



**SLEEPER SQUAD**

THE POPULATION OF THE YARDS MOSTLY LIVES IN ISOLATION OR IN VERY SMALL CLUMPS--VILLAGES OF TWO OR THREE HOMES. THERE ARE ONLY THREE TOWNS OF ANY SIZE (AND ONE OF THOSE DOES NOT PERMIT VISITORS). ONLY GRAYTOWER COULD BE CONSIDERED A "CITY"--BARELY.

And it's kind of a dump.

An't be snob.

Sorry.

I just don't get why if you can make a place anything you want, you'd choose this. We moved on Prom torches and fireplaces for a reason.

And your friend hasn't shown up like she was supposed to ...



Han't promise none. Might got else to do. Cries got all kinds pull goin on.

Told me where ask, so good enough.

I hope so. This is it?

Should.

If an't get lost comin.



Hey in there!

Anybody home?

... of course not. Why would I expect that?

Not one person in this whole fucking zone is where they're supposed to be ...

Leyna ...



Halt, damn you! You're not going to get away this time!

Shake tail, you two!

Oh, good, there's the crazy. I was starting to get worried.

Gon leave you an't quit pissin.

... Don't do that. I'm sorry.

At least whatever it is, it doesn't involve us.



Hey!

You two! State your business.

Lookin for some.

What kind of answer is that? I'll ask you one more time: why are you here?

I don't see how it's any concern of yours.

Two strangers who won't say what they're up to? It absolutely is. We're the City Watch.

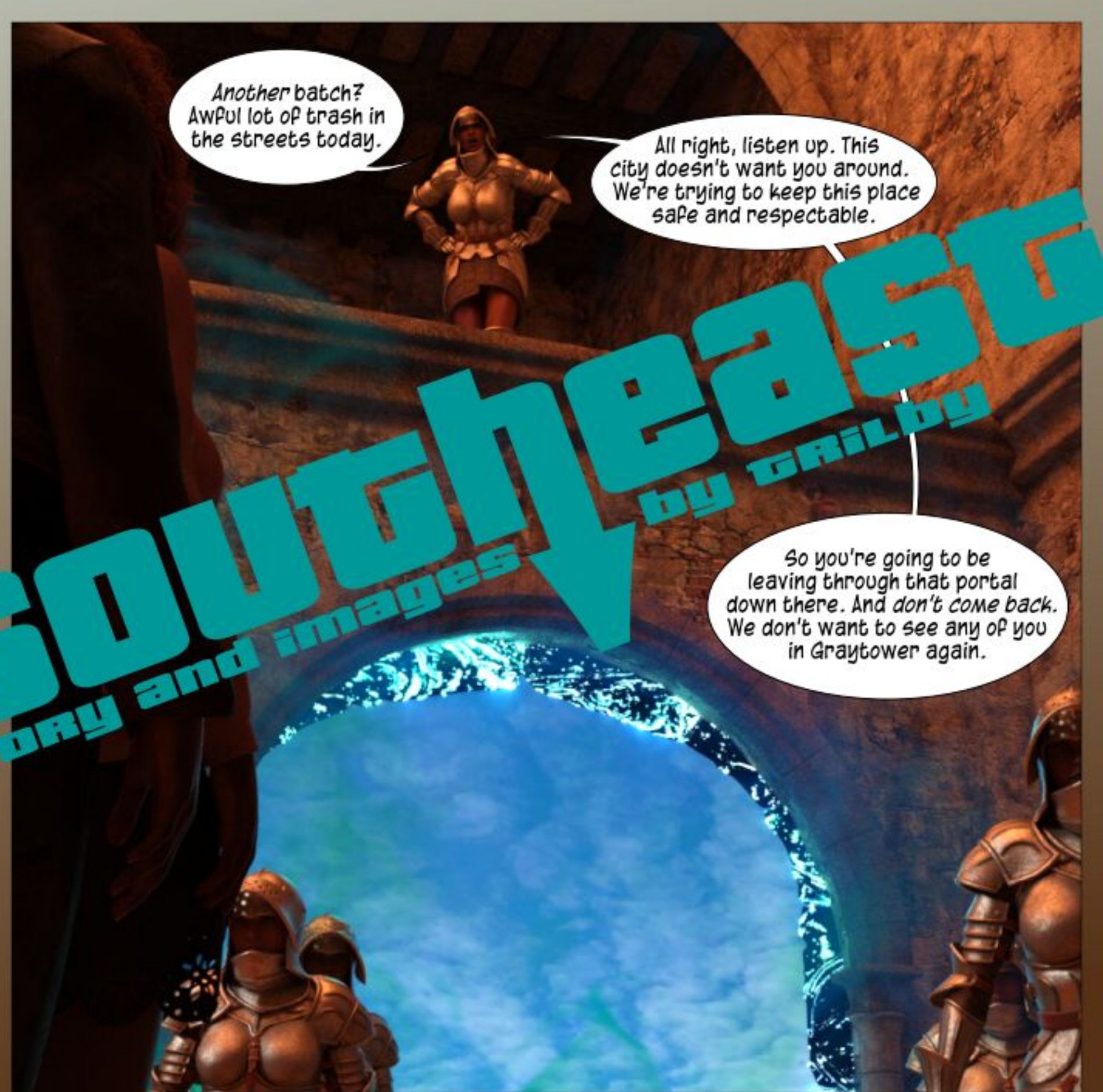
Come with us.



An't Peel crux.

If you mean "doesn't smell right," agree.

Let's go along with it for now. I want to see more first.



Another batch? Awful lot of trash in the streets today.

All right, listen up. This city doesn't want you around. We're trying to keep this place safe and respectable.

So you're going to be leaving through that portal down there. And don't come back. We don't want to see any of you in Graytower again.



Nah.

Nah.

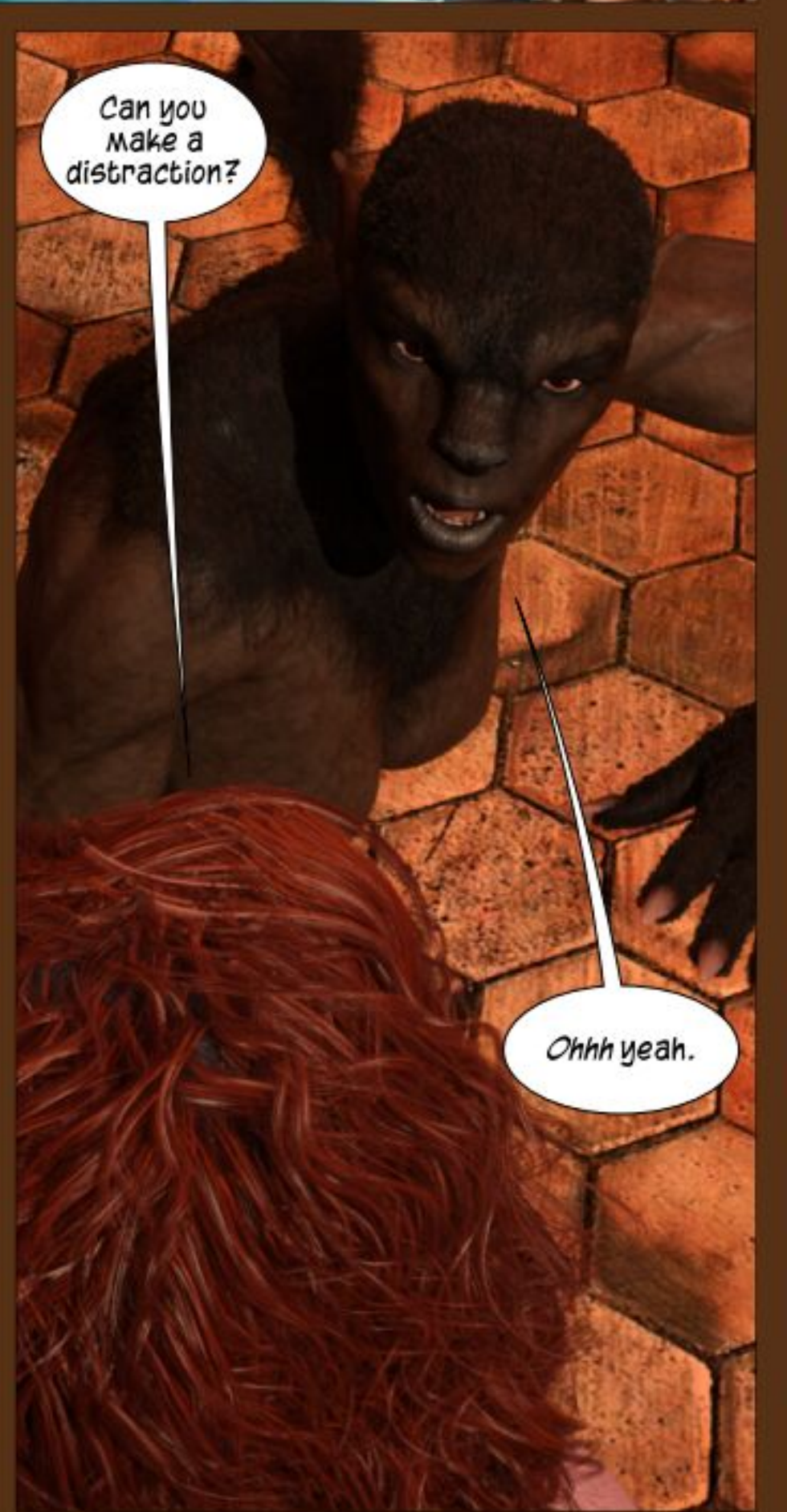
I live here, bitch!!



How many do you think you can handle?

Might none, all that stuPPP on ... break hand, more like ...

I've got something for that. I just need a minute to run the manifest.



Can you make a distraction?

Ohhh yeah.

**44 South by Southeast**  
story and images by GAILBY



WARRRROOOOWOOOO

AAAIGH!  
Filthy creature!

OK, here we go ...



Get oPP!  
Get oPP!!

whauuh?!



Nice!  
Big style.

upp

Thank you!  
And to think I wasn't sure  
what I was going to use it  
for when I made it.

AAA!



MEANWHILE, UPSTAIRS FROM THIS MAYHEM ...

All right, first oPP,  
there's no way in hell I'm  
going to listen to anything  
coming out of the mouth of a  
goddamned elf.

Second, you don't  
have a shred of  
authority here.

Neither do you!

Theoda's been searching  
around Por days, looking for  
any evidence that the "City  
Watch" is anything but a  
pigment of your  
imagination. She hasn't found it.  
Not a shred.

All you've got is a bunch of  
people in cheap armor you've  
managed to get to play along with  
whatever weird ideas you're  
working through.



This city  
needs to be  
cleansed!

It's overrun with  
criminals and witches, and all  
these horrible people who turn  
themselves halfway into animals ...  
Prawds ... predators ... we're  
going to make it safe for  
normal people ...

and ...



... what is  
going on  
down  
there?

They'd better  
not have gotten  
drunk and tried to  
do an indoor  
jousting tourney  
again ...

I need to go  
check on this. You  
two get the hell out  
of here.

Consider  
yourselves very  
lucky I'm not tossing  
you out of the city.  
This time.



Sorry.

AAUGH!



If it's any  
consolation, I  
was already  
planning on doing  
that to you  
anyway.



Ah!

I should have guessed.



I can always count on you to find trouble, Jex!

Slide Pound us.

These Pools aren't official. They're thugs who decided to shove anybody out they didn't like out of the city.

Their leader is going to be spending a little time as a Prog now.



Should I make the rest of them into Progs too?

I know --DOP-- something Paster.

Put me down!  
Hey!  
No!



This goes all the way to the

AAAAAAAAA!



ONCE THE DUST HAS SETTLED AND THE CITY WATCH HAS BEEN EVICTED ...

So where did that portal go?

Looked like the grasslands, but that could be ten minutes outside the city, or ten days. It'll still set them back a lot, especially if their leader can't un-Prog herself.

You know, you're a lot stronger than you look.

Mmm.

Cres, this is Leyna.

She an't usual hazzed. Han't like Yards none.



Don't understand the people? Or just too much weirdness?

Uh ... little of both? But mostly the second. Lot of weird here.

That's not completely fair. Some of the other zones are the same way. I hear things about Century.

I don't like going to Century either.

... and Serenity, quite a bit.

That's different. There, I can try to deal with it. Here, it's completely beyond my control.

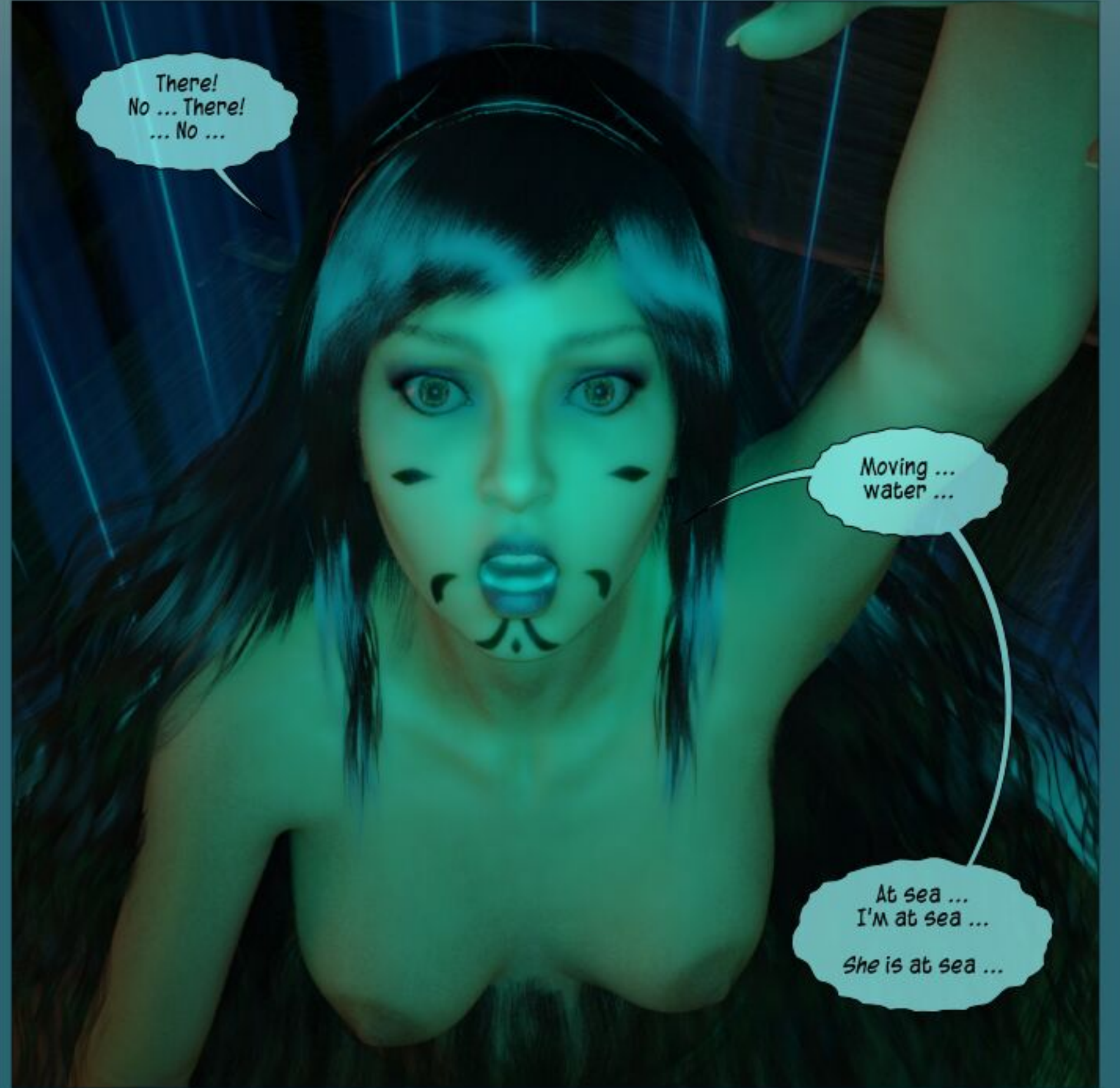
Hmm!

