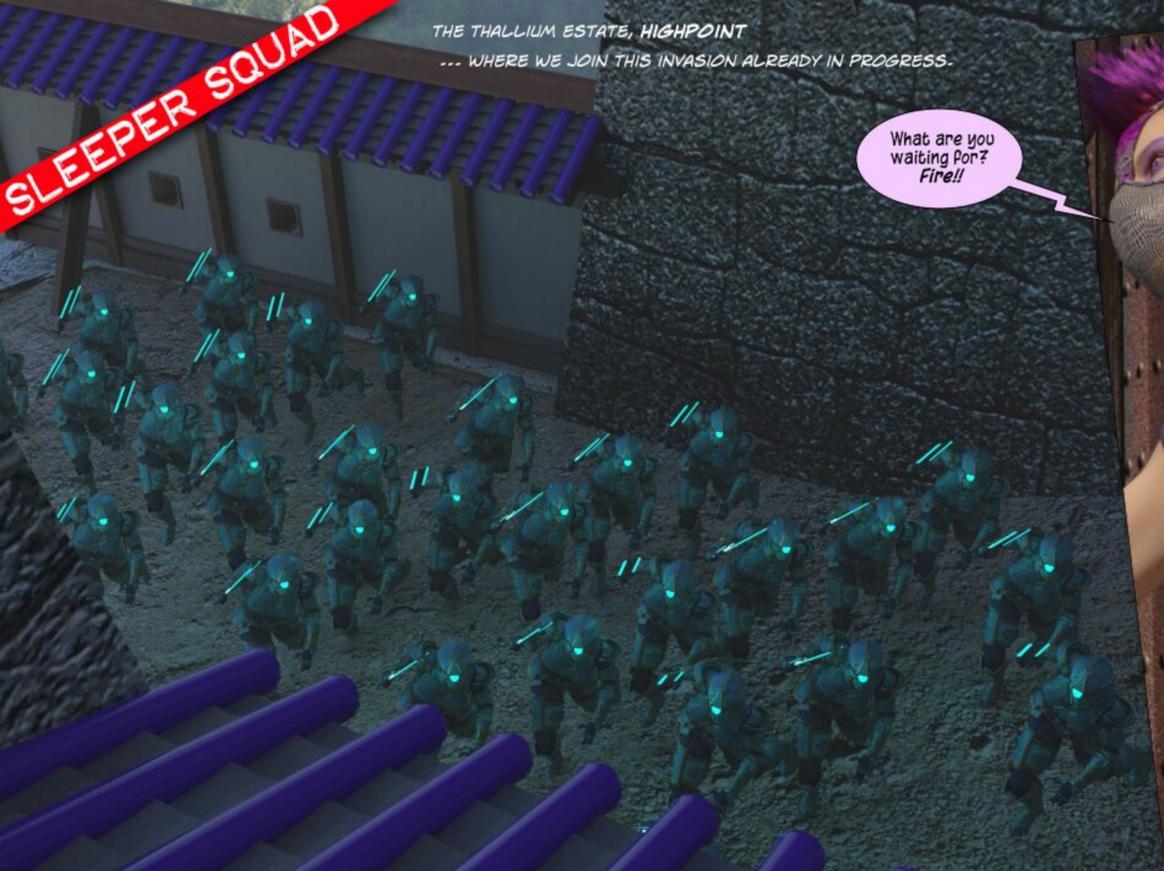


SLEEPER SQUAD

THE THALLIUM ESTATE, HIGHPOINT
--- WHERE WE JOIN THIS INVASION ALREADY IN PROGRESS.



What are you waiting for? Fire!!

Pick off as many as you can before they reach the gate --

Seev, no!

It's too late for that. We weren't expecting them to get here so fast. No wonder Jilly was running for her life.

Pull everyone in. They're going to take that gate, but this one should hold until we can get armored. Everybody. We're all going to have to fight.



Jilly ...

I'm in, milady. I never wanted to cooperate with Lady Scholz anyway. I just didn't have a choice.

Besides, my sister's out in that somewhere. Maybe we can save her.

Good. Help me close this gate, then go see Honor for armor.



"Emy, gather everybody at this gate. We won't have long, and we'll want to hit them as soon as they start to take the stairs. Seev, put together groups to watch the back gates. They might be smart enough to try them."

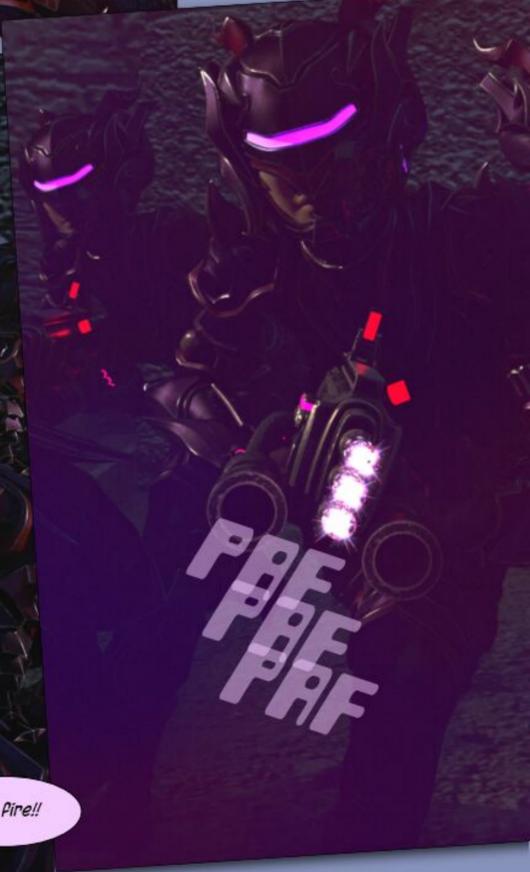
That sound was them breaking the lower gate. Everybody ready? If not, too bad ...

GO!!!



Use the smoke first if you're in front! Everybody else, stay back! Let it get them!

OK, fire!!



Wish they'd make some kind of noise. But they're definitely retreating.

An't Preal done tho. Just push some. Might come back.

... That was easier than I expected.

And new hats gon be hard sepp.

I noticed that. She's made them tough to remove.

VIOLET, LADY THALLIUM

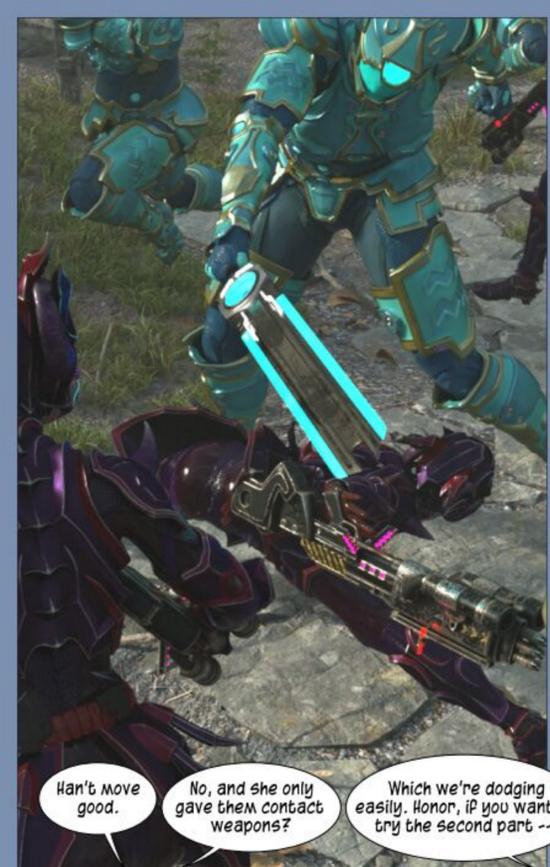
JEX, JUST VISITING

HONOR, LADY DELP (DISPLACED)

I guess she does learn something occasionally.

HIGHTHS and LOWS

Story and images by Trilby



Han't move good.

No, and she only gave them contact weapons?

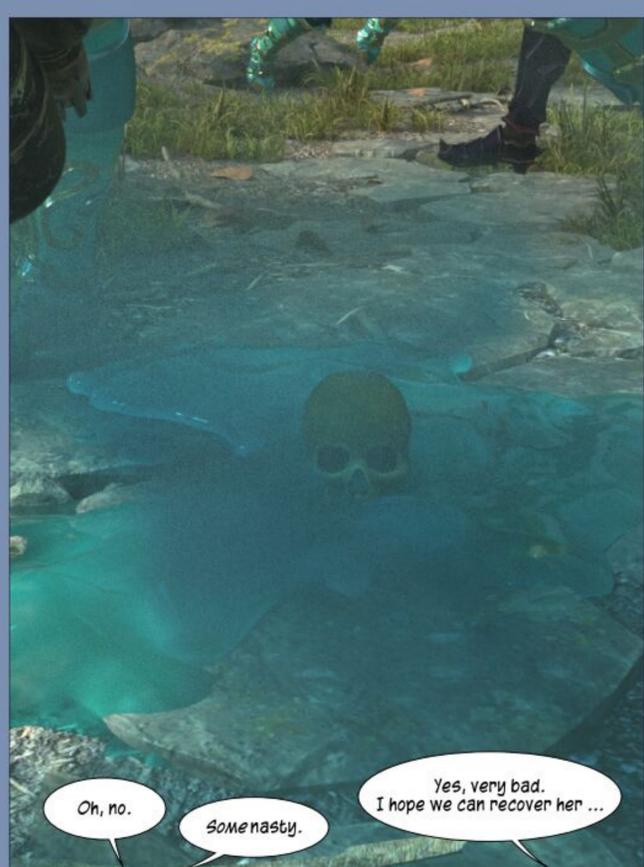
Which we're dodging easily. Honor, if you want to try the second part --



whoa!

What was that? Where did it come from?

An't see none ...



Oh, no.

Some nasty.

Yes, very bad. I hope we can recover her ...



That skel done.

Huh. Creepy nun. I wonder if...



The captured Order acolytes? I'd bet on it. She's not very original. The thing is, you can't see what they're doing -- we need to warn Amy to --

Oh. Never mind.



Hit the nuns first! Keep them down! They're the biggest threat!

Don't wait for them to attack!



It's so good to have competent staff.

Unlike hers. I don't think she's bothered to train them. I think we can hold our own if we can keep the nuns out of action.

But it's just going to be holding our ground. We can't really do more than that, and eventually they can wear us out. And she has a lot more people.

... I don't see her anywhere.

Could look like rest ...

She wouldn't do that. They need to be able to spot their leader, and besides, she's too full of herself.

I bet she's watching Prom inside the cloister.

Cloister?



See the big building at the Par side of the open fields? That's the former cloister of the Order of Vision, before they moved into the Delp holdings.

Oh yeah. Passed come in. Han't know name.

We could go ahead with the second part ...

I knew you were thinking that. But I don't like it.



