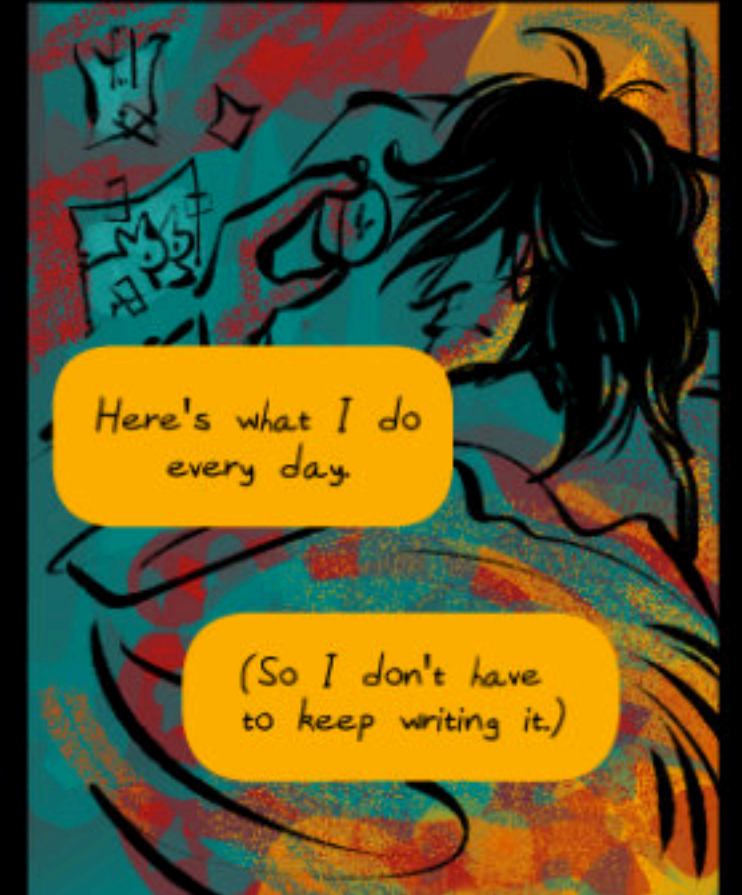




GAFFLING 8

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I tend to the lorriams first thing.



Collect the milk



May let me have the attic room.
It's large, but the sloping ceiling
makes it feel small.



I work for awhile.



Or, you know, whatever.

Then I eat
my breakfast
in the kitchen.



By 6 am I head
to work in the attic.

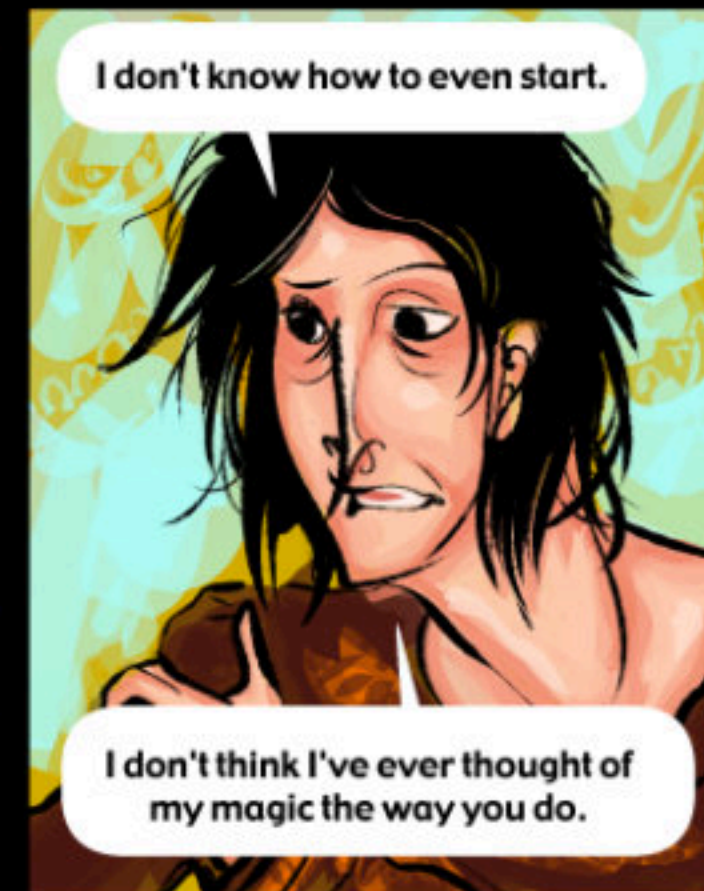
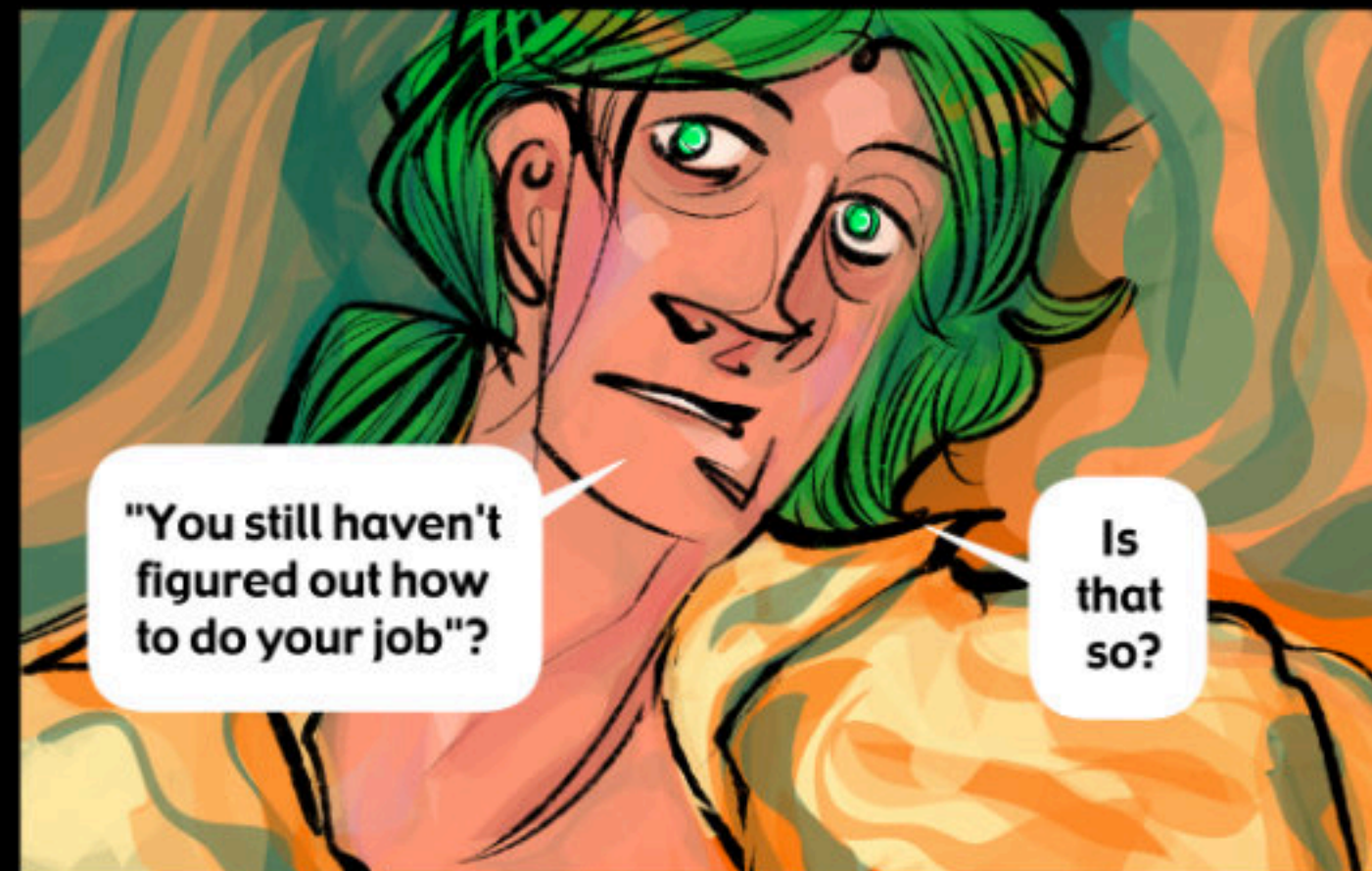


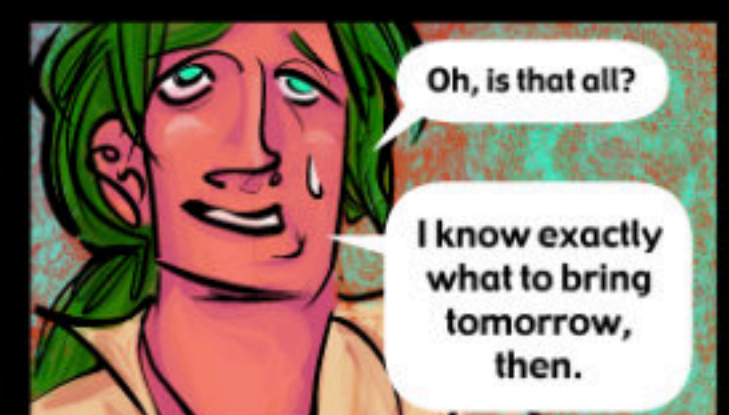
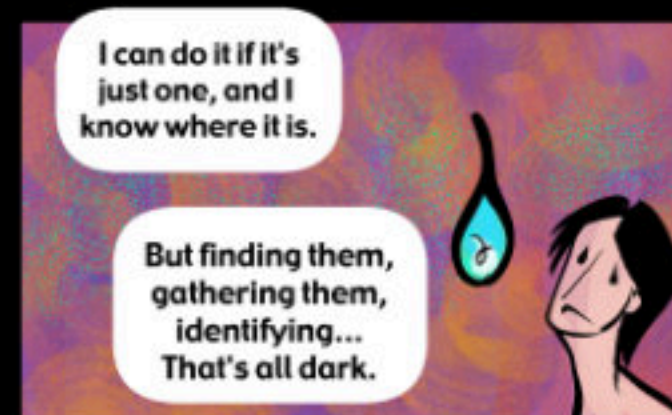
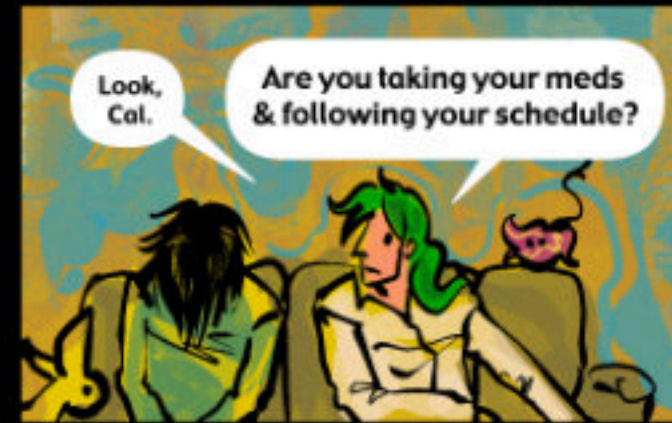
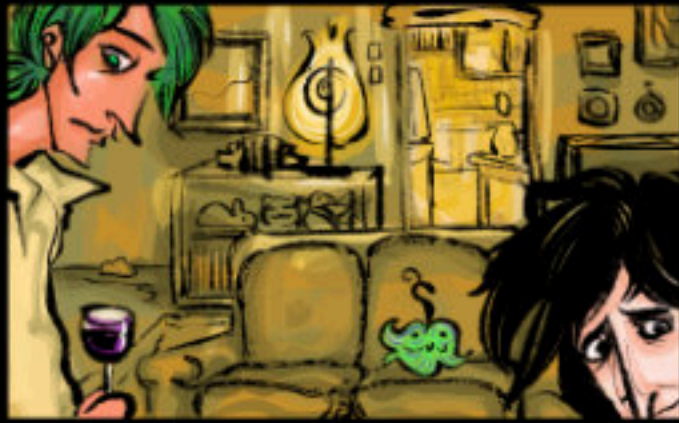
We stop for small
meals at 11am and
4pm. Dinner at 8pm.



If it's a nice day, I put
in a couple of hours
in the garden.







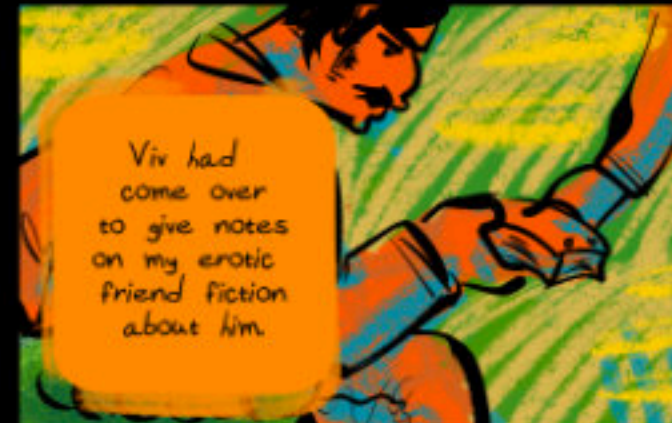


The next day was even busier than usual.



I didn't really listen, but he gave me his notes.

Lem came over with soul samples and talked A LOT.



Viv had come over to give notes on my erotic friend fiction about him.



Viv has gotten v. swole lately.

He's kind of scary.



So it's fine.

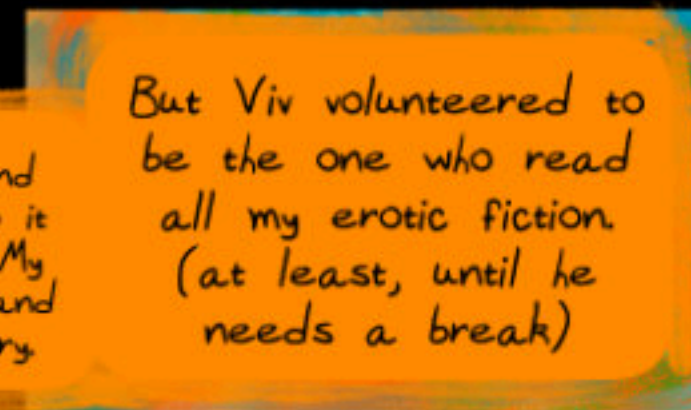


Viv had already arrived, so I had to hurry anyway.



Part of my sentence is a lack of privacy; all my writing has to be read by at least two other people.

May and Rae do it mostly. My letters and my diary.



But Viv volunteered to be the one who read all my erotic fiction. (at least, until he needs a break)



Lem started a fight with Viv in the living room.



They really hate each other still.



Aside from the racist & classist issues we discussed last time featuring yet again...

May says he simply pities me, but he seems to genuinely enjoy some of my writing.



This latest chapter was quite... suspenseful! Nice work.



I guess I'm not the only one with behavioral issues uuuu.

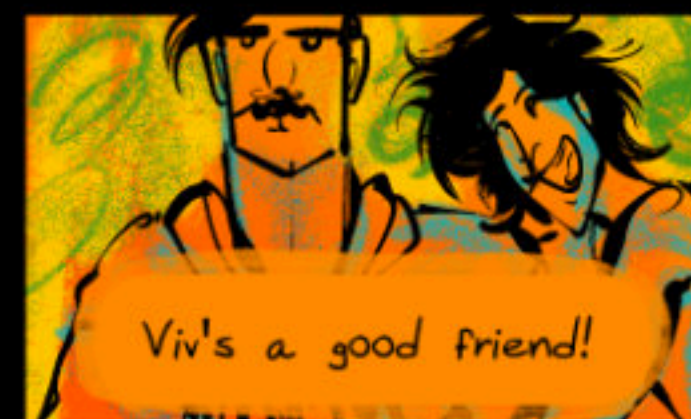


(I do wonder what their beef is though)



If you sanded our names off this, I might not mind having it on my bookshelf, you know?

Please don't take this too literally



Viv's a good friend!

After that, we got to talking about the souls Lem had dropped off for me, and how I was having trouble isolating and identifying them.

Observing them in the first place is hard.

They can appear or disappear apparently at random. It's only by chance that Lem catches them at all.

We have certain attractants, he tells me, but...

We need a tracking, monitoring system of some kind, or a test we can perform to determine where they gather...

Viv thought about it while I ate cheese.

Then, he started talking about how his scientists look at creatures too small to see with the naked eye.

Seems like an imaging issue. You can try dyeing the souls to make them visible, or shining weird types of light on them.

You may not be able to see them, but a camera could.

Oh! It's that easy!

What a fruitful day this turned out to be!

After Viv left, I went to the circle for my monthly meditation.

This is how we balance our elemental energy now. If we draw the correct kind of runes, we can do it anywhere. Lem calls it an "egregore."

This is actually something I enjoy doing!

I zone out and enjoy nature.

Our memories are stored in the egregore, and it manages what we forget and what we remember, as well as reducing the sheer number of memories we have on account of being immortal.

Overall, it should have the effect of making us a lot less demented. It's had a big impact already. I don't think I could have done this before.

But it has its down sides too.

I had a weird dream last night.

It was the past,
when we originally
lived together.

I was holding a
leek a particular
way. I felt the
leaves on my back
and shoulder.



I saw Lem in the
distance. He was
very small.

Green hair,
and liquid all
around him,
on the ground.



I looked down
at what Lem
was doing -

And a wave of relief
crashed over me.

So it turned
out to be a
nice dream!

LIVE
Laugh
LOVE

#1
BRO!

Everything
was fine.

It was just another
leek. He was holding
it a lot like I was.



It was weird, because none
of us cooked, but that's
fine. It's just a dream.

I didn't
know what
was going
on.

I didn't
want to
know.