Anyway, this is Theoda. When we get back to her place, she'll try to locate Ruby.



Got take off clothes for it?

She says they distract her.



There!  
No ... There!  
... No ...

Moving ... water ...

At sea ...  
I'm at sea ...  
She is at sea ...



NOT TOO LONG A WHILE LATER ...





A BIT LATER.



We're far enough away. Want to stop and put on some clothes?

--hpf-- Please.

I'd better change shoes. Looks like we'll be doing more walking today than I thought.

I wish I knew what happened to Damson. If she's not there anymore, why leave up those defenses? And if they're not here, whose?

Maybe just can't want Polk around none now?

Well, she never really did ... but I thought I was an exception ...



You sure you don't want to put on something that'll ... fit in a little better?

I'm not going to dress like a refugee from a bad passive.

This is athletic wear. It's fine for a long walk.

It's just that ... there are only a few types of dresses in the Yards, and that's not any of them, so people aren't going to know what to make of you.

Jex isn't wearing Yards clothing either ...

But Jex is dressed like an adventurer. Adventurers wear all kinds of things. They also wear pants.

I don't wear pants.



So what's plan B?

There's a small village we should be able to reach on foot before it gets too dark.

I can't imagine they won't let us stay the night.

AND INDEED ...



To!

We got visitors!



Good you got in when you did. Just in time.

Yes. Travelling by night is not something I like to do.

That, yah, but also ... after nightfall, we likely wouldn't let you in.

We don't much open our doors after dark these days.

Why is that?



Ghosts.

Seriously?

Oh, I know how it sounds ... but take our word. They wander around all night.

Wouldn't be so bad, maybe, if they just did that ... but we've got Polk missin'. Used to be six of us here. Now we're three. Lura's wife got took last week.

Been thinkin' about clearin' out ... hate to leave the place, but who knows how long afore they get us as well?

A FEW HOURS LATER.



Won't be the best kip in the world, mind, but it's somethin'.

It'll be lovely, Clery.

We appreciate your hospitality--

Clery!!



Lura's out there!

She's chasin' the damn ghosts!



To!, you've got to fetch her!

What, and get taken too?

Lura! Come back! Don't follow them! You'll be taken for sure!



And what if I am?

I can't be without her! I dunna where she is, but I'm goin' there!

We'll come back from it together or we won't be comin' back, neither of us!



MORNING-



urgh



Oh, hey.



Can't believe I did that.

It must have been some kind of mental effect ... I've never panicked like that in my life, I don't think.

And now I haven't got a clue where I am ... or how to get back to the others ...

Hopefully they'll at least know how to get back to the cow village ...



Uh ... excuse me ...

Can you tell me how to--



SKRAWK!  
SKRAWK!  
SKRAWK!



Oh, dear.

SKRAWK!  
SKRAWK!

Wait ... I just ...



Don't mind Maggie.

Not only is she very stupid, she doesn't see strangers often.

Go back to weeding the potatoes, Maggie. It's all right.



She'll be a person someday, but she's got a long way to go yet.

Better than not ever being a person at all, though. So many aren't, you see.

... No, I don't think I do.

Well, I suppose that's not surprising. Come inside and I'll explain.

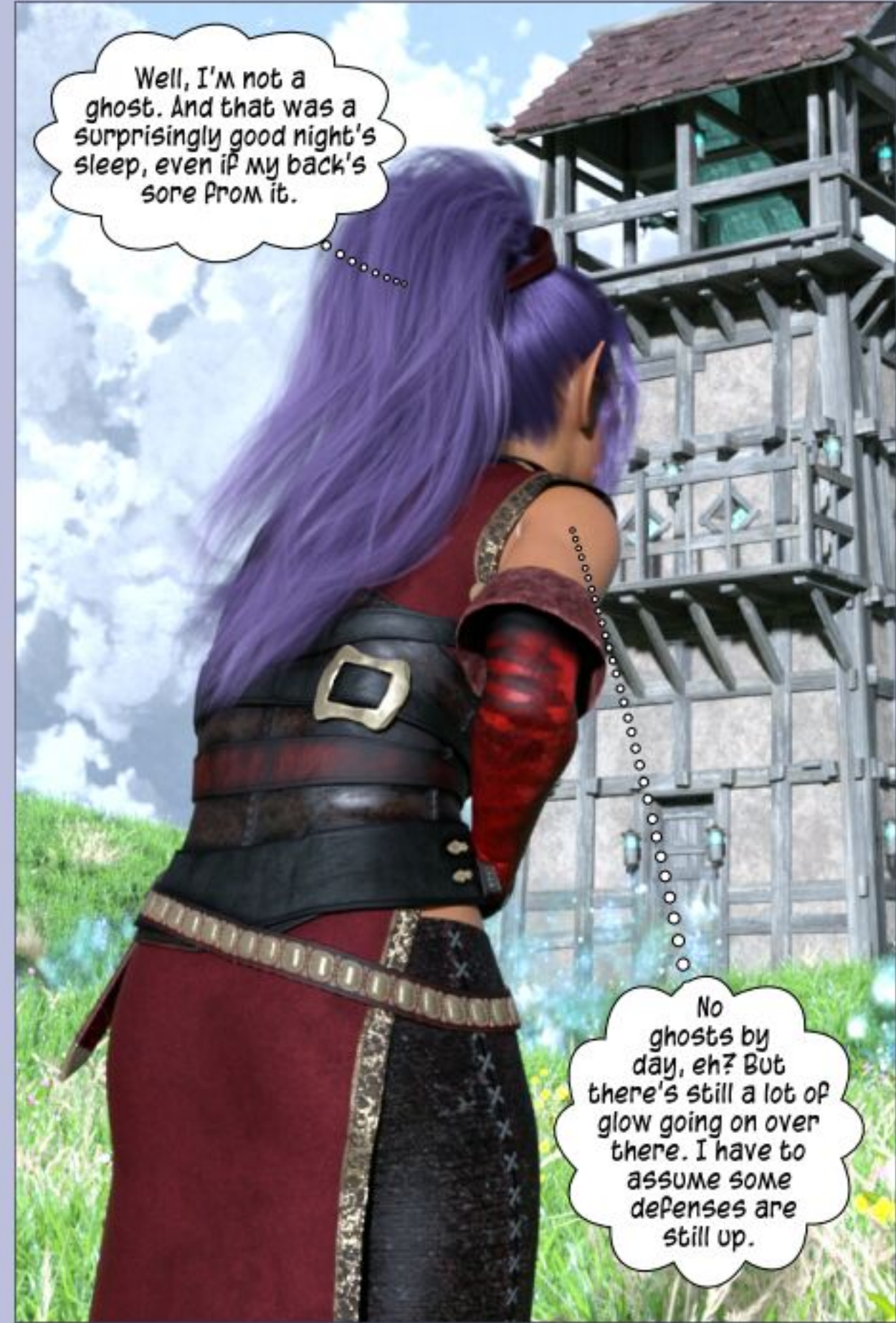


Hot out this morning. Are you thirsty? I just finished making a pitcher of lemonade.

MEANWHILE ...



urgh



Well, I'm not a ghost. And that was a surprisingly good night's sleep, even if my back's sore from it.

No ghosts by day, eh? But there's still a lot of glow going on over there. I have to assume some defenses are still up.



Hello, Lura.

You made it almost to the door. Not bad.





I'm ... I'm not taken?  
I'm not a ghost?

Doesn't seem so. What's the last thing you remember?

Went to the door ... 'twas locked ... was thinkin' to break it down, but then they were upon me ...



Might be another way in wherever these stairs lead.

If not, I'm going to climb a wall and go in at the top.

Stay put.



... hello?

I, ah, hate to just come in like this ... but you're--

She's gone!  
Damson's gone and I can't find her!  
I can't find her *anywhere!*  
I have to find her!  
I have to keep looking until I--

WHAT



Ghosts?  
I'm not sending any--

oh.

OK, that wasn't what was supposed to happen.

I've been trying to search for her mentally. Sending myself out. Uh ... I'm not sure how long now ... I've kind of lost track ...

... I need to know. Even if we're never together again, I need to know what happened to her.



You didn't have to do that.

The ghosts you're sending out are terrorizing the countryside.



Witch!  
What did you do with my wife? Where is she??

I--  
I don't know what you're--

Hold on, Lura. I don't think she had anything to do with it.

Greengage, this is Lura. Three people have gone missing from Lura's village, and they've been assuming your ghosts took them.



Well, if it weren't her, then where did they go, ey?

When did they start disappearing?

Near a month back. Not long after your ghosts came.

So about the same time as ... hm. Has anything else unusual happened in the area?

Nowt strange, no ... There's a new farm downroad a bit, come in about then ...

I think we should go pay them a call.

They might know something about Damson, as well.





Damn her and damn you!

WOAH!!

I will not fall to beasts!



Squeonk! Squonk!

You animals insist on coming to find me.

That's fine. I enjoy caring for livestock. And it gives you purpose.

But I don't have another mask ... I'll have to figure out what to do with you until I can--

oogh



THWACK!



Are you all right?

Was bout push her so hard ...

Eppn Plain Folk. An't like none.

Nobody does. From what I hear, they don't even like each other much.



Cows changed back. Why she han't? Mask?

Lura! You came to find me?

Of course! Did you think I wouldna?

Yes. But it's there ... I mean, it's on her face, it's just concealed ... I can peel the edges, even if I can't see them ...

... Ah! Here we go.



... if that's not the most humiliating thing that's ever happened to me, it's surely in the top three.

Believe me, I sympathize.



And I need a really long shower.

If I knew Plain Folk around, would have said some. Sorry.

I did warn you about approaching strange women.

... It didn't feel like I had any other good choices at the time.



What do we do about her?

Put pig mask on her. See what.

That's not a bad idea.

Most people don't have good resistance to their own magic. It could take her quite a while to shake it.

Speaking of shaking things off, what happened to the one in the bird mask?



Who's volunteering to go unmask her?

Me. Watch back.



Wh-- Greengage? Where are we? What's happened?

Damson!!

LATER, AFTER EVERYTHING IS CLEANED UP (INCLUDING LEYNA) ...



... It wasn't me! It was like I was somebody else ...

Which is probably why Greengage couldn't find you.

I think she was trying to convert you. I'm not sure, because I've never heard of one of them. Of doing that before. Mostly they just change people into animals.

I suppose, from her point of view, it was a compliment. She thought you were fit to become one of them. Of course, to do that, you'd have to stop being yourself ...



We're going to keep a close eye on her. We're also going to be watching out for the cow village. I feel like we owe them that.

I'm glad to hear it. I'll pass by when I can ... but for now, we've got to be moving.

We can make it to Lone Rock by sundown, if we work at it.

Even on horseback, we've got a long four days to Piertown.

That's if I can teach these two to not fall off a horse.



Well ... if you've got stops to make I can't help you, but if you're only going to Piertown ...

I can portal there. Would you like me to take you?

We would appreciate that very much, Greengage.

INTERLUDE.

**THE COBBLES.**  
IT'S A BIT EARLY FOR BAR TRAFFIC, AND IN FACT CUFF PURCELL'S ESTABLISHMENT ISN'T EVEN OPEN YET. BUT THESE AREN'T CUSTOMERS. THEY'RE BUSINESS ASSOCIATES.



Thanks, Jenny.

Not saying there's anything wrong with it ... I just think we might need something a little more ... flashy, y'know?

Yeah, see, the thing about this place, it's a dump, but my regulars like it like that.

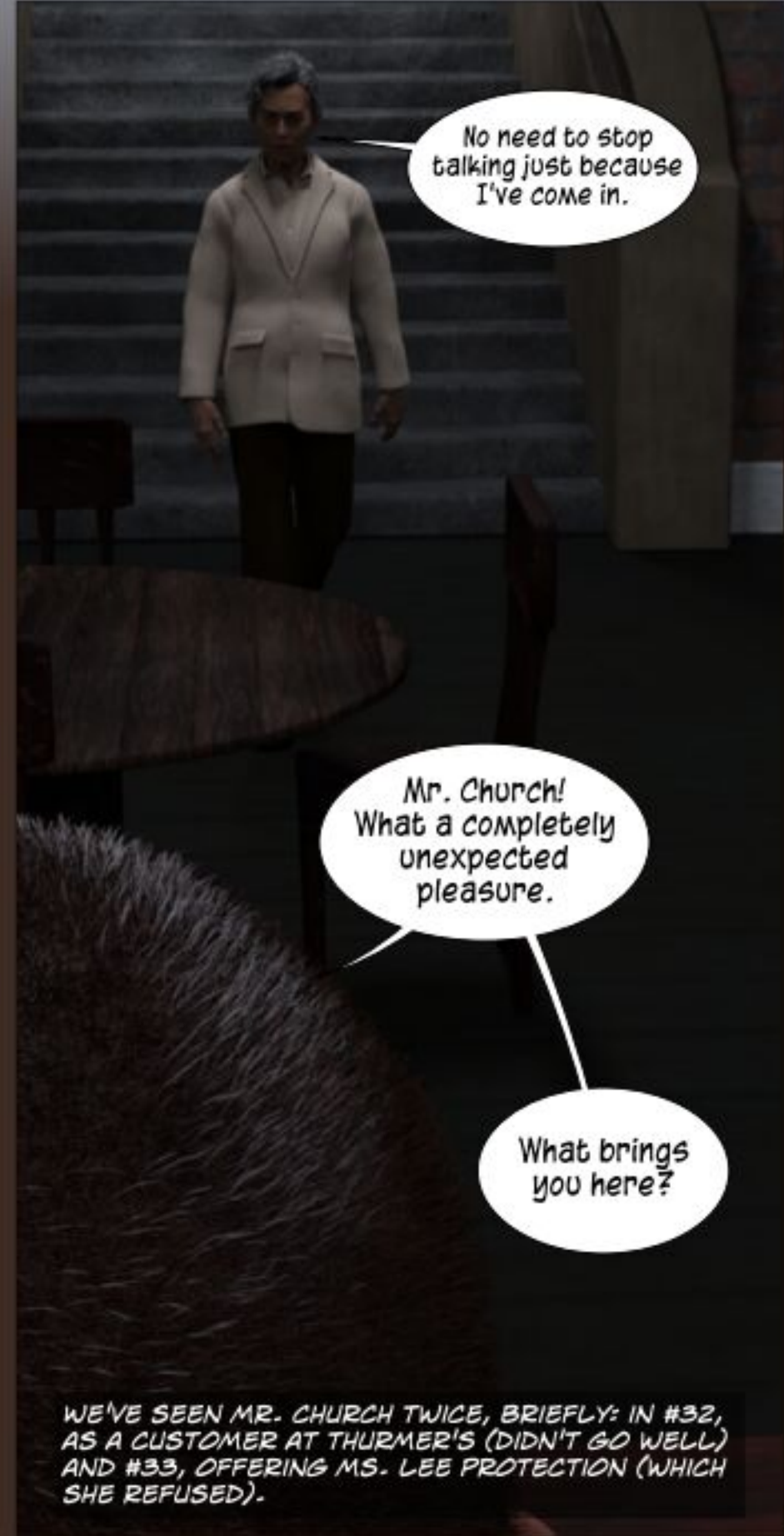
I'm already thinking the drug customers aren't the same crowd. I've seen the way they look around when they come in to buy. And the drinkers don't like them any more than they like the drinkers. What if we opened a second place? Something more shiny for the algos--



Well, shit. Look what just walked in.

