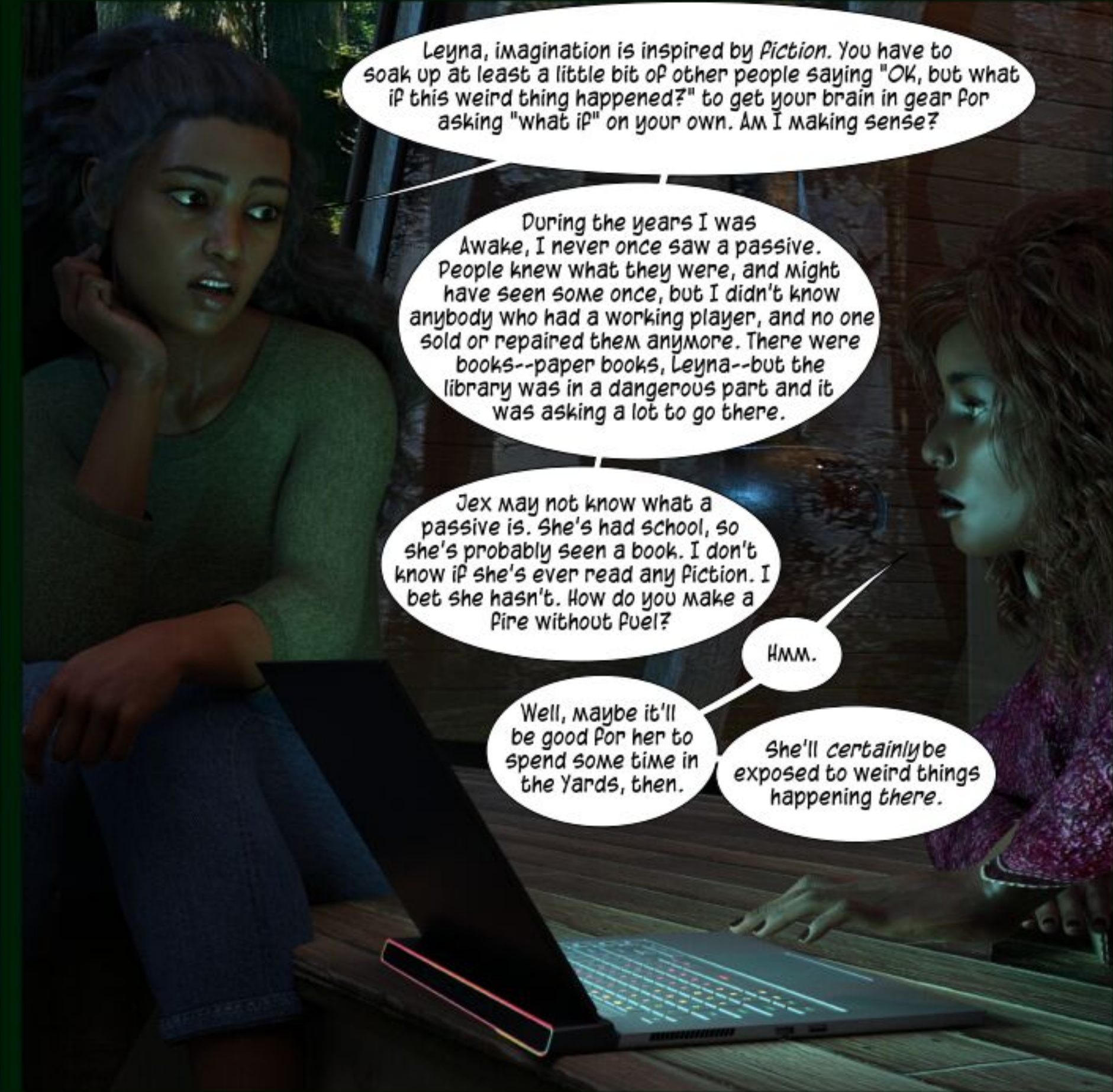
Well, she will be. She's smart as hell, pays attention, and she has a very high resilience, so she'll snap out of bad scenarios by herself, given enough time.

But she needs a lot more practice to get there. Her manifestation is coming along so poorly that it's frustrating her, which I hate to see.

And I don't know how to tell her I know what the problem is, because I don't have a way to fix it.

She doesn't have any imagination. Which ... well, that's not a surprise.

Why do you say that?



Leyna, imagination is inspired by fiction. You have to soak up at least a little bit of other people saying "OK, but what if this weird thing happened?" to get your brain in gear for asking "what if?" on your own. Am I making sense?

During the years I was awake, I never once saw a passive. People knew what they were, and might have seen some once, but I didn't know anybody who had a working player, and no one sold or repaired them anymore. There were books--paper books, Leyna--but the library was in a dangerous part and it was asking a lot to go there.

Jex may not know what a passive is. She's had school, so she's probably seen a book. I don't know if she's ever read any fiction. I bet she hasn't. How do you make a fire without fuel?

Hmm.

Well, maybe it'll be good for her to spend some time in the Yards, then.

She'll certainly be exposed to weird things happening there.



Jex ... The sun's up. And I have to be off.

MMMhr?

Head south down the rise. That'll take you to a path out of the woods.

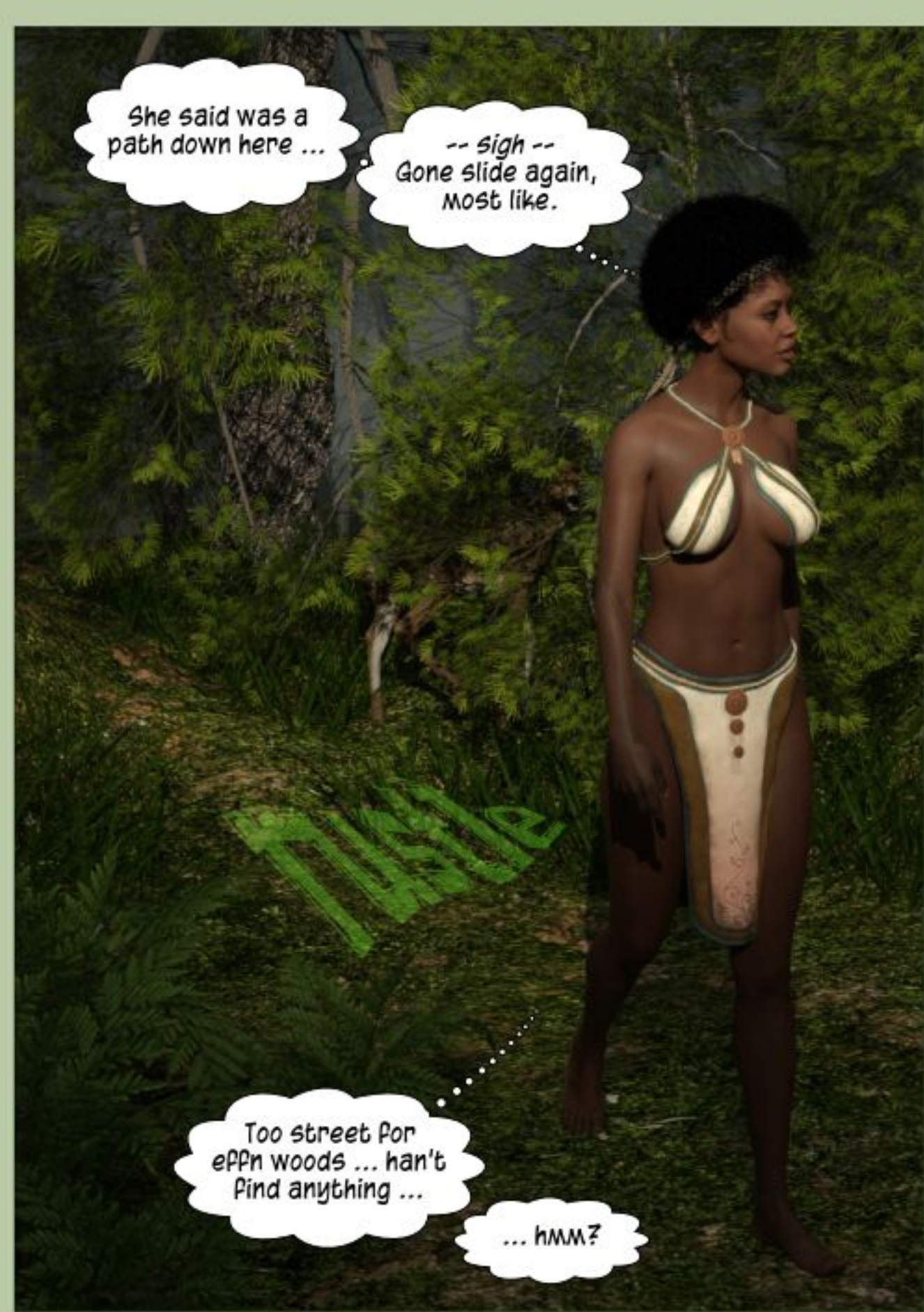
Been Pun.



