

SLEEPER SQUAD

GRAYTOWER IS NOT A WALLED CITY. THOUGH IT SITS AT A CROSSROADS AND PEOPLE OFTEN REFER TO THE "NORTH GATE," "SOUTH GATE," AND SO ON, IT HAS NO OUTER FORTIFICATIONS AT ALL. IT DOES HAVE A FEW WATCH TOWERS.



... that's not good.

How close are they?

Milady!

I was just about to come find you ...

BARONESS HALLWELL, DE FACTO KEEPER OF THE PEACE AND LEADER OF THE CITY WATCH.

Freja Pound me.

Where are they? Are they close?

See for yourself.

There are hundreds!

... and are those cannons?

I think so.

Go find Freja and the two of you assemble whatever defense you can. Quickly.

I need to go get other help. I don't think we can do this on our own.



WARNING: THIS IS GOING TO BE ONE OF THOSE ISSUES WHERE A LOT OF BITS OF PREVIOUS STORY COME IN FOR A LANDING. AT THE VERY LEAST, YOU SHOULD HAVE READ #58 FIRST.



She's not seeing anyone --

Don't give me that, Tam!



She's not here, is she? She's not in the tower at all.

I bet she wasn't really here the last three times I asked either.

Look at yourself! I've never seen your hair before. You always have on makeup. You wouldn't be down here looking like this if she were around.

Tell me the truth, Tam.



... she's missing.

She's been missing for weeks. I think kidnapped.

Her daughter went out to find her and she hasn't come back either.

I don't have anything for you.



We'll just have to come up with something ourselves, then.

Tam, if she shows up again --

-- and if we survive this --

-- she and I are going to have a talk.

This is not how it was supposed to work.

I know.

# WITCH WARS

**PART ONE: THE FALL OF GRAYTOWER (SPOILER!)**



They're already this far in?

Don't let them get any further! Drive them back! ... somehow.

EEEEEE!



OK ... you may be big, but ... uh ...



WUAAAAAAAAHH!



Not good.

We're not going to be able to stand up to them physically. Do you think there's anything for our staves to work on?

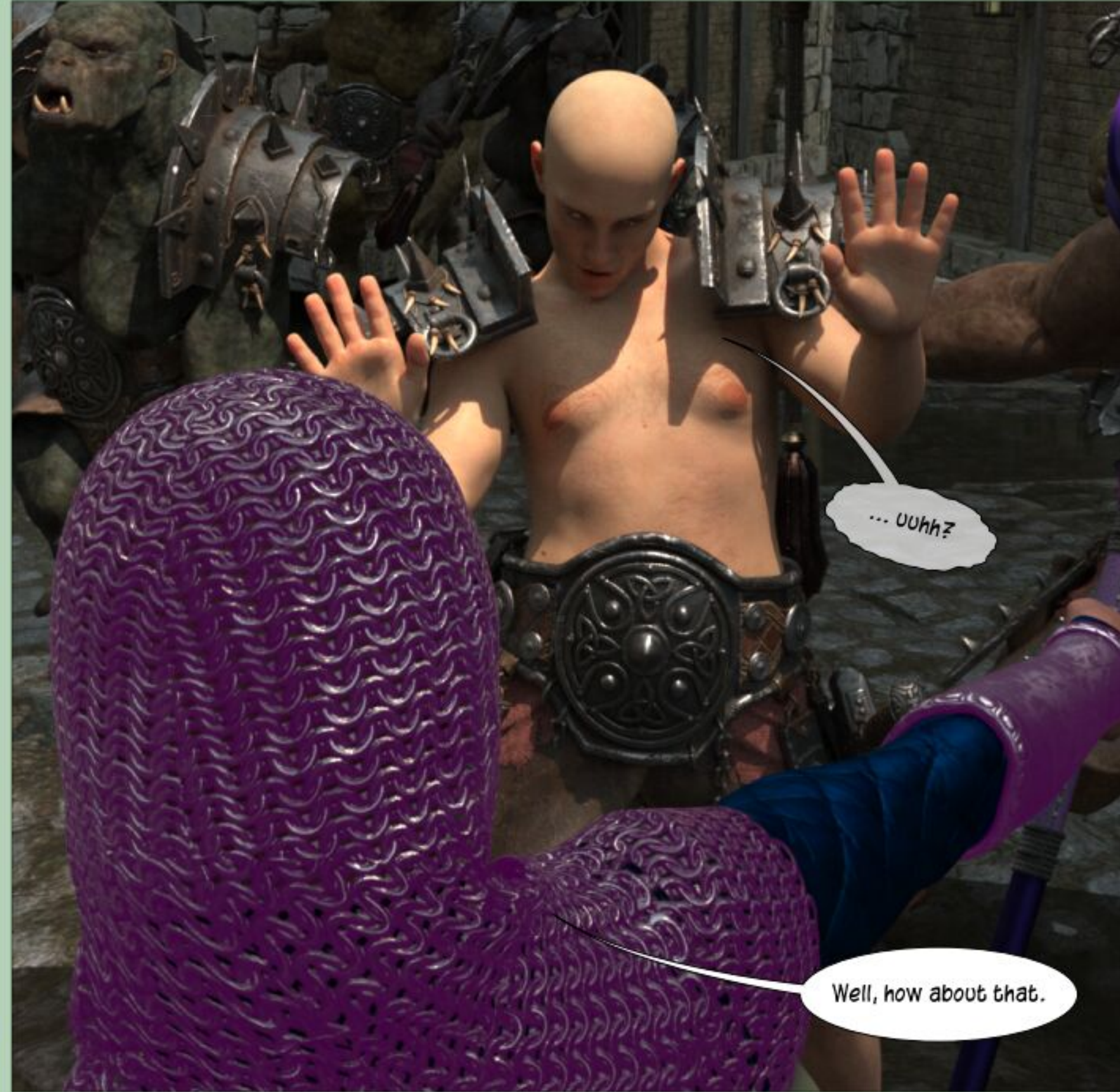
Can't hurt to try.

Use your staves! Don't try to fight them directly!

THE CITY WATCH HAS MAGIC-CANCELLING STAVES AND MAGIC-RESISTING ARMOR.



HURRRR!



... Uuhh?

Well, how about that.



AAAAAAAAAAAA!

Hey, wait --



Now, don't be like that.

I know it's scary, but don't worry -- I'll make you a troll again right away.

hrk!



THIS IS BRAGA, THE LEADER OF THE TROLL ARMY. BUT YOU KNEW THAT. YOU MAY NOT HAVE KNOWN HER NAME, BUT THEN, NOT MANY DO.

Destroy those staves!!

Deal with them, but deal with the staves first!

LAST ISSUE, THE EGRETS CALLED HER THE "GREEN LADY." THAT WILL SUFFICE AS WELL. TRUTH IS, BRAGA DOESN'T MUCH CARE WHAT YOU CALL HER.

MEANWHILE, IN THE "MOUSEHOLE" ...



Hura, we can't go out there! If the City Watch can't handle them, what can we do?

We've got to try! If we sit in here, we're just waiting for them to take us!

We could still get out. We can dodge those trolls easily. Leave the city ...

The City Watch can't fight worth a shit.

That's your idea? Just abandon everybody?

Why not? None of them would stand up for us. You know how the humans treat us ... Puck it, let the trolls have the place!

-- ahem --



I don't give a damn how some humans treat you ... as far as I'm concerned you're just as much citizens of Graytower as anybody else.

And better than some I could mention.

This is an all-hands. Everybody who can defend the city needs to, right now. We're in danger of being overpowered, and we need all the help we can get.

So all of you come with me, and grab anybody else you can find on the way.



No, no! Don't let them outmaneuver you!

You're three times their size! Pick them up and throw them into a wall!

It's hard to find good help, isn't it?



Fortunately, I may be able to assist with --

Who are you, and do you dress like that on purpose?

-- er -- I'm Baron Entrich, and I run one of the corners of this lovely city.

A fairly dismal corner, let it be said, but at least those of us in it have the ability to tell which way the wind's blowing.



We feel it would be better to offer our cooperation ... We don't particularly care if you're in charge, especially under the circumstances ...

Ah. You're one of those.

Tell me, what are you the baron of? Who made you a baron?



I don't like people pretending to be things they aren't. No matter whether it's people playing at being monsters without actually wanting to go the distance ...

... or people acting like they have power and position they're not entitled to.

I know how to solve the Pake Monsters. I just make them actual monsters.

But I'm not sure what to do about someone like you.

Now, hold on --



Let's try this for now. I'm in a hurry.

You might be able to make yourself useful this way, at least.

RAAAAA!

HGRNK?

Oh, now what?



ARRRRRR!!

In your face!

Get 'em!

WUH!

SMASH YOU, POG!

Not at that speed you won't.



RHUUURR!

Gotcha!



Don't just stand there -- help them out!

GRNKH



Need to start repopulating the ranks. Past. Some of those animals can actually fight.

Unlike you idiots. Why they'd make you guards and not train you adequately ...

Still, I'm sure you'll do much better as a troll --

-- hmm.



Oh, I see. It's your outfit. Clever.

I wonder if that explains those horrible colors ...

Well, we'll just have to take it off. Then we'll --



HRRRAAAAA!

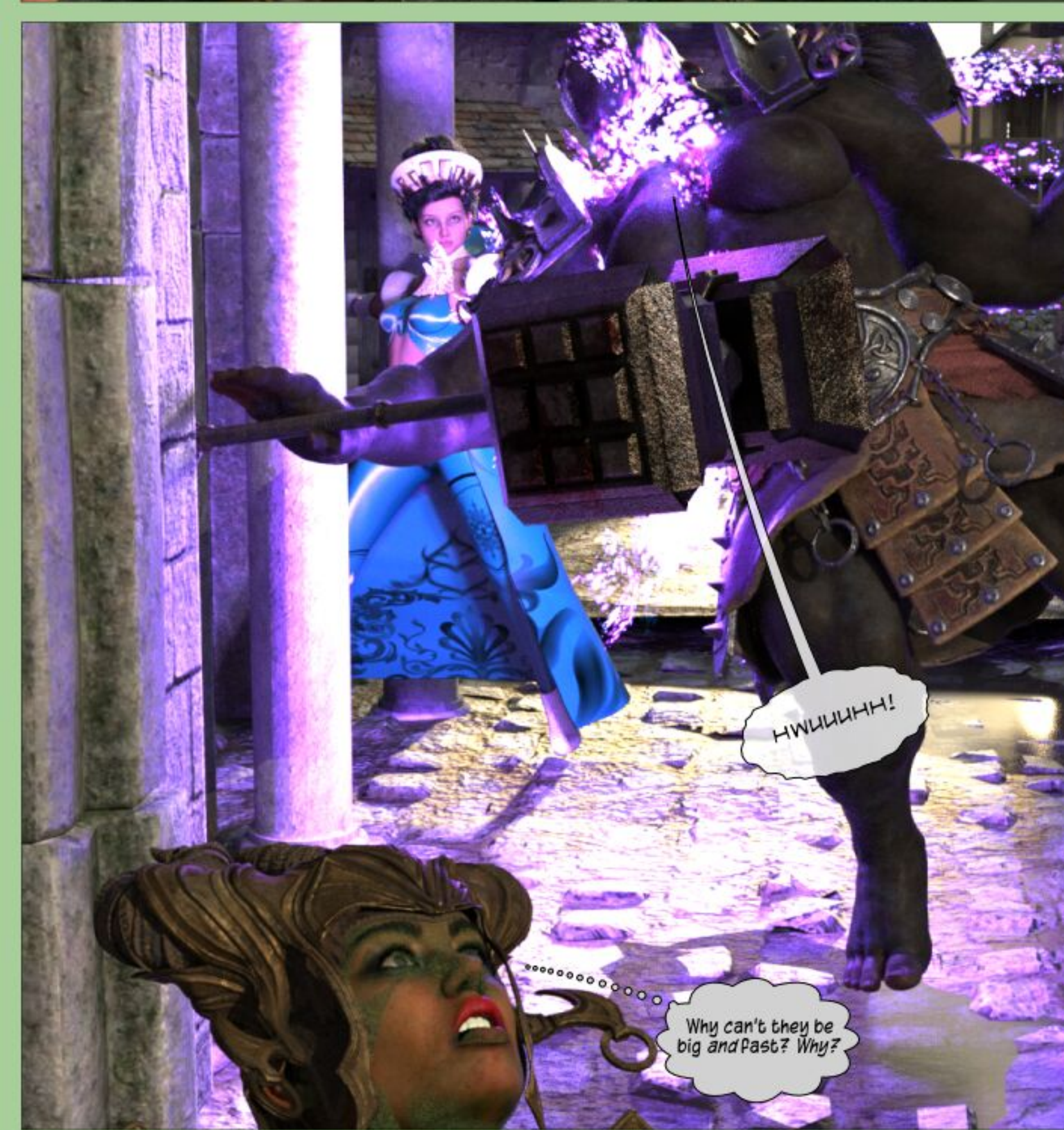
YAAAAH!



How about it? Are you ready to bleed?

Get her away from me, stupid!

LYUH



HWWLHH!

Why can't they be big and Past? Why?



BITCH!!

I owe you a lot of grief for doing that to me!

Stop hitting me!!

No.

Keep hitting her! She can't do anything if you keep her off-balance!

Yeah? I'll hit her until she pucking comes apart --



WUAAAAA!

-- whoa.



I don't know what the hell you are, but I'm not interested --

FWOM

She's getting away!



Don't lose her!

I don't believe this.



Good, somebody who's doing exactly what he's supposed to be doing.

We're about to have company. Keep them busy while I get her away from here.



All right, puppy. I know you can't just make things happen any time you want ... I'm sure it takes a lot of effort ...

... but we have a problem. If we're not careful, these stupid people are going to win, and then everything we've done will be wasted.

And you might be the only one who can fix all this at once.

So I'm going to need you to try really hard, OK?

I know you can do it.



RHUUURRR!

Damn, bigger than the trolls?

... This is gonna be rough.

Don't! Go after them. See them going up those stairs? You've got to catch them and stop whatever they're going to do.

I'll take care of this one.



Hey there ... easy ...

I'm not going to hurt you ...

... you just need to hold still for a second, OK?



... but I liked that!

You did?

Uh ... sorry?



Have you got it, puppy? I think you have.

I can't tell how much you understand, but I think it's more than you let on.

Now, I need you to be a good girl for me and do this.

It's important.



Hey!! Stop where you are!

Do it now.

You've got it coming!



... good puppy.



You did such a good job! I'm so proud of you!

Now everybody's a troll!

... including the ones who were wearing that special armor. Hmm.

We'll have to look into that later, once we --



-- MMRgph!!

You horrible, horrible creature!

I'm not going to let you do this to MY --



WAAAAAGH!!!

Try harder.



Graytower belongs to me now, and nobody is going to get in the way of that.

Especially not some fake noble in silk pants who can't fight to save her life.

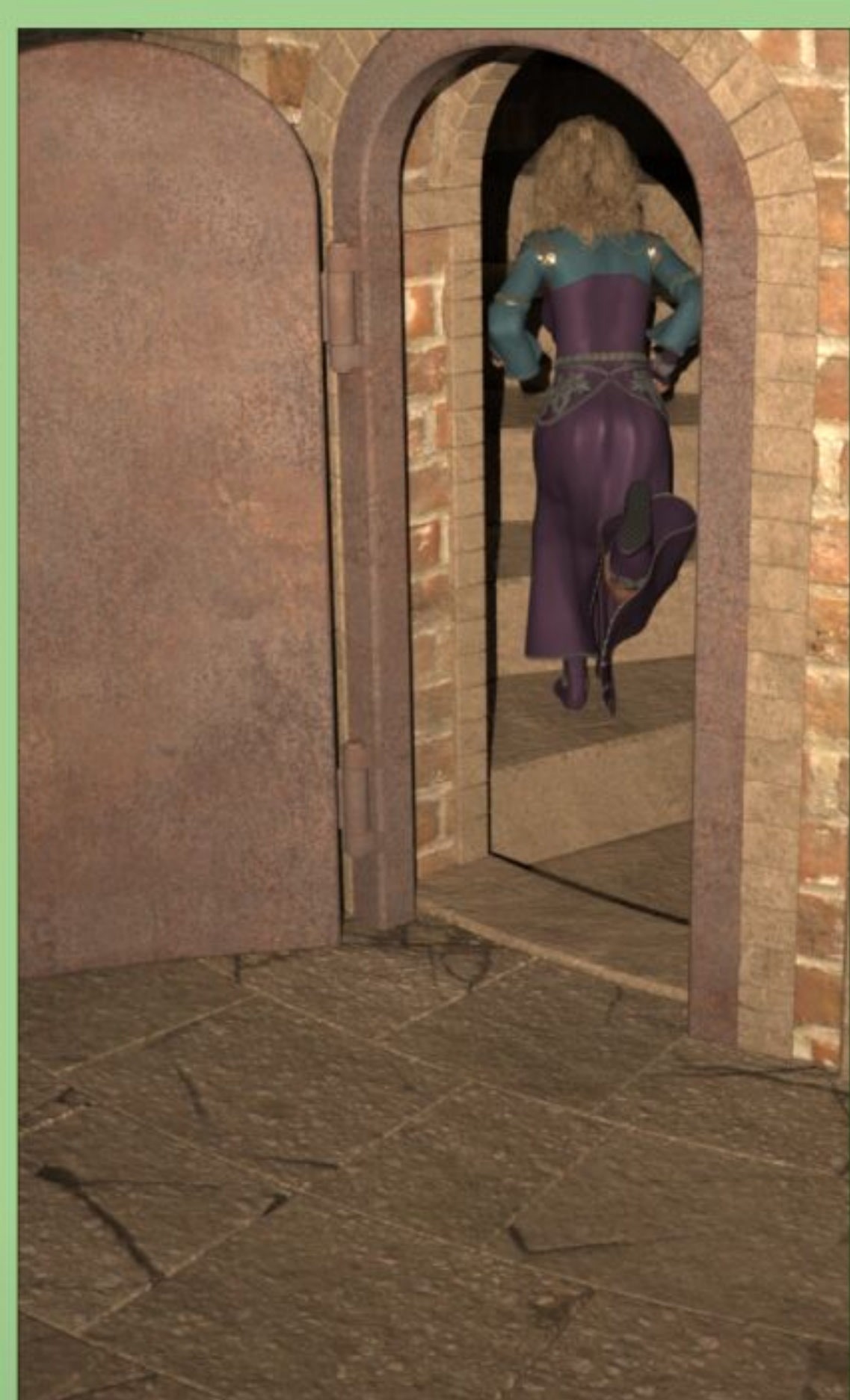


NOT GONNA MAKE HER TROLL?

I don't think so. Not right away, at least.

