

WHEN WE LAST SAW ERI AND MEADOW, THEY HAD FINALLY REACHED THEIR DESTINATION IN THEIR HUNT FOR MISSING FRIENDS ... THE SWAMPY EASTERN REACHES OF THE YARDS.

THREATENED BY A MALICIOUS FAIRY (THAT PHRASE CONTAINS A REDUNDANCY), THE TWO WERE RESCUED BY A MYSTERIOUS ELF. THOUGH SHE APPEARED TO BE ON THE SAME MISSION AS THEY WERE, SHE REFUSED TO ALLY WITH FAUNS, AND PROVED CAPRICIOUS HERSELF: SHE SHRANK THE FAIRY TO INSECT SIZE AND TRAPPED HER IN A LANTERN, AND TRANSFORMED MEADOW INTO A SWAMP YAK TO USE AS A MOUNT.

MEADOW'S LAST WORDS TO ERI WERE "GET HELP" ... WHICH ERI IS TRYING TO DO.

THE PROBLEM IS, SHE'S GOTTEN LOST.

... wandering the swamp all night trying to find this village ... there's no closer portal ...

Maybe now that the sun's coming up and I can actually see where I'm going, I can--

--huh?

AAAAA!



no
no
no
no
no

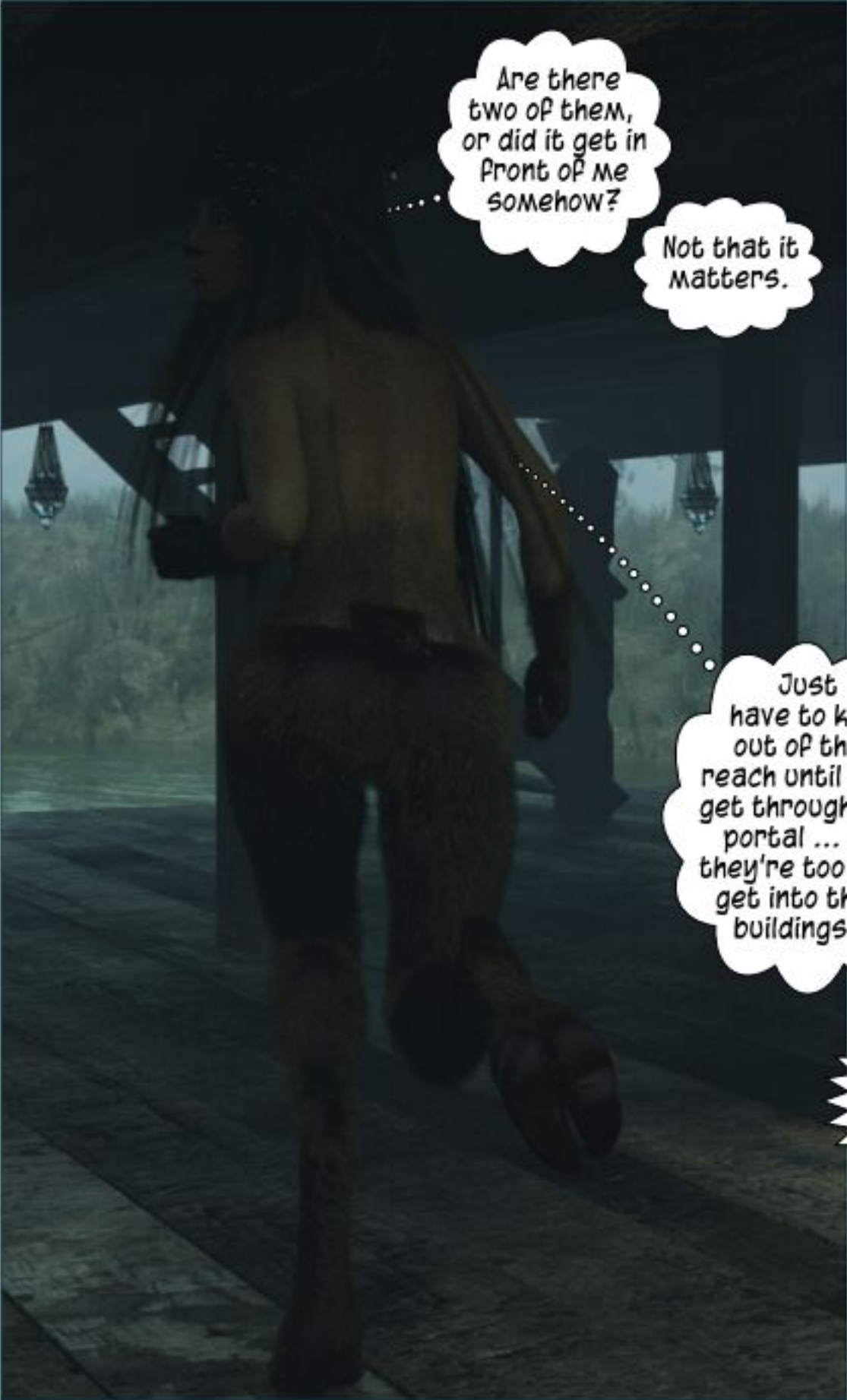
not getting me ...
not getting me ...
I can outrun you ...



YIIII!

Oh, this is it!

Now I just have to find the damned portal--



Are there two of them, or did it get in front of me somehow?

Not that it matters.

Just have to keep out of their reach until I can get through that portal ... and they're too big to get into these buildings ...

AAAAA!
What --



HRRGLHH!!



That wasn't a stalker!

I don't know what it was and I don't think I want to find out.

... I told Meadow this was a really dumb idea.



There you are.



c'mon
c'mon



Where does it lead?

The Souk, I believe.

Is she fleeing, or getting help?

The air is turbulent. I do not say.



This one's deserted too. How many is that so far, five? Where did they go?

Maybe they all wanted to get out of this swamp!

I'm starting to agree with Daisy ...

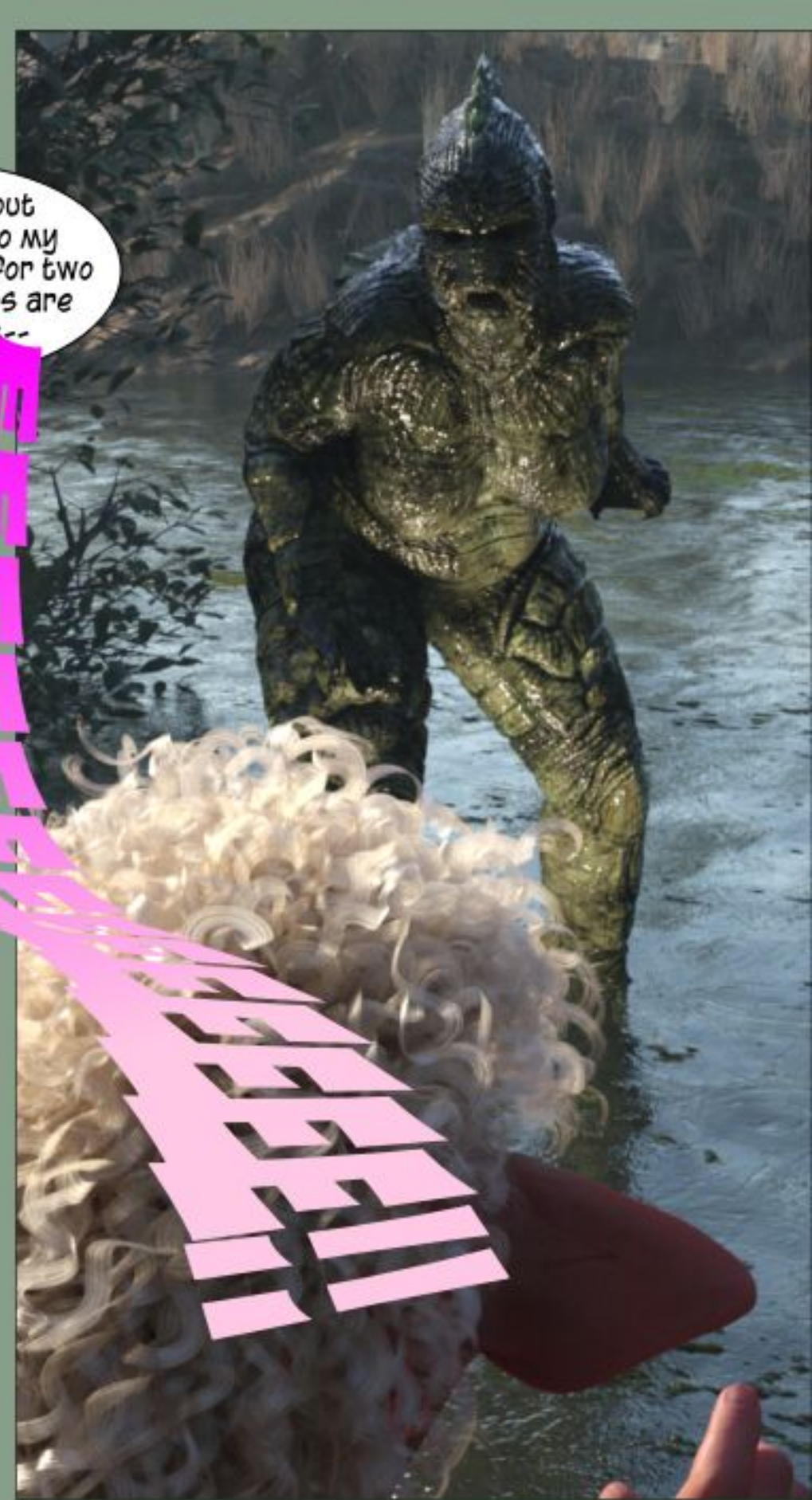
This was your idea. "We have to find out what's going on, because nobody else will."

I know ... but I don't think I can take much more.



You're supposed to like mud.

Mud's fine, but I've been up to my calves in water for two days! My hooves are gonna crack--



HURRRH!

Pearl! What are you doing?

That wasn't an attack posture, Daisy. Or even a warning. I think she's scared.

Had to have been a person once, right?

Help!!
Daisy, wait!

Hey there! Are you OK? We won't hurt you.



Oh! OK, more scared than I thought.

UURRH!

But we're not scary--

Daisy!!



AIEEEEE!



Now, that's an attack posture.

You're such a help.

Run, you two!!



RAAAAH!



It ... vanished?
Did she kill it?

I don't think so. She looks just as confused as we are.



Can you understand me?

UUUH

... I can't tell if that's a yes.

Look, we're trying to figure out what's made all the people disappear around here. Do you know anything about that?

UUUH!

That definitely sounded like a yes. Can you help us?

UUUUHH!



So we're just going to follow her to who knows what?

Do you have a better idea?

We could just go home ...



I didn't know that portal wouldn't go to Serenity ... I hate the Souk ... I get lost, and people were staring at me ...

And now I don't have a clue what to do ... is there a directory or something? How do you find somebody in this place?

Oh, wait! I bet the locating song would work ... IF I can remember it well enough ... and if she's in this zone right now at all ...

Ooh! Not even very far away!



Nope, just an't get it.

Specially here ... so much cusk all over ... you got watch someone shake titties for that?

You got see some titties to get hard, ask somebody shake for you all private ...

Jex!!



I need your help, bad!

Meadow and I were trying to find out where all the people were disappearing to and we ran into this crazy elf and she turned Meadow into a yak and now they're both somewhere nasty and I need to rescue her and we still haven't figured out what--

Hold up! Hold up.



People gettin seffed? In the Yards?

Lots of them. Goblins, Mostly, it's the swamp part and it's mostly goblins that live there. But also some Pauns ... a friend of ours ... and I guess some others too ...

We passed through whole villages that were just emptied out. We haven't even found anybody to ask about it ... there are these big monster things, they grab them and disappear. We were trying to find out where they go ... I think the elf knew, but ...

K but why come find me? Get some help there be better ...

Last time, you hexed me, gave me to red lady, asked for help anyway, and ran off after got it all done ...*

* ISSUE #32

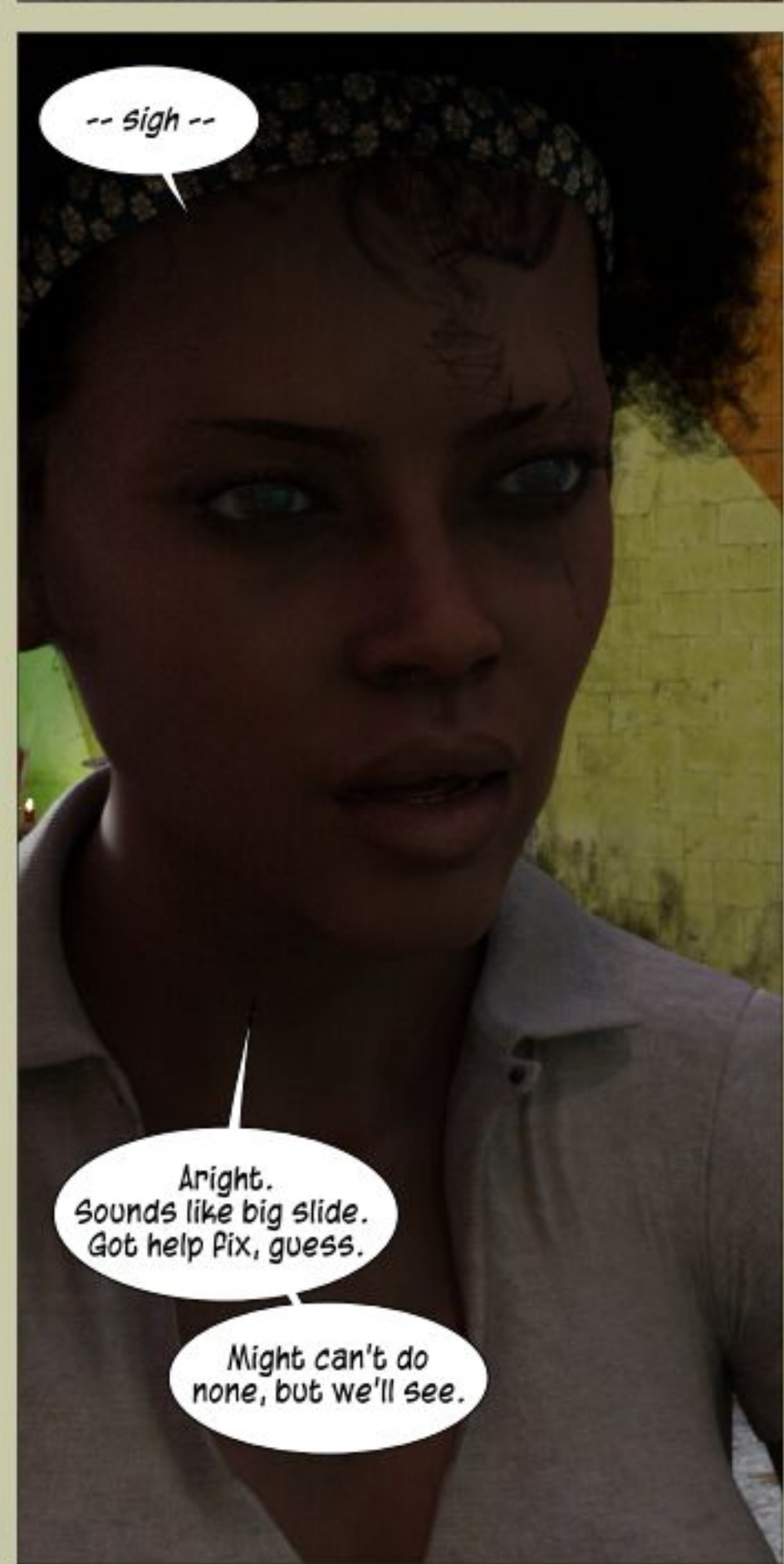


I know! I'm sorry. I was so happy to see Meadow I got distracted.

I wouldn't have done any of that if I hadn't thought it was the only way to find Meadow. I swear!

Look, most of the people in the Yards won't do anything to help Pauns. They don't like us.

We've got friends among the goblins, but we can't find any of them! They've all been taken ...



-- Sigh --

Alright. Sounds like big slide. Got help fix, guess.

Might can't do none, but we'll see.



Where are you going? The portal's over this way ... we have to go to the Souk, then there's a portal there to the SWAMP ...

Forest portal first.

... OK, but why?

Need help ... han't none here. An't know how find anybody, 'cept knock Ruby's door, and she an't in zone.

Got friend by Forest Night help.

The orcs?

They won't want to help me ...

Prob not. Ask anyhow.

THIS OVERLAPS A BIT WITH THE END OF #36, SO RUBY IS LIKELY STILL IN THE COBBLES.



OK ... "castle carved into a hill in the middle of the swamp" was not on my list.

This isn't the Middle. It's the top. Those are the Poothills of the mountains. We're a lot further north than I thought.

UURRH!

y'all. Are we really going in there?



Hey!

Aaah! Get away! Get away!!



MEANWHILE, INSIDE THE FORTRESS ...





Turn me into a yak, will you?

I said we should team up--

you could have just said yes-- or no--

but you had to go and--

Stop!

--oogh--

Stop!!

Huh. Didn't realize there was a hole there.

Too bad.



This just keeps getting worse ...

Han't know you could cast portals, Kala ...

Thought we gon have haul past Serenity and Souk Por portal out here.

You got lucky. I've got to know somewhere real well before I can make a portal to it. But I was all over this swamp a year or so back.



You should pick it up. It's not easy, but when it works, it's real usePul.

Been trying. Han't got it yet.

Witch stuFF.



It is not! A lot of people can cast portals! It's not magic! It's like ... like making clothes appear or something.

It's not like turning people into bugs or whatever, like you do Por no reason. Only reason I'm willing to be around you is Jex says you're OK.



We don't do that! It's the Pairies who do all that!

I don't do magic! All I know how to do is to play some music that does stuFF.

That's why I need a witch Por this! Like Jex.



An't no witch, Eri!

I don't believe you ...

You tell her.

Nope.

Now, you know I an't no witch ...

No, I don't. You took out the Russet Lady; you broke loose of the Plain Folk ...*

Han't make me a witch! And she thinks I am, she gon think I can save this goes slide ... gon be bad.

Maybe. But she'll do better with you than without you.

* ISSUE #32.



It's quiet.

Good.

No, I mean it's too quiet. Shouldn't something be happening? Somebody coming after us or something?

CarePul what you wish Por. Maybe they're waiting inside.



ugh ...

Y'clear?

Huh?

Are you OK?

Oh. Yeah. Just don't like this place. Dark, and the air doesn't move.