I didn't think he'd ever set foot somewhere like this. Might get his shoes dirty.

Everybody be real polite, now.



No need to stop talking just because I've come in.

Mr. Church! What a completely unexpected pleasure.

What brings you here?

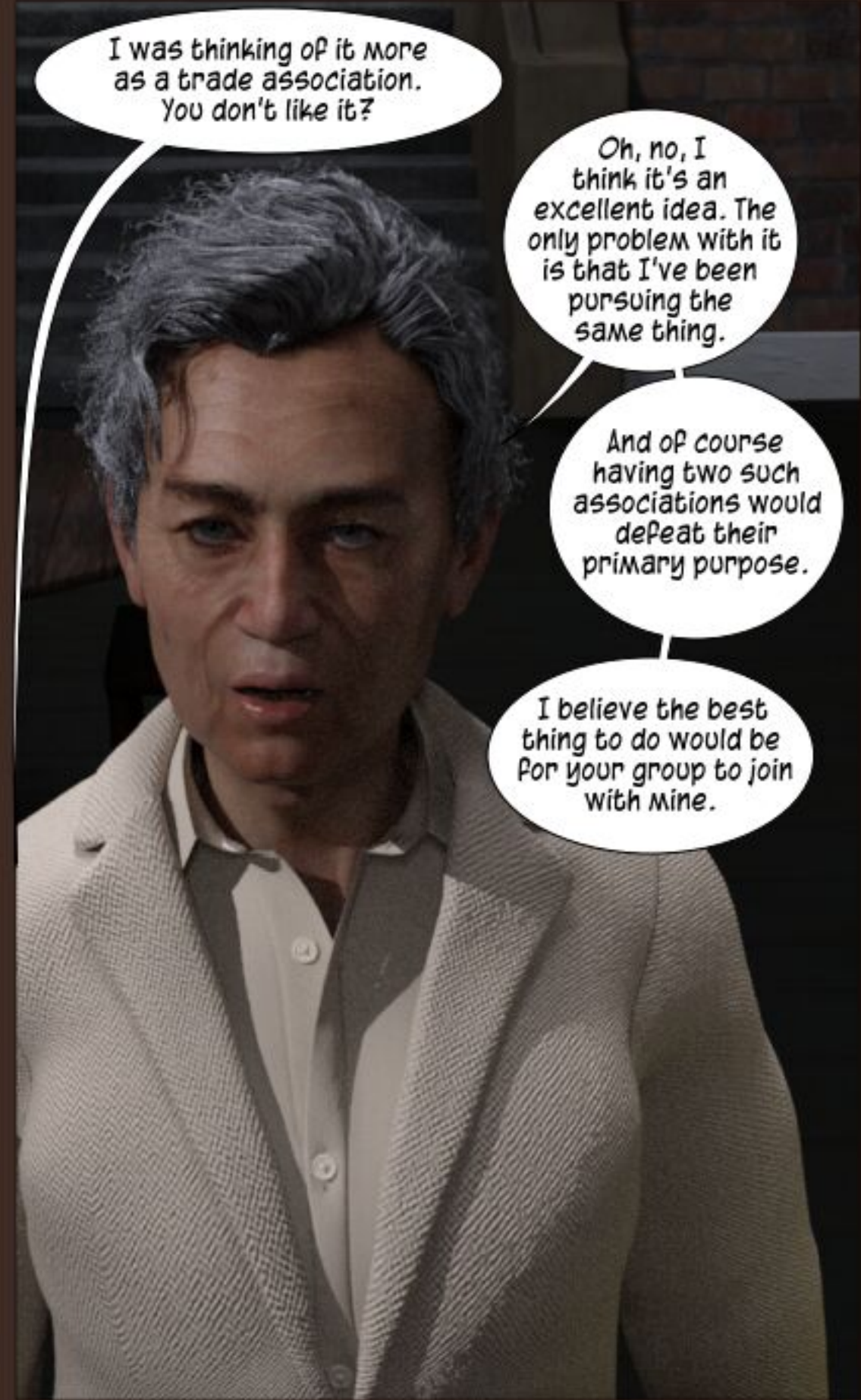
WE'VE SEEN MR. CHURCH TWICE, BRIEFLY: IN #32, AS A CUSTOMER AT THURMER'S (DIDN'T GO WELL) AND #33, OFFERING MS. LEE PROTECTION (WHICH SHE REFUSED).



May I offer you a beer, Mr. Church?

That's very kind of you, but no. I never drink before sunset.

So, Mr. Purcell, this is the little cartel you're forming for algorithmic drug sales?

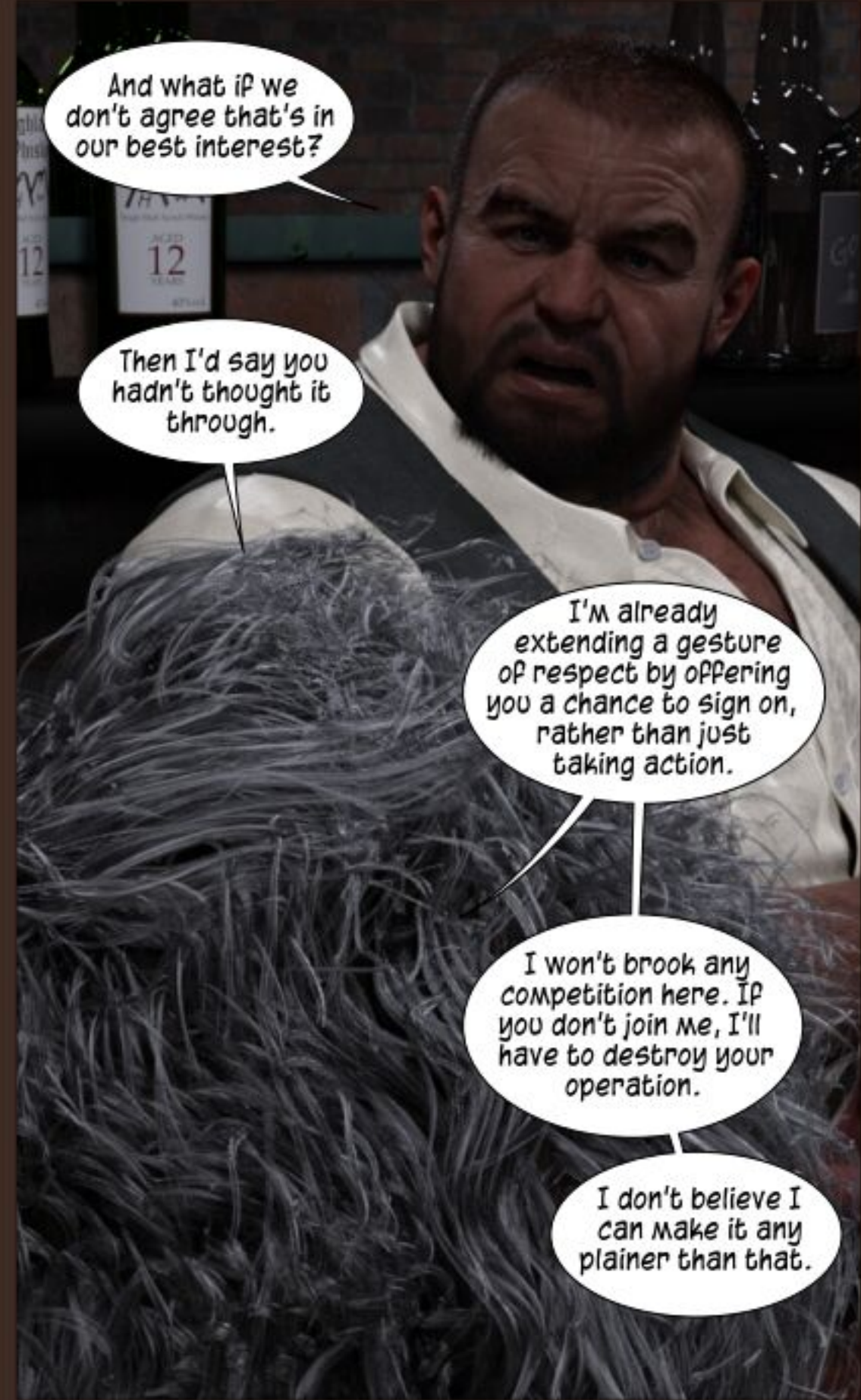


I was thinking of it more as a trade association. You don't like it?

Oh, no, I think it's an excellent idea. The only problem with it is that I've been pursuing the same thing.

And of course having two such associations would defeat their primary purpose.

I believe the best thing to do would be for your group to join with mine.



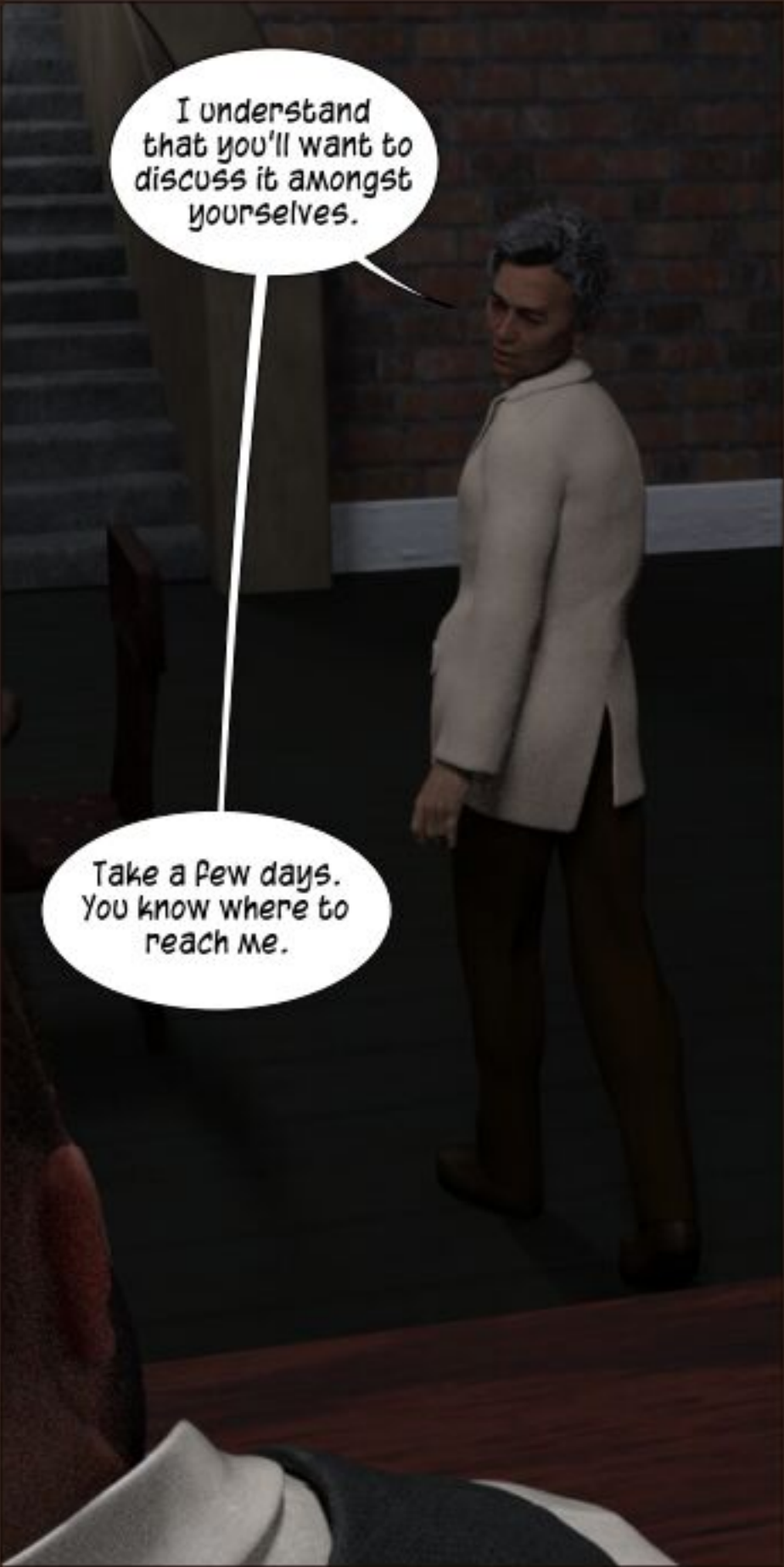
And what if we don't agree that's in our best interest?

Then I'd say you hadn't thought it through.

I'm already extending a gesture of respect by offering you a chance to sign on, rather than just taking action.

I won't brook any competition here. If you don't join me, I'll have to destroy your operation.

I don't believe I can make it any plainer than that.



I understand that you'll want to discuss it amongst yourselves.

Take a few days. You know where to reach me.



So that's Mr. Church. I didn't know he was so tiny.

What do we think of his offer?

Is that what it was?

I don't like being told what to do. And anything where you work with him, he's going to be the only one running it, no matter what he promises.

Trouble is, he's real bad to cross. He may not look like much, but he gets what he wants, and he'll do anything he needs to do to get it.

If we don't go along with him, I don't know if we can keep him from shutting us down.



I think I know how we can do it.

But it'll be a lot. And we'll all have to be invisible, for a while.

You want to lie low? What would we be waiting out?

Not exactly. Yes, we'll have to lie low, but it won't be waiting. I have something else in mind.



Well, that certainly made everything easier.

Glad han't have learn ride horse.

Now the question is, how long will it take us to find Theora?

AS IT TURNS OUT, QUITE A WHILE.



Why do you want to know?

Look, we've been all over town for hours now. Nobody knows anything. Finally somebody said she might be here. You're the only hint we've got ...

Yes, but why do you want to know?

We need her to find a friend of ours.

Oh, it's work, then!

Good. She needs to pay her bar tab.

Table in the back corner.



Theora?

Do I look like Theora?

I have no idea. I don't know what Theora looks like.

Why are you looking for her?

Does she have people after her or something? We need her to find someone.



Hey! Theora!

Get up! You've got a customer.

ugh

Go away.

Your sister said you were the person to talk to.

My sister? Go away twice.

You don't want the work?

Not in the mood.

I'll pay your bar tab.

... Who are you looking for?



There's nothing in this pucking mug ...

You drank it all, remember?

-- sigh -- I'll buy you another. Hang on.



-- glug --  
-- glug --  
-- glug --

... That's better. --urp--

Ruby Martinez.

Comin' right up.



She is ... she is ... uh ...

Here? No ... that's not right ...

I'm at sea ... she's at sea ... no, except ... This is very confusing ...

Under red? Under rose? I don't understand ...



I don't have enough. She's in the area, but "area" covers a lot here. Could be in port, could be way the hell out in the ocean.

Would you do better if you weren't drunk?

Leyna!!

Being kinda wasted actually makes it work better, I'll have you know.

I'm sorry. It's just ... that's the same information we got before. We were hoping that once we got closer to her, we could get something more specific.

Well, it's not my fault. Something's obscuring her. I get a signal about how she's "under red" or "under rose."

I have no idea what that means.



"Under rose" ... Hey, your friend didn't sign on with Damask Rose, did she?

Or got captured by her.

Who's Damask Rose?

Trouble, probably. Most of the pirates are just having fun ... you know, they fight, they drink, they patch everything up the next day and do it again ... but not with her. The rest of them don't like her.