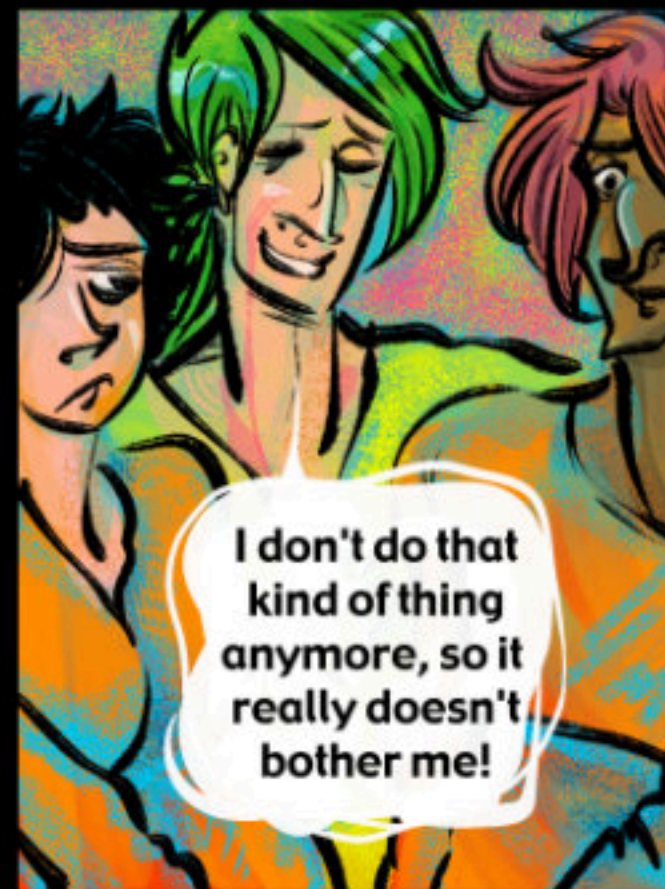
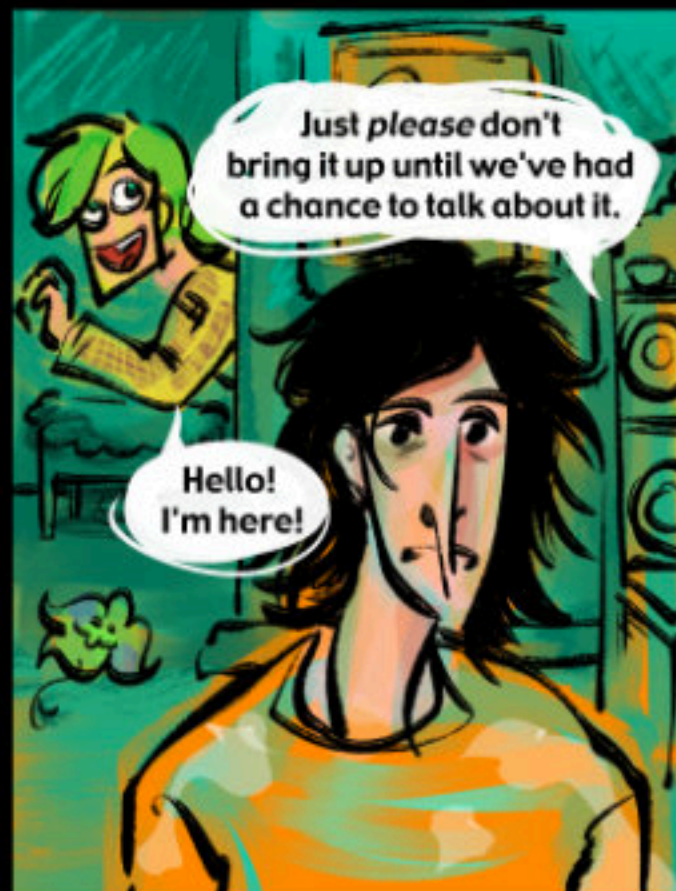
I was
terrified.

But I had no choice.

I went
closer

He turned
to see.

He looked
so empty.





By the time I got out of baby jail, they were playing video games.



I've already talked about this with May, but Lem and Rae are getting along surprisingly well.

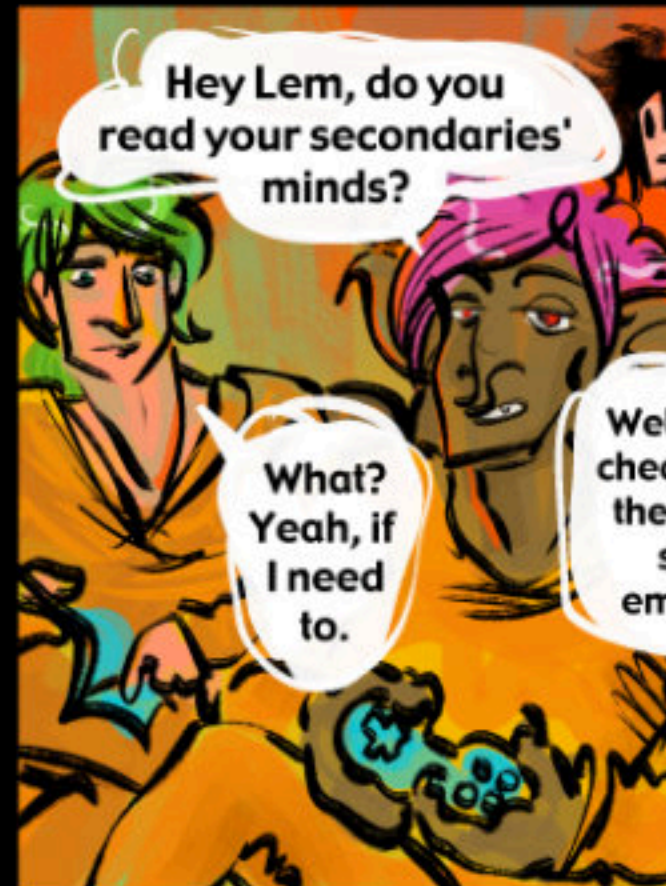


They started talking again like nothing happened.

They spend a lot of time together.



May says that as long as they don't talk about anything serious, it's easy for them to get along with each other.



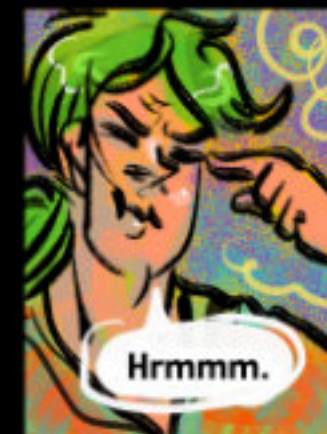
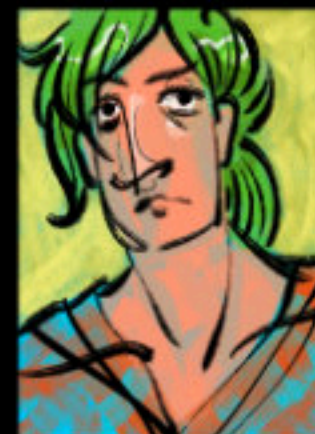
Hey Lem, do you read your secondaries' minds?

What? Yeah, if I need to.

Well, what if you checked on one & they were doing something embarrassing?

Wouldn't that be funny?

Come on, do one!



Hrrmmm.



Yes, yes, I'm getting an image...



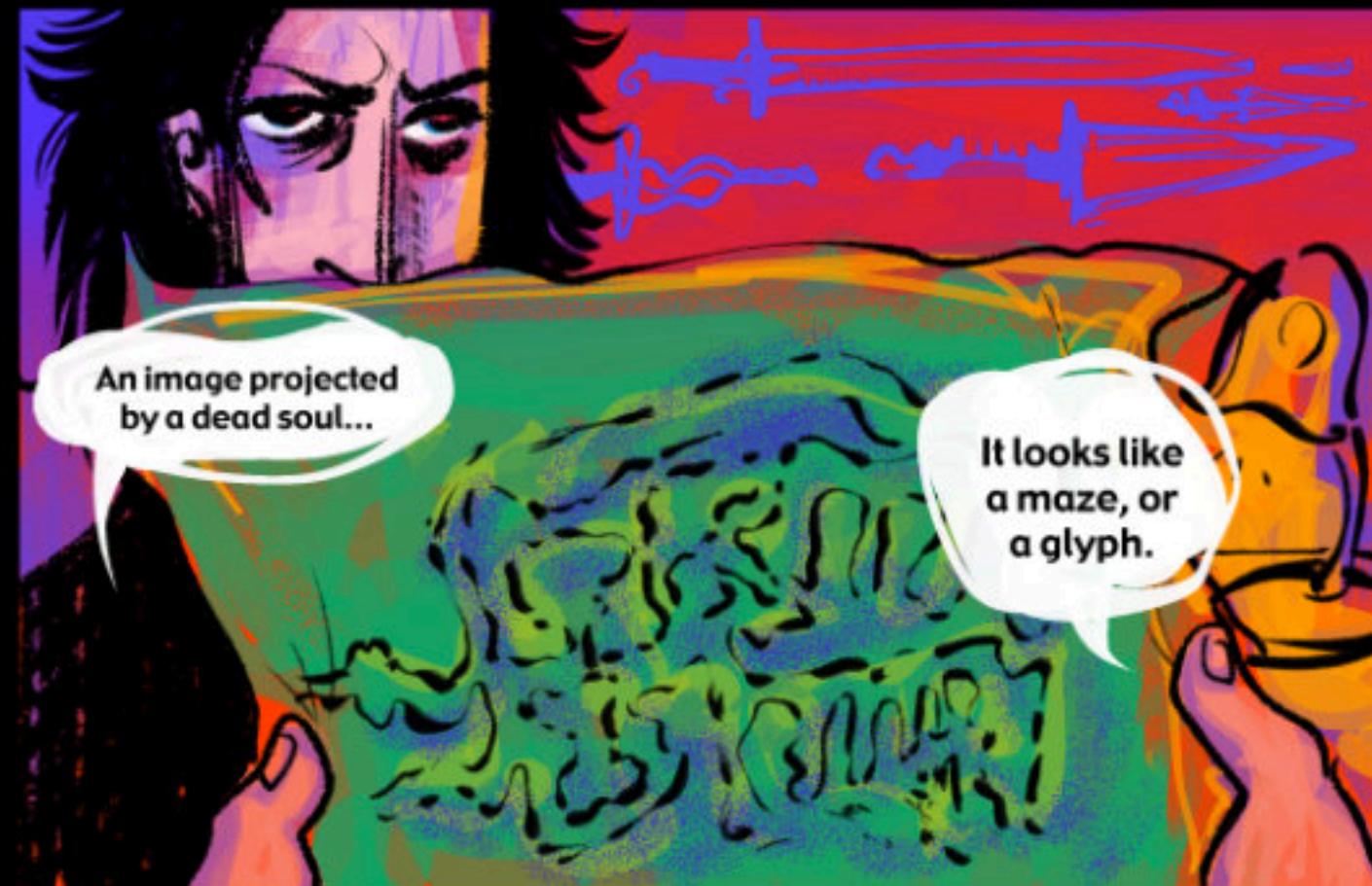
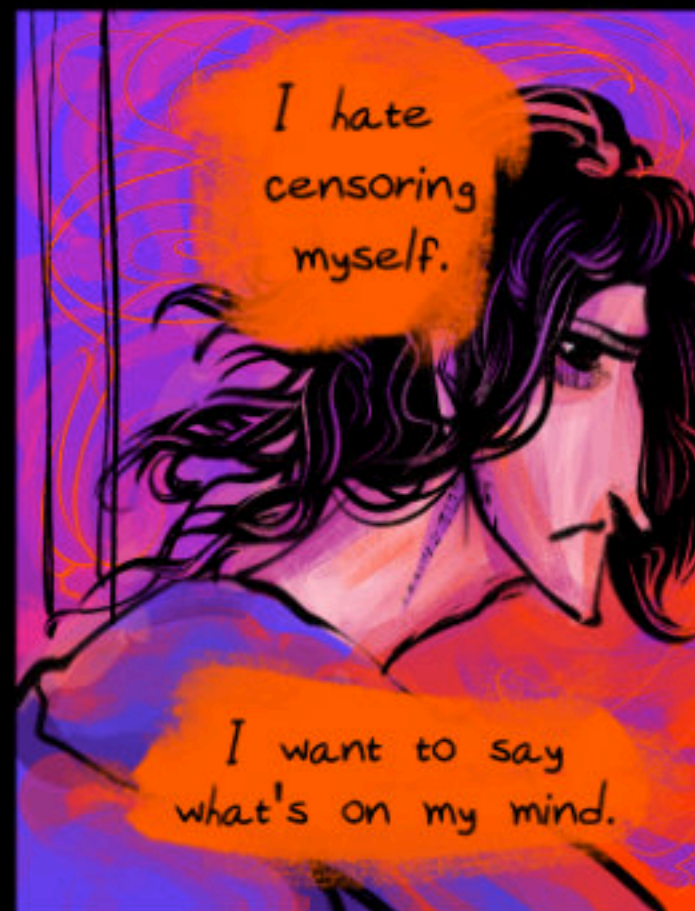
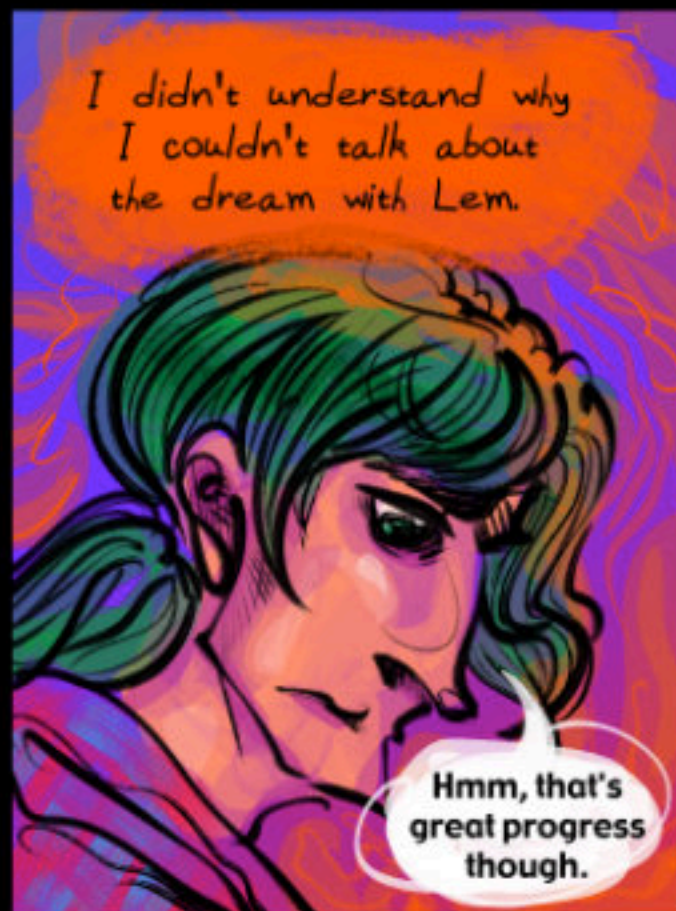
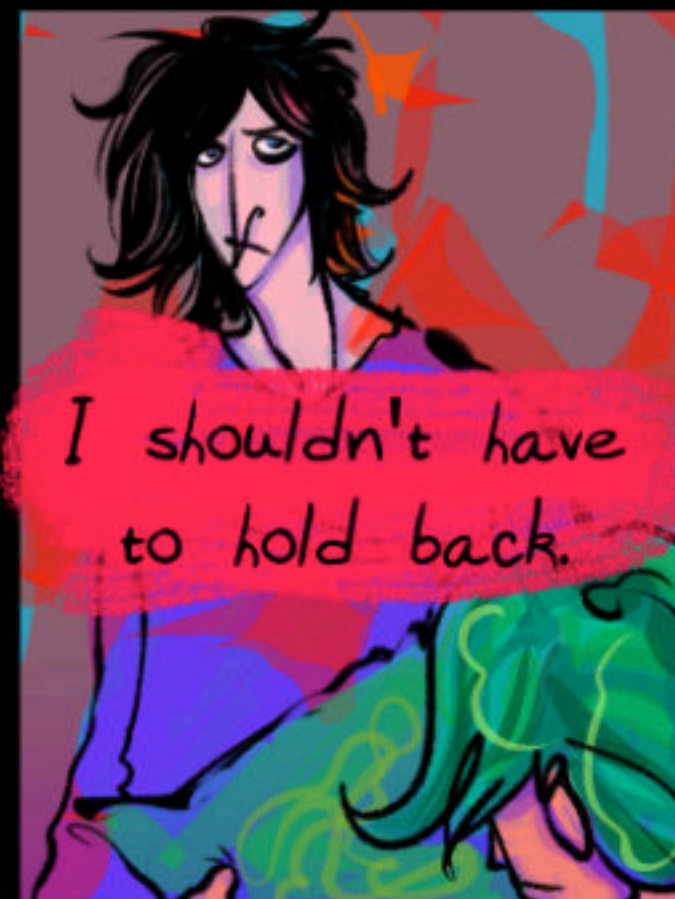
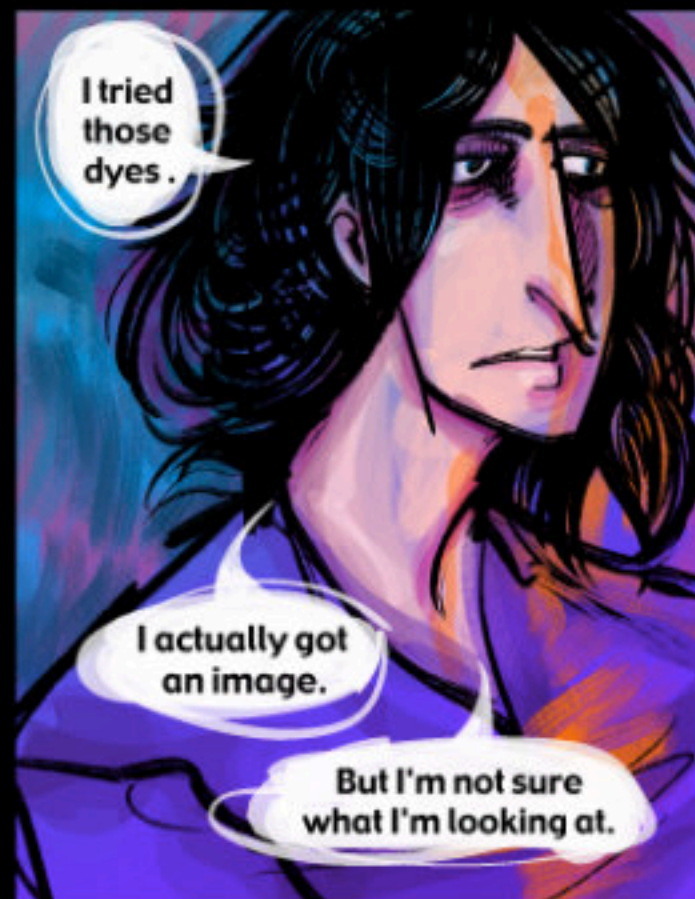
Oh god! I see Fola... He's eating a **DISGUSTING** messy sandwich!

He'll never live this down!



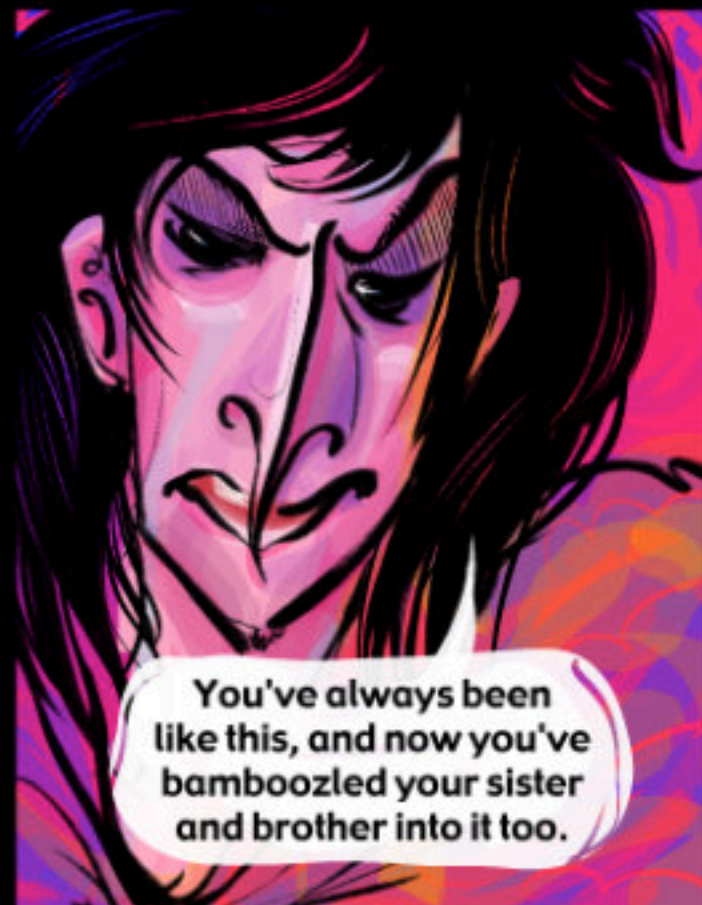
FOR REAL?!?