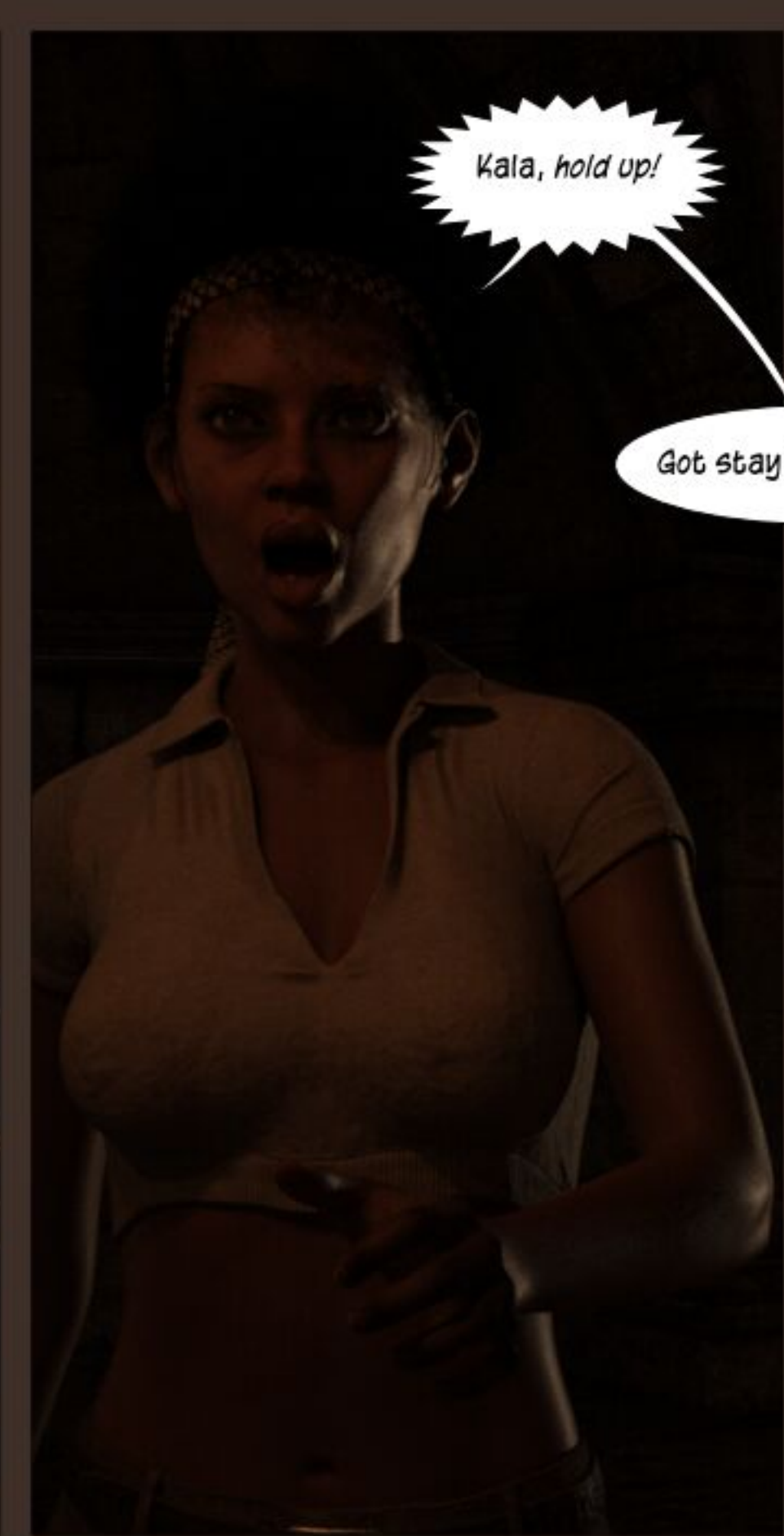
Right bout too quiet tho. An't see none.

No, but I hear something ...



There!

Oh, no, don't you go anywhere!

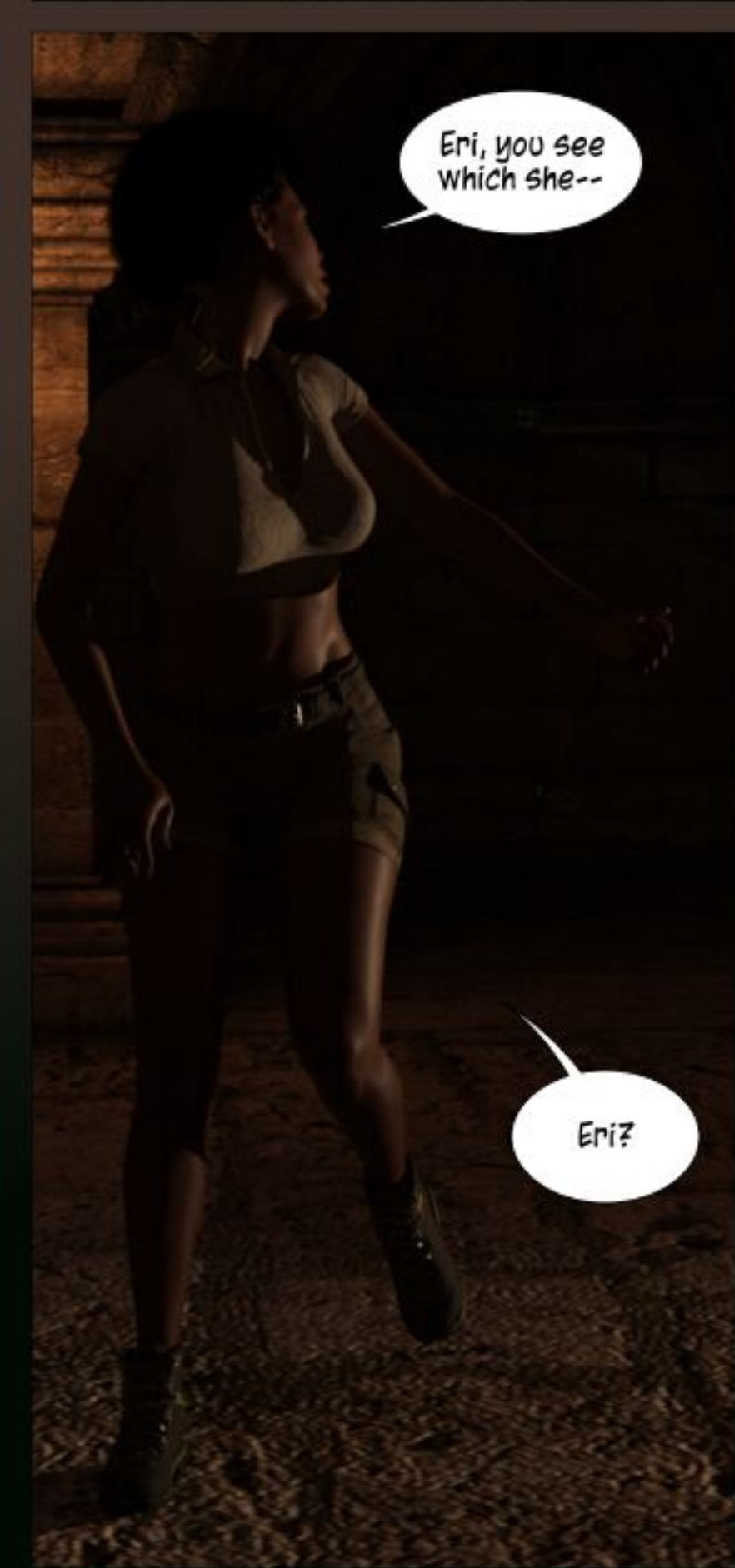


Kala, hold up!

Got stay together or--

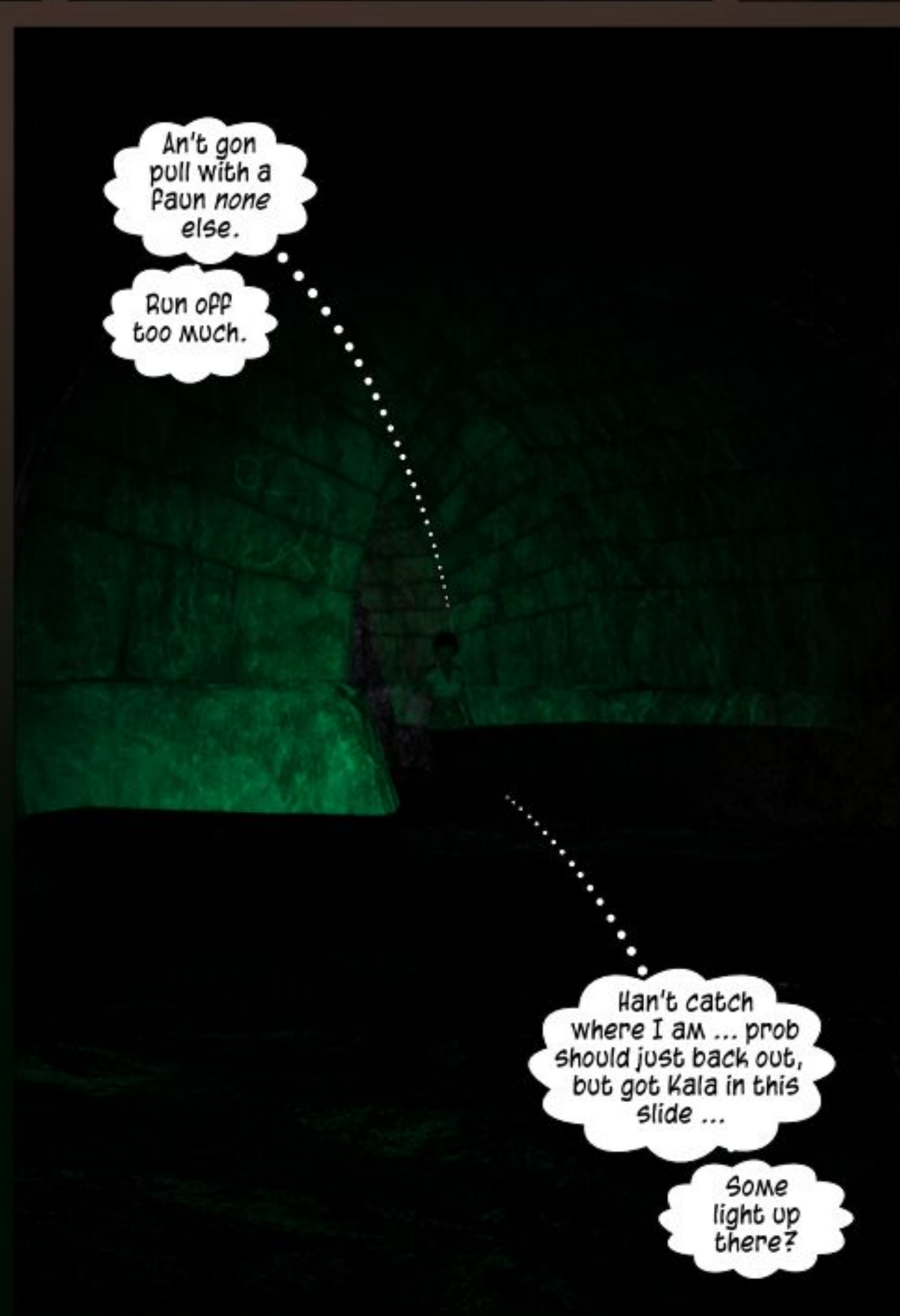


Shit.



Eri, you see which she--

Eri?



An't gon pull with a Paun none else.
Run opp too much.

Han't catch where I am ... prob should just back out, but got Kala in this slide ...

Some light up there?



Lamp ... some moving ... bug?

An't style. Should let it out ...



Aaaraahh!

Yii!



am i in a cave? ... i'm in a cave! i hate caves!

i'll get her! put me in a lantern like a bug! not a bug!

Uh ... sorry but I--

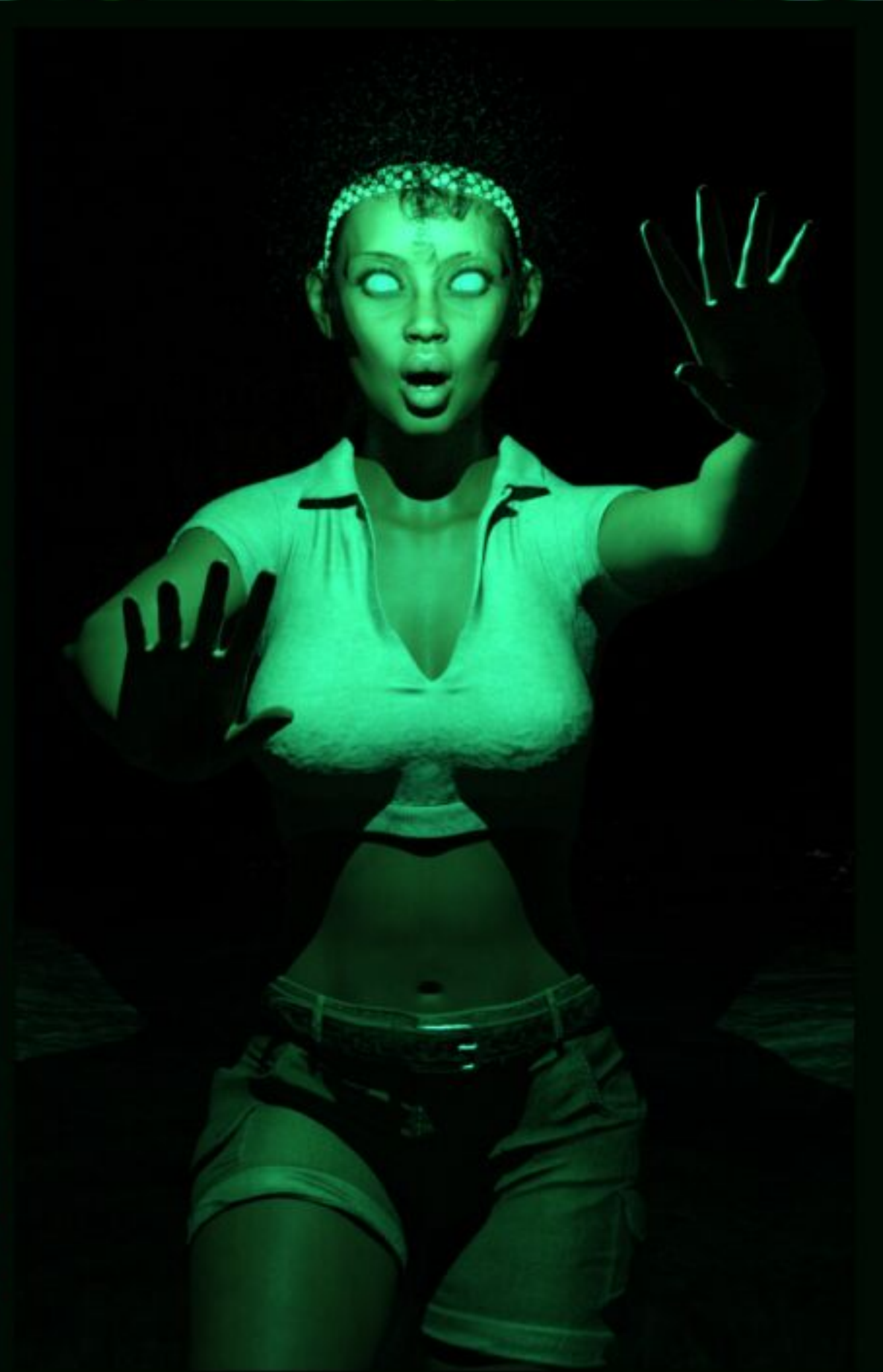


want to keep me in a cave! won't keep me in a cave!

aaauuh!



got to get out ... won't be in a cave ... find her later ... later ... yes ...





Uwgh!

Everything down here's covered in yuck! I've nearly slipped off this ledge twice ...

And that water smells horrible!

I don't think that's water.



I hope she knows where--

uh.

Jinx? What is it?

... just saw something Move.



Jinx!!

uhaaaaa!



Pull her loose! Pull her loose!

UURRH!

Hang on, Jinx, I'm--



Pearl, no! -- kapp -- Stay up there!

It'll grab you too-

PUB



You've got to get her free! What even is that thing?

HRR!

--spit--

...huh?



eeheheee eeheheee

eeheheee



AAAA!