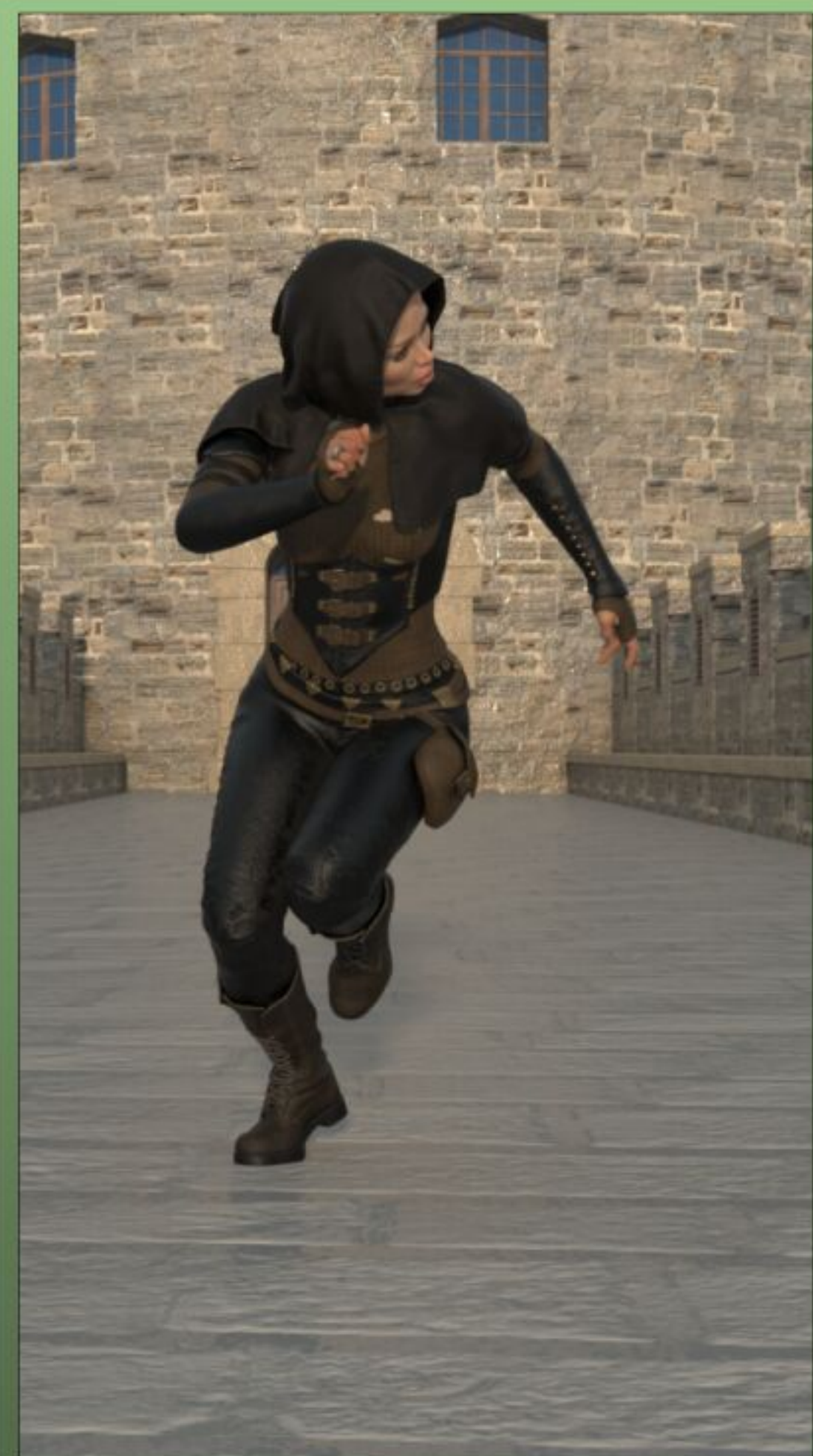
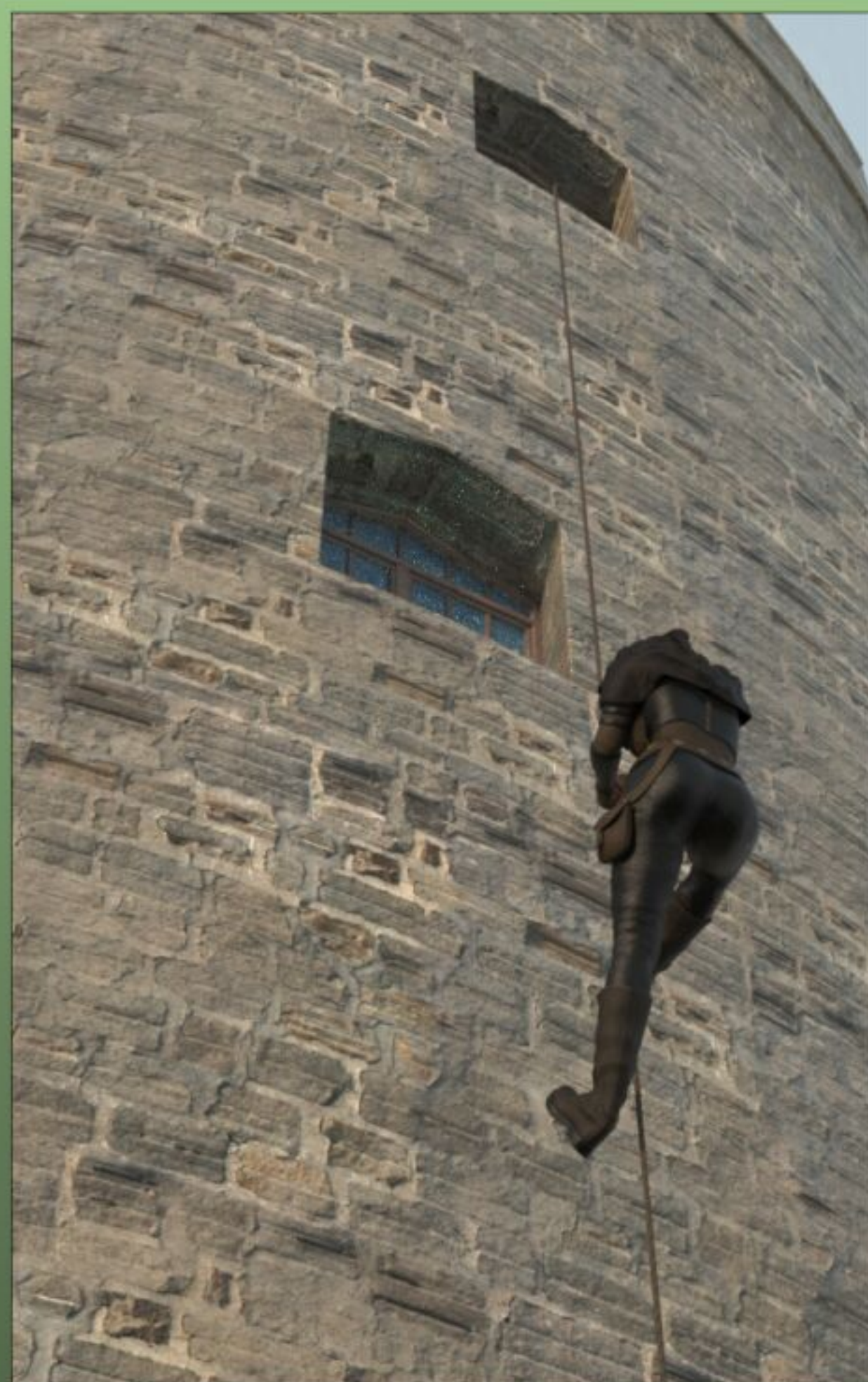
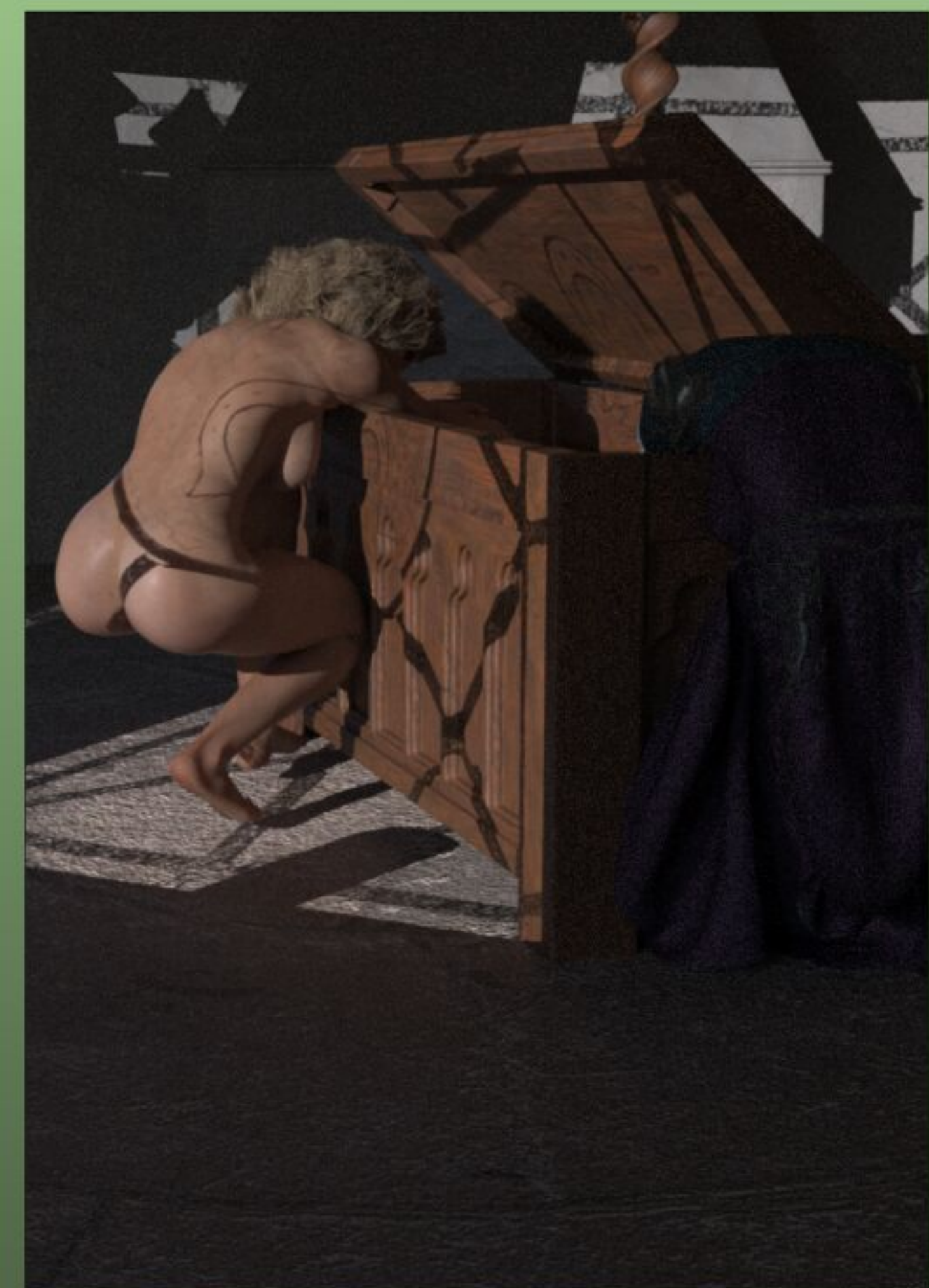
I have something better in mind. Maybe.





... If you can't break them down, then go get one of the cannons! That's what we brought them for!

But one way or another, we are getting into that tower!



A FEW HOURS LATER.

... it's not even a very nice throne.

Definitely going to have to redecorate ...

SO TROLLS GO HOME NOW? CITY ALL DONE.

Why, Chully! I didn't realize you were impatient to go back to your piddly little cave. I thought you liked being my lieutenant.

SURE ... BUT CITY NO GOOD. TOO MUCH STONE. TOO MUCH WALL. NOT GOOD FOR TROLL.

Yes, I realize. That's why I had you set everybody up in campsites outside the city.



Eventually everyone can go live in their caves or Pam dirt or whatever you want, and this city will be a ghost town ... but not yet.

We need a buffer to the south. We need to claim that space, across the hill country, maybe all the way to the desert. Empty it. Otherwise some of the hill folk will get ideas.

CAN'T GO OUT. NEED BE HERE. KEEP CITY.

Actually, I was thinking about not sending a Force at all. A different approach might work better.

Now, see, that's why you're my lieutenant, because you're so smart.

No, the city won't hold without me, not yet ... and I can't spare you to lead a Force either.

It'll take a little time to set up, but I think it'll be worth it.

And I think she'll be the right person for it ... with some alterations.

# PART TWO: AN UNEXPECTED POWER

A FEW DAYS LATER

NOT FAR SOUTH OF GRAYTOWER, THE HILL COUNTRY BEGINS. THE LAND IS DIFFICULT HERE, ROCKY AND MOSTLY TREELESS. THE HILL COUNTRY ISN'T ANY LESS POPULATED THAN THE REST OF THE YARDS, BUT THE RESIDENTS ARE SCATTERED WIDELY. THERE ARE VERY FEW TOWNS. A "VILLAGE" MAY JUST BE TWO OR THREE HOUSES. PEOPLE HAVE TO FEND FOR THEMSELVES HERE.

FORTUNATELY, THERE ARE VERY FEW ROADS, ESPECIALLY NORTH-SOUTH ROADS, BECAUSE THOSE WOULD ONLY DEAD END AT THE DESERT ANYWAY. SO THERE ARE VERY FEW TROUBLEMAKERS WANDERING THE ROADS.



BUT THERE'S ALWAYS GOT TO BE AN EXCEPTION.



... Monster ...  
name ...  
can't ...  
Monster ...



Uh ...  
Well met,  
stranger!  
... I hope.  
Forgive Me, but  
your companions  
are a bit ... ah ...  
May I know your  
name and your  
business here?



name ...  
My name is ...  
hhhhh ...  
... My name  
has been taken  
from me.

and My  
business here is  
My own.



Dool!  
Hara!  
Bar the doors!!

There's a  
witch and two  
trolls out here!

that wasn't  
very nice.

well, go on, you  
two, catch him!



Burt?  
What is all this noise?



AGRAH!

hold still,  
now --



-- UUNH!

hhhh ...  
was that  
supposed to ...

... should it  
Peel like that?  
I ...



HARA!

She's gone!

What did you do to her??



... Monsters ...  
all Monsters ...

44444444



ooooohrrr

more ...  
need more ...

... so strong ...

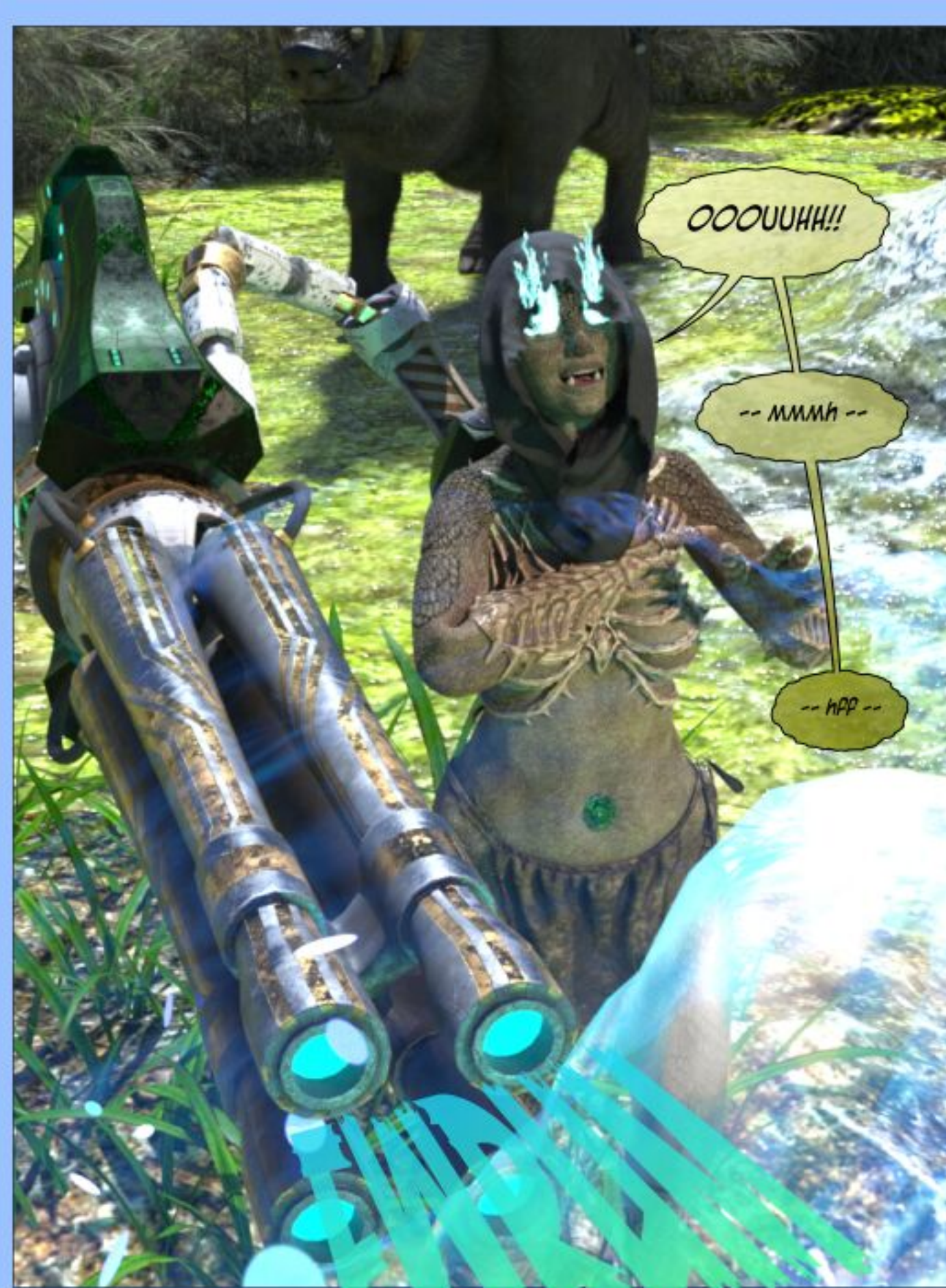


Piss off, you lumps!

Give it up! You're slow as dirt!

More ... a little more ...

... Yes!



OOOUHHH!!

-- MMMH --

-- HRP --



... all right, then.

on to the next one.

A FEW MORE DAYS LATER

THE HILL WITCHES ARE CONSIDERED A PERIL BY MANY TRAVELLERS. THEY TEND TO LIVE ALONE, AND THEY TEND TO BE HIGHLY ANTISOCIAL. SOMEONE WHO DISTURBS A HILL WITCH, EVEN BY ACCIDENT, MIGHT WELL END UP TRANSFORMED INTO SOMETHING UNPLEASANT. DAMSON AND GREENGAGE AREN'T TYPICAL HILL WITCHES, THOUGH. FIRST, THEY ENJOY EACH OTHER'S COMPANY -- SO MUCH SO THAT THEY NOW LIVE TOGETHER. SECOND, MOST HILL WITCHES COULDN'T CARE LESS WHAT HAPPENS TO THE OTHER RESIDENTS OF THE HILLS, BUT THESE TWO OCCASIONALLY GET CONCERNED.



WE MET DAMSON AND GREENGAGE IN #44.



Probably too late for this one too ...

Not sure about that. I hear something moving down there.

Something big --

EEEEEE! Get away from me!!



stop running.

No, don't! I--

WUAAGH!

HEY!!



What do you think you're doing?

I'm sending them off. to be monsters.

everyone will be monsters. she says so.

You're going to undo that, right now.

no, I'm not.