As if I'd let you goad me asshole

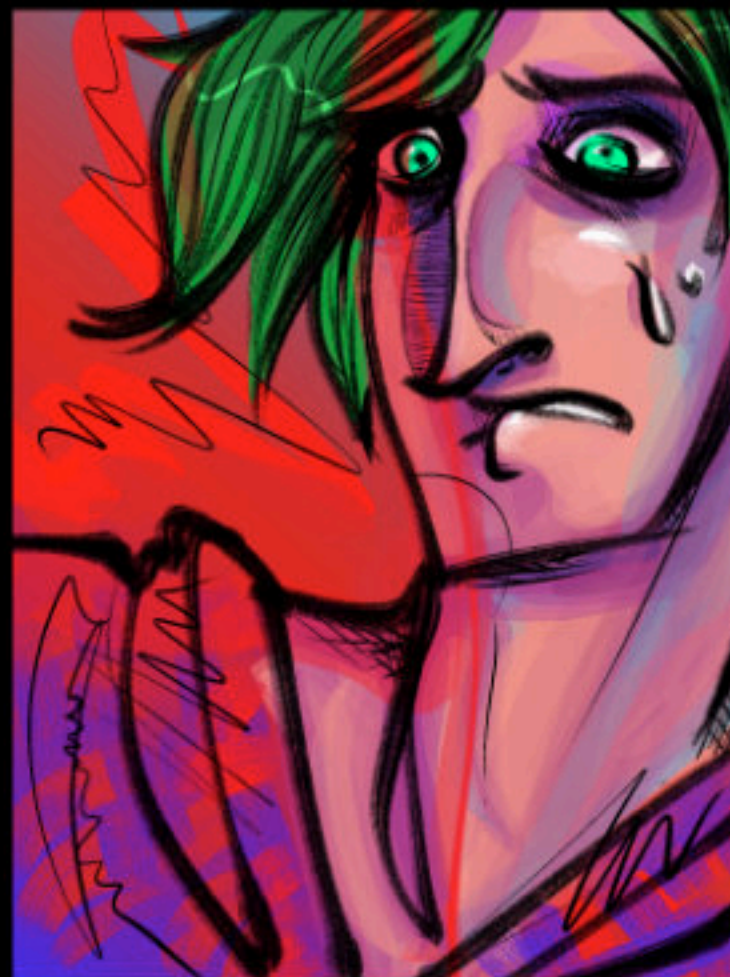




Don't you think you owe me an explanation of that dream?

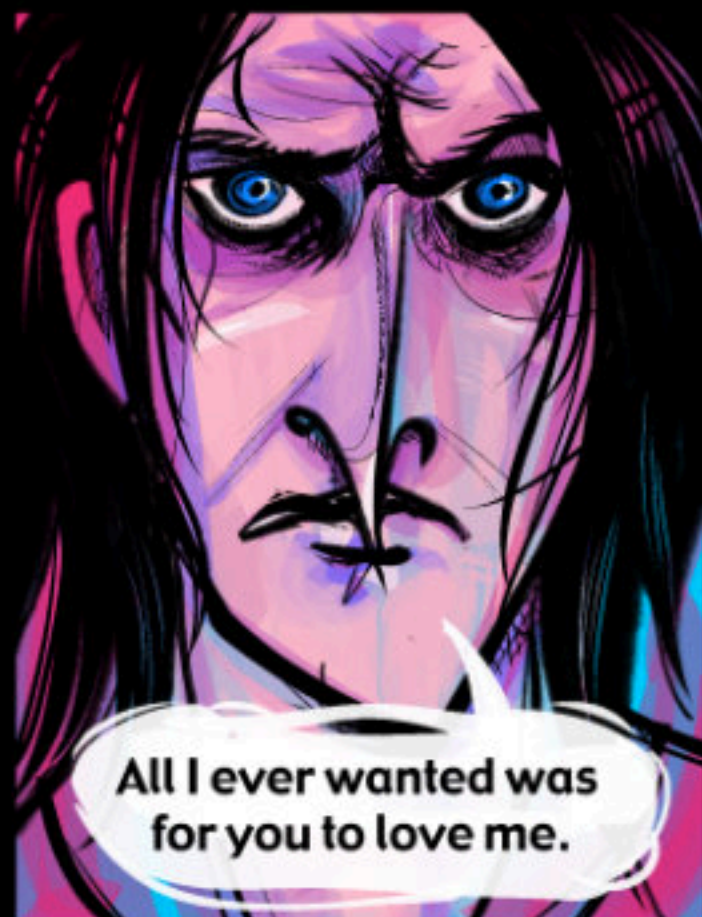


You've always been like this, and now you've bamboozled your sister and brother into it too.

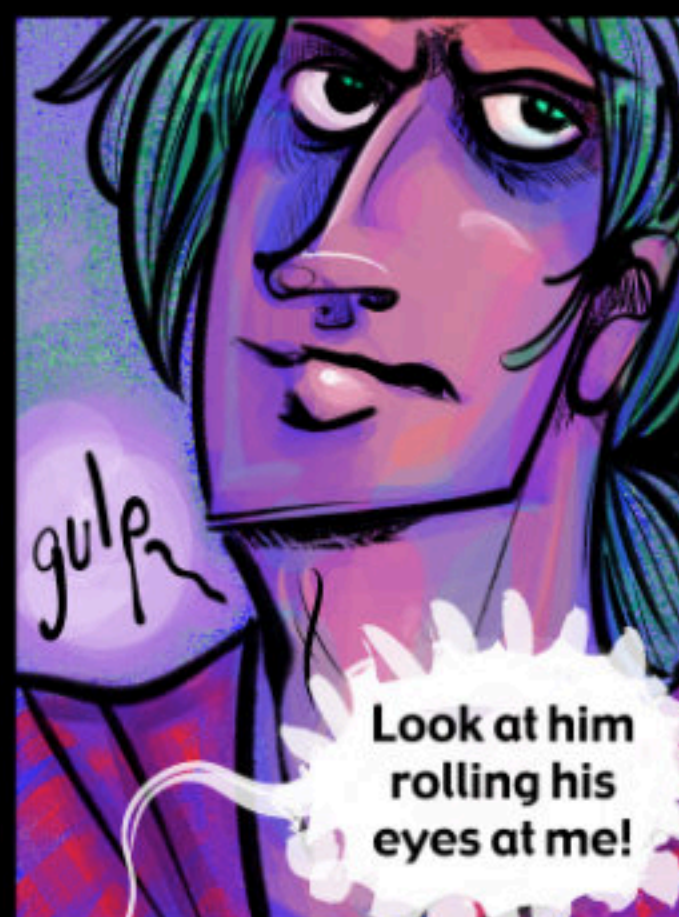


You think you're better than me, don't you?

I'm punished for having the same feelings as everyone else!



All I ever wanted was for you to love me.



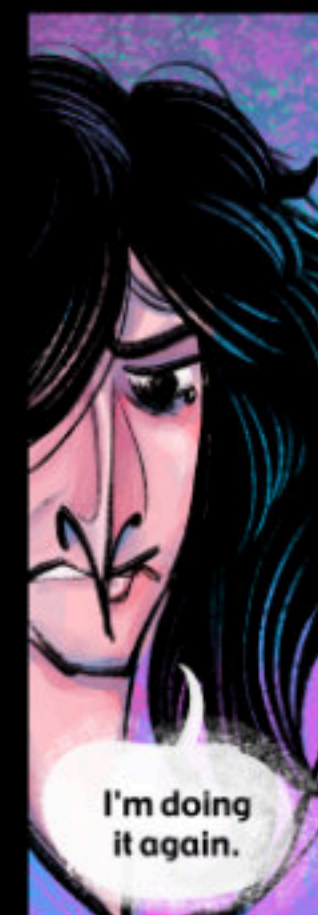
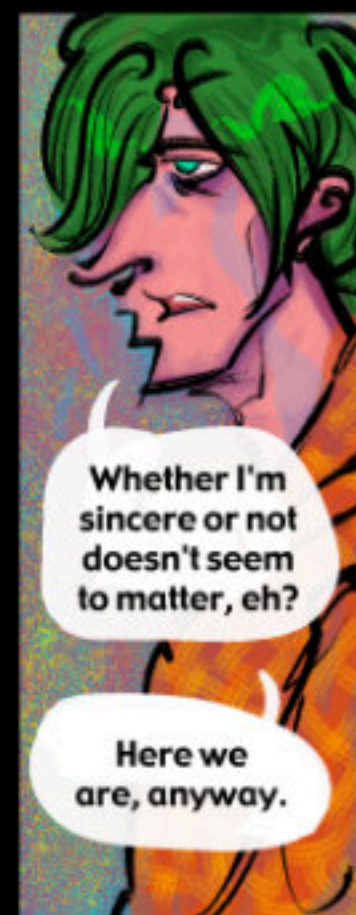
gulp

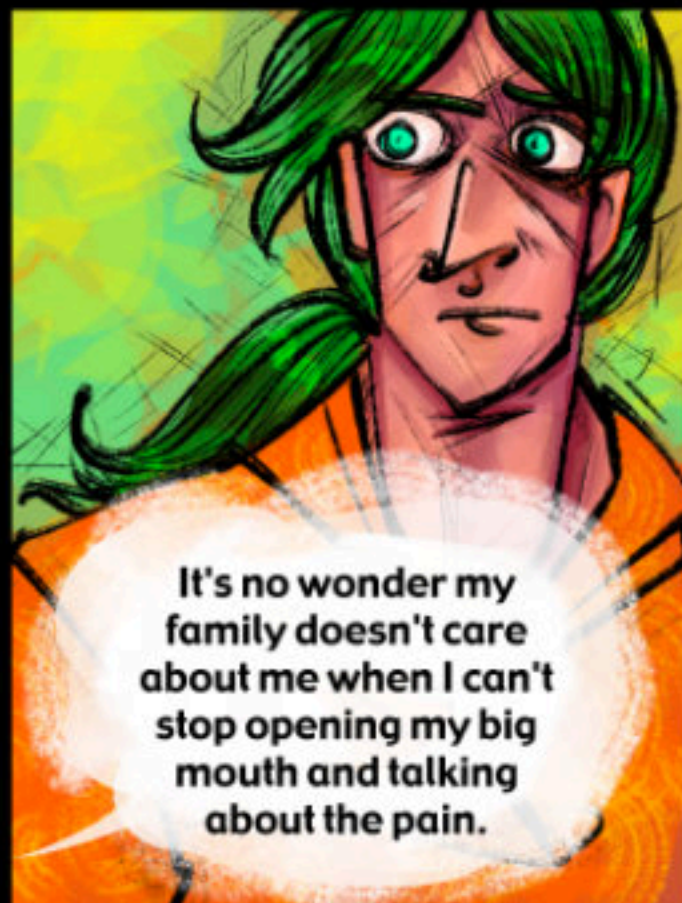
Look at him rolling his eyes at me!



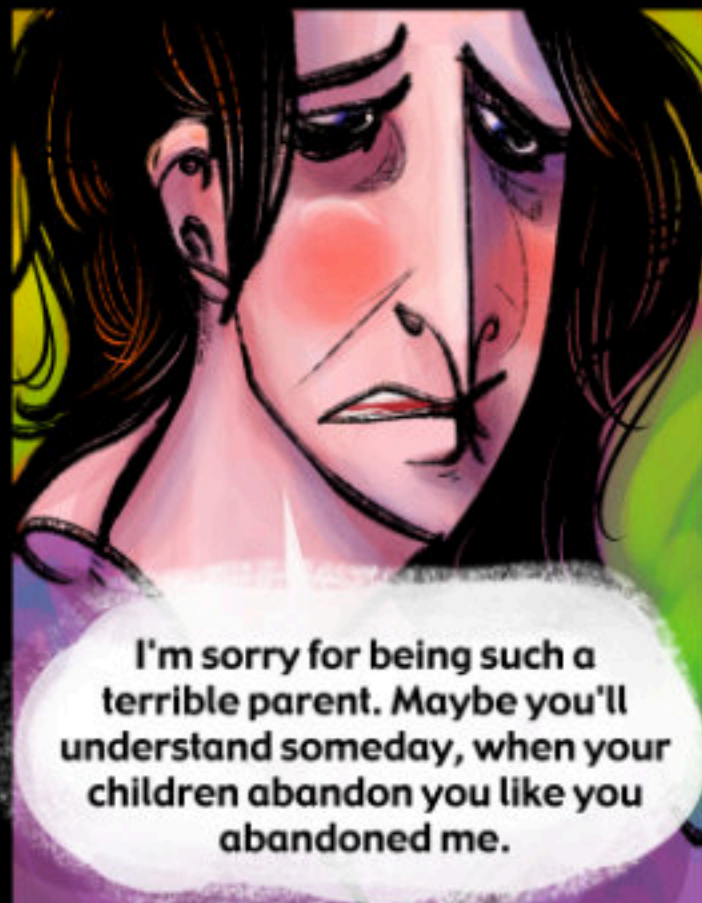
Turning his nose up at me from his throne.

It's too much for my feeble heart to bear.





It's no wonder my family doesn't care about me when I can't stop opening my big mouth and talking about the pain.



I'm sorry for being such a terrible parent. Maybe you'll understand someday, when your children abandon you like you abandoned me.



I did my very best for you children.

But...

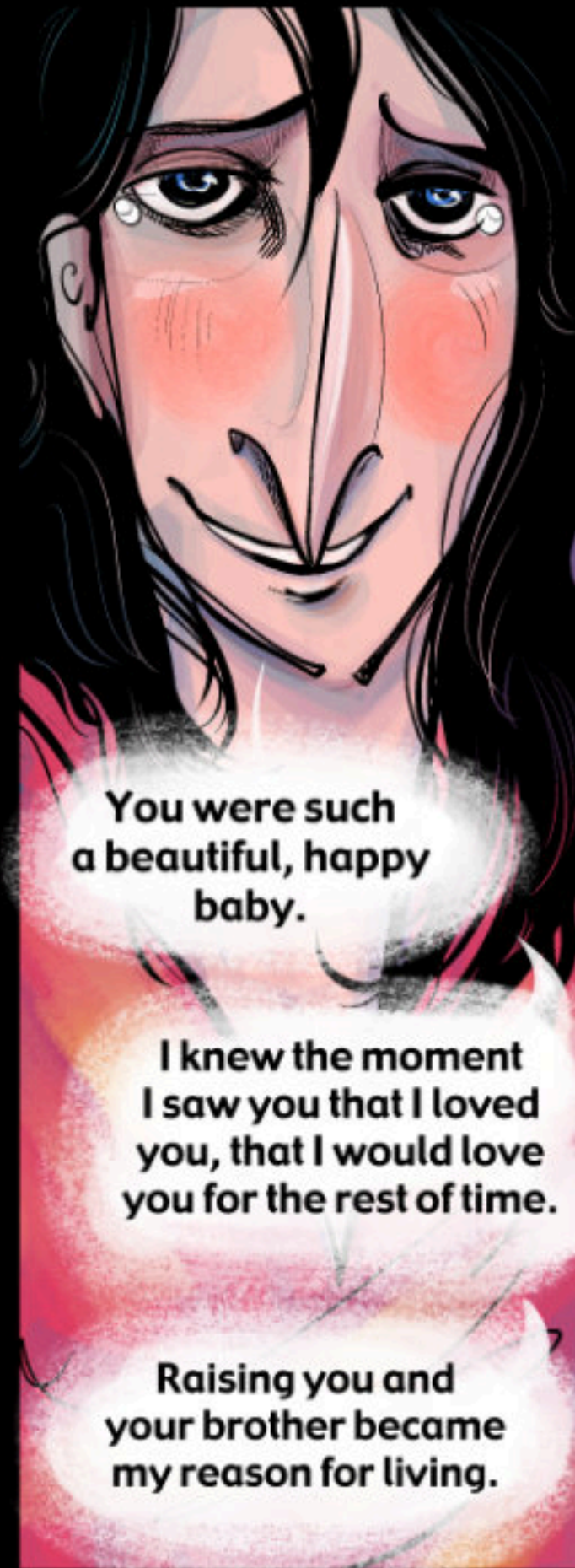


Cal. Please. Don't.



Remember what our lives used to be like?

Or have we all forgotten the good times?



You were such a beautiful, happy baby.

I knew the moment I saw you that I loved you, that I would love you for the rest of time.

Raising you and your brother became my reason for living.