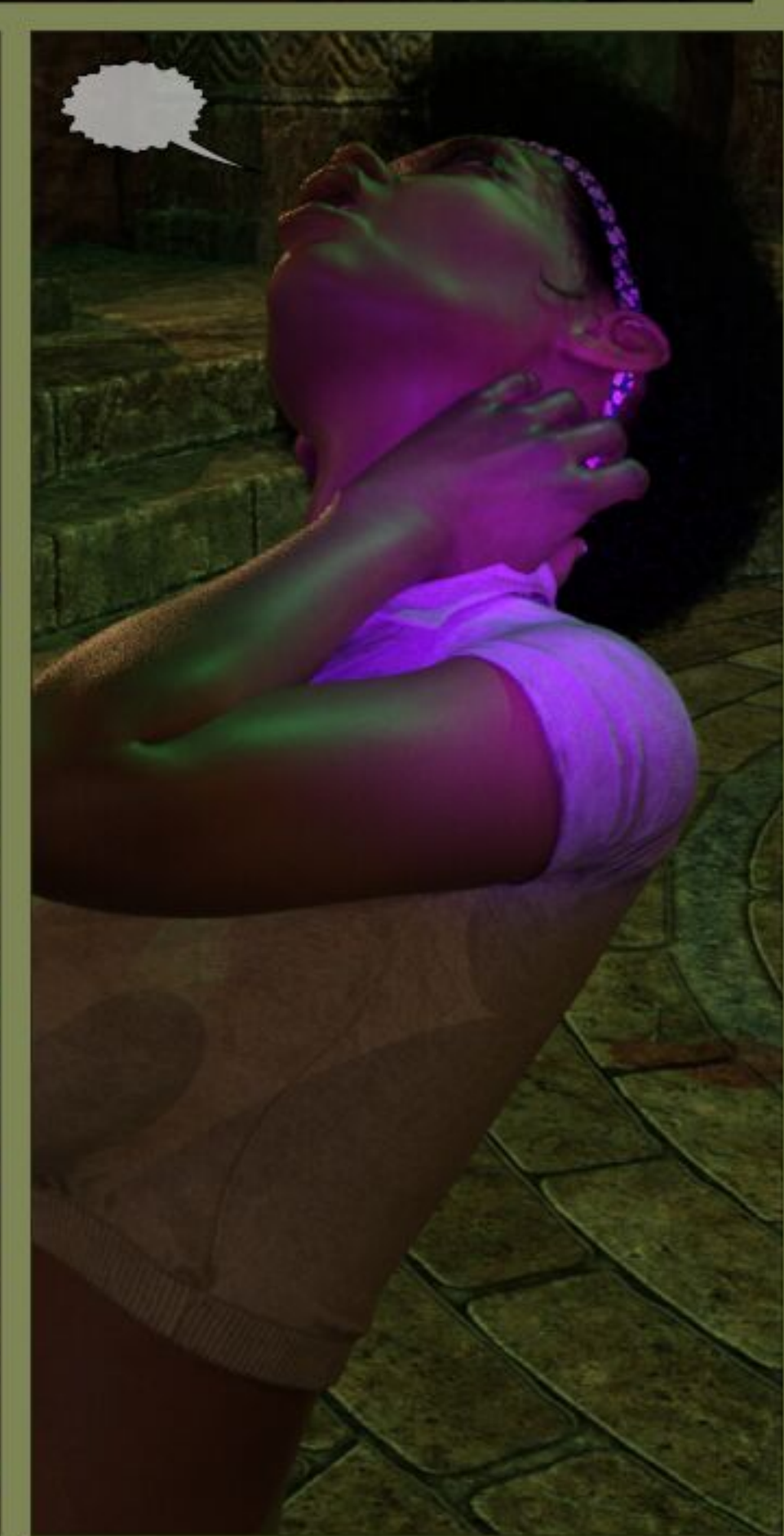
YAAAA

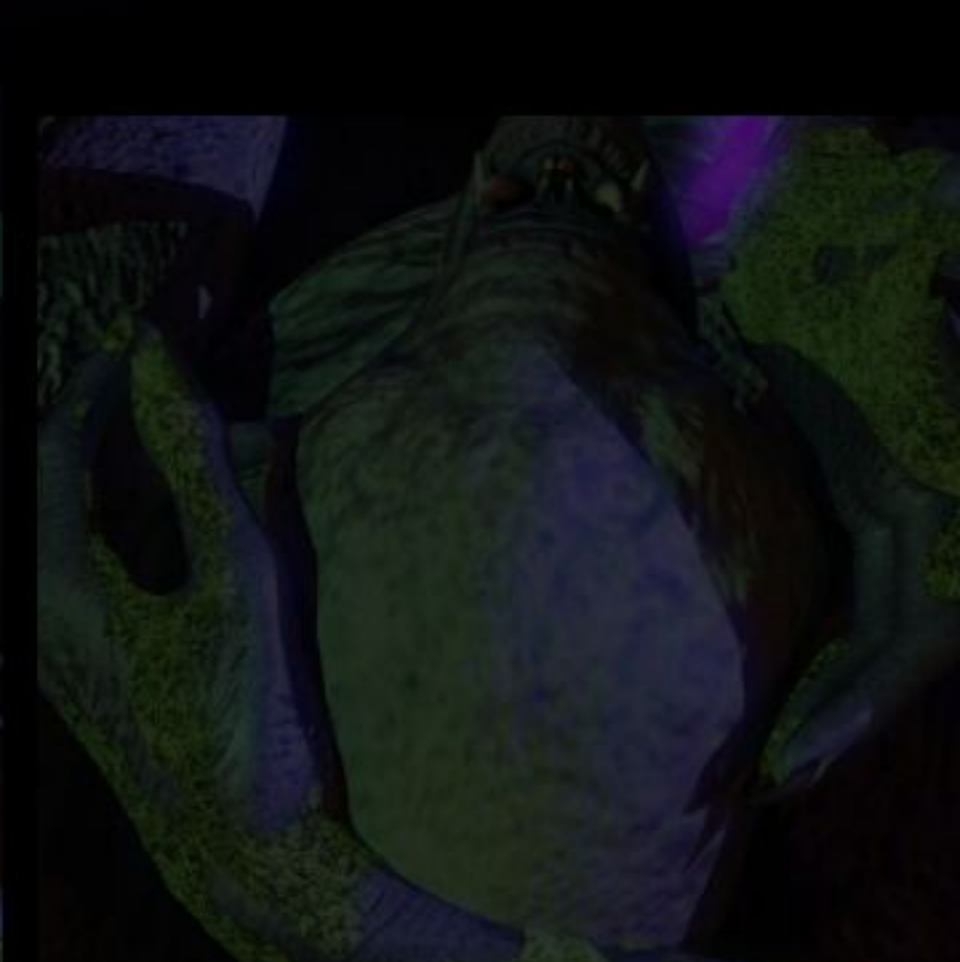


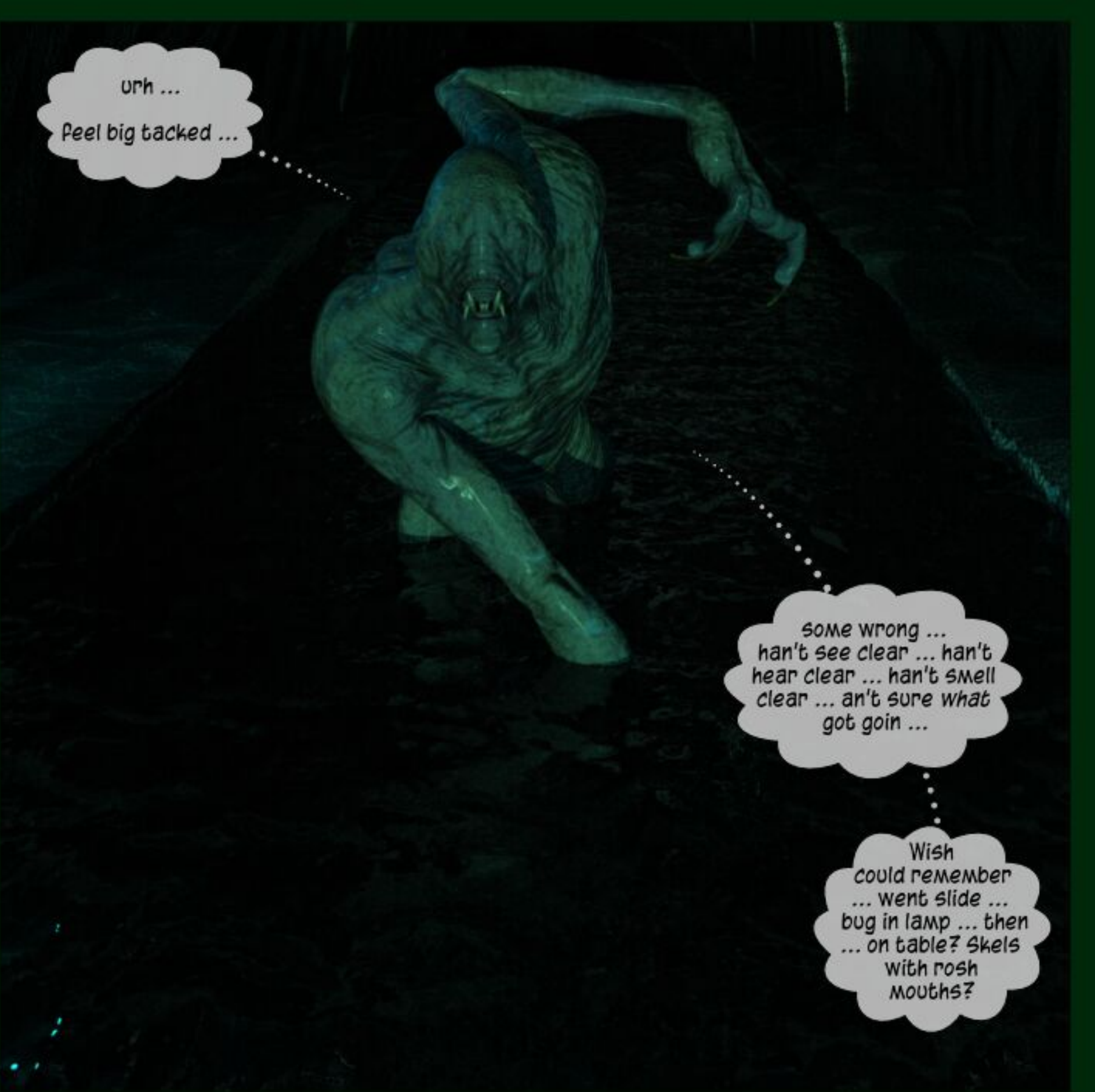
eeheheee eeheheee eeheheee

Get away!!

PUB







urh ...
Peel big tacked ...

some wrong ...
han't see clear ... han't
hear clear ... han't smell
clear ... an't sure what
got goin ...

Wish
could remember
... went slide ...
bug in lamp ... then
... on table? Skels
with rosh
mouths?



An't right shape!
hands all rosh ...

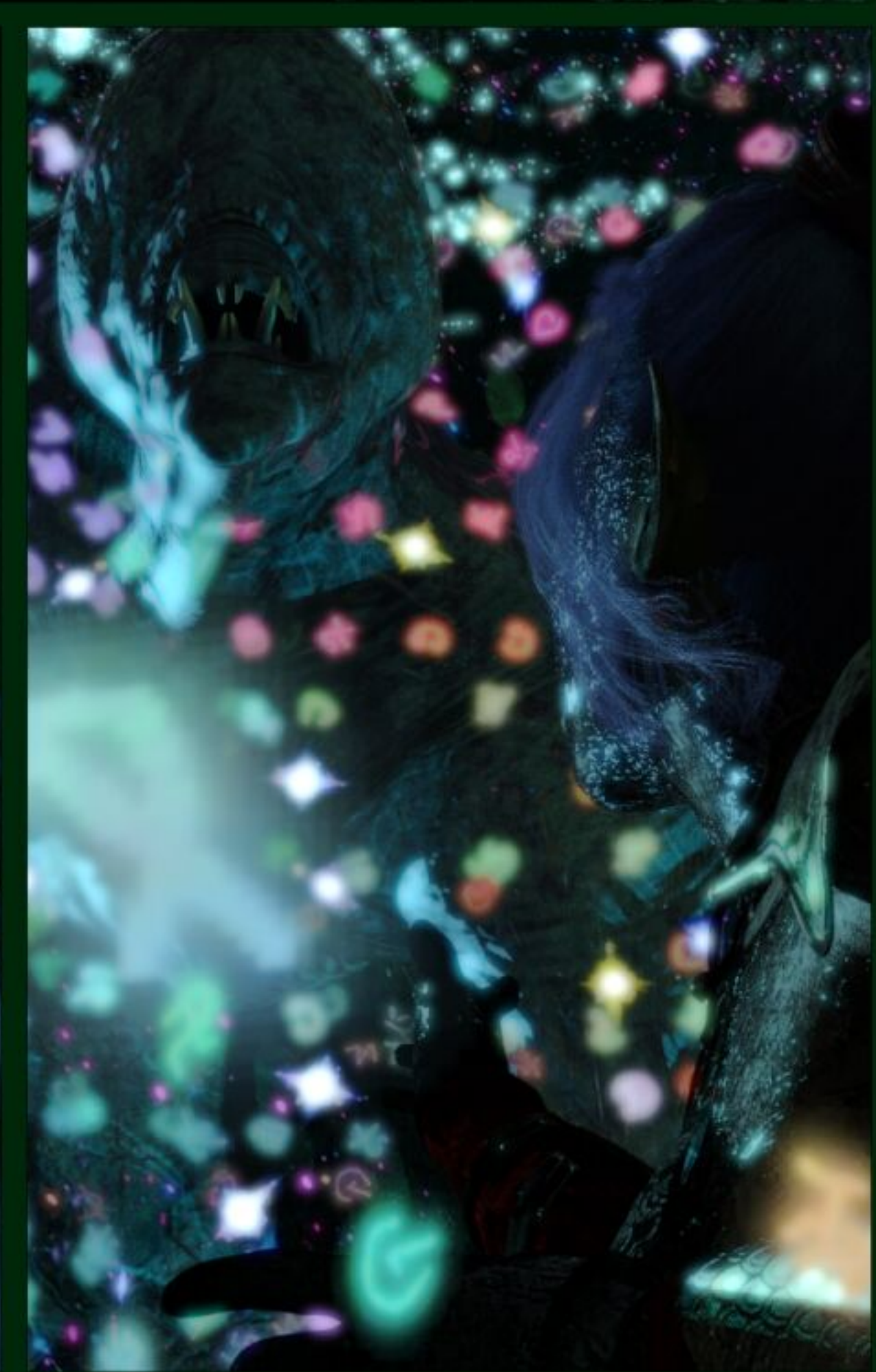
Skels make
me some kind ...
monster?

... someone up
ahead ... maybe if
han't run away ...

Might han't even
talk ... urgh.

Oh, wonderfu!
Just the thing to
complete my day.

Foul creature!
I extend you the courtesy
of truce, if you remove
yourself from my presence
with haste ...



... ah, what
the Puck.
You probably can't
understand a word
I'm saying
anyway.

Look, I've had a
really bad day, I'm
covered in whatever this
shit is, I'm too tired for
the usual garbage, and I don't
want to fight anything
right now.

How about you clear
out so I don't have to do
something neither of us
will like?

... Not retreating
... and not attacking
either. Huh.

Oh!
Broken out,
have you?

I might be able to
get you the rest of
the way.
Hold still.



Thanks.

That was ...
wrong.

You're welcome. May
chance remain in your
favor this day.

I take my leave now to
resume my mission.

Just gon
walk off?

What
would you have
me do? I have
already lost far too
much time in this
accursed oubliette.
Tasks await me
above.

Friends up
there need help. You
got juice and look
style--

And you look like
someone who will
jeopardize my cause
through incompetence.
Apologies, but I cannot
petter myself with
kindness.

Huh.
Born hegger, or had
to practice?

I'm not sure what's
meant by that ... but insult
is no way to win my good
grace, churl.

K.
What will?

-- sigh --

You know
what? Fine.
Come if you
want.

Maybe with
two of us looking
we can find the
way up.

... You han't know.

Apparently
when they throw
things down here they
intend for them to
stay here.

Do you have
a name?

Jex.

I'm Cres.
Let's go.



I think I'm going the wrong way.

I was hoping that corridor would lead out, but now I'm in some kind of ... big cave?



Only place in here I've seen something actually growing ... Doesn't help much, but it's better than nothing.

Hope this isn't a dead end ...



Wait a minute.

Is that ...? Is that possible?



Meadow!

Eri!! You came back!

I'm so glad I found you! Come on, let's get out of here. I know the way.

No, wait-- Come look at this ...



Is that shai?

I think it must be, don't you? It's either shai or a mushroom that looks exactly like her ...

We have to get her out of this!



OK, but Meadow ...

Even if we can figure out how to get her back to normal ... she's half-buried!

What if changing her back when she's like that hurts her? How do we get her out of the ground? And ... uh ...



... uuhUUUHH!

Eri!

This is no time for that!

Can't help it ... Feel so ...



Eri, no! Something's wrong! You've got to stop!

You've got to ...

got to ...

...ooooOOOH!



Misguided creatures. You really should be satyrs, but you're unwilling to go fully priapic. You lack the courage of your convictions.

"Fauns." You're not fooling anyone. Satyrs are about lust. If you want to be about lust, then take the mask off, for pity's sake.



I don't think we should keep them in here, Amanita.