Honor figures we won't get anywhere with a stand-off in the field. Her idea -- the second part -- was to find a way around behind the battle and take out Lady Scholz while her troops were occupied.

I agree it's probably the only way we can actually end this, but I can't go with her -- I have to stay here in case I need to help my people any way I can -- and I don't need to tell you it's a risk.

It's not that big a risk, if she's in the cloister. We can get there through the tunnels and not have to go anywhere near the battle, and she won't be expecting us from behind.



Jex? I don't know if I have the right to ask ...

Might chance throw with Scholz skel?

If we're lucky. And careful.

Hell yeah.

... Let me get you some armor.



JEANNE LAVAL'S HEADQUARTERS.

... It's all right. We're not on a schedule. I'll talk to them, but I think they're recovering fine on their own. We just need to give them a while --

Jeanne!



Scholz is moving!

What? You're sure?

She was marching on Thallium when we left! They'll be there by now!

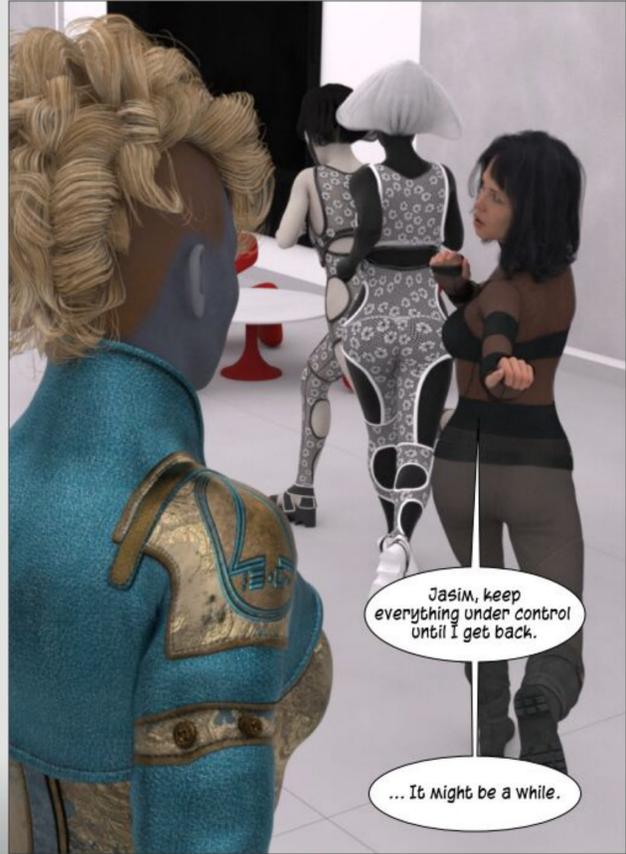
And Corven?



She knows. We're sure she's mobilizing too.

It's always all got to happen at once.

OK. Let's go. We'll have to hurry.



Jasim, keep everything under control until I get back.

... It might be a while.

FOUR WEEKS EARLIER ...



GRAYTOWER, THE YARDS.

Irbo! Uh ... did you want something?

Spare me.

I warned you, Chonsy. I told you the new rules.

Nobody gets to do a job without it going through me. And I can't have any bad examples lying around.

So Stiv's got something for you.

You don't get to just crowd your way in --



-- waaaahgh!!



Gonna have a real hard time doing jobs now, huh, Chonsy?

Unless it's something very, very small.

squeak!



Hey!!

hgh

I don't know who you are, but you messed with the wrong rats!

Since you're so chummy with Chonsy, I got just the look for you --



hgh!

Chonsy! Hang on, we're coming -- -- oh.

You haven't seen the last of us!

Like your friend said:

Spare me.

Cheese, Irb, cut your losses, wouldja?

You OK?

-- rgh -- Yeah.



Thanks, stranger. Irbo's been a real pain in the ass lately.

I'm Jenee. This is Thea.

Can we buy you a drink?



... Don't see why not.

My name's Naomi.



... I'm not too surprised. It's hard to find people here.

I didn't know it'd be that hard. I've been at it a week and I haven't even gotten a clue. Graytower's not so big that it should be this difficult ...

Mmm, but the thing is, there's been a lot of trouble the last year or so. It's calming down now, but you can't blame people for still not wanting to tell a stranger anything. I mean, maybe your person doesn't want to be found.

What you should do -- what people here usually do, when they really need to find somebody -- is go talk to a seer.



Oh, come on.

I bet I'm not the first person to tell you that.

No, you're not. And I couldn't believe it the other times either. Fortune tellers? Really?

Not fortune tellers. Seers. Some of them are Pake, but the Pakes don't last long.

So, yeah, really.

IN CASE YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN OR COME IN LATE, NAOMI IS IN THE YARDS TO LOOK FOR "PERI." MORE ON THAT A FEW PAGES FROM NOW.



They've somehow got access to information we don't have. Cres tried to explain it once, but it kind of bounced off me.

We know one we can vouch for -- she's absolutely for real. But we haven't seen her in here in a few days.



Hey, Ursula, do you know where Theoda's gotten to?

What do I look like, the lost and found?

... yes?

Hmph. She's out of town. Piertown, I think. She said she'd be back at the end of the week.

AND NOW WE RETURN TO OUR REGULARLY SCHEDULED PROGRAM.

THE (FORMER) CLOISTER OF THE ORDER OF VISION.



Got tunnels all place?

No, they only go a few places, and not all of those are useful. The Micheners, for example, sealed off their entrance almost as soon as they got here.

Smart of them, really. I always wished I'd gotten to know them better. They seem interesting.

But Daddy didn't believe in socializing with the other estates.

... Hang on, I hear somebody.



... because you won't let any of the others speak!

I get that you don't trust us, but --

It's not about trust, Ivy!

Yes, it is! You wouldn't even let me leave the estate without locking my button!

That was for your safety! What would you do if someone accidentally pressed it during a fight?



OK, Pine ... But look. If they can't talk, then they can't give orders. And they're supposed to be leading.

And if they get targeted, they can't yell, "Hey, need some help here!" --

... maybe it is a little bit about trust.



But you trust me, don't you?

Well, yes ...

Then trust me that you can trust them. They're not going to pull anything. They've completely come over.

All right. Go give them their speakers.



But this better not go badly!



Wuuugh!!

You're not as quiet as you think.



I didn't think you were dumb enough to come back.

You and your Pather and that Corven witch all got out clean. Nobody was coming after you. Then I found out you were with Thallium. Could have knocked me over with a feather.

But ... Corven ...?

Came back in to try to take your estate back, huh? Well, too bad. You don't get to have it. Thallium doesn't get to have hers. There's only going to be one estate in Highpoint.

I'm sick of all of you.

I've been waiting for the right person to try this one out on.

I don't --

uhrrag

Oh, that did very well! I'll need to make more of those.

All right, now you need to go join the --

rguhrrr



Oyo, skel!

-- yaaaaa!



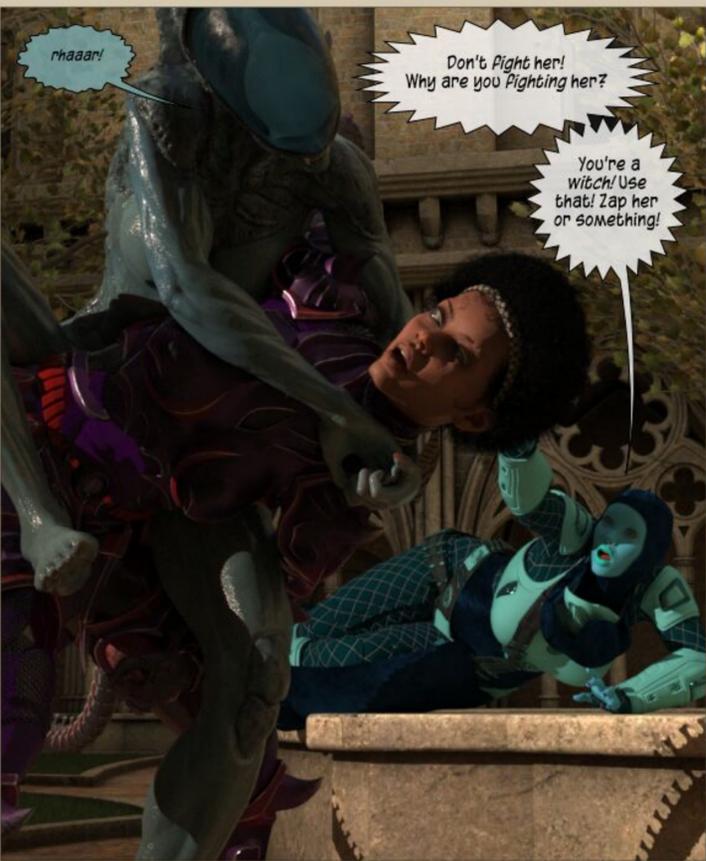
Got big push.

Do I know you?

Don't just sit there, stupid, help me!



aaa!



rhaaar!

Don't fight her! Why are you fighting her?

You're a witch! Use that! Zap her or something!



rhrrg!

Fig some take off ...



Thanks.

urgh ... why do I peel ...

Oh. Leftovers.

Might an't want Pix right now.

No, I saw. We might still be able to catch her.



Thinks got more slap than Preal.

I know. She has no idea what abilities I do or don't have.

Let's let her keep guessing.

She also doesn't know what happened to my Pather. And she thinks Corven left Highpoint.

Gon slide that real Past.



Yes, especially if --

Wait! Hold up ...



Turn around!
Quick!
We have to get back to the tunnel.

Who all
this?

From the colors,
I'm thinking Soileau,
Michener, and Isidore.
They've got to be here
to fight Scholz.

But they won't
consider us allies. If we
don't get out, we're going
to get trapped between the
two armies.

And we need to go tell
Violet right away.



THE PREVOST ESTATE.

They're on
the move!

Damn it, you
have to wait till I
announce you!

DOONA, LADY ISIDORE

Our forces are going
to close with the Scholz
any minute now! They may
already have!

We need that
support you
promised!