How would we find her?

You won't, here. I don't think I've seen her come into port in years. She's got a hideout at sea. Island or something. You'd have to get one of the other pirate crews to take you.

Hmm. And since the other pirates don't like her, it's going to be impossible to talk them into that?

Maybe not. I can think of one who's crazy enough to do it.



I'm telling you, musclehead, I didn't do that!

Don't feed me any of your shit!

You might have some trouble talking to her right this minute, though.



Pol Ramsey's the one did that, and ye know it. I've better things to do with my time than make you look a fool.

Besides, ye do Pine at it all on yer own.

You see? This is the kind of --

You've been asking for a beating for years, you salt-nosed bitch! And now you're going to get one!



Ramsey told me you put him up to it.

... as soon as he got his face back together enough to talk again.

Ah, the subtle approach we've all come to expect from you.

The Rega Method: just beat the everlovin' tar out of everything and don't think too hard.

Not that you could think hard if your life depended on it.

That's it! Stand up so I can knock you across the table properly!

-- ahem --



You're interrupting a private conversation.

Can't be all that private; the whole house can hear it.

We have business with her. You want to break her into little pieces, you'll need to do it some other time.

That so? I don't know who you are, but--



-- getting real tired of bitches giving me shit!

Hey!

THWOCK

OW!!



Push her, got push me, pisser!

WHHHD

huk

Grab her!



-- uph -- That rightup all you got? Weak.

Bigass orc talk, then han't throw for shit.

FWAY

-- rrrgh --

Oh, you want a real fight, huh? You got it!!



Enough, Regal!

I'll shake you till your fucking teeth fall out!

-- hrk --



Enough of you? Damn right!

wagh!

THWACK

Haul off, heh!

-- ork --

YAAAAAA!

Whoa!



Han't know when done?

THWOP



Got no more time for crazy-ass bitches.

Ever makes you feel good bout it, pisser!

Jex ... I love your nerve, but ... three orcs?

Had throw with orcs Pore. Can't fight none, like every else here. Just big is all.



Not sure if ye lubbers are brave or daft ...

Prob both. You all right?

Well ... whatever the reason, you have my gratitude.

Cap'n Amelia, of the Melancholy. That's Carmina over there, sitting it out.

I'm Leyna. Jex is the one with the Pists of death, and the other's Cres.

I'm glad to hear about your gratitude, because we need to ask you for something you might not like much.



We're trying to find a missing friend. We have reason to believe she might be in the company ... or, ah, in the custody ... of Damask Rose.

We need someone to take us out to her.



... You're not joking, are you?

But ye should be.

Nay. I'm in your debt, for sure, but that only goes so far.

We can pay you--



And ye damned well would pay. You'd pay if I took you anywhere.

But there's not enough coin in the world to pay that fare. Might as well beg passage to hell.

'Sides, if your friend's with the Rose, you won't be getting her back. I'd bet my ship on it.

My advice is belay that foolishness and go have a drink. Or five.



We'll have to start asking around for other ships tomorrow. -- sigh --

Do you have any rooms available?

How many do you want?

Three.

Two.

... two.

Have you got anything to drink besides ale?

Oh, sure! Wine, whiskey ... what would you like?

Whiskey. And give these two whatever they want.



You OK?

No.

I ... think I should go back to Serenity. You two will have an easier time finding Ruby without me here.

Han't dare!



Jex ...

Look, I'm a liability. I'm not good at this. All I've done so far is get into trouble. Got tangled with that weird woman ... got you into a fight that turned out to be a waste of time ... pissed off everybody right and left ...

An't the point.

This your push. You want find Ruby. Han't start some then not stay. An't gon clean up your slide.

Also Ruby loses shit cause han't want be find, gon throw with you, not me.



hrm.

Well, I appreciate your sticking with me, anyway. I sure couldn't do it by myself.

Cres, that goes even more for you, since this isn't even remotely your problem. Also since it's got to be a little difficult for you.

Have you explained to Jex how strange it is for an elf to be seen anywhere?

Ah ... it hasn't come up. I sort of assumed she knew ...

An't know none. Elves han't get out much?

We are ... well ... It's never actually been said that we're forbidden to leave the Citadel, but in practice ...

It's never even been confirmed to anyone else officially that the Citadel exists, I'm told.

How are you allowed to circulate? Are you very special, or are you non grata?



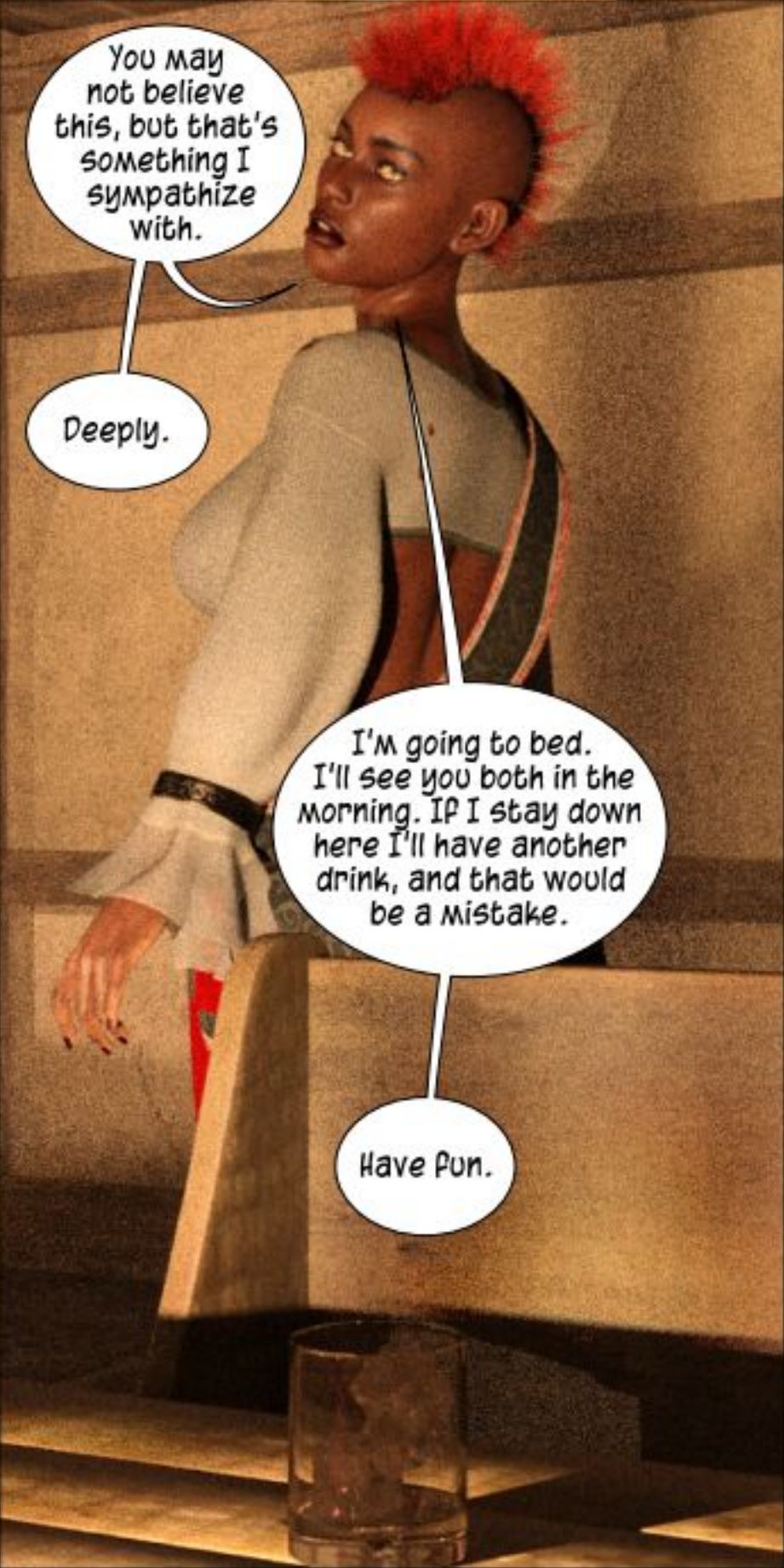
The latter.

I've been exiled. None of my people will so much as speak to me. Jex remembers Liane, the one I was trying to rescue in the swamp. \* Though I may never have told you her name.

Liane and I were ... very close, once. I thought that might have made a difference. Apparently not.

Now I suppose I'm casting about for an identity.

\* IN #37.

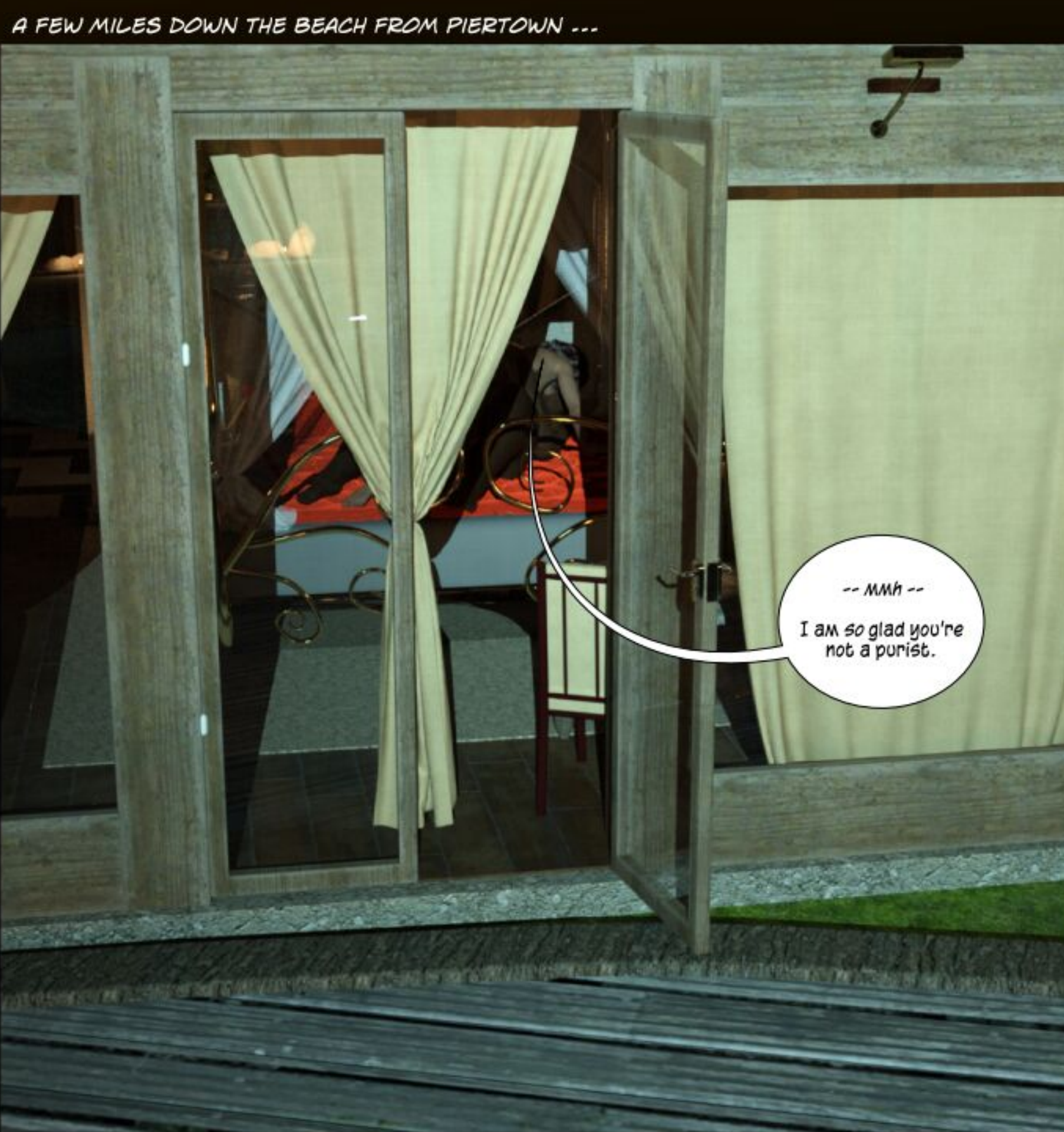


You may not believe this, but that's something I sympathize with.

Deeply.

I'm going to bed. I'll see you both in the morning. If I stay down here I'll have another drink, and that would be a mistake.

Have fun.



A FEW MILES DOWN THE BEACH FROM PIERTOWN ...

-- Mmh --

I am so glad you're not a purist.



What, you mean the resort? The beds are just as comfortable in Piertown, you know.

I don't think anybody's that much of a purist. I've been in hovels in the grasslands where they didn't allow themselves plumbing ... but, by heaven, they had large, soft beds. Every time.

It was mostly the plumbing I was thinking about. I had been dying for a proper bath.

Don't like the shipboard facilities?

Of course I do, but you have to admit a bucket of salt water leaves a lot to be desired.

Heh. That's the lifestyle, love. Spend enough time at sea to look forward to port, then spend just long enough in port to want to go back out to sea.



You don't seem too unhappy with it.

I'm not. Who knows in a few months, but for now ...

Do you ever get tired of it? You've been doing this for a long time.

I never get tired of the sea.

I get tired of some of the other parts. Being captain. Having to take care of people. Having to be ... well ... feeling like I have responsibilities.

But I can't run the ship alone.



Speaking of responsibility ...

I've been giving thought to what happened in the inn this evening ... and I've come to believe I've done the wrong thing.

... You have?





Whoa!

Might have had a too little much ... a too much ... You know what I mean.

Should have done like Leyna ...

Leyna might had too much too. Han't none seen her drink sliv Pore. Just wine, one time.

Hmm. And she gulped it. You think she's OK?

Han't sure with Leyna. An't think she's happy much.

Wants things right way. Han't like when none else wants make that only thing ever do, same she does.



I must be drunk, I understood that.

I don't know, I'm kind of with Leyna. There's so many bad things that happen, and no one else seems very interested in trying to do anything about them ...

An't crux tho! Want Pix things. Ruby too. Lot Polk.

Just han't want do it all time.

Got do Pun stuff too. You know that.

... Yes. Gotten in trouble for it.



That why you got toss from elves?

... Sorry. An't want say, all good. Not my pull.

Oh, I don't mind telling you ... but not right now, all right?

We should have a long talk one day soon. I've got some questions myself. You've encountered the Plain Folk before ... you've been in Fights with orcs ...

An't all that. Tell you if you want.

Well, not right now. Right now I want to get back in the mood so we can have some Pun, especially while I've still got some of this drunk on.



ugh!

Course if you ... uhhh ... keep doing that ... mood's not going to be a problem ...

uuuahhhhh!



I notice you let her dress you up her way today ...

It looks good on her!

And somebody who Fights like she does can make use of armguards.

See you doin up too tho.

Ah, well ... I thought it might improve our chances of getting a ride if I looked like I fit in here a bit better.

Wan't sure gon change hair back.

I considered keeping it for a little while. It was interesting, but I don't think that look works for me.



Ahoy, there!

Well, well.



I was a bit hasty yesterday.

Now, I need ye to understand: Damask Rose is trouble. There's good reason none of the rest of us go near. And I might get you close and send you the rest of the way in a dinghy.

But if you're game even knowing the danger, I'll take you out.

Still going to charge you for it, mind.



We're still game.

If you don't mind my asking, though: What made you change your mind?

Maybe I don't like to see Polks stranded.

Maybe I want you to find your friend.

Or maybe I just think it'll be some excitement. Hell, I don't know what goes on in my own head half the time.

Get your things if you've got any. I want to make sail in an hour.