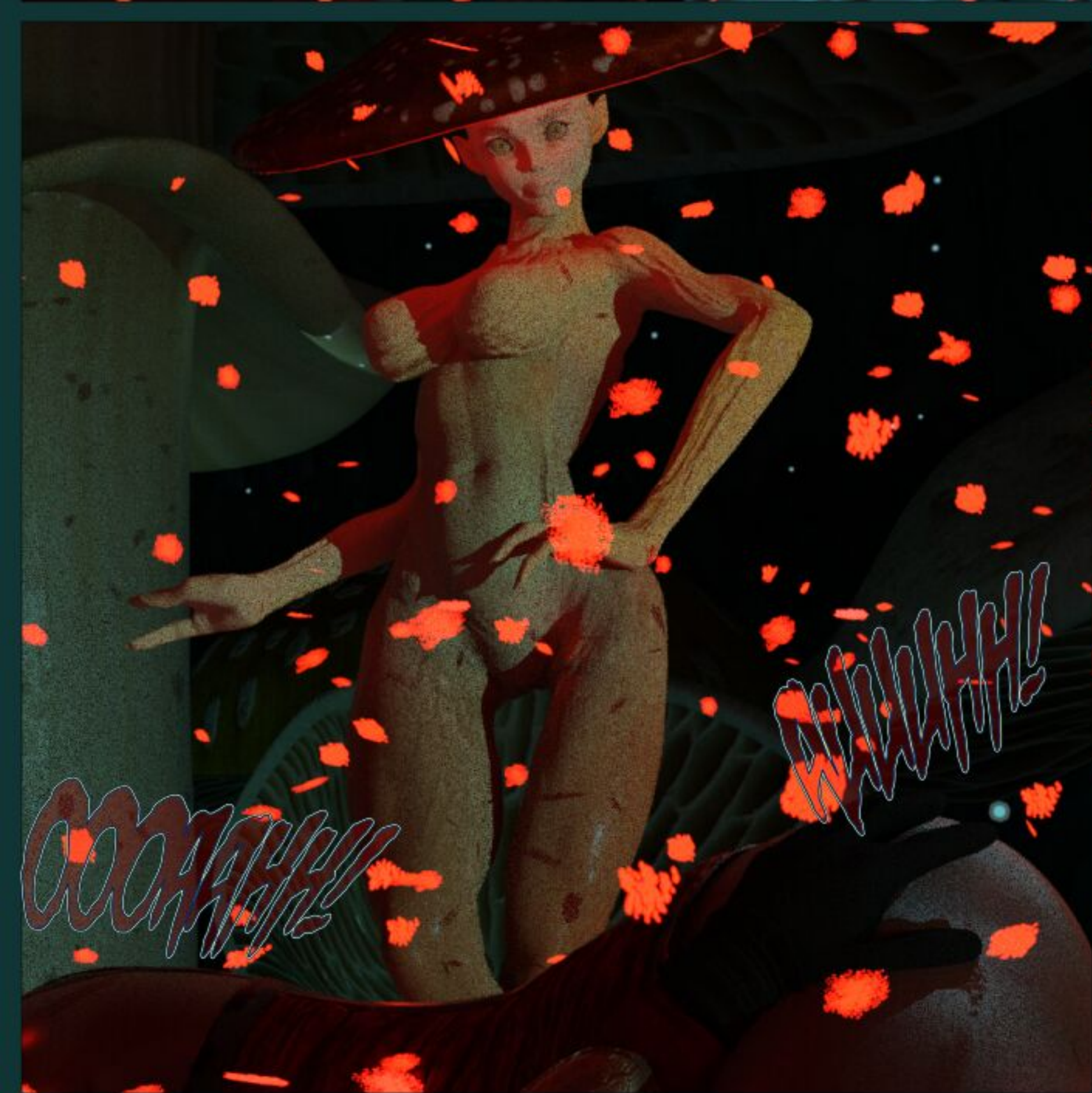
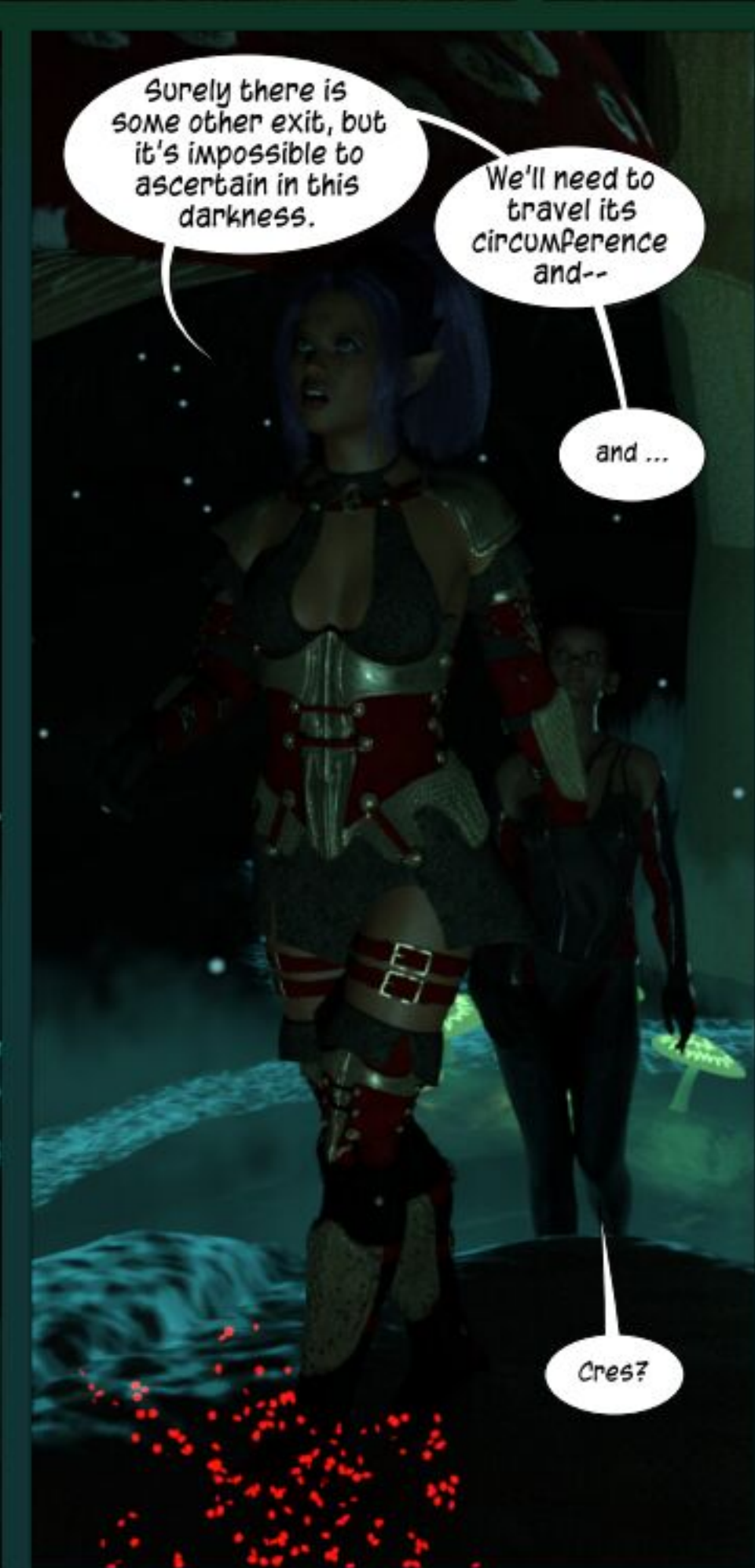
I have some other things that will suit them better.

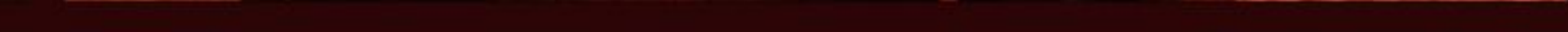
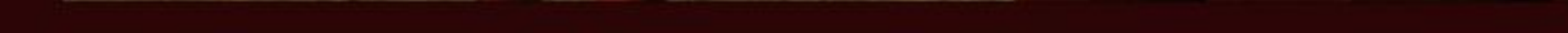
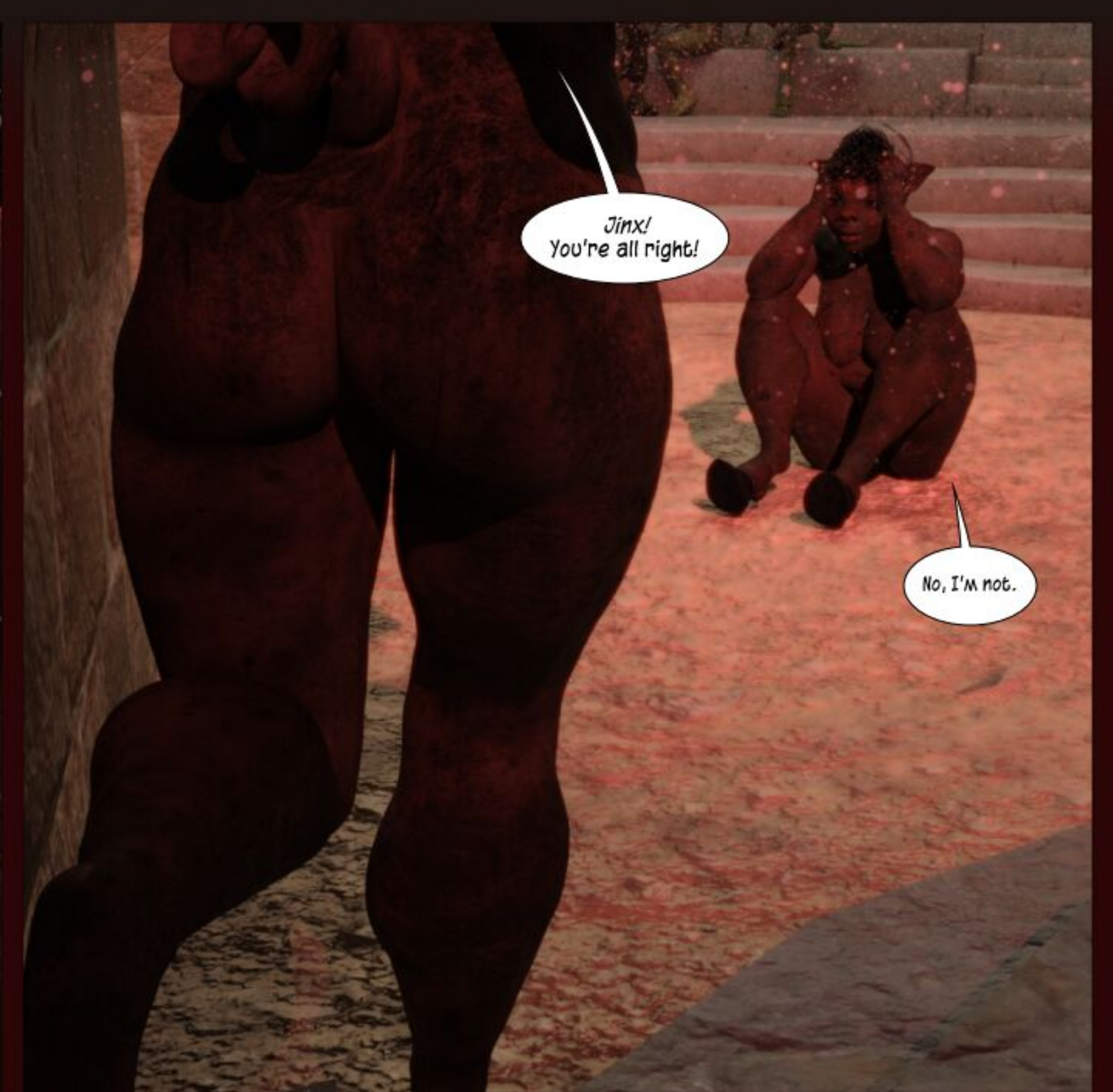
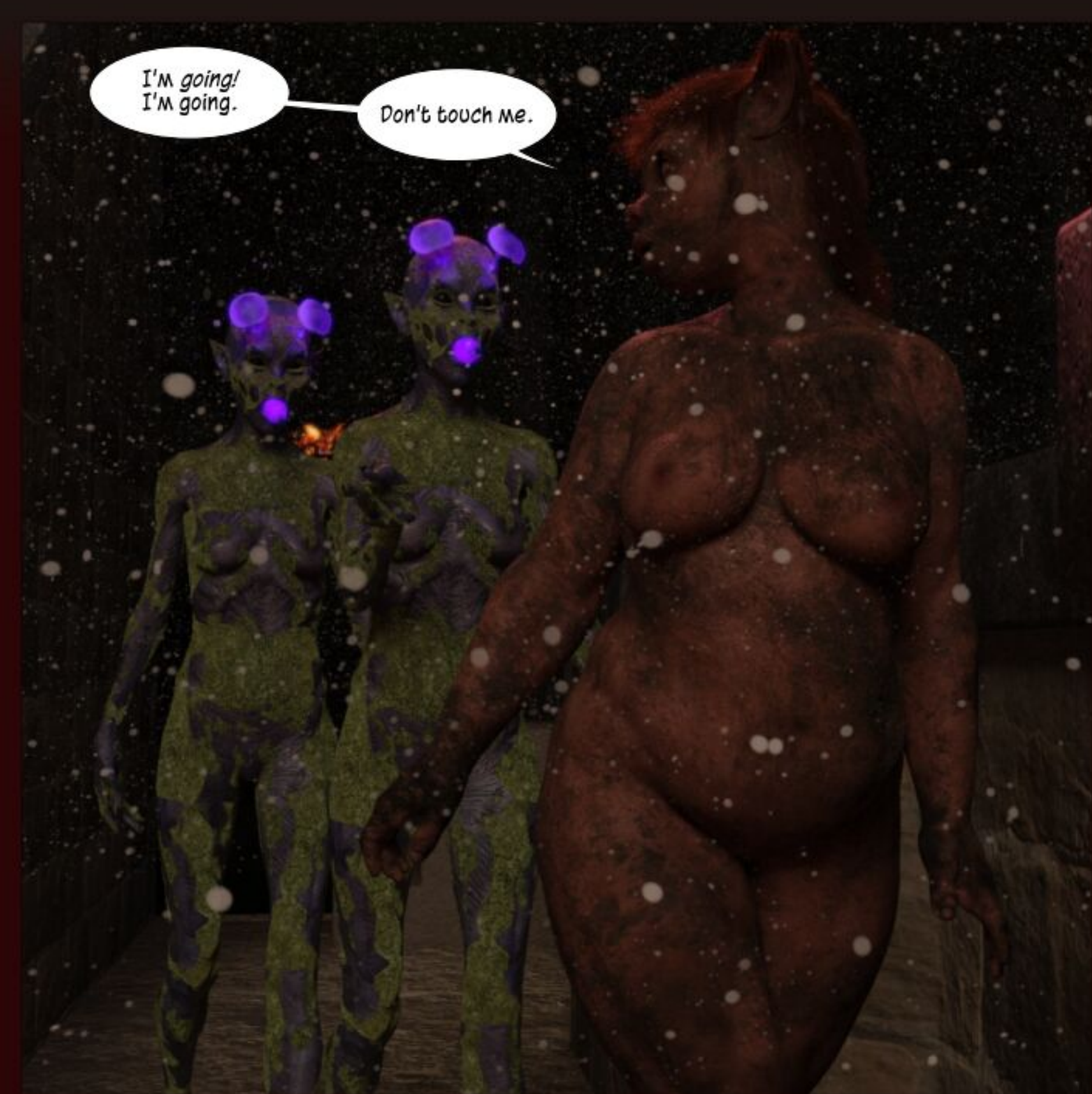
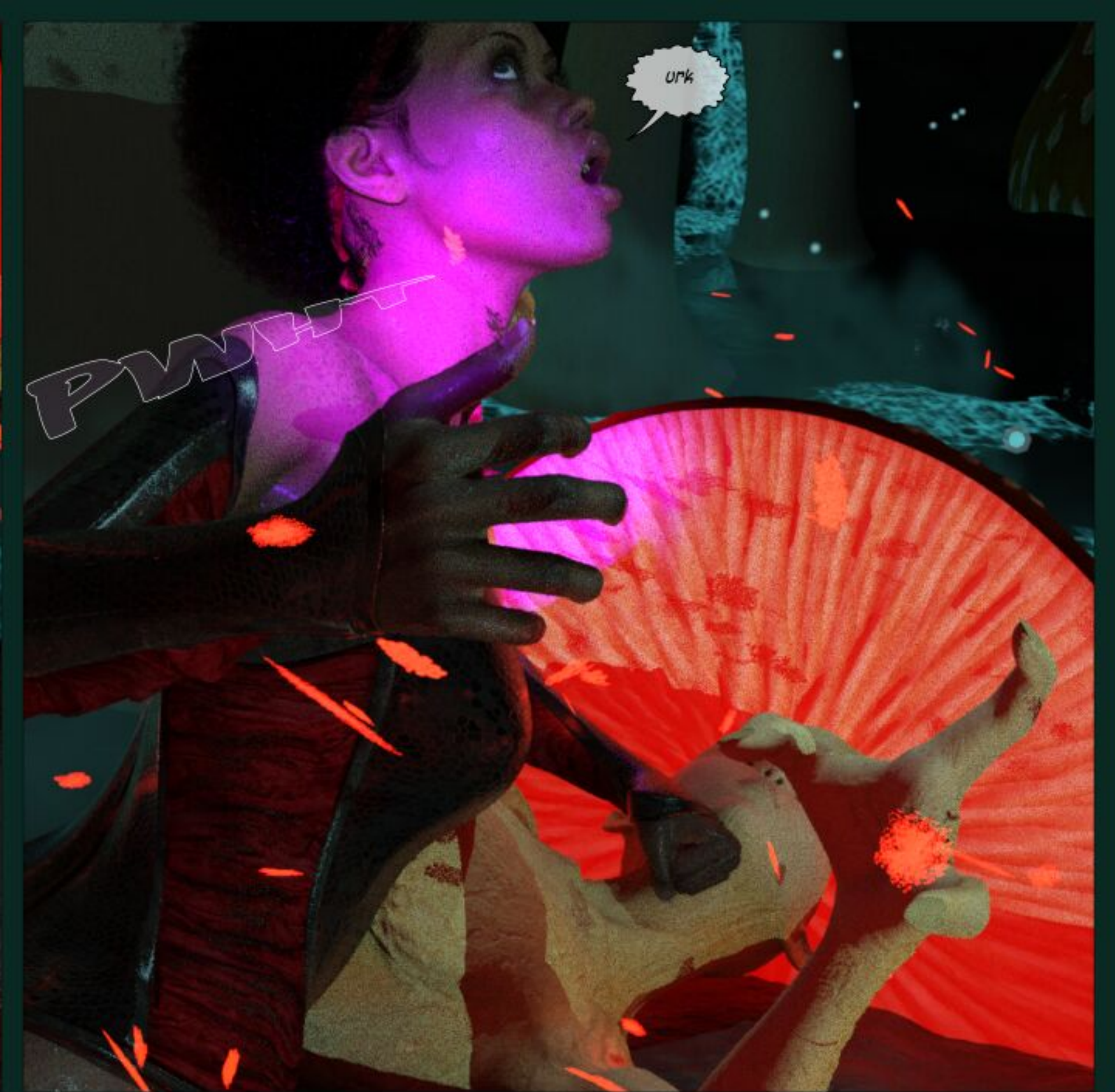
uuuuuhhh!

ooooohhh!

Restore the other one and keep all three distracted. I'll send in some preparers to take custody of them.

I have another group of intruders to deal with first, but I'll get to these shortly.





Hey, now--



Idiots.

"Oh, let's be Fauns and live in the woods and dance and Puck and ignore everything we don't want to think about!"

I should have just let Amanita keep all three of you as mushrooms. You wouldn't have to think about anything.



But you have too much power. You're magical batteries, even if you're too stupid to know it. You'd break Free and wouldn't even know why ...

Hmm! I could change you into something where I can use that --

--oh, now what?



I have a definite sensation of déjà vu.



I don't tolerate intruders, especially not ones I suspect of being here to cause me trouble. Why are you here, witch?

-- hkk --
An't no witch ...



Of course you're a witch. The preparers have tried to deal with you and it hasn't held. What else would you be?

Han't do magic!
Han't mess Polk like skels here ...



No? You just break out of things?

And if I change you again, you'll shake it off ...

... I may have taken the wrong approach with you.

Let's try something different.



Back off!
An't want none!!

I think you do, though.

Don't struggle. If you try anything the preparers will just dart you again.



There.

I've wondered what it would be like to have a disciple.



You say you can't do any magic, but I can't help but wonder whether you're holding yourself back.

Suppose we lose the inhibitions and give you a little boost ...



Stand right there.

It won't hurt.