S'pose should recall ...

An't got else in Serenity tho.

Maybe should stay. Folk big Cho here but it an't boring ...



She said was a path down here ...

-- sigh -- Gone slide again, Most like.

Too street for ePPn woods ... han't find anything ...

... hMM?



AAAAH!

... oh.

Oyo.

Might's well haul off, selah. Got none for you.

Less you can show me out of here ...

Still?

Not yankin' you--I got nothing. And prob just gon get into slide. You should haul.

Hold on.

You're the-- I remember! Red skel messed you up ...

That's right, huh?

Han't know what you want with me, tho ...

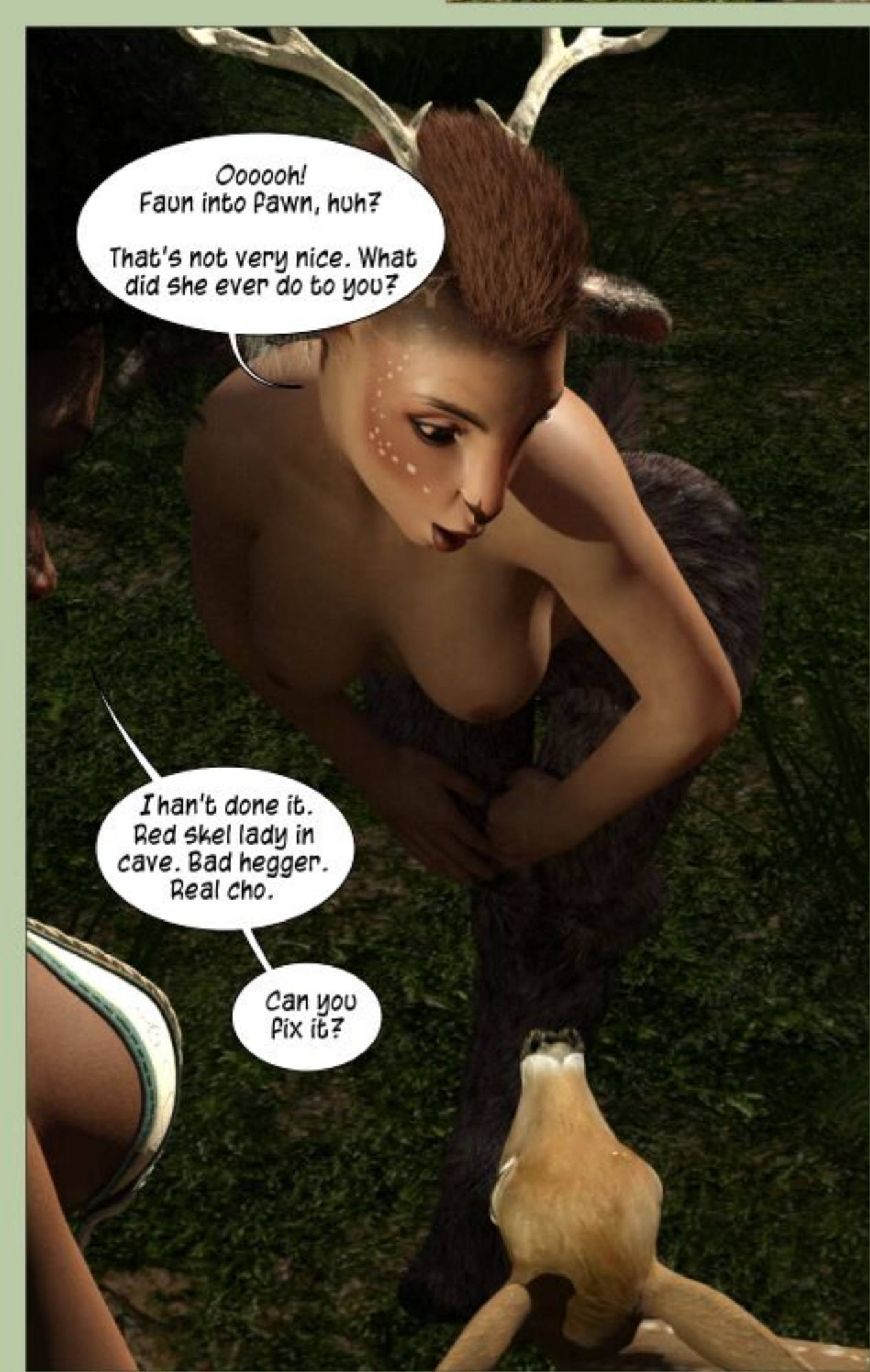
--snerk--



Hahahahahaha!!

You know, it's one thing to talk to animals, but it's a bad sign when you expect them to answer back!

She an't animal. Was one of your Polk yesterday.



Ooooooh! Faun into Pawn, huh? That's not very nice. What did she ever do to you?

I han't done it. Red skel lady in cave. Bad hegger. Real cho.

Can you fix it?



Me? --hahahaha!-- I can't even undo my own magic. You want me to undo the Russet Lady's?

You're a witch--why don't you undo it?



An't no witch ...

Of course you are! Any human in this part of the woods has to be a witch. Or they're really stupid.

And you got away from the Russet Lady, so you can't be that stupid, right?

Bye now!



Guess could try ... Ruby says have to find what ...

See, she says should peel like some change ... on top, like paint ... Han't know how to do that ...