DRUSILLA, LORD
PREVOST'S
MAJORDOMO



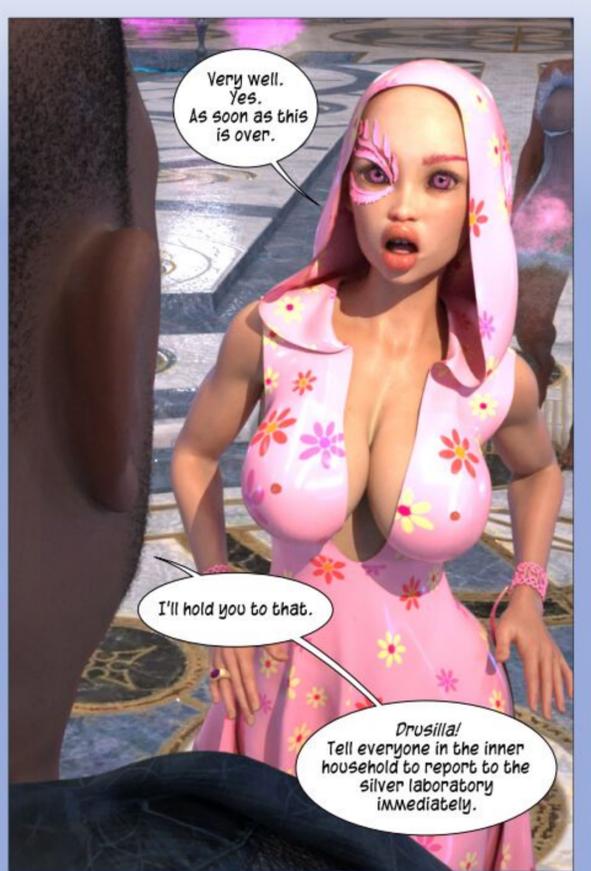
THAND, LORD PREVOST

As you'll
recall, that
promise was
contingent on a
promise from
you.

And you never
explicitly told me yes.
You just made what you
thought were the right
assurances.

I'll provide you with
help, but I need a real,
verbal commitment.

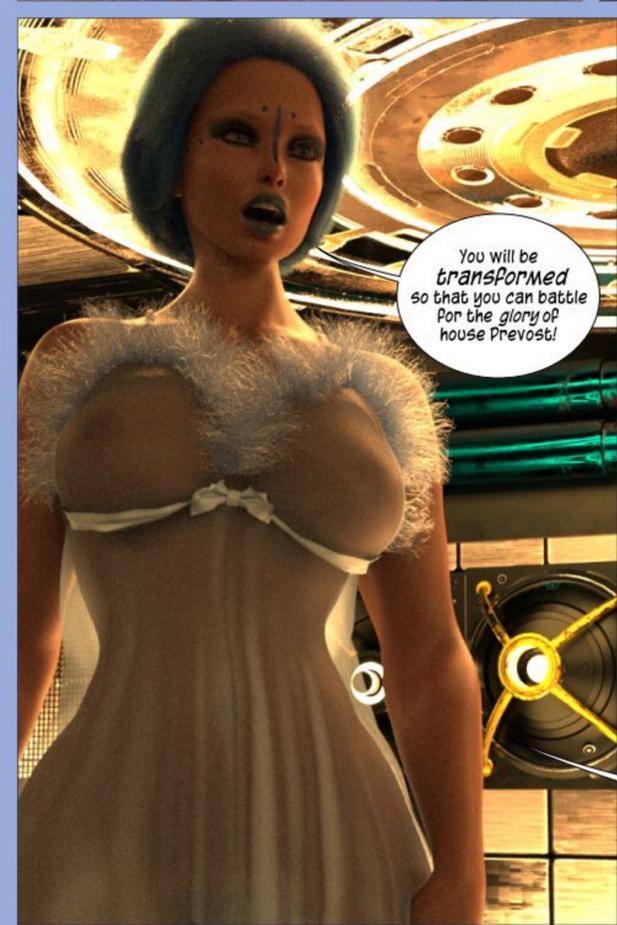
You know my terms.
They haven't changed.



Very well.
Yes.
As soon as this
is over.

I'll hold you to that.

Drusilla!
Tell everyone in the inner
household to report to the
silver laboratory
immediately.



You will be
transformed
so that you can battle
for the glory of
house Prevost!



You will become
creatures of warfare!

Unstoppable forces
that will send the enemy
pleeing before you!

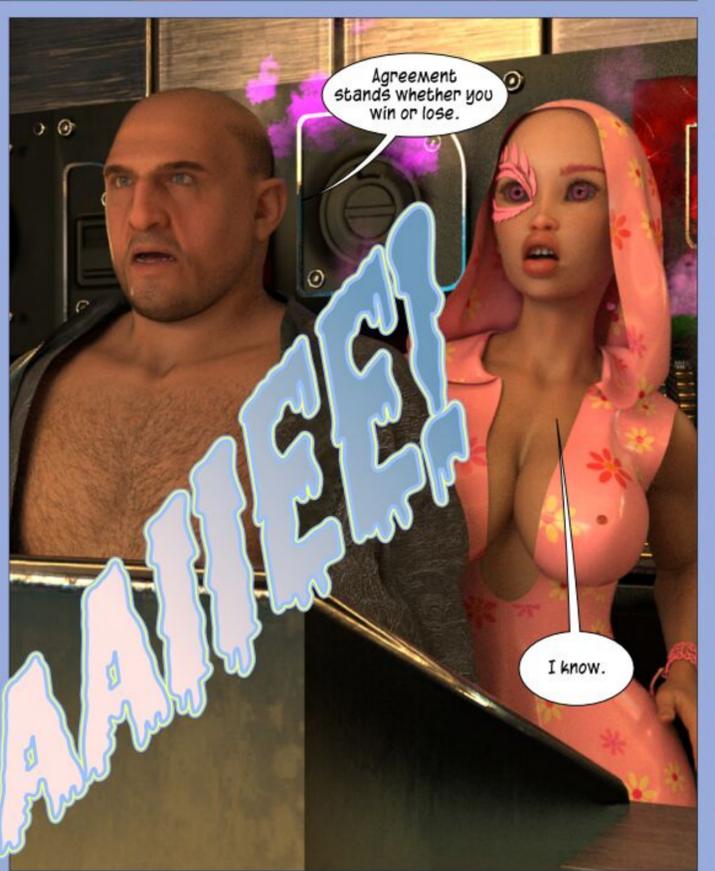
... All right, queue up.
We're in a hurry.



Is it ... gonna hurt?

Probably.

But what is pain
next to the glory of
house Prevost?



Agreement
stands whether you
win or lose.

AAIEEE!

I know.

THREE WEEKS EARLIER ...
THE HOME OF THEODA THE SEER.



The thing is, I require honesty.

You say you've told me everything you know about this Peri, but I think you haven't.

Because your amazing mystical powers tell you that?

No. Because you're a bad liar.

And if you peel that way about my powers, why are you here?



I'm desperate.

Not good enough.

... All right. She's really Pauline Barker. But she doesn't want people knowing that, or she wouldn't be travelling as "Peri" in the first place.

And? If she wants to be incognito, why should I help you find her?

She's also my mother. Well, near as makes no difference. Closest thing I've got, anyway.

She hasn't checked in for a long time and ... I'm worried about her.



Look, I'm not trying to get in her face, I just want to check on her ...

I know.

Like I said, you're a bad liar.

It's really a strength, if you ask me. It's the good liars you have to watch out for.

Take a seat over there and don't talk.



HMM ...

Beyond the pale ...

Oh ... Oh, well, that's simple ...

wait ...



What?

Oh ... oh, goodness ... all right ...



She was easy to find. She's here in Graytower. I'll tell you where to ask.

Seems to me like there was a bit more than that.

Well ...

I can't actually see the future, you know. I see things that have already happened, all over the place.

Sometimes my brain puts those things together and makes a good guess about what's going to happen. I don't know how it works.



But ... I think you're going to end up having to go to hell.

BACK TO THE PRESENT DAY, AND THE BATTLE ...



THE "OLD VILLAGE" IS A SECTION IN THE MIDDLE OF HIGHPOINT THAT BELONGS TO NO ESTATE. IN THE EARLY DAYS, SOME PEOPLE STAYED HERE WHILE BEGINNING TO BUILD THEIR PROPERTY, BUT IT HASN'T BEEN USED IN YEARS.

THE OLD VILLAGE CONTAINS THE ONLY NEUTRAL, PUBLIC, SET PORTAL IN HIGHPOINT (IN THE BACK, THERE).

ARIANNA IS FULLY COMMITTED, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN THERE HAVEN'T BEEN A FEW TIMES IN THE LAST HALF HOUR WHEN SHE'S WANTED TO USE IT.



It's Scholz! Get her --

waaaaah!



There you are! I'm out here nearly getting shot to pieces trying to find you ...

Go tell the others to pull back. We need them over here. There's twice as many, it looks like it's several houses ... Soileau and Michener for sure ...

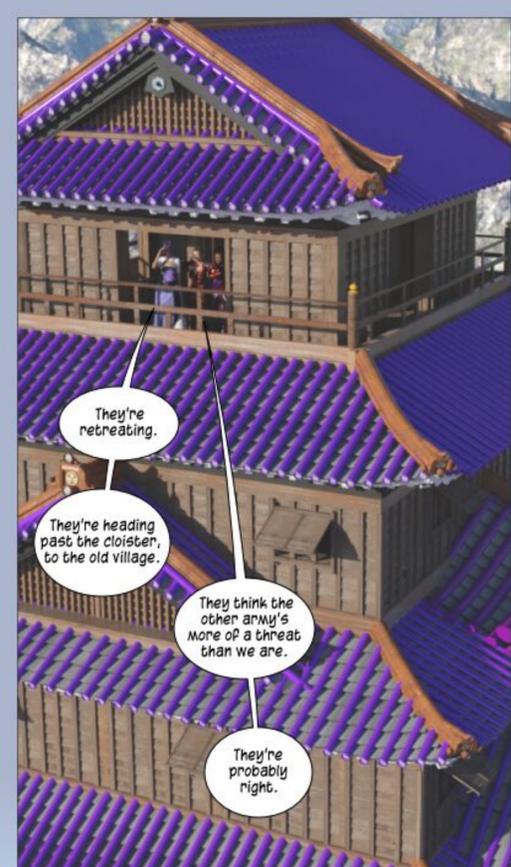
We can deal with Thallium later, even if they try to hit us from behind.

They won't. They're not pushing out, they're just depending their space. I came to tell you the same thing.



Be careful until we get here. You don't even have a weapon ...

It's all right. I see one nobody's using anymore.



They're retreating.

They're heading past the cloister, to the old village.

They think the other army's more of a threat than we are.

They're probably right.



Well, that's Pine with me. That puts us back on plan.

Now we just have to hope the others will do what they said they would.

They will. It might take them a while, since we didn't have a chance to get out the word ...

But I don't think we should bother at this point. By now, they know it's on.



What this plan gon got?

Containment, first opp.

We want to keep those two groups occupied with each other. Let them both get worn out. Use up all their tricks.

Then we'll have some surprises.

Are you going to stay and watch?

Han't miss.

ONE WEEK EARLIER ...

THE RESIDENCE OF BARONESS HALLWELL...



You know, for the person who runs Graytower, you're awfully hard to reach. Ten days ...

I'd never claim to run Graytower. I don't think anybody runs it. It might be ungovernable. I just try to prevent the worst kinds of mayhem.

The City Watch has a public office. People go to them, not to me.

I have to be fairly careful. I'm not popular in some quarters. I had to check on you first. But Jenee and Thea vouch for you. They may be thieves, but they're very good judges of character.

Anyway, now that you've reached me, what can I do for you?