You look like you've never seen the ocean before.

Har't.

Do you like it?

Yeah.

S'big tho. How we han't get lost?

Oh, the captain's got all kinds of boys for that.

Been becalmed a couple of times, but I don't think we've ever gotten lost.



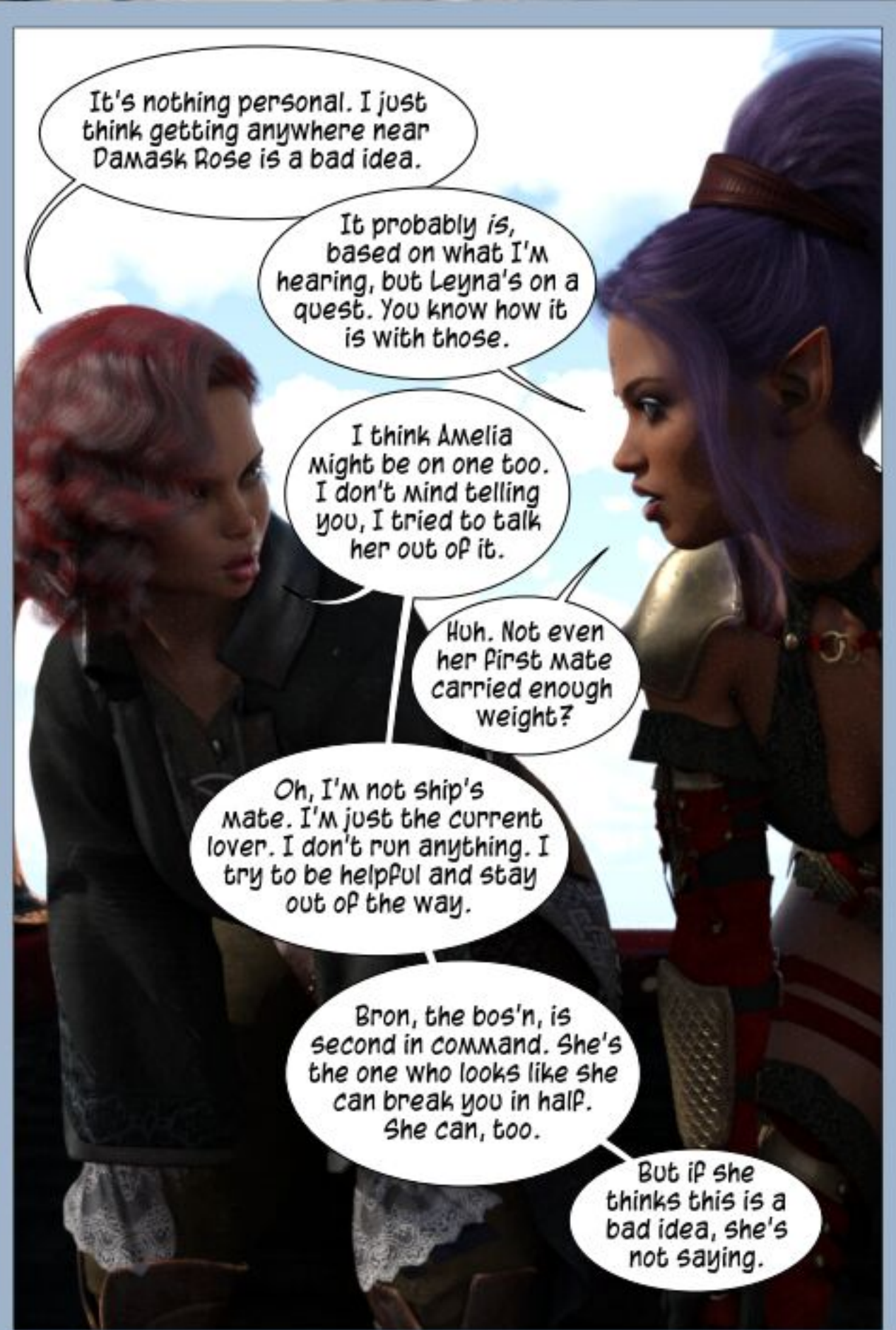
But you're not really pirates, though. I mean, there's nothing to plunder.

Nay. Just sounds better.

We're all out here because we love the life, but we don't do much. Wander about, have a battle or two ... sometimes carry passengers, there are a few islands ...

"Pirates" is better than "vagabonds," don't you think?

I don't know, "vagabonds" has a certain charm.



It's nothing personal. I just think getting anywhere near Damask Rose is a bad idea.

It probably is, based on what I'm hearing, but Leyna's on a quest. You know how it is with those.

I think Amelia might be on one too. I don't mind telling you, I tried to talk her out of it.

Huh. Not even her first mate carried enough weight?

Oh, I'm not ship's mate. I'm just the current lover. I don't run anything. I try to be helpful and stay out of the way.

Bron, the bos'n, is second in command. She's the one who looks like she can break you in half. She can, too.

But if she thinks this is a bad idea, she's not saying.



Ship out there?

Well spotted! Hard to see in the sun like that.

Ship to Port starboard, Cap'n!



Aye, I see her.

Sing out if you see her turn. We don't want any today.

Probably the Endeavour. Right rigging for her.

Doesn't look like she wants a fight.

She might well, but she'd have trouble getting in range. Wind's not with her.

I can close on her ... but I won't get in a battle with passengers aboard, not if I can help it.

But you would if we weren't here?

Might. If I Pelt inclined.

A FEW HOURS LATER ...



All right, we've got clear seas and I think this wind'll hold all night.

Light the lamps and let's see about a meal and a drink.

Let's have Corgan on first watch.

Aye, Cap'n.



So you mostly stay below deck?

Yes ... I'm the cook, Poremost, that's why they call me Mess. Also the medic, and ... well,

I think you asked something nosy, Leyna!

Sorry! I just like to know what's what.

No, no, it's Pine! I'm ... I also try to keep the crew ... entertained.



Been sunk??

Oh, aye! Three times now. Easier to just manifest the ship again, back in port, so the wrecks are still down there, somewhere.

How get back to port if none ship? Big swim ...

We have rules. If you sink somebody, you've got a responsibility to carry them to some landfall. You don't just leave them floating in the ocean.

Folk all play nice tho?

Amazingly, yes.

Mostly.



Hey, Peri, Curgan's on watch ... I'll flip you Por Mess ...

Ooh, Curgan will be upset he missed his turn!

Maybe I'll console him after the watch change.



All yours, Bron! I'm going to go find out some things about Jex here.

Cap! ... Aright.

Be nice to our guest, now, Peri!

Aye, aye, Cap'n!



Cres might gon hazzed some ...

Cres is going to see you a lot more, though, isn't she?

I might only get the one chance.



Gon cusk on that??

Fall off!

No, you won't! You just have to be a little carePul.

Besides, I bet you have great balance. I've seen how you move.



ohhh!!



Are you OK?

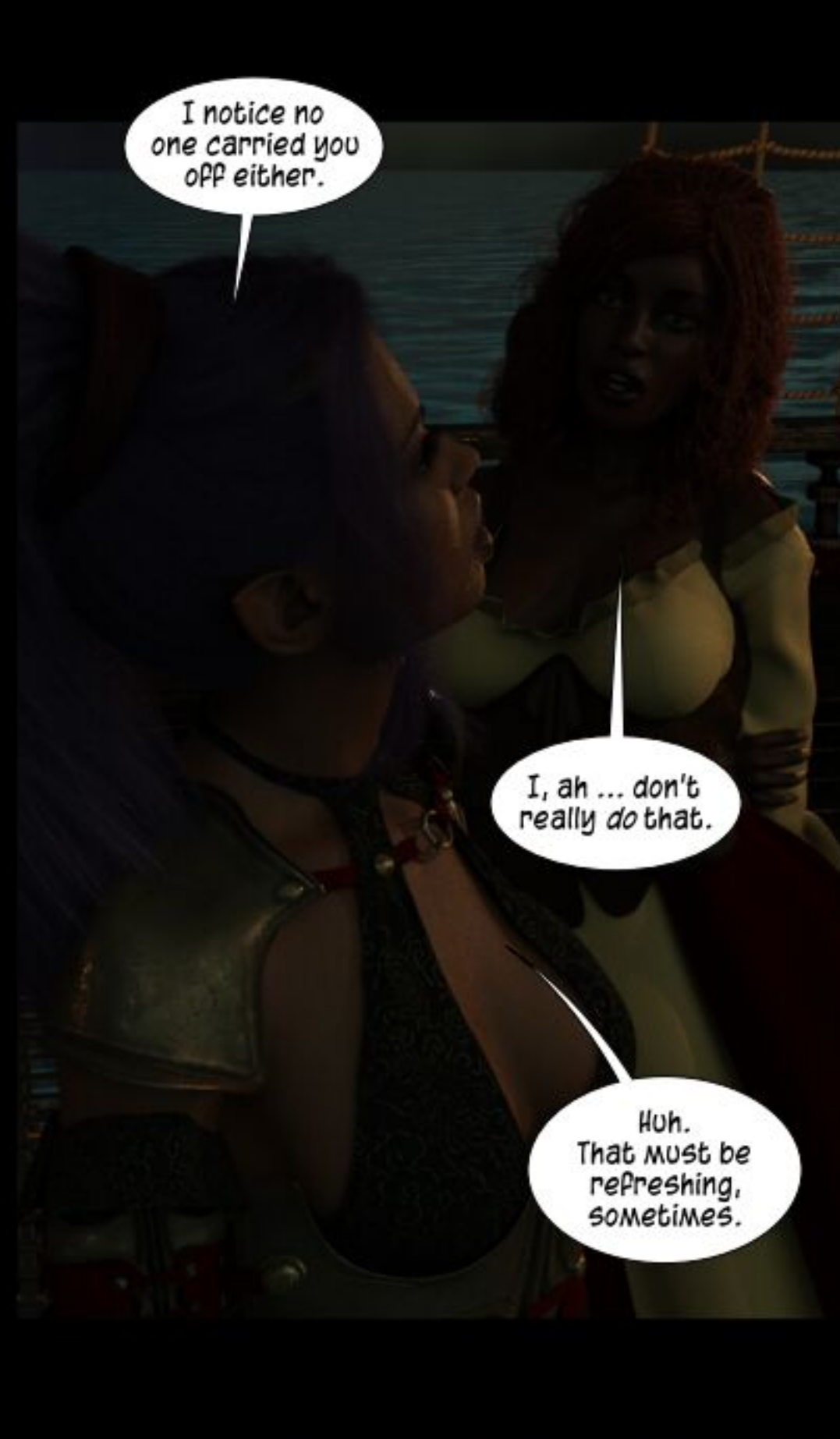
... Mostly.

Oh, no, that doesn't bother me at all. I hope she's having Pun.

But you'll notice no one carried me off. Nobody wants to have anything to do with the eIF.

They either think we have bad attitudes--which, honestly, many of us do--or they're scared of us. Or both.

I don't think Jex meant to hurt your feelings ... she got carried away. So to speak.



I notice no one carried you off either.

I, ah ... don't really do that.

Huh. That must be refreshing, sometimes.



**BOOM!**

YAAA!

It has its ups and--

Ring the bell! All hands! We're under fire!

Shit!!

It's the Endeavour! She's running dark! I didn't see her till she was on us!

Curgan, get below and open fire! Anybody who can, go load for him!



Get below, lubber! You want to catch a cannonball?

Peri! Get a bail rig and put out that fire!



Ooaaah!



Yeow!

Really putting their backs into it tonight.

Went to a lot of trouble for it, too. I think Cap'n Britten might be peeved with us.

Wind's not with us, I can't maneuver away. Can't even manage not to show them our broad side ...



Would it help to tell them we've got passengers?

Probably not ... but that gives me an idea.

Go fetch my horn, would ye?

Ahoy, Endeavour! We're committed to take some passengers to Damask Rose!

You know the rules. If you sink us, you have to take them!



... I didn't expect that to work.

Makes you think, eh?

Make the rounds and bring me a damage report.



No breach. Couple of spots I'll have patched up by dawn.

And some scorch marks on the deck.

Personnel?

Nobody hurt. Well, not seriously. Peri brushed up against a hot cannon. I'm sure someone will kiss it and make it better.

But--

Where's Leyna?





Well, that can't be them ... it's too old.



So it sounds like you know Cap'n Amelia?

Oh yes! Most of us who live around here know the pirates pretty well.

They're good people. They mess with us a little, but it's just Pun. We like them.

... Well, except for one.

Damask Rose?

Oh, they told you about her, huh? Yeah. Nobody likes her.



Unfortunately, she's where we're sailing to.

We think she has a friend of ours and we're going to try to get her back.

Ooh! That's rough.



You'll probably have to take care of Rose to get your friend back, you know.

Course, if you do, everybody will be thrilled ...

A LONG SWIM LATER, AS DAWN IS DAWNING ...



There she is!

Huh. Either we swim a lot faster than I thought or she sails a lot slower.

Barra, I can't thank you enough for doing all this ...



-- SMOOCH -- It was Pun!

Come visit sometime. You're even cuter with a tail.



You're sure? Come a long way to turn back ... I'm tellin' ye, she'll be fine. She'll either recall or one of the mermaids'll find her ...

An't that.

This Leyna's pull. Han't got her, han't got none. Ruby might an't want be found. Only lookin cause--

Can I get a little help here?



Leyna!

... New look! Hot.

Yeah, yeah ...

Ahoy, Cap'n! I think you lost something!

Ahoy, Barra! Thanks for bringing her back.



Are we still on course? You didn't decide to turn around, did you?

We're still on. Should be there in a few hours.

You're dedicated, I give you that. But you're going to have a hard time making landfall ...

The tail's supposed to go away in a moment, now that I'm out of the water.



There.

Now I suppose I have to figure out some fresh clothes.

Let me help you with that. I have some ideas.

... OK, but I still don't wear pants.

A FEW HOURS LATER, AS PROPHECIED ...



Well, there you are.