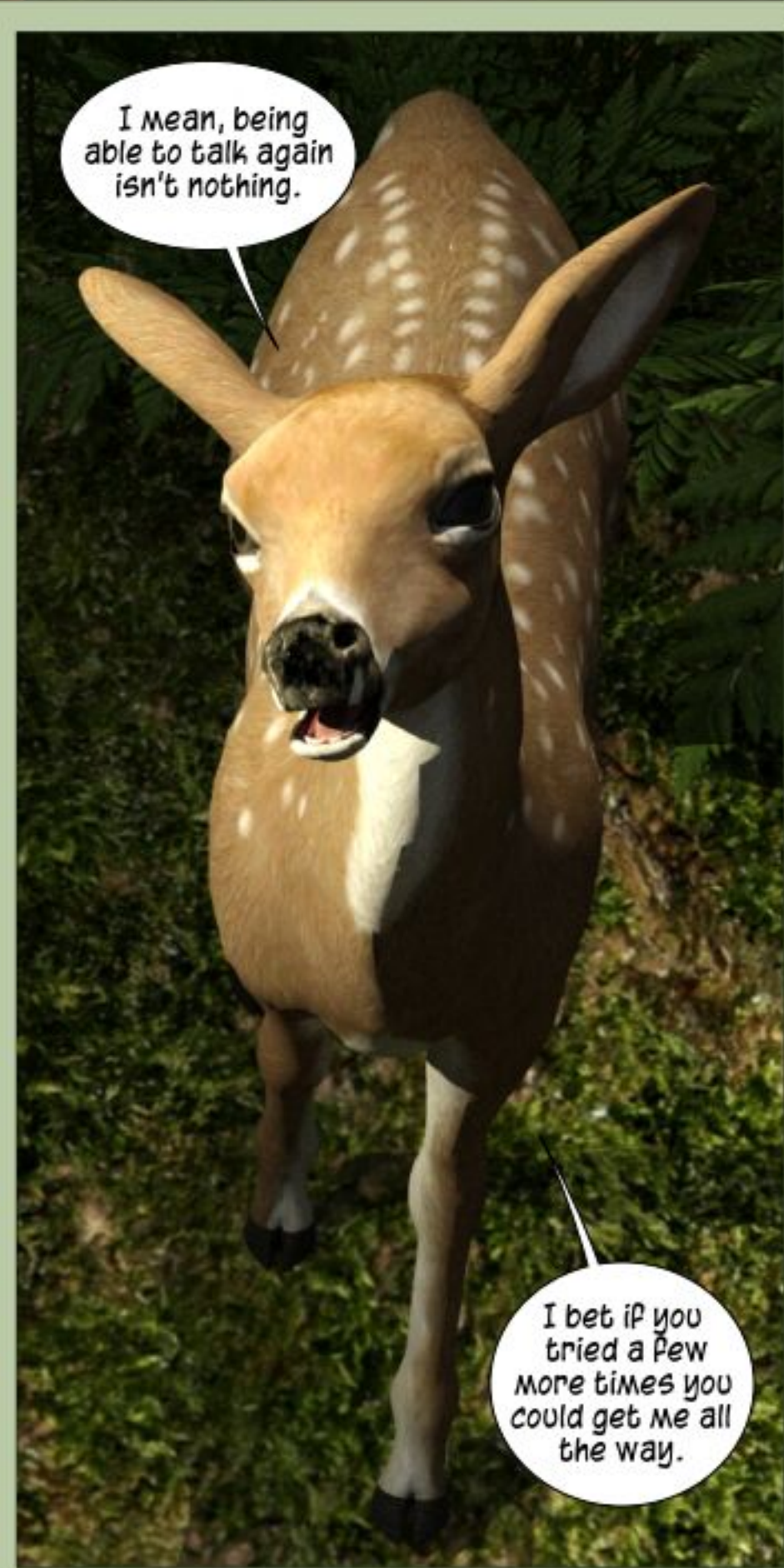
How come you han't turn back when red skel got proze?



--pfeh-- Shit at witch. Figured.

Han't done ePPn thing ...

That's not true.



I mean, being able to talk again isn't nothing.

I bet if you tried a few more times you could get me all the way.



Han't count on it.

An't sure should try anyway, since what you did.

I had to do that! I needed a Favor from the Russet Lady and that was the only thing she'd accept for it!

Must been some Favor.



Meadow disappeared days ago! No one knows where she went! I know she's in trouble and I have to find her!

The Russet Lady could tell me where she was.

Did she? Before she jagged you?

Yes. She's on one of the Plain Folk Farms out in the grasslands ... not too far, I know where ... I don't know what could have made her go out there ...

Maybe she was done with your shit. Had to haul.

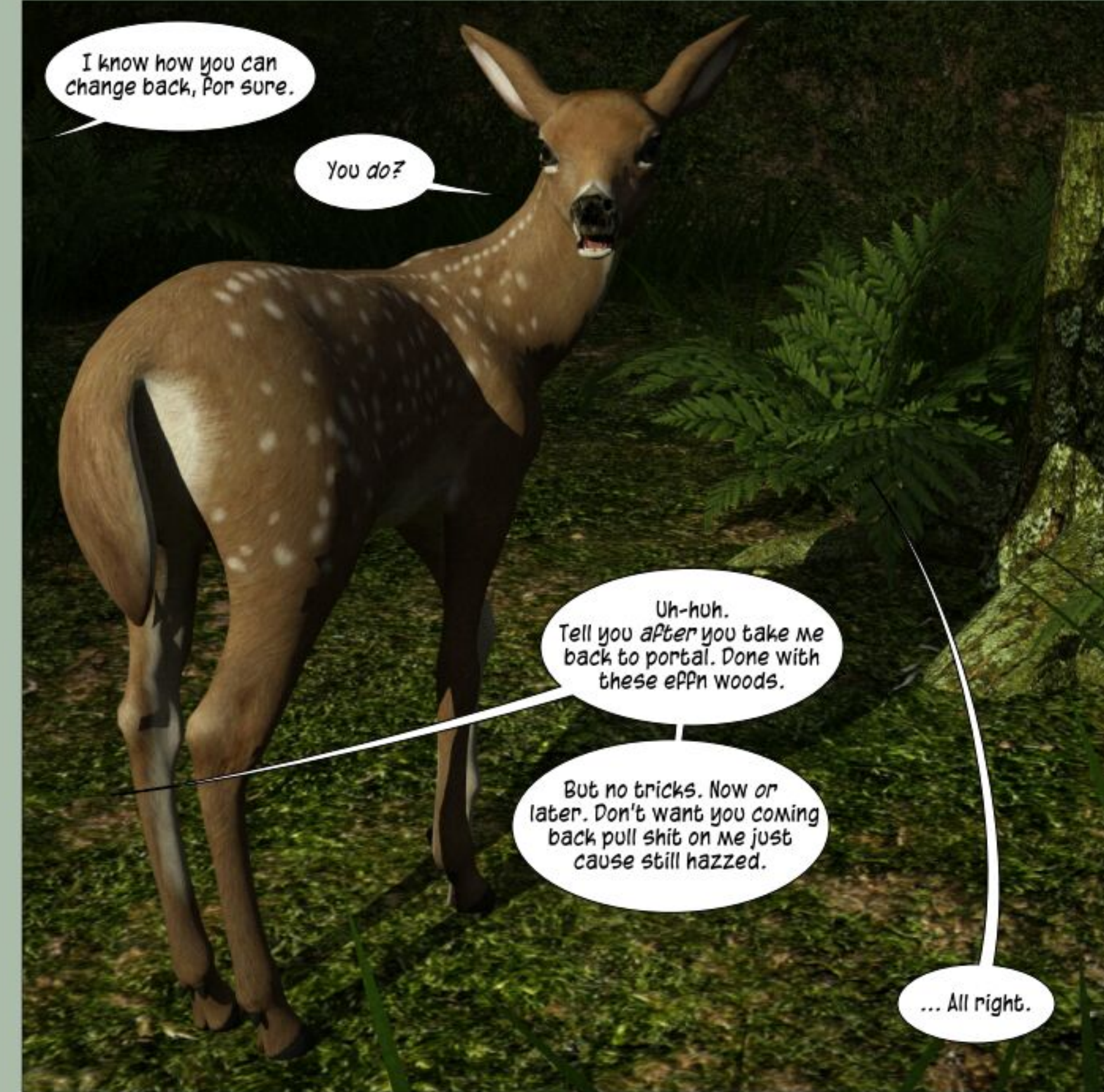


You can Puck right oPP.

Meadow's the only true love I've ever had, and I know she Peels the same about Me.

I'll recover some other way.

Hold up!



I know how you can change back, for sure.

You do?

Uh-huh. Tell you *after* you take me back to portal. Done with these ePPn woods.