I need to see the pale lady.



The -- and you think I'm hard to reach ...!

Oh, I know. Word is you're pretty much the only person in the city who can get in to see her.

That's why I'm here. I have to go through you.

But I don't just waltz in there without a good reason -- and then to come in with a stranger ...

Why do you need to see her?



You're not going to believe it without a lot more explanation -- which I'll be happy to give you -- but, short answer:

I'm pretty sure she's my mother.

And I'm worried about her.

BACK AT THE BATTLE, EVEN THOUGH THE SCHOLZ REINFORCEMENTS HAVE ARRIVED, THEY SEEM TO BE DOING POORLY. HOWEVER ...



Milady, run!

It's one of the ones that got melted! They're waking up!

The guns don't do anything to it --



Behind you, Jer! I'll deal with this thing.



Don't you try to help.



You either.



That's my wife.

ARSENE, LORD SOILEAU

It sure is. I didn't know she could fight.

SONJA, LADY MICHENER

She grew up with three older brothers.

SERSI, LORD MICHENER

More Schoizen coming in from this side. I'm sending some of ours to meet them.



This is a big problem!

We're pretty much evenly matched on armor, so neither side can keep the other down for long. Even the nuns get back up.

LOUISE, LADY SOILEAU

But when they turn one of ours into one of those ooze things --

-- we don't get that one back. Yeah. They'll get us by attrition, if nothing else.

We need somebody who can revert them!

Or somebody who can change their people into something that can't get back up ...



Well, the first of those two is Oona ...

Hard as that is to believe.

... and she's oPP getting Prevost to get his ass over here.

The other would probably be Corven.

Where is Corven?

That's the thing. She's gone oPP somewhere and I can't see her. The range on these helmets isn't very far.



Stand still, will you?

"MOTHER" CORVEN, LEADER AND LAST REMNANT OF THE ORDER OF VISION

I want to get this over with.



WUAAH!



You! Are you behind all this? Another one who never should have come back!

I never left.

You think I was just going to walk away and let you have everything you took from me?

I'm going to rebuild the Order, far larger than it ever was, and the only thing in the way of that is --



YEEEAH!



No ... you're not supposed to ... you're one of mine! You're FAMILY!

Is that what you think?

You know, when I got them, I took a lot of steps to condition them, and it turned out I really didn't need to. They were mostly willing to come over on their own.

You've got to give people some good things. You've got to let them have some joy. Or they break control.

Nobody likes you. Nobody wants to serve you.



Now, you're going to hold still while I put a hat on you. I've got one I think will make you really useful.

Or you can try to make a move -- any move -- and you'll be an ooze a second later.



hrrk!!



That was not one of the choices.

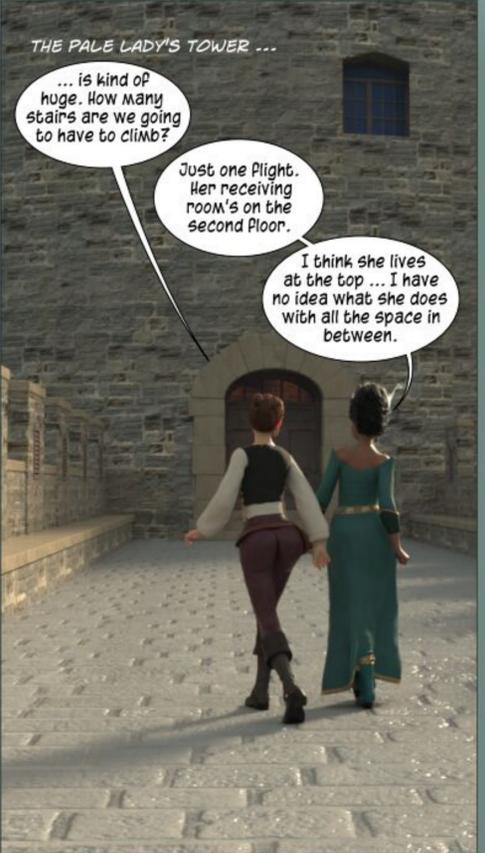
That didn't look like a portal ...

No. She just made a flash to distract us while she ran.

Don't bother chasing her ... but tell the others to watch out for her.

Ooze her the instant you see her. Don't give her any time to do anything.

THE PRESENT DAY. WE HAVE CAUGHT UP ON NAOMI'S STORY. OR IT HAS CAUGHT UP TO US.



THE PALE LADY'S TOWER ...

... is kind of huge. How many stairs are we going to have to climb?

Just one flight. Her receiving room's on the second floor.

I think she lives at the top ... I have no idea what she does with all the space in between.



Listen ...

I believe you, but, uh ...

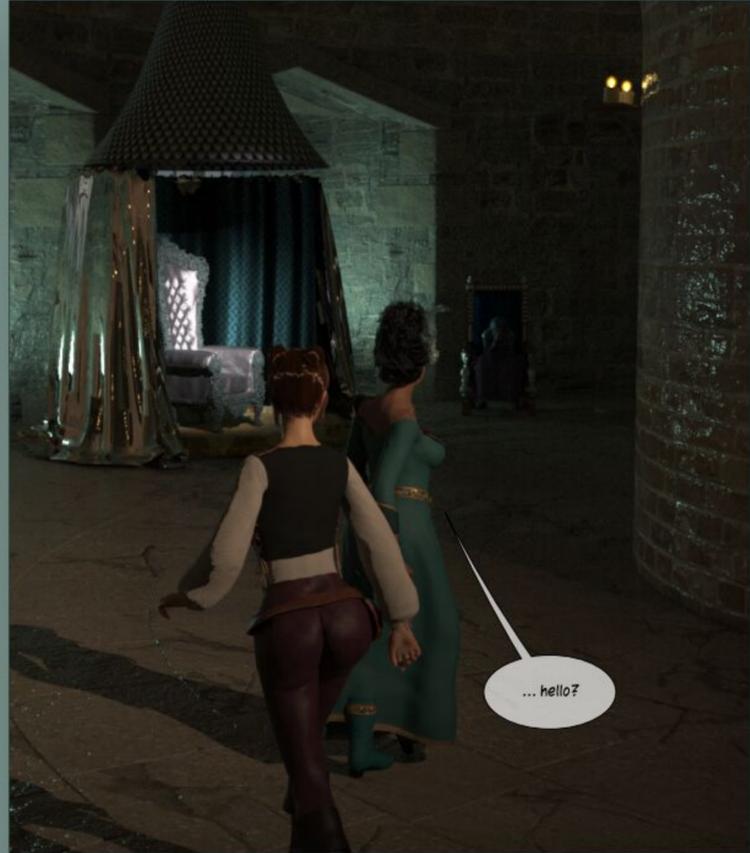
I haven't had a chance to get to know her very well yet, but my impression is she's kind of ... capricious.

What I mean is, she could decide to bite your head off even if she is your mother. Especially since you wouldn't let me tell them who you are. I wouldn't like being surprised by that either.

More danger of me biting hers off.

But I'll try to keep it civil.

Thank you.



... hello?



She's not seeing anyone today.



But we arranged this! I have a petitioner here! She's come a long way --

No audiences today!

Is that hard to understand? She is not available!

Get out!



Sorry.

Not your fault.



No, no -- pull back! Everyone pull back! We have to regroup!

And where have you been? We needed your help!

Don't berate me. I was trying to behead their forces by taking out Scholz.

Didn't work, I guess. Not a bad idea, though. We're outnumbered, and those oozes ...

What about Prevost? He hasn't shown up?

They're coming now.

I think.



You've got to be kidding.

Well, I don't think his people would last long the way they normally look ...



I see he didn't come himself.

No, but he sure sent his procurer.

Watch your people.



They're effective, I give them that.

Well? What are you all standing around for? Help them out!



You know, even with the Monsters, and Cona trying to revert oozes, the best we're likely to get is a stalemate. We're too evenly matched. We could be at this for days.

Yes, that occurred to me.



Which is why I want to take a small force around the top. Pass in front of the Linden and Stone estates in the hills, and come around the back of the old village.

Their front seems to be entirely focused in this direction, so it might be a chance to do a lot of damage from behind.

... Drusilla, is it? Why don't you come with me. Bring three or four of your, ah, people.



They got chummy real fast.

Are you surprised? They understand each other.



We're getting too close to Stone's territory ...

We'll have to get even closer. We need to cut through it.

urk

But Stone's remaining neutral, and is presumably in his castle diddling himself with his stoners --

-- what?



You aren't allowed here. Leave our territory immediately, or my people and I will have to do more of that.

Lord Stone?

You said you were staying out of this!



I said no such thing. I said I wasn't helping you.

JEROME, LORD STONE (PRESUMABLY)

Now get off our land and go back to the mess you've made.



I'm not doing anything you say!

Lord Prevost says you're the most useless house in Highpoint, and he's right!

Get them!!

No, don't!



Damn, they're fast.



Fall back!
Fall back!
We'll find another way around.



She's making a mistake.

That way's not going to lead her around. It's going to drop her back at the village in the middle of the Scholz lines, and it's going to go badly.

Come on. If we go west and cut very close to the Linden estate, we'll come out on the north road, and we can head back to our side of the Pight.

LET'S TAKE A BRIEF INTERLUDE IN SERENITY.



SPECIFICALLY, DR. CHAPMAN'S MEDICAL FACILITY, WHERE ...

You're releasing me?
I'm done?
I mean, I'm OK?

Perhaps it'd be better to say there is no longer any good reason to make you sit around in here.

It's very boring, after all.

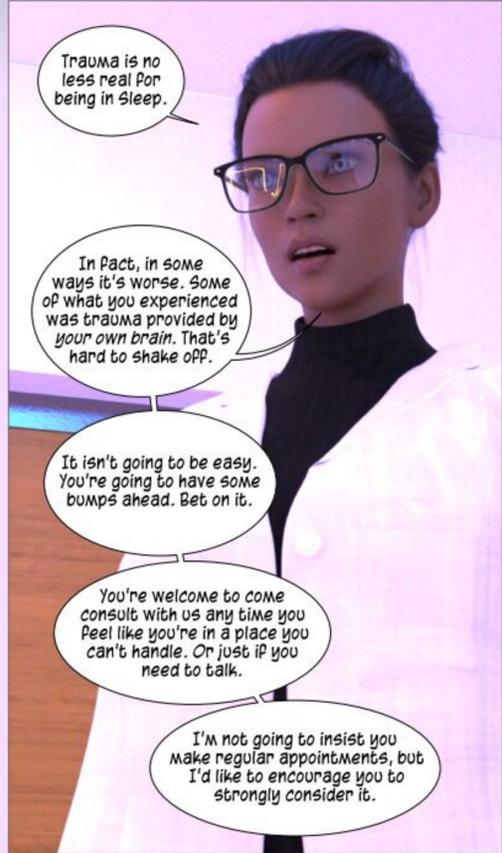
Physically, you're as "done" as we can get. Every tool we have says you're back to normal.