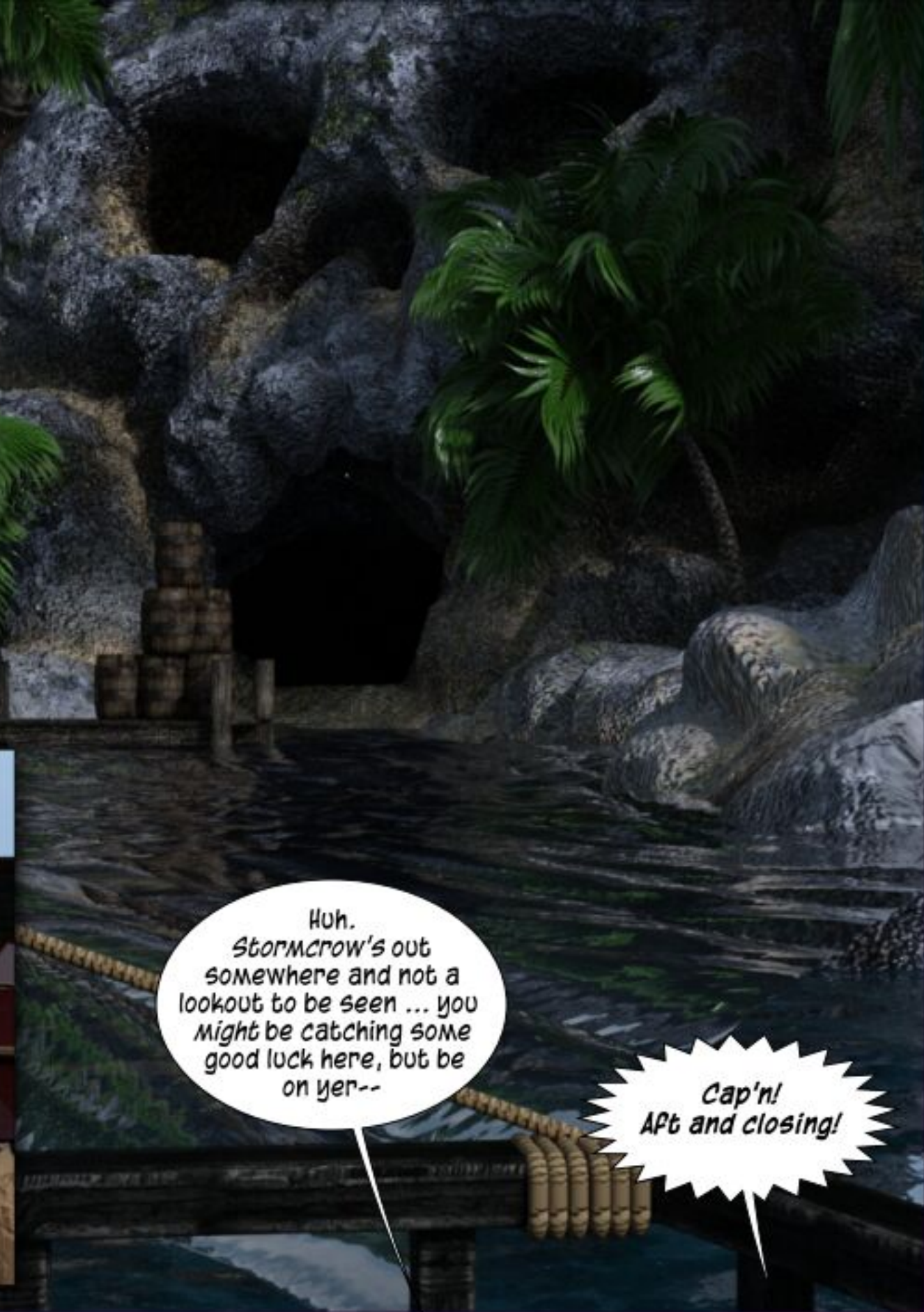
Friendly-looking place.



I can get you a bit closer, but if any of their lookouts see us we'll be in a spot ... the Stormcrow's three times our size ...

You'll have to take a dinghy. Hope ye know how to row.

We'll figure it out.



Huh. Stormcrow's out somewhere and not a lookout to be seen ... you might be catching some good luck here, but be on yer--

Cap'n! Aft and closing!



Ah, shit.



Repel boarders! Arm yourselves!

Look sharp, now!



Back off!

C'mere, skel, got push!

See, this is why I like to stay in the ops room.

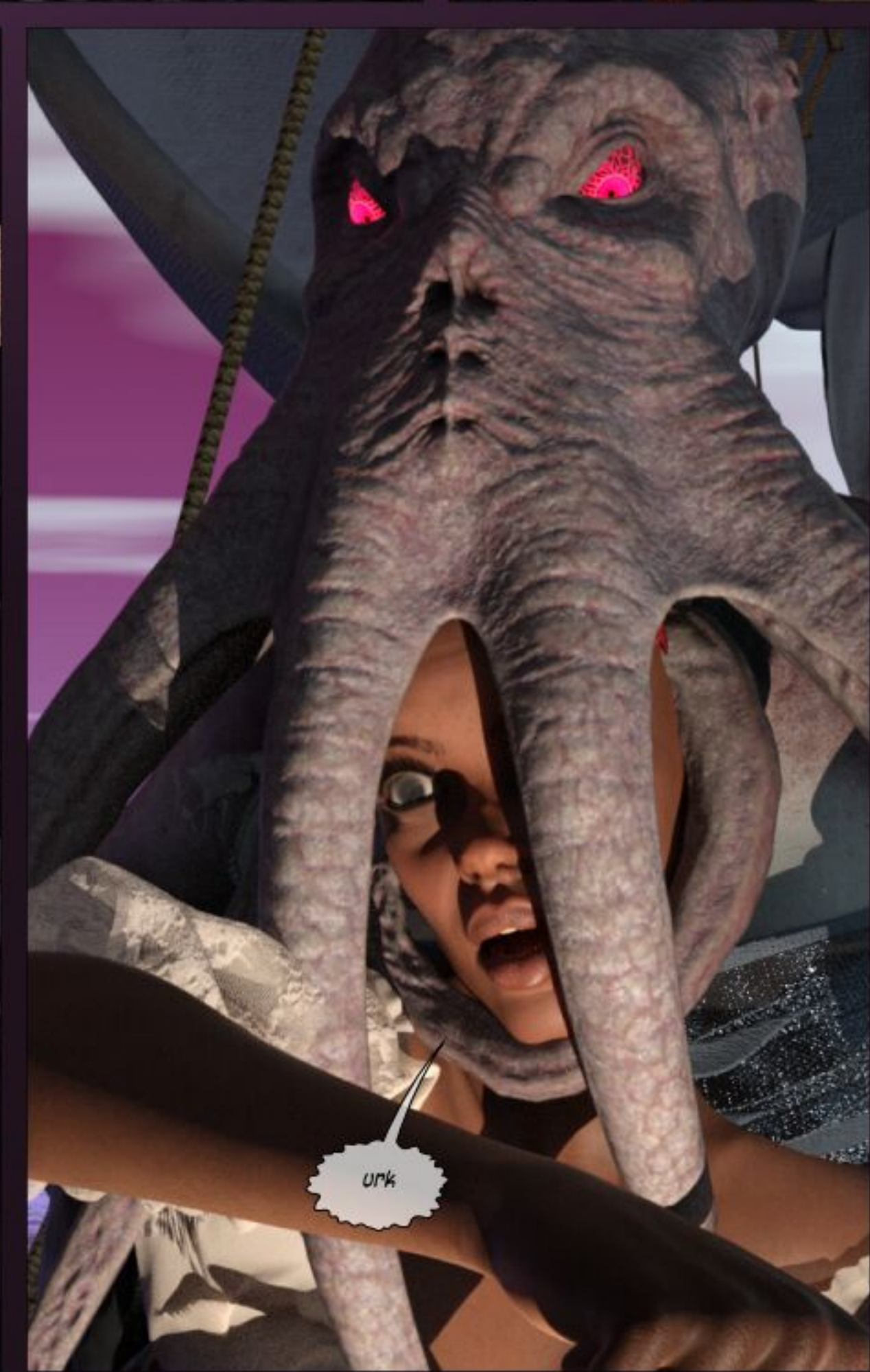
I can't fight worth a damn with my fists. I'm sure not going to try it with a sword ...



WHAA!

Han't care what got, jagger, gon tack you blind!

Can all just rightup haul your eppn--



urk



INTERLUDE.

SERENITY.



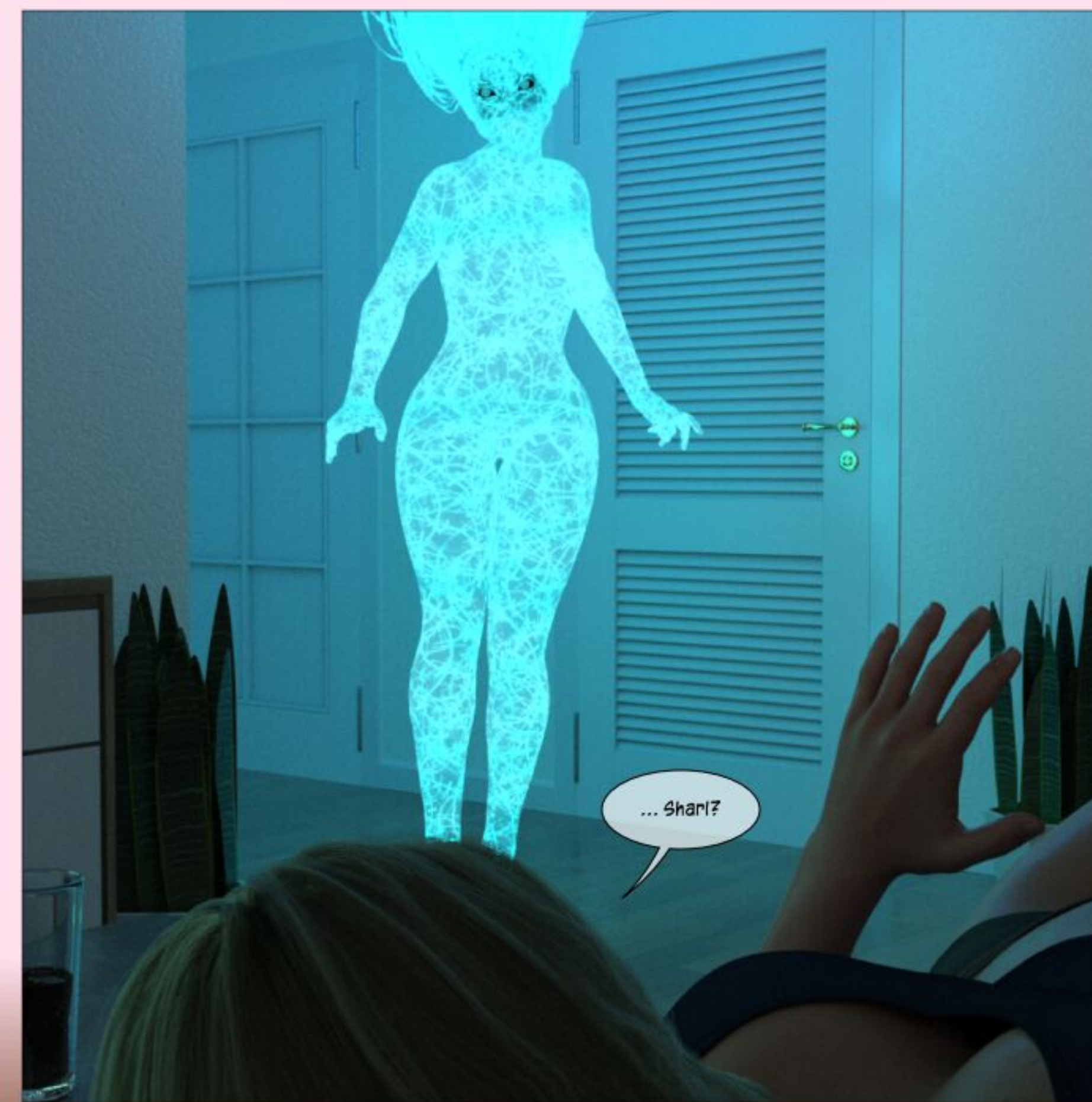
OH. HUH. SO YOUR IDEA IS WHOEVER PULLED THE LEVER DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN? OR DO YOU THINK THERE'S TWO PEOPLE IN IT?

MOSTLY THE FIRST ONE, THOUGH I SUPPOSE THERE'S NO REASON IT COULDN'T BE THE OTHER. CAN YOU THINK OF ANY CANDIDATES?



... AND, I MEAN, SHE DID GIVE ME THE COSTUMING GIG, THOUGH REALLY I THINK SHE ONLY DID THAT BECAUSE SHE ONLY DID THAT BECAUSE SHE ONLY TALKED ME UP TO HER.

MIMI, AS IN MIMI LANIER?



... Shan?!



I APPRECIATE YOUR HELP. IF I HAVE TO ASK ANY MORE QUESTIONS, I'LL TRY TO FIND YOU BACKSTAGE INSTEAD OF BARGING IN ON YOU ...

AND NOW BACK TO OUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED DUNGEON.



I CAN'T KEEP THEM ALL MINDLESS FOR VERY LONG. THERE ARE TOO MANY.

YOU'RE GOING TO NEED TO FIGURE OUT STORAGE OPTIONS. QUICKLY.



Not to worry. That's why we have the cages.

I want to do something special with Amelia here, but I haven't quite figured out what yet.



... Nadine, I don't recognize these two. And they don't look like crew.

HOW SHOULD I KNOW? MAYBE THEY WERE PASSENGERS.

THERE WERE THREE, ACTUALLY.



An e/P?

All right, she's the first priority.

YOU'RE SERIOUS.



Deadly.

Those elves are dripping with magic. We need to take care of her before she can cause trouble.

Have the crew bring her along. I'll take her into the display hall myself, but I'd rather not carry her all the way.



Put the two other passengers in a cell. They don't look dangerous.

That leaves you all six cages for Amelia and her lot.



By the time I'm finished with the e/P, I'll likely have decided what I want to do with Amelia.





--oof--  
I should have let them carry you all the way in ...

Now, what would suit you best? I've never had an elf before.

When I first started, you see, all I had in mind was to make crew. But then I had enough crew.

So then I began making all my pretty light fixtures. I thought they might as well be useful.

But then I decided I should branch out a little. Artistic expression, you know? I needed an outlet.

This is Cap'n Tarrant of the Nightingale. She'd hate the pose, and she never smiled like that.

I think she turned out well.

I don't know why I'm telling you any of this, it's not like you can absorb it.

I suppose it's because I don't get to show off my pieces to anyone very often.



You've got pretty hair ... that's how I know you're not a pirate, you'll never see one of us with long hair. Gets caught in things.

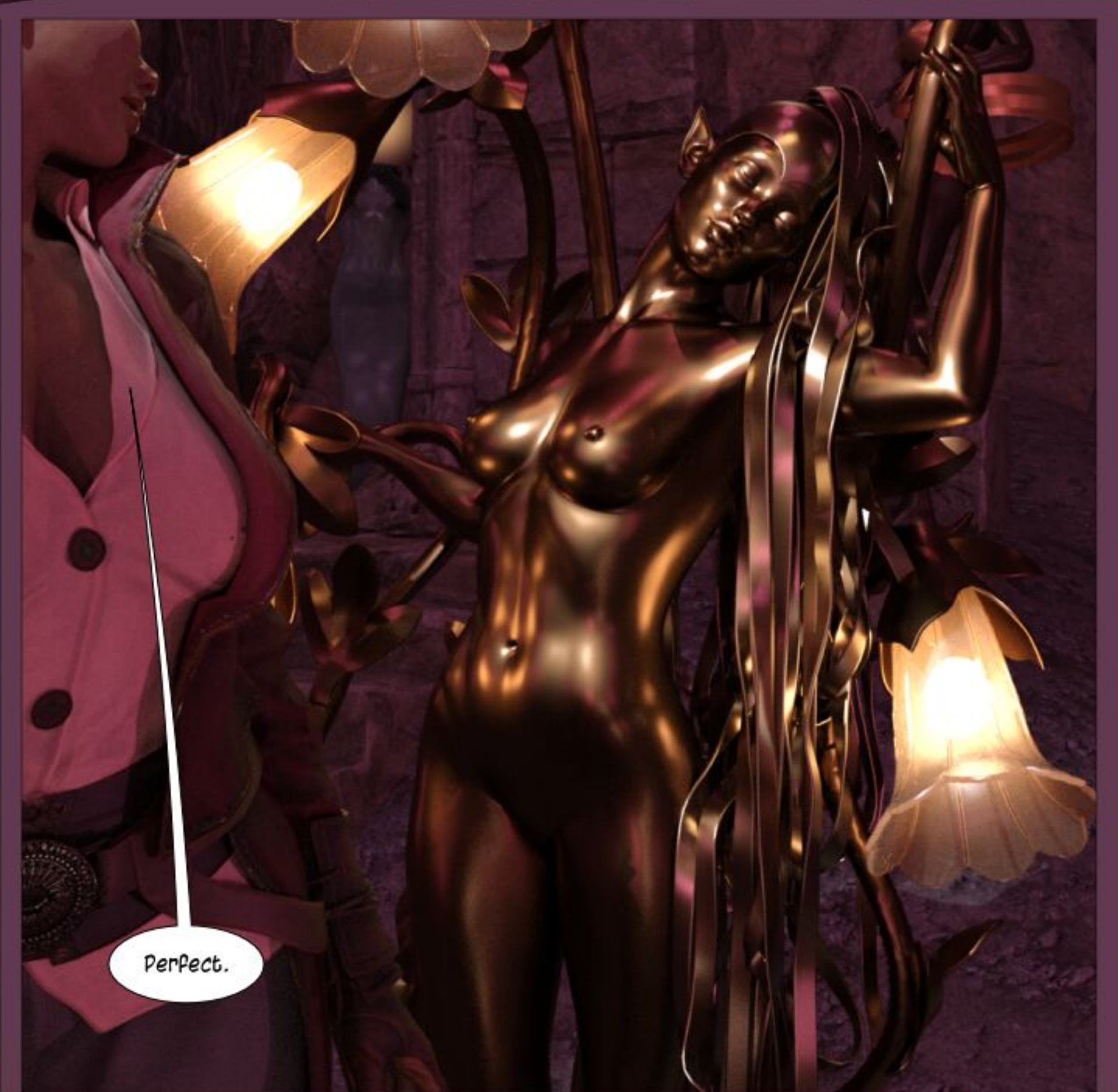
I think we should use that, don't you?

