

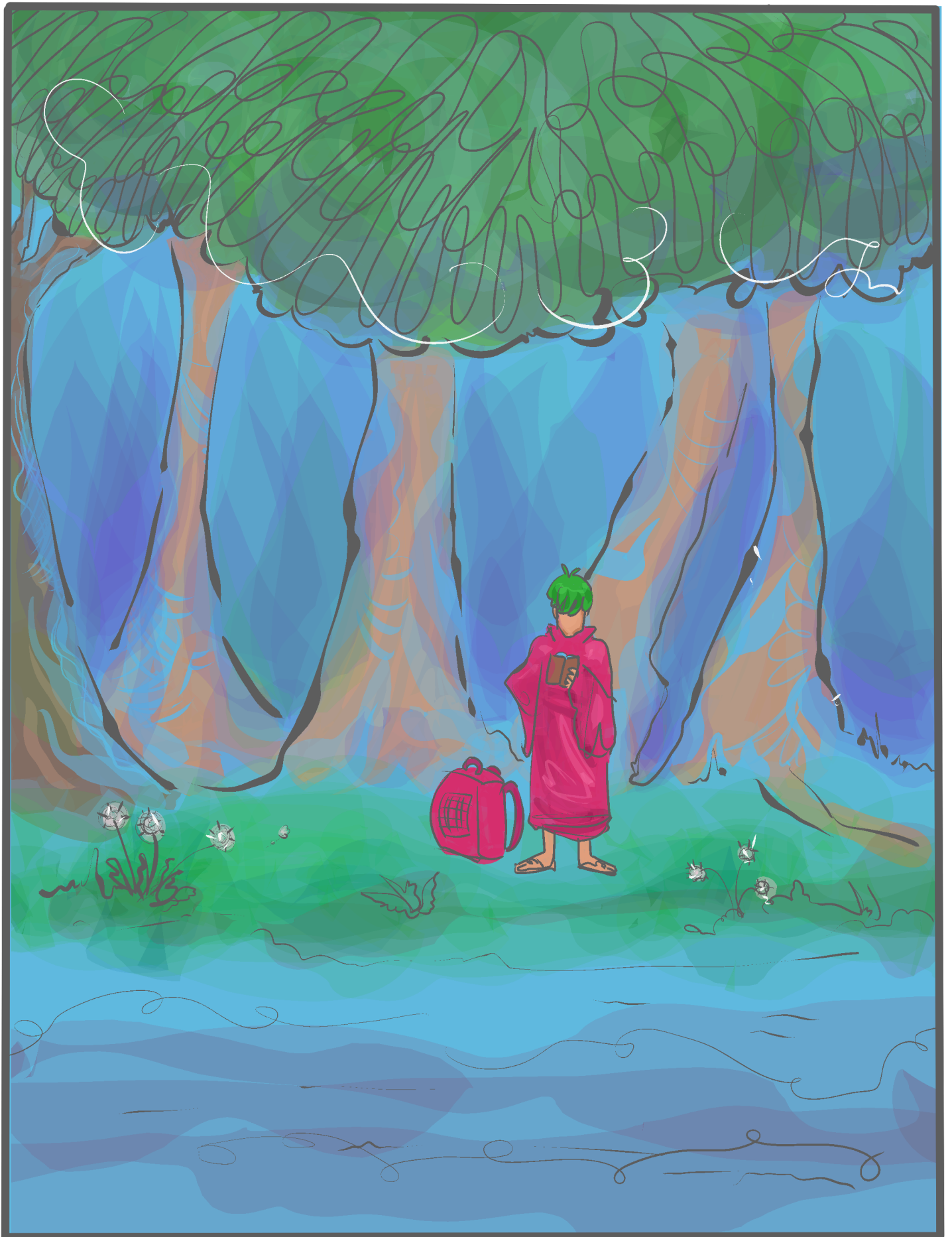
GRAPLING 7

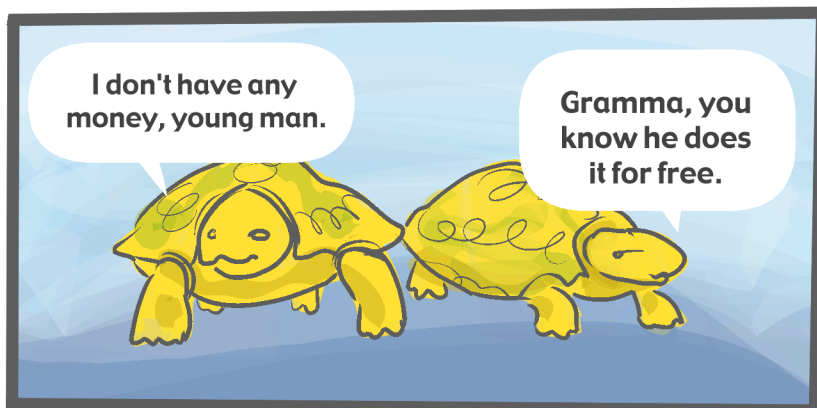
by ARBORWIND





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How many years has he been taking you up the hill, grandma, and you never remember him?

Who'd expect me to notice some human lad?



I'm just glad to be of service, grandma.

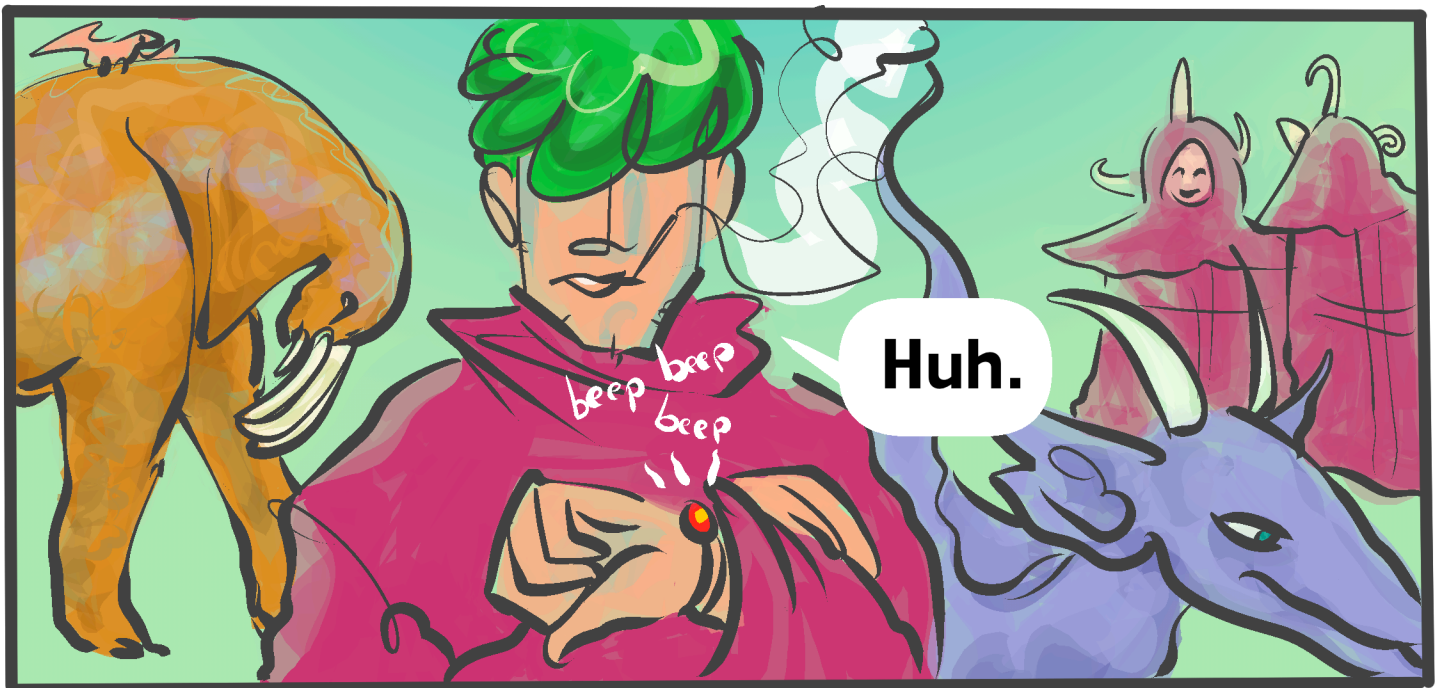
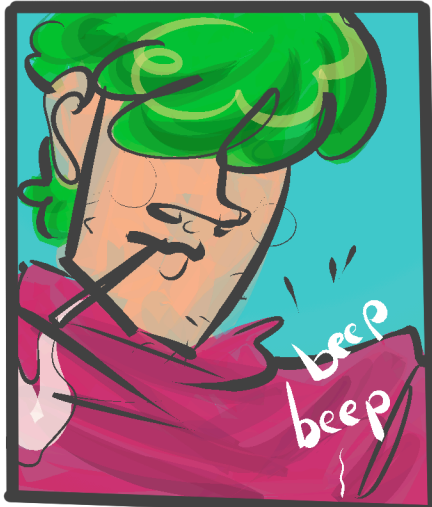


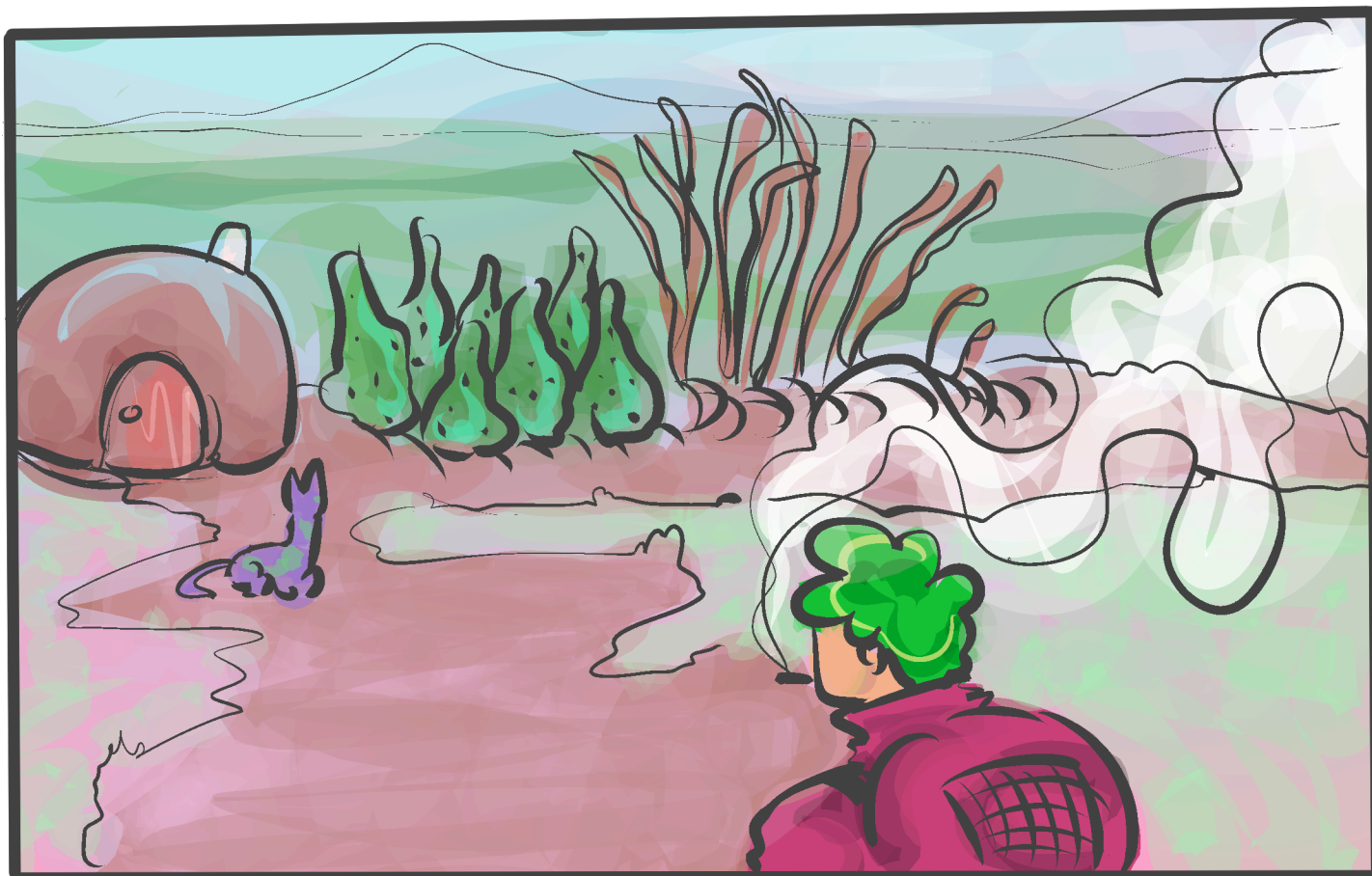
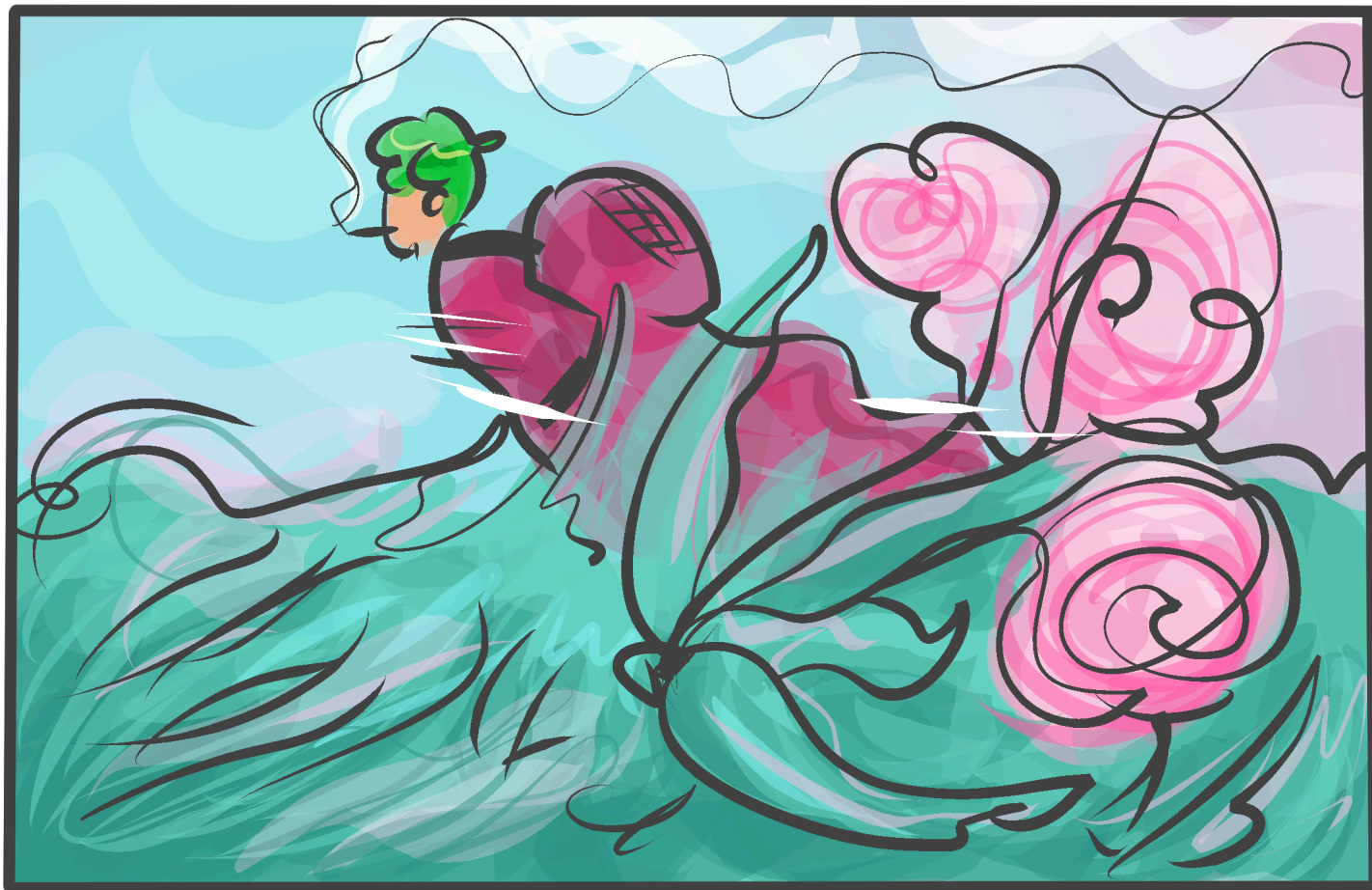
See, he doesn't mind.


Well, his standards are low.













What took so long?
I paged you an hour
ago!



You know I was
at church. I'm not
going to teleport in
front of all those
people.

Anyway, it's probably
a dud again. No need to
hurry just to banish
the ghost of an amoeba
or whatever.