Mentally, though ...

IN CASE YOU'RE NEW: THIS IS EELI, WHO HAS SPENT MANY MONTHS AS A SEX DOLL.

DR. CHAPMAN, A4'S CRISIS PSYCHOLOGIST -- BASICALLY A4'S ONLY PSYCHOLOGIST ...

... AND HER APPRENTICE JOSIE, WHO IS TRYING HARD TO FILL THAT GAP.



Trauma is no less real for being in sleep.

In fact, in some ways it's worse. Some of what you experienced was trauma provided by your own brain. That's hard to shake off.

It isn't going to be easy. You're going to have some bumps ahead. Bet on it.

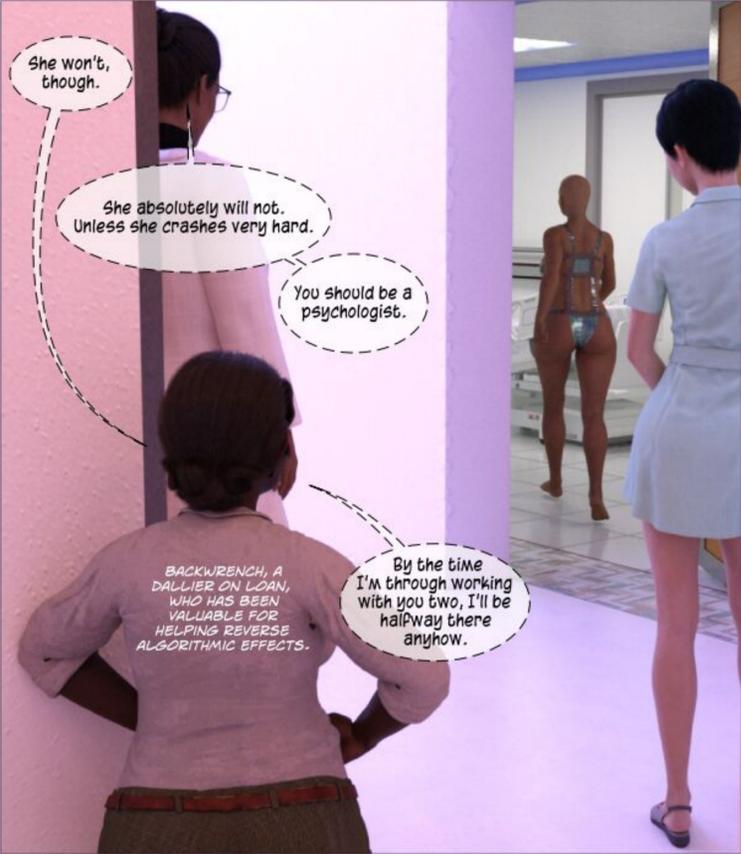
You're welcome to come consult with us any time you feel like you're in a place you can't handle. Or just if you need to talk.

I'm not going to insist you make regular appointments, but I'd like to encourage you to strongly consider it.



... I will.

Thank you, doctor.



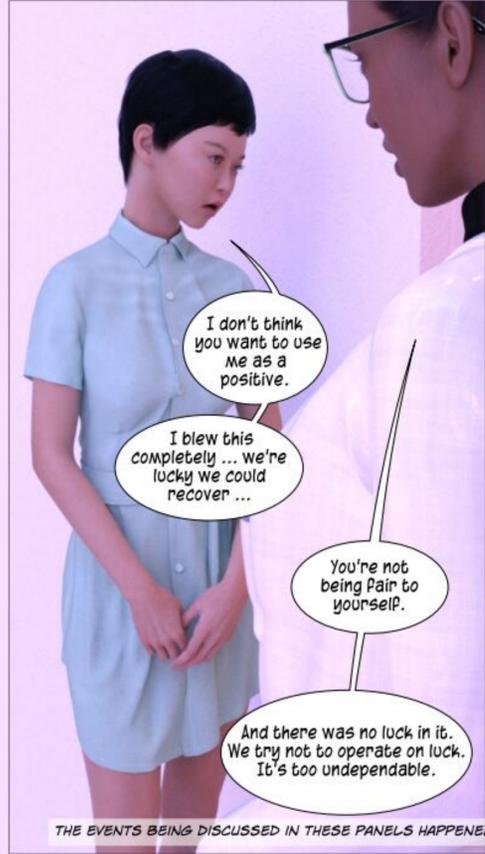
She won't, though.

She absolutely will not. Unless she crashes very hard.

You should be a psychologist.

By the time I'm through working with you two, I'll be halfway there anyhow.

BACKWRENCH, A DALLIER ON LOAN, WHO HAS BEEN VALUABLE FOR HELPING REVERSE ALGORITHMIC EFFECTS.



I don't think you want to use me as a positive.

I blew this completely ... we're lucky we could recover ...

You're not being fair to yourself.

And there was no luck in it. We try not to operate on luck. It's too undependable.

THE EVENTS BEING DISCUSSED IN THESE PANELS HAPPENED LAST ISSUE.



There was always a strong chance that you wouldn't be able to break the loop.

It's not easy, you know. None of this is easy.

I put you in because it was important for you to try -- and I'll do it again, because you need to keep trying. You aren't going to be able to do everything well right away. You know that.

In this case, I admit, I didn't know it'd be a first-person loop, where you were experiencing it as the patient. Actually, I can't recall that I've ever seen that before in practice. I expected you to be an observer.

Broke new ground, I suppose -- but also made it much more difficult.

... among other factors.



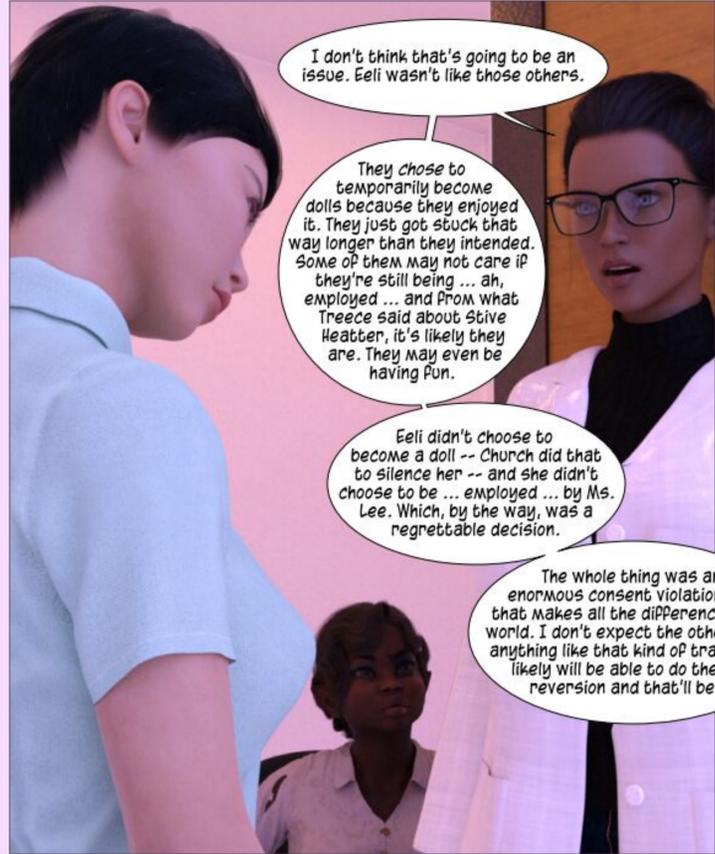
HMM.

You know, everyone has personal quirks, including some we don't know we have until we stumble upon them.

You think I don't have kinks? I have a closetful.

Being ashamed of them, avoiding confronting them, isn't a good answer. You have to process them so you know how to accommodate them in the future ... or work around them.

What worries me is we've got a whole closetful of dolls to fix ... Am I going to get into this same trouble every time?



I don't think that's going to be an issue. Eeli wasn't like those others.

They chose to temporarily become dolls because they enjoyed it. They just got stuck that way longer than they intended. Some of them may not care if they're still being ... ah, employed ... and from what Treece said about Steve Heatter, it's likely they are. They may even be having fun.

Eeli didn't choose to become a doll -- Church did that to silence her -- and she didn't choose to be ... employed ... by Ms. Lee. Which, by the way, was a regrettable decision.

The whole thing was an enormous consent violation, and that makes all the difference in the world. I don't expect the others have anything like that kind of trauma. We likely will be able to do the algo reversion and that'll be it.



Eeli, though ... I'm worried about her. She's going to try to avoid processing any of it until there's an explosion. I couldn't in good conscience keep her here ... but I hated letting her out.



Here we are!

Right where we're supposed to be.



Except you're not supposed to be here.

HANNE, OF NO HOUSE

HOLLY, FORMER ACOLYTE OF THE ORDER OF VISION

ALEX, LORD BONISOVA

The north road is closed to you for the duration. Back where you came.



What is it with all the useless houses?

Attack! Tear them down!

Oh! All right.



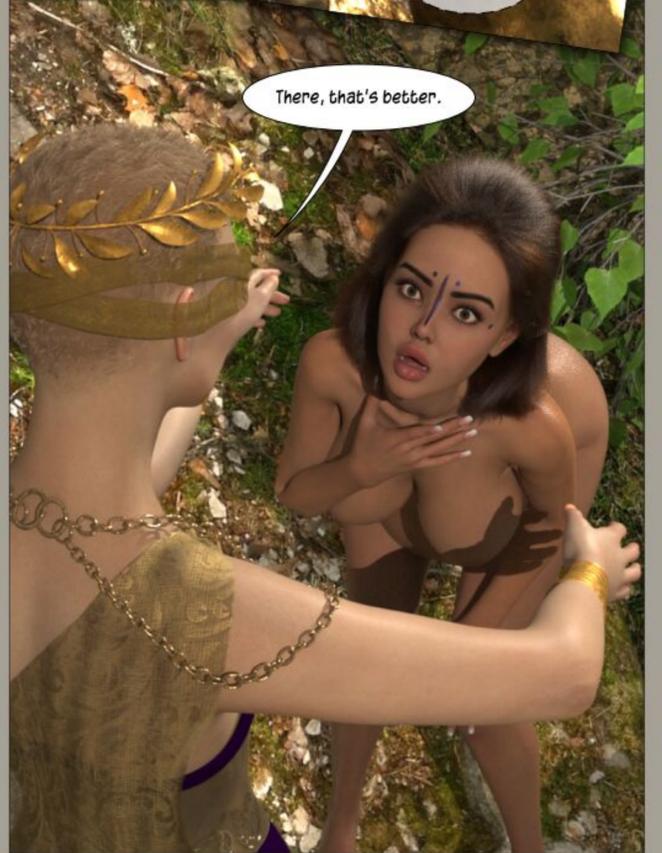
wugh!

Lumina boomina!