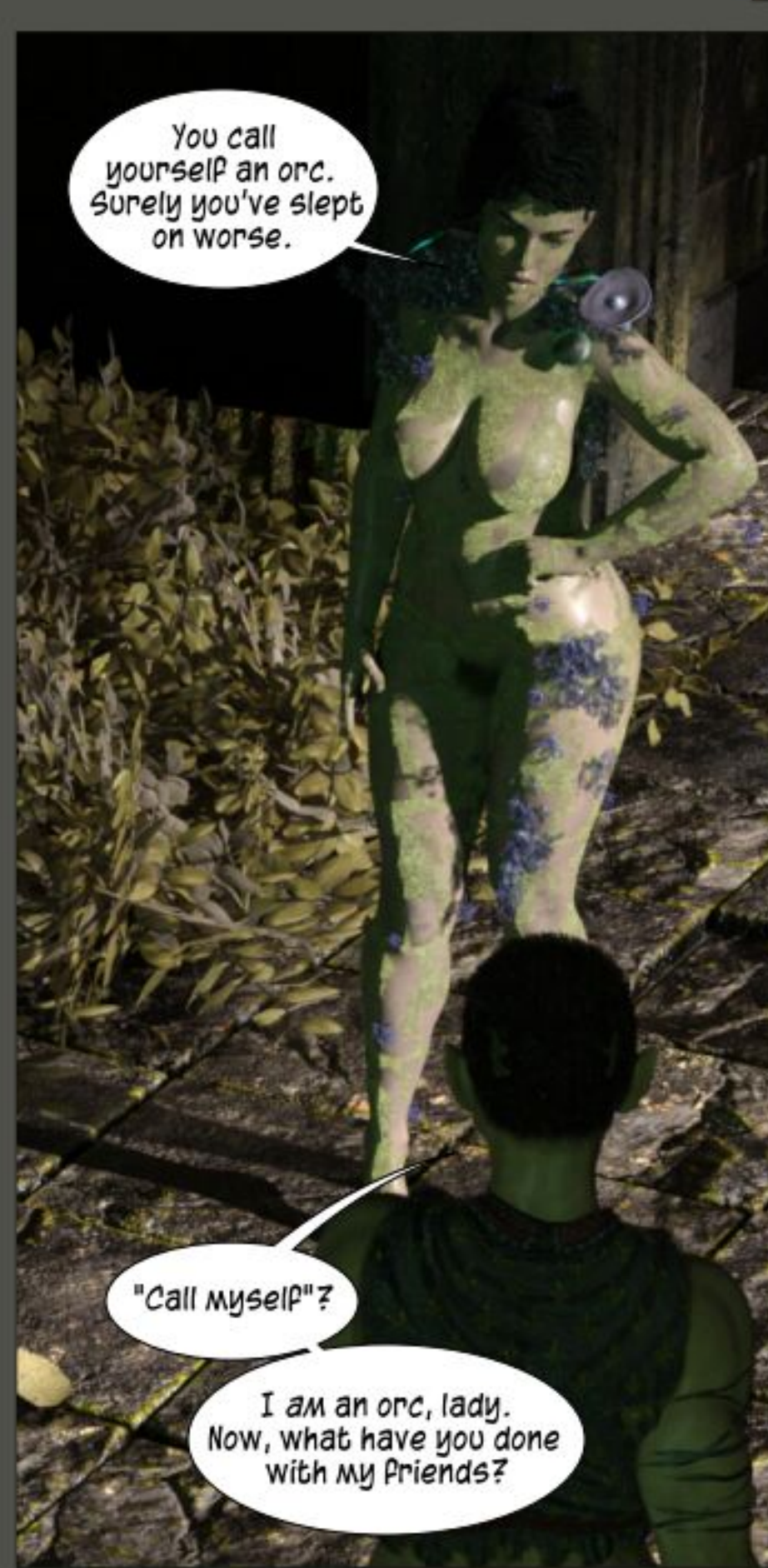
... I don't think.



Let's see what you do now that you're set free.



You really sleep on that?



You call yourself an orc. Surely you've slept on worse.

"Call myself"?

I am an orc, lady. Now, what have you done with my friends?



No, you are a stupid little games, like all the rest of them. I get so tired of it, I can't even tell you.

You look like you might have potential, if you stopped playing ...

Don't you touch me!



It's too late for that.

If you didn't want to be touched, you shouldn't have gotten so close.



I don't understand the woman thing. You "orcs" clearly want to be men. You want to be big and surly and drink and Puck and fight all day, right?

Look at you! Not a hair on your body. That's the kind of thing I mean. You want to be huge ferocious monsters, but you don't want to have hair. And you don't see a problem with this?

I mean, I can understand not wanting to be a man-- men are only useful for one thing--but if you're going to go halfway, have the balls to commit ...

And speaking of balls, now you're equipped the way you should have been. No, don't thank me.



Come over here and let's see if you can figure out how to use it.

I'll decide what else I'm going to do with you in the morning.



SERENITY, THE NEXT MORNING.



Oh, hey, the gang's all here. Slow day?

Can't tell. It's barely started.

Hi, Ruby. What's up?

Can you find Jex for me?

Usually it's best to try to find her early. I know most of the places she sleeps ... she's not in any of them.



I thought we were giving her space.

We are! I haven't talked to her in close to two weeks. I just want to check on her.

Hmm. Well, she's in the Yards.

... without even looking.

We told Leyna where she was, and a few minutes ago she confirmed Jex hasn't come back yet. We were just talking about her, actually.

We saw her get approached by a Paun yesterday morning.



The Paun came in through one of the portals from the Souk, but they were heading to a different portal, one to the Yards, over in the Sidelight neighborhood ...

Doing a little eavesdropping, huh?

We were curious. A Paun showing up in Serenity is weird enough, and then Jex obviously knew her ... Leyna's helmet mikes are great.

Surveillance state.

Jex had an adventure in the Yards a while back. We talked about it a little ... she did mention some Pauns. Hear anything else?

Lots. The idea was they were going to the forest part of the Yards to get some help, then come back and go through the Souk again to take a portal down into the swampy part ... it sounded like there was something going on there?

YOU MAY NOT HAVE NOTICED SINA AND ESPERANZA WATCHING FROM A ROOFTOP BACK ON PAGE 3.

ISSUE #32.



Are you going to go check on her?

No one else will.

I'll try to do it without getting in her face.



... Do you think she wanted us to go with her?

How should I know?

I can't figure Ruby out half the time these days. She gets in these moods, and she won't talk about it.

I wonder sometimes if she worries about Jex because she sees similarities...



Anyway, you're not available. We've got another Sprue incursion. Fashion Street.

And now the day truly has begun.

Tally-ho.

BREEET!



AAAAAAA!

Didn't Leyna just track this? It's coming apart Past ...

Can you see the epicenter anywhere in this mess?

Shh for a sec.

Do you hear something?

Besides people screaming?



... oh.

I bring the inevitable!



You can't run from it! You can't hide from it! You must accept it!

It must all decay! It must all fall apart! The void must claim it all! You have no choice!



Why try to escape?

Whoa!

AAAA!

Hey, lady --



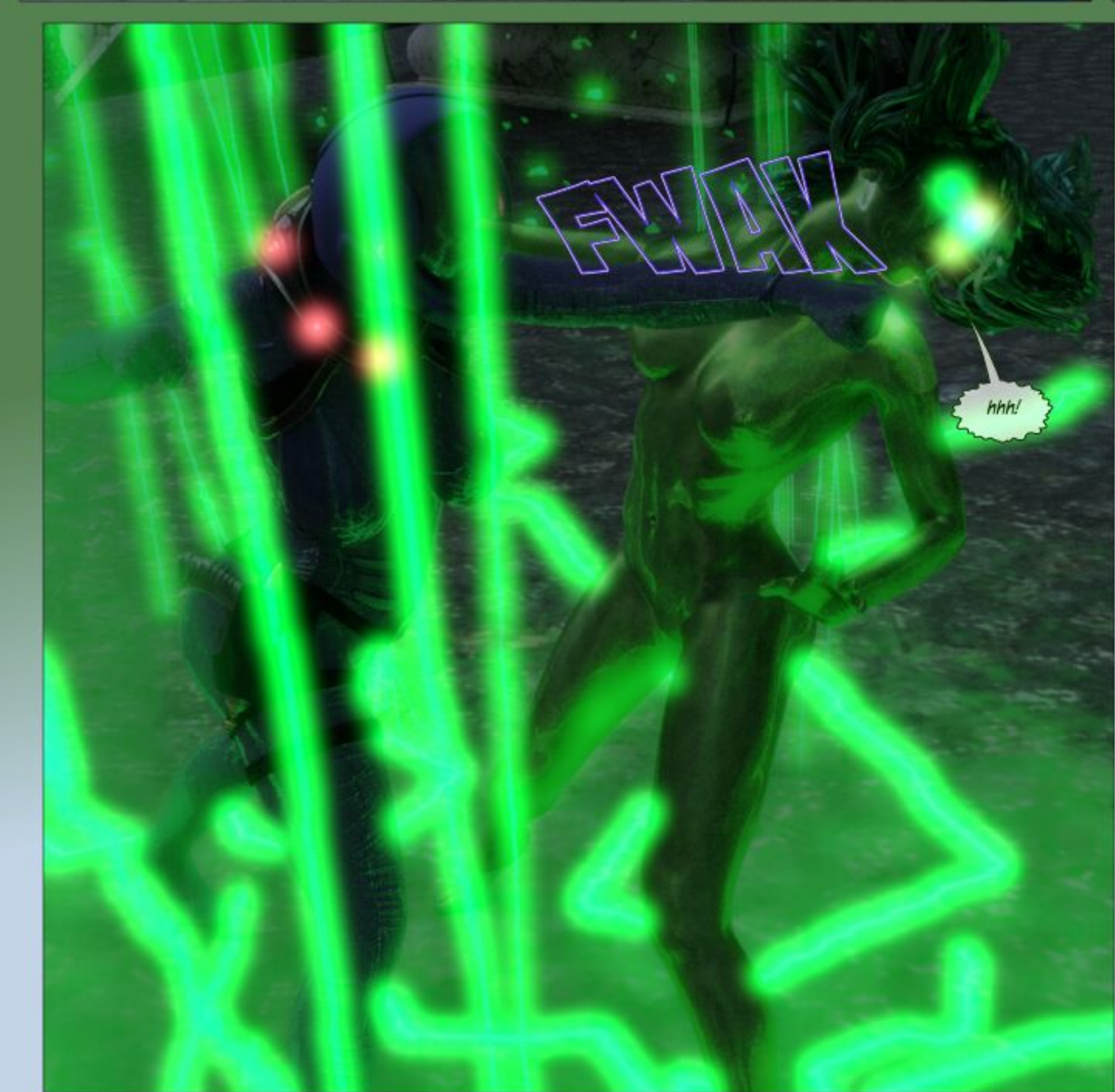
Gina!

We're -- oof -- We're OK!

Try the Ruby method on her!

oogh!

This is all corrupt! It must all be deleted --



FWAA!

hhh!



All right, what the hell was that?

... I couldn't begin to guess.

Let's rope this off and then go tell Leyna.

She's going to need to do a lot of hard resets here anyway.



MMMM ...

I've decided. I'm going to keep you around for a while as my personal ... guard.

I might make you even bigger ... couple of other adjustments ... I think you'd look good with a--

eh?



Damn it.

People have got to stop breaking out of my effects. It's really frustrating.

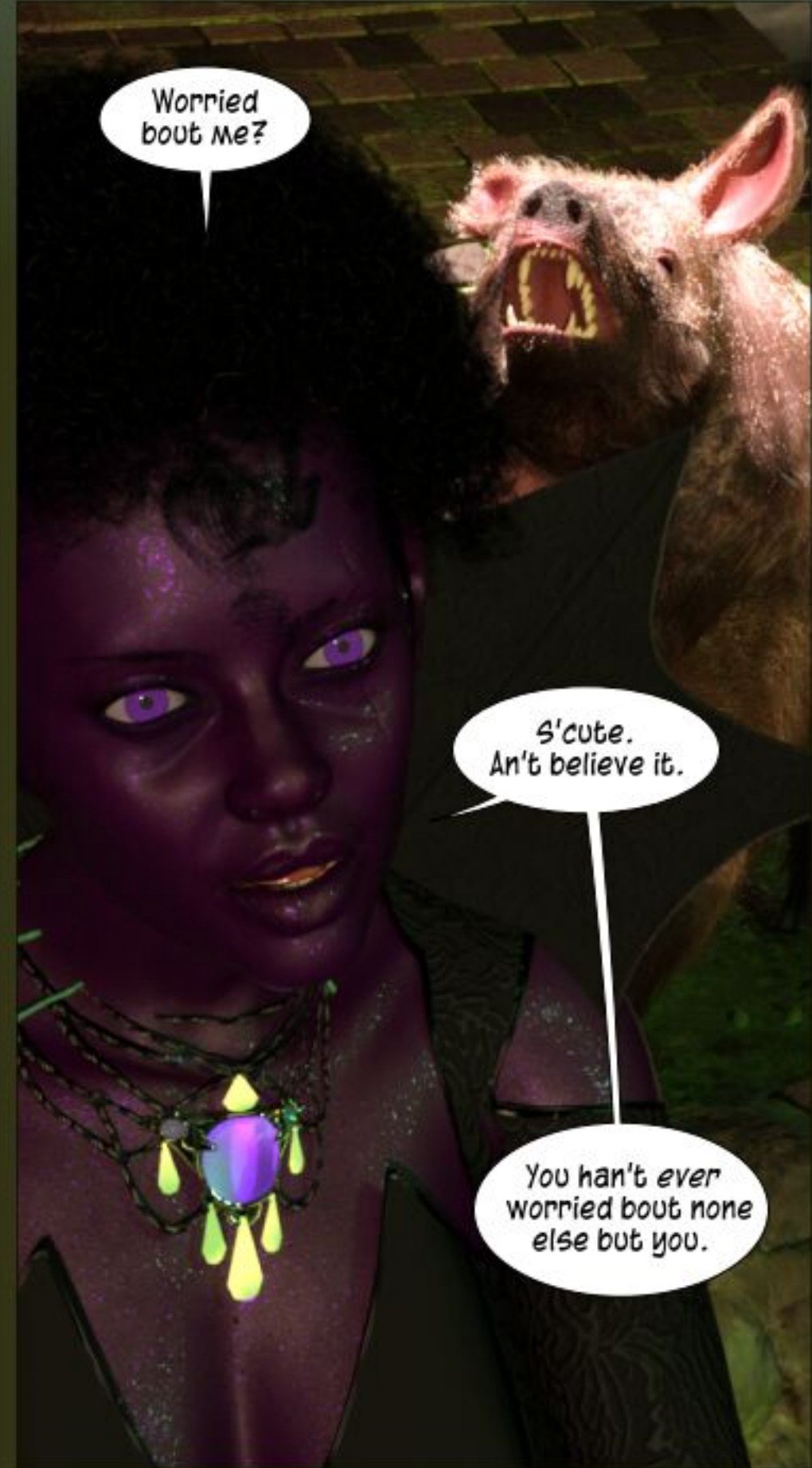


GRNK

SQUEEEEEEEEL

Jex! You're intact!

When those creatures hauled you away, I feared for your safety ...



Worried about me?

S'cute. An't believe it.

You han't ever worried about none else but you.



What??

How can you say something like that?

I looked for you all night! Tramping around these awful tunnels--

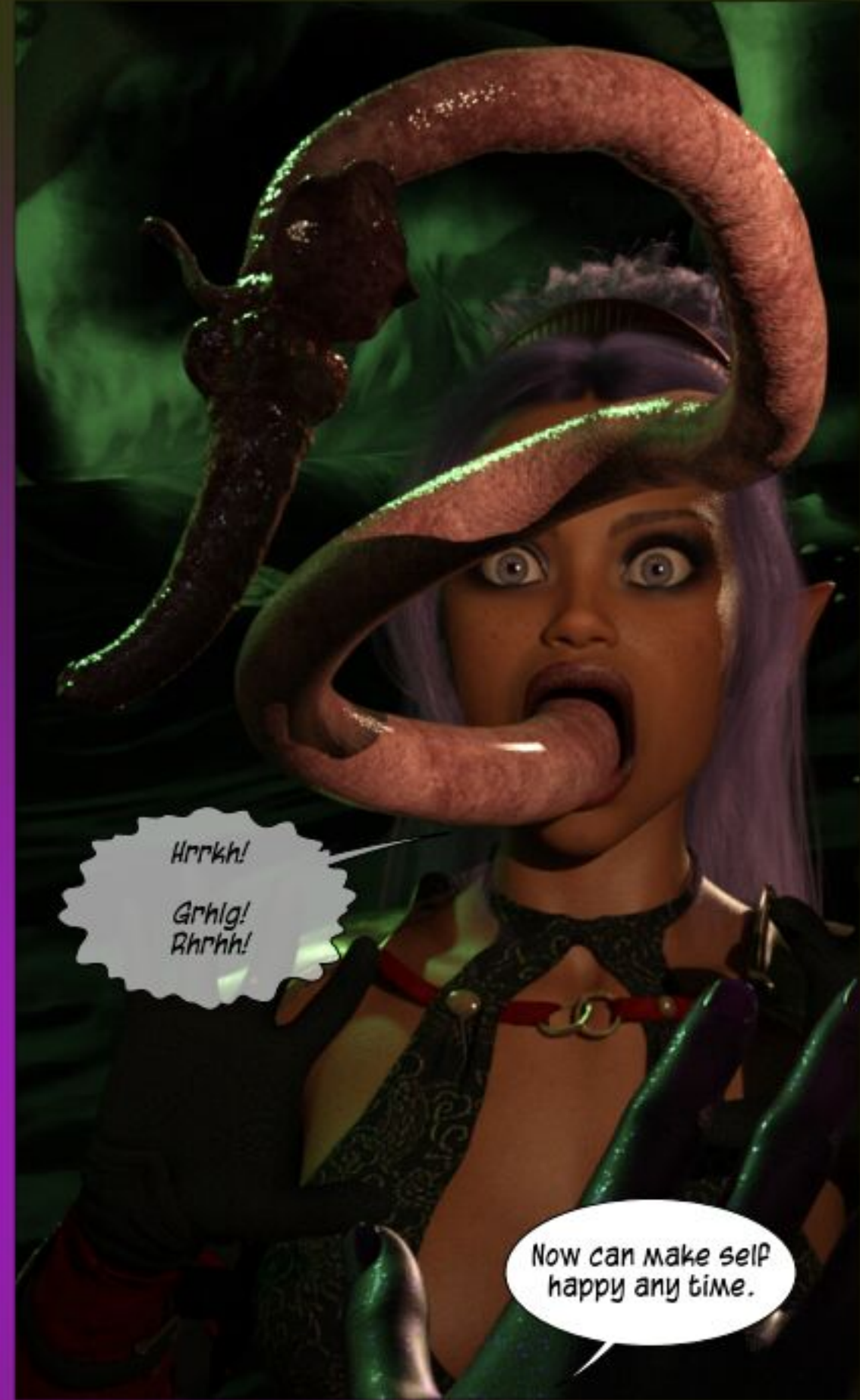
See? All about you.

Only care about Polk else it can make you happy.