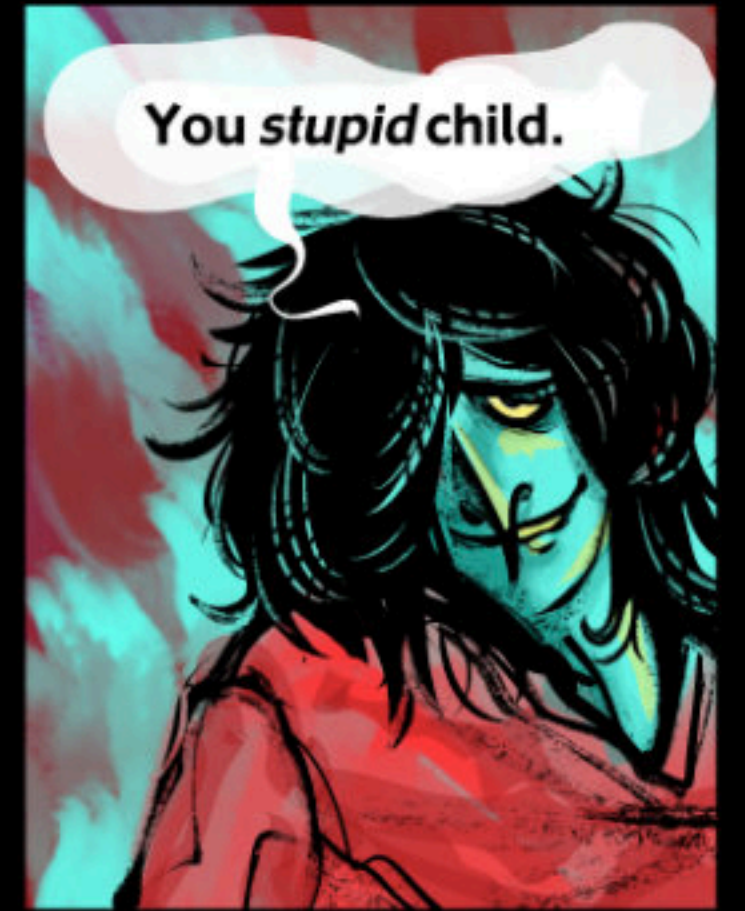
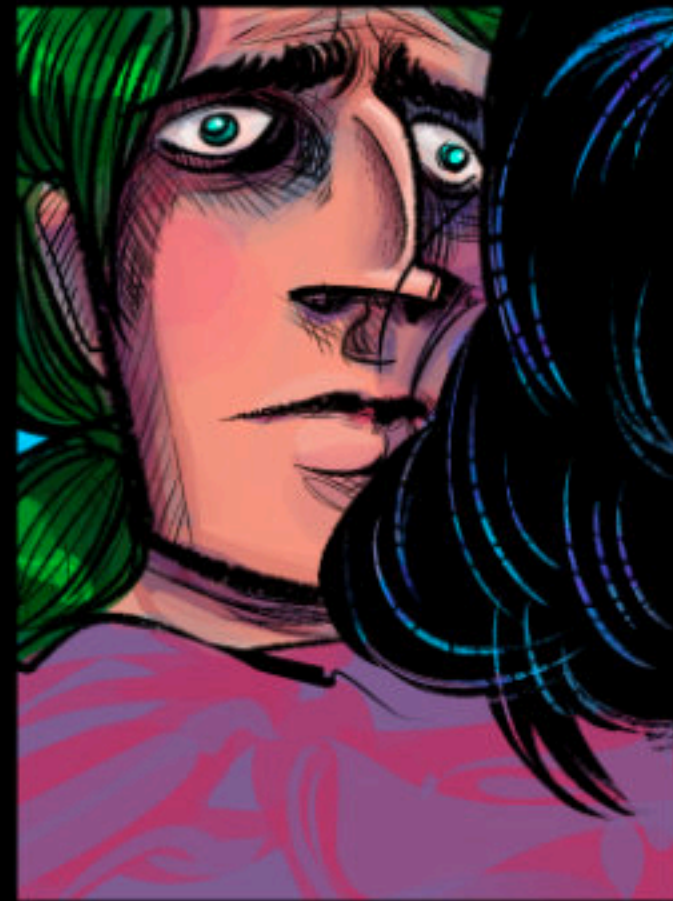


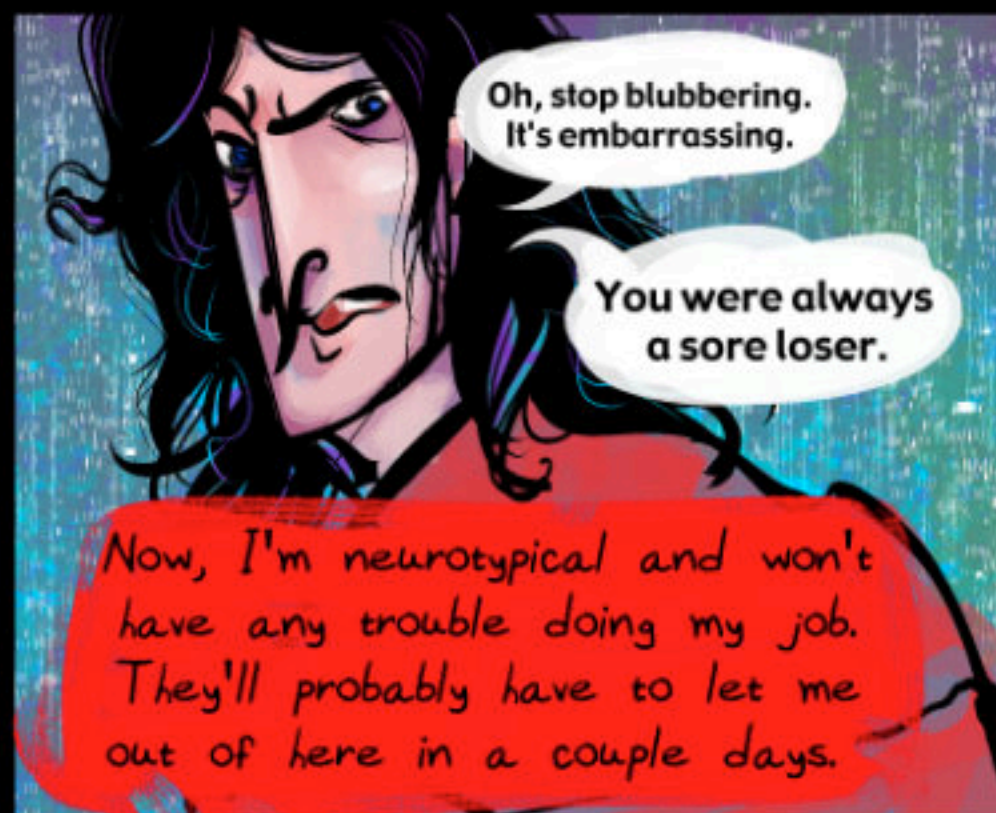
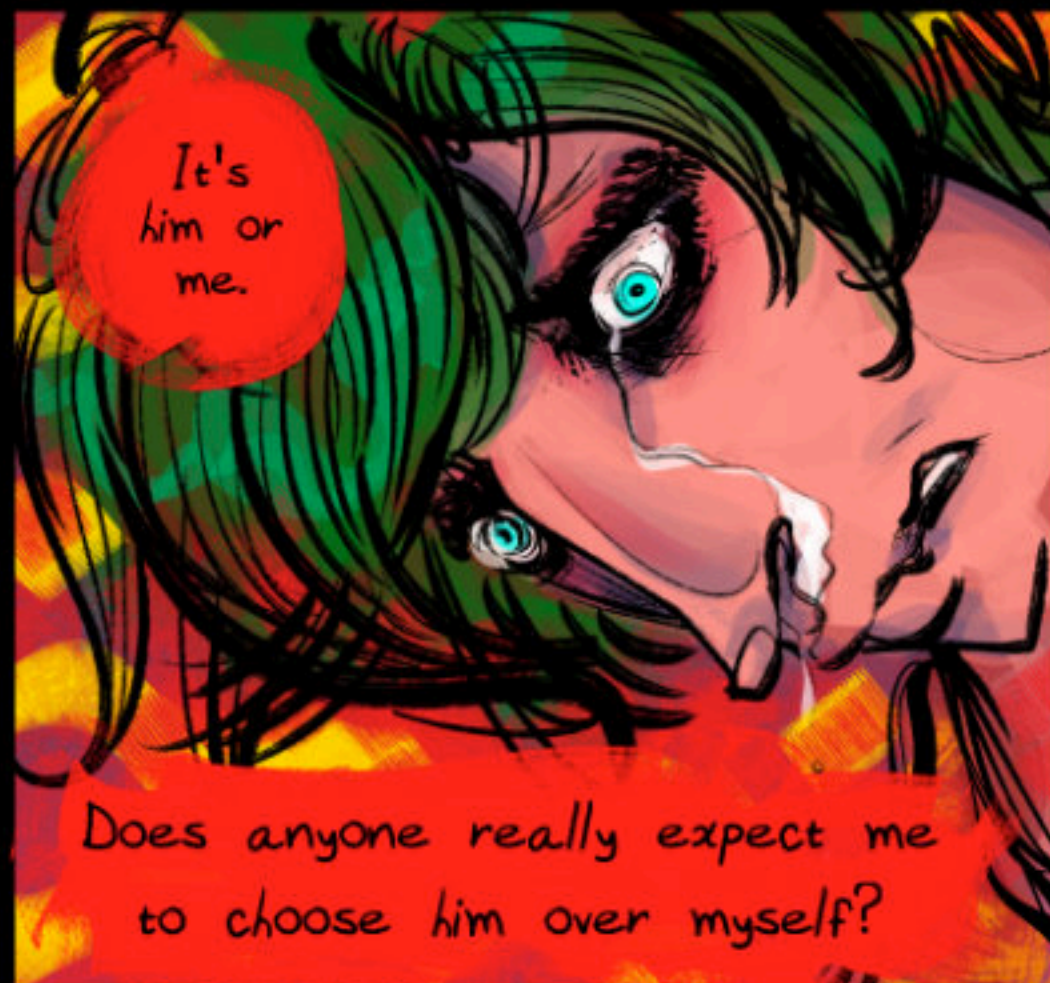
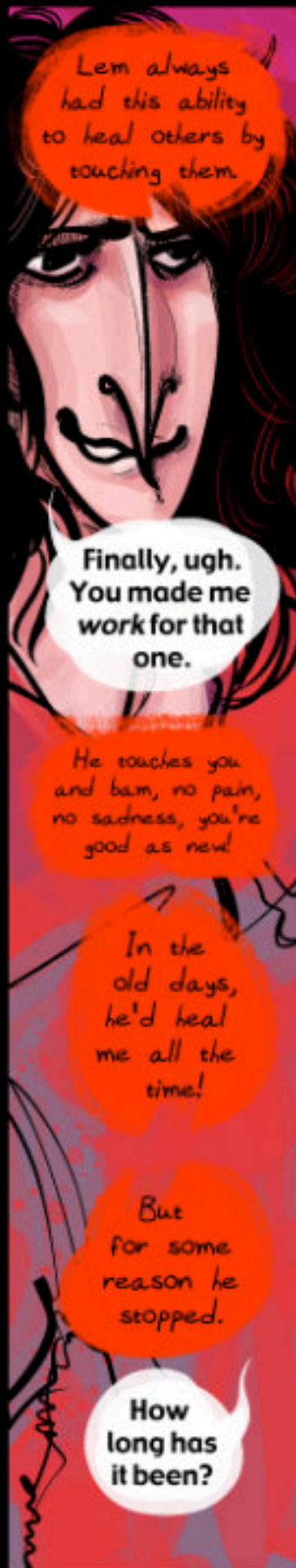
To think it would all turn out like this...

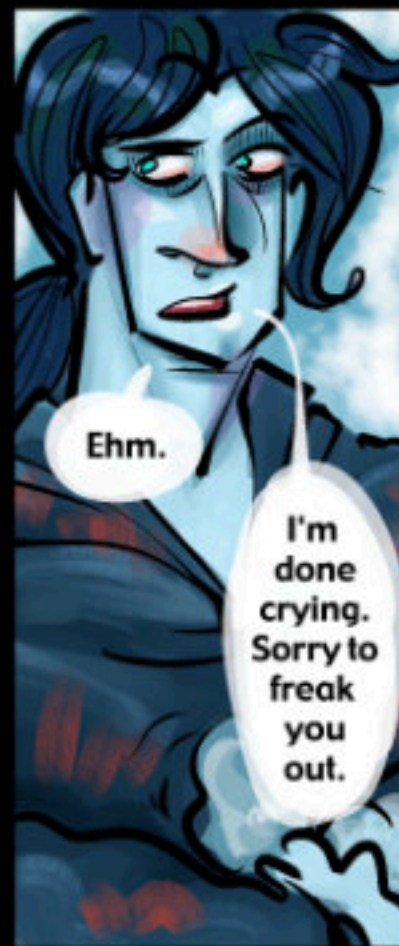
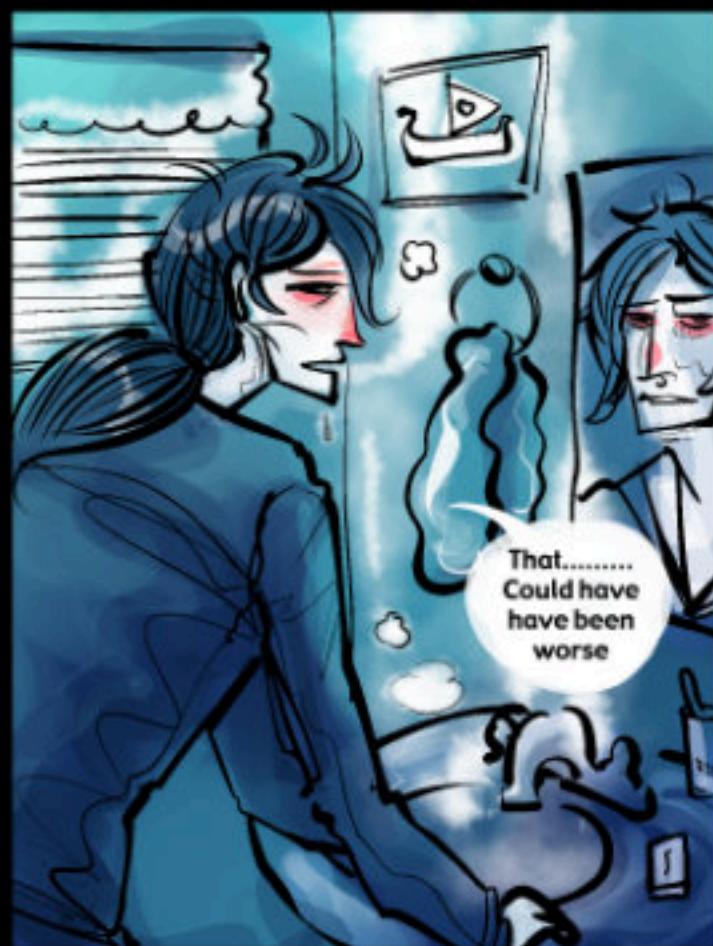
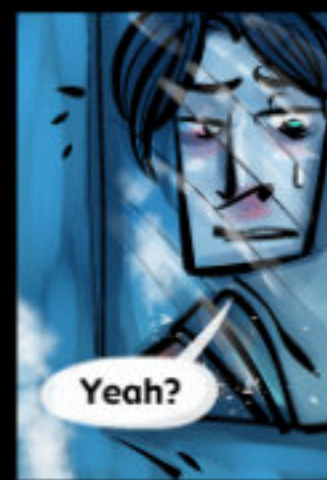
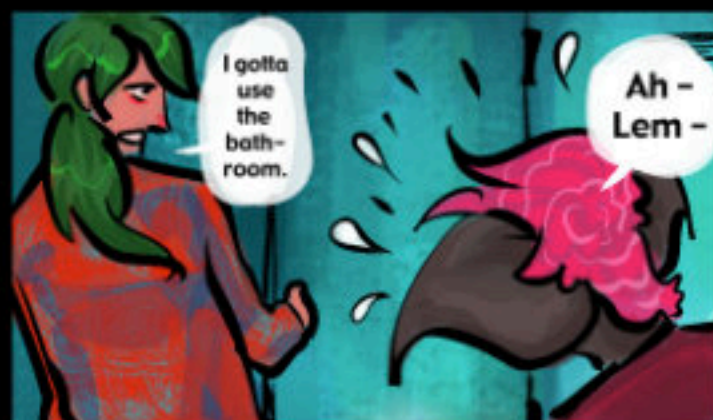


How can I apologize for what I've done?

It will never be enough.











Have you gone to the colony much?

No...I'm still pretty nervous about leaving the house...

These are nice people. They'll like you.

Yeah, May says so too.



Lem... Uh...

What?

Do you wanna talk about what happened?

Maybe in a bit...Though honestly it was nothing special.



He was doing that every other conversation back when we still talked.

Not stealing a heal, but being a huge asshole like that

Really? Was it that bad?



Don't you remember? You were there, mostly.

Though I guess you were pretty deluded about it.

Yeah..I have a lot of memories to reassess.



It's cold comfort, but that's what the egregore is for.

Mm...Yeah.



Oh good, they have a fire going like I hoped.