But no tricks. Now or later. Don't want you coming back pull shit on me just cause still hazzed.

... All right.



A LONG WALK LATER.

OK, here we are. Now tell me!

Recall. Undoes all that shit, right?



But -- agh -- You cheat!

If I was just going to recall, I could've ...

But you han't. Cause you forgot about it.

An't no cheat. It'll Pix you. That was the promise.

Anyway now we're even.



Aright, now, try this again ...

S'posed to be easy ... all kinds Polk do it ...

Ah ...

... look ...

... I really do need to go try to find Meadow. The Plain Folk are trouble.

An't stopping you.



The thing is ... Fauns aren't much liked in the grasslands ...

Han't figure why.

Go as human. You were human before, right?

Humans don't do a lot better. Also, if I'm human, I lose my magic. And I haven't been human in years, anyway ...

... You want me to go with you?

You seem like you know how to deal with a lot of things. And it'd be safer than traveling alone.



How long's the trip?

I'm not sure. A couple of days, I think. Wouldn't be much more than that.

Hm.



... just think you're overreacting a little.

I disagree. Obviously.

BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE'VE SEEN FREELANCERS ASH AND MAIRE. WHAT ARE THEY UP TO NOW? KEEP READING.



Every time they've done this, we've found a replacement within a day. It's just a nuisance--

It's more than that! People aren't going to want to give us business if they think this kind of thing could happen at any time. You! More than anybody else here, you should know we depend on appearances!

If we put guards everywhere, it'll look even worse. Is that what you want?

If it comes to that, yes.

Look, Mr. Church will be in soon. It's his first visit, and we want him to visit again. Just make sure nothing goes wrong. Whatever it takes.



Here we are, Mr. Church.

Now, please don't hesitate to let me know if you need anything else.

Thank you, Alexander, I don't think that will be necessary.



The arrangements look entirely satisfactory.



MMMOhhhh ... oh, yes ...



AAAH!

UUUUU!

Sorry to burst in like this.



I knew it!

I knew you bitches would find the one place I really didn't want you to be, damn it!

Get them!



And just like that, everybody pitches in. No hesitation.

Makes you think.

AUGH!

-- oop --

uuur!



Don't worry, Thurmer. If she wants to come back and keep working for you once her head clears a little, we won't stop her.

But what are the odds?

uuuua!

That's it! I've had it.

I'm going to find a way to deal with those two once and for all! And if I can't ...

... I'm going to take it to the boss!



Han't ever walked this much.

Me neither.

We're close now, though. See that old cowshed back there?



Need some way else to get round here ...

I'm not built to ride a horse.

... Do you hear something? Someone coming?



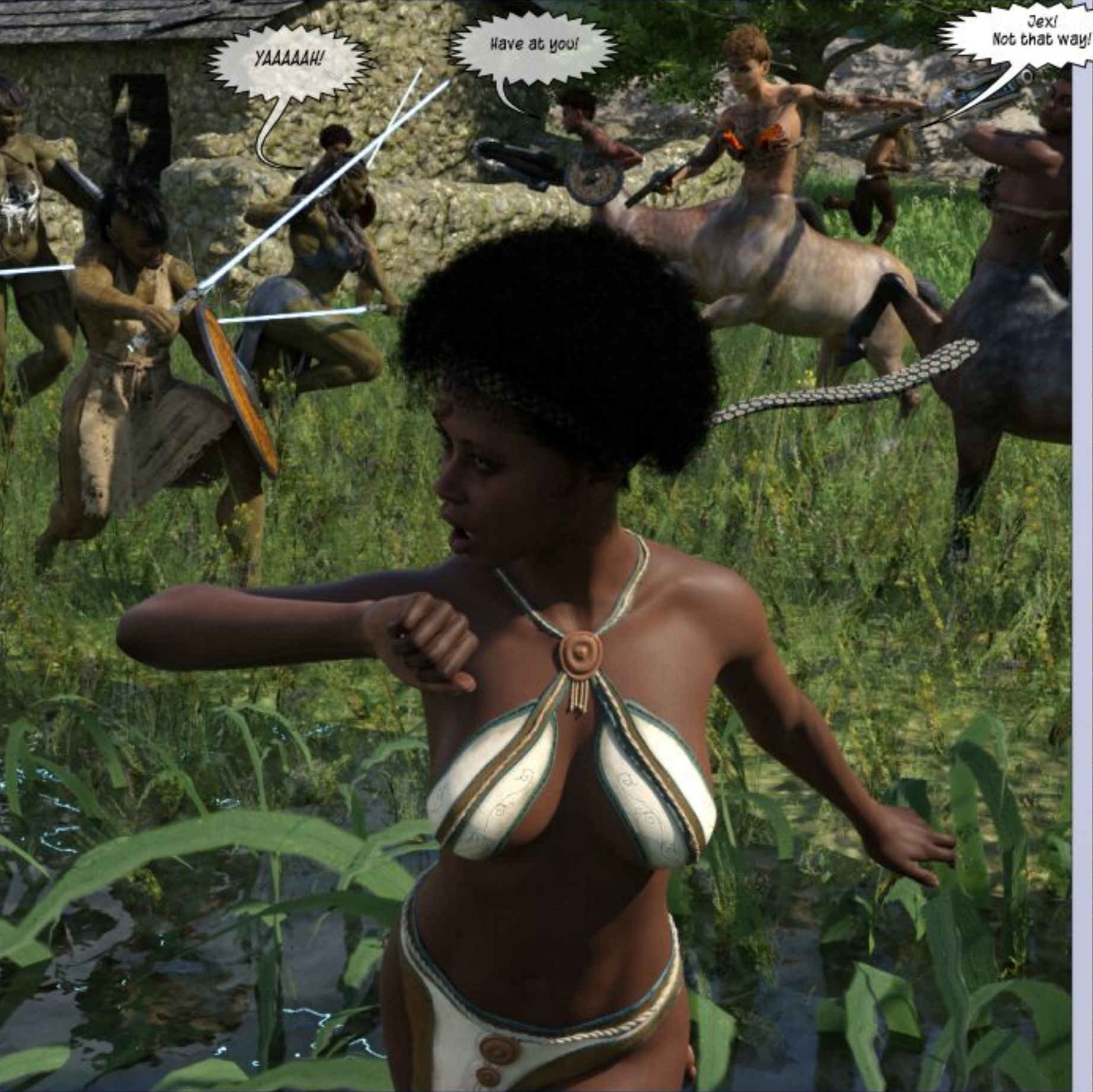
AAAA!

An't think they got push with us tho ...



Maybe not, but we're going to be caught in the middle!

Run!!



YAAAAAH!

Have at you!

Ox! Not that way!



Aaaaaa!



Oyo!

Oh! What business have you here?

Big push up hill ... horse Polk and orcs ... caught in middle ...



And you need rePuge.

Of course. Come inside.



Upstairs, and get out of that filthy clothing.

But ...

I'll be up to bathe you in just a moment.



Han't need someone wash me ...

Oh, but you very much do.

It's important to be properly clean. I can tell you'd do a poor job of it on your own ...

When was the last time you washed well here, eh?

Uhhhh!

You see?

Hmm. ... Yes.

I've decided what I'm going to do.

Let me finish rinsing you off, and then you can soak while I wash your hair.



Difficult choice ... not an orc or a centaur, I know what to make of them ... nor one of those horrible Pauns ... nor a Fairy; I've gotten a few of those.

I can't recall when I last had a human.

Still, no matter. The path to redemption is the same.



Peel tacked ... Uhhh ... got trouble move ...

Creatures like you aren't meant to stand upright.

We must strip away these delusions to achieve purity.

but I--



Down.

--bbbuuuuh!



So many refuse to see. They don't recognize what they are.