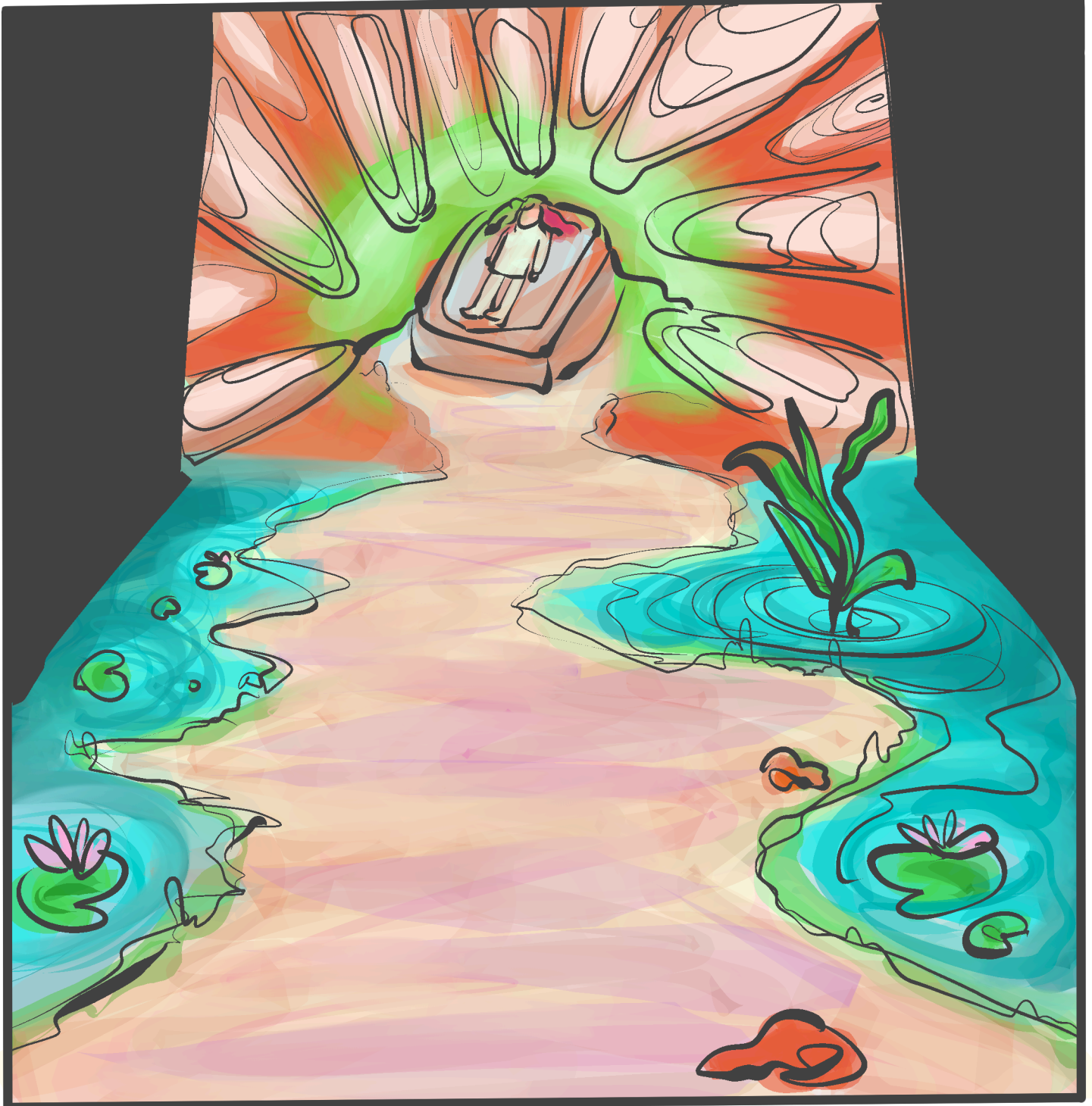


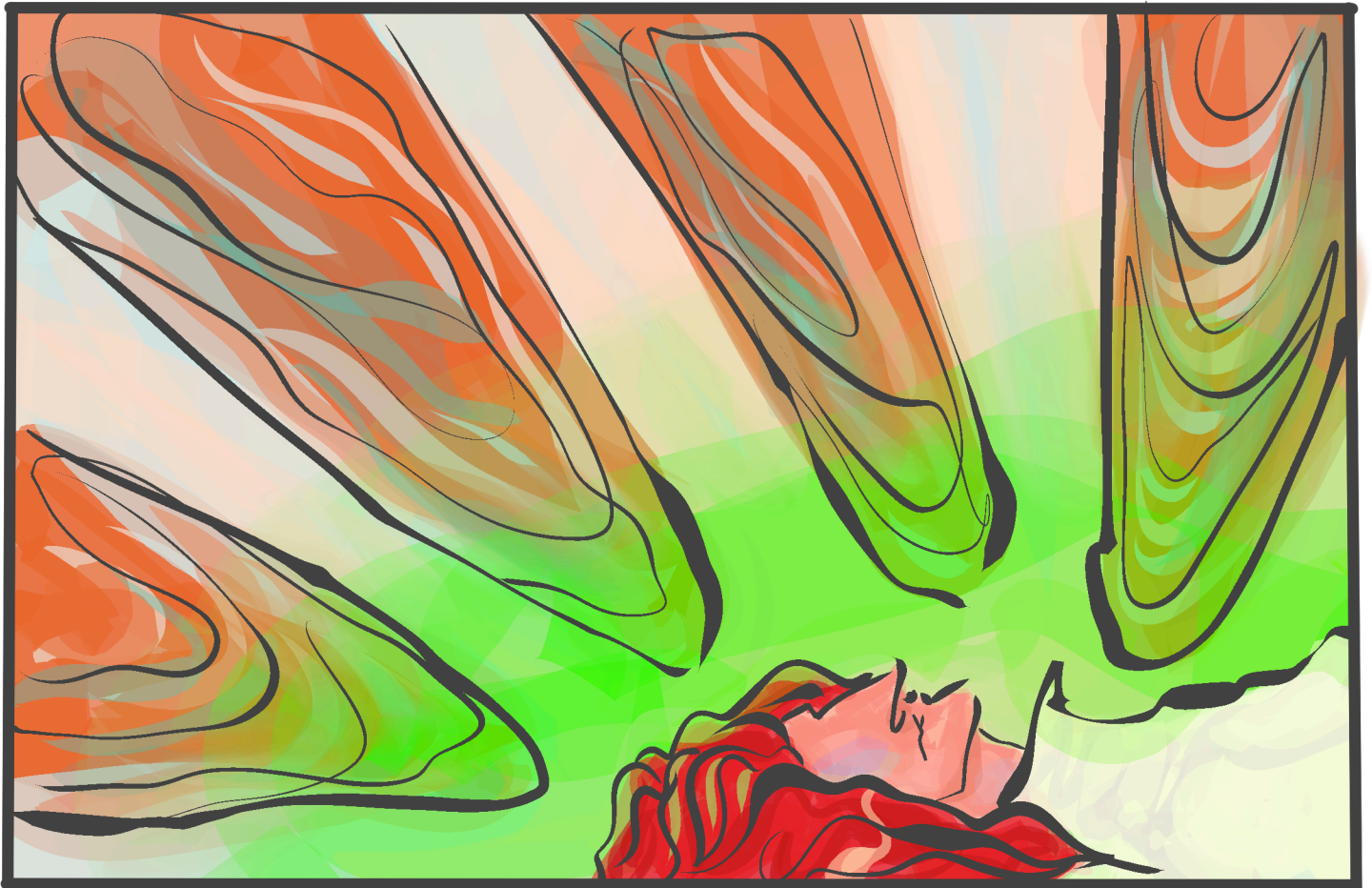
I don't think it's
a dud this time.
He mumbled
some words.



Oh shit,
really?

I better get down there then.







Hey there. Just so you know, you're safe, but please don't make any sudden moves.

You're surrounded by amplifiers that could give you a nasty bump on the head.



CHUNK

Oh shit! Sorry! That's not supposed to do that.



You all right? We're almost there.

You should be able to move now, but take it slow, ok?

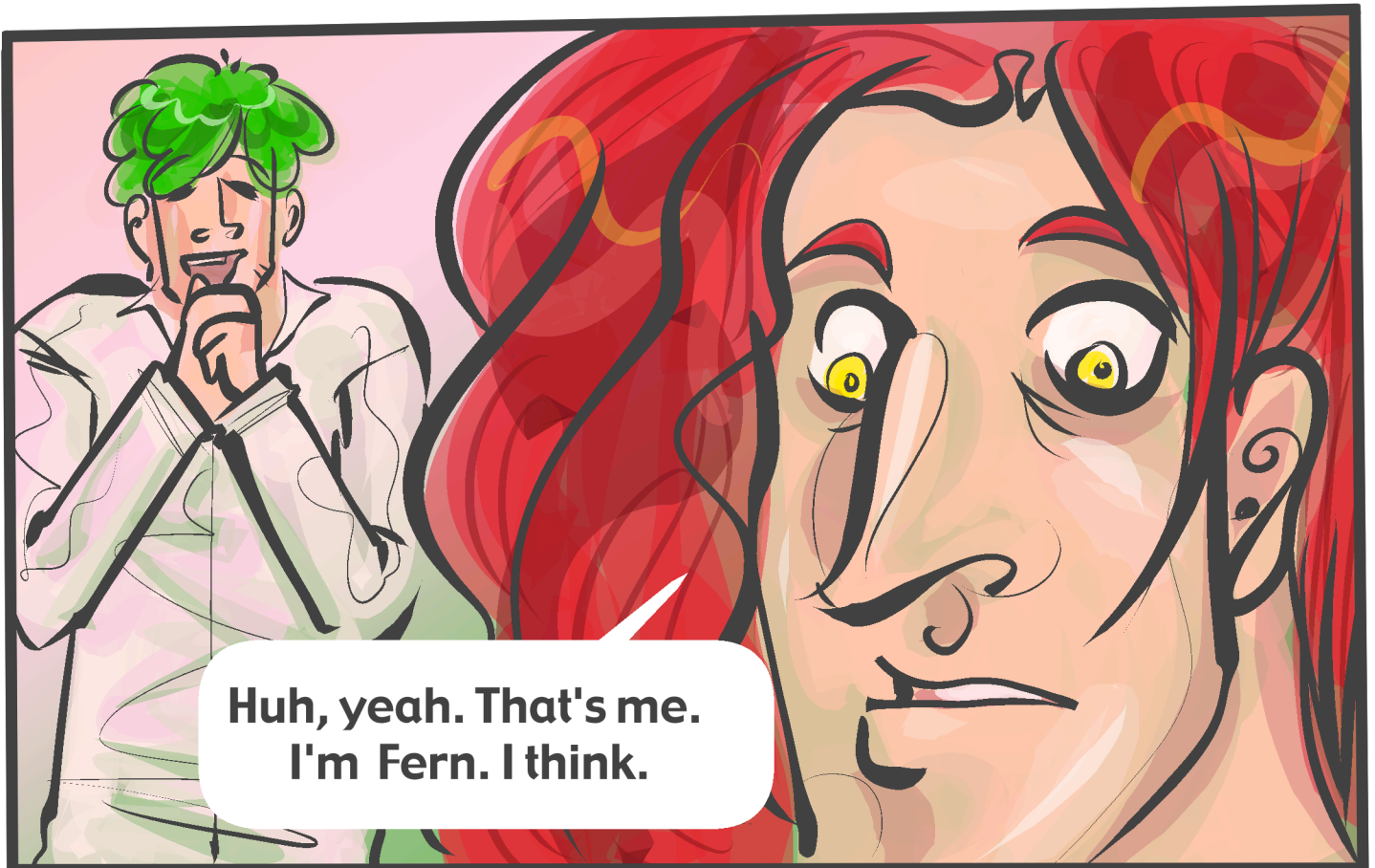
.... Right...

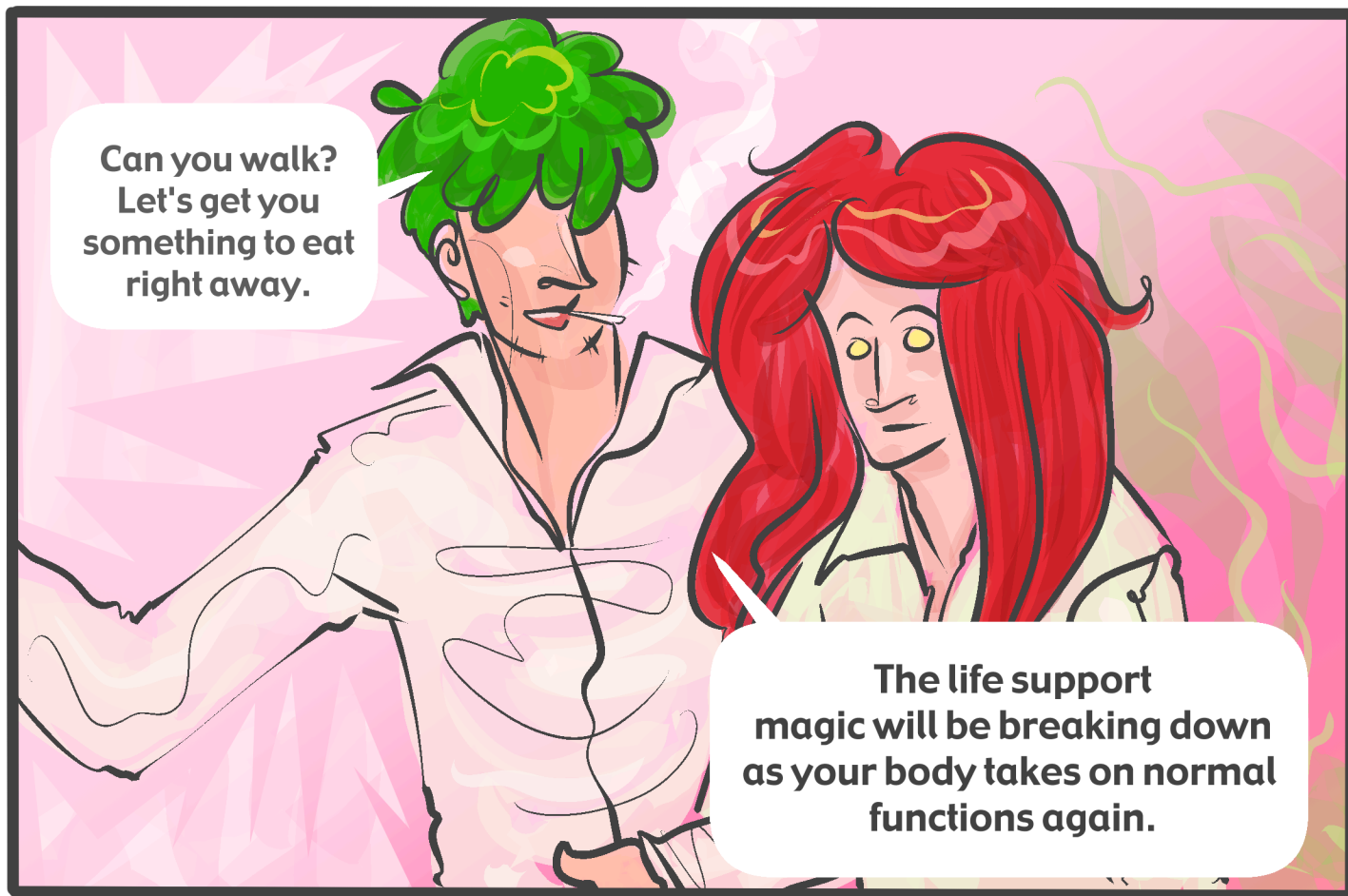


Oh wow, sorry, I ... I'm amazed right now.

It worked? It really worked?

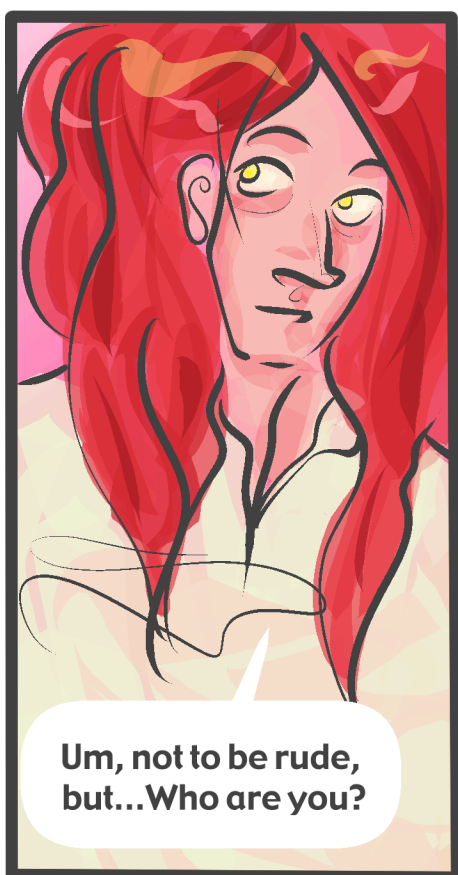
Fern, is that you?



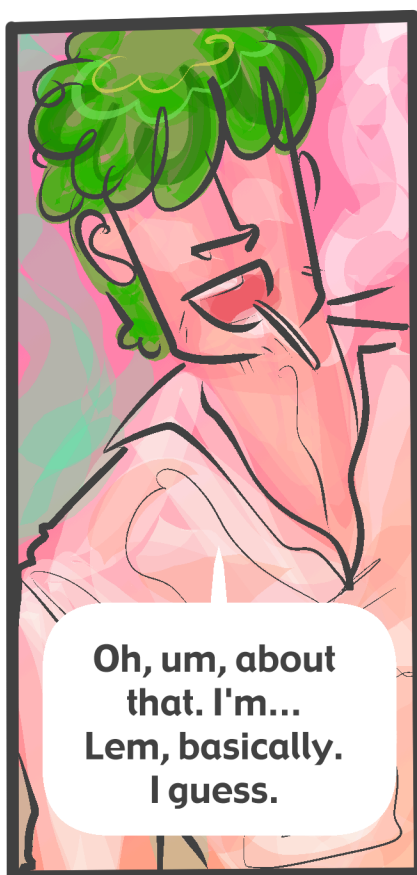


Can you walk?
Let's get you
something to eat
right away.

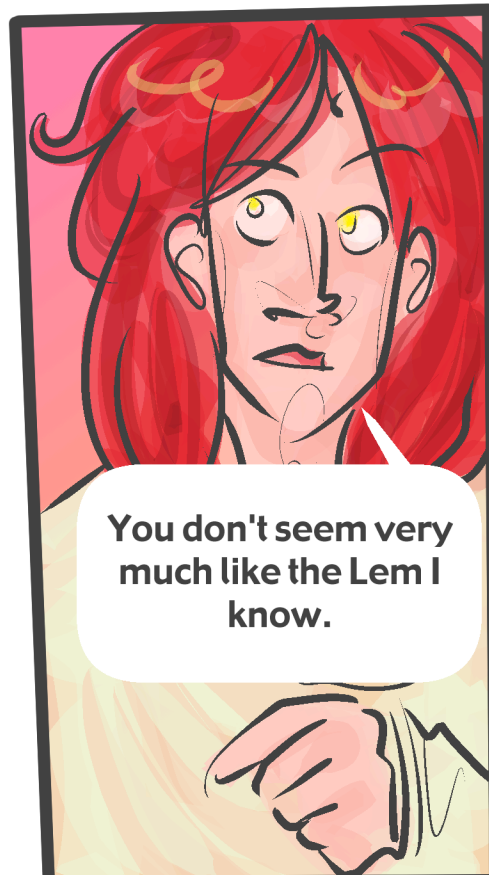
The life support
magic will be breaking down
as your body takes on normal
functions again.