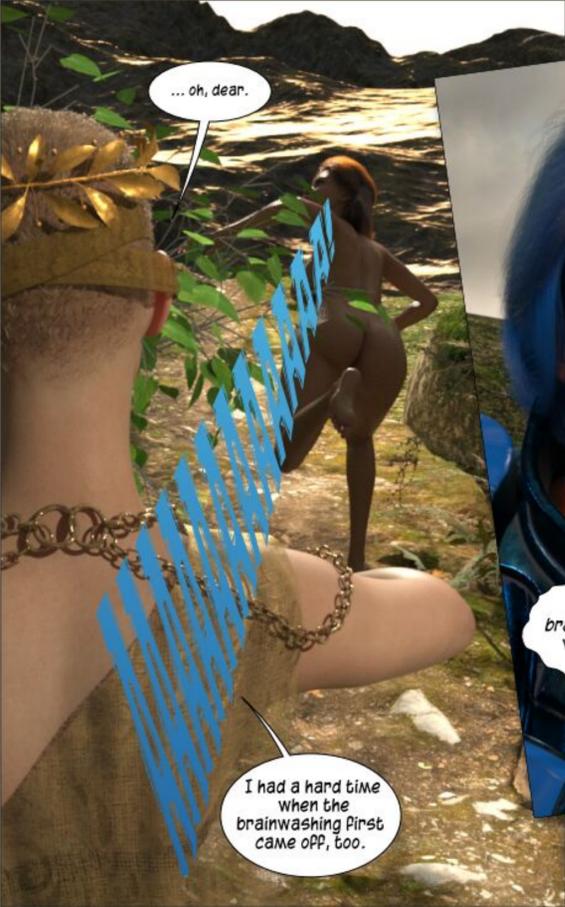


Hold still, now ... it's OK ... I'm not going to hurt you, and I know you're not going to hurt me ...

Oh ... you haven't been yourself for a long time, huh?



There, that's better.



... oh, dear.

I had a hard time when the brainwashing first came oPP, too.



None of our people are brainwashed! They are all with Prevost because they want to be!

Yeah, I know you have to tell yourself that.

You --! I'm going to break you myself!



Not a chance.



You know, when I was guarding Brendan I met all kinds of really obnoxious people, but there was only one person in Highpoint so horrible I wanted to beat her to a pulp the instant I met her.

You and your thralls clear out of here, or I don't think I'll be able to stop myself.



Move it, idiots!

Right in the direction we needed to herd them. Good job.

... how much of that was Por real?

All of it.

You have no idea, Alex.



MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE BATTLE ...



-- pant --
I think we got away.

... Ivy, we're going back to the estate. We have a clear route there. If we're Past.

Milady!

You can't just abandon your troops! You have a commitment!

I don't have a commitment to losing --!

-- sigh --

... OK. There's still the ones we kept back to guard the castle. Let's go send them out too. Maybe that'll tip the balance.



Nice and quiet. Good. No sign of any trouble ...

Uh, milady?



Oh, hey! We heard you'd left a skeleton crew here, so we thought we'd come tidy up a bit.

We took off everybody's Punny hats. They were thrilled.

Some of them were so thrilled they even volunteered to help out.



Your estate's PorPeit. We control the property.

Now: what happens next?



All right ...

Carefully now ... don't get excited ...



There!

Wuuuh?

Iris!
It's OK. Come on, we'll get you together.



And we just suit her up and put her back in again? To get taken out again?

Yeah, I know.

The numbers aren't changing. Scholz could convert ours, but she hasn't. We may not be giving her a chance to.

Corven ... well, she said she had some ways to take some of theirs out, but she's not using them. I don't know what she's doing.

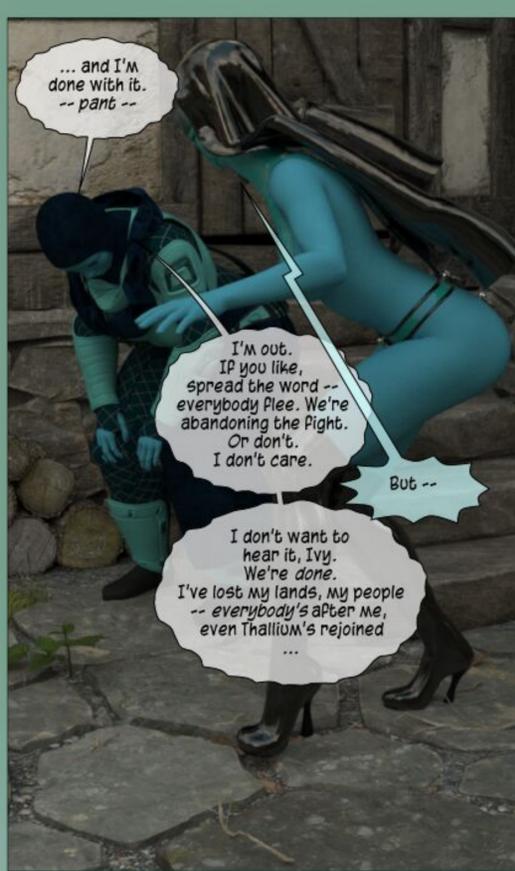
At this point it's going to come down to who collapses from exhaustion --



yeow!



THIS IS THE THIRD TIME IN THIS STORY WE'VE SEEN ARIANNA RUNNING FOR HER LIFE ...



... and I'm done with it. -- pant --

I'm out. If you like, spread the word -- everybody Plee. We're abandoning the fight. Or don't. I don't care.

But --

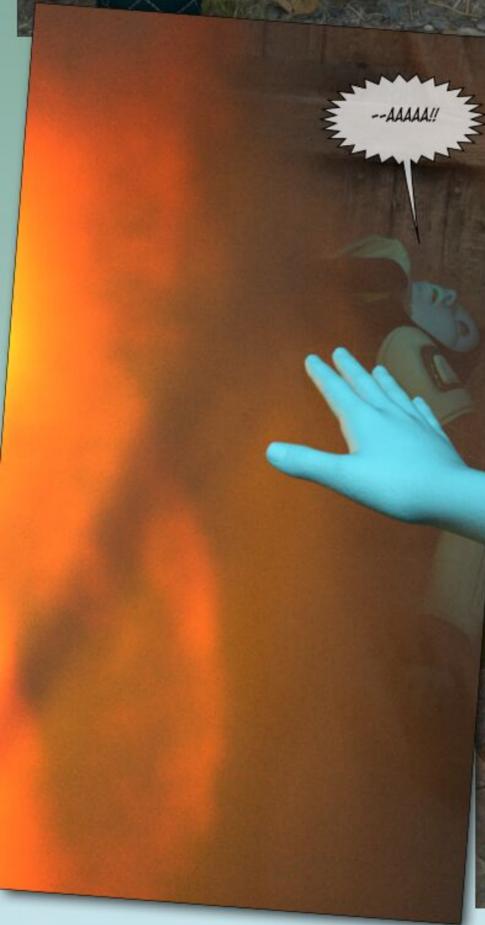
I don't want to hear it, Ivy. We're done. I've lost my lands, my people -- everybody's after me, even Thallium's rejoined ...



And it didn't even work! We lost it all and it didn't work!!

Remember? "Move now and Brendan will have to intervene." It was your idea.

The point was to get him out of hiding so I could take him, and he hasn't shown so much as an --



--AAAAA!!



Milady! Milady!!

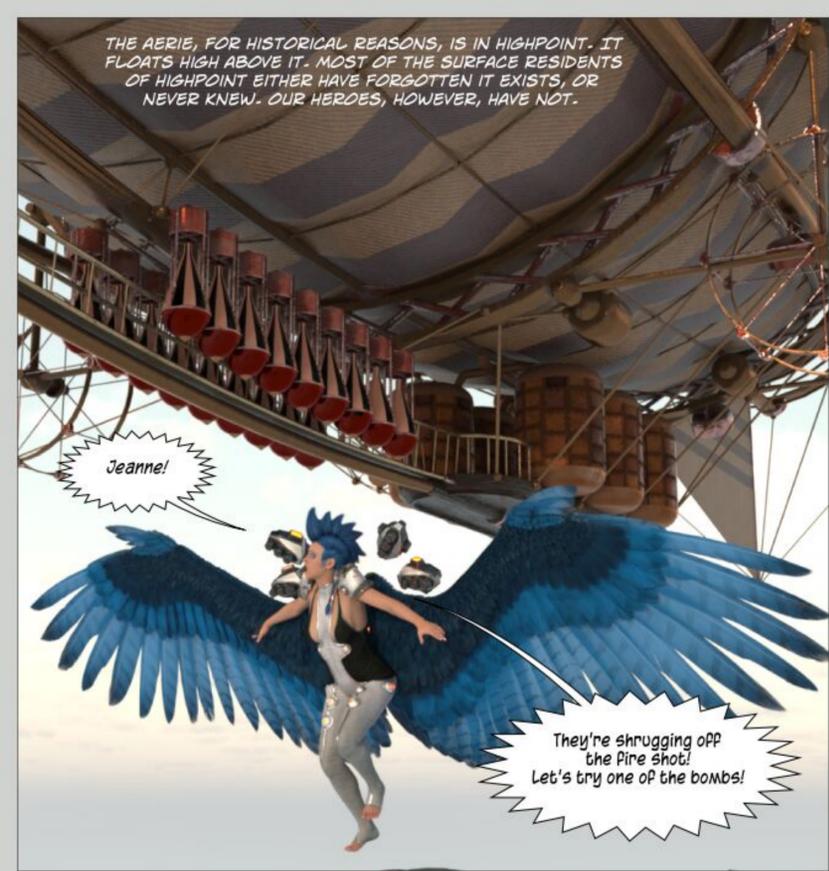
... Arianna!



GLYNIS

THOR

CINNAMON



THE AERIE, FOR HISTORICAL REASONS, IS IN HIGHPOINT. IT FLOATS HIGH ABOVE IT. MOST OF THE SURFACE RESIDENTS OF HIGHPOINT EITHER HAVE FORGOTTEN IT EXISTS, OR NEVER KNEW. OUR HEROES, HOWEVER, HAVE NOT.

Jeanne!