They deny their unworthiness. Their animal stench. They persist in believing they are entitled to be intelligent.

Beasts insist on play-acting.



I don't keep a ram, I'm afraid. But I have something you'll like almost as much.

Now let's end the make-believe, shall we?



M-eh-eh-eh-ehhh!!

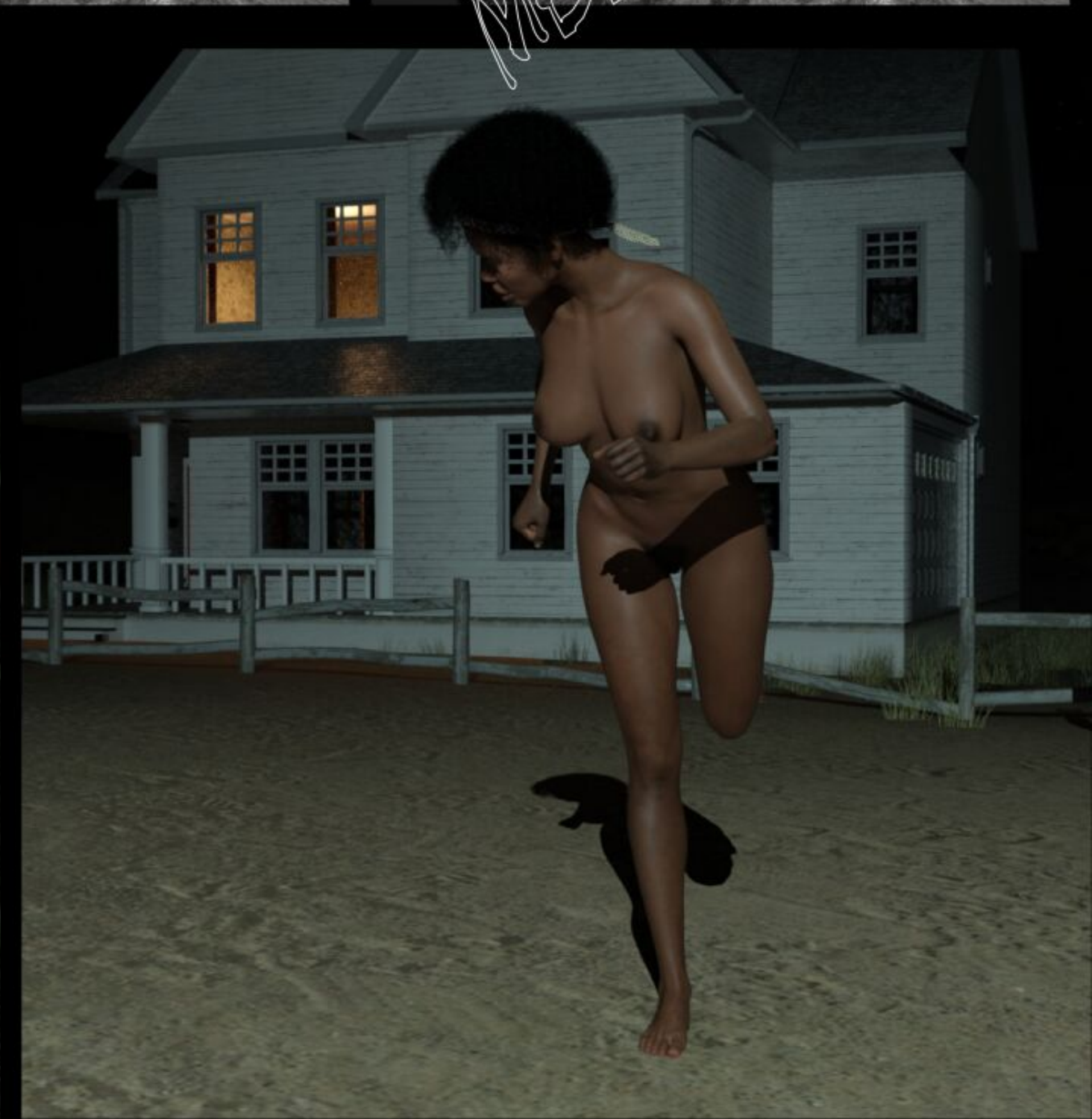
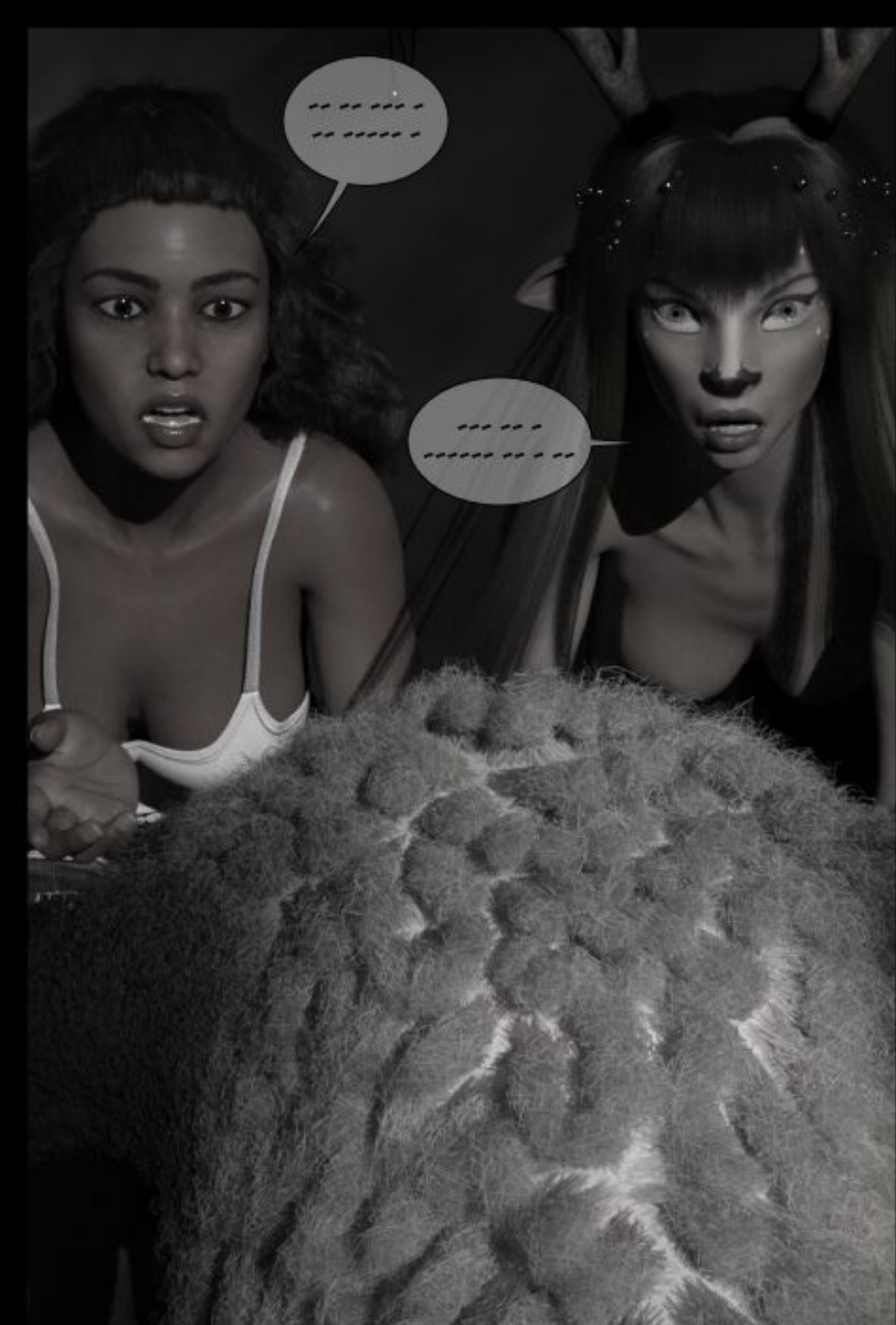


That's better.