Maybe even add to it. A waterfall of hair. Yes. I think that would look very nice.

Let's see now ...

MMM, what a nice body ... let me try to get those nipples to perk up a bit, it makes a much better look ...

And of course we want to give you a more pleasant facial expression.



Perfect.



urgh...

Jex?  
Jex, wake up.

hnhrrrr

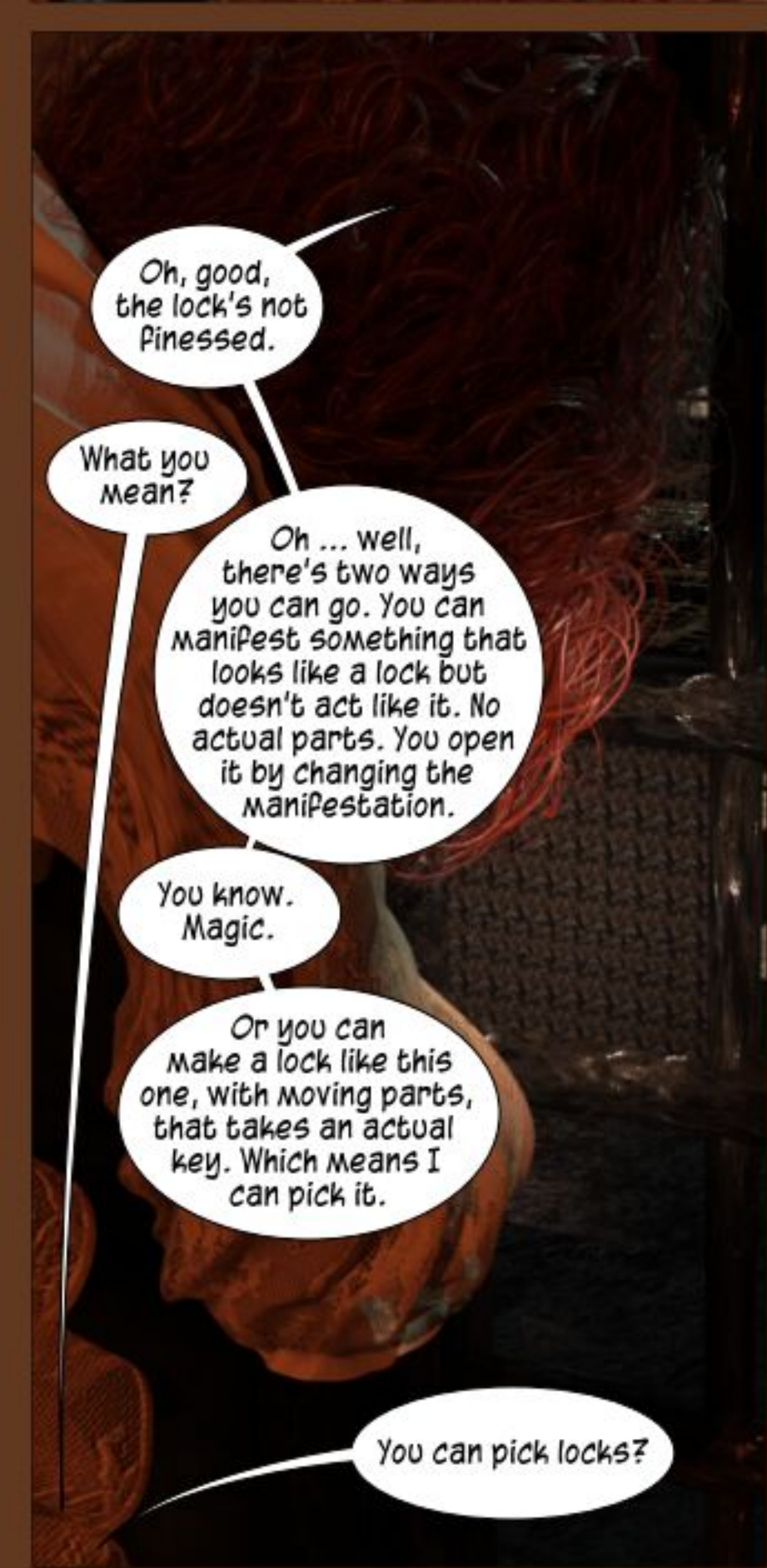


What do you remember?

None. Was fightin. Then here. Some prom behind ...?

A woman with ... well, it looked like an octopus head. Kind of. I saw her get you. I couldn't reach you in time. Then two of those zombies or whatever they were held me down.

We have to assume they got all of us, I think.



Oh, good, the lock's not pinessed.

What you mean?

Oh ... well, there's two ways you can go. You can manifest something that looks like a lock but doesn't act like it. No actual parts. You open it by changing the manifestation.

You know. Magic.

Or you can make a lock like this one, with moving parts, that takes an actual key. Which means I can pick it.

You can pick locks?



The hard way? No. With this device? Yes.

Nice!

Got lot tools ...

Yes, and I never know when I'm going to need one. I haven't used this one in ages.

Ruby would just will it open, but I can't do that kind of thing.



Now what?

... Good question.



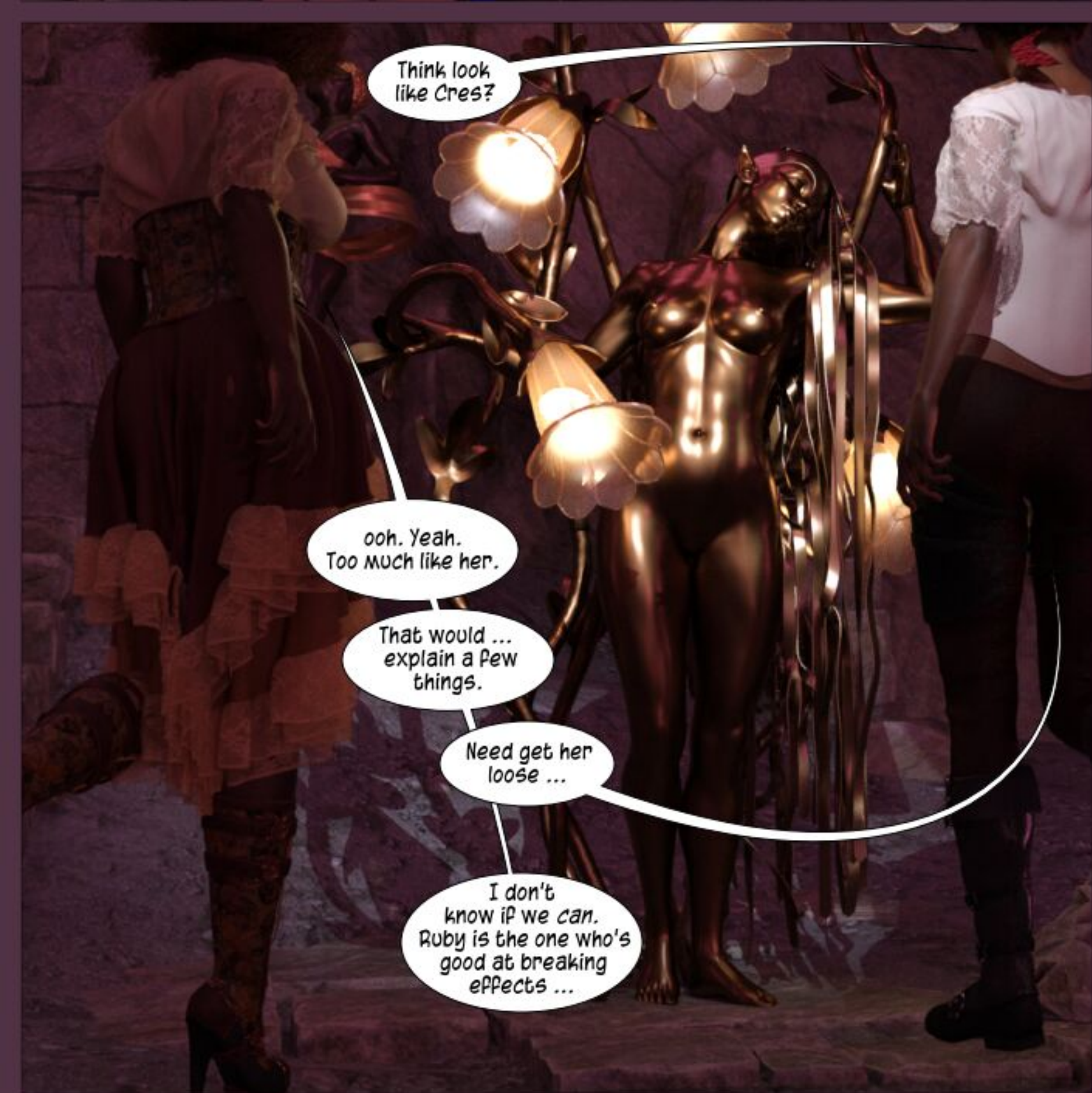
Big pink room.

Full of statues with their tits out.



Whoever did these has got a definite sense of design ... not necessarily good, though ...  
I'm not sure why, but I feel like there's something unhealthy about them ...

... Leyna?



Think look like Cres?

ooh. Yeah. Too much like her.

That would ... explain a few things.

Need get her loose ...

I don't know if we can. Ruby is the one who's good at breaking effects ...



So I guess all of these statues are people?

And it looks like she's been doing this for a while. No wonder the other pirates don't want to go near her ...

Do you think if we manage to disrupt her, it'll undo all this?

... Jex?



Jex!!



Get off her!

This is not going to go well ...



HRRAAH!

Yep.



Wait a second.

I only know one person who's into that kind of look ... You've changed your head, but not your body ...

Are you ... Aren't you Nadine? From Xenomorph?

I ...!!

Hey, wait!

LONG-TIME READERS: DON'T FEEL BAD IF YOU DON'T REMEMBER NADINE. SHE WAS ONLY SEEN ONCE WAY BACK IN ISSUE #10, AND NOT FOR LONG.



Ah, good. Bron the bone-brained bos'n. Couldn't start without her.

I've been looking forward to this for a long time, Amelia. I'm tingling with anticipation.



I still haven't decided what I want to do with you ... but that's all right. I've got time; you were going to be last anyway.

That way you get to watch.

Mhrp!

The musclehead here is going to take some thought as well. I definitely want something special for her.

Actually, I feel like I should do something special for all of you. I'm tired of my usual designs. You deserve something better.



By the by, Amelia, I'm very disappointed in you for letting a man join your crew. You'd never have done that when I was with you.

And this skinny little pale thing ... she must be his, yes? I know she's not yours. You can't convince me you've sunk that far.

Hmm. ... I think they deserve each other.



Now, I think it's important we get these bits down here exactly right.

And I think you should look like you're enjoying it. Probably much more than you ever actually did.

He looks like the type who believes a big dick substitutes for skill.



My first explicit work! I think I've outdone myself here. What do you think, Amelia?



Oh, that was enjoyable. Makes me want to ... ah, but I forget, we don't do that anymore.

Such a shame.

So this one's yours, then? I know you don't sleep with Bron. Maybe you and Bron share her? No, no, you don't share.

I think we'll put her with Bron anyway. But we need to do it right. Did you know Bron broke my nose, the day you had her throw me off the ship?



Gon need Cres. Han't got nough juice just us.

I told you, I don't think I can do it.

Can. Ruby told how. Did it once. Well, some.

Change on top. Like paint. Got scrape it off, get under.

But that doesn't make any sense! The data doesn't work like that ... the old identity isn't--



Now, we need to be very careful how we arrange this pose ...

Han't do data way, Leyna.

Magic. Got do magic.

Jex, wait ... you can't let her touch you. That's how she does the transformations.

You can't actually fight her. It's too big a risk.

Huh. K. Do some else then. You fix Cres.

\*JEX MANAGED TO PARTIALLY UNDO A TRANSFORMATION IN #32.



Oh, yes! --hahahaha-- Push her face into your cunt forever. Make her like it.

Mmmh, god ...



It's gotten me so worked up, I almost--

You look really hot like this, you know. And you used to like it rough. Is that still true?

What would you do if I put my hand inside you right now, eh?

hgrhph! Mrrsgn Prsggh!!

--sigh-- It's too late for any of that anyway. I wouldn't pucker you if you begged.

Though I'd love it if you did.



Oyo! Skell!

Han't got all! Got loose.

Gon see what slide can make now.

B'sin!

WHAT?!



You little ...

Nadine!  
Get her ass!!

... Nadine?

Never there when you need her.

Fine. Fine.  
I'll catch you myself!