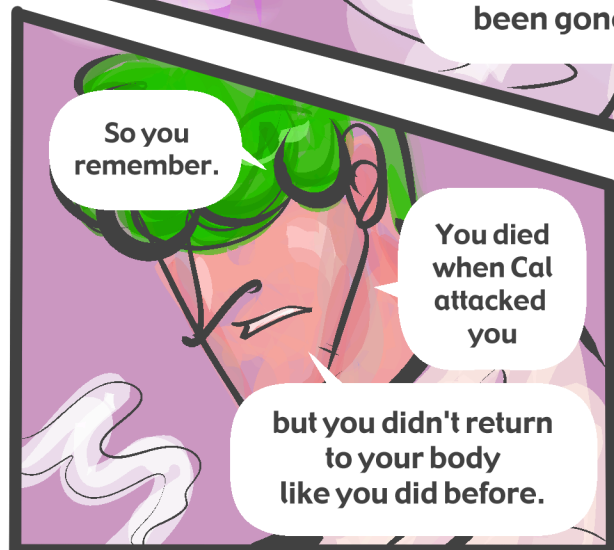
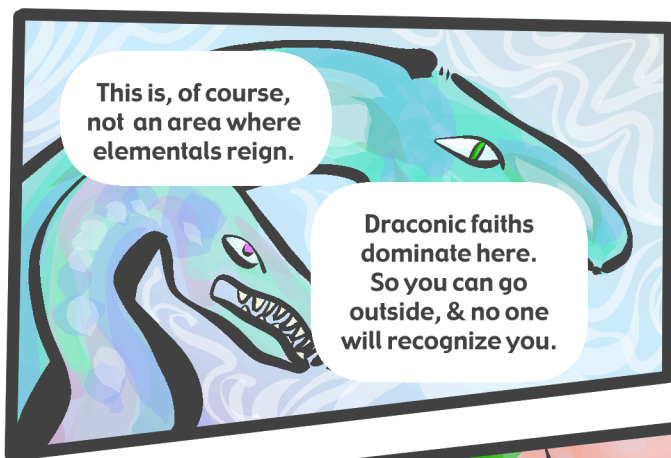
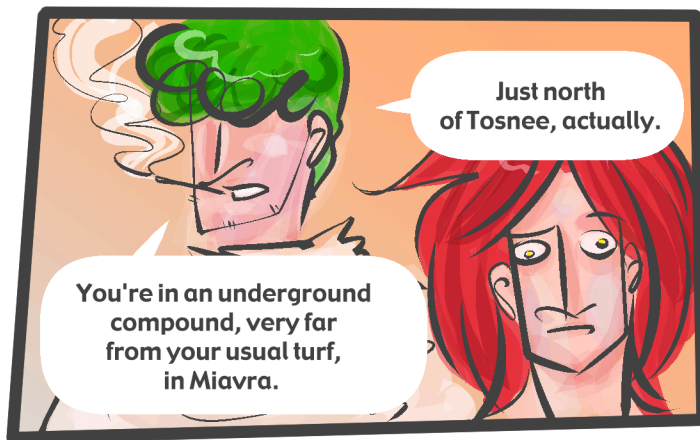
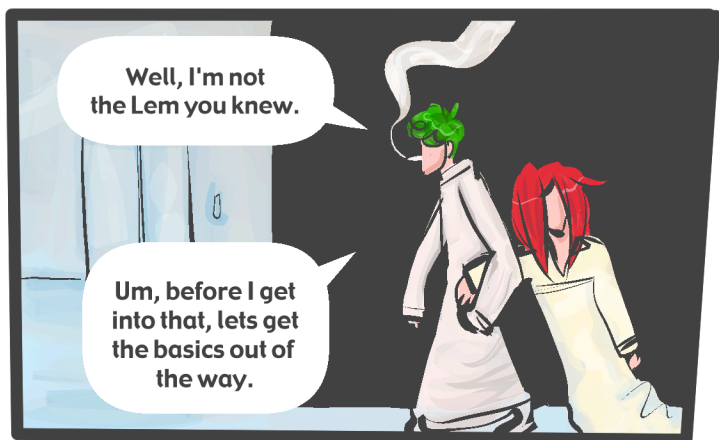
Um, not to be rude,
but...Who are you?

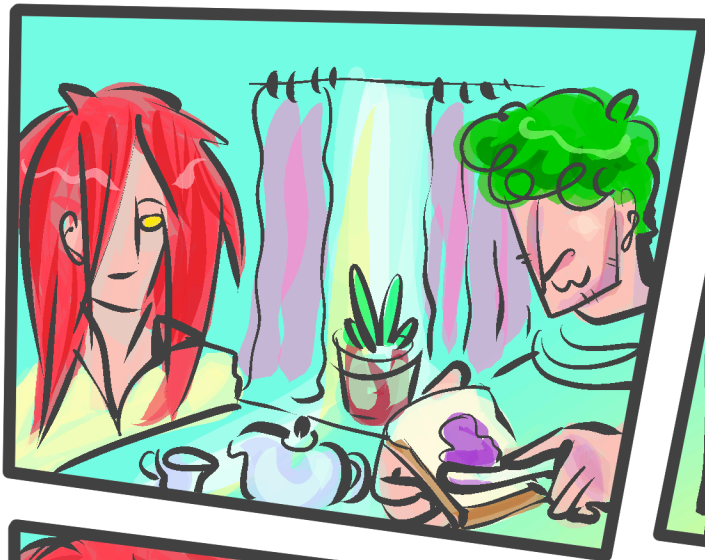


Oh, um, about
that. I'm...
Lem, basically.
I guess.



You don't seem very
much like the Lem I
know.





It's a little cramped.

Don't let her hear you bro

Let me know if you boys want anything else.



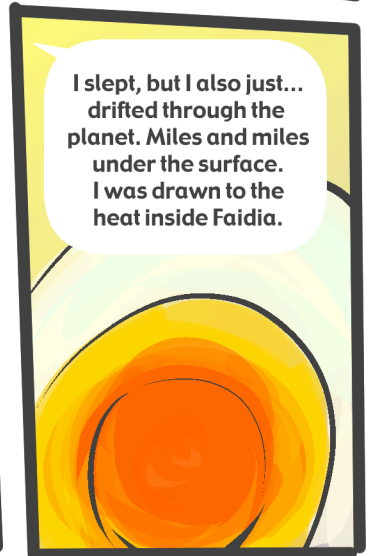
I'm trying to wrap my head around it.

And I'm recalling what I was doing all this time. Some of it anyway.

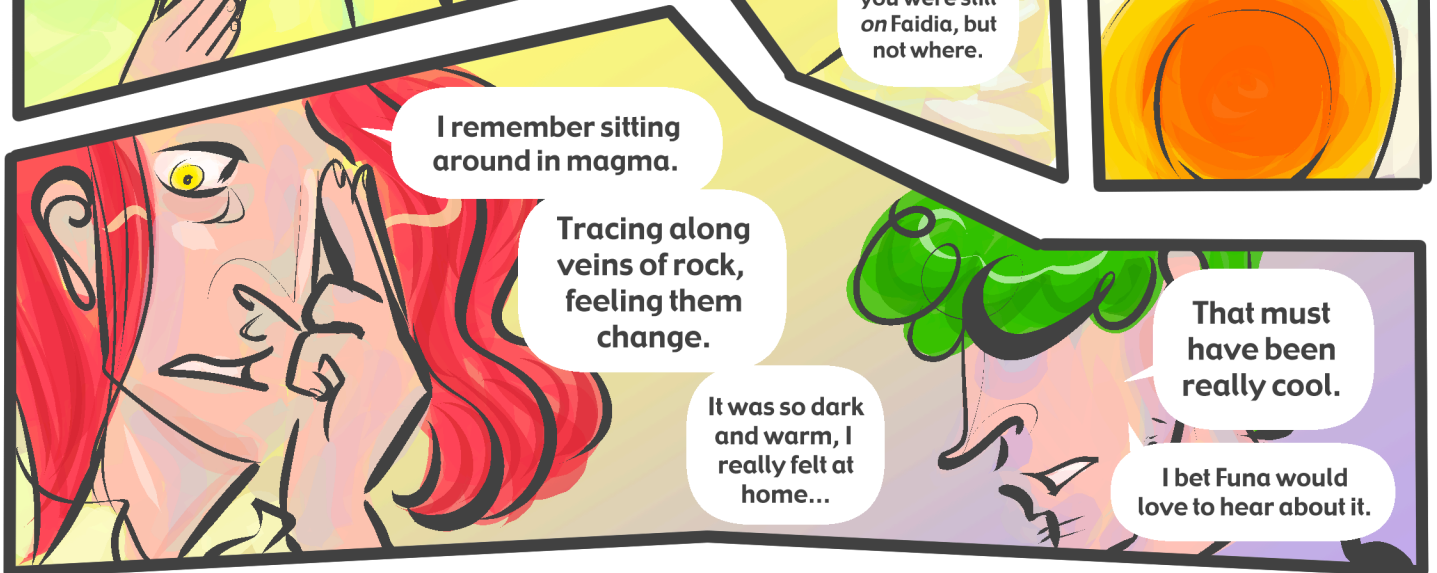


I was always curious what you were up to.

We could tell you were still on Faidia, but not where.



I slept, but I also just... drifted through the planet. Miles and miles under the surface. I was drawn to the heat inside Faidia.



I remember sitting around in magma.

Tracing along veins of rock, feeling them change.

It was so dark and warm, I really felt at home...

That must have been really cool.

I bet Funa would love to hear about it.



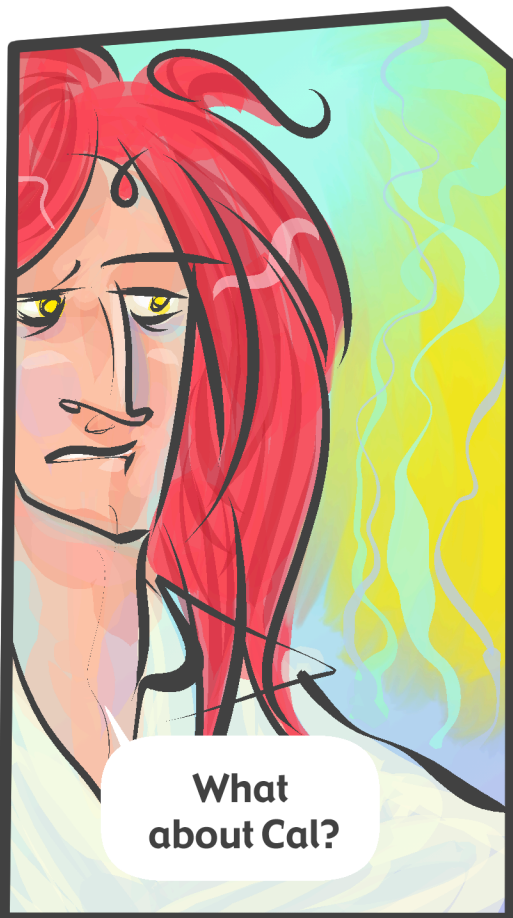
What about the work I skipped out on?

Oh, that's what the melceys are for!

Melceys are the first elemental-capable organisms. They're born oriented to a specific element.

They can naturally gather & wield magic of their own element.

I'm sorry we didn't think of it earlier, before things got really bad, but we didn't really expect it to get... Quite that bad.



What about Cal?



He's in prison.



Prison?!?!?




**Don't tell me you
threw together some
ridiculous kangaroo
court over this!**



**What about
testimony?
You passed
judgment
without me!**



**Stop
right
there.**



Look, it's not for me to help you work through your feelings about Cal.

You shouldn't share that with me – save it for the therapist.

Therapist?


Admittedly, we *did* arrange a 'kangaroo court.'

As you put it.

We had nothing set up, and we had to start somewhere.

I won't get into all of the ugly details right now, but Cal was part of the process from start to finish.

He had to be! None of us are powerful enough to compel him to do anything he doesn't want to.



Are you trying to tell me Cal admitted he did bad?

Not right away, but eventually.


At first, he submitted himself because he tends to self-pity & isolate after fucking up.

You've seen him do that, yeah?

We agreed he would be house-bound again, but this time he was required to properly start his work as elemental of death.

Once he started the work, a lot of things improved.


For him, for us, for everyone.



But, I'll leave it to him to explain all that. I got the impression he wishes to tell you himself.

You don't have to do anything.


So...I have to talk to him again, huh.




I guess I should talk about that next.

We talked about rights because of your case.

You know, like the right to privacy?



The nature of our magic allows elementals to read the minds of other people.



One of the facets to Cal being a dick... he never saw fit to do the ethical thing & knock that off.

Unless you protect yourself, he'd read your mind & use it against you.

You're telling me he was reading my thoughts the whole time I was with him?

Yup.

If you've had enough to eat, I'll show you something that will help with the whole issue of privacy.

There are other methods, but this is a good baseline.

I designed this herb I'm growing out here with an express purpose.

You can ingest it and it will prevent your thoughts & memories from being read by other elementals.
I usually smoke it.

Oh. So that's why you smoke so much.

Yea, and May too.

It's not great for certain things...
But it's better than nothing.

You maybe inhaled a bit too much there.

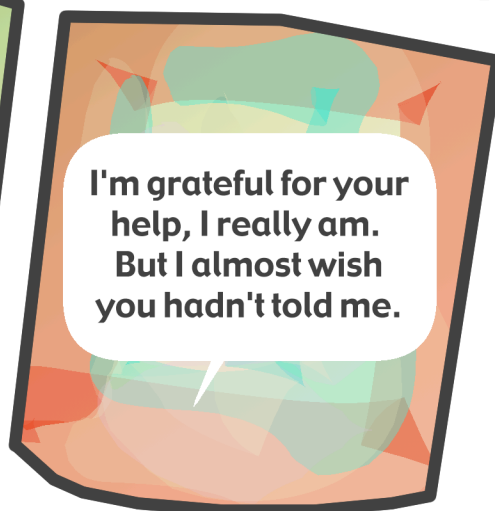
KAFF
KAFF



I'll stick to the cigarettes.
A fire elemental who can't
smoke? I'd never live it down.



Augh. Jeez.



I'm grateful for your
help, I really am.
But I almost wish
you hadn't told me.



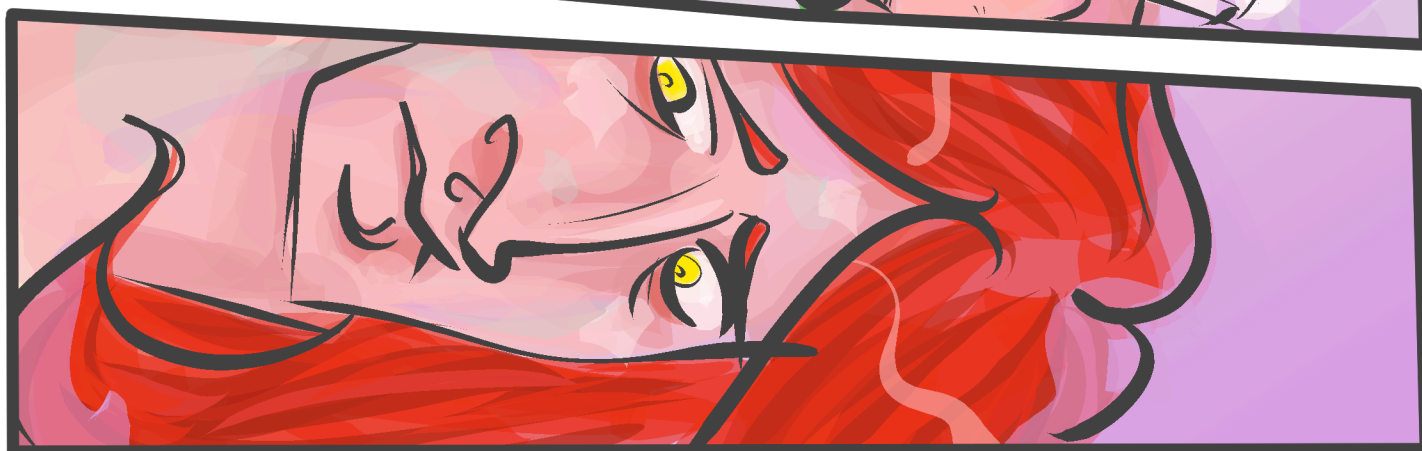
If Cal can read my
mind, and he did what
he did, maybe...
I wanted him to...



You think that didn't come up?

Him committing one crime so
he can commit a *second* crime
doesn't absolve him of anything.

He violated
your rights!
end of story.

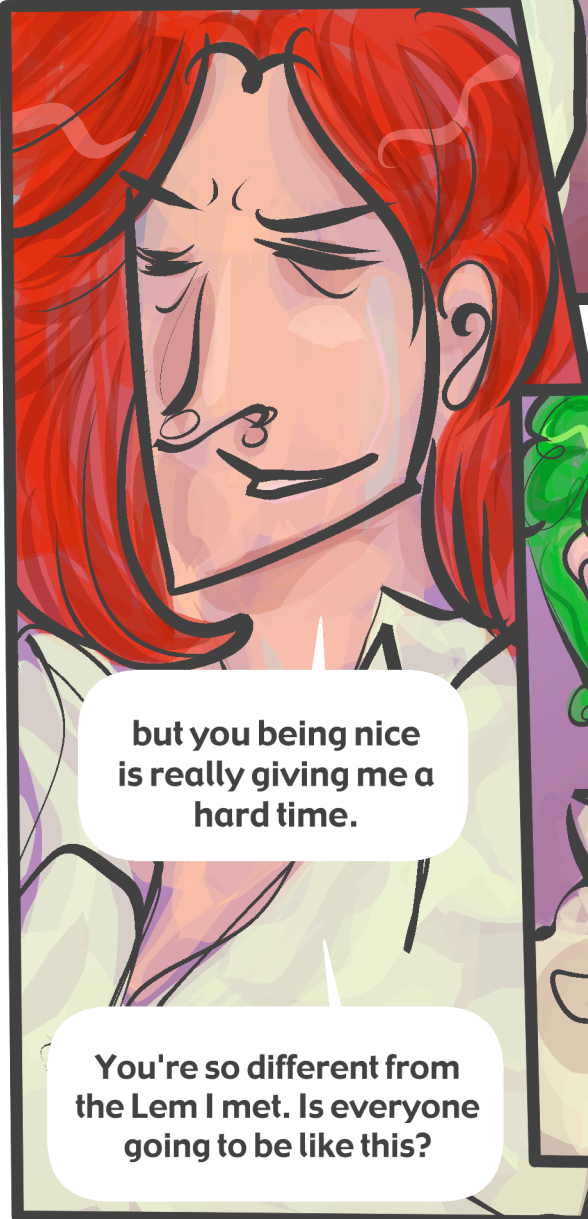




It'll be ok buddy


Give yourself time.