Let me clean up, then I'll take you where you belong.



friends munch







Yes, I think so. The Plain Folk have caused a lot of trouble for the centaurs. We have an obligation to repay in kind.

She gon try turn you to horses or some.

We won't give her a chance to. Don't worry, I've dealt with them before. Let me get my staff.



You look horrified. It's an honor, you know. We very seldom let anyone ride us.

Han't done before is all ... gon Fall off for sure ...

Hold onto my belt. And look ahead, not down.



Shoot up house just gon haz her tho ...

That's what we want. The Plain Folk are big on self-control. We need her to lose her temper a little.

YAAA!

YAAA!



Filthy animals!

Get off my land before I--



rrrrrghh!

Gotcha!



'K, now what?

COUHHHH

Well, she'll be disrupted for a while, but now we need something more permanent. I'm no good at transformations ... they need close contact to make trouble, so we could put a barrier around her--

Cousin!



Sop? You're supposed to be halfway to the jungle right now ...

I know. Don't tell Mother I got caught ...

Eri!

Meadow!



None of us knew one of the Plain Folk had set up this close to the forest. She wasn't supposed to be here ...

She turned me into a calf, Eri! I thought a cow was my momma!

Meadow ... why'd you come out here anyway? I was worried you'd--

Oh, silly! Of course not! I'd never give up on you!

... I ... had something important I had to do. Still do ...

I didn't want to involve you ... but now ... now I think I shouldn't have tried to go alone.

Everybody! Look out!!



Again?

It's on!

Regroup!  
Quickly!!



Eri, you got some  
MUSIC works on  
orcs?

... Eri?



Hmph.



Har't no place  
safe while like this ...  
they all cho ...

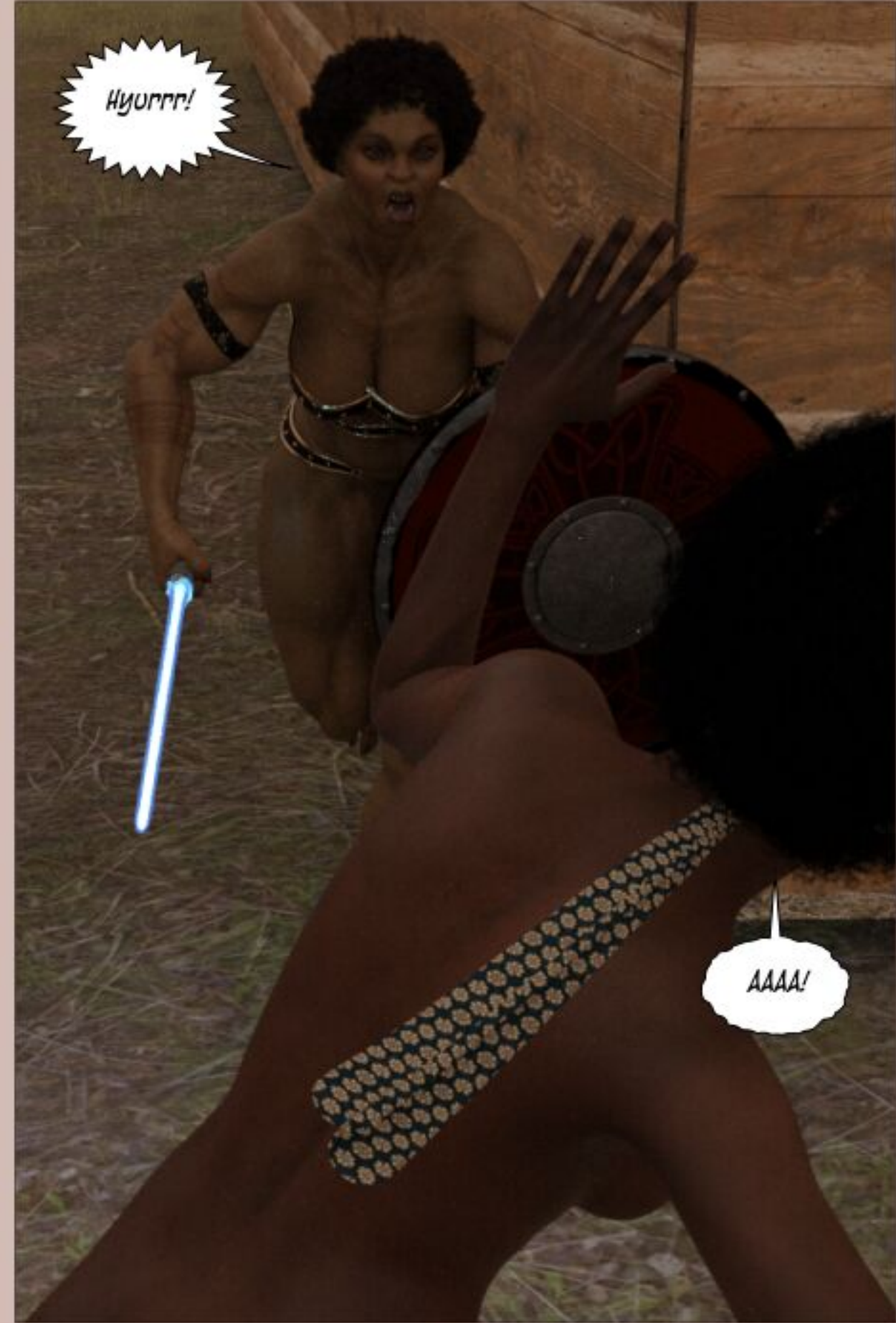
Yaaar!

For  
glory!

Maybe the  
barn?



A weapon!  
Someone give  
me a weapon!



Huurrr!