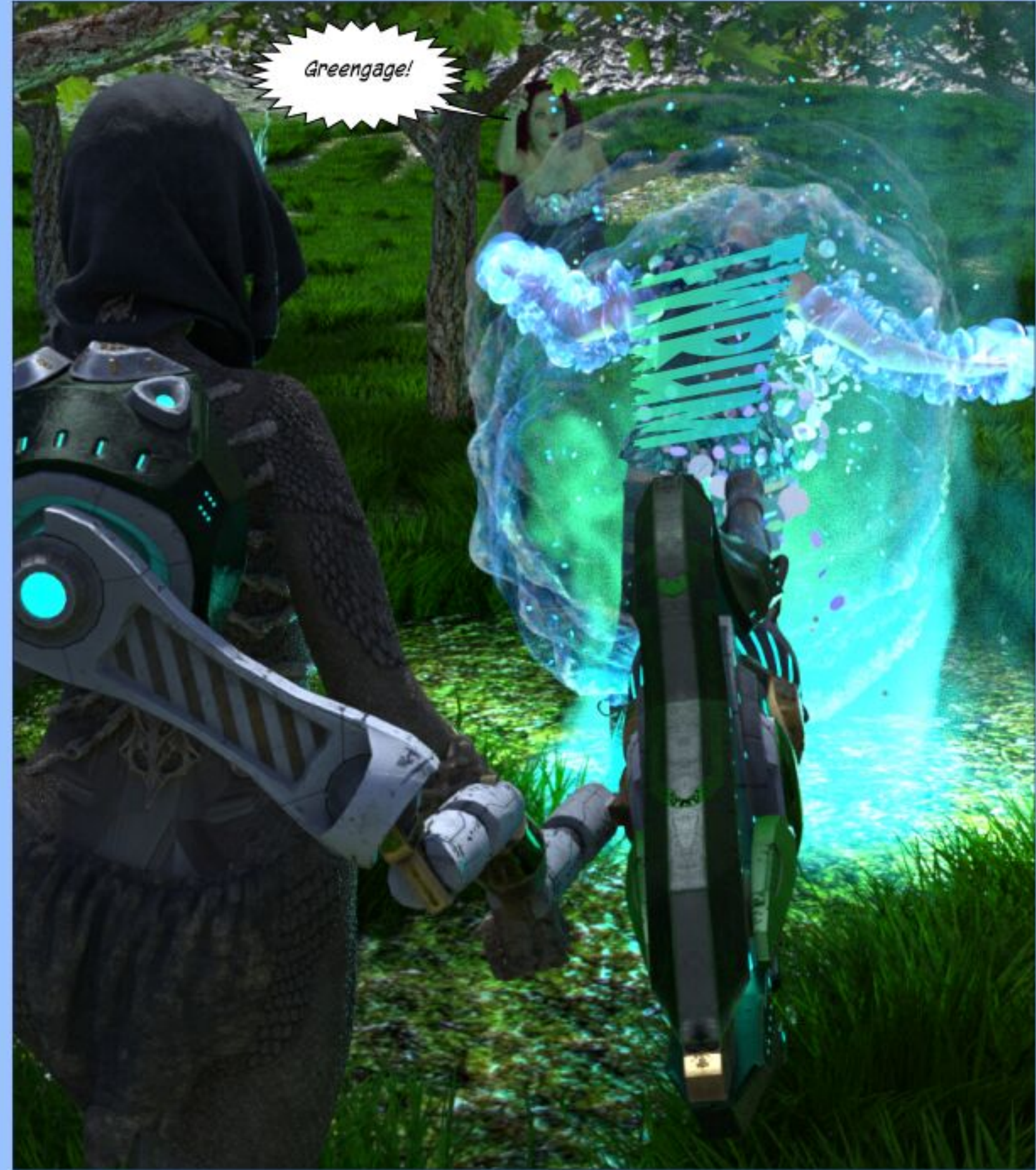
I wasn't offering you a choice.



What?

things like that mostly don't work on me.

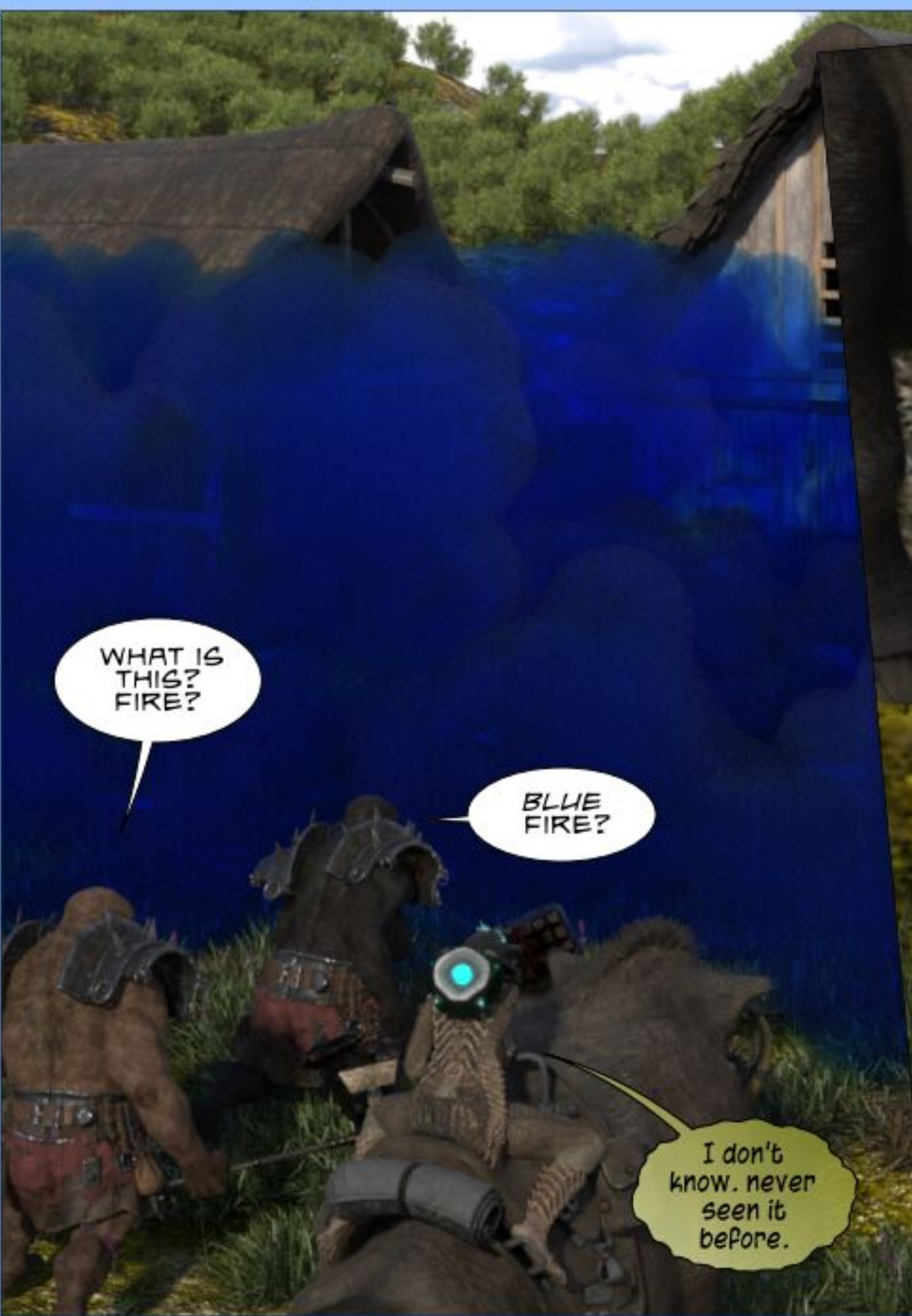
it's my secret monster power.



Greengage!



I'm not leaving you behind. don't worry.



WHAT IS THIS? FIRE?

BLUE FIRE?

I don't know. never seen it before.



if it is a fire, it can't have been going this long. whole place would have burned down.

can't see past it ... maybe nobody here --



MMA!

OOOO!

-- oh.

well, that won't keep them from ...

OOGH



OOOHHHHH

MMMM

hey!

stop that, both of you!

that's not what we're here for!

-- giggle --



What are you here for? There are new rules now, you know.

Look how peaceful it is here! Look how happy everybody is!

You're not trying to spoil the fun, are you?

MMA!

OOO!



I bet you are. You look like you're absolutely no fun.

Maybe we can work on that together, though --



Whoops! Or not!

OK, 'bye now!



uuurrhg

that ...

Why do I ... is it because I didn't get her? it only feels good if I don't miss?

she didn't really leave ... she's still making the smoke ... I've got to take care of her first ... then drag those stupid trolls out or something --



Hi!

-- waaaah!

That's a cute gun. Did whoever made it for you warn you that you're the battery?

Maybe you should do something less exhausting. And more fun. Like giving up.



YAAAA!

can't give up ... I'm a monster ... she says I'm a monster ...

it's all going to be monsters ... monsters everywhere ... can't stop it ...

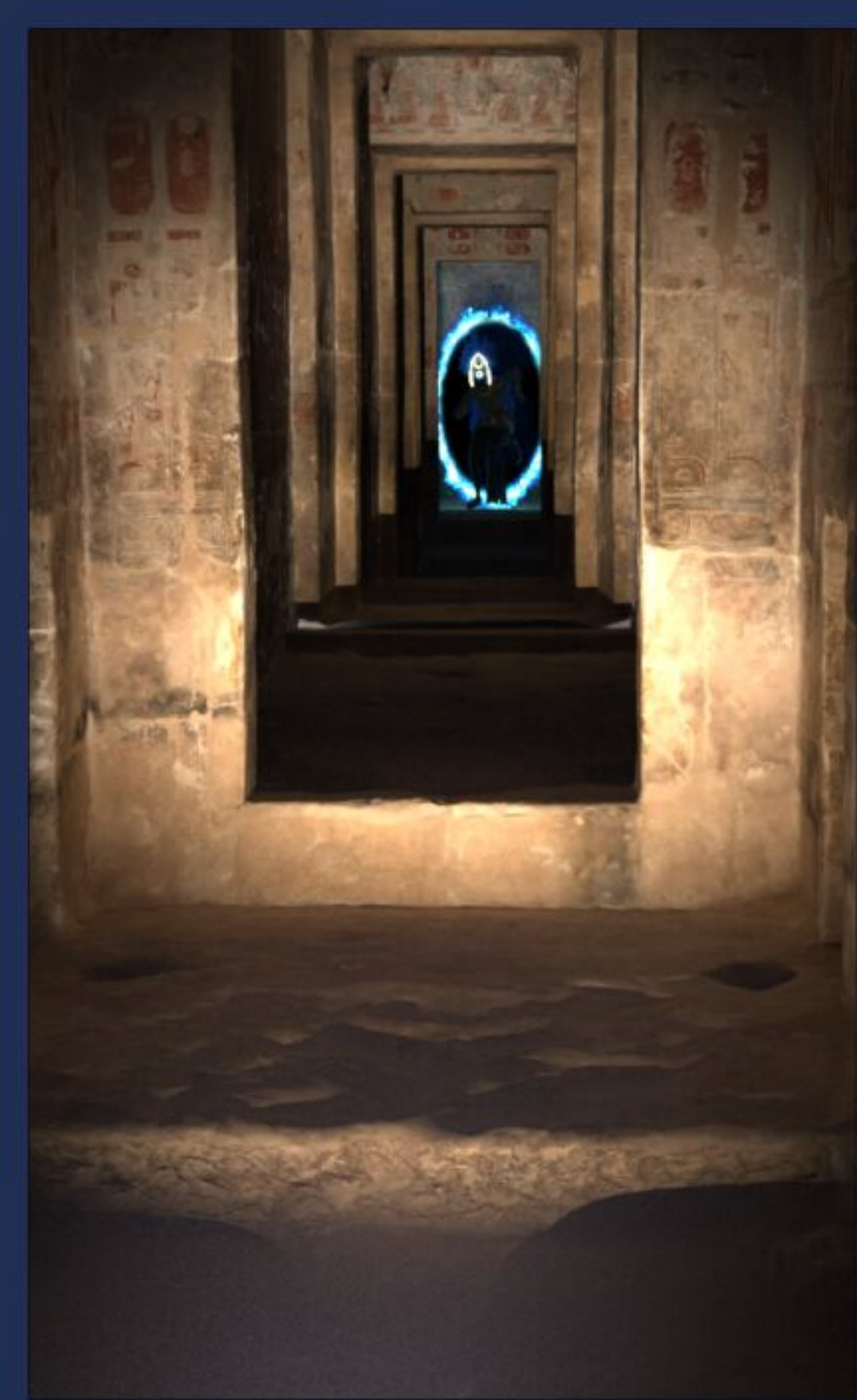


I think you might have a few problems, hun.

MMA

Don't know who 'she' is, but if I were you, I wouldn't believe everything she tells you.





Turn off your Pog.



Sorry, imah.

Have you had a difficulty?

... I'm not sure.

But I thought you had better know.



I just encountered someone. She's got a large arcane weapon attached to her, and she's not affected by the Pog.

I'm not sure what she and her party were doing, but she said "everybody was going to become a monster." She sounded like she was under someone else's control.

I've been in two villages this week where everyone who should have been there was missing ...

Were her party trolls?

Uh ... yes. Is that important?



I've had reports of a "green lady" who's been expanding southward from the cold swamp. With an army of trolls.

I hadn't said anything to you about it because I'd assumed you wouldn't encounter her or her people -- that she'd never get that far, or wouldn't try to.

But if she's operating south of Graytower, that means she's passed Graytower -- and, likely, taken it.

-- sigh --



I'm going to have to reconfigure you a bit, Nuri.

As you desire, imah ... but why?

We are no longer planting. We must now harvest, whether we care to or not.

After I adjust you, I'll give you instructions.

Carry those out as quickly as you can, while I go to assemble our southern cohort.

THE GAJA LANDS.

THE SEERS' ROOM OF COUNSEL HAS LOST MOST OF ITS SOLEMNITY SINCE CHELLE ARRIVED. THERE ARE THOSE WHO WOULD SAY THAT'S NOT A BAD THING.



Bored!!



Least make one lick us --

I'm not in the mood right now.

Lie! All time in mood. Come on! Make one lick. Make bigbig tongue --

Can't you just enjoy watching Por a change?

I don't Peel right. I keep Peeling like something is about to --

-- happen ...



Imah! Is something wrong?

somebody's in trooouble ...

Shh!

No, no. You've done well.

This is a good way, a peaceful way, the way that they're suited to ... but it was never going to be the way forever. We knew that one day they would have to serve another purpose.

The time has come to arouse them.

Way past that.

That's not what she means.

You're not very good with portals, so I'll take you around and we can gather them. I'll show you what to do.

We're moving now?

We have no choice. Events are forced upon us.

THE CAPTURE FORCE HAS REACHED THE LAST OF THE HILL SETTLEMENTS BEFORE THE DESERT. THE SANDS LOOM JUST OVER THE HORIZON.

BLUE.

I noticed. Mostly gone, though. old.

don't see any people ...

ALL INSIDE FUCKING.

BY THIS TIME THEY HAVE ENCOUNTERED SEVERAL SETTLEMENTS WITH THE STRANGE BLUE FOG.

maybe.

stay out of the smoke while I have a look. just in case.

but be ready. something seems wrong.

Go!

Go!

Go!!

Don't let her hit you with that thing!

Some of the bigger Polk, keep those trolls from getting in the way!

The rest of you, take her down!

Whuuaa!

aaaaaiii!

YAAAAAR!

-- hgh --

BACK OFF!

Stop her!

that Miss ... really felt it ... I can't Miss too many more times, or ...

... need a clear target I can hit ... charge back up ...

there!

she's not even looking ... easy shot --

That's my friend!!

let's boom her!

Do it!





Out!  
Got out!!

Put in box ...  
make head bad ...  
put in somebody else  
head ...  
still got out!

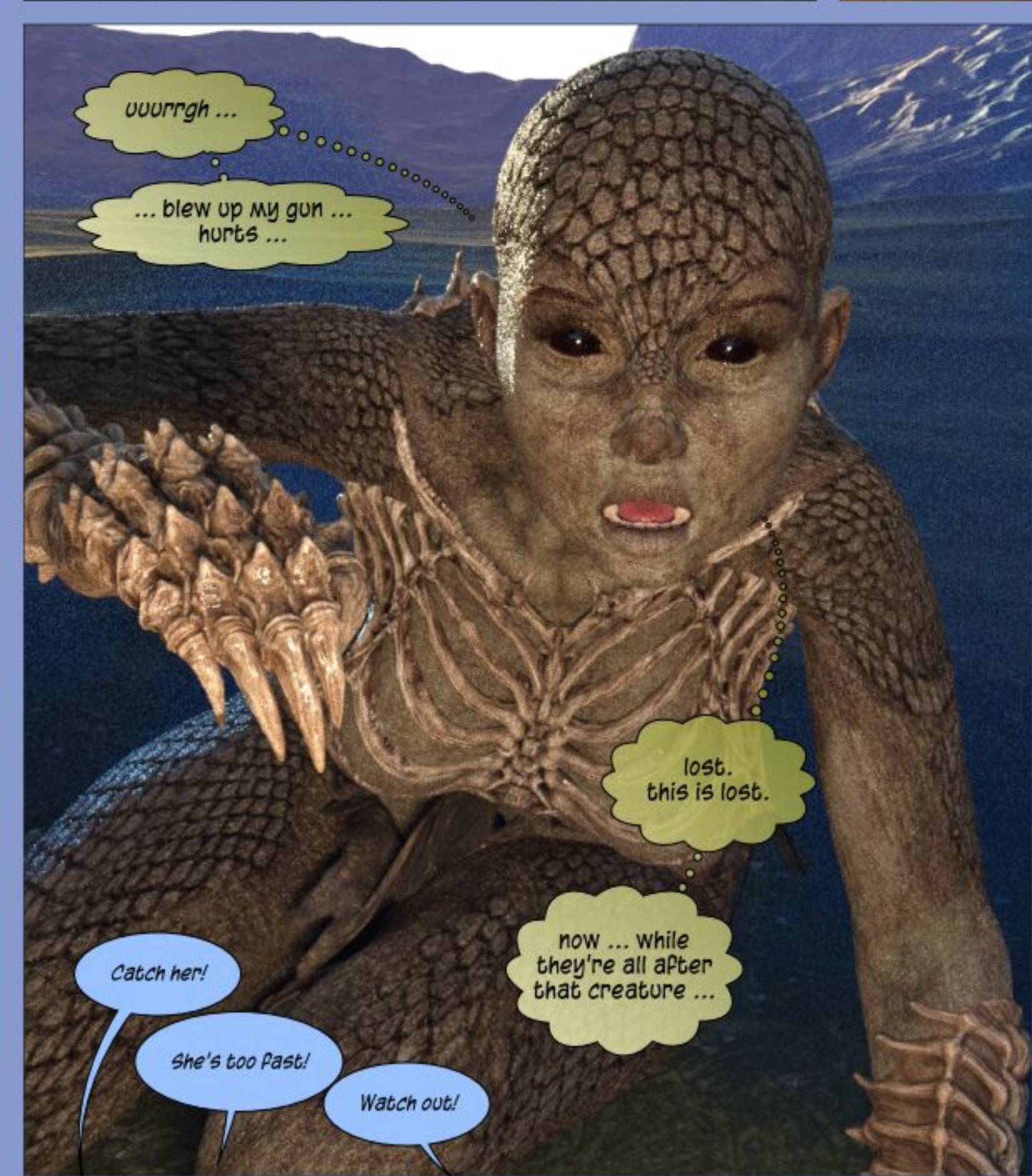
Always  
doing things to  
Dezil! Want to make  
Dezil sad all time!  
No Fun!!



HEY!!

BOOM For  
everybody!

All boom!  
All time!  
Nobody make Dezil sad  
again ever!!



uuurgh ...  
... blew up my gun ...  
hurts ...