The thing is, I'm just having trouble believing all this already



but you being nice is really giving me a hard time.

You're so different from the Lem I met. Is everyone going to be like this?



Well, the others are gonna take getting used to, but I'm like this for a different reason. Eesh, is it really that obvious?

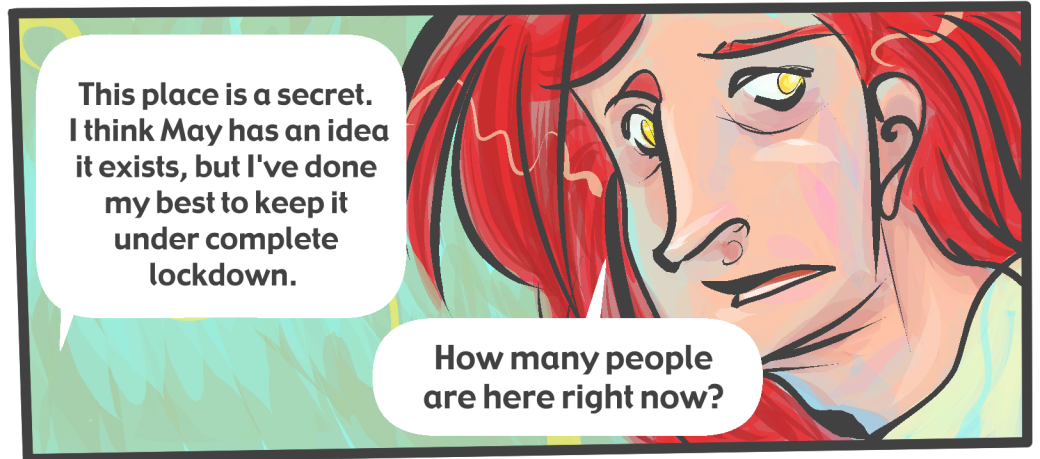
I do plan on explaining, but there's some other stuff I need to get to first.



To do that,
lets head back
downstairs.



And taking
stairs down
to an elevator...



How many people
are here right now?



But I would say...
A few hundred small
life forms, give or take,
& two other "beings"
you haven't met.

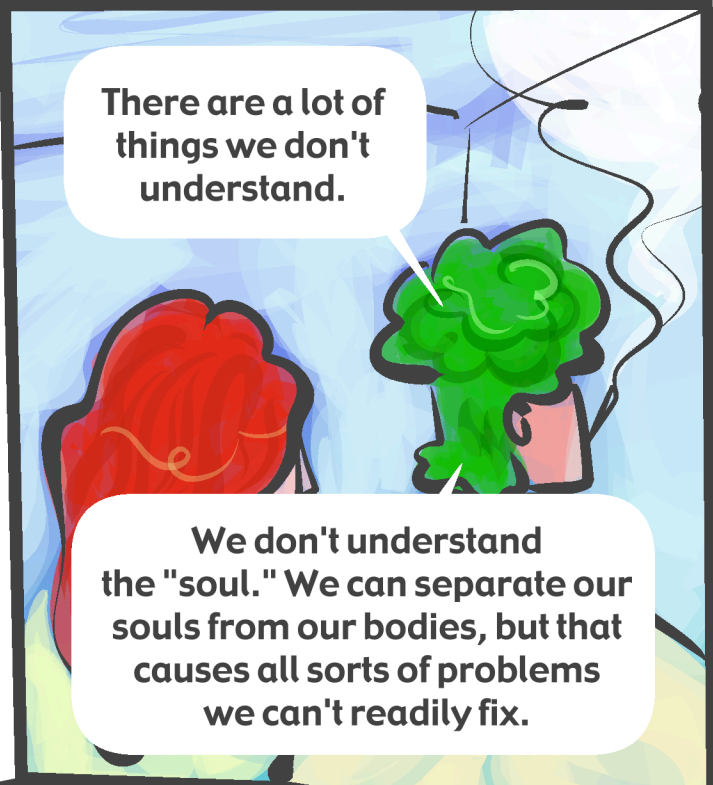


I eventually built this facility around
the formation so that I could keep
an eye on other experiments &
keep them secure.




What kind of experiments?

I mostly try to study how to manage magical afflictions here, so it's also something like a hospital. I keep the patients stable & I search for cures.



There are a lot of things we don't understand.

We don't understand the "soul." We can separate our souls from our bodies, but that causes all sorts of problems we can't readily fix.




So the other two people here are afflicted with problems similar to mine?

Yes, they have similar issues.



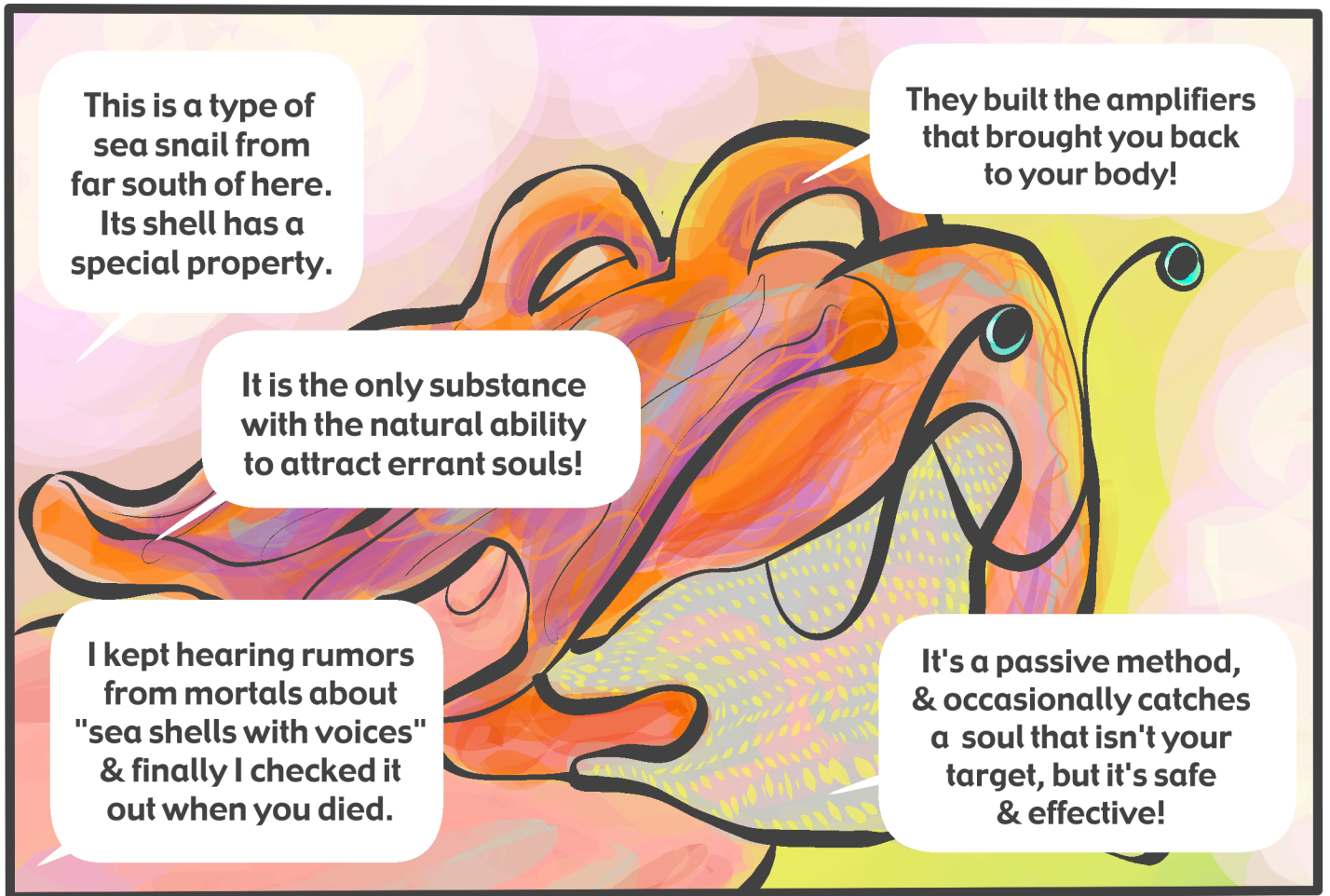
This is where I woke up, right?

Yeah. You were really groggy.



Now that you're recovered, I can send these folks home.

But before that, allow me to introduce you.



This is a type of sea snail from far south of here. Its shell has a special property.

They built the amplifiers that brought you back to your body!

It is the only substance with the natural ability to attract errant souls!

I kept hearing rumors from mortals about "sea shells with voices" & finally I checked it out when you died.

It's a passive method, & occasionally catches a soul that isn't your target, but it's safe & effective!



I didn't even design them to do this and I still don't actually understand how they manage it.

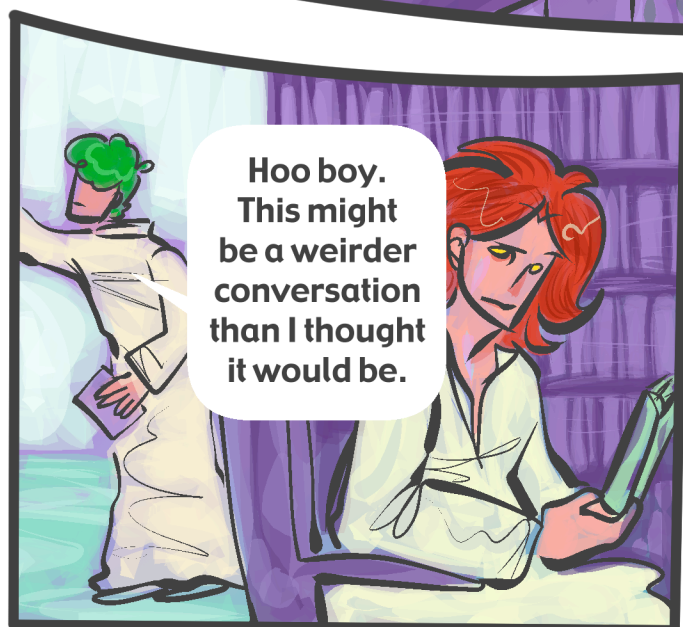


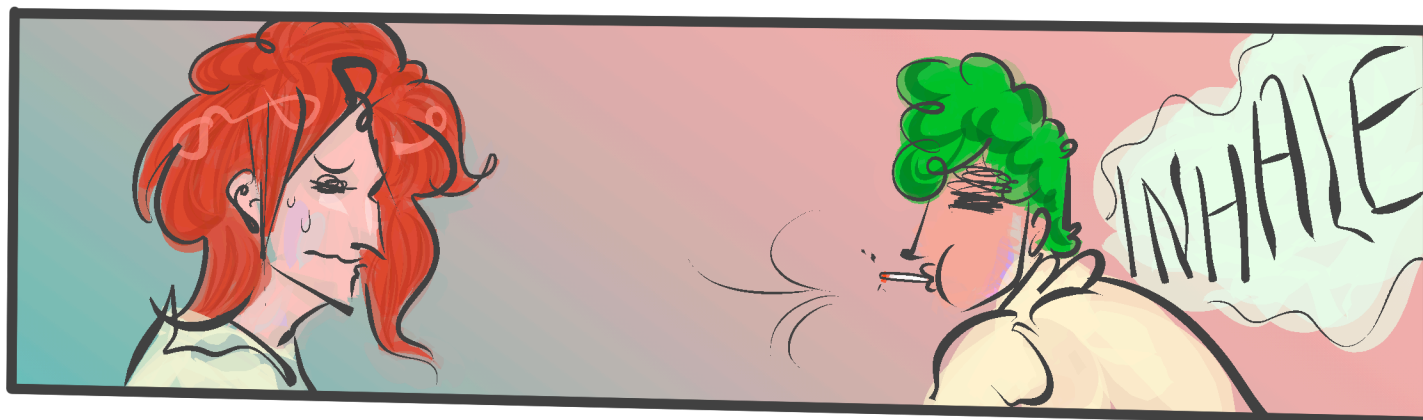
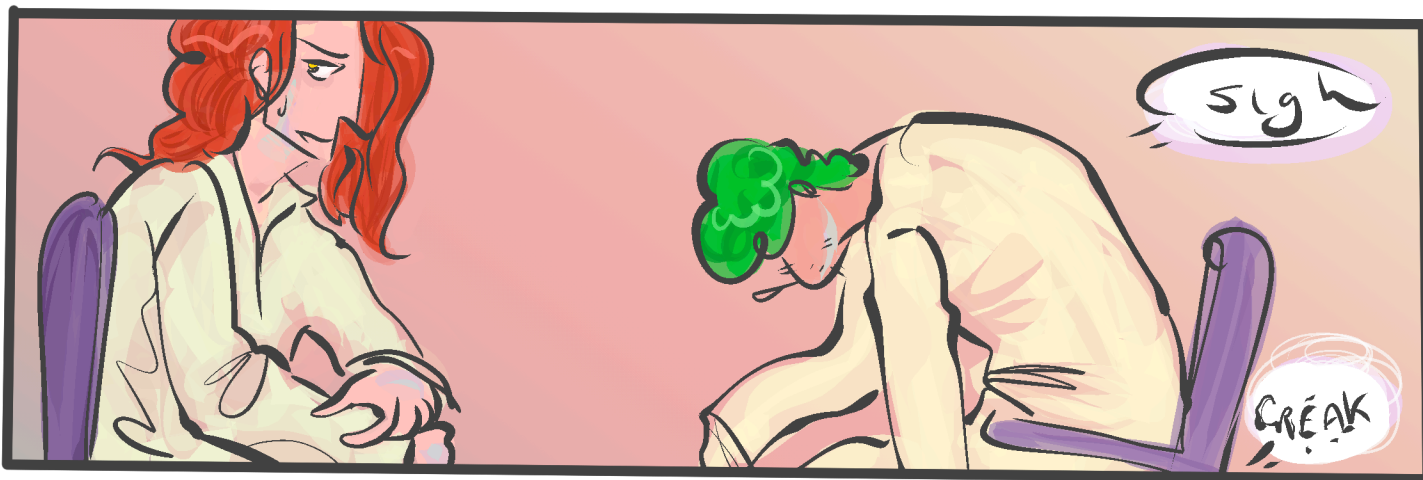
Are you all right? I think it's neat, but your face tells me you don't agree?

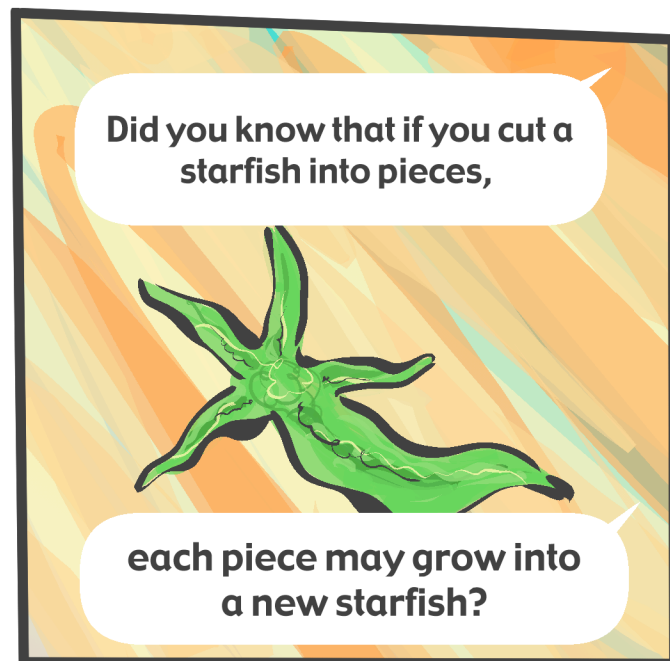


I'm sorry. The last time a primary showed me a small animal didn't turn out so well for me.

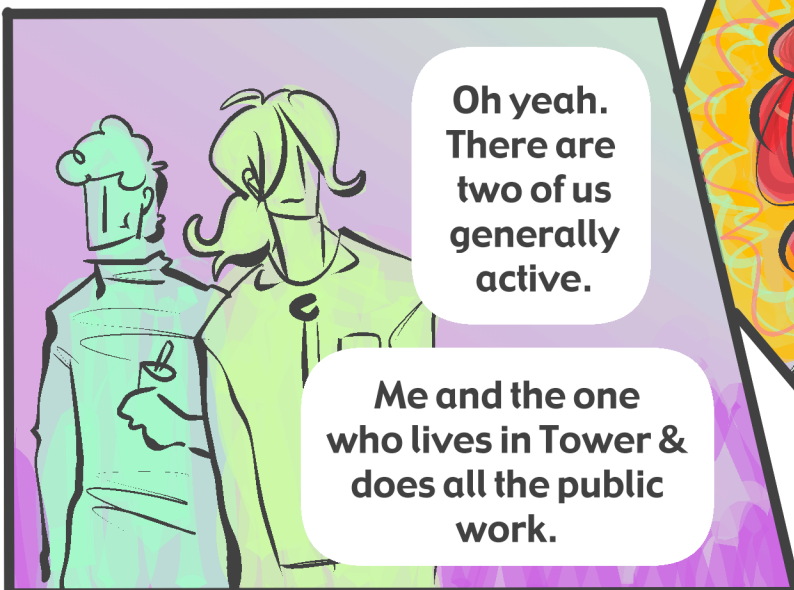
Oh dear. I won't ask.