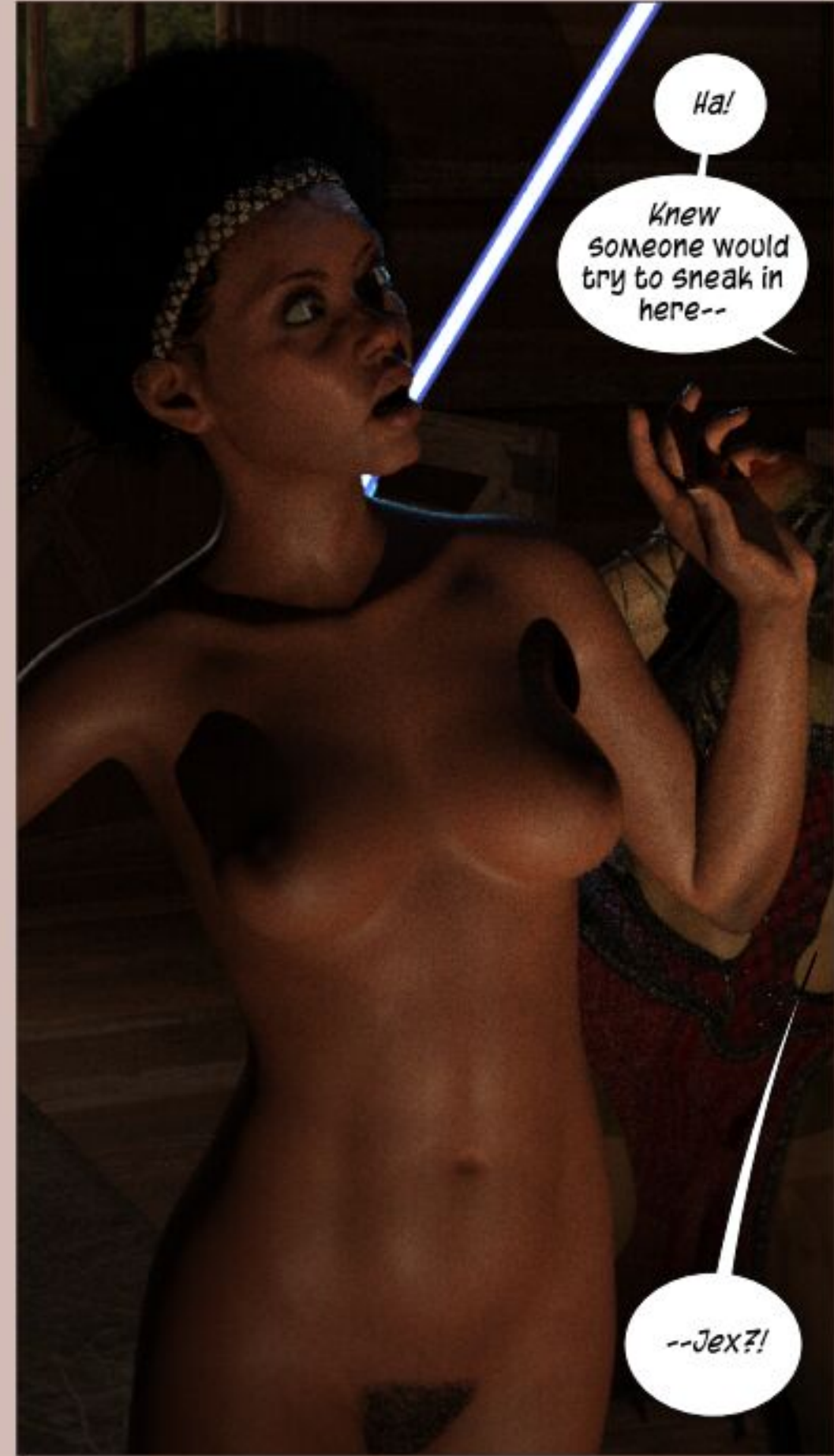
AAAA!



--HUU--



Owed  
you that  
one.



Ha!

Knew  
someone would  
try to sneak in  
here--

--Jex?!



Kala?

Bear-Friend  
clan's in this?

'Course! All the clans near  
enough to make the trip are here.  
Wouldn't miss it! Fun like this  
doesn't come along every day!

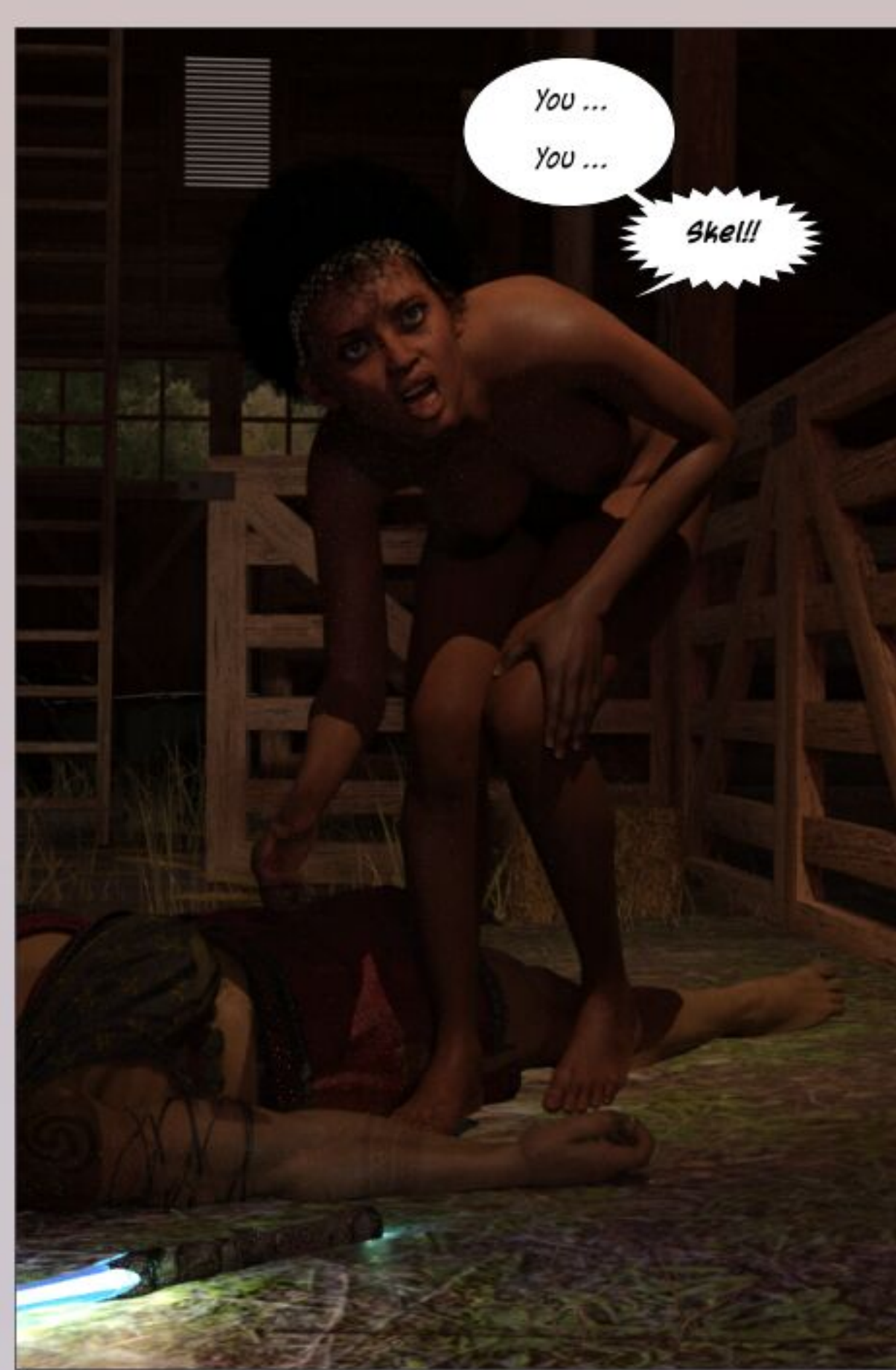
Fun?



Gotcha!