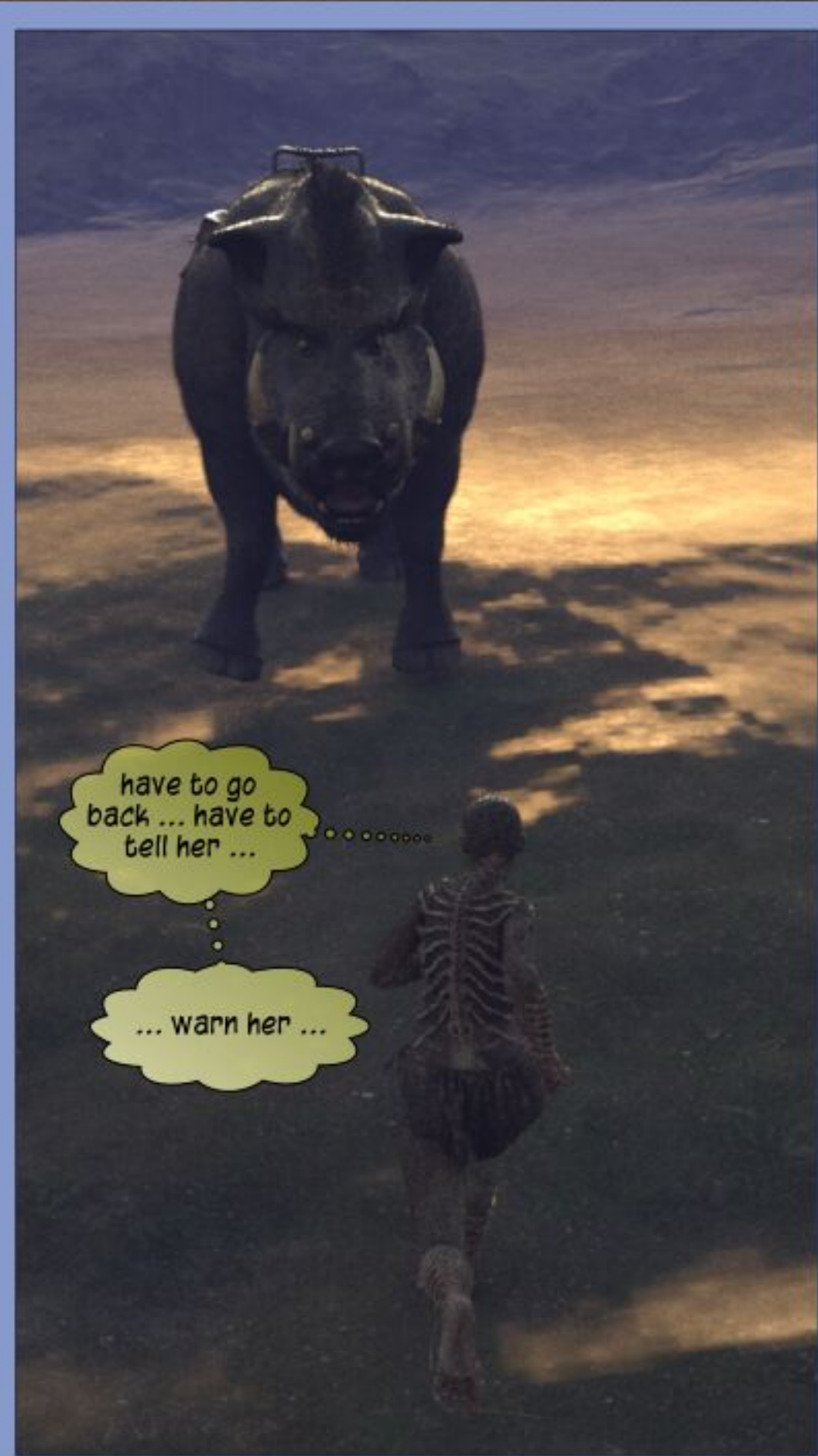
lost.  
this is lost.

now ... while  
they're all after  
that creature ...

Catch her!

She's too fast!

Watch out!



have to go  
back ... have to  
tell her ...

... warn her ...



run, pig!!

GRNK



You've got  
weapons,  
damn it!

Use your  
beams! Shoot  
her down!

It's too close!  
We'll hit each other!

Figure it out!!



... and she's  
flying away.

I guess she knew we  
were about to get her.

Were you though?

I think she  
just lost  
interest. Wisps  
are like that.

Well, now she's  
gone ... and the  
trolls are taken  
...

... and the  
woman with the gun  
ran off when she  
thought I wasn't  
looking. Yes.

We win by default, I guess.



And well-timed, too.

I've gathered our  
remaining Porces. I'll  
take you to rendezvous  
with them.

We'll equip,  
and then we will  
take this battle to  
Graytower. We'll  
portal directly  
there.

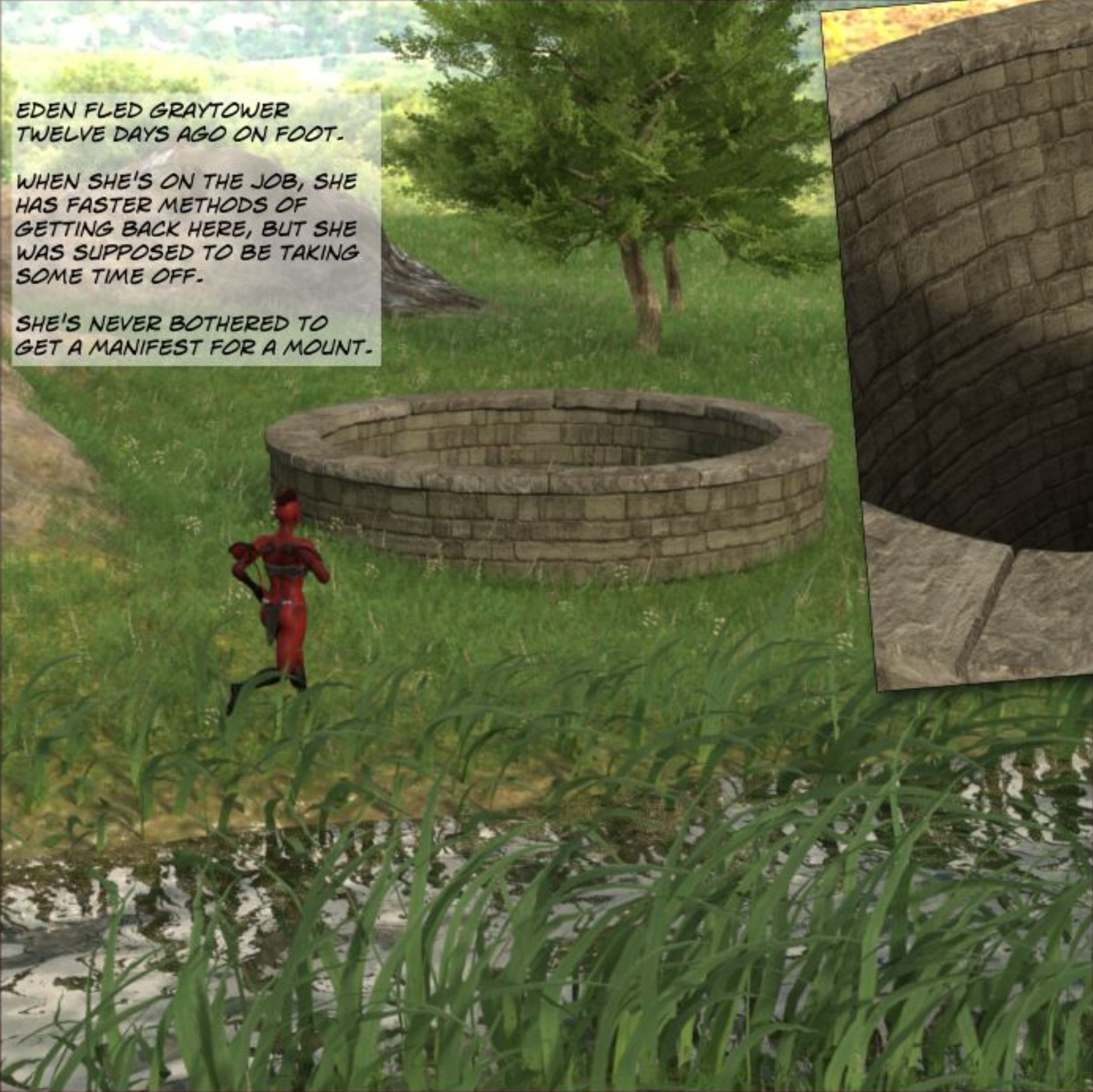


The green lady  
will have no idea  
what's coming.

Unless  
someone manages  
to warn her. I wonder  
how fast that boar  
can run.

Oh well. At  
least we've had  
no losses yet.

# PART THREE: UNDERGROUND CURRENT





How did it go?

Not well.



He kept resisting until he collapsed under the weight of his own violence.

Mm. Same as usual.

You knew that was going to happen? Why'd you send me in, then? You've got people who've --

-- done this a lot more than you have. Yes. But I hoped maybe you'd succeed. Experience isn't everything.

Sociopaths -- actual sociopaths, the ones who don't think anyone else but themselves matter -- are almost impossible to fix.

I throw everything I can think of to try at them, but I know that most of them will never leave once they're here.

I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to get discouraged by the odds.



You shouldn't feel bad about it. Not with him. He's probably hopeless.

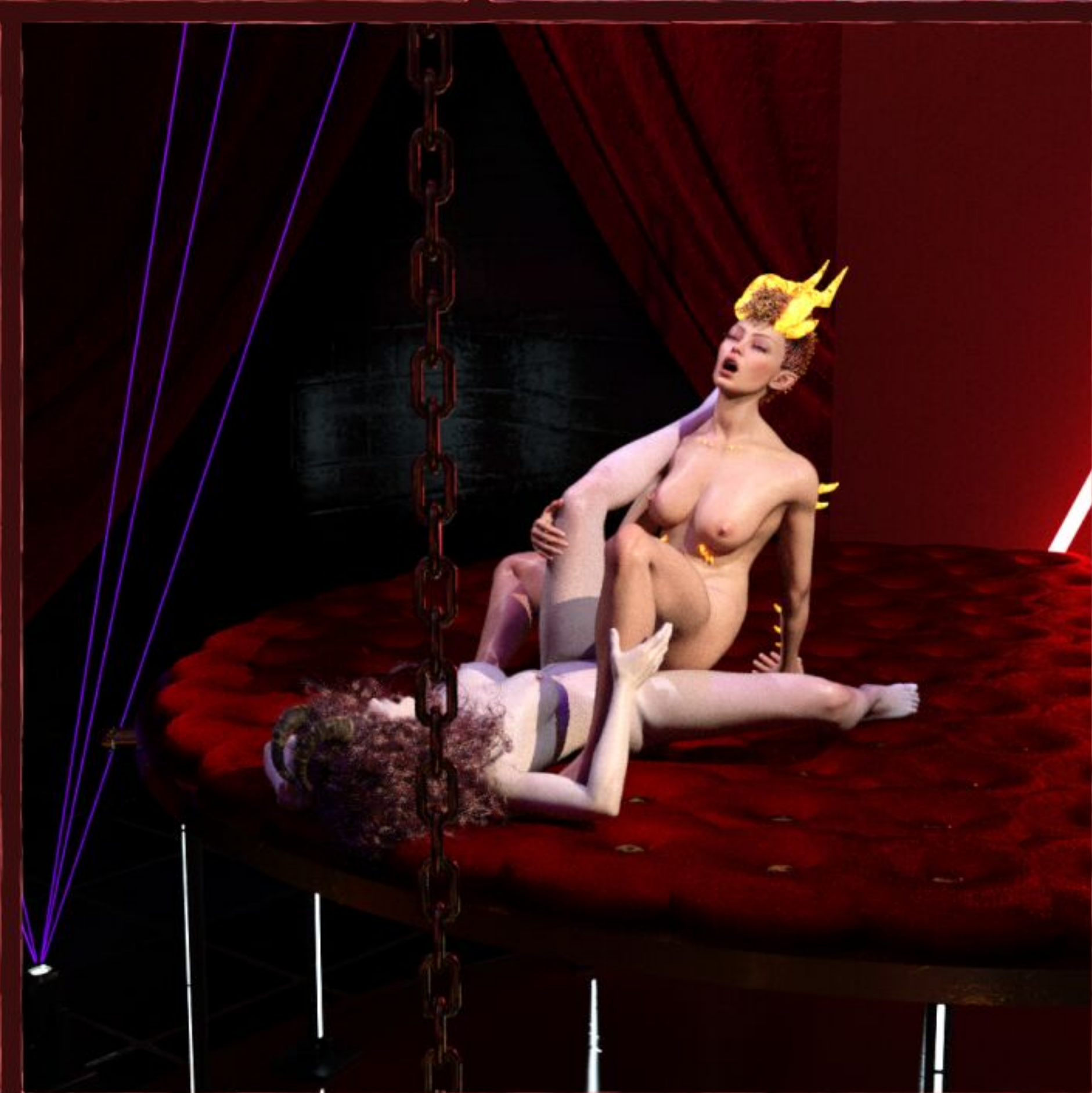
But if you do ... would sex make you feel better?



I probably shouldn't ...

You absolutely should.

Even after all this, you still have too much of a tendency to try to bury what you really want.



A WHILE LATER.



... Drina, if you'd come in here before we finished, I might have had to kill you.

If you hadn't been finished, I wouldn't have come in.



Eden has returned.

She's not supposed to be back yet. Is something wrong?

Yes, but not with her.

Naomi's green witch and her troll army have made it to Graytower and, judging from conditions when Eden fled, have taken over.

Eden says probably everyone in the city is either a troll or a captive now.



She's not my green witch.

You know what I meant.

Well ... that's disturbing news ... but it's not our problem.

WHAT??



Merys, I know you like to stay out of surface business ... but it seems to me like if she's taking over the place and turning everybody into trolls, that's a problem for everybody in the Yards ...

Not to mention these things have a habit of escaping their zones.

It doesn't affect the way we do things a bit. If we find someone we think needs torment, we don't care whether they're a human or a troll or an anthro --

We might have to change the way we hunt a little, but that's all.

That's a hell of an outlook.



We can't fix everything. And most of them wouldn't want us to if we could.

Answer honestly. Would you want to go up and get caught in that mess, if your mother wasn't involved?

I might.

If no one who was better qualified was willing to do it, which is what it's sounding like.

Not that it matters, since you won't let me off your leash to go try. Stuck here for months while you're happy to just let the world come apart ...



... Drina, leave us, please.

Be where I can find you. I may need you to help me assemble everyone later.



I know you are very far from stupid, which is why it frustrates me so much when you refuse to find things on your own.

You haven't been here for "months." Time is experienced differently here. It's been twenty-five days since you fell through the earth.

I've only ever placed you under very mild control, and even that ended after your first few days here.

The control was just to get you to stop thrashing and listen. I was hoping that if you thought you couldn't leave, you might actually hold still long enough to absorb something. But when you say things like that, I'm not convinced it did any good at all.



Do you get many victims who say that being trapped improves their outlook?

Not sure. If you were one of my actual "victims," you wouldn't have an opportunity to discuss it.

You've seen them. Compare yourself, why don't you? Do you feel like you're in the same situation as they are?

You're enjoying all of this. You like what I've been teaching you. You like learning to do torments. You like my company. You like the sex. You are the fucking princess of the realm and royal consort and star pupil and you love every minute of it.

And you're perfectly capable of knowing when you're actually being compelled, but you're in denial because you don't want to admit you love it.



You know, it'd be a lot easier if I could believe anything you say!!

But, OK. Suppose you're right. Did it ever occur to you that you can enjoy something and resent the hell out of it at the same time?

You've messed with my head! You've changed my body! I didn't ask for this body!!

You're trying as hard as you can to make me into something, and it doesn't matter whether I enjoy it, that's not what I want to be! It's not what I should be doing!

I should be in Century putting my life back together! I should be up on the surface trying to rescue my mother! I should not be down here playing some kind of devil-in-training!



All right. Back-to-Pront:

You are a devil. You have always been a devil. I'm just trying to get you to realize and accept that.

You haven't made a sound about your mother in weeks, not until just now when you were reminded of it, so don't try to tell me that's been on your mind.

My entire point has been that you seem to let yourself be ruled by this strange idea of what you should be, what you should be doing, and you never let yourself be or do what you want to be. I'm not sure, even now, that you know what that is.

You've been hiding from yourself so long that when I do show you yourself, you don't know how to accept it.

... and I changed your appearance because you're beautiful and interesting, and I couldn't stand to see you trying to conceal it in a cloud of boring any longer.



I don't like your methods.

Nobody does. They're cruel.

I gave up on the soft ways a long time ago. You can only fix gentle problems with gentle methods.

Now, people hate me, but I get results.



When I look at you I see a vast, terrible, irresistible power.

I see someone who might be able to do what I do, but even better than I do it. I see someone who might be able to send people down the right road with far less effort than it takes me.

I see a brilliant monster, an angel of darkness who might be able to shock people into doing the right thing for themselves by her presence alone.

And I know you want to be that, and do that. Every choice you've ever made in your life tells me that's what you want -- when you've actually chosen what you want, instead of what you think other people want of you.

The only thing keeping you from that future is you.



But you can't use force to push somebody into being something just because you think it's better!

It's a violation, don't you understand that? It's an assault!

What if you wanted to "improve" who I was attracted to ... or how I dressed ... or ... I don't know, you get my point. If you're just messing with people to have the world you want, you're as bad as some of the people you're tormenting!

... But that's not what I do. That's never been what I do.



Look, you agree that most of the people I torment deserve what they get, right? They have actually done harm to others, they need to be taught to not do that. Clear-cut. Yes?

... Yes, but --

-- but we're talking about you. Right. You're the exception. You're the only exception.

... Well, for a long time. There was another once.

But I'm not trying to make you into what I want you to be. That's the thing. I'm trying to make you into what you want to be. I'm not reforming you. I'm showing you your own head.

Which is all I ever said I was going to do, from the beginning.

I told you no lies. I used the absolute minimum amount of dirty tricks I could get by with. And in the places where I didn't give you the whole truth, it was because I knew it wouldn't work unless you found your way there yourself.

Just as it's probably not going to work now because you've forced me to explain instead.



Yeah, well, I might surprise you.

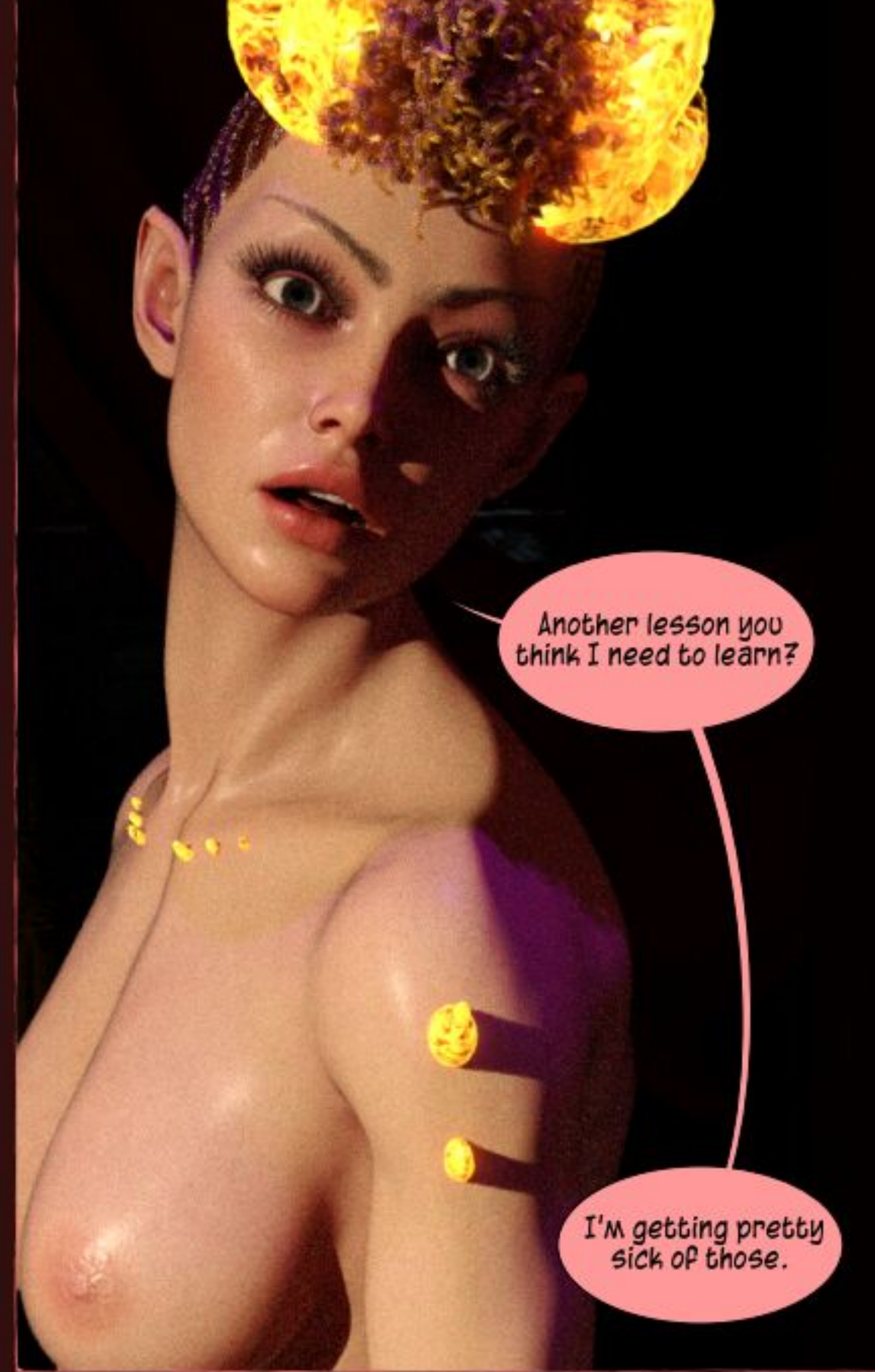
But you also have to understand that some of those "things I should do," I have to do, whether I want to do them or not.