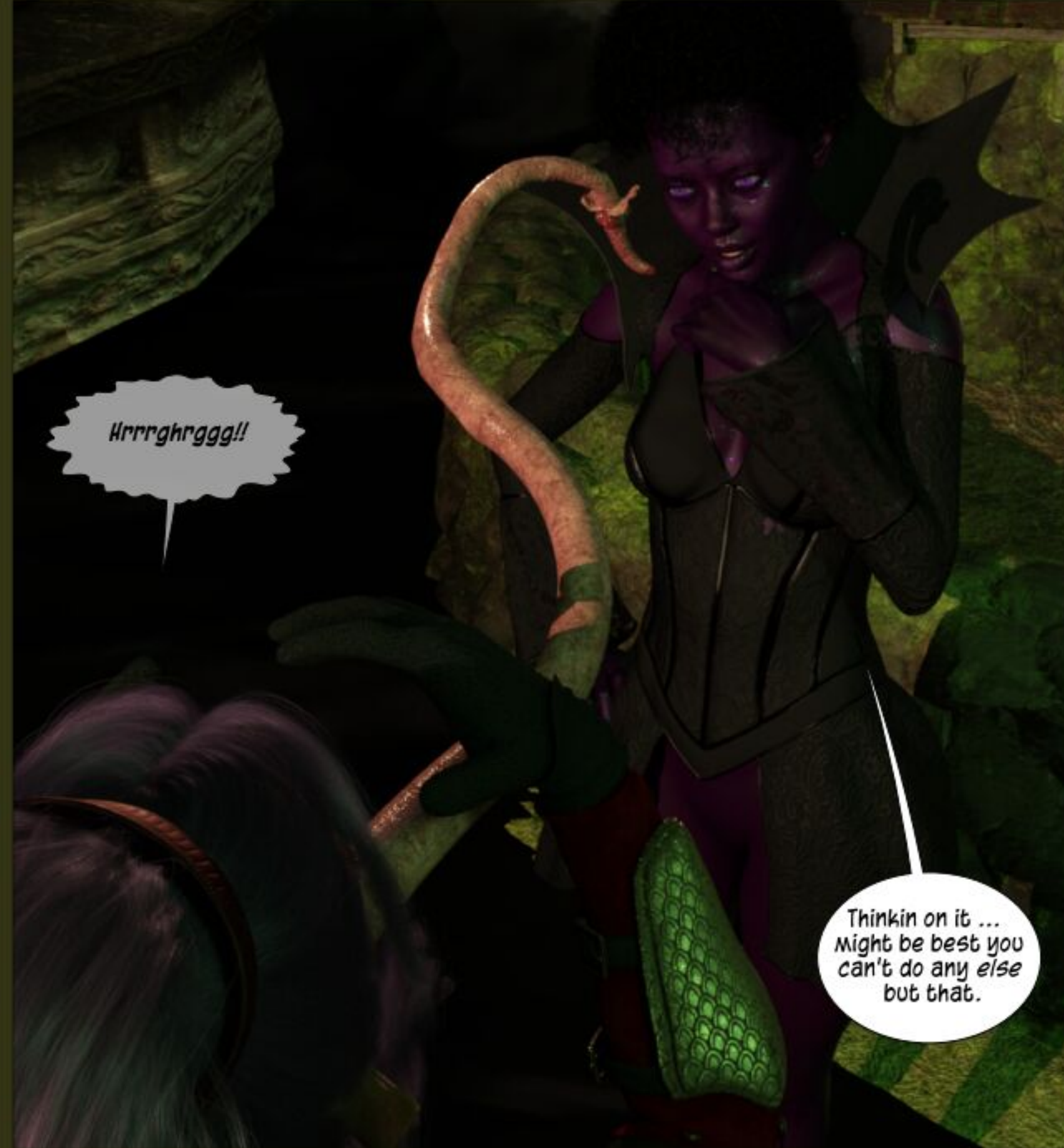
Jex, wait! Something's wrong with you ... What did they dooo

Got idea for that.



Hrrkk!
Grhlg!
Rrhhh!

Now can make self happy any time.



Hrrrghrggg!!

Thinkin on it ... might be best you can't do any else but that.



Hrrrghghh!!



Get bored, know what to do.



... hrrgh?



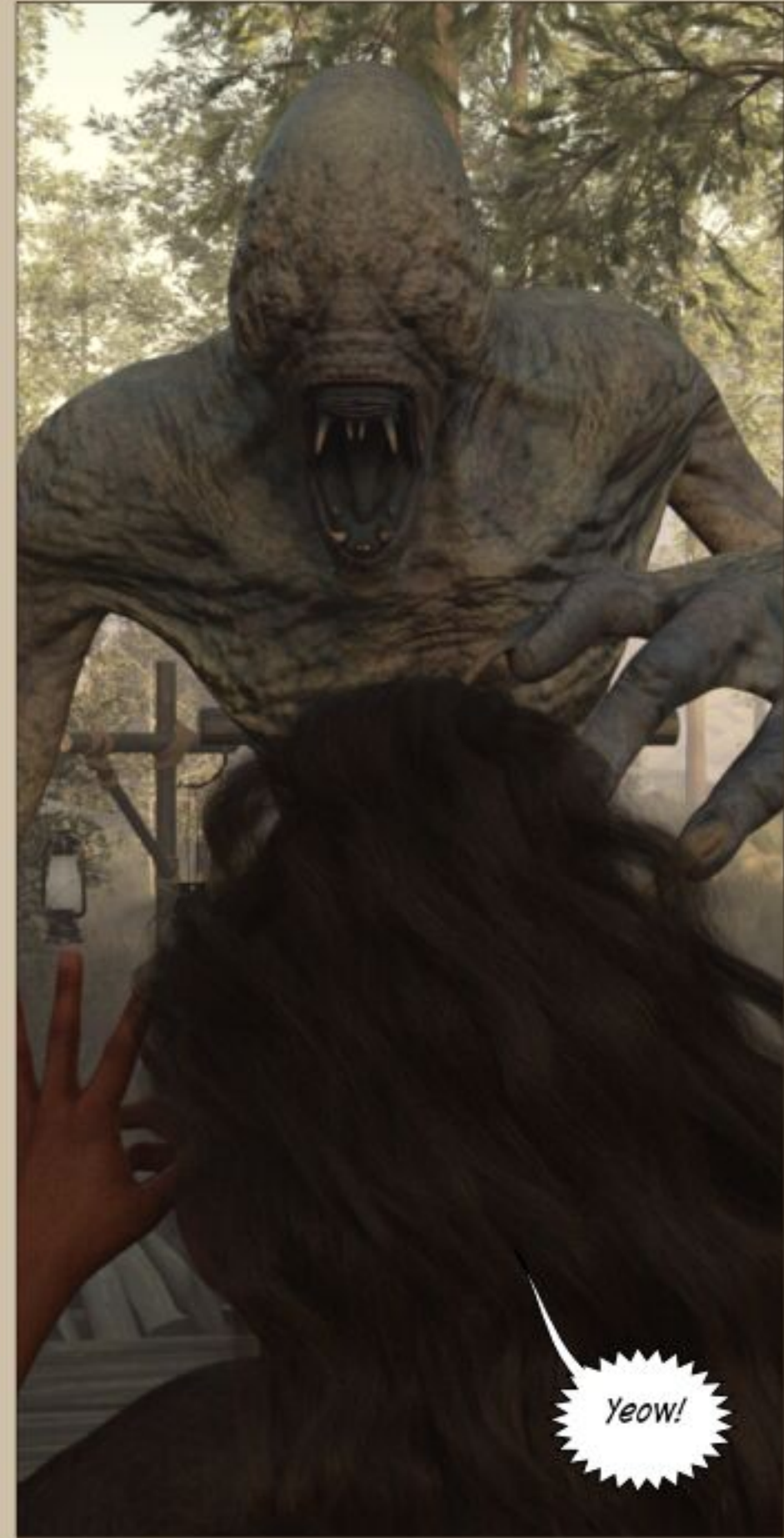
Starting to see what Jex might have come out here for.

Swamp never had all that many people, as I recall, but it's empty. These houses should have somebody in them ...



Wait, is that a --

Hey!
Hello?



Yeow!



Not friendly, huh?

OOOAAARRGH



Will she need help?

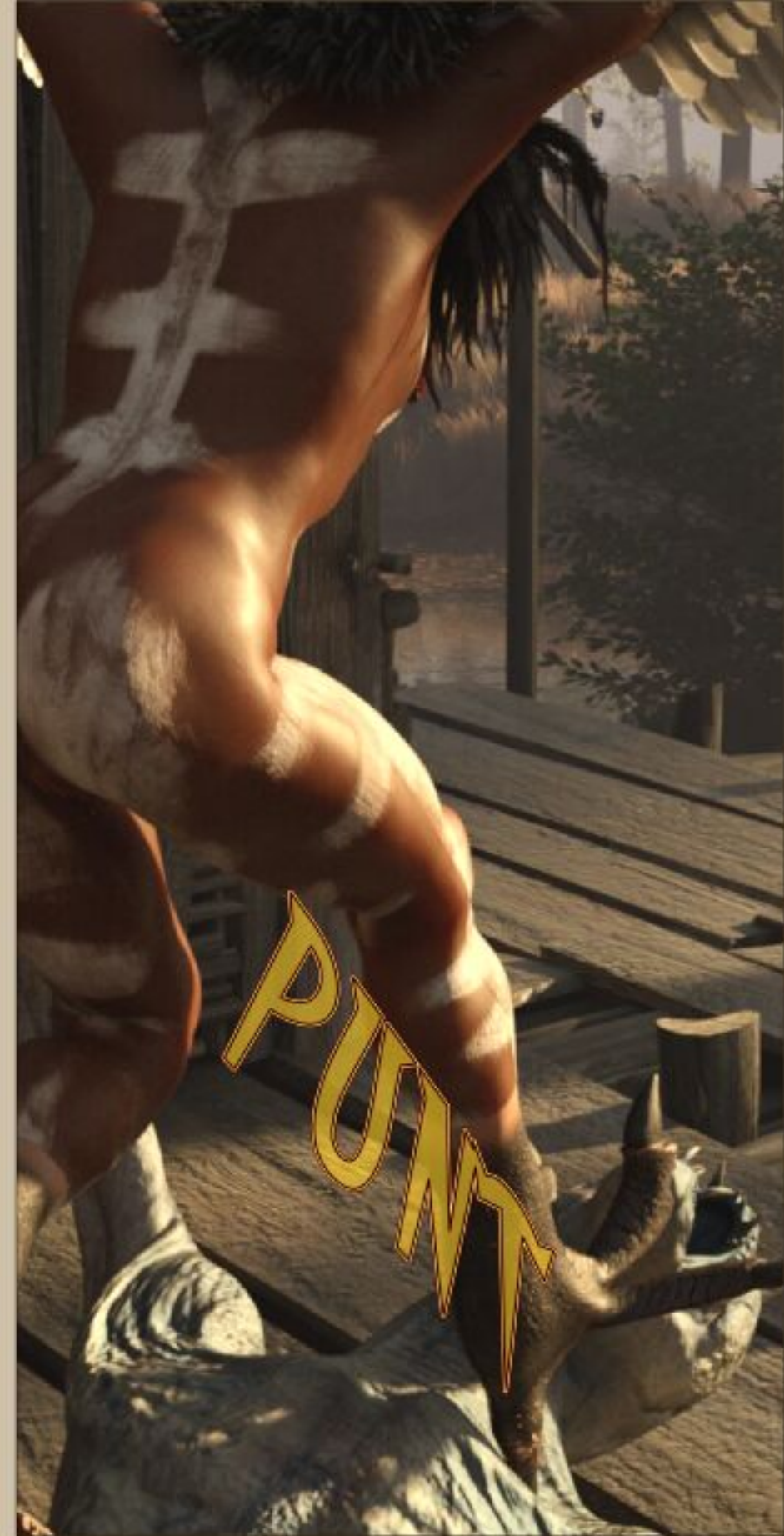
Perhaps.

Back off!

PUNT



Whooooa!



PUNT



... OK, I have questions.

They capture people and take them away. They seem to be able to portal instantly. Usually they disappear as soon as they have someone.

... or if anyone actually gives them a fight. This is the first time we've knocked one out before it could vanish.



Huh.

I'm pretty sure I can undo whatever this is. Give me a moment ...



... There.



AND SO ...

... When they brought me to her I think she was surprised. Maybe because I wasn't a goblin? Mostly goblins around here ...

She said as long as I'd wandered in where I wasn't wanted, I might as well be useful.

It's, uh ... all kind of a mess after that.

I was ... something big? People running from me? I was trying to catch them?



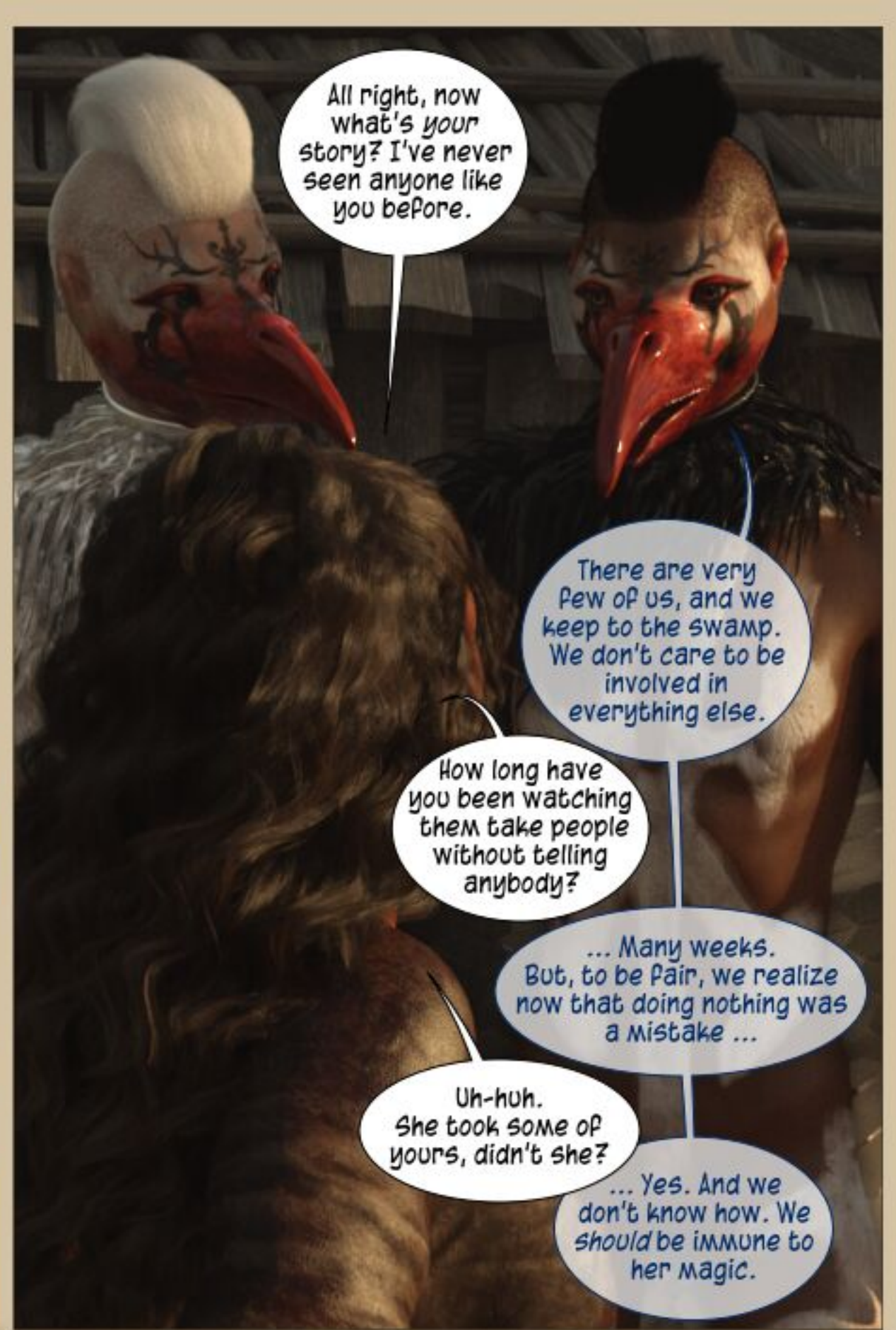
It sounds like she changed you into the same kind of creature that dragged you in.

Well, that was a mean thing to do ...

Are you going after her?

-- sigh -- Probably, at this point. I think I may have a friend stuck in there.

Look, you'd better recall out. And stay away from the swamp until we fix this.



All right, now what's your story? I've never seen anyone like you before.

There are very few of us, and we keep to the swamp. We don't care to be involved in everything else.

How long have you been watching them take people without telling anybody?

... Many weeks. But, to be fair, we realize now that doing nothing was a mistake ...

Uh-huh. She took some of yours, didn't she?

... Yes. And we don't know how. We should be immune to her magic.



You can show me where she is?

Yes.

Prepared to offer any help beyond that?

Ah ... perhaps.

It will go badly for us.

But she will persevere, we will be saved, and our presence will have provided something vital.



What do I call you two?

I am Eilonwe. They are Keridwen.

I'm Ruby.

Can you really tell the future, or are you just good at guessing the odds?

Is there a difference between the two?