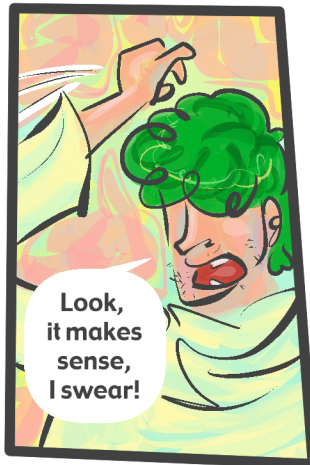


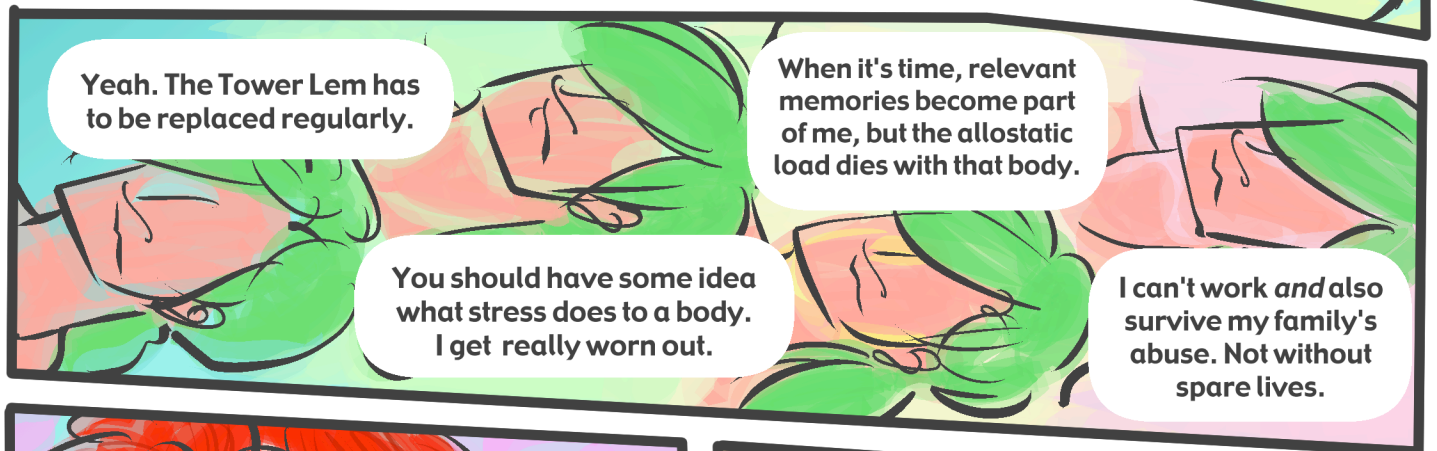














Anyway, this is also why you have my face.

I normalized my face so that my copies would go unnoticed. Your whole village had my face.

Though I didn't think one would wind up being a coworker.



Huh. Yeah, that explains it.

I just thought you were vain, like your brother...



I'm not angry this time

But please don't compare me to my brother.

From you, that's pretty weird.



Ah, mm, okay. I'll try to be more considerate from now on.

Thank you.

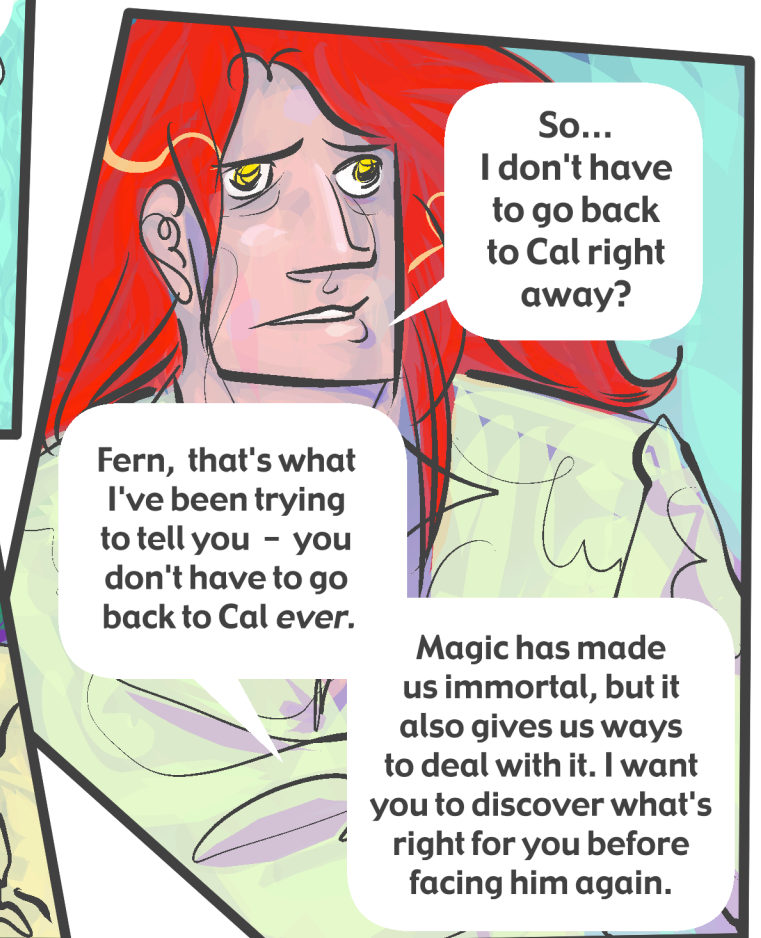
So what now? What am I supposed to do from here?



I think you should rest and wait.

Consider your options.

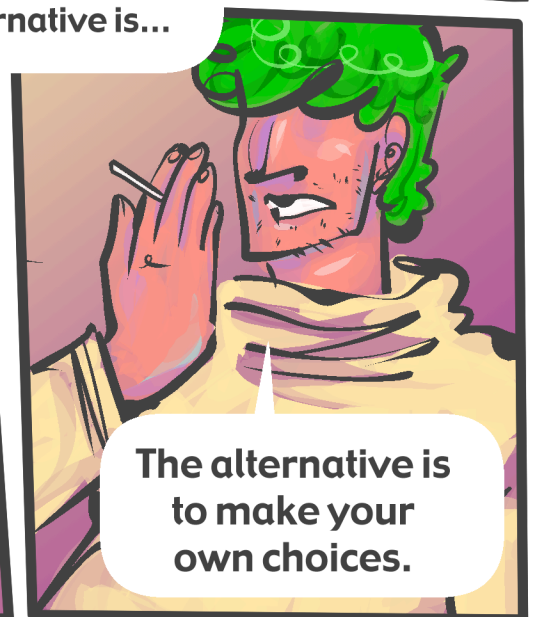
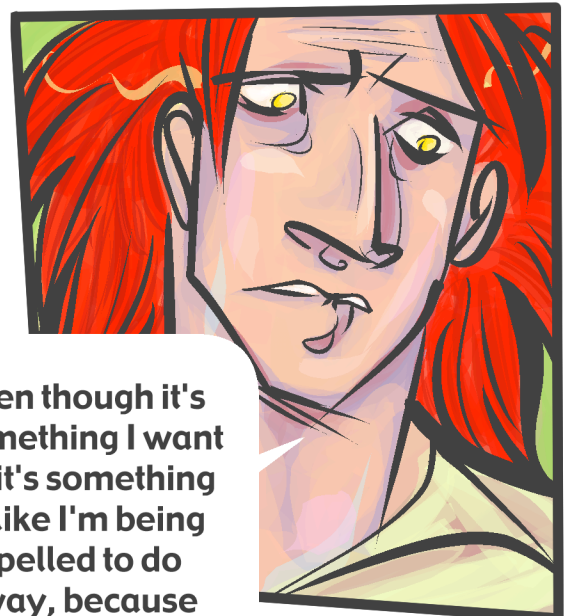
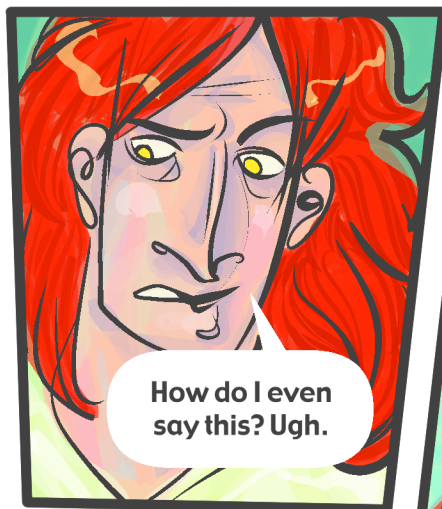
There are more of them than you thought.



So... I don't have to go back to Cal right away?

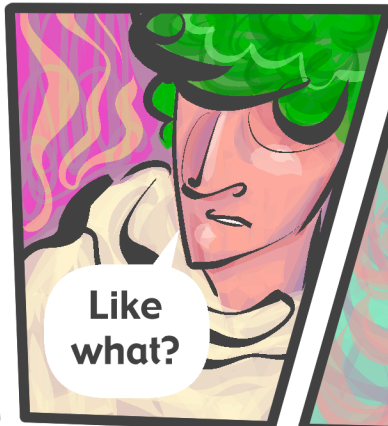
Fern, that's what I've been trying to tell you - you don't have to go back to Cal ever.

Magic has made us immortal, but it also gives us ways to deal with it. I want you to discover what's right for you before facing him again.





Well, when you say it like that...



Like what?



You're making it sound like I'm doing something irresponsible. I'm *trying* to do the right thing.

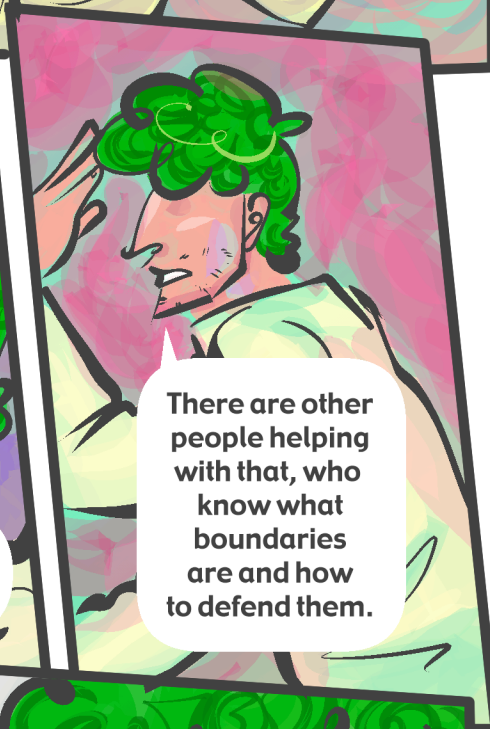


I can't just leave. He's horrible, but he's troubled.



He's gotten on fine without you for 250 plus years now.

Have you been listening to me?



There are other people helping with that, who know what boundaries are and how to defend them.



Look, I just. I haven't thought about anything besides going back, okay?

Start thinking now.

What if I can't?
What if I never think of something else I'd rather do?

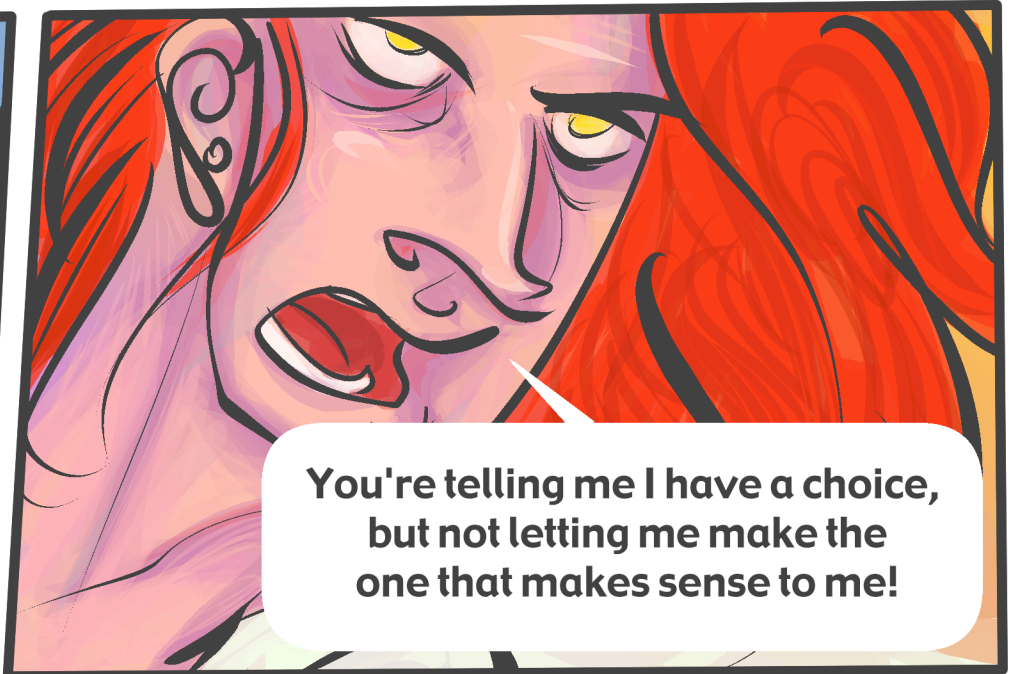


Do you hear yourself?

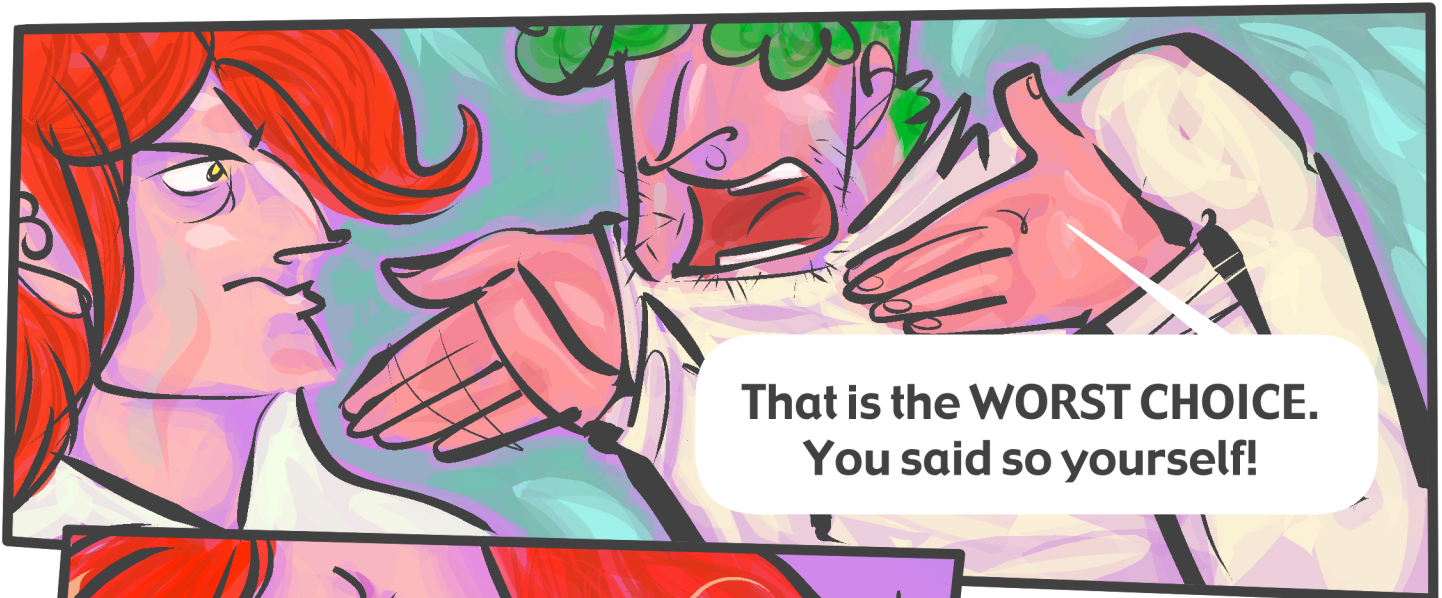
Making choices is scary, but investing every aspect of your existence into being the perfect victim for one very stupid & horrible man is NOT scary?



Why are you making this into such a big deal?



You're telling me I have a choice, but not letting me make the one that makes sense to me!



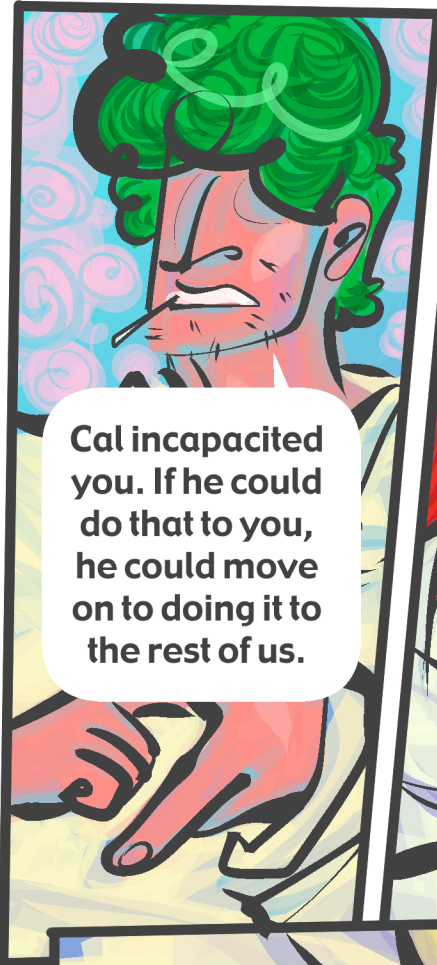
That is the **WORST CHOICE**. You said so yourself!



I am literally giving you the time and space to make **ANY** better choice, **ANY** choice **BUT** the worst one, & you're angry with **ME**?



Try to look at it from my perspective, okay?



Cal incapacitated you. If he could do that to you, he could move on to doing it to the rest of us.



I'm not supposed to think that's a big deal?