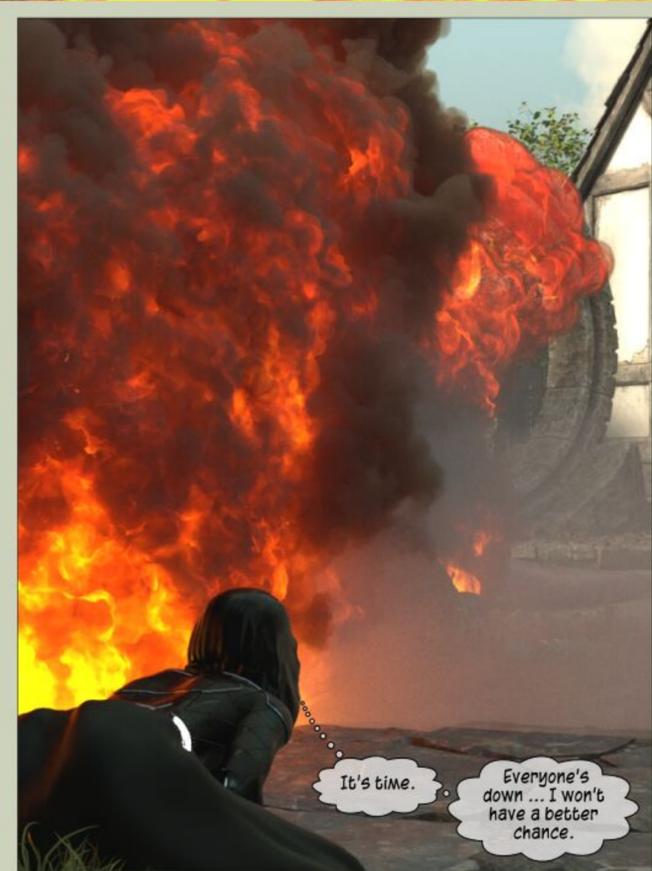
They're shrugging off the fire shot! Let's try one of the bombs!



You heard her.

Aye, aye.





It's time. Everyone's down ... I won't have a better chance.



First time I've tried modifying one of the procedures from Delp's notes ... but I'm certain it will work. There's no reason it won't work.

I knew it!



This is why you weren't actually doing anything! You never intended to!

You just wanted everybody to wear themselves out in a big fight so you could -- what? Take over?

And what do you think you're going to do about it?



YAAAAII!!



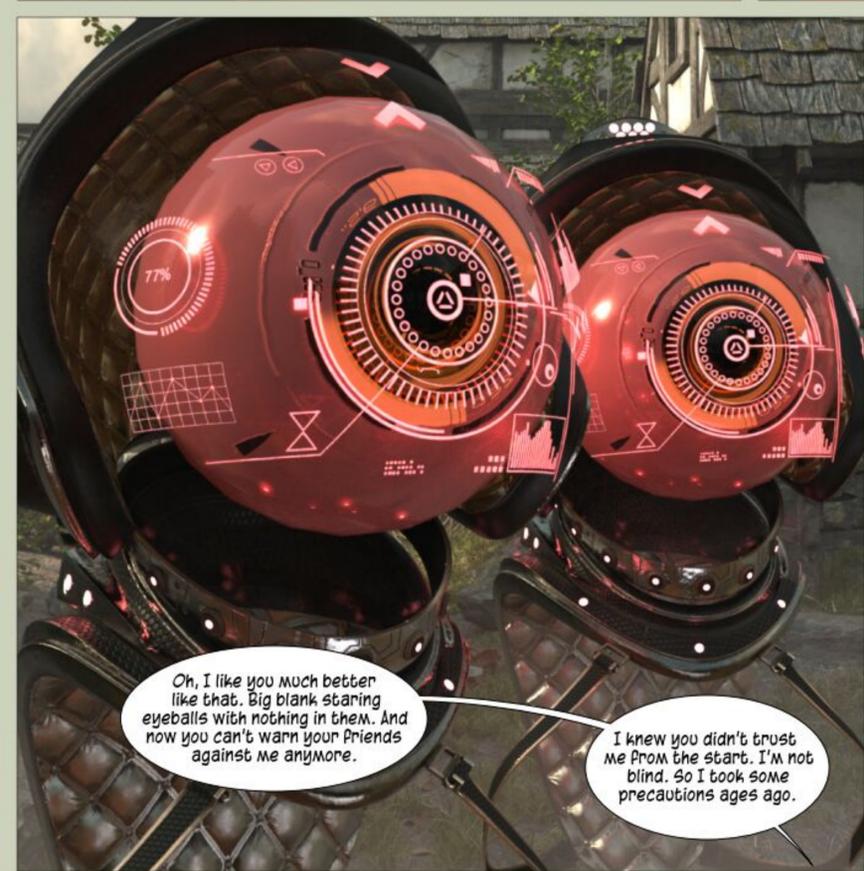
-- hrgh --

... some features of those helmets you didn't tell anybody about, eh?

I have a surprise too.



EEEEIIII



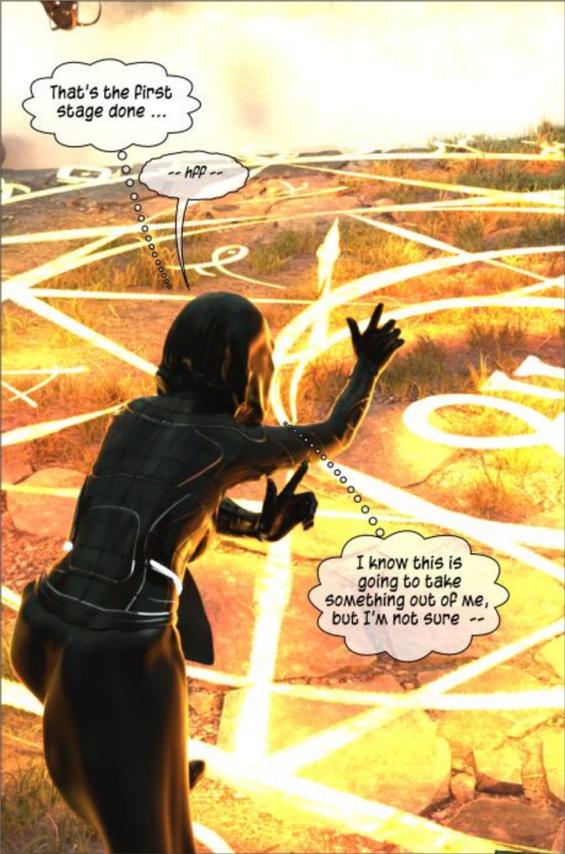
Oh, I like you much better like that. Big blank staring eyeballs with nothing in them. And now you can't warn your friends against me anymore.

I knew you didn't trust me from the start. I'm not blind. So I took some precautions ages ago.



Now, keep watch, stay out of the circle, and stop anyone from interfering with what I'm doing.

This takes concentration, and I don't have a lot of time.



That's the first stage done ...

-- hff --

I know this is going to take something out of me, but I'm not sure --



huaaa



-- kaP --

Uuhhr ... took a lot more than I expected ...

But it's up! It's working! It just needs the final activation ...



What is that?

Can't remember the last time I was on the ground ...

I don't know, but I don't like it.

One of us needs to go up and tell Jeanne to bomb it --



It's too late for that anyway!

You are on the verge of -- kaP -- something glorious!

urgh



YES! ha ha ha -- kaP --

I am transmitted! I am inescapable!

My will sweeps away everything around me! Nothing withstands!



uhh?





-- what?



no ... that's not ...



Oh, Drusilla.

Perhaps if you hadn't abandoned Me in the hills, I Might have had a better role For you.



Hurry!

We've got to make sure our troops get all the hats off the Schoizen while they're down ... and make sure they're taking care of Corven's people properly ...

They're probably already starting to recover, and we --



-- uuuuh?



hgrh



Uh-huh. An't havin none, skel.



Han't break all ... han't should even pull Honor ... skel Might catch.

Got get some with big slap ... know who, too.

Help Make slide, should help Pix.

A QUICK PAUSE IN SERENITY, WHERE LEYNA IS LOOKING FOR ...



Constance.



You know, nobody has ever called me "Constance." Unless they don't know me at all.

I probably don't know you at all.

What did people call you? Before you became a Conundrum?

... I don't remember.

What do you want?



I know you don't think so, but I do pay attention.

You helped with the banana woman ... you put Gina and Esperanza onto that asshole with the Flies, and when they got caught up in it, put me onto it ...

And the people who were victimized by Kaolin Delft say she was stopped by someone matching your description. Which is pretty distinctive.

What's your point?

I also remember what you tell me. You said at one point that you're not interested in permanent damage, that the Pun and games is only OK if it has an end condition ...

That same night, I asked you what your business was, and you said "If you ever figure that out, let me know."

I ask again ...



I want to offer you a job.

It's not a job that will make you Friends. A lot of people will hate you for taking it. But I don't think you care much about that.

I think it suits your aptitudes and inclinations. It's not a job many people would enjoy. I think you'll love it.

And, most importantly, you'll be a lot less bored than you are right now.

ANNA BANANA: #43. LORD OF THE FLIES: #46. KAOLIN DELFT: #52. THE CONVERSATIONS LEYNA ALLUDES TO WERE IN #46.



We are the rebirth of the Order of Vision!

You now have order, and I have the vision!



No one will stop us! -- kAP --

Anyone who wanders in here to interfere ... they will join us. Anyone who comes through the portal ... will join us! Instantly!

My will washes over this place! It cannot be resisted --

kAW



eh?

kAW





That's an interesting new look, Mirasol.

I think it really shows off your personality.

Let's lose this before we talk.

YAHHHH!!

-- hrrrk --
you
-- hpp --
you ...

Took a lot of you with it, did it?

I did wonder, when I saw it, if you had any idea what a parasitic thing you'd made.

It might have been interesting to let you run it until it completely drained you dry ... but you were doing too much damage to allow that. Jex was right to Fetch us.



Bethany ...

I haven't been "Bethany" in years, Mirasol. My name is Yvara.

Bethany is dead. You helped kill her.

It's probably best for you that she's dead, because if she were here right now, she'd destroy you.

I've moved past that.

But it's possible Yorie here hasn't. After all, you killed Lord Delp much more recently, and she's still not fully recovered.

Which is why whatever happens next has to be your decision.

I ... I don't want to destroy her. I don't think.

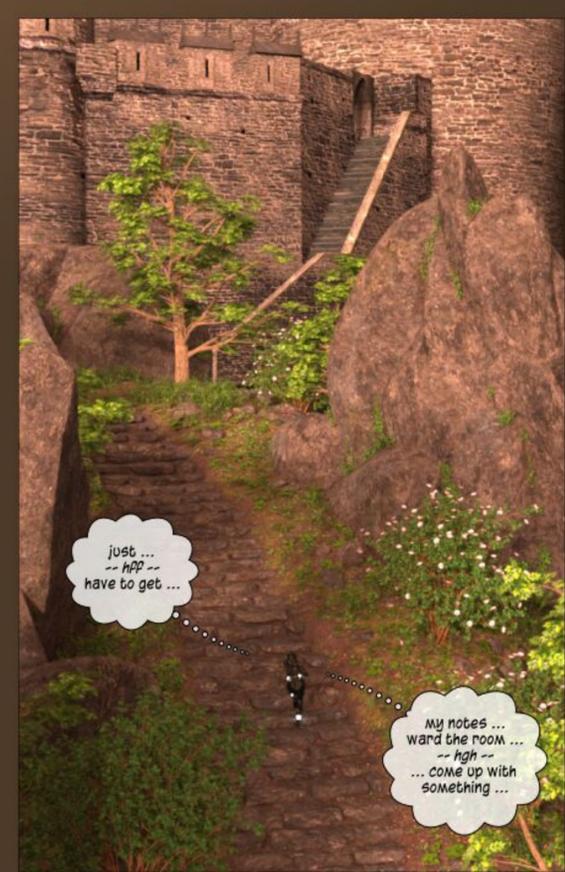
But I don't think she should be allowed to do something like this again ...