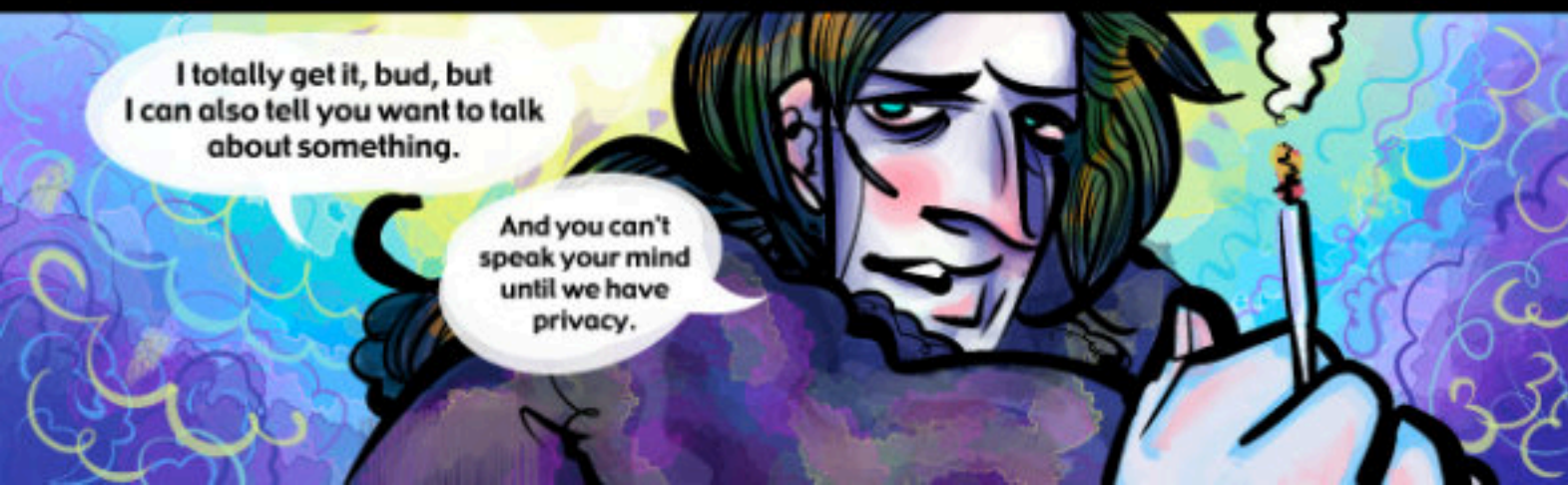
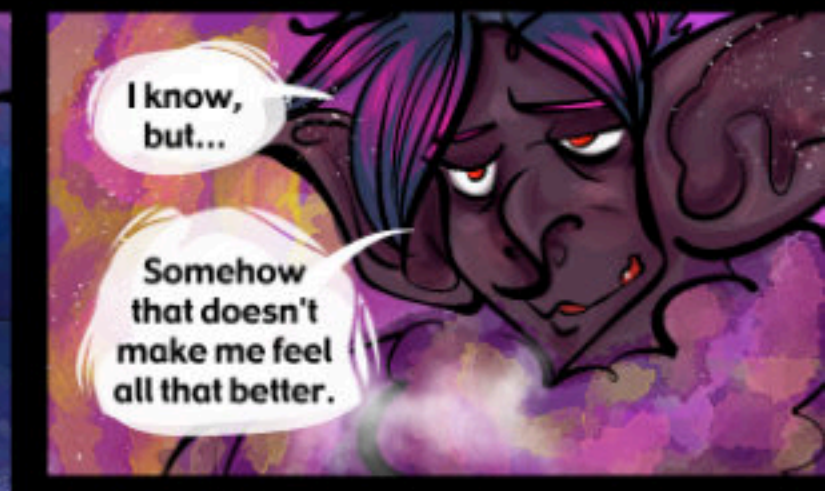
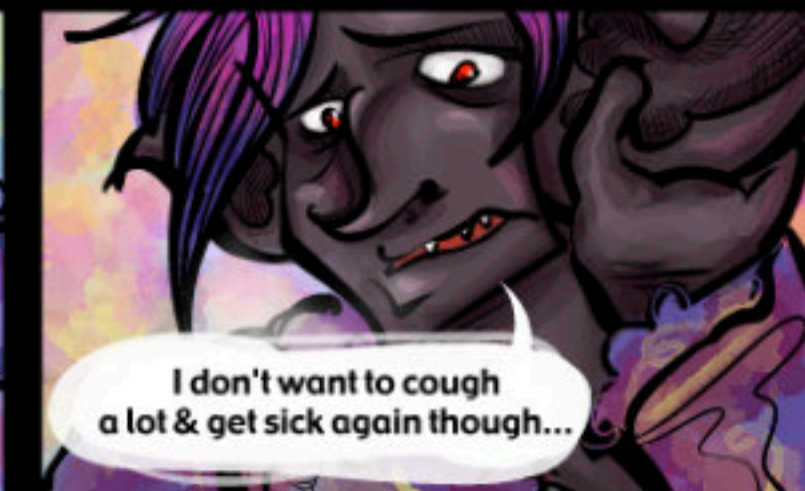
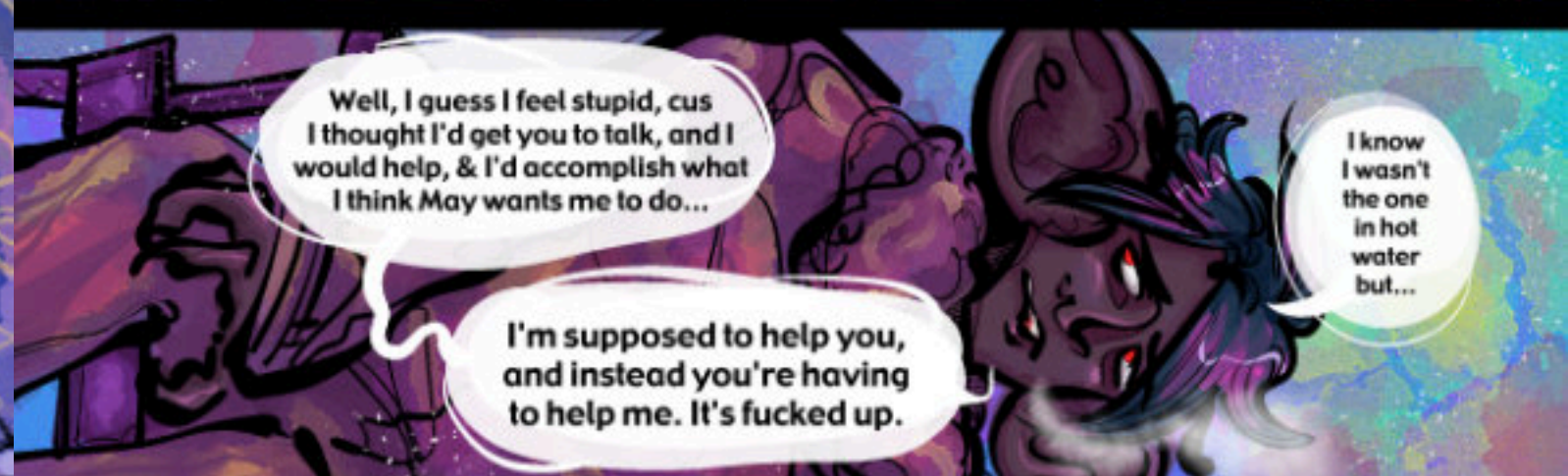
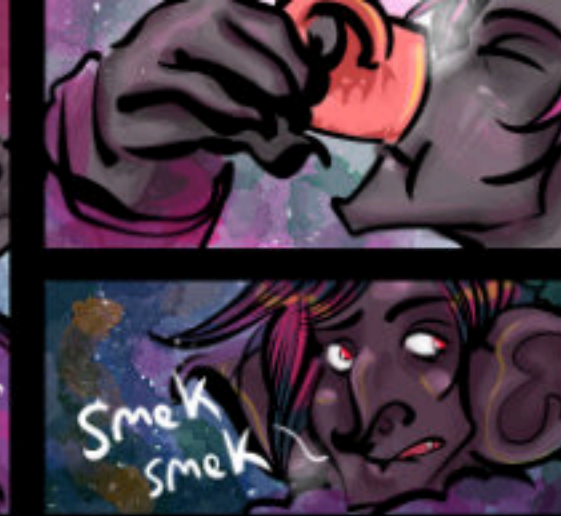
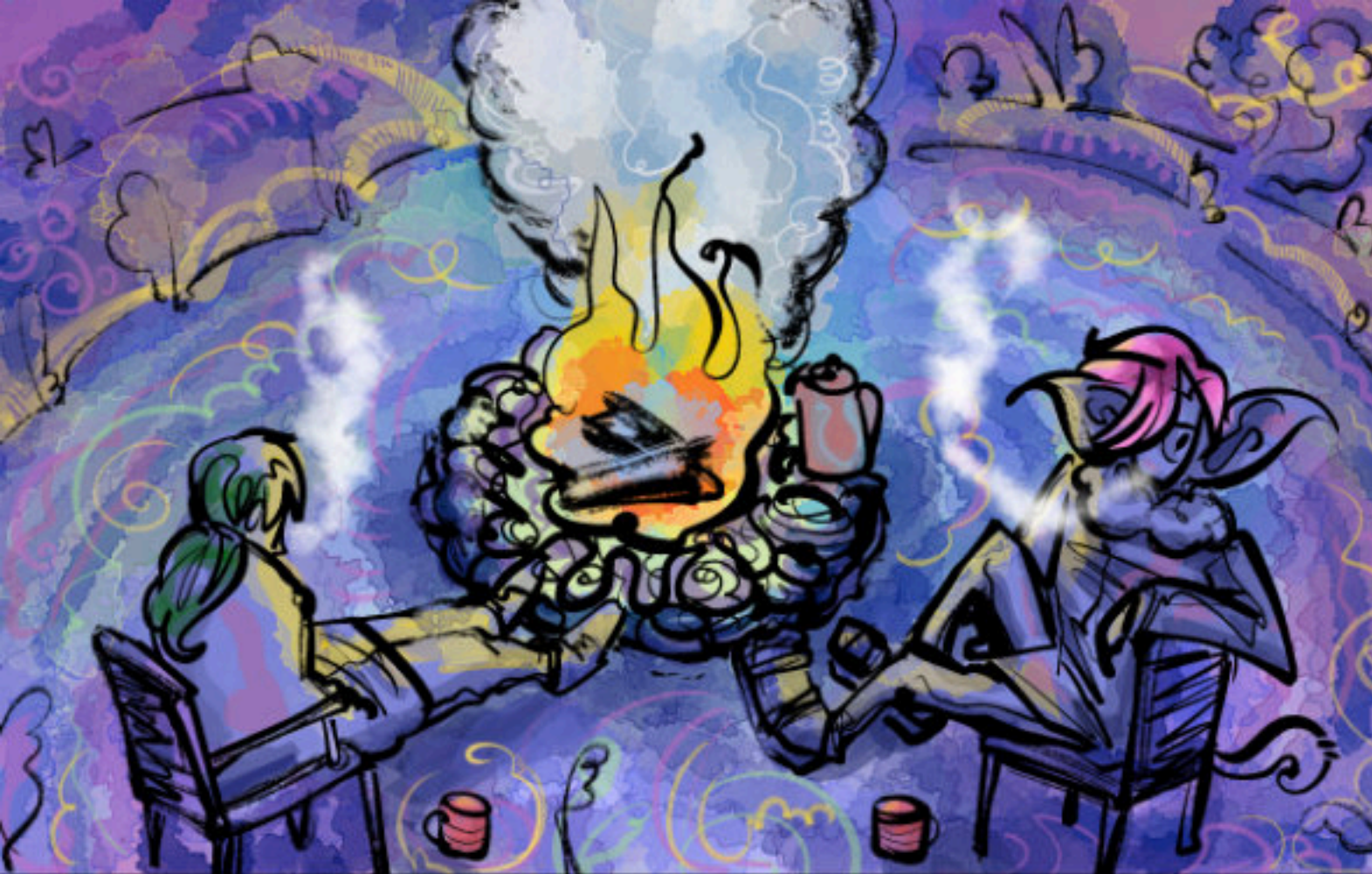
Come on, we're almost there.

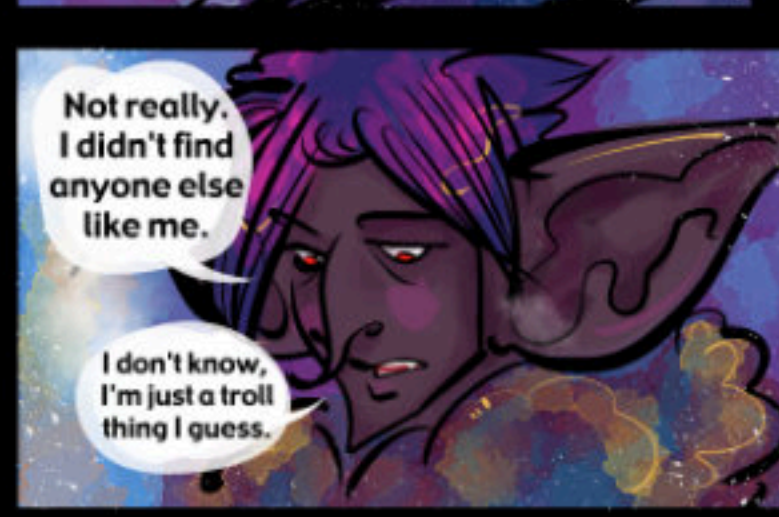
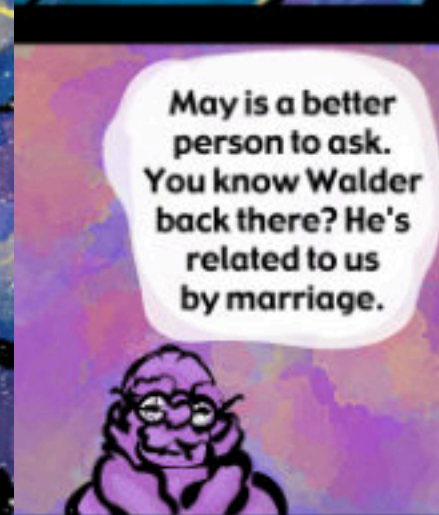
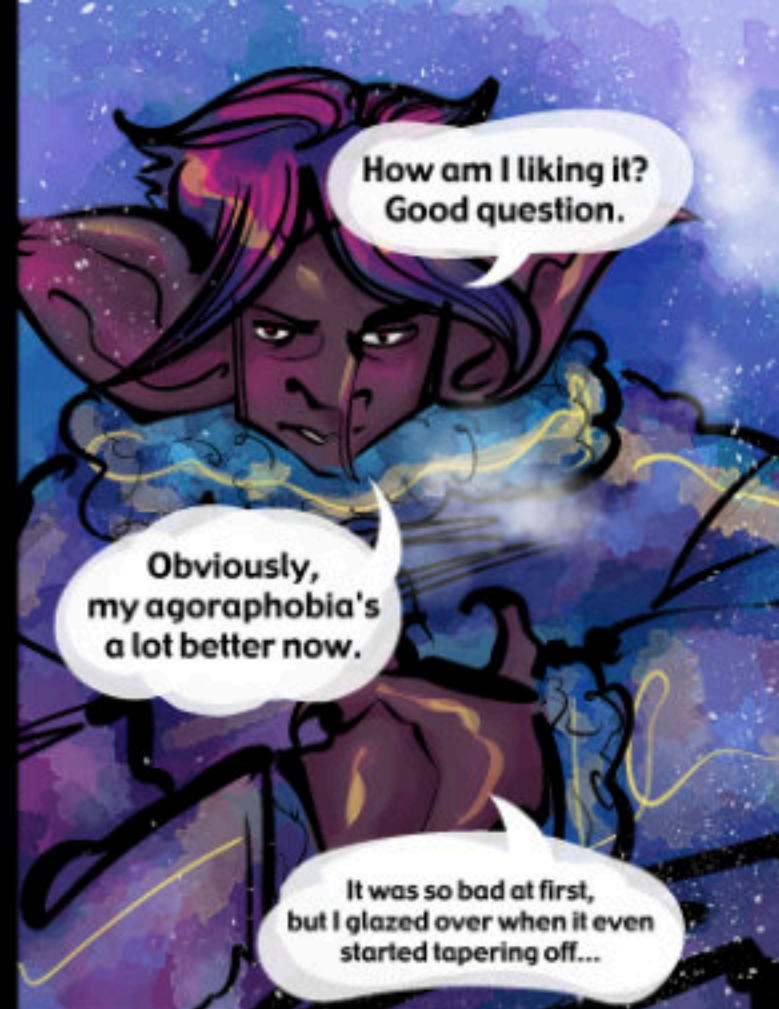



OK, Walder says
we can use the fire
as long as we -
What is it?

Lem, is that what old
people look like?

....Yeah, Rae,
that's what old people
look like.








Cal, you're staying in your room the rest of the day.

Fine, punish me, browbeat me, whatever.




I'm used to your ill treatment.

Far be it for me to object!

You are all so small minded. You act like mortals half the time.

It's a wonder I get anything done at all....




I don't feel bad, if that's what you're trying to do.

Why? It didn't hurt him! He's fine!




You're bullshitting me on this?

I remember what's happened before, Cal.



It may feel good now...

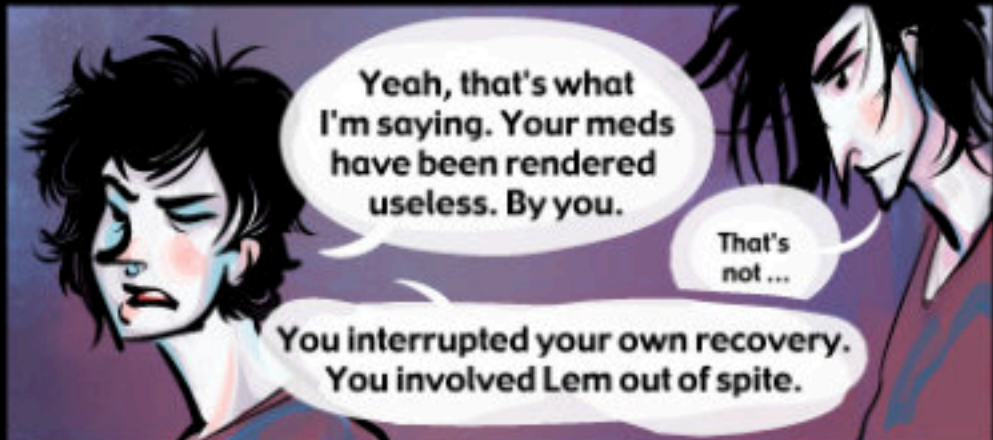
But because of what you've done, you're going to be really sick later.



Your medication will have to be adjusted again.

It'll be different this time.


I don't need it!




Yeah, that's what I'm saying. Your meds have been rendered useless. By you.

That's not ...

You interrupted your own recovery. You involved Lem out of spite.



I'm not holding back either, Cal.

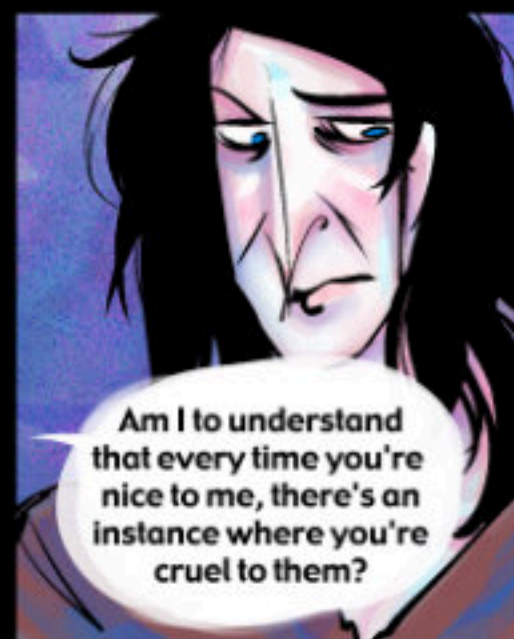


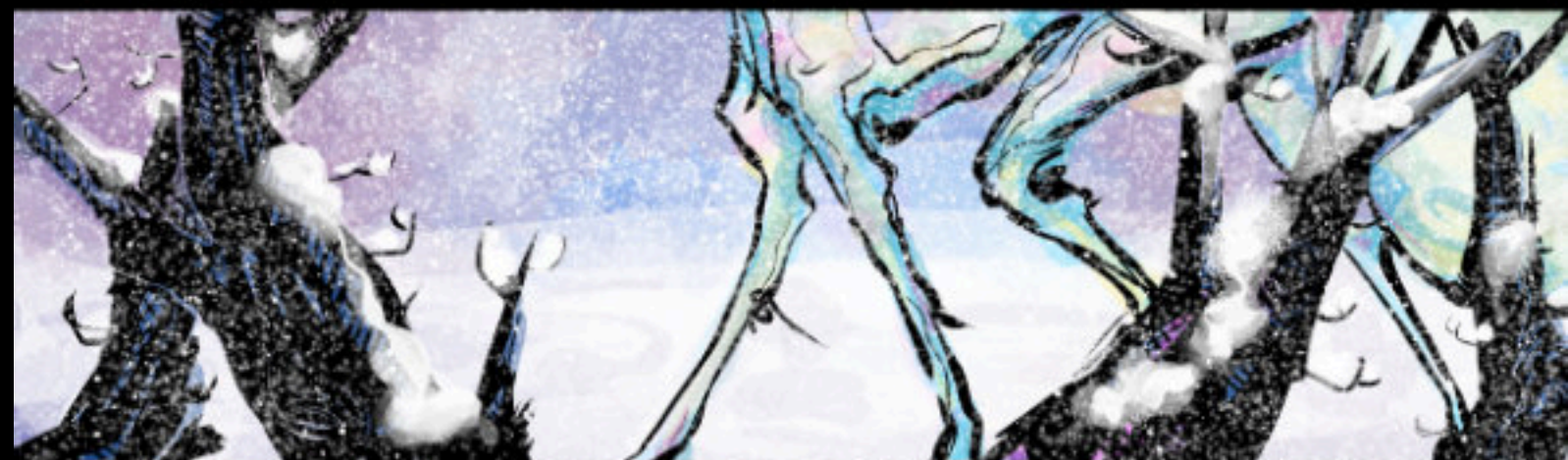
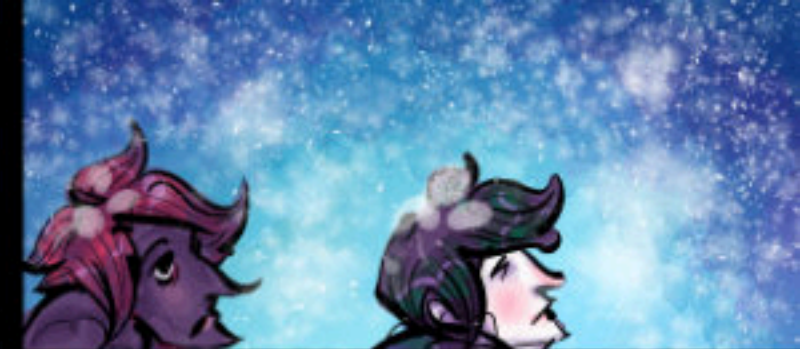
Everyone else is putting in a good faith effort.