I do understand. I like that you feel you have an obligation to fix things.

But you don't feel the same obligation.

I still don't think this is MY fight to fight.

But I'll help you ... if you allow me to impose a temporary condition. On you.



Another lesson you think I need to learn?

I'm getting pretty sick of those.



This one will be the last. I promise.

After this, I have nothing left to try to teach you.



I have no idea what this will involve. We could be up there for hours; we could be up there for days.

All of our guests have been put on hold. A few of you will be staying here to help Drina watch the place.



I don't know what to tell you to expect, but I do know we'll be up against trolls ...

... I think it would be better for you tormentors to all be in your bigger forms.



Good.

We should see about some armor ...



There. That should help a pair bit.



Enforcers, you're also going to want to use your big forms, but don't change to them just yet. I'll tell you when.



So we just go up?

No, no. The enforcers can't fly, the tormentors can't really do more than hover for a few seconds when they're in their big forms, and I'm not the world's best flyer myself.

Besides, if we go out that way, it's a long trip overland to Graytower. Like I told you when you first arrived: that hole's mostly for people coming in.

I have a better way to get out.



# PART FOUR: APPROACH FROM BEHIND

IN THE STONY BOWELS OF GRAYTOWER.





wheeyaaa!

HRG

Sorry. We're not quite ready to do that yet.



-- sigh --  
Now we have to figure out what to do with them to keep them from sounding the alarm when they come to.

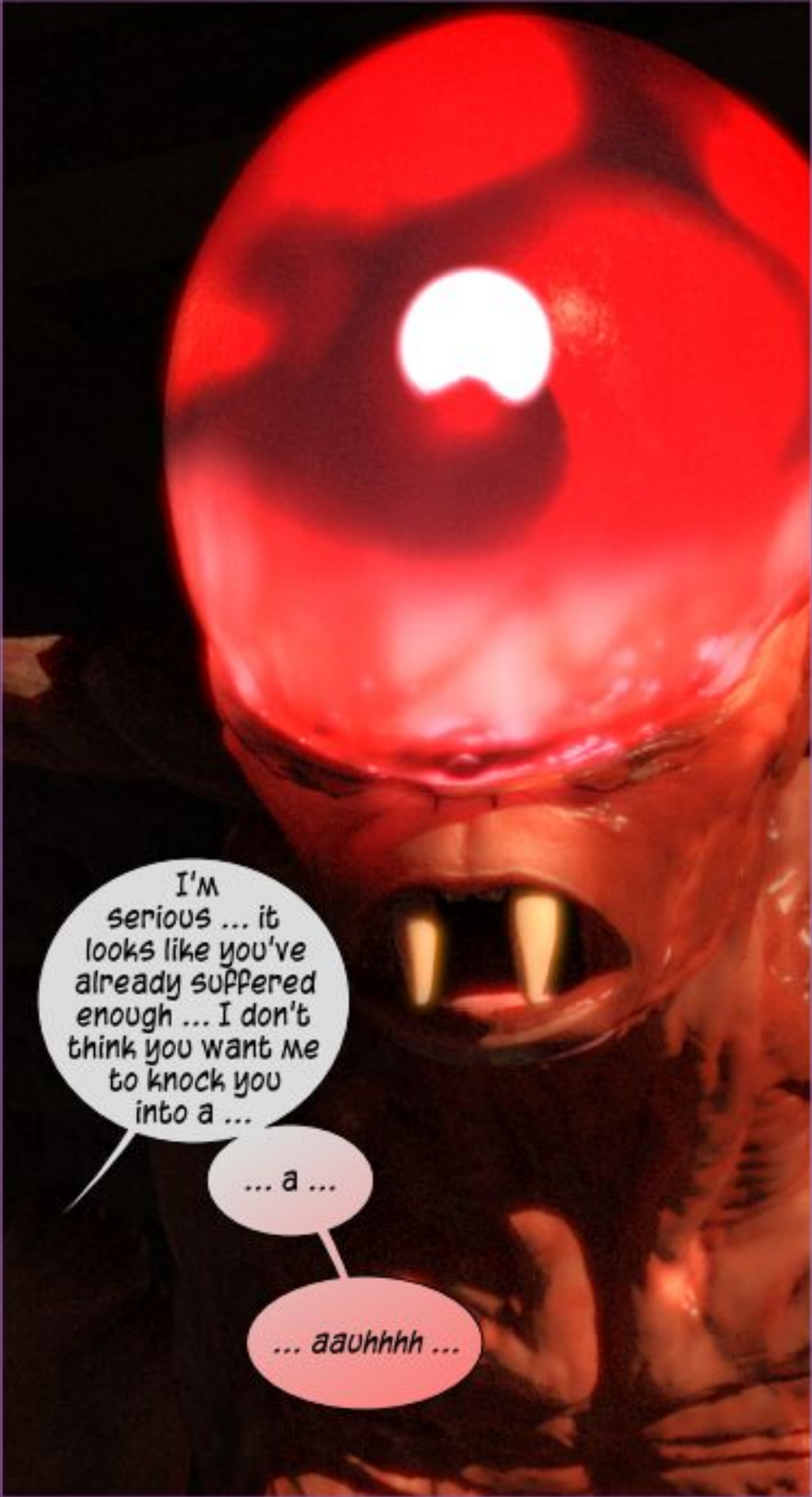
And they're going to be hard to drag anywhere.

The other one ran, I guess ... she's probably going off to tell her boss about us right now ...



This is already not going aaaaaaaiii!

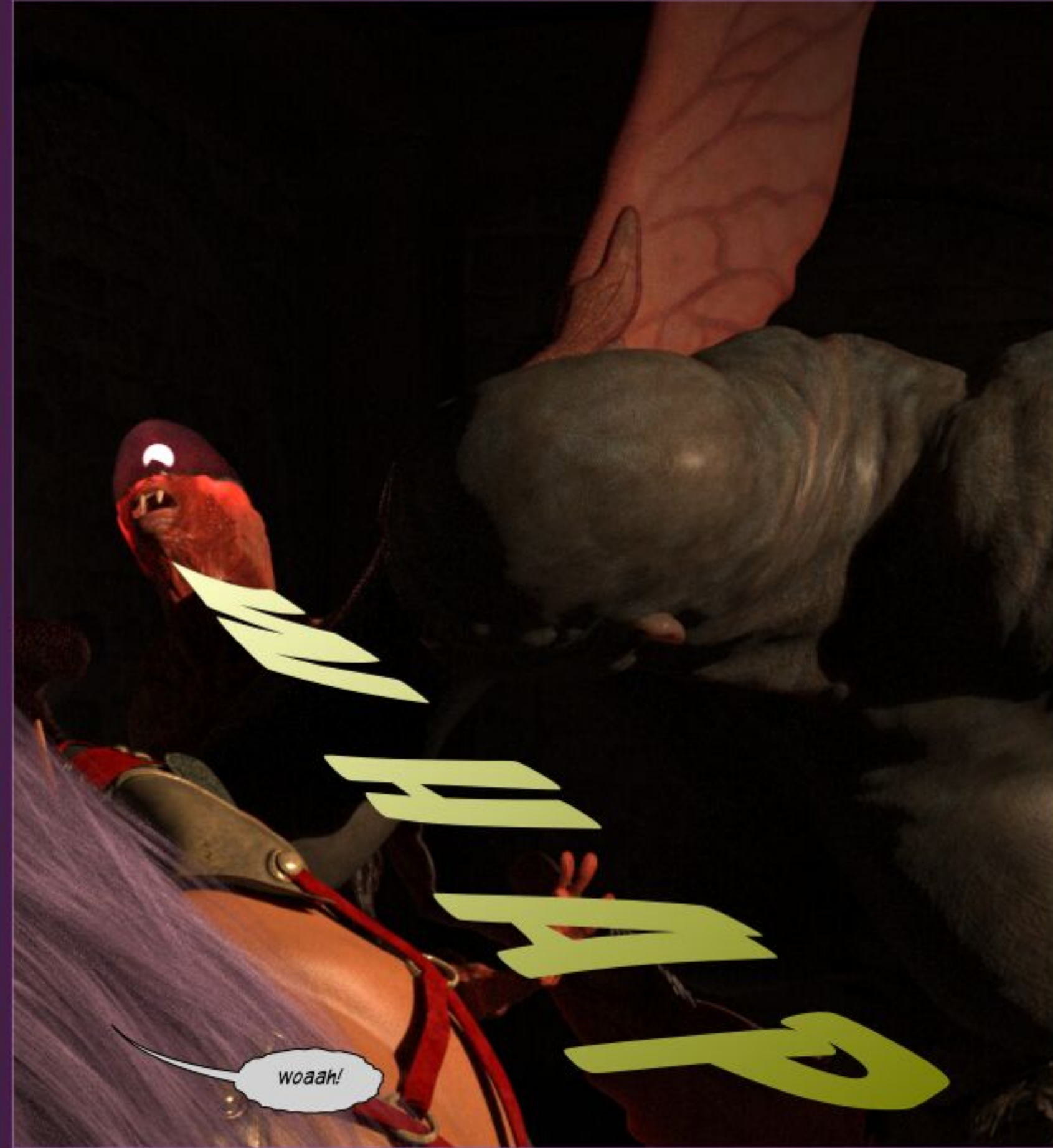
Who told you to get motivated? Back off!



I'm serious ... it looks like you've already suffered enough ... I don't think you want me to knock you into a ...

... a ...

... aauhhhh ...



woaah!



SORRY ABOUT THAT.

WASN'T SURE WHO YOU WERE WITH FOR A SECOND THERE. YOU SEEM OK THOUGH.

HANG ON, LET ME CHANGE.



Oh! Were you disguised, or did you manage to break out? I haven't seen anybody break out of it by themselves before ...

Yeah, well, you mess with somebody too much, look what happens.

First I was a goddamned grmlin and I couldn't break that ... then I was some kind of bug thing and I might have gotten out, if I'd had a chance ... then I was a troll ... sloppier job every time ...

I broke it the day we got to Graytower, but it seemed like a good idea to stay a troll for a while. Made it easier to look for ways to Puck their shit up.

Are you here to Puck their shit up?

Definitely.



Then I guess we're Friends.

The trolls are gonna be hard to crack. I was thinking to try for the taungs. She doesn't give them as much attention.

I'd have started before now, but this Flay bitch is everywhere and she's hard to lose.

Hey, you got a name? I'm Raz.



Raz??

You're one of the people we're supposed to find!

Well, you found me. Who told you that?

The egrets ... they're seers, in the swamp ... they told us we'd need to approach from behind, but first we'd need to "repair" poor people.

Egrets? I didn't think they were real. Huh.

Who else you got?



You're the first we've found ... I've been hoping they're all tangled up with the green lady ...

You, Rani, Peri, and the "russet lady." Do you know any of those three?

Nothing on two of them ... but I know who Rani is.

Or at least I know there's a Rani here. She's a taugharn. One of the only two females, I hear.

Let's go. Even if it turns out your seer's full of shit, we still want to pry some taungs loose anyhow.



Do you want to stop and put something on?

Been walking around tits-out for weeks.

Taungs won't care either.

You said you were a grmlin ... so I guess that means you crossed paths with the violet lady.

I was the violet lady.

And I never had a single Pucking problem until my Pucking apprentice decided she wanted to steal my life.

... But that's a long story.

Yeah, we know about some of it.

Oh? How'd you get in on that?

Well, we were --



Hold on!!

If you're the real violet lady, then how come you don't know --

You're Pleek.

Not hard to remember. You're the only bat who was a bat before I made her a bat.

I was waiting to see how you wanted to play it. I didn't know what you'd told the eip.

... I apologize.

"The eip's" name is Cres, by the way.

RAZ HAS ACTUALLY BEEN AROUND FOR A LONG TIME, BUT WE HAVEN'T SEEN HER SINCE THE SPRUE. SHE APPEARS IN #23, #25, #27 AND #28.



CRES MANAGES TO GIVE THE TAURGHARNS THEIR BRAINS BACK.



... but she's apparently a lot better at the physical effects than the mental ones. Or does a more thorough job with them, I don't know. Point is, I can't change you back.

I think the only way we're going to revert everybody is to take her out ... so I'm hoping you'll all help us with that.



OK. Do we Pix her too?

I Peel like we should ... I hate leaving anybody with their mind in that condition ...

Not sure I agree.

But it's your deal. Give it a try if you want.



It's all right ... I'm not going to hurt you ...

... just need to ...

... there! How's that? Better?



YAAAAARRR!

WUAAA!!



Called it!

hurg!

PUNT



I knew it was you! It just about had to be.

Got a dose of your own bullshit, huh, bitch? No wonder you've been sulking since then.

Get OFF ME!!

Uh-uh. No Pucking way. I'm just taking a second to decide where to kick you next.

Raz, what --?

Why don't you tell my friend here who you really are and what you did?



No? Guess I'll have to.

This is my apprentice, Cres. A goblin named Geeta I took in because she seemed like she was for real. Somebody I liked and trusted.

Who then turned me into a grmlin to get me out of the way, stole my identity, and -- from what I hear -- completely trashed my reputation with the rotten shit she did in my name.

This is the bitch who ruined me. And she's going to Pucking bleed for it.



You were a waste of space! Using the things you could do for stupid sex games! I had something real to use it for! But you wouldn't have let me!

You deserved what you got!

They all did! Everybody I pulled in! They all deserved it!

And I'd do it again, so Puck you and your reputation!



Yeah? you want to know who's Pucked?

OW!

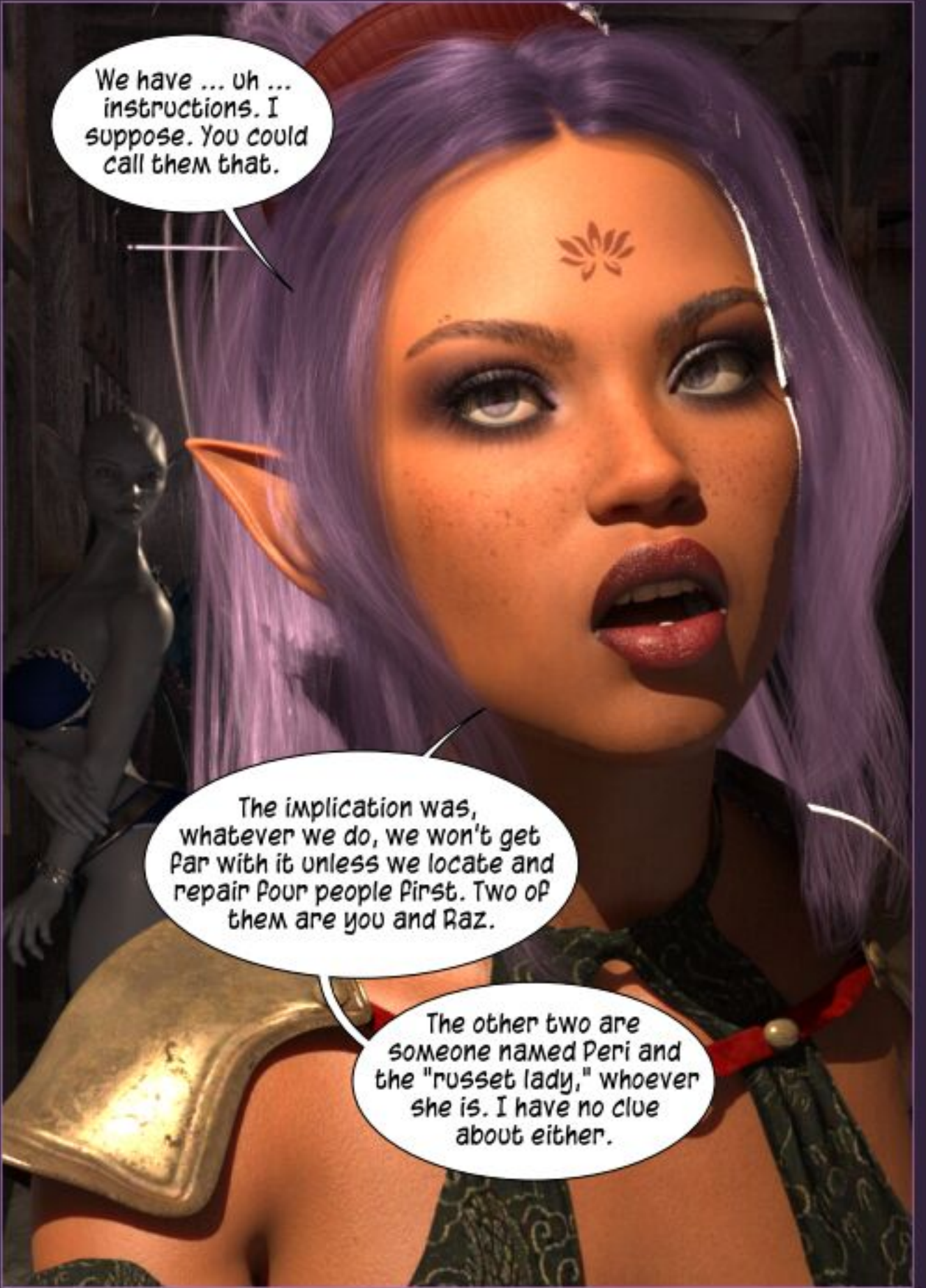
Stop!!

I'll stop when I Pucking Peel like it, bitch!

So ... Once your friend is finished beating Geeta to a pulp ... what do we do next?

Well ... I'm not sure. We were here mostly to try to get through the preliminaries. We knew we were going to need to do some kind of stealth action, but we hadn't gotten that far yet. This all happened very fast.

What do you mean, "preliminaries"?



We have ... uh ... instructions. I suppose. You could call them that.

The implication was, whatever we do, we won't get far with it unless we locate and repair four people first. Two of them are you and Raz.

The other two are someone named Peri and the "russet lady," whoever she is. I have no clue about either.



I know who the russet lady is. But you're not going to like it, I don't think.

I didn't know who she was, for a while. It took me a long time to connect her to the stories about her, especially since I was thinking like a taurg at the time.

My trolls brought her in, unconscious. I didn't get a chance to figure out what to do with her, because that was the same day the green lady walked in and took over.



And the green lady decided to turn her into this.

Oh.

The trolls call her Flay. Can you fix her mind? It seems to me like she's been seriously messed with.