Good. I agree.

Let's follow her.

Follow?

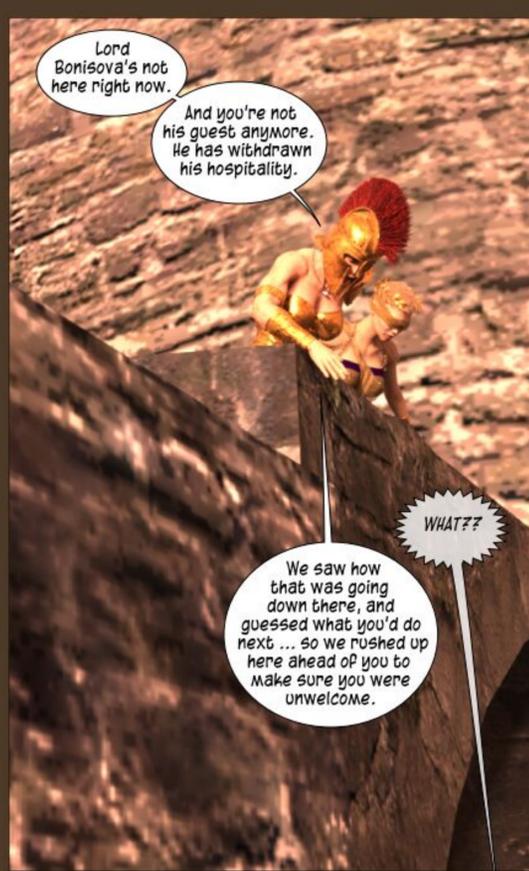
IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THIS, YOU NEED THE SCENE WHERE WE MET YVARA, IN #49.



Oh.

just ...
-- hpp --
have to get ...

My notes ... ward the room ...
-- hgh --
... come up with something ...



Let me in, damn it!

I'm a guest of Lord Bonisova!

Lord Bonisova's not here right now.

And you're not his guest anymore. He has withdrawn his hospitality.

WHAT??

We saw how that was going down there, and guessed what you'd do next ... so we rushed up here ahead of you to make sure you were unwelcome.

We've warded everything, so I wouldn't try to break in. You might bounce off.

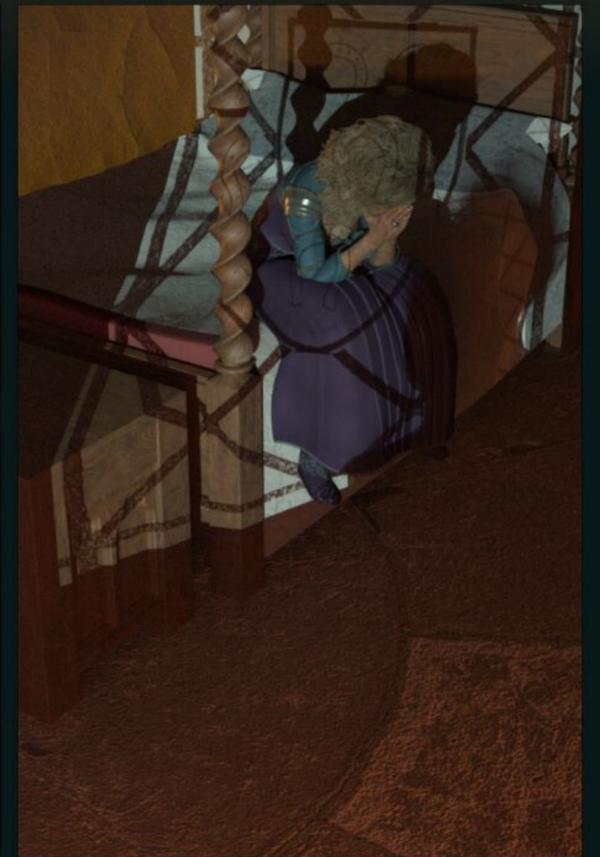
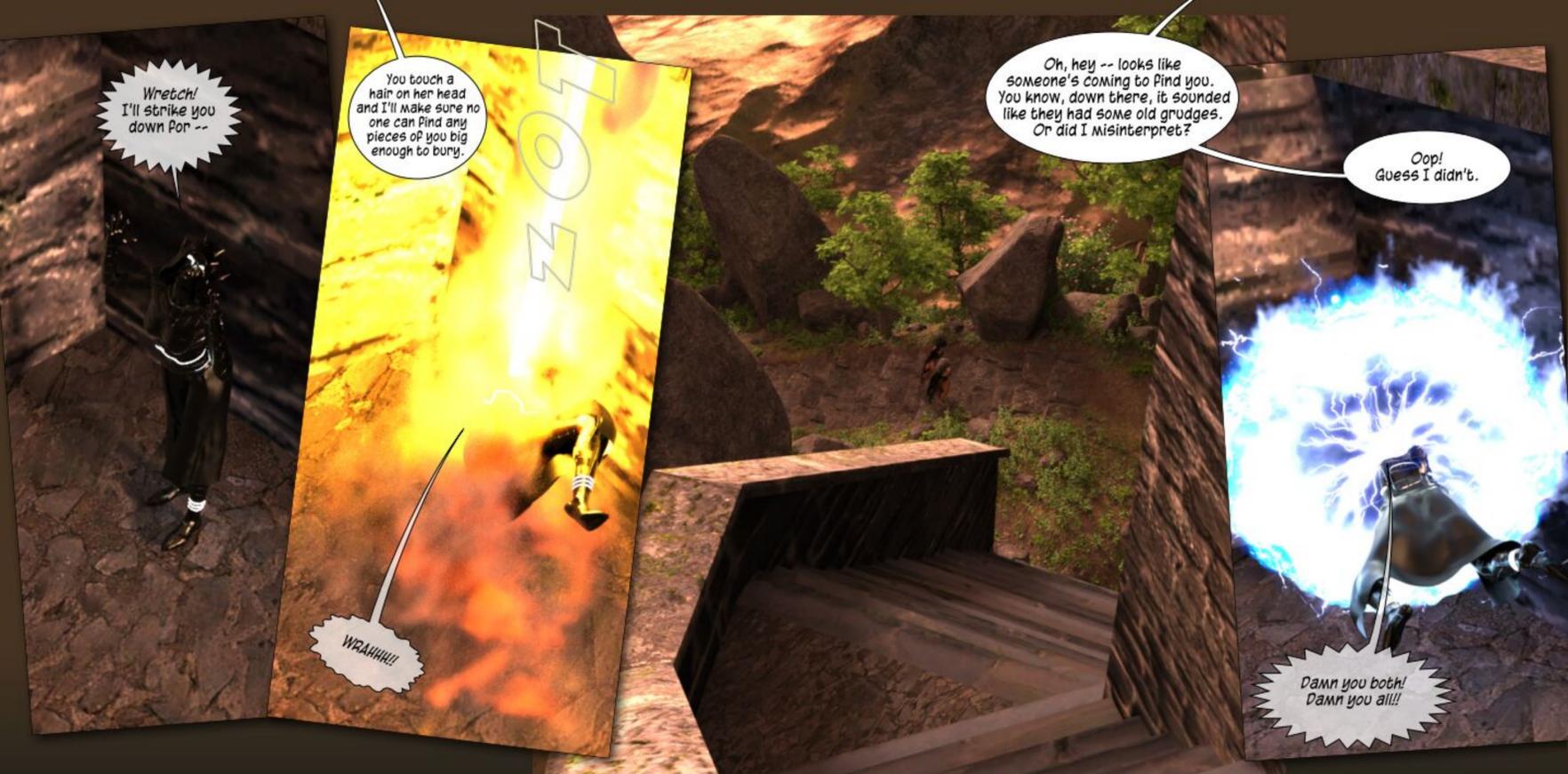
And we've burned all your notes and equipment, so you don't have any reason to want to come in anyway.

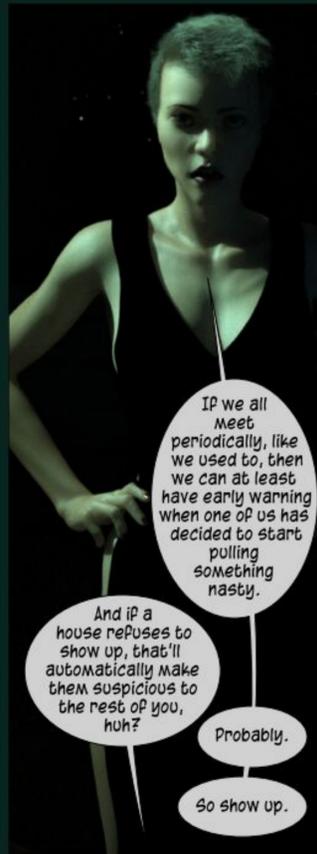
Holly!
You ungrateful child!

I raised you!
You're practically my daughter!!

Yes, well ... maybe I've finally outgrown you.

Mother.







... so she's just gone?

Mmm. Don't spread it around. I don't think her chamberlain wants it known.

Hallwell won't either. She's been leaning pretty hard on using the pale lady as a threat for things the Watch can't handle.

Don't sit on my bar, Jenee.

The thing is, now I need to find her even more. I was worried she was in trouble before -- now I know she is.



And I don't have the slightest idea where to look. "Carried off by bats" doesn't give me much. They could have taken her anywhere.

Bats ... hmm.



Remember when Sigi crashed into town like she'd been through hell, and she said she'd barely managed to escape that crazy purple lady with that castle way out on the cliffs?

Oh yeah. She did say something about bats.

I mean, it's a long way to carry somebody off -- that'd be about two weeks on foot -- but, I don't know, maybe they fly fast ...



Well, it's more to go on than I had two minutes ago. Can you tell me how to get there?

Oh, sure, that's easy. Go west until you run out of land and look for a big creepy castle.

But listen, if you're gonna chase this, be careful.

Word is, people who go into that castle don't come back out again. At least not as themselves.

ELSEWHERE ...



We gave you our answer last time. Corven. It hasn't changed.

#55

And your presence here is unwelcome. We have no set portals for a reason.



We have no interest in providing bodies for your misguided little battle, and we don't trust --

I'm not here about that!

It's too late anyway. The battle's over.



People are going to be looking for me.

I'm asking for shelter, nothing more. Asylum.

I need to hide a while in a place where they won't find me.



SPLIT



That's easily arranged.



No one will ever find you.

I hope you enjoy it.

NEXT: REMORSE