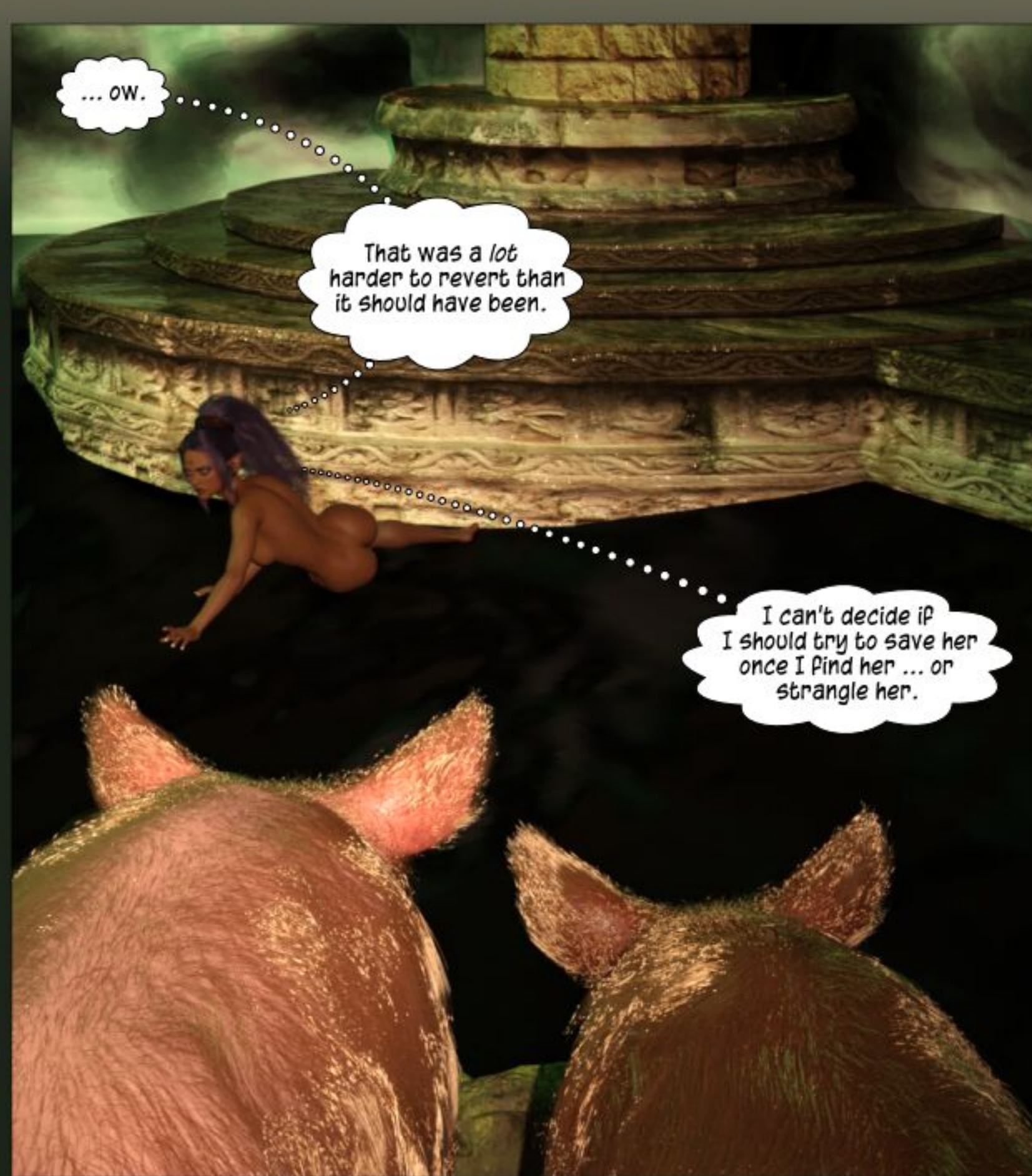
Hrgkh!

Hrgkh!!

Hrgkh!!!



AAAA!



... OW.

That was a lot harder to revert than it should have been.

I can't decide if I should try to save her once I find her ... or strangle her.



I suppose I should rescue the little pool. Can't even manifest her own clothes ... and now she's doing things like this. She's clearly way in over her head.



If I'm lucky, maybe she'll be able to lead me to the bitch.

And then we are going to have a --



URK?



You horrors are supposed to make my life easier, not keep bringing me problems.

What is it you can't handle this time?

Oh, I see. Hmm. Well, that's legitimate.



I thought you'd have enough sense not to come back after you fled the first time.

But of course you didn't. You think you're an elf. Which means you think you know better than everybody else.



got ... mission ... have to stop you ... took my friend ... can't just ... evil ...

Yes, yes, I'm a menace to society and all that.

And of course you're the only one who can stop me, because you're an elf!

You know, it's funny, I could have sworn that you elves never left your little citadel or whatever you call it. You don't like to mingle with us inferior types.



And yet I've had two of you in the last few months. I guess you can't pass up the chance to be righteous at somebody so obviously evil.

Hold onto her, now.

She wants to find her friend, so I'm going to point her in the right direction.



No ... Uhhh...

Most of the people I take on, I try to make useful.

But you "elves" annoy me. I don't want you to be useful.

I want you to be completely useless.



uhhrrr ...

I want you to be wandering around aimlessly for the rest of your life, unable to pull your pathetic mind together enough to even know what you are, let alone have a purpose.

I want people to run screaming from you whenever you approach them, and I want you to always be too stupid to ever figure out why.



RAAAAAH!



UURRH?

Get ready, you two, this thing's -- ugh -- heavy.



URRAAAH!!



You'll know if you find your friend down there.

She looks just like you.



I don't think I've ever before had the feeling of being surrounded by things I can't see.

I know they're skittering around us, but so far I haven't gotten as much as a --

Hey!

No, don't run! We need to talk to you!



Oogh!

I mean it!!



Get off! Get off, pig! Mistress won't like you did this! Mistress will get you!

This is another one that's been changed. I guess they probably all are, huh?

Let me go! Let me --



-- oh.



AND SO ...

She said if I was going to play at being a goblin then I should be a real goblin. She said "goblins aren't cute." She said I should stay down here as a monster ...

With her as your ruler, of course.

... yeah.

I wonder how long I've been in here ...

We need to get to her. Can you help?

Sure, I can show you ... but I don't know what you think you can do. Nobody's beaten her yet. A lot of people have tried.

Well, one more try won't hurt.



Since you can restore them, why not just do that?

Do you want to be in here for weeks, Eilonwe? I do not.

Same. And the more we undo, the more we attract her attention and her defenses ... we wouldn't get very far before we had to take her on anyway.

If we're lucky, when we deal with her, most of her effects will revert by themselves.



... This is a lot.

Huge dark cave, perfect for--



SKREEE

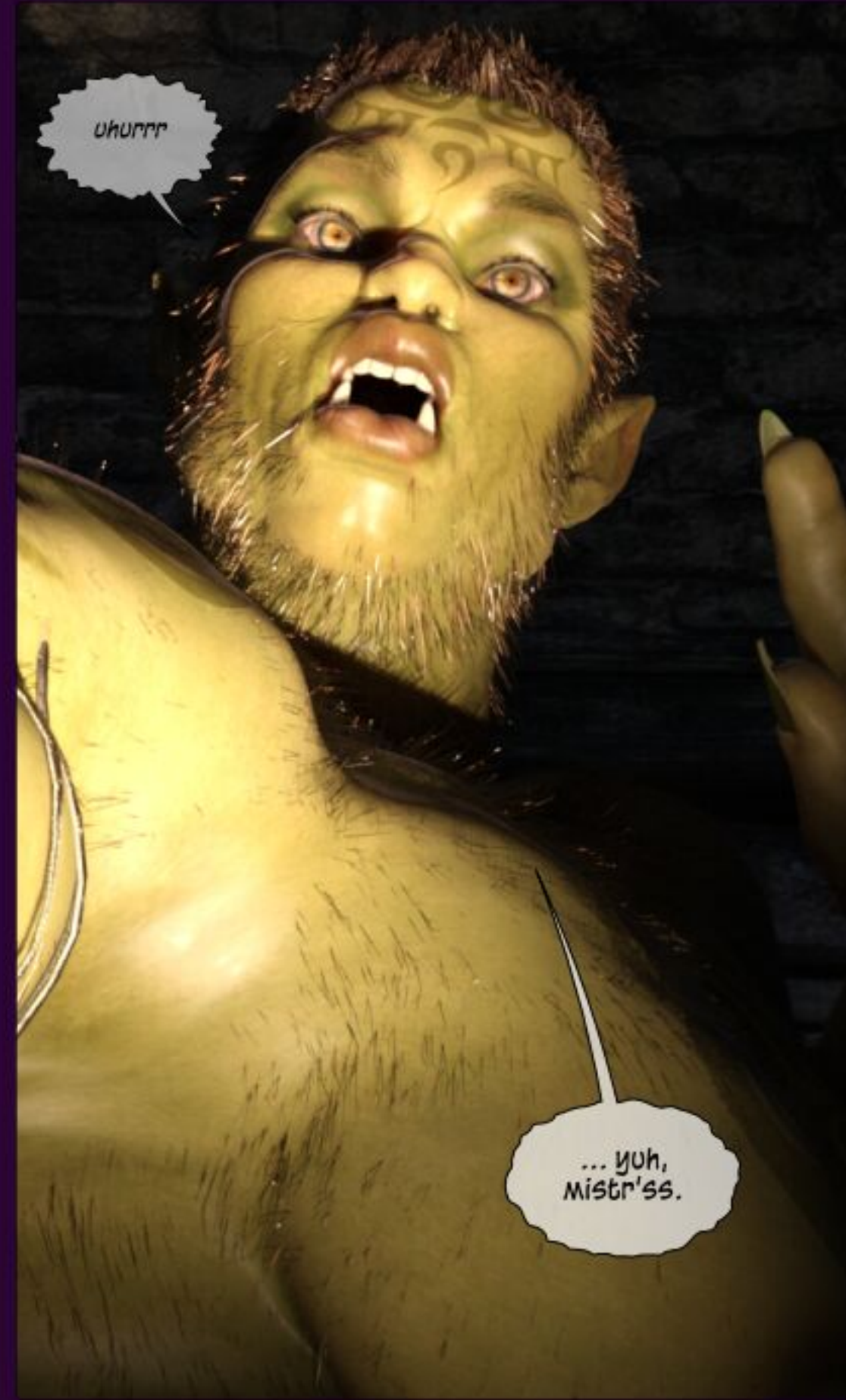
NO!!



Ruby, get away! -- awwkkk --

Not that way!!

Quickly, before they net you!





My goodness, Amanita! do you have any idea what you've brought me?



I think you must; I can't remember when you last came out of your cave ...

I'm a little surprised you were able to affect her, honestly.

oooo!

Leave her with me. I'll take it from here.



Ruby Martinez. I've heard so much about you.

uuh?

I always knew you'd show up eventually. Can't be safe from the notice of A4's chief Meddler forever.



It's a shame you were stupid enough to wander into Amanita's cave. I'd have liked to have subdued you myself.

Still, we might as well make use of the situation ...



mmm!



Mmm, yes ... we're definitely going to play a little first ...

But I'll need to make one change.



uuh!!

I know the statistics. I know how many men in sleep become women. I guess that's why there's such a shortage of dick these days.

I'm sure that's fine for some, but for me, it just doesn't work without it ...



We could even go bigger, I think ...

Oh, yes.



-- aaaaah! --
That's good ...

I'm ...
-- UHHH! --
I'm going to tell you something ...

UUHHHHH!



I knew you were faking. If Amanita had gotten to you, you wouldn't be out of it like that, you'd just be practically trying to frug yourself.

My effects put you in a daze, and they're a lot stronger. You've been breathing them. Let's see if you can shake those off.

oh, shit --

OOCHNNNN!!!



Uuh?

Good, you're awake!
Did you have Fun? I did.

The next part's not going to be as much Fun, I'm afraid. It's time for a nasty little meddler to get what she deserves.

I'm told you came in with these two birdbrains, so I thought I'd let them watch. Their turn's coming.

uuuugh ...

Can't focus ... head still feels like it's full of marshmallow ...

Ruby, move!
You've got to get out of there!



I don't know what you think gives you the right. Where do you get off telling people what's acceptable and what isn't? Why do you get to change things to something you like better, but nobody else does?

S'not like that ... just looking for missing people

Not trying to --



AAUGH!



You're like the birds. A lot of things don't affect you, or you shake them off fast. I solved that, though.

You have to wear it. Something that keeps applying the effect. Something hard to take off. Like the masks on the harpies.

Or a coating of slime.

noooaarr ...



URRR!

You want to police things, you can go police the muck tunnels. I've noticed there have been way too many people sneaking in here through the muck tunnels lately.



Ah, there we go. Oozing on through.

Don't worry, I'm sure it won't take you long to figure out how to stay solid.

UURRRRR!



Have Fun down there.

INTERLUDE.

THE THALLIUM ESTATE, HIGHPOINT.



URF!
URF!!

Fifi, shush ...
Mommy's trying to sleep ...



-- urgh --
Look, you silly puppy,
it's just seev ...

She wasn't barking at
me, Milady. The king's
adjutant is here, and you
know how Fifi Peels
about her.

Adjutant? Already?
... not supposed to --

It's after
eleven, Milady.
Time to let the
daylight in ...

Aaaugh!

Sadist.
... All right. Stall her until I
get dressed.
And go put Fifi in her run so
she won't make a
commotion, will you?



Lady
Thallium.

I'm very sorry
to have kept his
majesty's
representative
waiting ...



I imagine you were up
late last night with
important business.

... Something
like that.

You may go,
seev.

Yes, Milady.



I'm always
a little
surprised when
his majesty doesn't
insist his bodyguard
be joined to him at
the hip. Did you
have much
trouble getting
away?

He was probably
thrilled he didn't
have to ditch me.
Every so often he
does this "Hanne,
I'm not going to
need you for a
couple of days,
it'll be fine"
thing.

So the timing was
good for everybody.

I'm pretty sure he has a lover
he doesn't want me to know
about, which is stupid,
because with him I've seen
everything by now.



So, were you
keeping busy last
night? Any good
stories?

Believe it or not,
I went to bed
alone last night.

I ... haven't
been sleeping
very well.



Hanne, that
Scholz bitch has
got me at the end
of my tether.

She never used to
bother with us before, but
now she's raiding the estate
constantly, grabbing people ...
at the rate she's going I'm not
going to have anyone left soon.
And I don't have the kind of
defenses that Delp has. I was
trying to stay out of all that.

Delp's improved his
defenses, too. Brought in some
help. That's why she's raiding
you. She can't get much traction
with him anymore.

You didn't hear that from me.

Great.

Anyway, that's why I was thinking of
taking this upstairs.



Vi ... you know I
do everything I can ... I
don't mind keeping Brendan from
asking where the hell Lord Thallium is
... but I can't interfere here.

If I did and he found out, I'd be
lucky to get out of Highpoint in
one piece.

Oh, no, I
didn't mean you!
I meant I was
thinking of going
straight to Brendan
and saying "House
Thallium didn't sign
up for this."

Wouldn't do any
good. He thinks you all
should fight your own
fights. You get wiped
out, so be it.

Damn.

Well, if Delp can bring in
help, then I can too,
right? Brendan can't
possibly object to
that?

He's not
very consistent ...
but, no, I wouldn't
think so.

Who do you have in
mind?

I don't. I
haven't gotten
that far yet.



So ... that was the business
portion of the visit.

Now we can get to
the fun part.

SOME TIME LATER.

I'm sorry I wasn't able to deal with you sooner. It took me a while to make more masks.

I hadn't expected to get two more of you this soon. You're not very smart, are you?

Ready?

Yes.

KREEEEEEEE!!!

AAAAA!

While you were making masks, we were breaking the field on your cages.

Get them!
Get them!!

ARRRR!

YAAA!

HRR!

WAAAAA!!!

aaaa!

WUUUUHHH!

No!
Stay away from me!!

Jex!

Just the person I need!

They're after me!

Help me keep them away --

AAAAAAAAEE!!!

Skel bitch!



Anything you do to me will just prove I'm right.



I don't think so, especially since you're so wrong about everything.

You hate people, don't you?

I've noticed that when someone hates people, it gives them really weird ideas about who people are and what they want.

It also leads them to underestimate everyone, because they don't believe that anyone else can be capable.



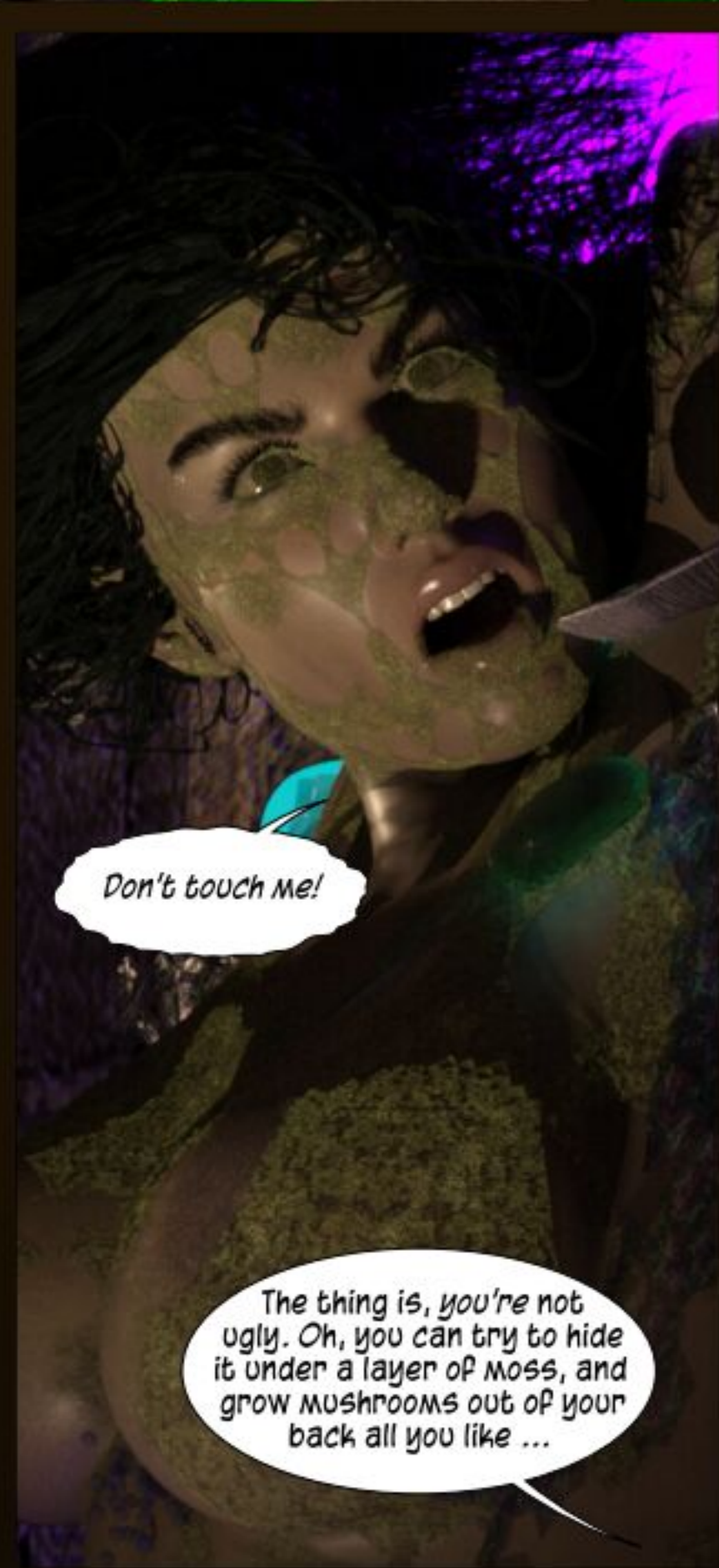
And because you assumed no one could break out of your effects, you were willing to make your victims powerful. Big. Tough. Make better minions that way, right?

Never occurred to you for an instant that might backfire.