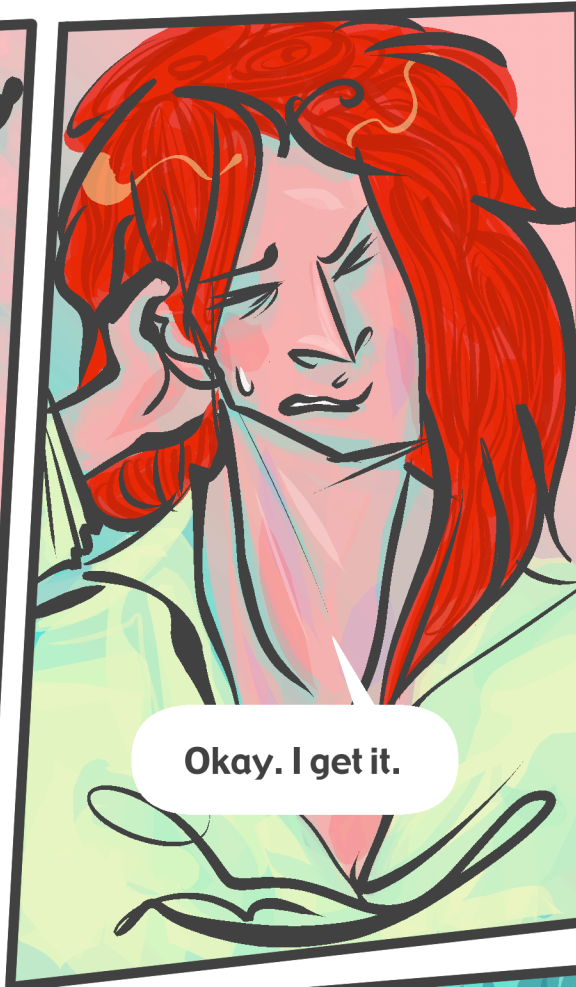
This isn't solely about you! We have to protect ourselves, protect each other, know to defend ourselves at all.



You can't just pretend you can make it all right by figuring out what makes **YOU** feel the most responsible or noble.



You have an obligation to the rest of us too. You have to reconcile that somehow. *That's* what you have to think about.



Okay. I get it.

But if I don't go back, I won't know where he is or what his moods will be.

I'd have to go through life worrying he could show up at any moment, any place -

That won't happen.



His wings have been clipped.

He's tracked at all times & he can't teleport.



He agreed to all this.

Because he knows he poses a threat.



There is also a kill switch of my own design.

It immediately neutralizes him.

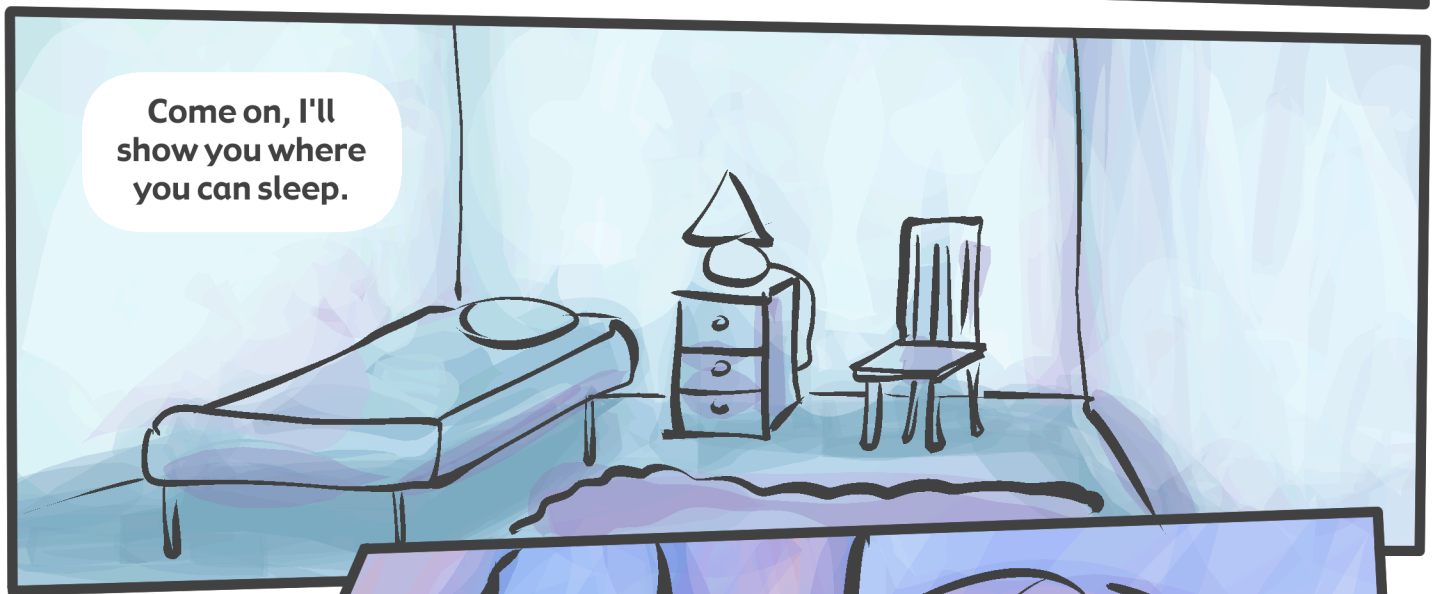


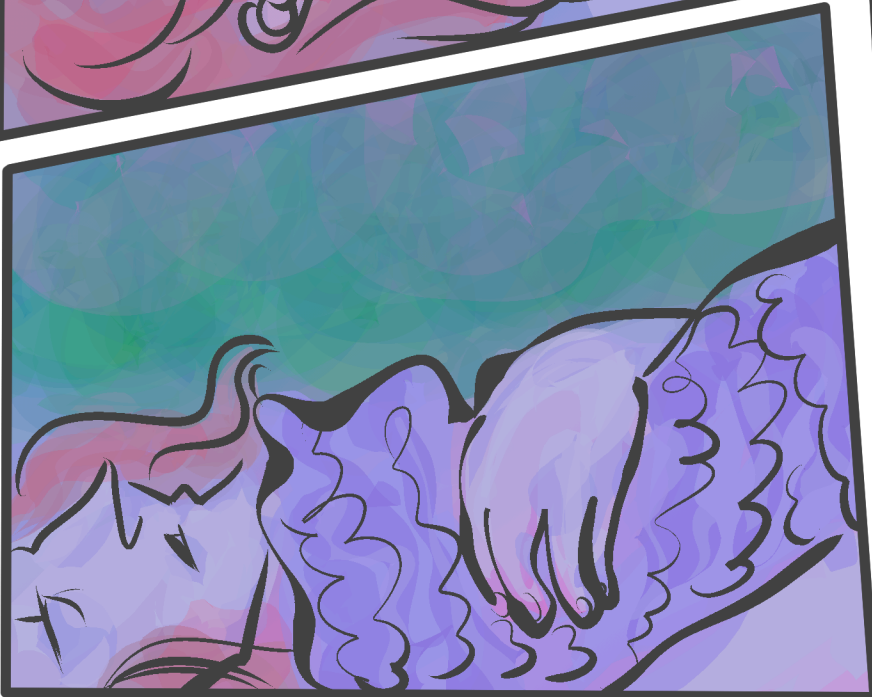
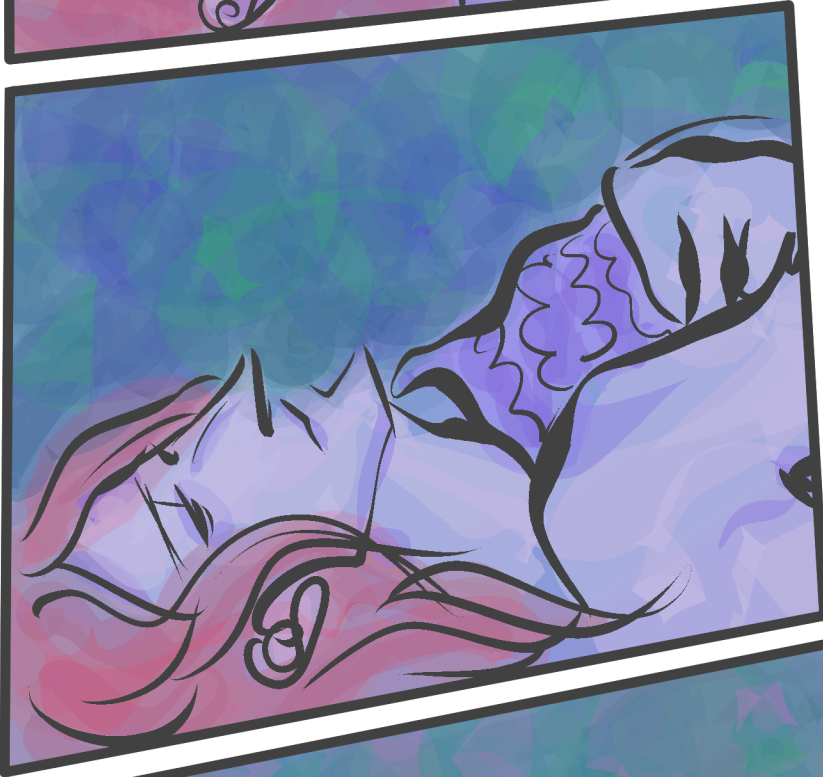
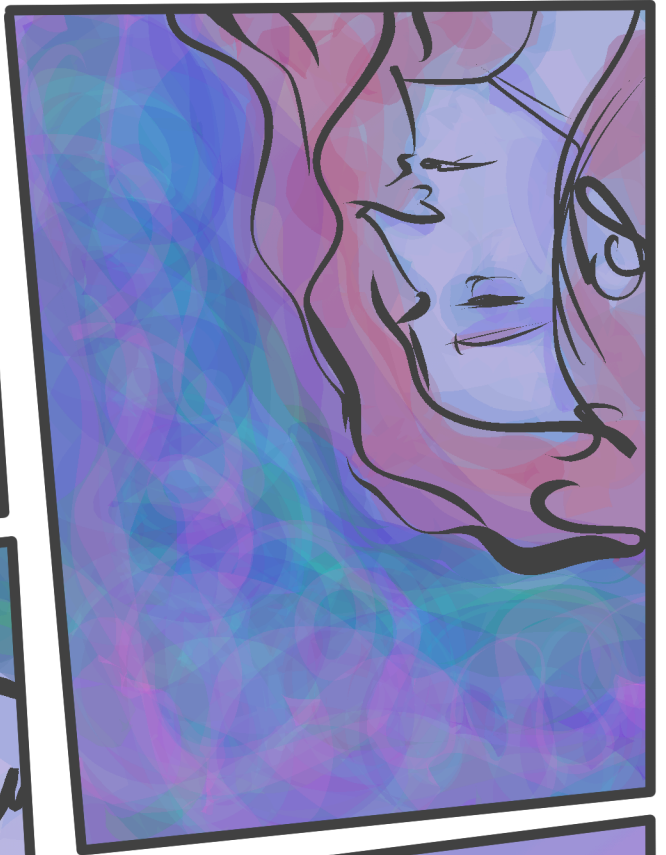
Sheesh, you're really taking this seriously, aren't you?

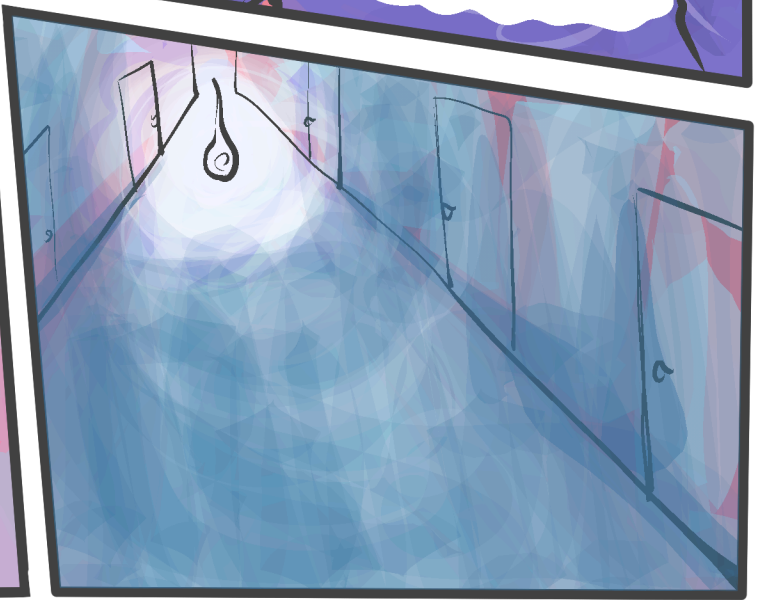
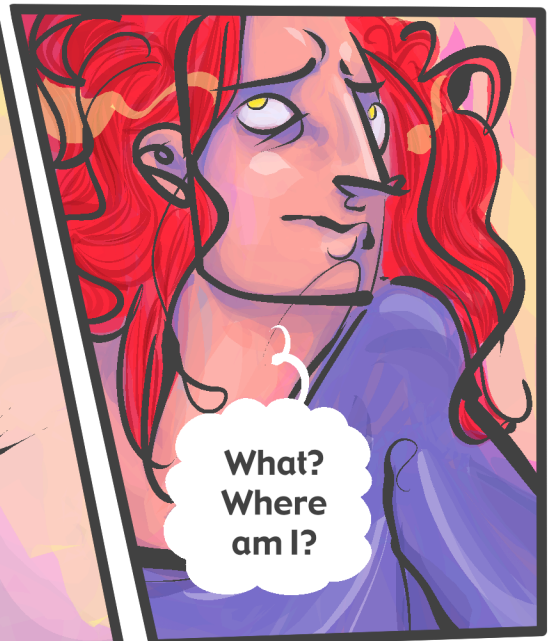
Do you really believe he could hurt everyone?

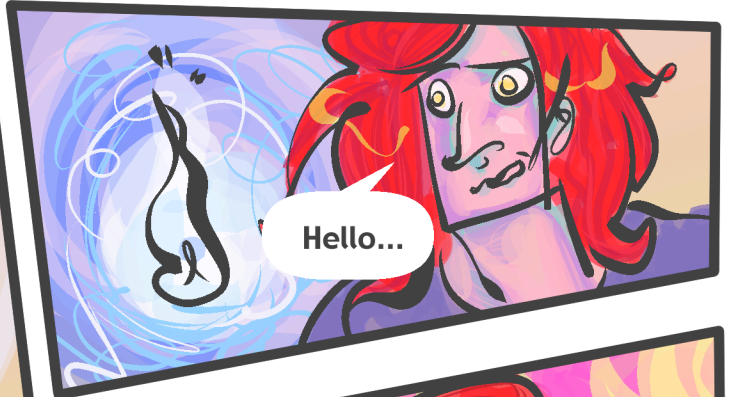
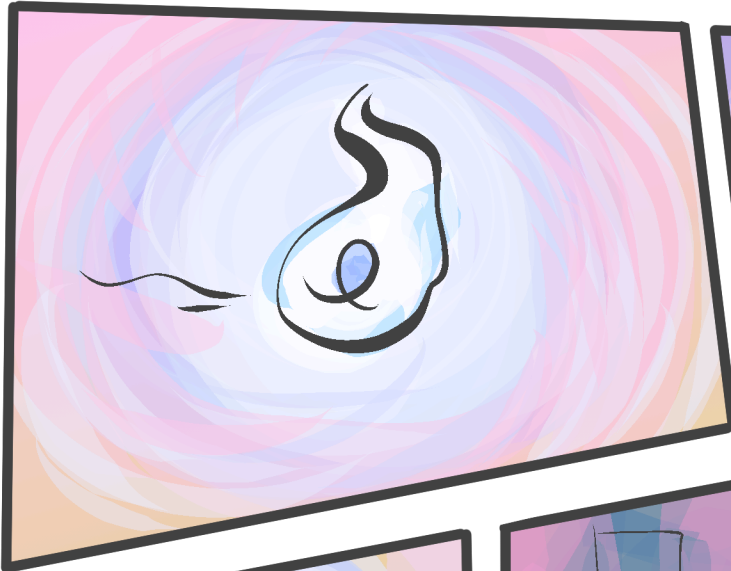
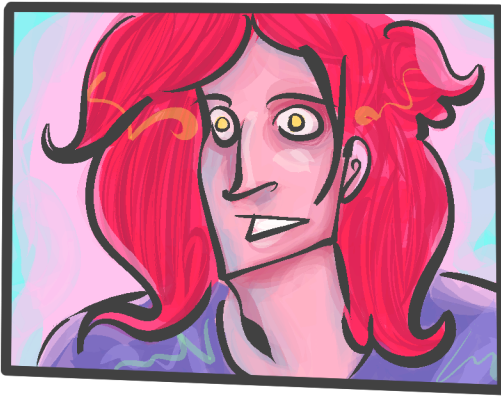


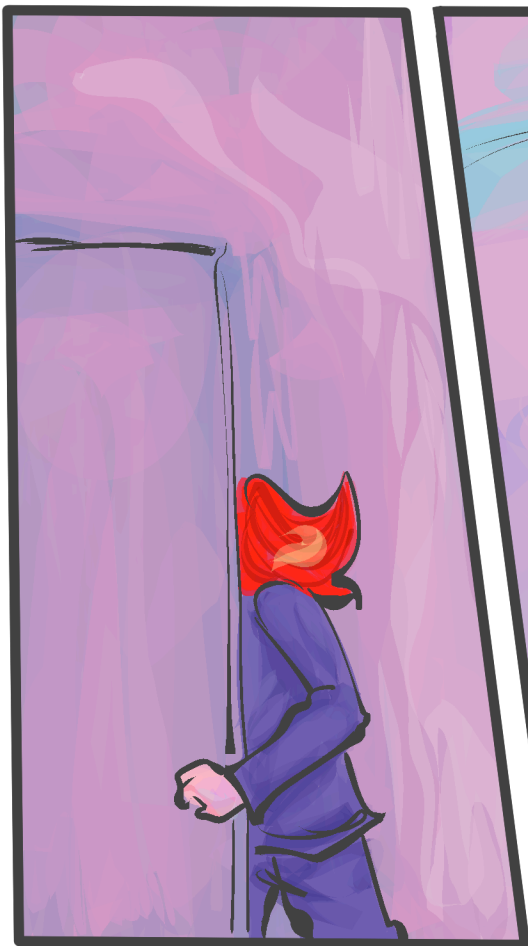
Of course I fucking do!