That was my impression too. I don't know. I'll have to try, though --

Get your ass back here!



I'm not done Pucking you up yet!

Get away! Don't you touch me!!

I'm not gonna stand around this place just so you can kick me in the --



-- right!



Don't try anything else. I outweigh you.

It's kind of nice being this big, sometimes.

And the rams don't like you either, so I'm sure they'll help me out.

I'm inclined to let Raz break you into pieces, if that's what she wants. And you'll lie there and take it, if that's what she wants.

It's not like you were going to do anything useful anyway --

I know who Peri is.



What?

I heard you talking. While she was kicking me in the Face.

I know who Peri is. I probably know where she is. I'll tell you ... but if I do, you have to let me leave. I don't want any part of whatever you're going to do. I want to be out of here.

And you have to keep her away from me. She doesn't get to hit me anymore.



You haven't gotten anything near what you deserve --

Yeah? Go ahead. Touch me again. Fuck it up for your friends.

It's awfully convenient, isn't it? You could just say anything and then clear out.

And have you coming after me later? Or her? You're both Pucking crazy. I don't need to see either of you ever again.

Or we could let you go and you could head right off and warn the green lady ...

Fuck that. Just because you're nuts doesn't mean I'm on her side. I hope you take her apart. I just don't want to be around when it happens.



Raz, we kind of have to.

No!

Listen.

I misunderstood the egrets. I thought they were saying "you have to fix these four people or your attack won't work out."

They weren't saying that. They were telling me how it was going to go.

Pleek and I got here today not even knowing where to start, and we found all three of you in the same place in less than an hour.

They meant "You'll find and fix all four people and that'll be how you proceed." Finding and fixing them wasn't the requirement for the attack. It is the attack.

We have to find Peri.



OK, but couldn't we just beat her until she --

-- what the Puck is that?

Sounds like ... battle horns? Call to arms?



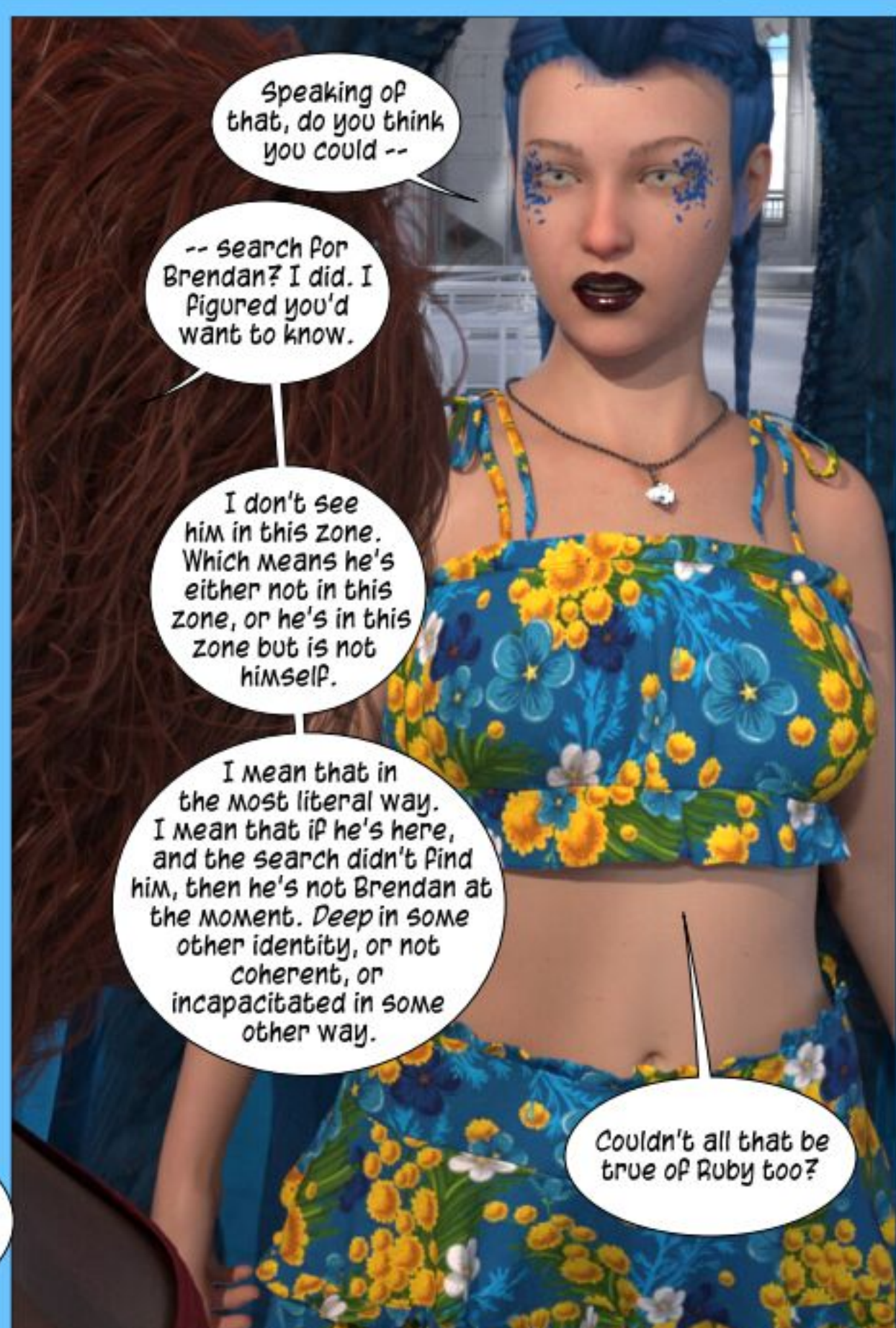
But who's battling?

I don't know.

But I do think we just ran out of time.

# INTERMISSION

THE AERIE, HIGH ABOVE HIGHPOINT.



# PART FIVE: MULTIPLE FRONTS

THE PALE LADY'S TOWER (NOW REDECORATED).



MILADY!

Chully, what are you two doing here? Didn't you hear the horns? We're under attack!



STRANGERS IN BARRACKS. CAN'T FIND NOW. THINK MAKE TROUBLE --

What?

We can't worry about something like that right now!

BUT IF MESS WITH TAURGS ...

No one can subvert the taurgharns, Chully. They're too stupid. That's the point of them being so stupid.



Now listen.

Because of this creature's incompetence, the south camp is being besieged by some Porce. We don't even know who they are!

She was supposed to seal up all the terrain between here and the desert, and instead she attracted the attention of somebody we can't even assess! We have to assume they're very dangerous.



You two go round up all the trolls stationed in the city, and take them to the fight at the south camp. Hurry.

Get the taurgs too. Have them haul out the cannons. Use them where you think they'll do any good.

YES, MILADY.



I'm going to go to the north camp.

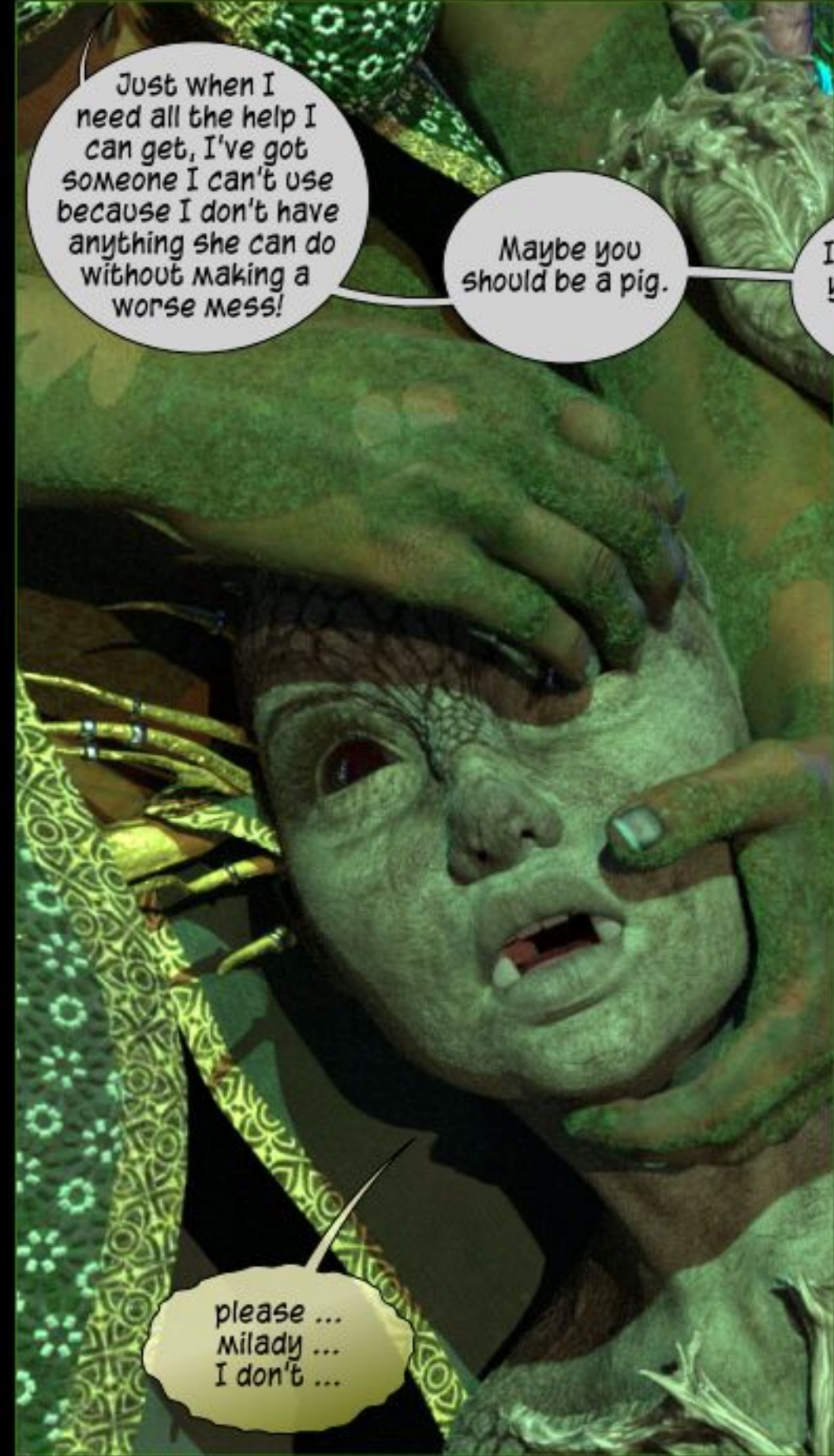
I'm going to bring them around as reinforcements. Since my other support is so unreliable.



Trolls that aren't where they're supposed to be ... who knows where Flay's gotten to ... the puppy's being no help at all ... and you two!

I didn't expect much from the pig ... but you were supposed to be competent! I had very high expectations for you!

Now I don't know if I can trust you to do anything!



Just when I need all the help I can get, I've got someone I can't use because I don't have anything she can do without making a worse mess!

Maybe you should be a pig.

please ... Milady ... I don't ...



I don't think even you can screw up being a pig ...

... no, wait.

I -- GRNK -- not SQUEEEL



Yes. This is a better idea.



Now, pigboy's going to run me to the north camp ... assuming he can get me there without tripping over his own feet.

You're going to stay in here and guard the place.

If anyone tries to come in ... and I mean anyone who isn't me ... deal with them.

And you'd better not Puck it up, or I'm going to find something a lot worse for you.

HOLD GROUND!  
BLUE THINGS  
NOT PASS!

TOO MANY!

Let the  
anthros get out  
front! They're big  
enough to go  
head-to-head with  
these things.

Your job is to  
shoot the trolls as  
soon as they're down.  
Do not get close to  
them! IF they hit you,  
you won't get up.

WUWUWU!

Eat my horn,  
troll!

HOLD

HOLD GROUND!

Supper!

YAAAAH!

TOO MANY!  
NEED HELP!

BUT HELP HAS ARRIVED!

HERE GOOD.

TURN CARTS  
AROUND AND  
BRACE! FAST!

GET READY  
TO FIRE!

All right,  
now!!

URGH!

WHAT THIS?

It's called a  
revolt, Chully.

Do you like it?

HRK

PHWO

This is  
going better than  
expected.

Way  
better.  
I expected them  
to put up more  
of a fight.

That's why  
you don't want  
your soldiers to  
be too dumb.

Keep  
pushing into  
the city. I'm going  
to go see if I can  
deal with this  
problem at the  
source.



What is this?

You're supposed to be keeping a perimeter patrol!

And none of you are wearing your pauldrons?



Move your asses! The south camp is under attack and we need to go reinforce it, now!

I want everyone armored and ready to march by the time I --



-- Uh?



What in hell?!

... Take them!

Push them back!



HAAAAAH!

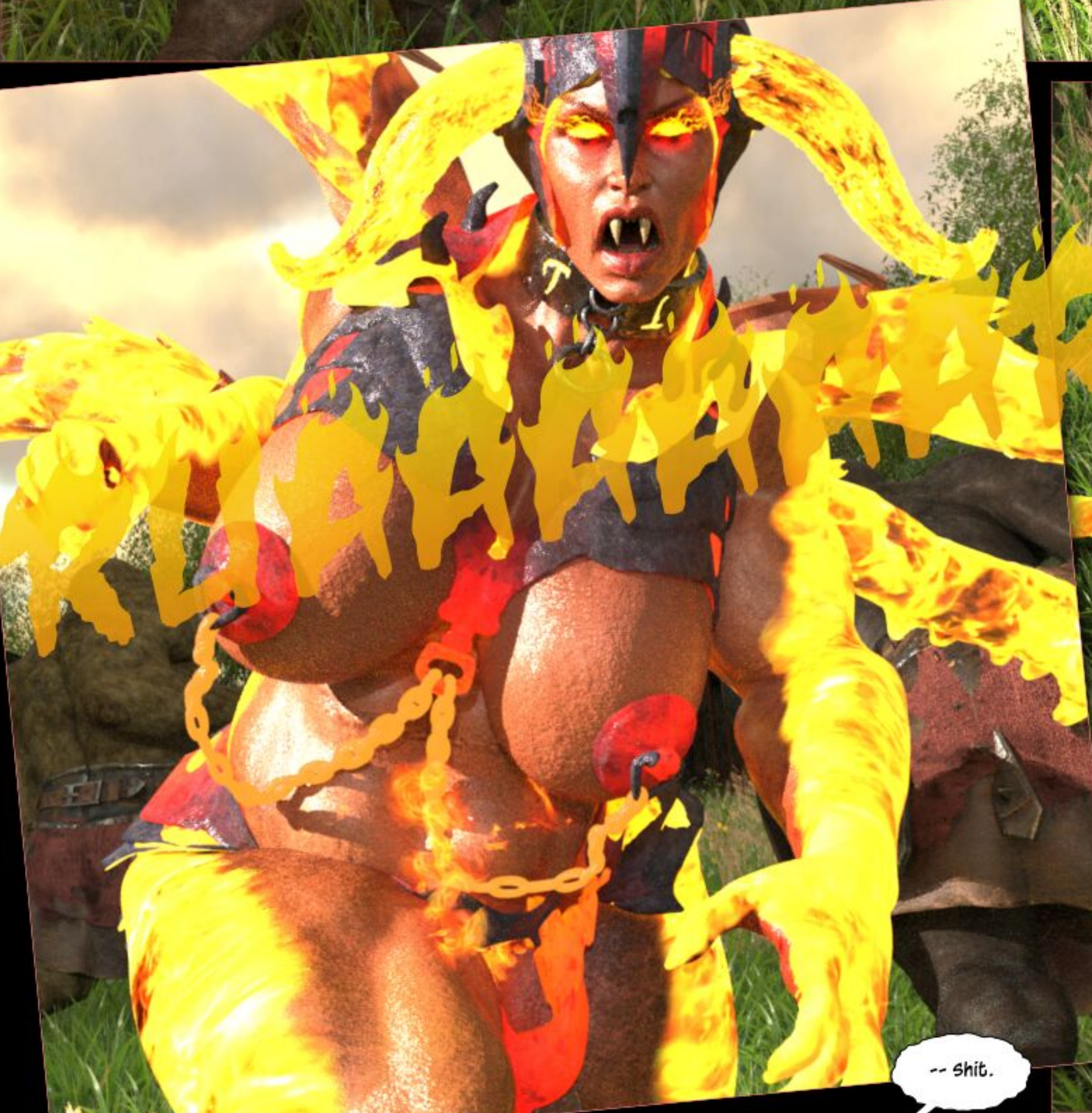
HURK!

Don't let them get advantage! You're bigger than they are! Use it!



You can't just take them head-on! You need to --

WAAAAHHH!!

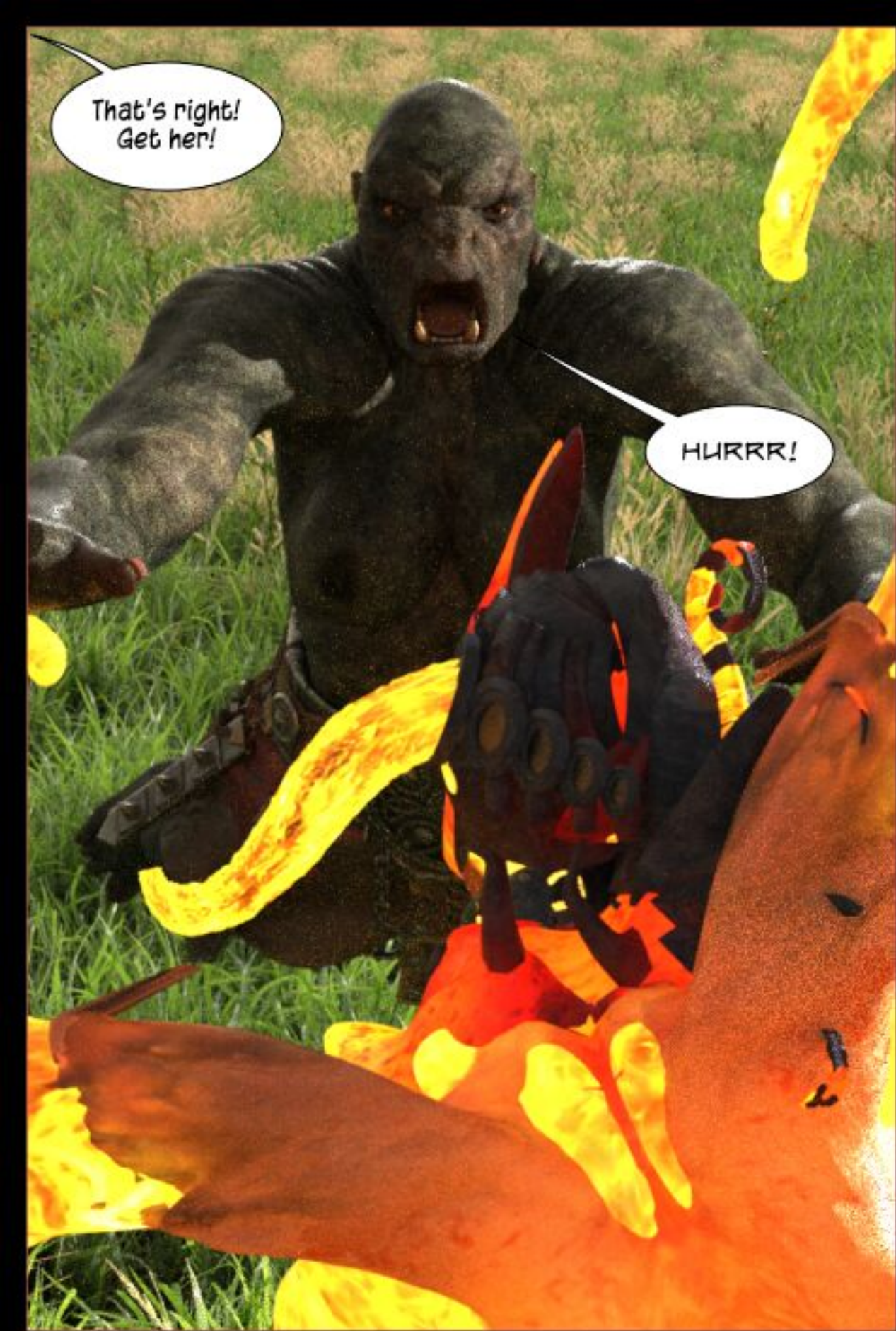


-- shit.