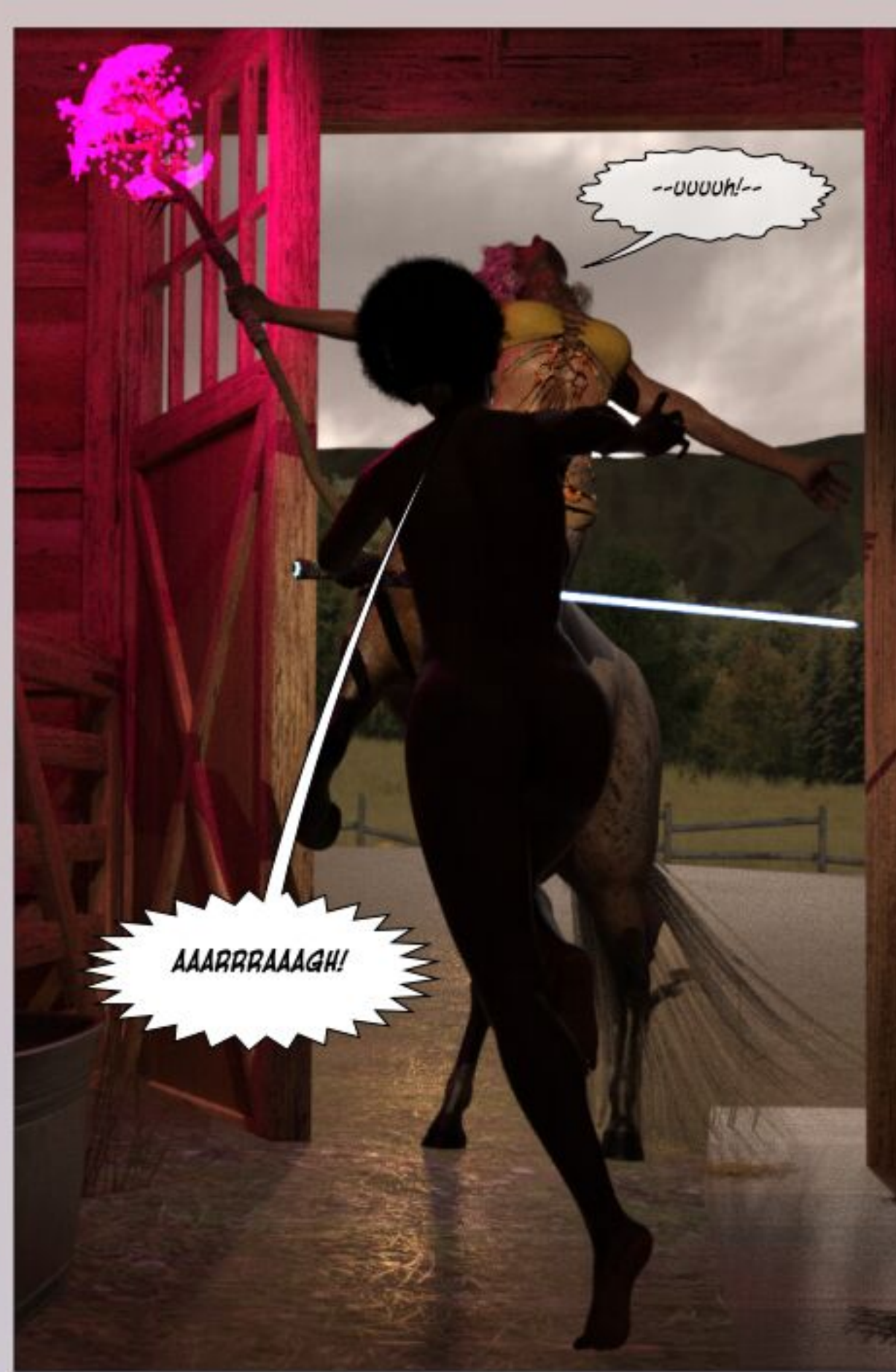
AAAOW!

Kata!



You ...  
You ...

Skell!



--UUUH!--

AAAAAAAAGH!



... Shit.



Victory!!

I claim victory!

The enemy is defeated!



Not a moment too soon.

Hey, whose side are you on, anyway?

--UUP--

That was a ferocious blow. I'm going to be peeling that for a week ...



Not nearly as hard as you hit me. That staff's really something ...

Kata!

I'm going to need a lot of ale to clear my head after that!



What a good idea!

Ale for everybody! Start the bonfire! Roast the meat!

It's time to celebrate!!

AND INDEED, THE CELEBRATION LASTS THROUGH THE DAY AND THE NIGHT. THE NEXT MORNING, THE HERDS BEGIN THE JOURNEY BACK TO THEIR USUAL GROUNDS AND THE CLANS BEGIN THE RETURN TRIP TO THEIR VILLAGES ...



... just an't like the big fights is all. Little push sometimes, sure, guess, but ...

Well, we don't do battles that often.

They take planning and we're not good at that. Neither are the centaurs.

I still think you'd make a really good orc.

Thought you were dead, Kata.

Then thought she was dead.

I know.

You didn't know the rules. I'd have told you, if I'd known you'd be there.

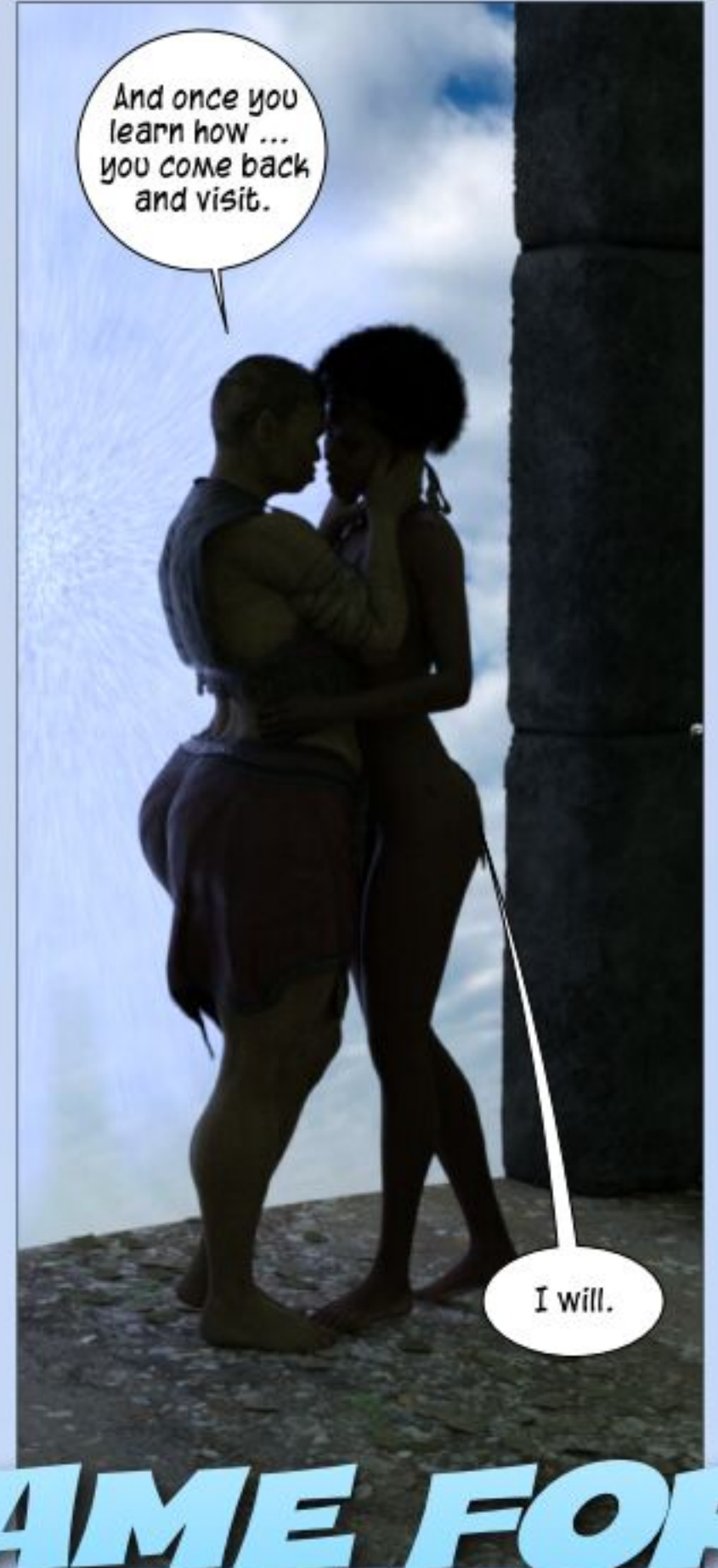


Anyway, I'm sorry you had to be upset like that.

Listen, when you get back to Serenity, make sure you get your friend to teach you how to work these things.

You gonna wander around, you absolutely need to be able to use a set portal.

Cruz.



And once you learn how ... you come back and visit.

I will.



Take care of yourself.

**NEXT: A GAME FOR FOUR**