Everyone except you.

I'm so ashamed and embarrassed right now. I'm bitter and I'm angry.

You take things I've worked hard on, and you turn them to ash.







Whoa!

What is that?!

Steady on, it won't hurt us.

It's some type of carsekel'ek, uh, an ice dragon.

You normally don't see them at all. They hide.

Where does something like that hide?!



When it snows, they pace about, gathering the flakes in their wings for water.

Whoa. It's fast.

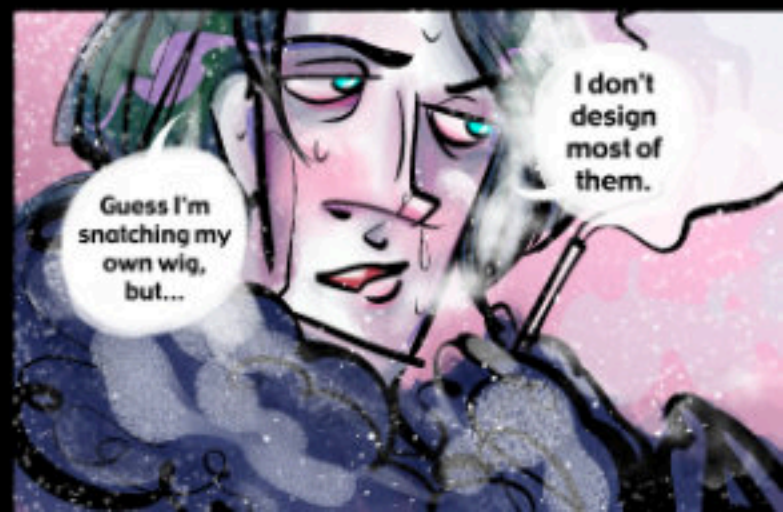
Why is the tail like that? It looks like a pancake.

I have no idea.



Didn't you make it?

Oh, no. Not that one.



I don't design most of them.

Guess I'm snatching my own wig, but...



You used to design when we were kids.

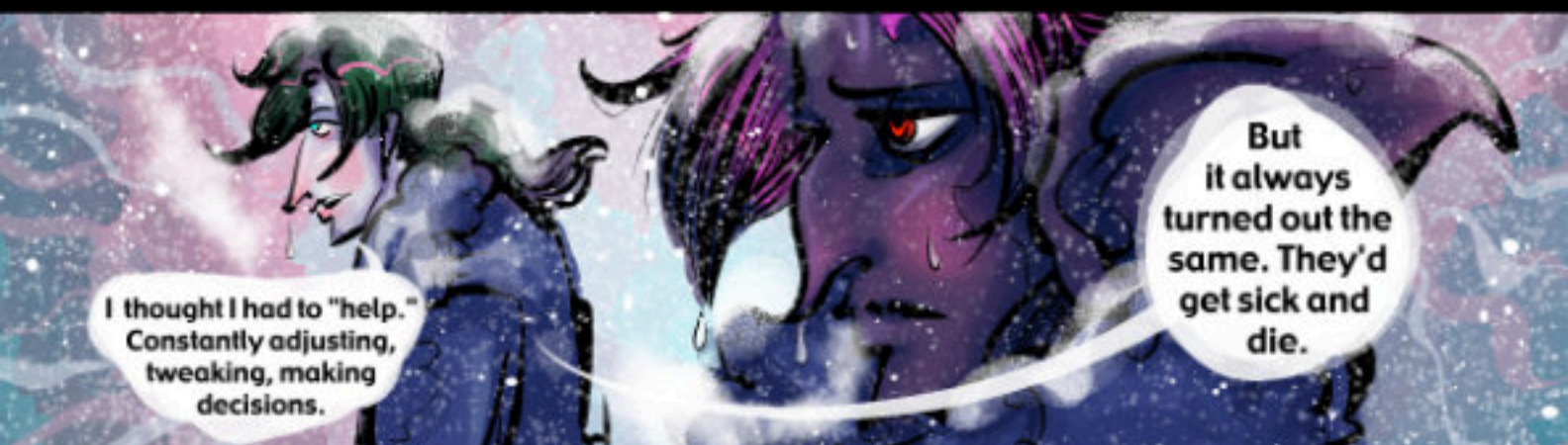


Yeah, and how many of those do you see now?

BUMP



How I used to do things was flawed.



I thought I had to "help." Constantly adjusting, tweaking, making decisions.

But it always turned out the same. They'd get sick and die.



What they really needed was my absence.

The "failures" that were ignored are actually responsible for most plants & animals on Faidia.



But even if I'd had a choice about it, I would have preferred it like this.

Lots of weird animals to see.

Speaking of weird, what's that?

Of course, I design when I need to. Like the melceys.



Yea, that's what I was saying.

Lem was telling me about how he doesn't do his job barely at all.



Seriously though, elementals are mere figureheads.

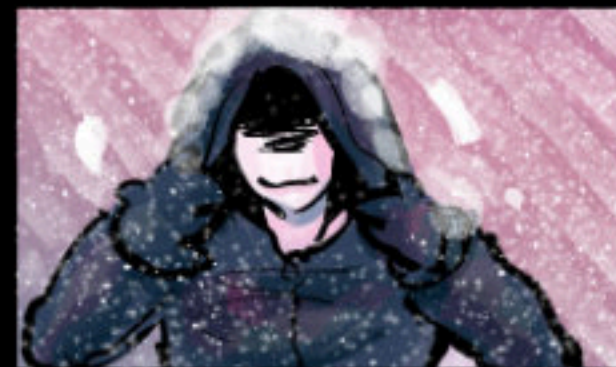
I believe our purpose is to become obsolete.



We have to stop meeting like this.



Lem, wh-what is it!?



Rae, it's me.



Well, we are just sentient conduits for elemental energy.

We're not sure why we happened to be sentient.

See, May gets it.



Well I for one am not interested in being "just" a conduit, thank you.

You have nothing to worry about. At least not yet.

There are mortals interested in turning us into batteries.

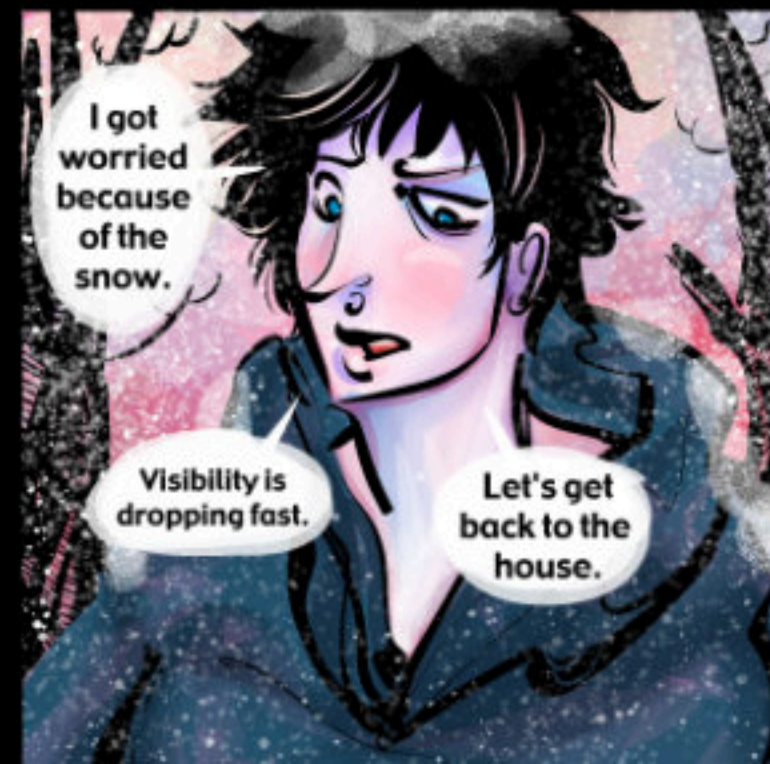


You looked different... There was a thing eating your head....

It's called a hood, buddy.

Tricked by clothes again...?

Why are there so many clothes?



I got worried because of the snow.

Visibility is dropping fast.

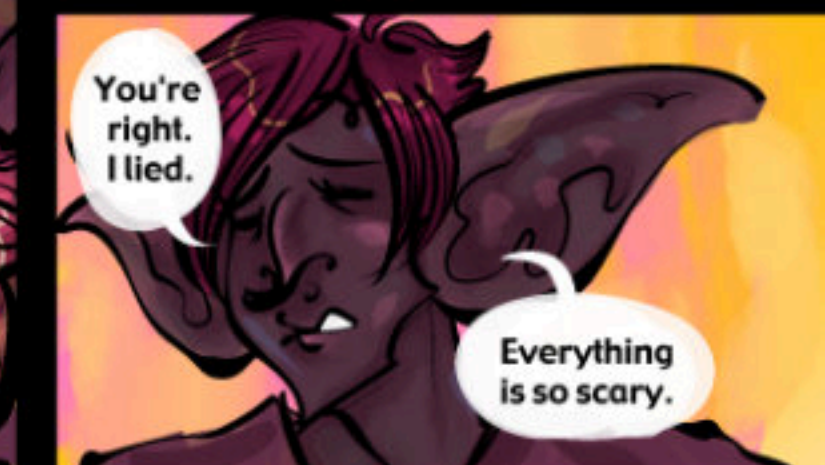
Let's get back to the house.

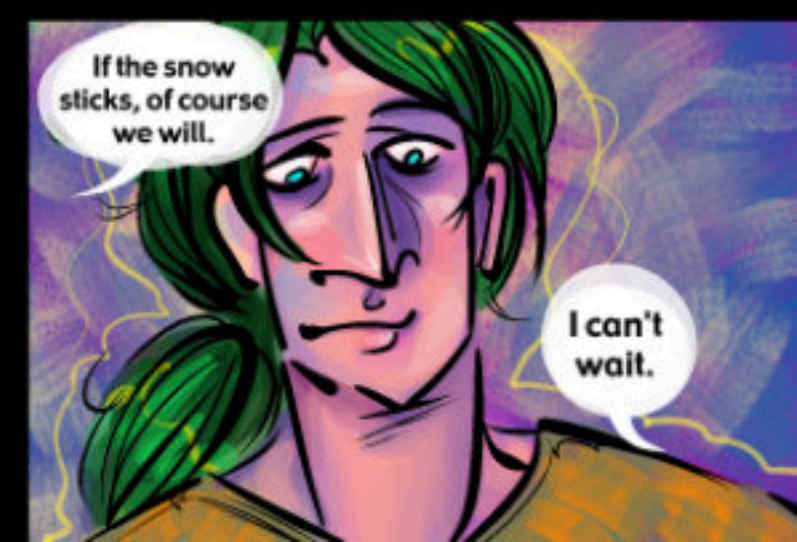
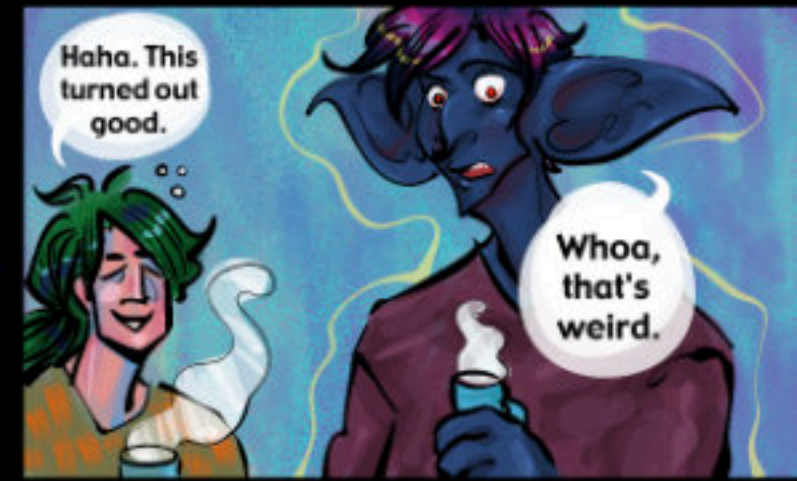
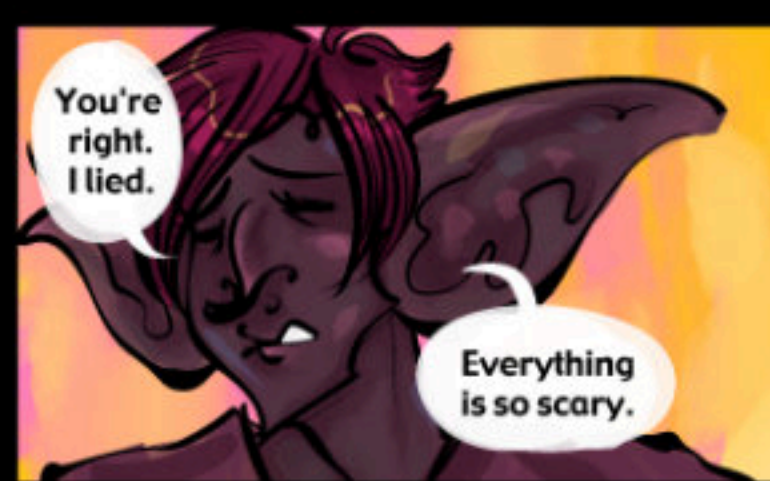


Oh, yes. The anti-elemental sects from Miavra. Mienogolner.

I shouldn't joke about it, because it's horrible, but there's a part of me who's kind of on board for the battery thing.

If they want my job, they're welcome to it.







Cal.

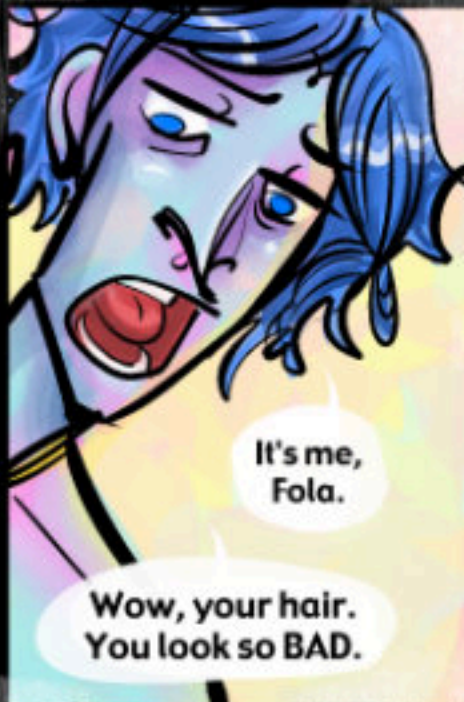
Cal.

Cal? Wake up.



Nn...Quiet, quiet.

I'm 'wake...



It's me, Fola.

Wow, your hair. You look so BAD.



Does my sister know you're up here?



Stinky.

Yes, she let me in.



It's almost 6pm, you know.

Just give me a minute to um... Sorry...

Don't be sorry.



Yes, go ahead, make merry where I can hear everything.

Kick me while I'm down.

Make sure I know how much you all love it when I'm not around.



Soon, you'll all be sorry...

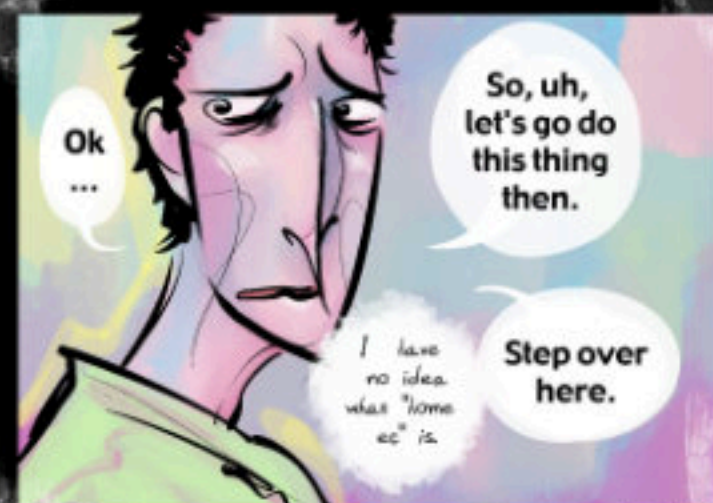
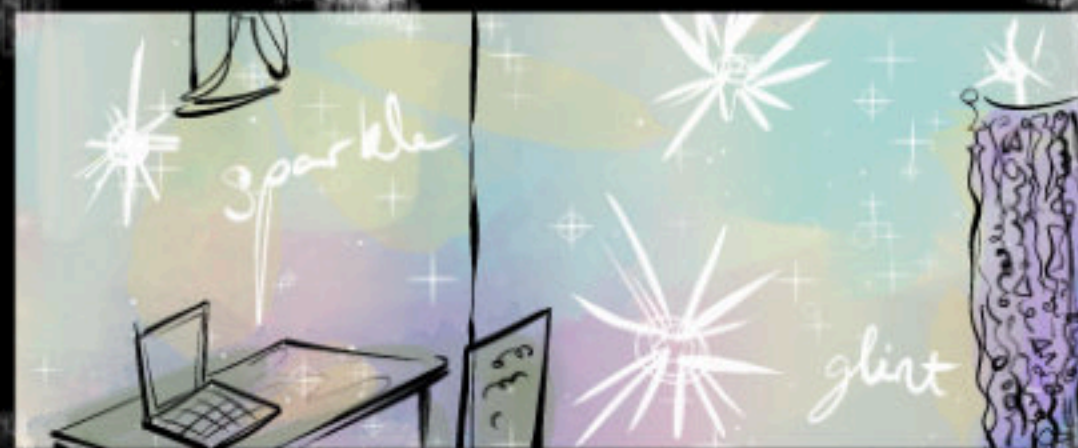
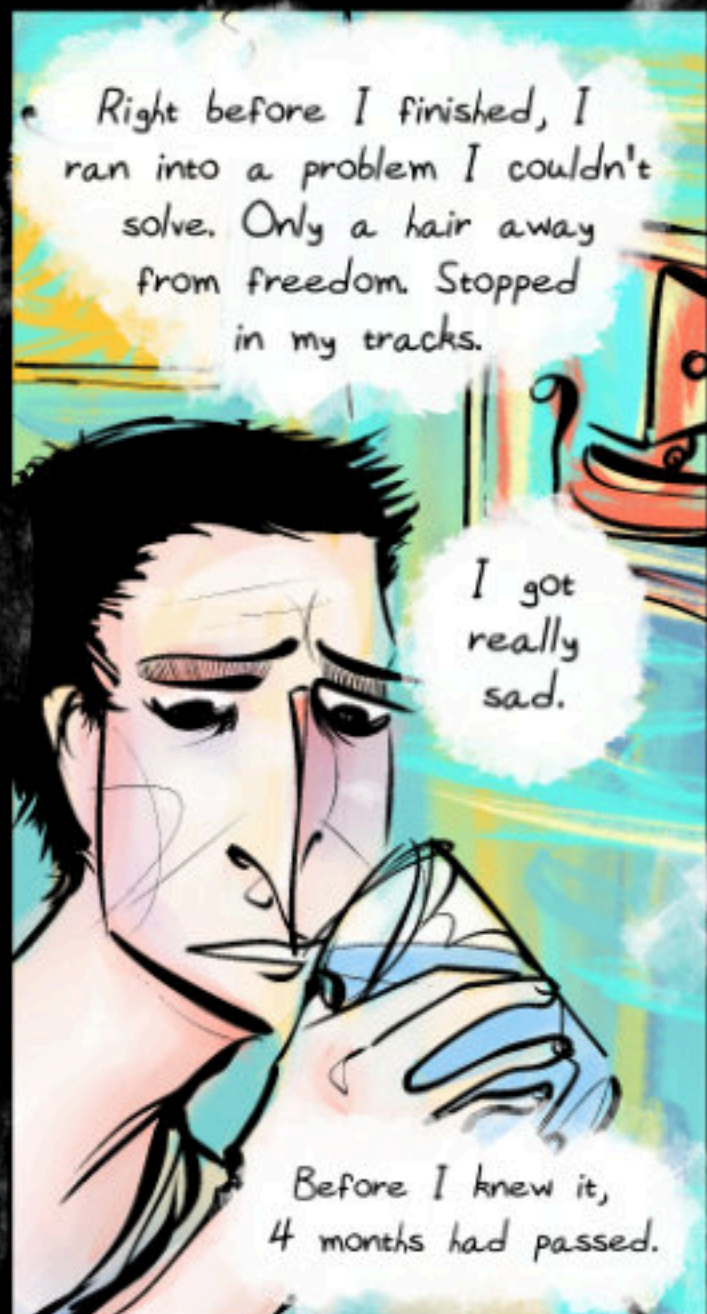
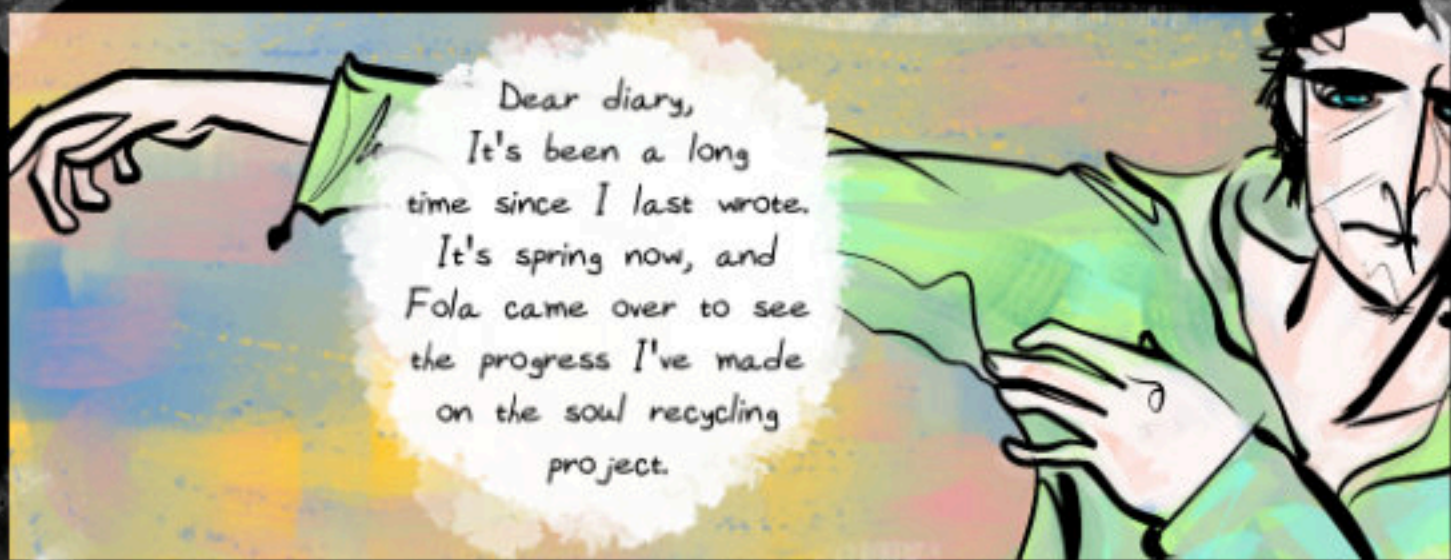