Back off!

Keep her away from me! Keep her away!!



That's right! Get her!

HURRR!



LIWAAA!



Come on! Surely all of you can --



HUUUWAAA!

She's going to kill one of them if she's not careful.

No. They're tough. And it's just a tent.

That's not what we have to watch out for.



Move, pig!

And she's off.

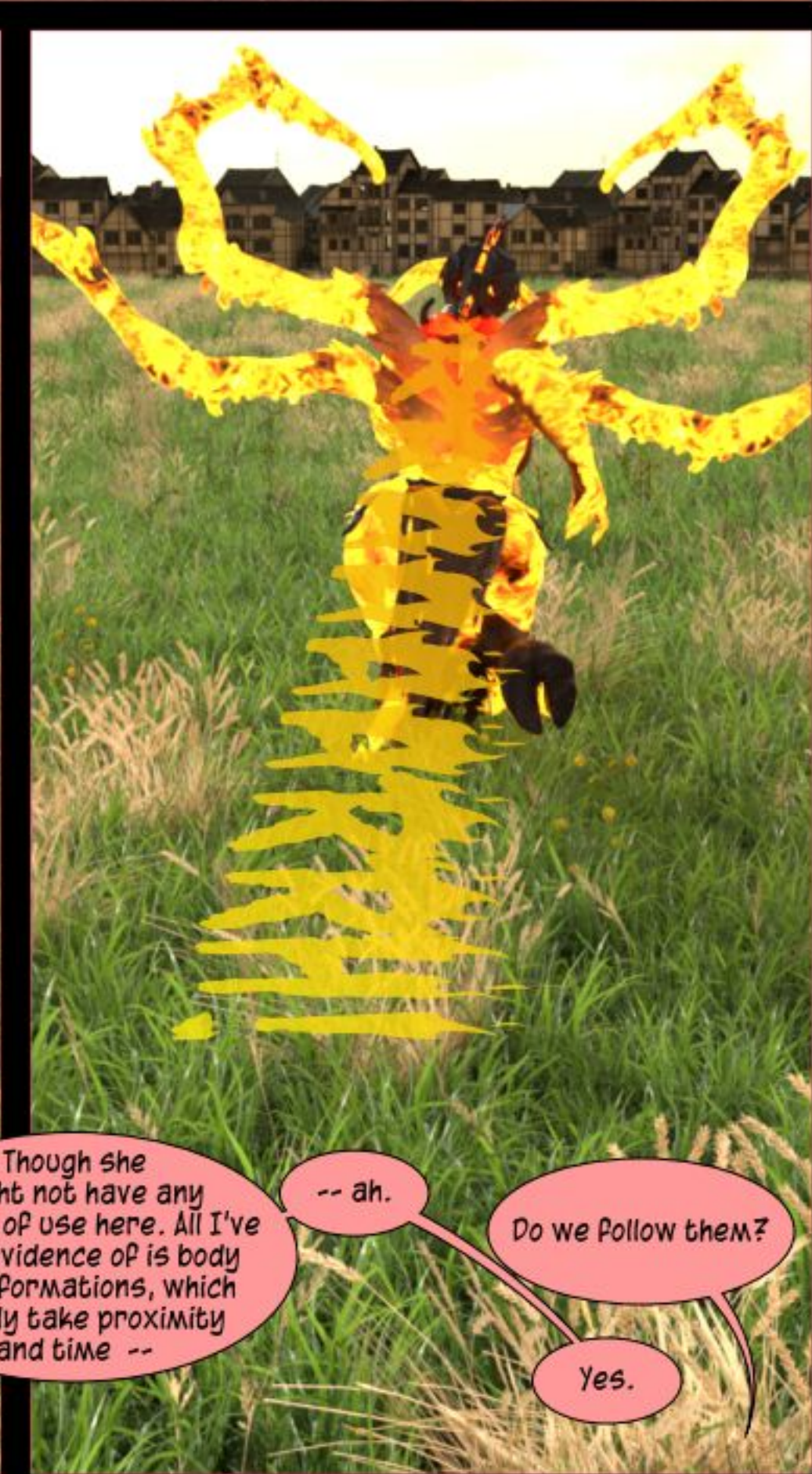
Predictable. I would never hang you all out to dry like that.

Though she might not have any abilities of use here. All I've seen evidence of is body transformations, which usually take proximity and time --

-- ah.

Do we follow them?

Yes.



I think we're getting pretty close.

I still can't believe you don't actually know where this tower is.

When Pleek and I were there, we flew there! It's not the same as going overland.

And I hadn't been back to Graytower in a while ... the tower didn't even exist last time I was here on Poot.

REMEMBER, CRES AND PLEEK, AS BATS, FLEW TO GRAYTOWER TO CAPTURE THE PALE LADY AT THE (FAKE) VIOLET LADY'S COMMAND.



I missed the whole pale lady thing, just like you, and for the same reasons ... stuck either as a grimlin or a bat ...

It seems like it all happened really fast, and I'm still catching up too --

-- hold on.



I thought someone was following us.

Who are you? What do you want?

... wait a second.



You're that woman! Her majordomo. Or her lover. Or maybe both.

-- kaf -- How do you ...

Green lady threw your ass out, huh?

I left. She was coming for the tower. If I'd stayed, I'd probably be a troll now.

But Peri's in there! I saw her move her back in. In a cage.

... I guess that doesn't make any sense to you, let me --

Peri's the pale lady. We want to go free her.

-- oh.

Well, see? I knew you were the right people to follow.



The green woman's not in there right now. I saw her ride out in a hurry not long ago. We can probably get Peri out before she comes back.

I was looking for help, I saw you Polks, and then I overheard you say you were going to the tower.

What do you need us for?

You look like you can deal with trouble. You know, not many people will walk out in the open right now.

Just because the green woman's not there doesn't mean she hasn't left something nasty behind. Guards or traps or something. I don't have any abilities.

Well, honesty's good.

I'm Cres. What's your name?

... Tam.



What did she do to this place? It did not look like this before.

I admit, I've never seen moss used as a decor scheme.

I kind of like it.



I don't like the way this Peels.

You could always go wait back by the door.

I'd rather take my chances here than with that creature you've got watching it. If I'd seen she was with you, I might not have followed you.

Oh, she wouldn't hurt you ... I don't think. Probably not.



You're right, though. This definitely seems like "something going to attack any moment."

Especially with whatever this Fog is.

Fog should not be green.

Or indoors.



It's not doing wonders for visibility either ... I think we may want to --

-- what's that over there?



YAAAAAH!



AAAAUW!

Cres!!



I think it poisoned her!

You've got to get rid of that thing! Hit it, or zap it, or something!

Can't reach anything that's not pointy!

And I don't have any zaps! I'm a gadget maker, Pelek, you know that!

hgh h rgh g h hkh hhhh



zzzzzzzzzz

We've got to flip it onto its back, or something!

Trying! It's strong.



WUAAAA!

YEOW!



... I think I may need to throw up.



Wrecked ... absolutely ruined ... people coming out of nowhere just to get in my face ...

Well, I'm not going to roll over. I was trying to go easy before, but now they're going to --



-- WUAAA!

... oh. Fly.

Where have you been? You should be out in the battle!



Hey!!



Broke out, eh? And now you think you've got a grudge?

No, no. You'll stay down here where I can get at you.



I gave you everything, you ungrateful creature.

Your wings ... the sticky spit ... the stunning gaze ... that was all me.

You were already a monster before I got to you, but I turned you into a useful monster.

I made you.



And I can break you just as easily!



Oh, good.

Either nobody has thought to try to take the tower, or Hallwell's actually done her job this time ...



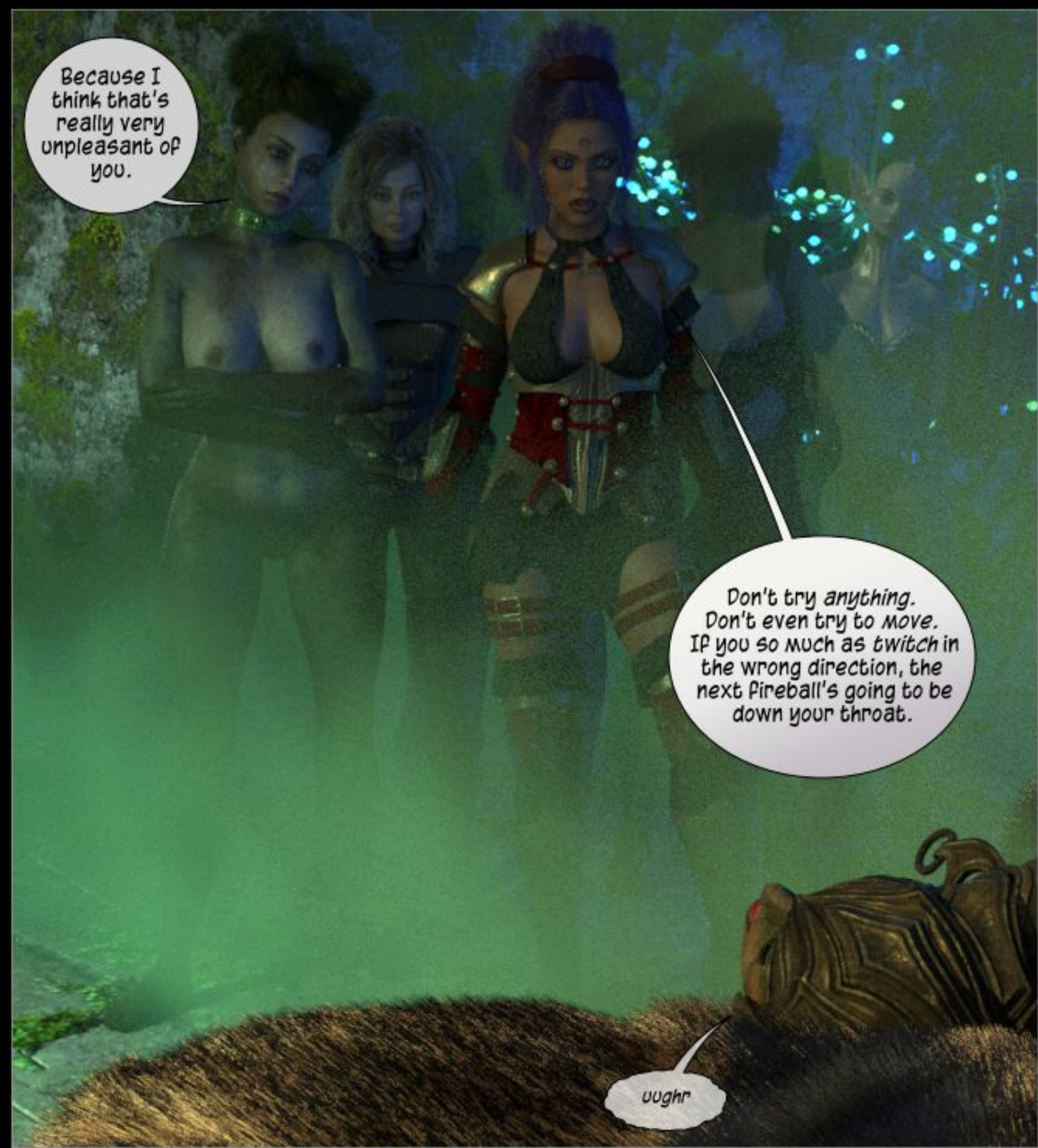
All right, puppy. I know you can't always make it work ... I've tried to be nice about it ...

... but we don't have any choice now. You've got to come through. We're going to keep trying until you do.

We're going to teach them all a lesson. Everybody. Turn them all into cockroaches or something like that.



Is that what you'd like?



Because I think that's really very unpleasant of you.

Don't try anything. Don't even try to move. If you so much as twitch in the wrong direction, the next Fireball's going to be down your throat.

uugh



How hard do you think we'll need to hit her before she's out of it enough that her spells revert?

I don't think it'll be necessary. I have the ability to nullify all her effects, even if she's still actively Peeding them.

I'll need to get into the right Mental space to do it.

... I may need Tam's help for that.

Cres, look out!



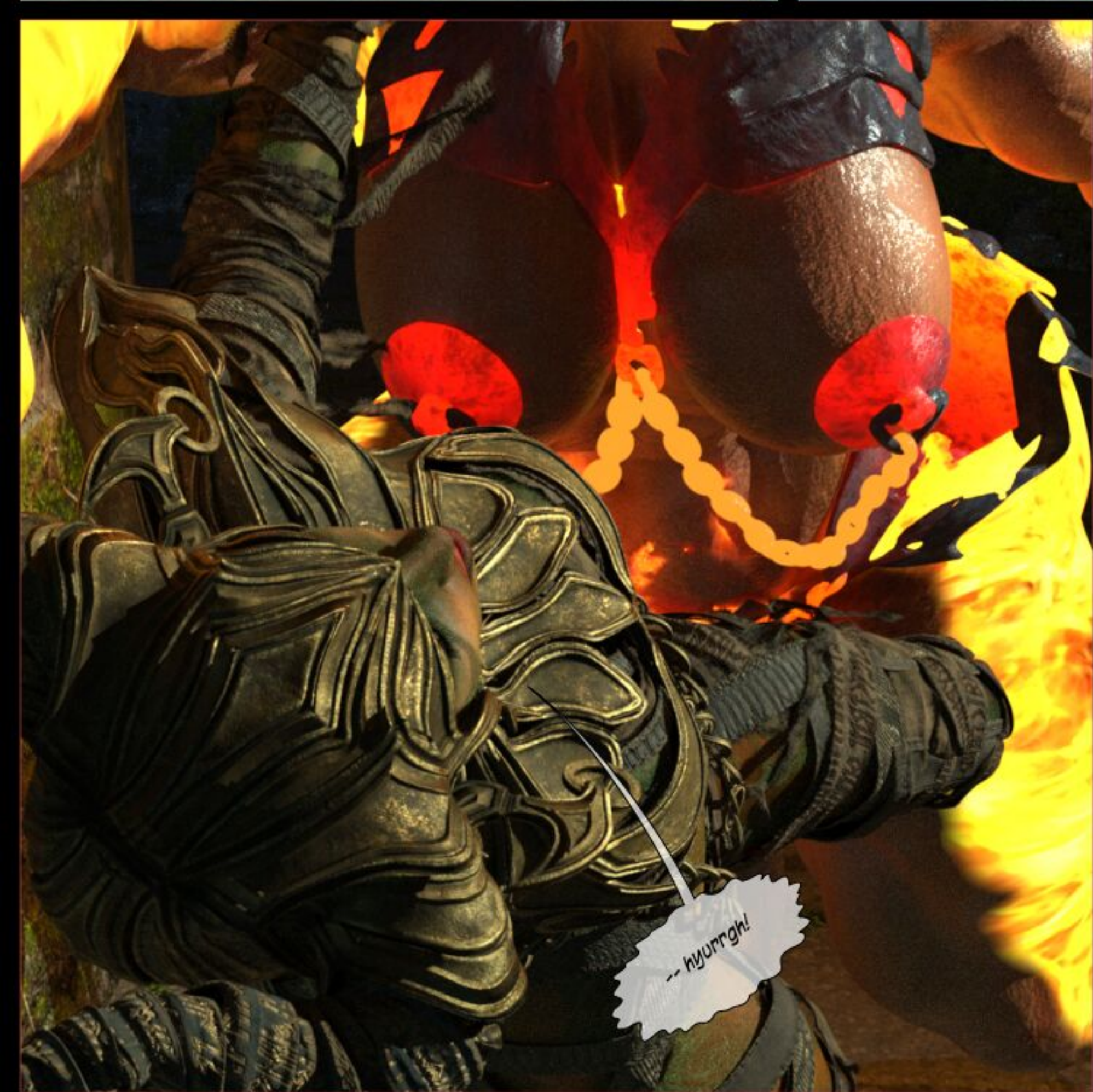
Hey!!

Damn it, I thought she was too stunned to get up!



Not going to get me ... not going to lock me away again ... never again ...

Get clear of here and start over ... I can start over as many times as I have to --



-- hyyrrgh!



NO!

No, no, no!

Leave me alone!!



Who is that?

I didn't do anything to you! I don't even know who you are!

No idea.

Go pick on somebody else --



weeeww --



OK. Fine. Go ahead. Destroy me.

Wait!!

That's what you want, isn't it? I can see it in your eyes.



You want to take me apart. Tear me to pieces.

Well, do it! I'm not scared of that. Do it!!



hkh!



Nah.

You're not worth it to My conscience.



Mother!

Are you all right? Are you back to yourself?

"Mother"?

... Naomi? Is that you?



You've changed a lot.

You should talk.



I think we're all going to need to give each other a lot of explanation.

And some introductions.

Deal with the green lady first, though?

The spider thing over here hasn't changed back, so probably nobody else has either.



She's apparently got pretty strong connections to her work.

Getting her to recall would break them ...

Even if we could do that, I bet you she doesn't remember hers.

Or she'd have used it, just then. I sure would have, in that situation.

No matter. I can break them, with a little help. She doesn't have to be conscious, or even present.

My worry right now is what to do with her *after* that. We need to put her somewhere she can't make this kind of trouble again.

And looping her like we did last time might just make her worse, if she escapes again.

I may be able to help.

I was wondering if you were going to say that.



# PART SIX: SWEEPING UP

OR, THE PART WHERE SOME READERS GO "YAY, WE FINALLY GET TO THE GOOD BITS" AND OTHER READERS GO "AW, I GUESS ALL THE FUN STUFF IS OVER NOW."



TWO DAYS LATER.

You're still trolls?

You should have reverted by now --

TROLLS BEFORE.

What Chully means is that she and Tur and a couple of others were trolls already, before the green lady took over.

We had a nice little tribe going. We weren't hurting anybody.



Yes, some people were brought to us as captives ... but we didn't keep them. I didn't make them trolls unless they wanted to be.

There were a few people I turned into taungs against their will, but they deserved it. Real assholes.

We promise to behave.

Really?