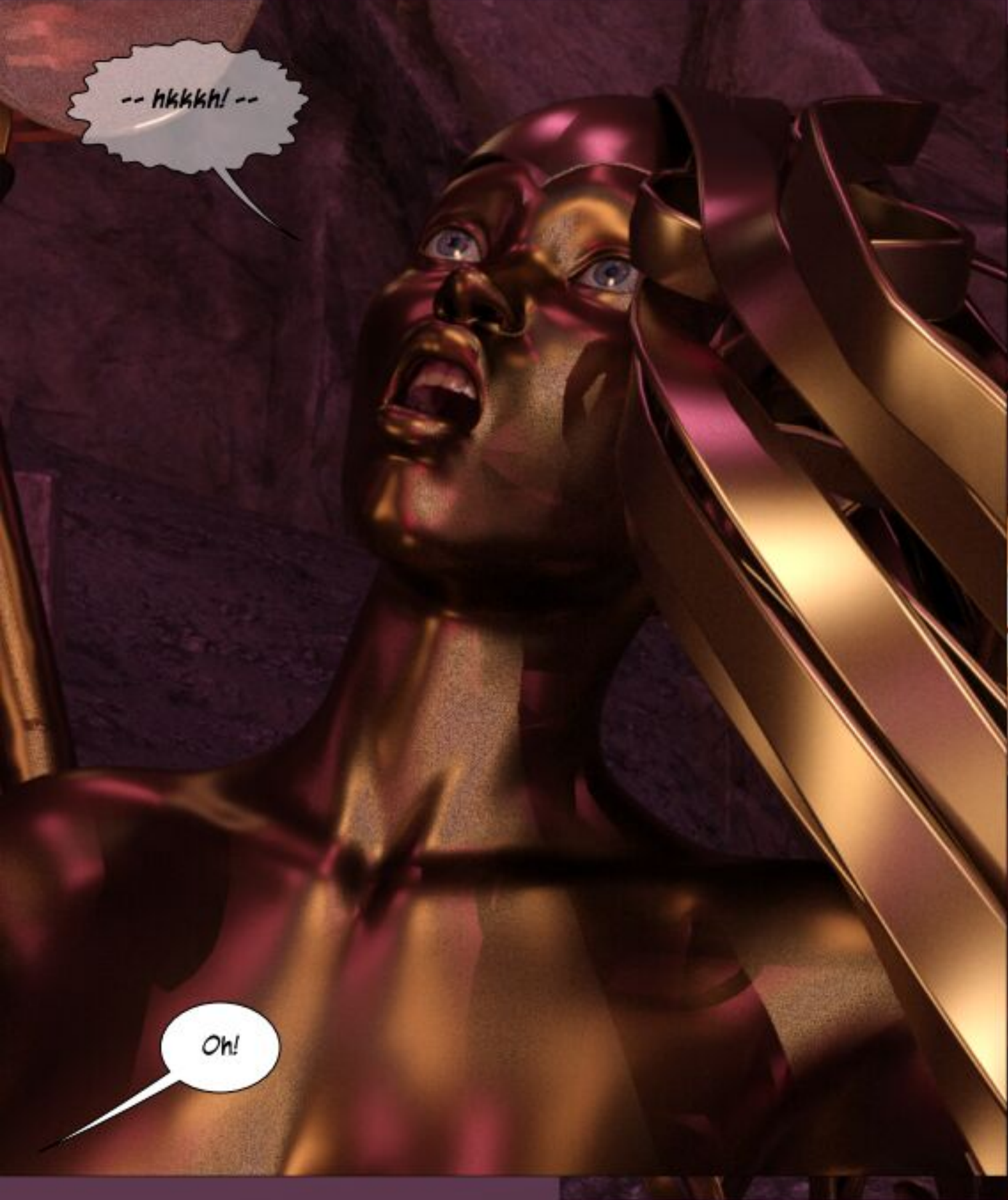


Come back here, you shit!

I know this place a lot better than you do!

OK, so, I'm not even sure how to start ...

Ruby would probably tell me to reach out my mind, but I've never understood what people mean when they say that ...



-- hkkkk! --

Oh!



If I ask you where we are or how I got like this, are you just going to say "it's a long story"?

Uh ... very possibly.

But I'll try to catch you up in a hurry.



... so you think all of these statues are people?

Hang on, Cap'n, I'll have you out of all that in a jippy.

It seems like a reasonable theory. ... I can't believe I just said that.

Some of them may have been statues for quite a while. So long they'll be hard to revert.

Let's deal with the Melancholy Polks First.



AND SO ...

Where is Carmina?

Is she one of these other statues?

I'm going to kill her.

We might need to draw straws for that.

Before any of that we have to figure out how to get her. We can't touch her. Literally. We need to corner her so that Cres can--

You won't get a chance!



I realized she was trying to distract me when I found out my crew was gone! I don't know how you did it, but--

There's no way you're going to win here. You do realize that, don't you?

Nadine!  
Just in time. Suck their brains out. I want so little left of them in there they'll have trouble figuring out how to drool.



NADINE!!

Have you lost your mind??



Get away from me, traitor!

WHOLA



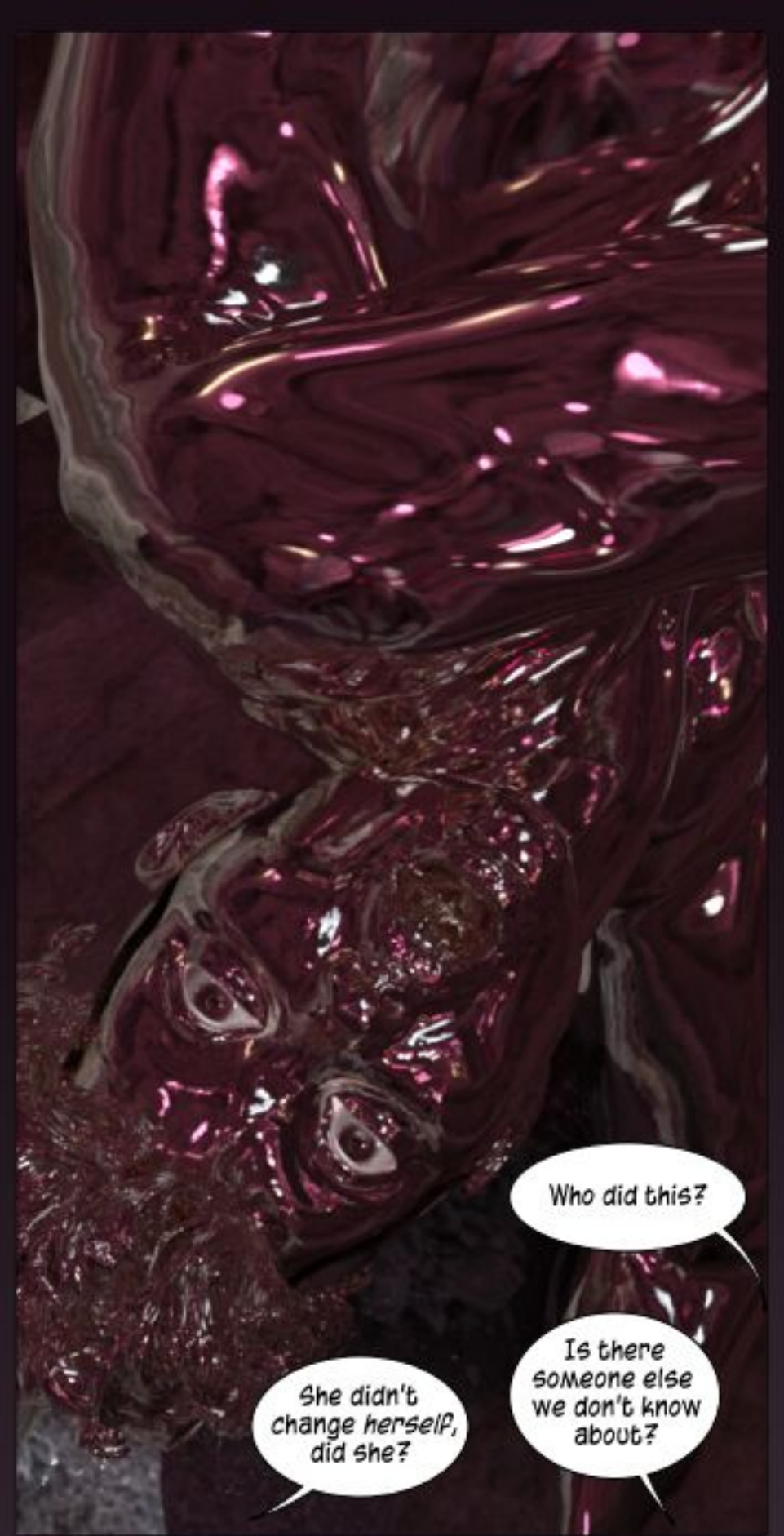
You're not going to trap me! I can outwait you! I'll find each of you one at a time! You can't stop me!!



NADINE



Huh.



Who did this?  
Is there someone else we don't know about?  
She didn't change herself, did she?



Carmina??  
Damn it, woman, you've been holding out!  
Never told me you were a witch ...



I'm not a witch, Amelia. I'm a pirate.

Ruby's the witch.

IT'S ALL OVER BUT THE SHOUTING.



Now that they've got their brains back, the best thing for them all is to recall and reload a Porm.  
Some of them have been statues long enough that they don't remember how, though.  
Aye. Cap'n Tarrant over there can't remember her name. Always did wonder what became of the Nightingale ...  
Hm. Can we get them all to port for help? Can the Melancholy hold them all?  
Melancholy's sunk.  
Oh.  
No worries. I'm stealing the Stormcrow. Rose won't be using it. It can fit everybody and then some.  
I was thinking maybe I should stay this way. I like the look.  
It's not bad ... but not an improvement either, y'know?  
I suppose the novelty would wear off pretty fast ...  
So that's everything sorted, then?



Not yet.

Oh.



I came to the yards because none of my old crowd would have anything to do with me. They think I'm ...  
... well, Rose didn't care. I mean, she didn't sleep with me, but she didn't throw me out either. So ...  
I knew she wasn't doing nice things, but it wasn't like anybody cared, so big deal. Until Leyna showed up and recognized me ... that really, uh ...



I'm sure you think I'm crazy for wanting to keep looking like this. But --  
I'd never think that.  
I get it. It's you. Even if other people don't think it's pretty, it's you.



People should always get to be what they want to be. As long as it's not hurting anybody.  
Oh, is that how that's supposed to work? Good to know.



Did you learn your way around a ship when you were with Rose?  
Yes, why?  
Crew with me. I'm about to be short one ... I assume.  
We don't care what you look like, as long as you know what's what.  
I ... yes. Thank you.



What was that crack about?  
And how could you just stand by and not say anything? If you'd spoken up in Piertown we could have saved this whole miserable trip!  
You didn't enjoy any of it? That's a shame. I was really hoping you had.  
Interesting how you insist on a quest nobody else wants you to go on, and yet you're determined to hate it the whole way. Martyrdom isn't a good look, Leyna.  
I didn't tell you to come find me, and if you think it was some kind of duty then you're either very misguided or you've got a lot of nerve, or both.



"That crack" was because you say everybody should be allowed to be what they want, but apparently that means everybody but me.  
What would you have done if I'd decided I never wanted to come back? What if I don't want to be Ruby? What if I don't want to be anything?  
What the fuck makes you think you get a say?  
Where do you get off, not only coming to find somebody who clearly doesn't want to be found, but dragging Jex and Cres into it?  
Do you have any idea how angry I was when you showed up in the inn? Do you know how close I am right now to never speaking to you again?



Ruby ...

... I need you.

I didn't want to come find you; I knew perfectly well you didn't want to be found. But I didn't have a choice.

The work we do is important. You do still think it's important, I hope?

I can't do it without you.



But you can, Leyna. You absolutely can.

Look, the main reason I didn't let on is that I wanted to see if you could get out of the mess you got into without me. And you did.

I freed the crew, but that was just to get them out of the way, and they were never the real problem anyhow.

And I finished off Damask Rose, but at that point it was just a time saver. You'd already gotten her. It was over. Even if she didn't admit it.

Of course your work is important, Leyna ... but it's *your* work. It isn't always going to be my work. I keep trying to tell you that. You've got to be able to do it by yourself.

Now, I have someone I owe an apology, and I want to catch her before she leaves. I'll see you back in Serenity. Eventually.



Everybody's aboard. We're about to hoist.

... Are ye sailing with us?

I'd better not.

Amelia ... I'm sorry I didn't tell you.



I didn't tell you because that was kind of the point.

I didn't want to be Ruby. For you, or for anybody else.

I liked that you liked Carmina. If I'd told you I was Ruby, I'd have been wondering if it was Carmina or Ruby you liked ...



Aw, love, I don't care about that. I'm just sad you're going.

Come back and sail with us again sometime, would ye?

Absolutely. When I can. If I can.

### EPILOGUE.

WELL, ALL RIGHT, IT'S AN INTERLUDE, BUT IT'S AT THE END, SEE.

THE HILL COUNTRY, SEVERAL DAYS LATER.



Why, that appears to be a pig, Rhi.

It certainly does, Tri.

Hey, piggy piggy ... are you hungry?



You know, I think there is something unusual about this pig, Rhi.

I do believe you are right, Tri.

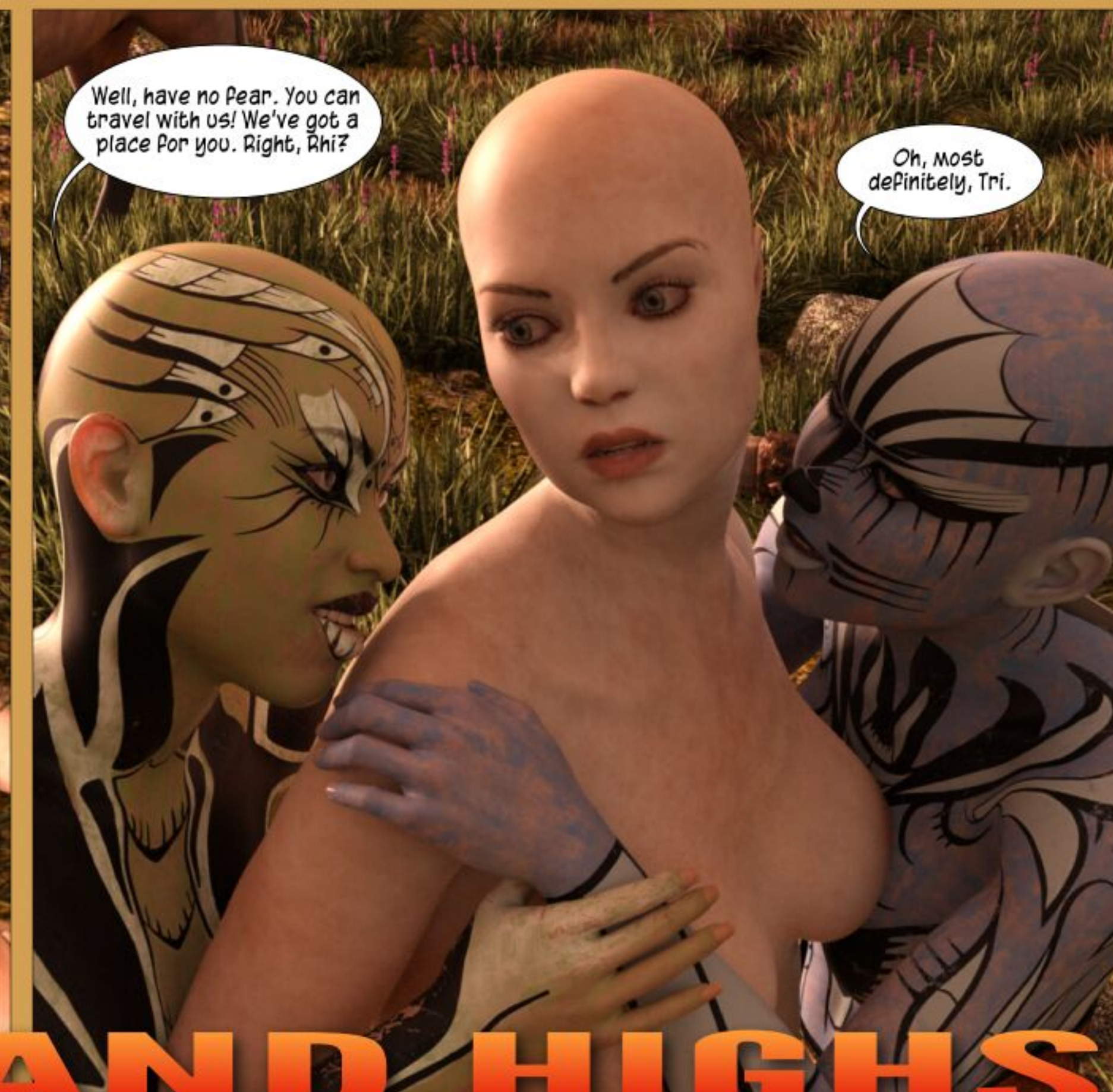


Ah, there we are ...

Now how on earth did you get like that? Who put that mask on you? What's your name?

--grunt--  
uhhh ...

Not sure ... hard to ...



Well, have no fear. You can travel with us! We've got a place for you. Right, Rhi?

Oh, most definitely, Tri.

**NEXT: LOWS AND HIGHS**