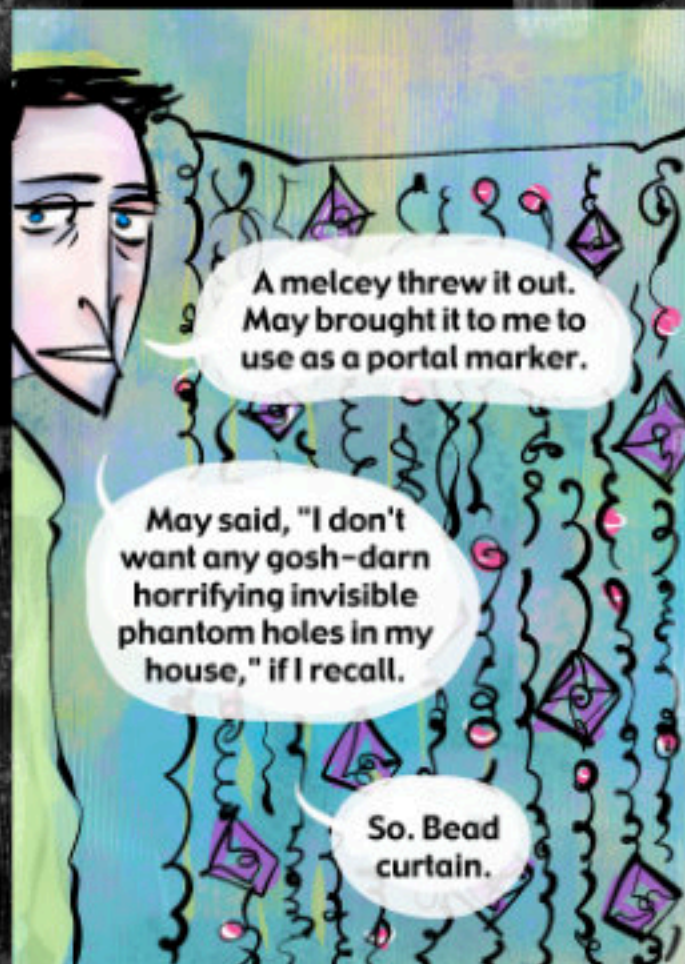
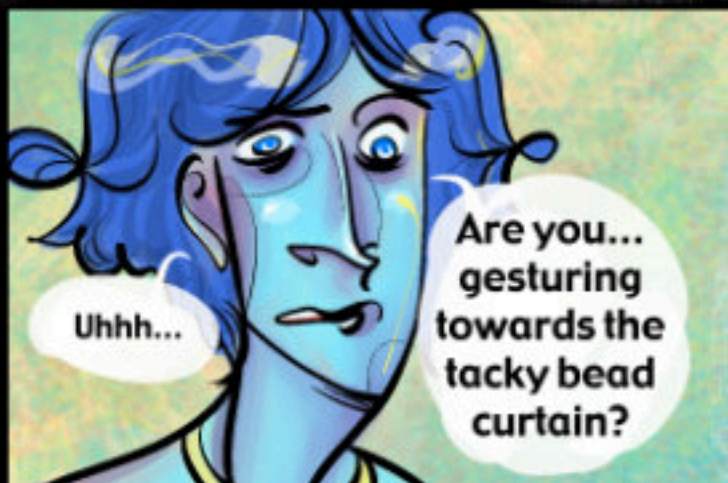
May warned me that it would be like this.

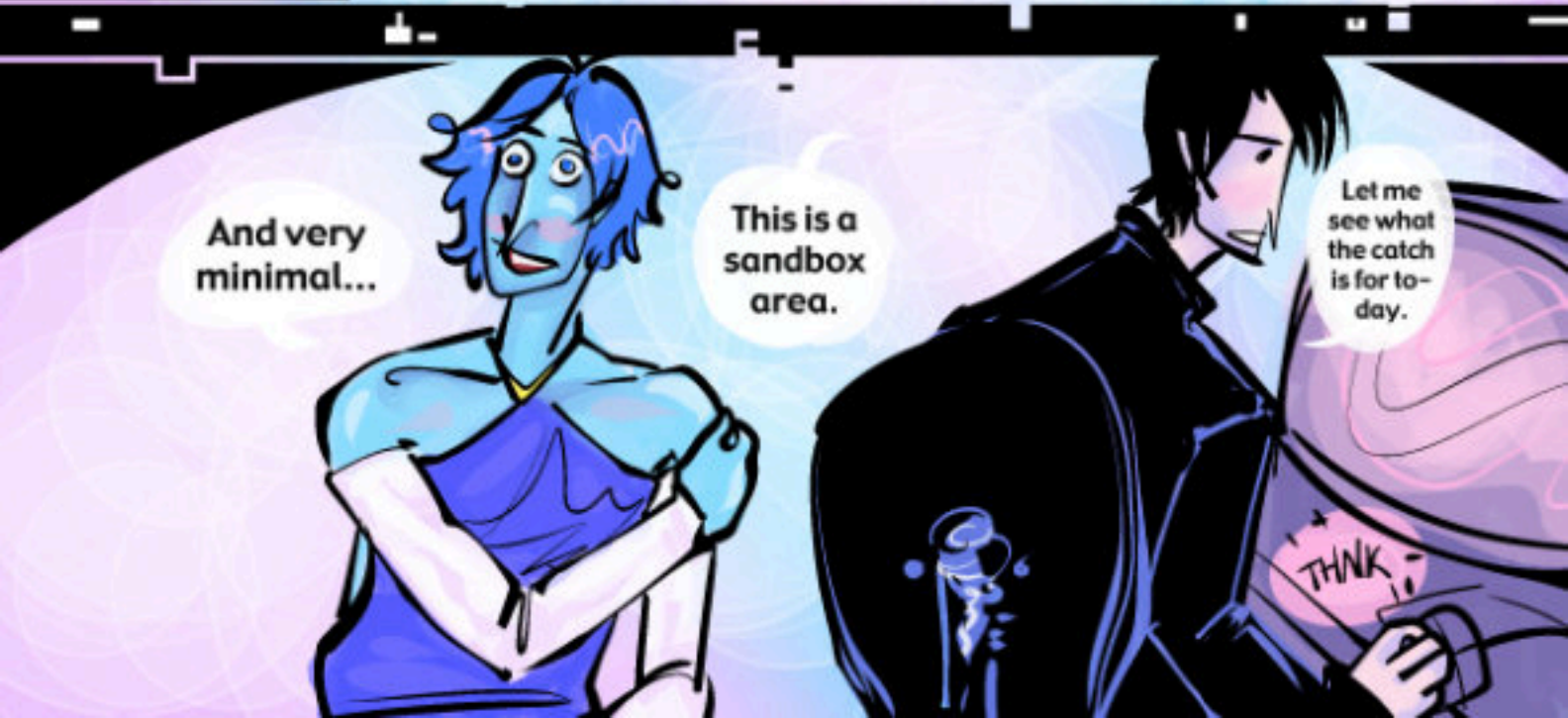
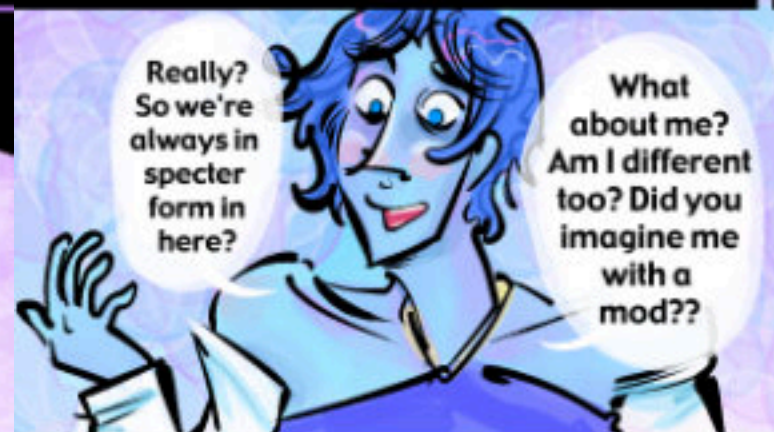
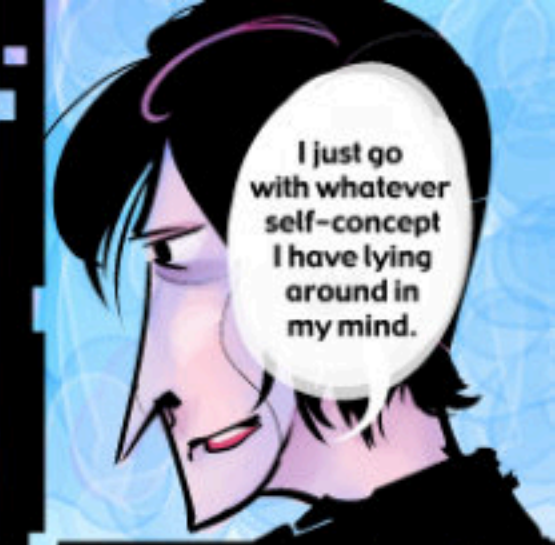
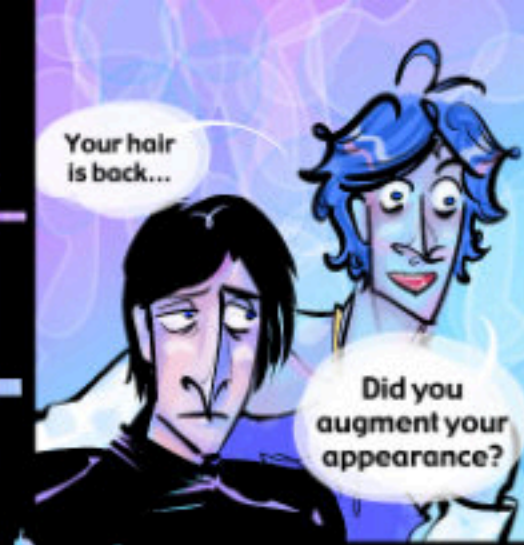
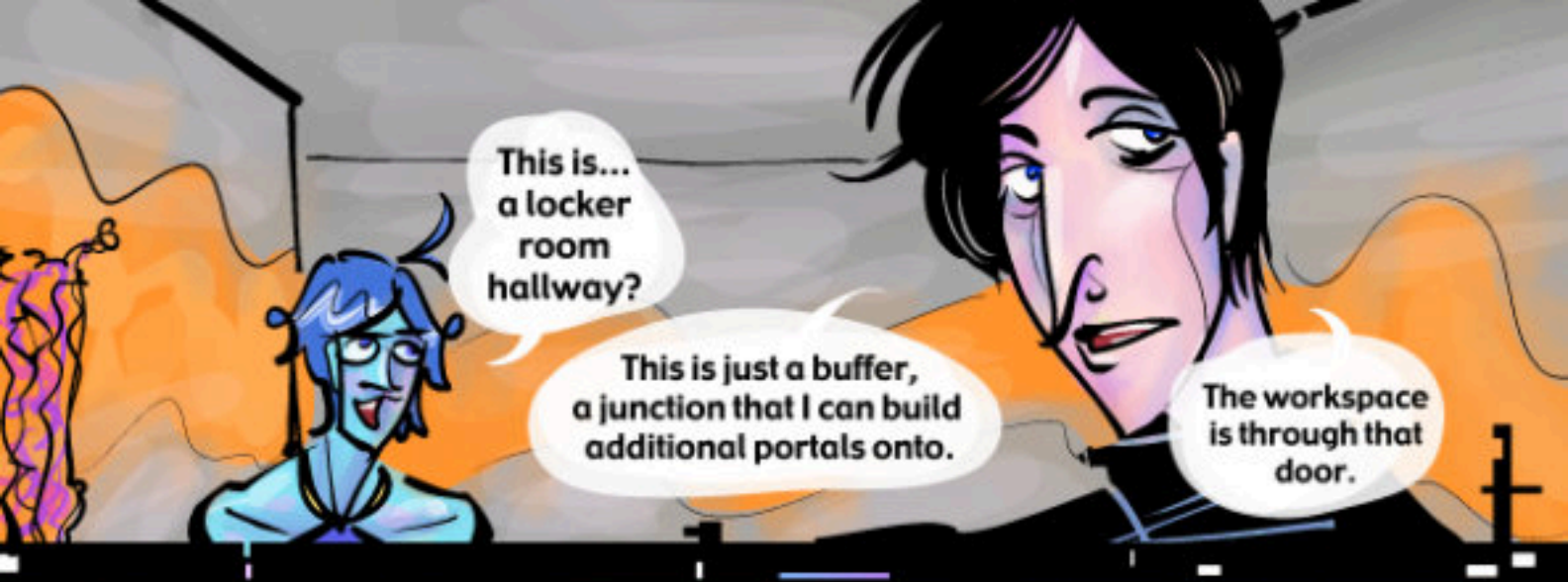
She said if I help you clean this room up, I get to ask you about the new death process.

So your depression mess gave me some leverage, & loosened her protectiveness of you while you are ill. See? It all works out.

Great, Fola.









Well, yes.

Your dogged interest in metaphysical elements is dangerous. You need guidance.



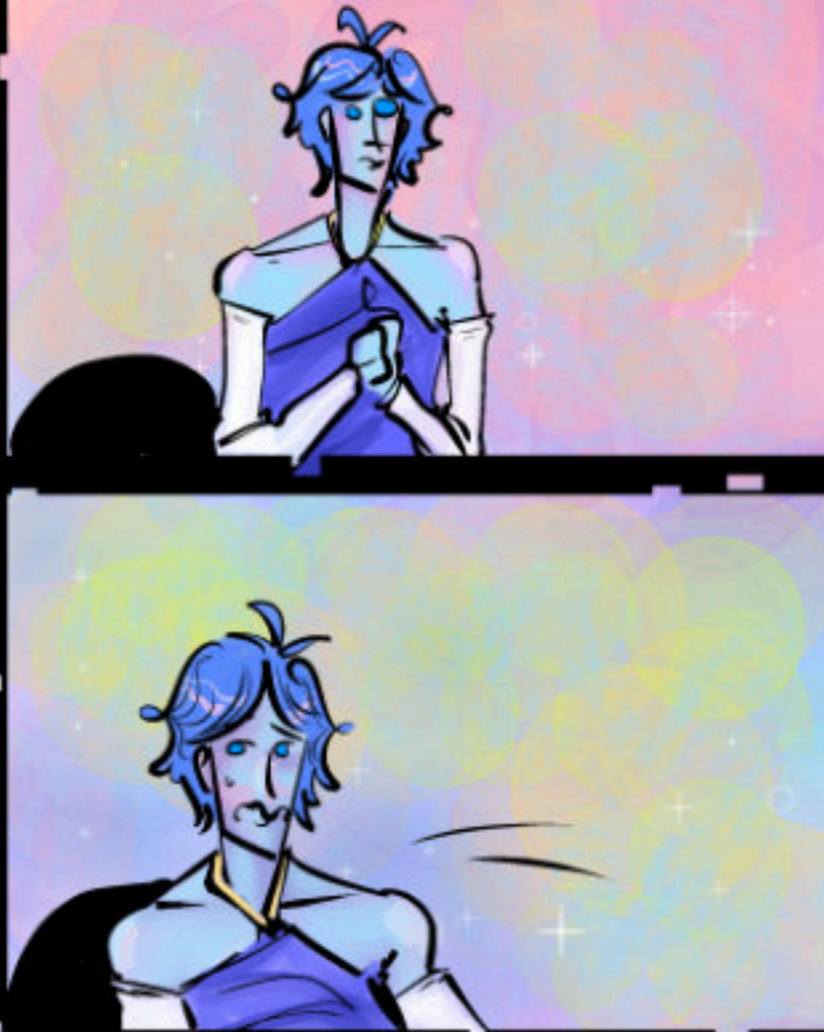
Oh, please, sir!!