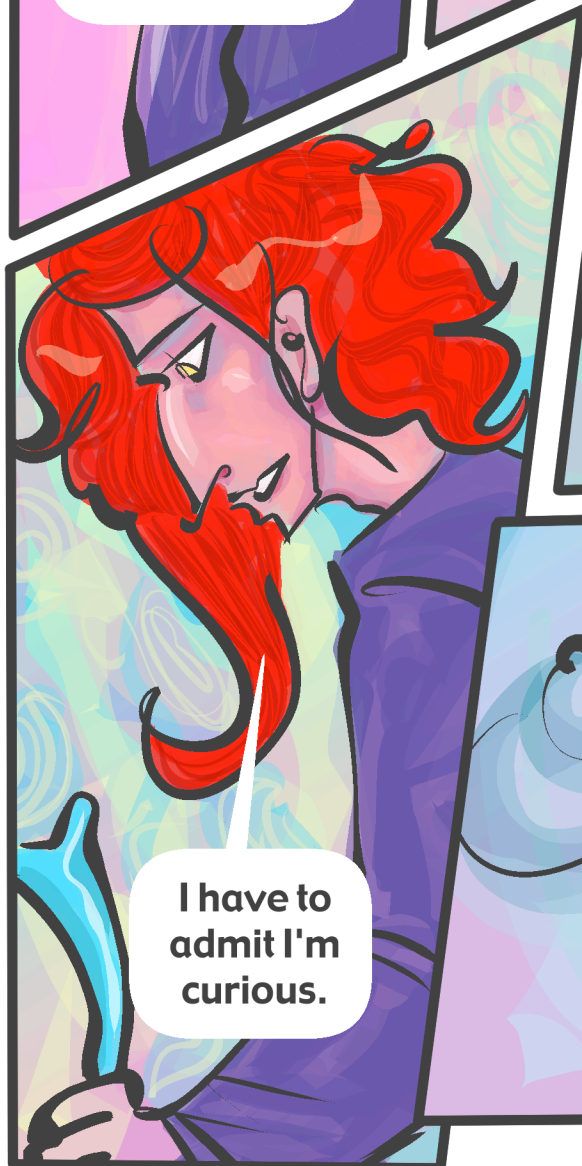




Let me guess.
The "danger"
sign is nothing
to worry about.



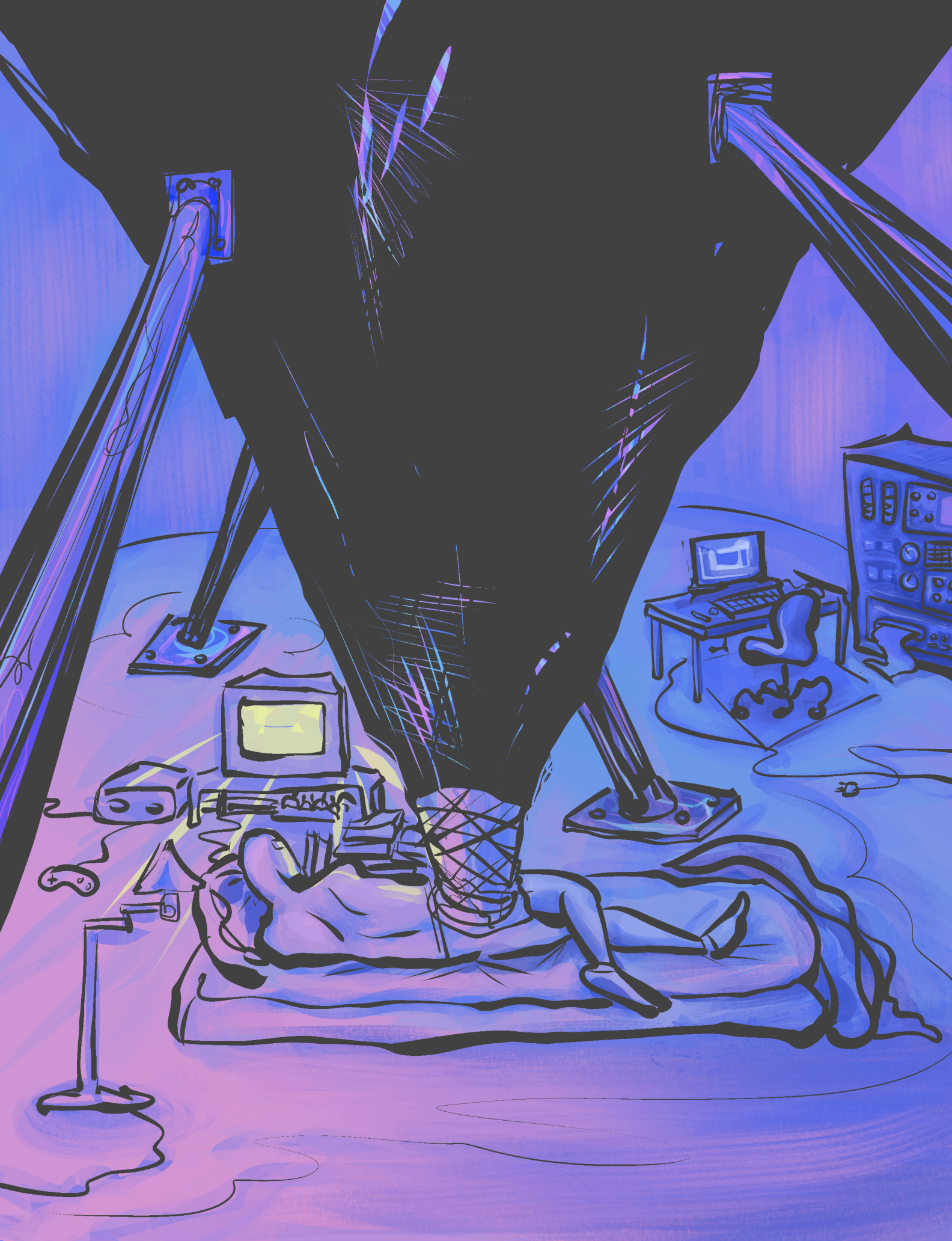
OK, I'm
gonna
trust you
on this
one.

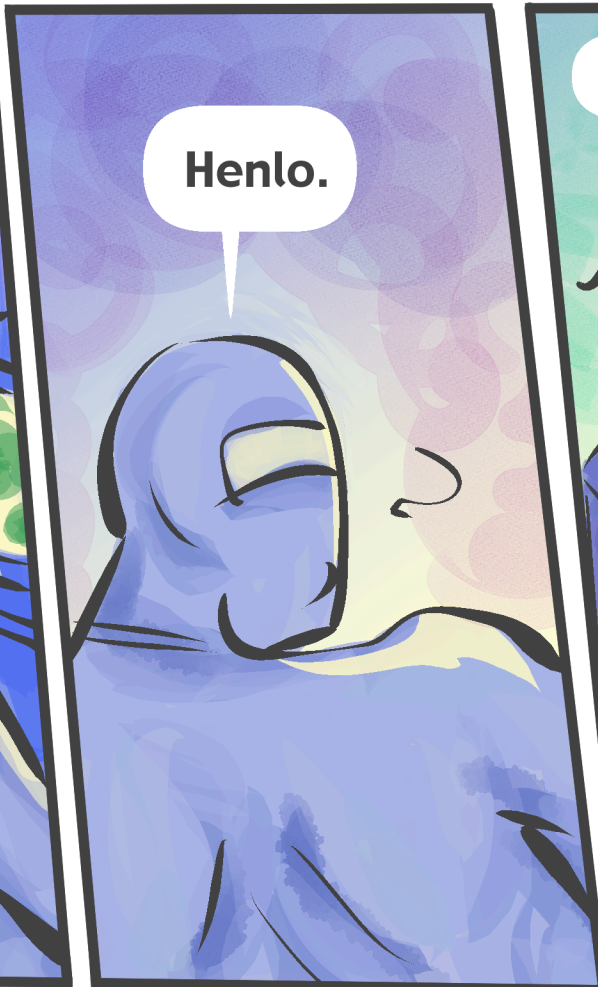
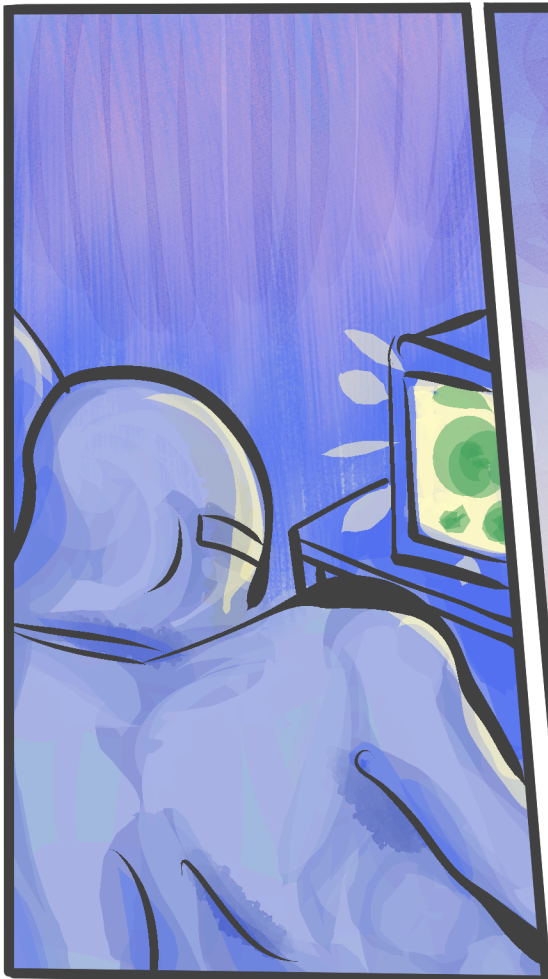


I have to
admit I'm
curious.



Whoa.





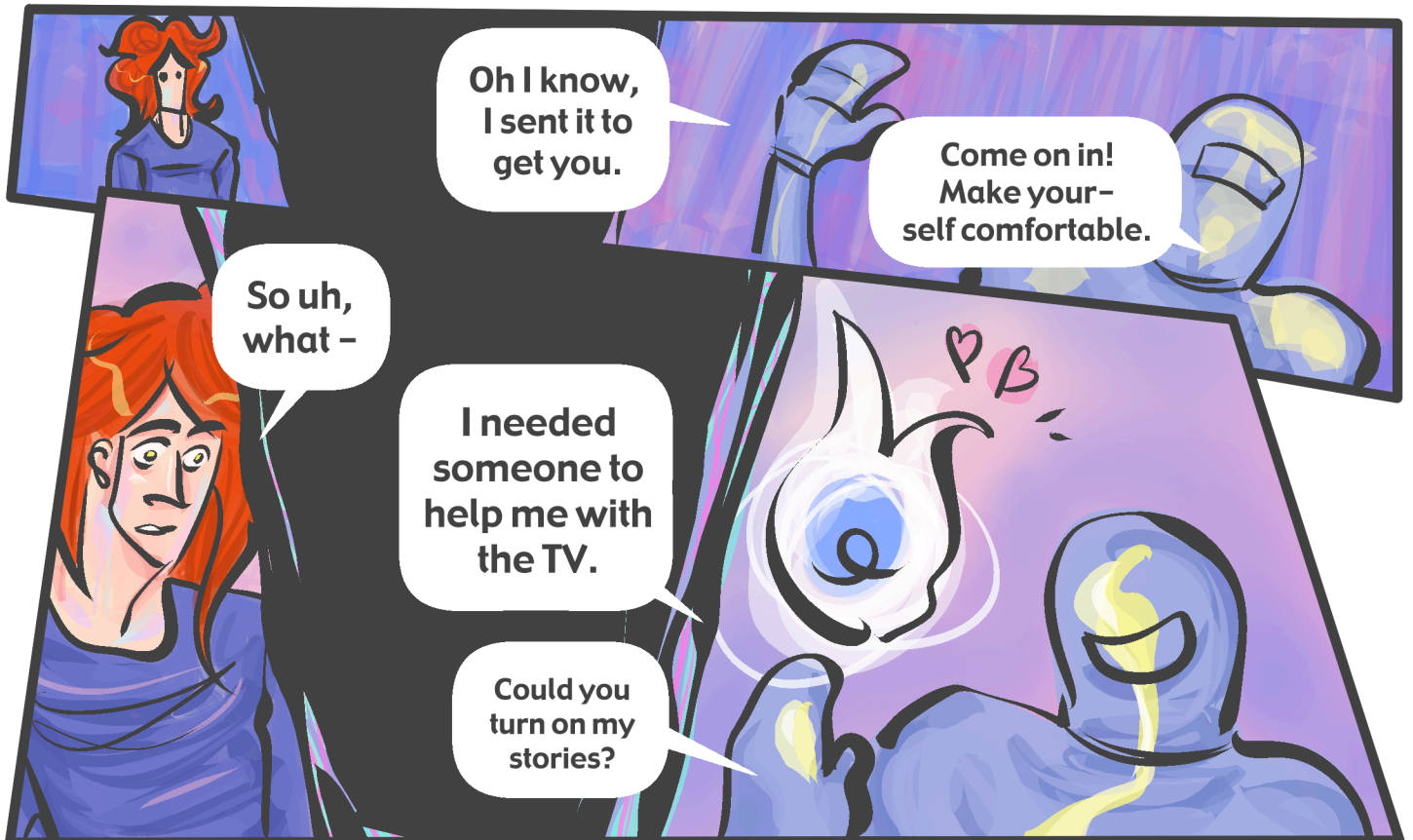
Henlo.



Oh - I -

I'm sorry for intruding.

I followed this flame here.



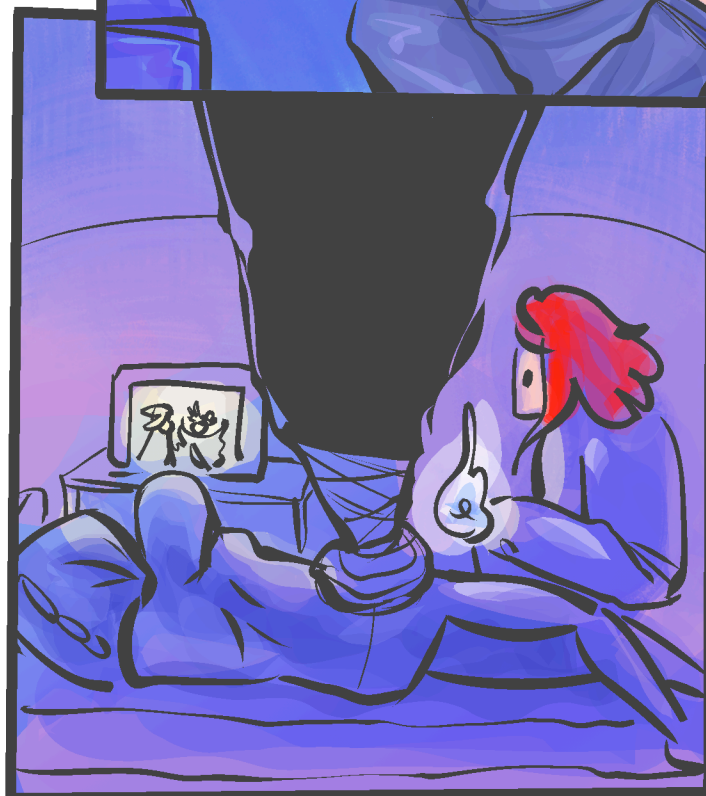
Oh I know,
I sent it to
get you.

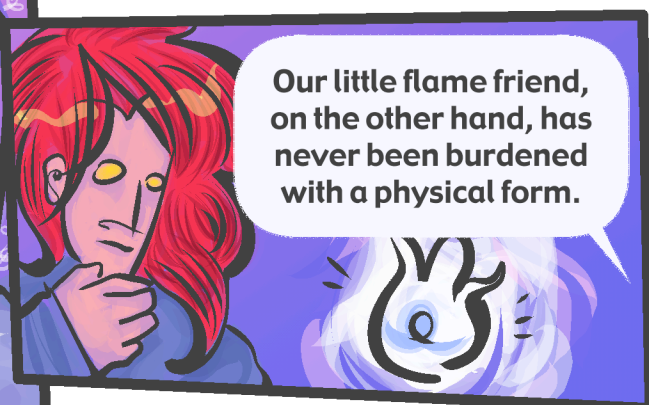
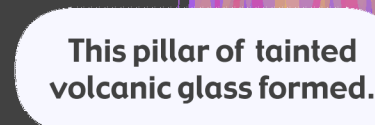
Come on in!
Make your-
self comfortable.


So uh,
what -

I needed
someone to
help me with
the TV.

Could you
turn on my
stories?








So its problem is similar to mine, but it doesn't have a body to inhabit.

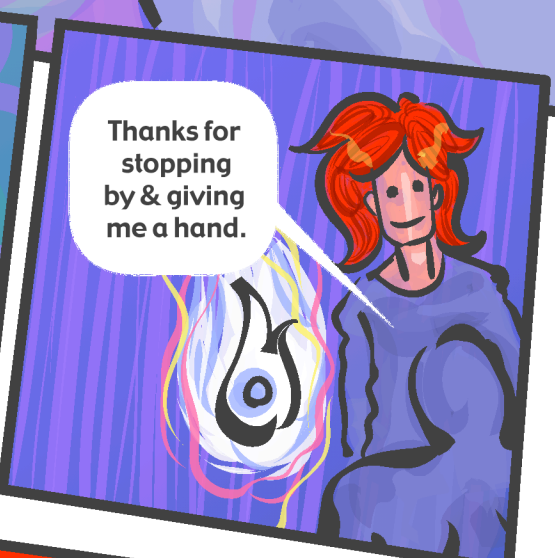


It has had plenty of opportunities, but it hasn't taken a liking to anything as yet.



Hmm, you had better return to bed now.

It's not safe to remain near the pillar too long.



Thanks for stopping by & giving me a hand.