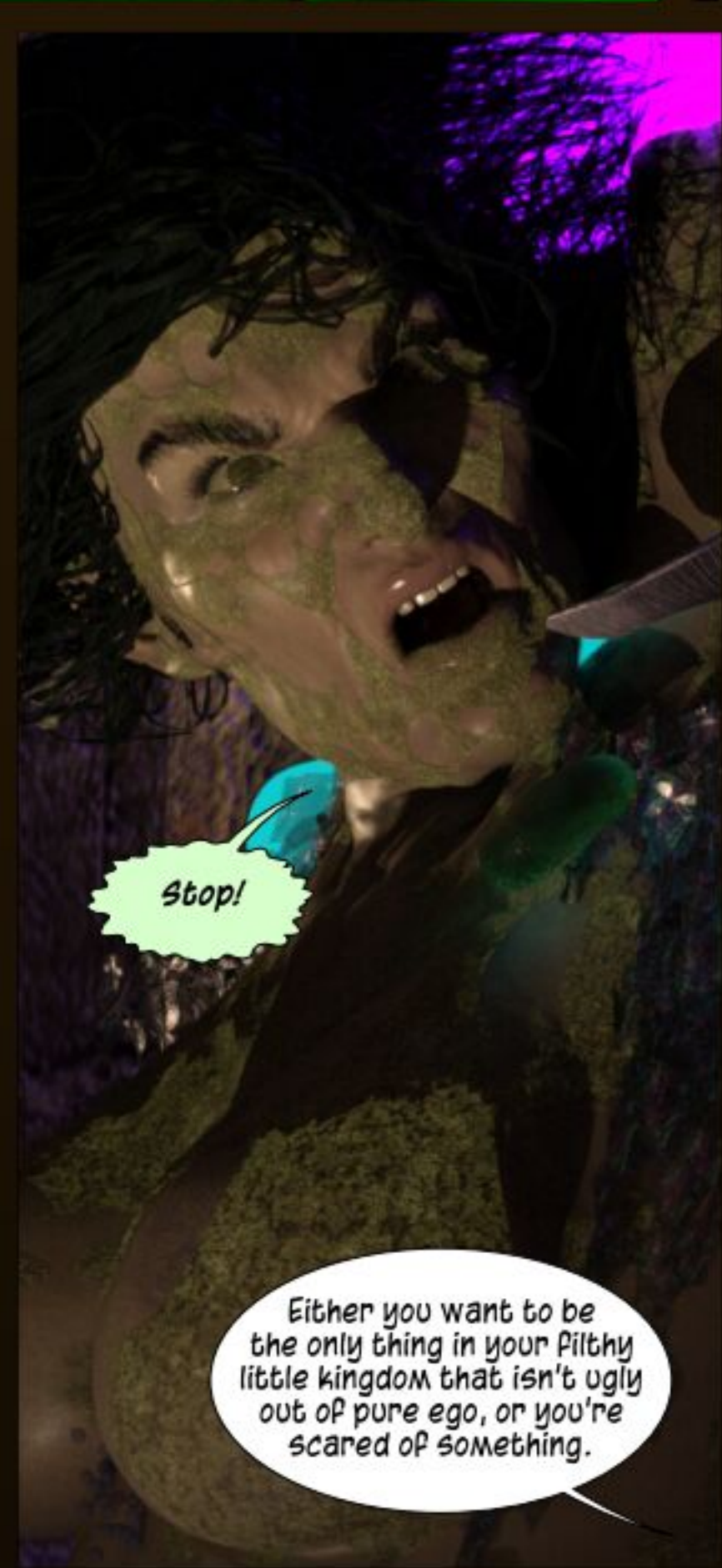
Why don't you go to hell and lecture the damned.

I noticed that every time you "punished" somebody by changing them, you made them ugly. Or ugly by your standards, anyway. That was the important bit. Big, small, whatever -- but they had to be ugly. Why's that?



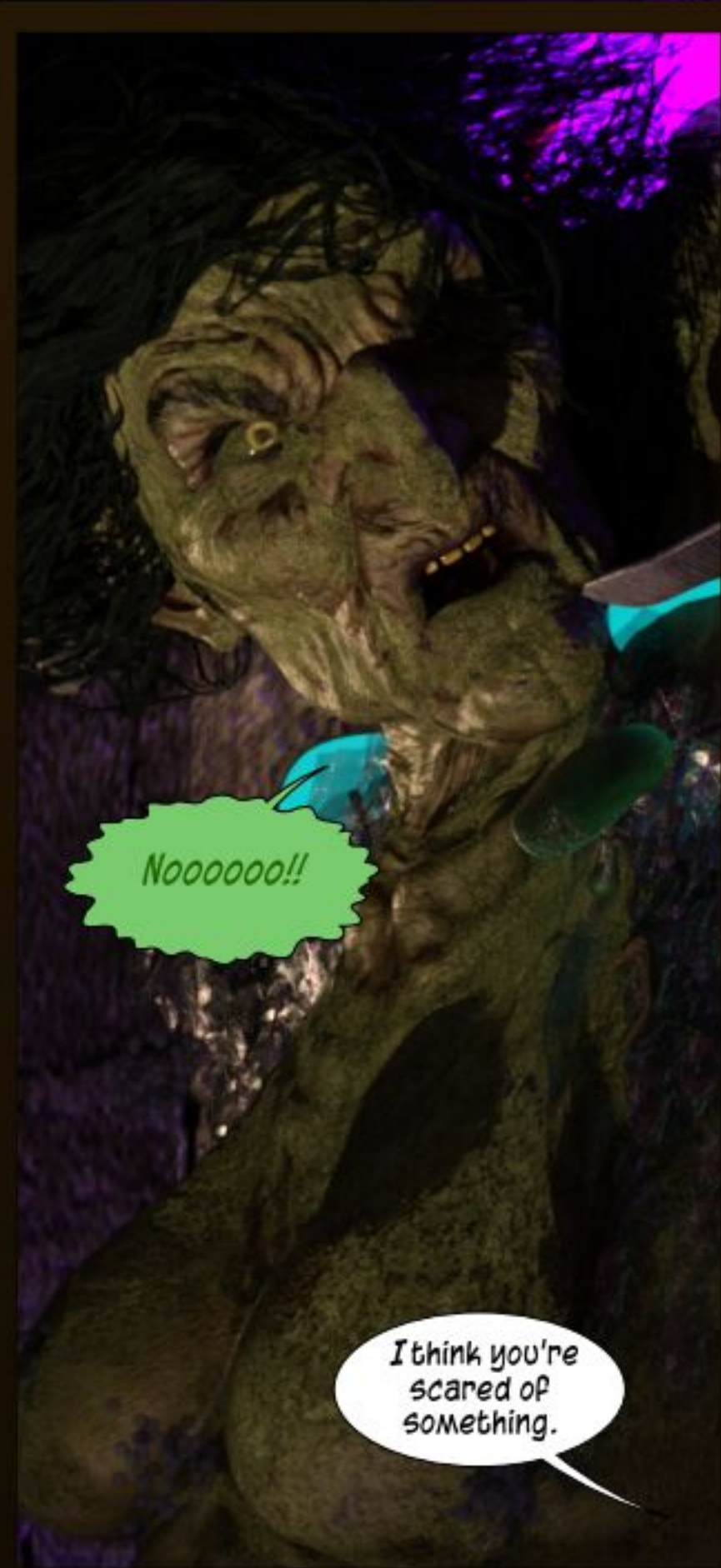
Don't touch me!

The thing is, you're not ugly. Oh, you can try to hide it under a layer of moss, and grow mushrooms out of your back all you like ...



Stop!

Either you want to be the only thing in your pitiful little kingdom that isn't ugly out of pure ego, or you're scared of something.



Noooooo!!

I think you're scared of something.



-- HPP --
It's OK. I'm all right. It's OK --



EEEEEEEE!!

I'm horrible! I'm a monster! What did she do to me?



No, this can't be right. This isn't real. It's some kind of trap.

Just leave. Just go out the door and it'll all be fine --



AAAAAA!



Don't look. Don't look. Walk in another direction until you get out. It's not real. Don't look.





Where is she?

Looping.

She's stuck in a scenario fighting with her own brain. It'll take her a long time to get out ... if she can do it at all.

... Good trick.

I managed to read the clues the right way.

Sometimes it's nice to have a psychologist as a friend.

I was hoping that would revert her changes, though. -- sigh -- We'll have to--

Did you get rid of her? You got rid of her, didn't you?

Is she coming back? Please say she's not coming back ...

Can you fix us?

Oh! Her control's broken. That makes it much easier.

I can fix you but I don't need to. Recall. Since you're not under her influence anymore, that'll revert you.

But before you do that, go around and tell anybody else you can find. If they've got their minds back, they should recall out. They're free.

There they are! Over here!!



Yeaahh!!

We should go through and check ... for ones who didn't break out, or can't remember their recall ...

I could use your help.

Of course.

UURRH?

HMM? ... Oh.

Sure. Let me see what I can do ...

I was having difficulty breaking it ...

... and I can't recall just now because ...

... ah, speaking of that, I don't suppose I could ask you to ...

Many thanks.

Already on it.



Cres???

That was you?

What did you think you were doing?

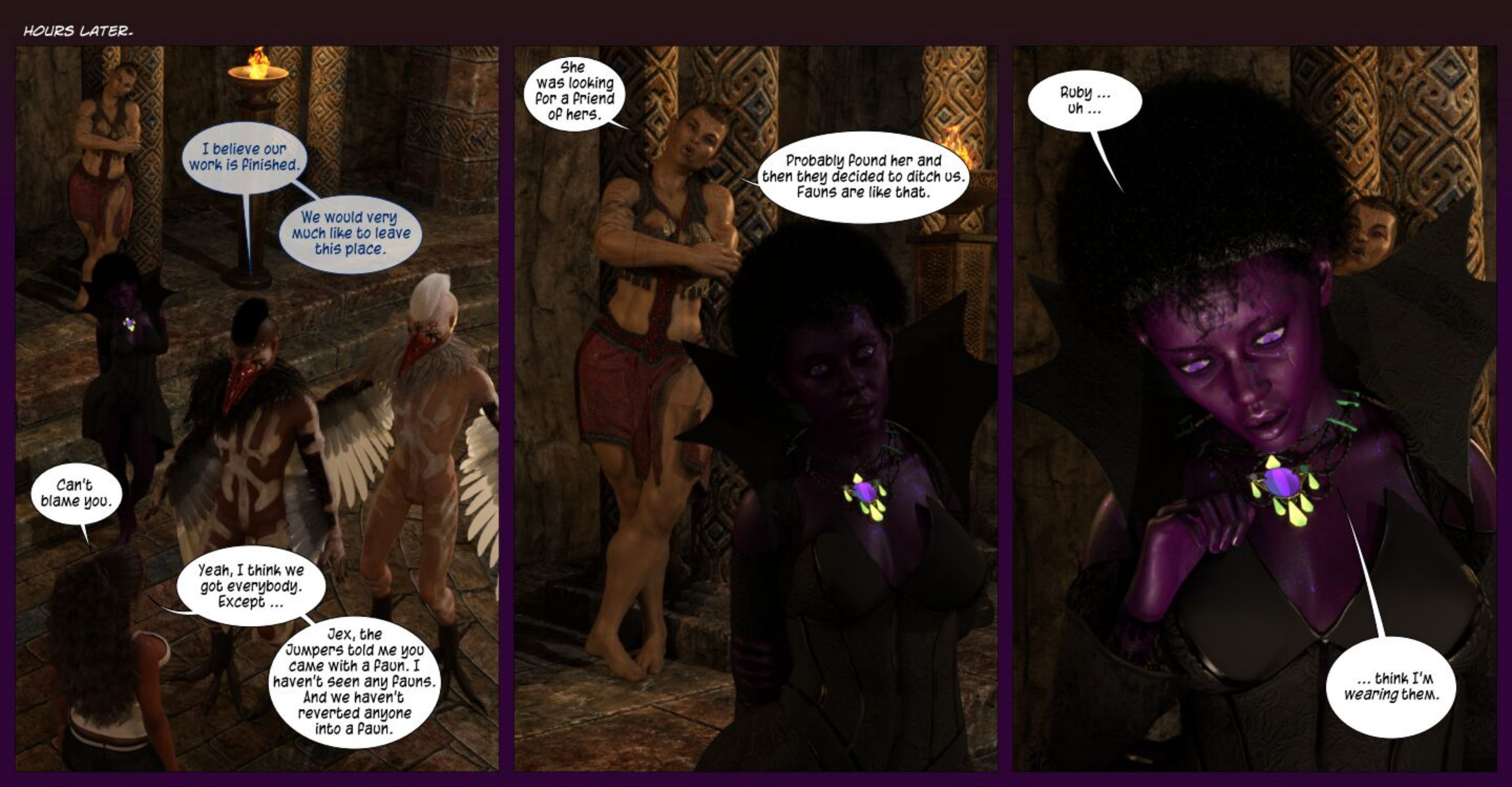
I was trying to rescue you.

You're an exile. You know perfectly well what that means.

I can't even be talking to you. If they found out ...

Liane ...

You should not have come.



HOURS LATER.

I believe our work is finished.

We would very much like to leave this place.

Can't blame you.

Yeah, I think we got everybody. Except ...

Jex, the Jumpers told me you came with a Paun. I haven't seen any Pauns. And we haven't reverted anyone into a Paun.

She was looking for a friend of hers.

Probably found her and then they decided to ditch us. Fauns are like that.

Ruby ... uh ...

... think I'm wearing them.



It is so. There are three forms here.

A very strong working.

Can you undo it?

Yes. But we will need a ritual. All must assist.



You all right? It won't hurt you. I don't think they'd do it if it would.

An't that.

Necklace on, can do things.

Necklace off, go back an't do none gain.



Leave them in it. They don't do anything but make trouble anyway.

An't style, Kala.

You know that.



AND SO ...



Thank you, Jex! For everything!

Nice seeing you again, Ruby!

C'mon, let's get out of here before they change their minds.

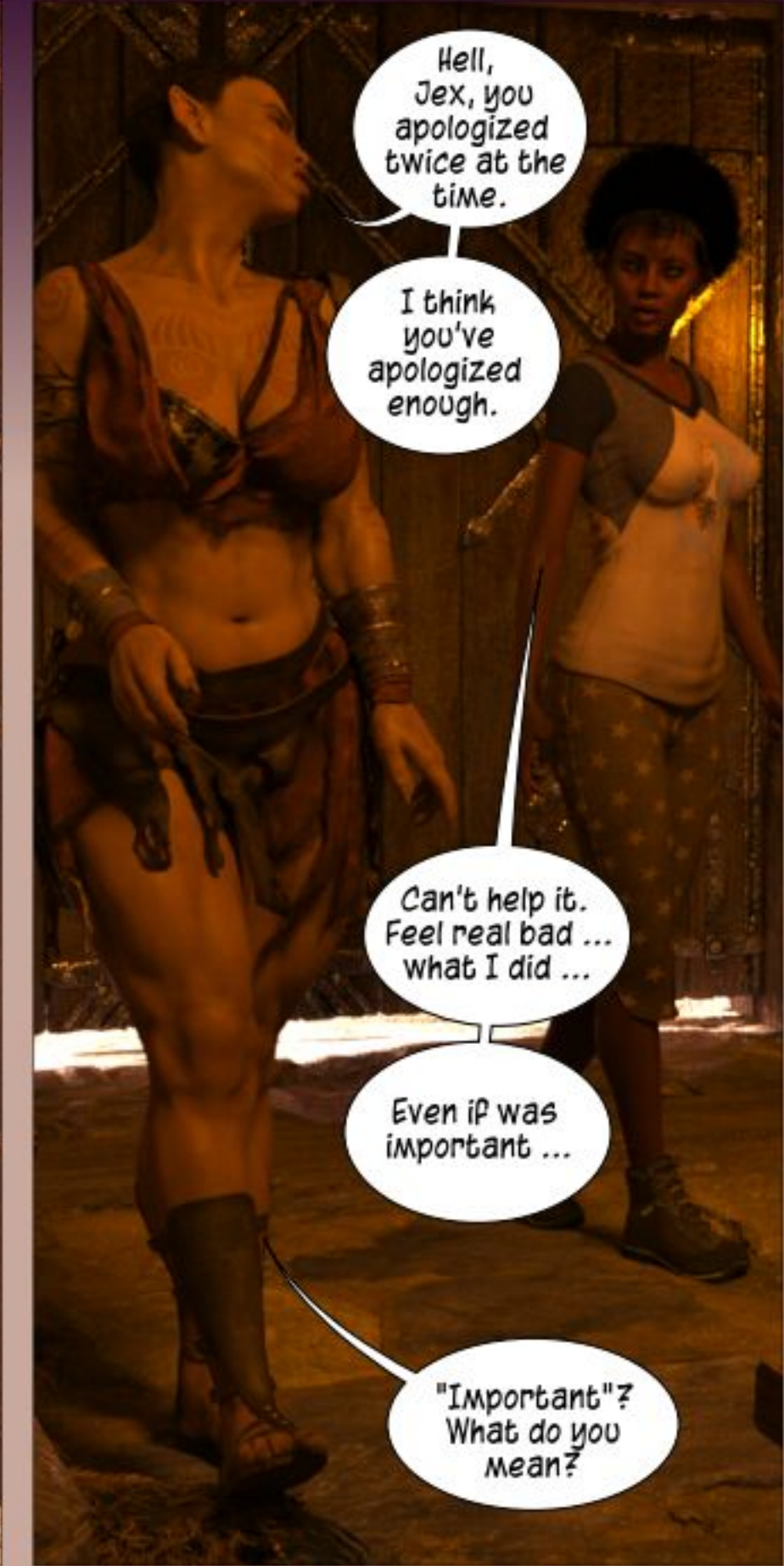
MEADOW KNOWS RUBY FROM THE "XENOMORPH" CLUB IN THE PRE-SPRUE DAYS, NOW GONE.

TWO EVENINGS AFTER THE DUST HAS SETTLED ON THESE EVENTS, JEX VISITS THE ORC VILLAGE, BLESSEDLY FAR FROM THE SWAMP.



Kala ...

... I'm so sorry.



Hell, Jex, you apologized twice at the time.

I think you've apologized enough.

Can't help it. Feel real bad ... what I did ...

Even if was important ...

"Important"? What do you mean?



Woke up after, felt so bad bout it, broke me right out.

Han't got head right, else.

Well, there, you see? Something good came of it.

I knew you weren't yourself. It's OK.

Honestly? Leaving off being controlled, it was fun. Couple of new experiences for me in there.

Which gave me some ideas ...



I thought maybe we could experiment, y'know, in better circumstances.

An't say no.



'Course ... -- uuhh! -- s'not something you'd want to do every day ...

-- OOOO -- ... An't sure bout that!

NEXT: GROUND MANEUVERS ... AND A FEW LOOSE ENDS.