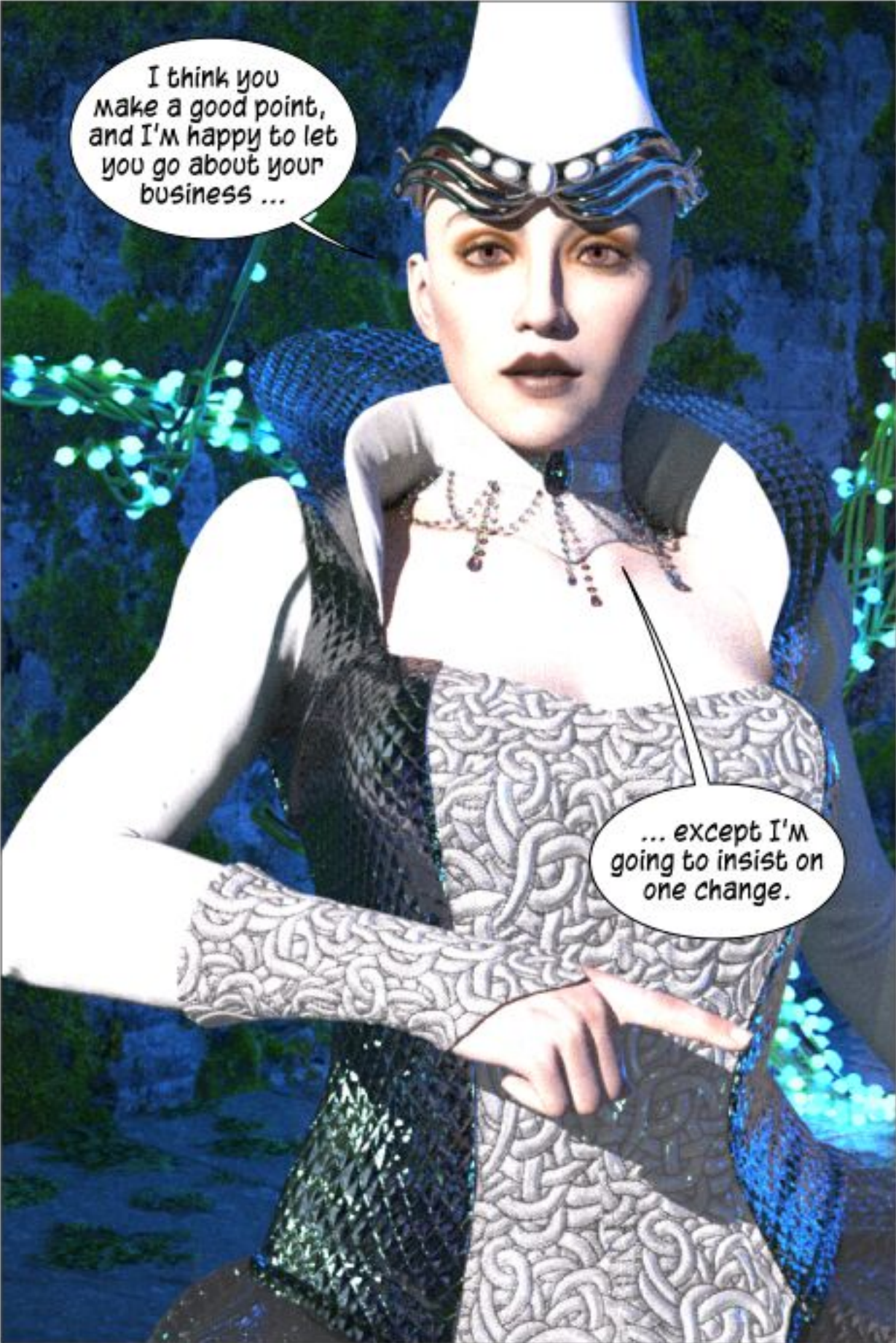
We just want to go back to what we had before.

I think it's important for there to be a tribe of trolls, y'know? There should be a place for everybody.

But, Rani --

Well ... as well as we can. I mean, they're trolls.

But no real damage. Nothing horrible.



I think you make a good point, and I'm happy to let you go about your business ...

... except I'm going to insist on one change.



I think if you're going to lead a pack of trolls, you should be a troll yourself.

It's only fair.



BIG AGAIN.

OH WELL. KIND OF FUN.

I hope so.

Try to stay out of trouble, now.



I was a dom, y'know? People came to me to be messed with and turned into things. It was voluntary. And I always changed them back afterward.

I used to do scenarios. One day I just decided I didn't want to take someone else's direction anymore. Be my own boss.

Around the same time, the Sprue hit and everything broke into pieces. And I like castles. So I moved to the Yards and set up.

It was a good gig and everybody had a good time, and I'm not interested in anybody judging me for it.

I wasn't judging you.

How'd Geeta come into it? You said she was your apprentice?



I thought she was.

The thing is, most of my stuff isn't casting -- what I mean is, I'm not good at "wave my hands and, poof, you're a duck," or any of that. I make devices to do the things I need to do. I'm pretty good at that.

But with devices it's a lot easier for someone to get their hands on them and use them against you. I trusted her, and I shouldn't have.

I don't know what her deal is. She's got something going on. Maybe she just hates people. Whatever it is, she didn't let it show with me. And now I'm probably ruined.

I don't know about that. It might take a while, but I think people will come back.

Honestly, your reputation might not have spread far enough that many people even noticed. The Yards is a big place. I didn't know you existed until I was following up on some kidnappings.



I hope you're right. Because I guess I'm going to start over.

And you're going with her?

I like being a bat.

And I like Raz.

Pleek and I are going to work on changing some things. Starting with the bat form.

There were reasons that made sense at the time, back when, for them to not be able to talk ... but now I think that was a mistake.

It's gonna be interesting.



Cres ... watch out for Geeta, OK?

That goes even more for you ...

Oh, for sure. There's a good chance she'll come after us. We'll be ready.

But, y'know, we don't know where she is, we don't know what's driving her ...

Could be anywhere. Could be anything.

"I wouldn't even want to guess what kind of trouble she's getting into right now."



Hey!

Are you OK?  
You don't look like you're OK.



You'd better come with me.

I'll help you get yourself back together.

It'll be fine. Everything will be fine. You'll see.

don't ... monster ... useful ... I ...

don't ... don't know ...

Oh, goodness! You're really a mess, aren't you?



... So the final lesson was that I could break out of it any time I needed to?

You want me to just give you the answers? That's cheating, isn't it?

I want you to confirm my answers. Check my work.

You're not being graded.

Liar.

... That's part of the lesson. The point is, you control your monster, not the other way around. At no time in there did you ever lose control of it.

It's important for you to remember that, because if you don't think you have control of it, you'll be hesitant to use it. And there are times when you need to use it.

It's a tool. This was about tool safety.



And once again you've gotten information from me I shouldn't give you. I'm a soft touch.

You are anything but, and you know it.

Now that you've gotten everything out of me that I can give you, are you going to tell MOMMA on me and shut me down?



Don't be a bitch.

I am a bitch. It's my job.

I told you there were risks for doing this aboveground. Here's the risk, right here.

Your mother is the absolute power in the Yards. If she decides she doesn't like what I'm doing, she can just shut me down completely. I won't get a say in the matter.

I don't want to shut you down. I really don't.

But she does need to be told.



In that case, you might as well come with me. I've been summoned.

I had to go there anyway. She and I have some things to discuss.

... yes, I'd imagine you do.



Obviously we have to lose the Moss. And the throne is completely inappropriate.

I like the trees, though. And that other chair's not bad.



Oh! Hello.

I'm Pauline Barker. I know you know who I am, but I don't think we've ever actually met.

I remember your grant, though. No one else has ever asked for a property anchor that was underground.

I gather you've been doing some interesting things down there. I want you to tell me about them.



Do you want to start?

No way. This is your story.

If I think I have something to add, I'll add it.

THE STORY IS TOLD, AT SOME LENGTH.



Hmm.

I can't say I care for your methods ... but the thing is ...

In recent months I've been forced to admit that there are a number of ... that there are things in the Yards which need to be addressed. That I've neglected seeing to.



I don't want to be the queen, but apparently we sometimes need one.

I don't want there to be police, but sometimes we need those too.

I don't like your style of justice, but I think sometimes confronting someone with themselves might be the only thing that works.

I don't see why you can't keep doing what you're doing. If you're careful. Cautious.



This feels like the part where you say "on one condition ..."

Mm. The condition is that I reserve the right to send some of the otherwise unsolvable problems your way.

I'd have handed Braga -- the green lady, that is -- to you, if she hadn't managed to vanish again.

Maybe you can't fix them either ... but you can at least keep them out of trouble. Better than I can. I can only throw them out of the Yards. Acceptable?

Yes.



And now I suppose you're going back to Century? After talking with your mother, I mean.

I have one or two other things to do here first.

But, yes. I'm leaving later today.

Century's where I am, Merys. It's where my life is.



I know.

Give her my regards.



But if you ever get bored with that, come find me.



Confronting someone with themselves, huh?

You know, she wasn't going to say it to you, but I'm not the only person here who needs some of that.

... I don't know what you mean.

Do you think these trees should stay?



You're not dodging this time!

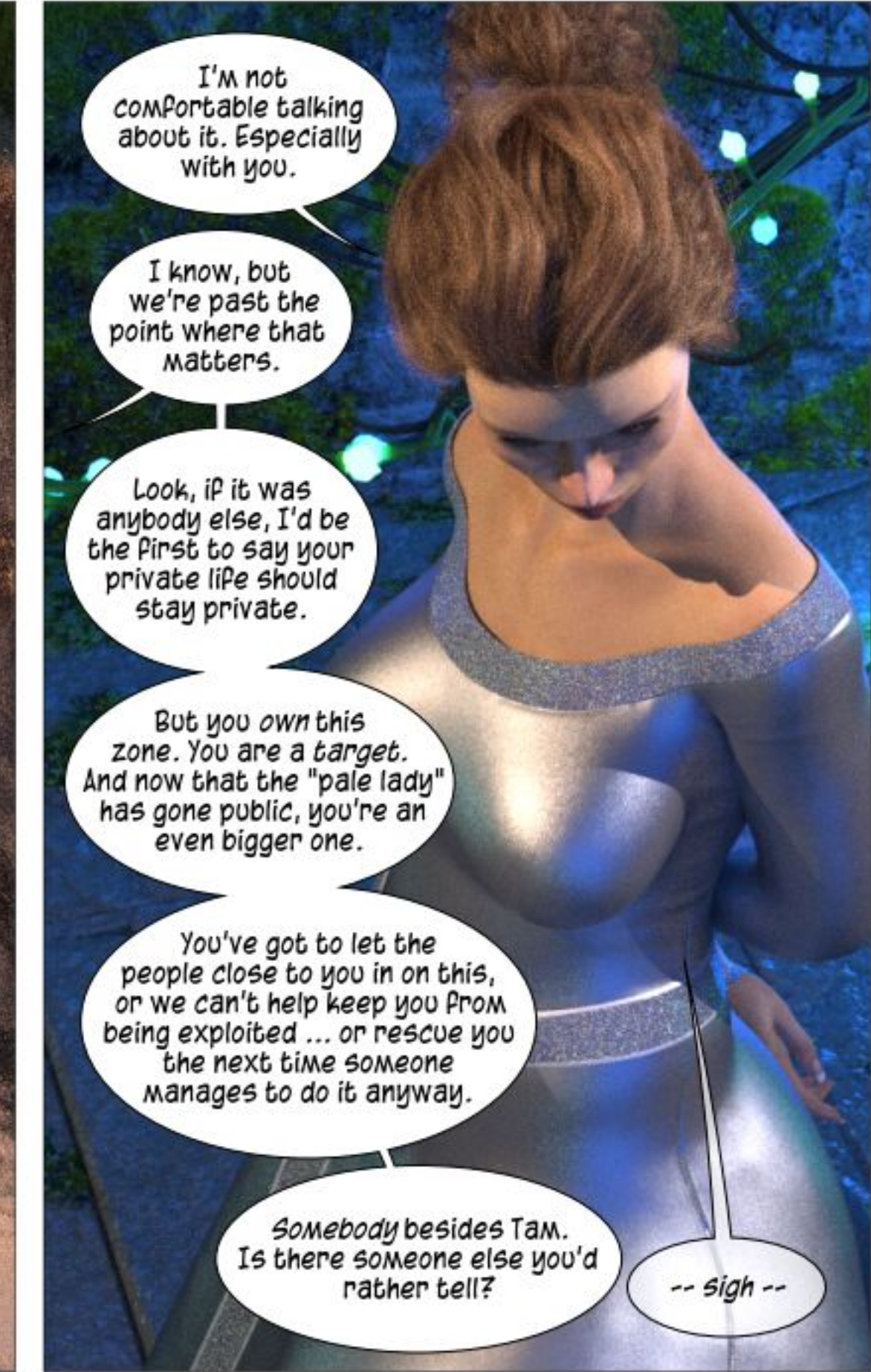
Listen, I understand that you like being an animal. Well, I don't really understand it, but I accept it.

But now it seems like it goes a long way beyond that ... and it's gotten you in trouble.

You were kidnapped. Twice, depending on how you look at it. You were used as a pawn.

I came to look for you ... because, as usual, you won't check in with anybody for months at a time ... and I had to go through hell to find you. There was a war, and you were in the middle of it. Did you even notice?

You have got to come clean.



I'm not comfortable talking about it. Especially with you.

I know, but we're past the point where that matters.

Look, if it was anybody else, I'd be the first to say your private life should stay private.

But you own this zone. You are a target. And now that the "pale lady" has gone public, you're an even bigger one.

You've got to let the people close to you in on this, or we can't help keep you from being exploited ... or rescue you the next time someone manages to do it anyway.

Somebody besides Tam. Is there someone else you'd rather tell?

-- sigh --

I've known ever since I was a teenager that I like being submissive.

And being a Barker has always made that difficult. I'm not oblivious, Naomi. Putting myself in other people's hands has always been a very delicate situation.

When I was paying for sex, it took a lot of vetting to find people I could trust -- and even then, that was how Melinda got to me. Nothing's safe.

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On the other hand, Melinda was the person who showed me that *really* turning off my brain -- going completely animal ...

... well, I don't owe her thanks. She didn't mean to do me a favor, after all.

The thing is, it's not just turning off my brain and handing the keys to someone else. Apparently, I also like humiliation. If someone makes me into a pet, that's fun. If they also tell me how stupid and useless I am like that ... that's ...

... look, I'm not responsible for what my mind wants.

I wasn't judging you --

Hold on, I'm not done yet.

I can't do magic as myself. Yards-style magic.

I have the highest permissions in the Yards and I *should* be able to do anything I want here, but as Pauline, I'm restricted by what I can do data-wise -- things like removing someone's rights, or deleting their space. Barker-style magic.

My brain just can't seem to make the leap.

When Tam puts me into "pale lady" mode ... or pet mode ... it unlocks something. It's like suddenly some of the rules are removed.

Braga realized that as a puppy I could do just about anything ... if she could get me to Pocus on it, and willing to do it ...

I noticed. Even as a pet, you didn't want to change me into something horrible. You were willing to send me below the earth, though. I wonder what you didn't know you knew.

You realize this makes you super vulnerable. The more powerful you are, the less you're yourself.

Who's "myself" though?

I don't want to be Pauline! Even before all this happened, I didn't want to be Pauline. Pauline has to be a Barker and isn't allowed to ever do anything interesting ...

I like being Peri. I want to roam around the Yards with Tam having fun and sex and being her pet.

The pale lady was Tam's idea, and the reason she's veiled is so nobody can tell she's Peri. So we can go have adventures, once Tam gets tired of staying in this Pucking tower and being boss.

Why do people ever want to be the boss? It's horrible. I don't understand it.

I don't think anybody really enjoys being in charge. Not even the ones who are power crazy. They never seem happy once they get it. I'm not sure Braga was going to ever be happy, even if she managed to make the whole place her army of trolls.

But you don't get a choice. And maybe that's not fair, but it's what it is.

I think you should get to have adventures. But you also have to be aware of who you are. People have got to be able to find you. People have got to be able to call you back when they need you. And you've got to watch your back.

... You know, you're the Mother. You should be advising me.

Do you realize that when you found me the other day, that was the first time you've called me "Mother"? I think? Ever?

I've never been entirely sure whether you wanted me to be your mother.

Neither have I.

I'm sure now, though.

Tam.

YIIII!

If you're going to come into people's private rooms, at least knock, or make some noise, or --

I have a set of ID goggles. I used them to check on you the other day when we were cleaning up.

You don't list as "Tam." You list as Tom. Tom Hartwell.

A few years ago, there was a Tom Hartwell who positioned himself as Ezekiel Barker's political adviser. Leyna and I had to intervene in one of his schemes.

#23

Eventually he corrupted Ezekiel completely, and Ruby and Leyna had to intervene. Hartwell vanished.

#40

You've inserted yourself into Pauline's life, in a way that makes her dependent upon you. She knows that, but she doesn't care, because she likes you and trusts you.

That's not good enough.

Don't tell her! Please!!

Why shouldn't I?

What if you're malicious? If you are, and I don't tell her, that'd be really negligent of me, don't you think?

All you have in your favor right now is that so far you seem to have been acting in good faith. But I also know you're willing to play a long game. You spent years working Ezekiel.

You need to convince me. Right now. Or you're going to be leaving this room in a box. A very charred box.

I didn't "corrupt" Zeke. You can't corrupt someone who's already there. I just made it a lot more obvious.

All of the Barkers are corrupt. Useless. They have all the power and they don't do anything positive with it. They just sit in their mansions and don't give a damn about the rest of us.

I went after Zeke to see if I could do it. But he doesn't really have a lot of power. I wanted to go after one of them who did. I picked Pauline. I thought the odds were good there.

While I was trying to find Pauline, I met Peri. We liked each other. A lot. Imagine my reaction when I found out who she really was. I didn't know what to do.

The thing is, Pauline's not corrupt. I was wrong. She's a good person. Her only real problem is she doesn't want to use her power. For good or bad. She'd really rather not be a Barker at all.

I'd already learned about her ... uh, her ... interests ... I'm very good at talking people into things, and we were already doing the pet stuff ... I made her the pale lady because I wanted her to use her power to make this a better place ...

Yeah, I know.

#51

And she has! That's the thing -- it's working! She's perfectly happy to intervene for good purposes, as long as she can say it's not her doing it. I don't really understand.

She's scared of the responsibility. If she can say it's not her doing it, then she doesn't have to take the blame for getting it wrong.

Or at least that's what she thinks. Except she's wrong. If she picks up, she will have to take blame, pale lady or not. And some of that will be on you. Are you OK with that?

I have to be! I mean ... I'm ...

You're invested.

... I never thought I'd actually be in love with a Barker.

OK, but you've created a monster and I expect you to try to deal with that. This will happen again.

And she wants to wander around the Yards having adventures ...

I think it's manageable. I didn't expect it this time. From here on, we'll be ready.

I hope so.

I'm going back to Century. But you know how to reach me now.

If she gets into a situation you can't solve, I expect you to contact me.

I won't be happy about it, you understand ... but I expect you to anyway.

And I'll be keeping an eye on you.

TWO MORE DAYS LATER.

... I was trying to keep my identity secret, but I see now I was keeping it secret from the wrong people.

I'm letting you two in on it because I need your help, and I'm going to continue to need it in the future, and we can't work together if we can't trust one another.

Baroness, you and I already have an arrangement.

I know you feel bad about getting caught out like that, but don't. It's partly my fault. I didn't see that coming, none of us did, but if I'd given you more information to begin with, you might have been able to do better.

Just keep doing what you're doing, and we'll find ways to improve it as we go.

That takes care of Graytown. But there's a lot more to the Yards than that, of course.

Cres, I gather you already wander around finding and fixing problems. From what I'm told, you do a good job of it.

I'd like to make that official. The only difference from what you're doing now is that once in a while I may need to call your attention to something.

For that matter, once in a while you may need to call my attention to something.

You want me to be your troubleshooter.

That's one way to put it, yes. How do you feel about that?

Well, as you say, it's pretty much what I was already doing.

It's too big a job for just me, though. I can't be everywhere at once.

Then help me find others to help you.

All right. I'm in.

Good! Because I already have some trouble for you to shoot.

We know nothing about this "blue army" that appeared out of nowhere, except that many of the soldiers appeared to be from the various types of anthros that live in the hot swamp area.

We weren't able to speak with any of them, because they all portalled out as soon as they knew they'd won the battle. So they're not interested in conquest... which is reassuring, but insufficient.

They have a leader. We have vague descriptions of her. A floating, glowing blue woman. We don't know who she is or where she's based. I don't have enough information to try to search for her data.

You want me to find her.

Yes. And find out whether she's a threat to the peace. She may not be. If she isn't, leave her alone. After all, she did help save us.

I warn you that I'm setting you a challenge. I have no information to go on. I don't really even know where to tell you to start.

"I'm not sure how anybody would go about finding her."



Next: A Girl and Her Dog