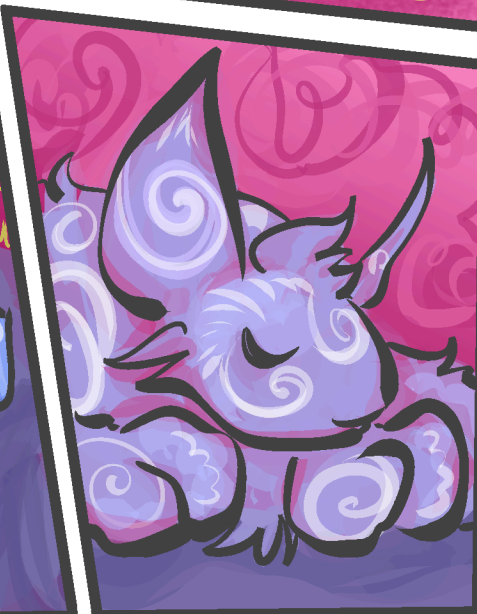
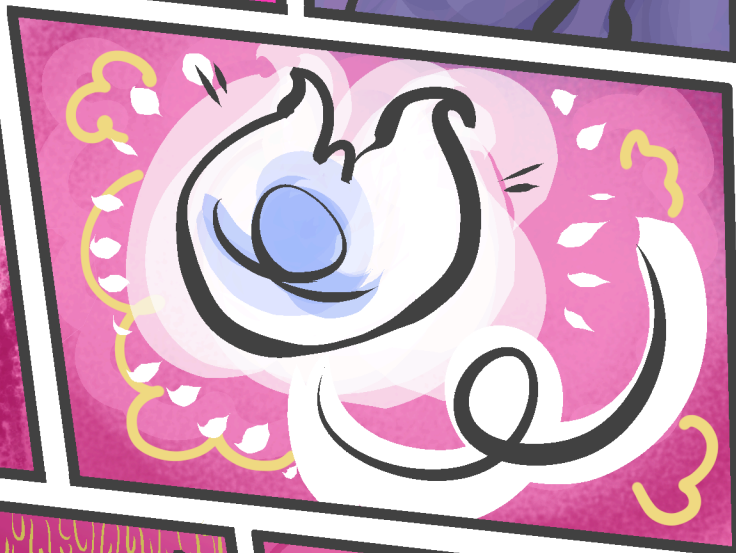
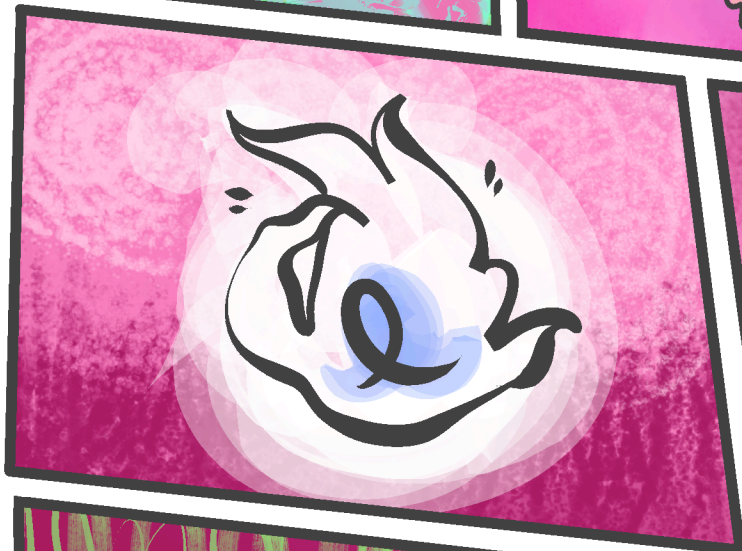
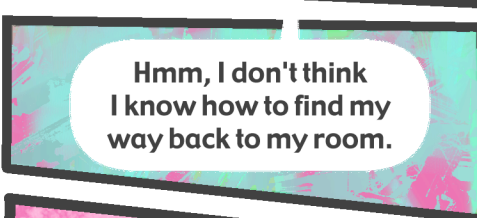
You should come again tomorrow.

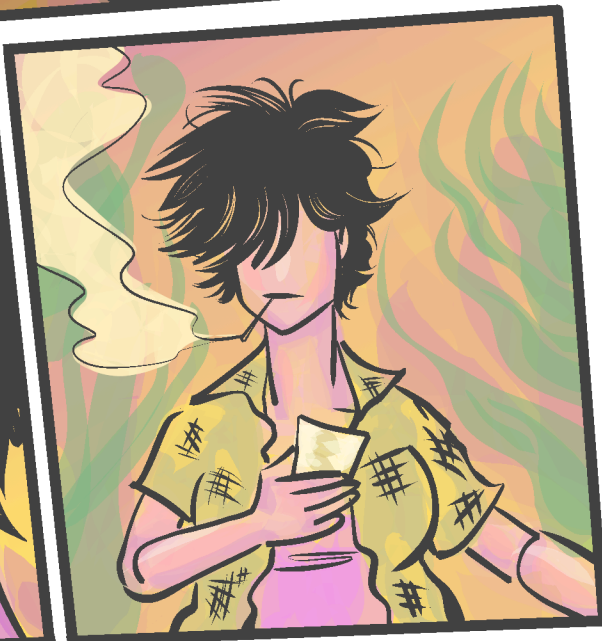
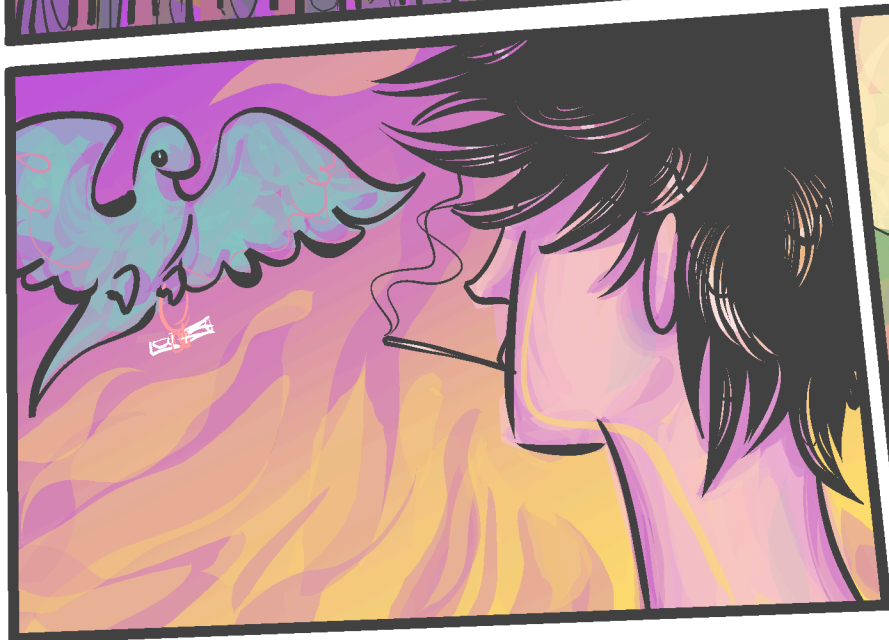
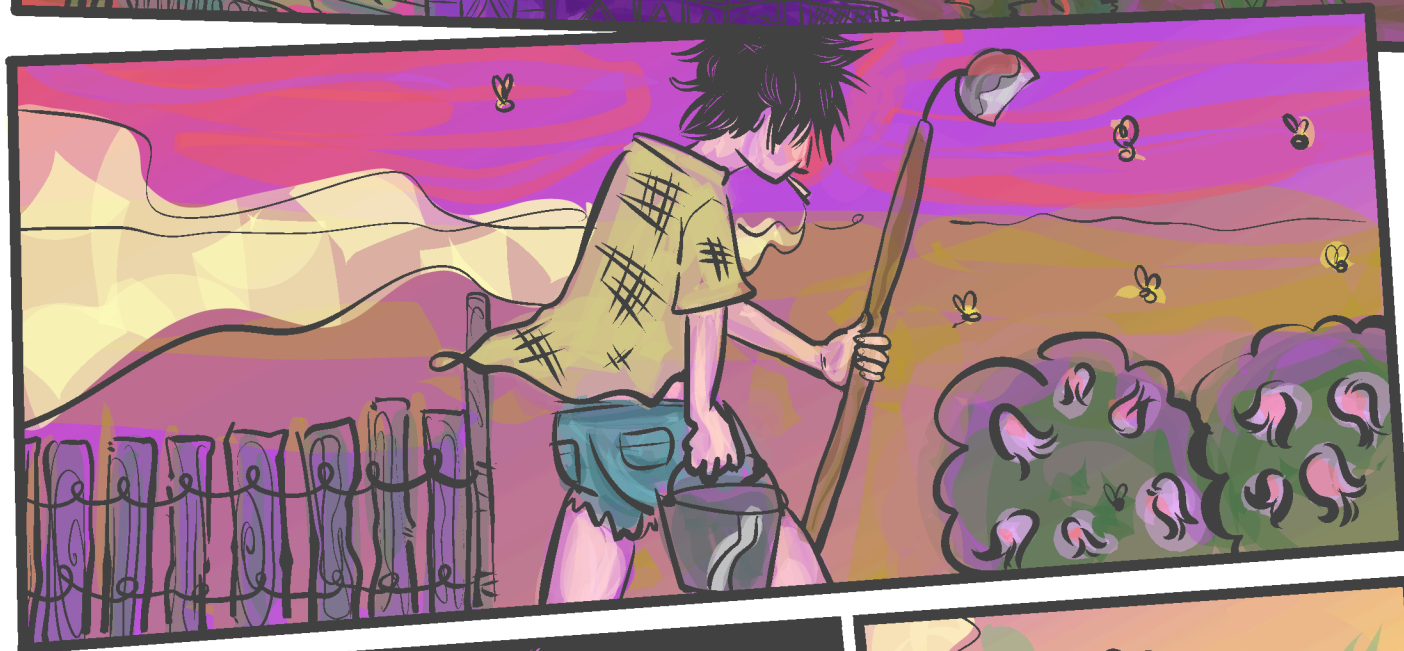
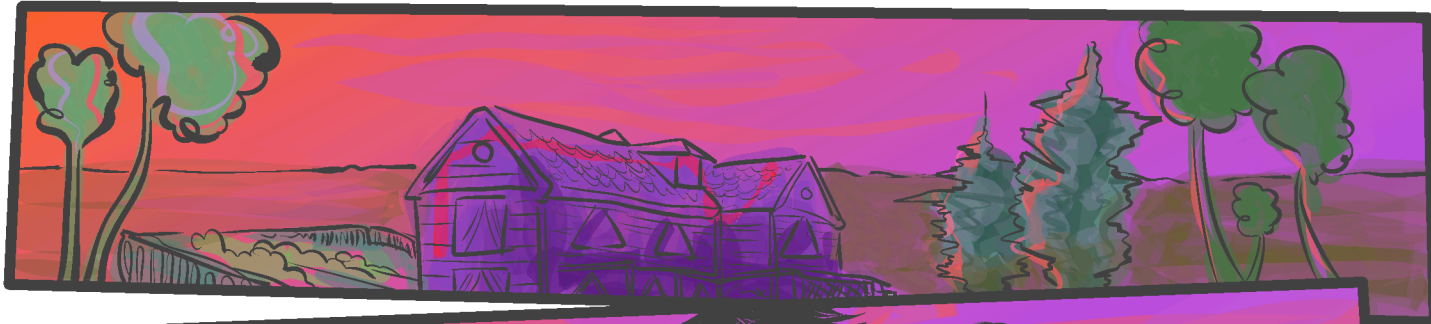
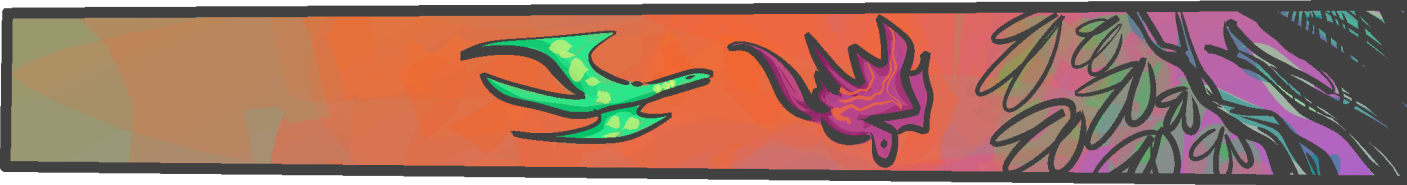


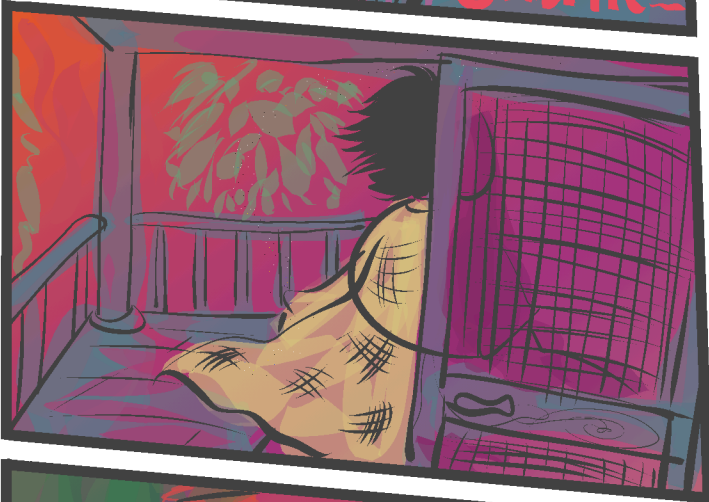
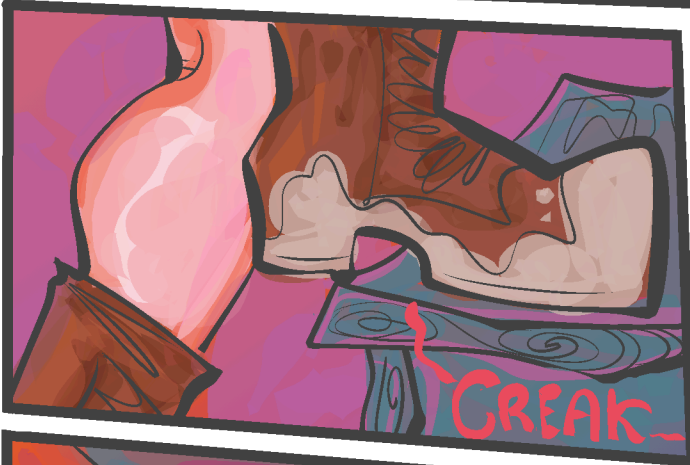
Okay! I will.

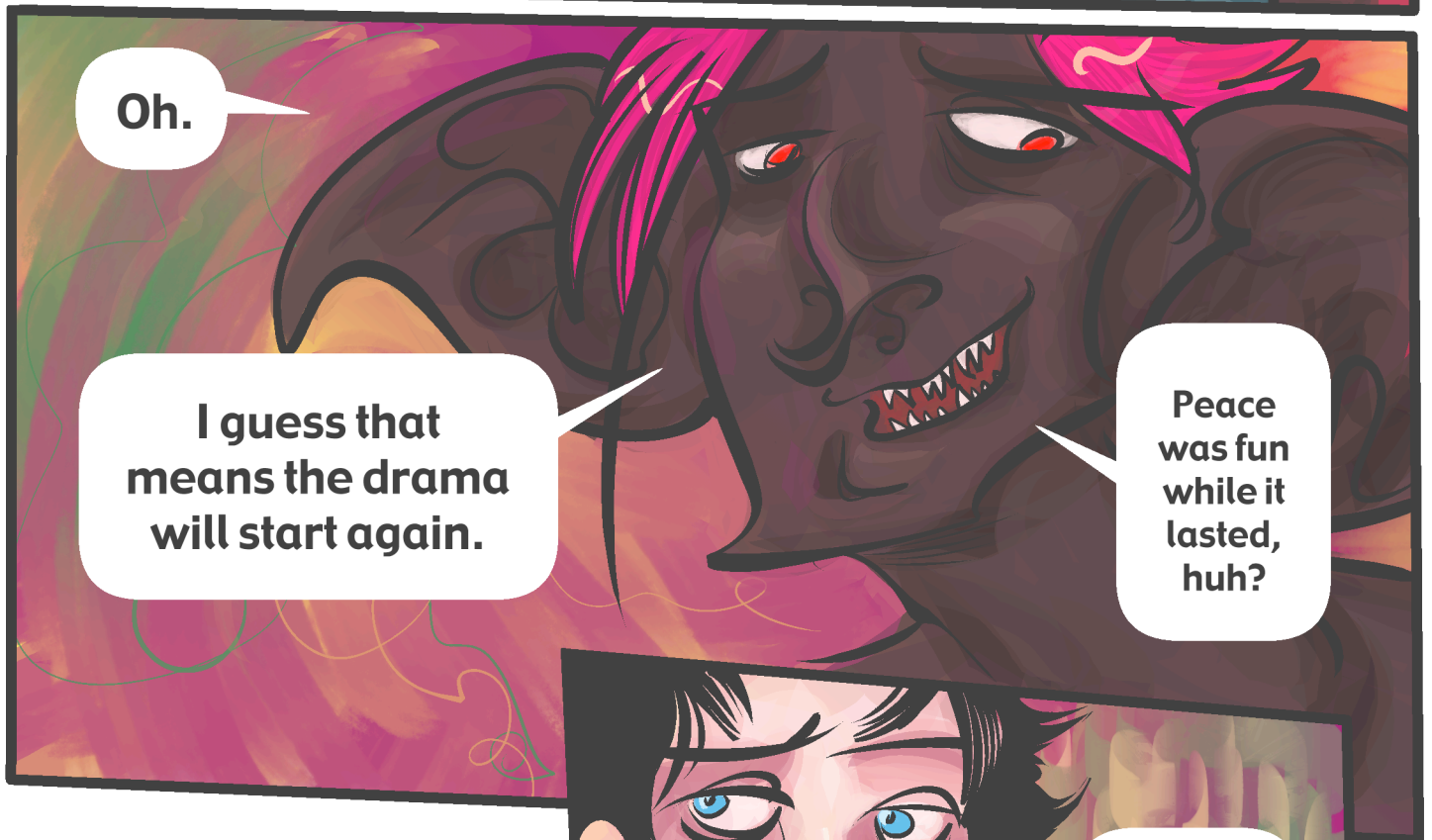
My name is Fern, by the way.

The little one doesn't have a name, but you can call me Hy.









//THANK YOU TO MY PATRONS!\\

Acriseus

Ben R

Caeth

Carlin G

Chu

Clara N

Devin W

Elizabeth N

Pyreaux

Fey M

Imhotep J

Ita K

Jackie C

Jay I

Jessie

Kat

Michelle D

NLG

Tasha D

Tuckles

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