Lem won't teach me!

He HATES me!

I should have been YOUR secondary, not his!

Fola, please, sit down.



Haven't you given him reason to worry, though? A moment ago, I said that your interests are dangerous.

Are you already dabbling in dimensional magic? Are you doing something involving the lagoon?

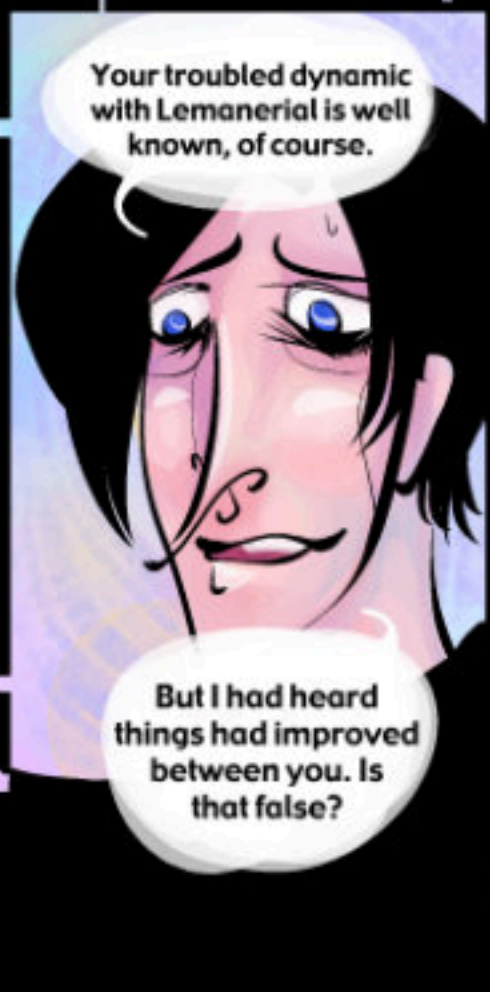


It hardly counts if the experiments are unsuccessful.

So, I guessed correctly. You need to stop immediately.



Isn't that better? Now we can take all the time we need.



Your troubled dynamic with Lemanerial is well known, of course.

But I had heard things had improved between you. Is that false?



No... It's better.

But he doesn't take me seriously. Constantly bugs me about my experiments.

I know I'm not fully matured. But I'm no baby, either!



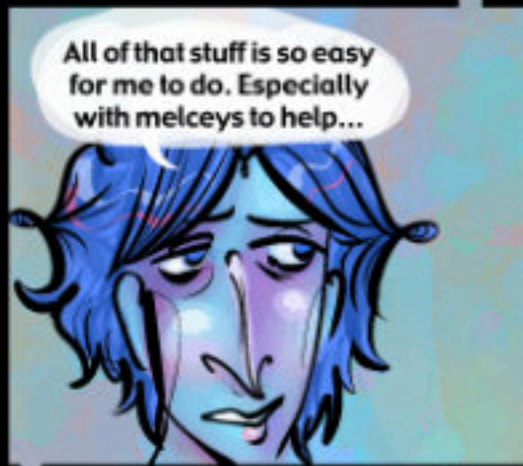
But I have workers. Employees.

Give them different jobs.



There's plenty of environmental work to be done.

Are you neglecting your own element?



All of that stuff is so easy for me to do. Especially with melceys to help...



Am I really that weird to be so interested in this type of magic?

Like. Am I crazy, or is this system full of strange loopholes that we could easily exploit for more resources...?



You're...not wrong.

Sorry, I seemed to lose my breath for a moment.

I'm not sure if you're aware, but Lem has always had a personal interest in this end of magic, from when he was about your age...

I remember him saying things like what you just said, to me.

I can assure you, he meant the same as you did.

How do you think he managed to defeat me in the old days?

It's hard to believe, but once you put it that way...

I think I might have figured out why Lem & you don't get on.

What?

No, he must have meant something else.

This was all my own idea, he has no interest in it whatsoever.

Lem didn't just talk about loopholes.

He used one.

You ...

remind him of himself.

Lem is way more precocious than you think.

He maimed himself many times in pursuit of his interests. He is probably horrified at the prospect you will do the same.

You might also cause injury to reality as we know it.

Like me & my portals & all the other issues this system has...

I have to be very careful.

That's another thing. Your system.

If it's up and running, why are you still locked up here? They can't hold you forever, can they?

Oh, well ...

To explain that, I should just get started on teaching the whole thing. It's what we're here for, after all.

To conclude our digression, consider this the first day of your internship with me.

I will!

But, remember, you can't go around saying Lem shouldn't be your primary. It isn't right & won't solve anything.

Yes sir... I'll do my best!

All right then. Let me load up the soul I selected.

These get caught in the filters I have had set up all over the world. We can look at those later.

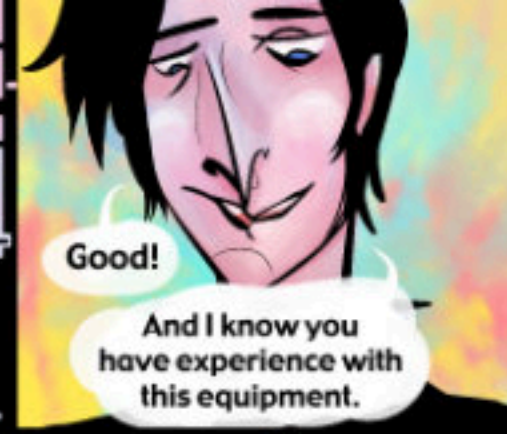


We'll go through the process of resolving a single soul.



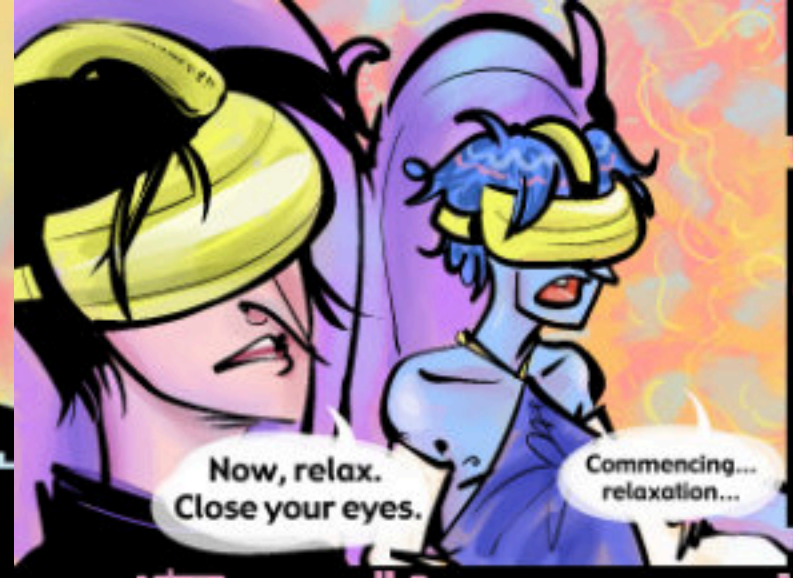
Do you have any issues with motion sickness?

Not that I know of.



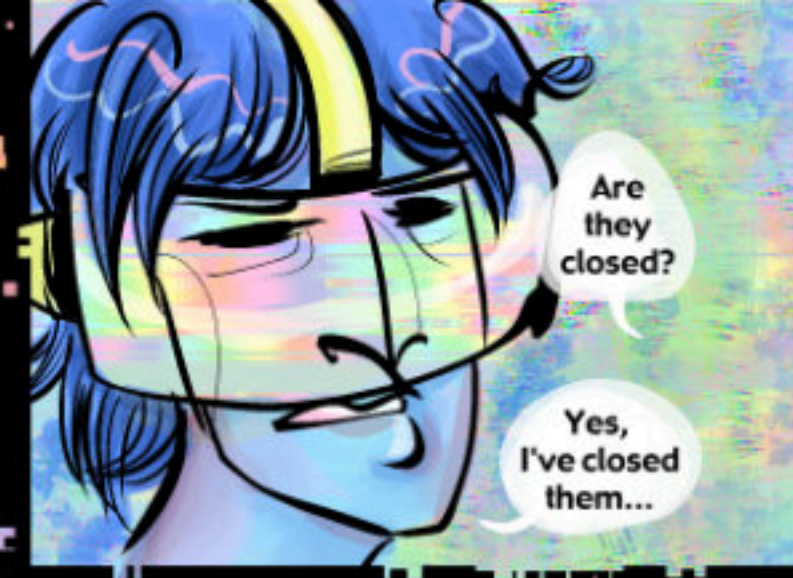
Good!

And I know you have experience with this equipment.



Now, relax. Close your eyes.

Commencing... relaxation...



Are they closed?

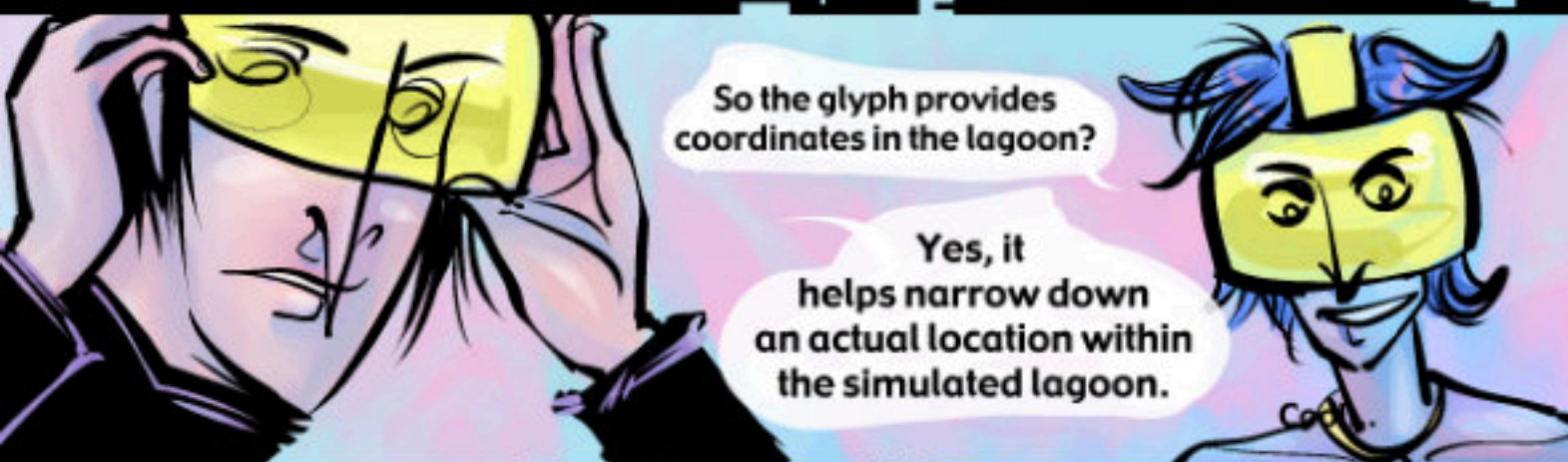
Yes, I've closed them...



Virtual reality...?

I was inspired by Rae & Lem's video games. They provide the kind of visuals & neural feedback I wanted.

The computer takes a death glyph, and turns it into an visualization you can explore & interact with.



So the glyph provides coordinates in the lagoon?

Yes, it helps narrow down an actual location within the simulated lagoon.



I guess we'll need chairs at first.

Now, I won't lie to you. This can be very frightening, but no harm will come to you.

Lem would never do anything as cool as this

Oh?



Wait...

Whoooooaaaa

Is this a dimension within a dimension, or...

No, there is only the one dimension. We are still "there," but I've loaded in a new environment.

Making dimensions within dimensions is pointless & too demanding.

The video game is simply a conceit to get your brain to accept what's happening as sensible.

You can skip steps once you get used to using it.



This reminds me of one of your earlier tangents.

What was it? How we should *live* inside pocket dimensions?

That's something you could argue used to be true...

Used to be...?

Way back when we didn't live on Faidia at all, just used it as a hub.



Living in a place I made seemed like a reasonable solution back then, when Faidia was nothing but a barren rock.

Seemed very inhospitable and uncomfortable back then.



Hold on to my hand. The gravity is strange in here.

The problem with fake dimensions is that you're in charge. Nothing you didn't imagine takes place.

S-sempai...

We struggled to maintain a sense of time, so it was impossible to get a rhythm going.



The tedium, the emptiness. It became maddening.

If we tried it as we are now, it'd be even worse.

Lem theorizes we need real bodies, in a real dimension, to nurture our minds.

Incorporeality, or staying in a shoddy pocket dimension... Neither are safe, long term.

The real world is the safest place from the lagoon.

So...what *is* the lagoon?



I'm not exactly sure how it came about. The lagoon is ancient, even to me. Maybe my mother created it, as a mirror for herself, or a measuring stick, sort of. But that doesn't fully explain it either.

No one really knows what its history is.

Simply put- it's a mirror dimension. It reflects our world, but strips away the cladding so you can see the rivers of energy inside.

By "cladding" I mean your physical body, & the physical world around you.

Unfortunately, it's ALL you can see in there, so it's very hard to navigate.



And because it was seminal to life in Faidia, through Lem, everything alive has been grandfathered into its structure.



It could also be a bridge to other worlds like our own.



We can still change things like that, can't we...?



Heh... Mm. No.

We haven't found a way of updating the infrastructure without destroying too much.

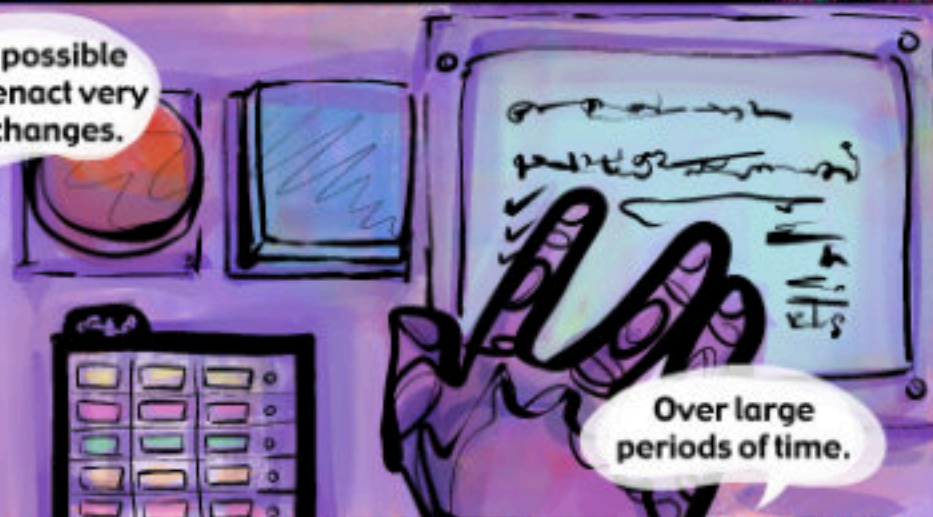
But it's a very dangerous thing to permit young beings to access.

We primaries have a theory the lagoon may have taken certain subconscious wishes of ours and made them manifest in the world.

So some weird things happened without us meaning it.



But it's possible we can enact very slight changes.



Over large periods of time.

Lem thinks that's where elementals came from, in fact.

It could be that some passing thought caused this world to start manifesting avatars of its magic in people, creating elementals.

If that's the case... if we had been aware of what we were doing, we would have made better decisions.



This isn't the junction I'm looking for. Let's keep going.

What are we doing?

So, these giant cables are where souls reside. I'm trying to find the location of the soul I'm targeting.

The glyphs are not the souls themselves, just coordinates.

We'll explore around this area until we find the spot the glyph corresponds to.





Oh, it might be time to switch up the skin. This is an aspect I was looking forward to showing you!

This cable & gravity suit look is just the default theme.

There's also...



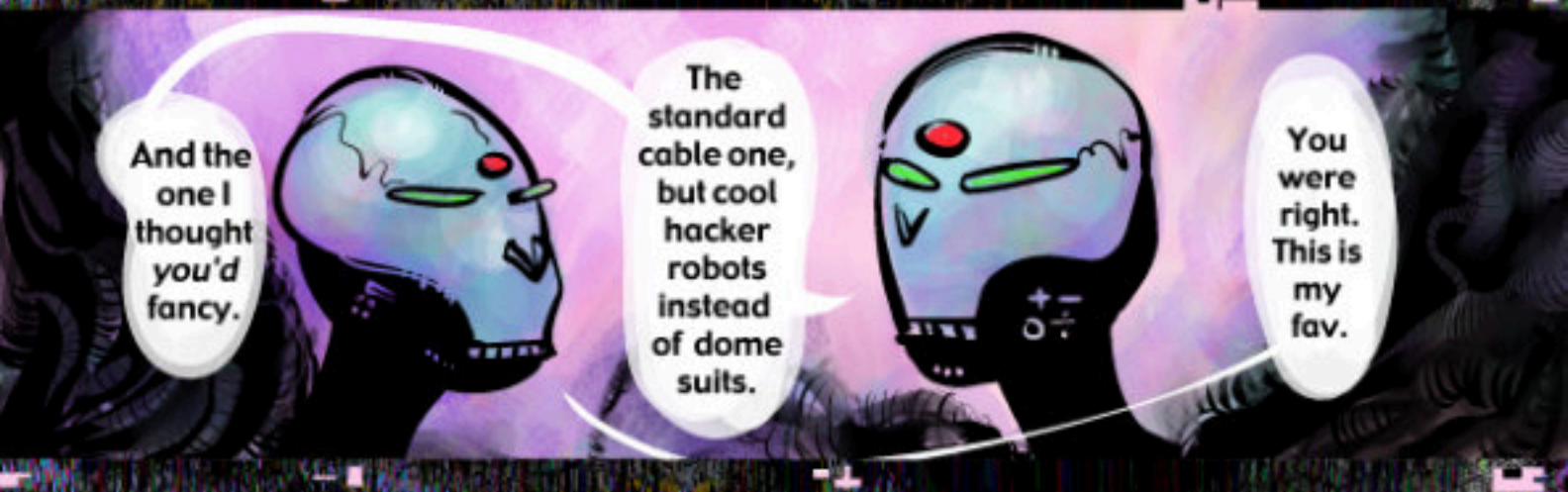
Fairy theme...

Mermaid theme...

And...

For some reason...

A minecart sewer theme.



And the one I thought you'd fancy.

The standard cable one, but cool hacker robots instead of dome suits.

You were right. This is my fav.



Careful, though.

Oh... You're not in control of that?

The gravity is still wonky.

It's buggy for whatever reason.



Hmm... That's lame.

I would have fixed that by now...

That's all it took for you to lose faith...?

You really are a kid...



Ah, never mind.

Let's go this way.

My data still isn't quite as smooth as I'd hoped.

I have to go by my gut most of the time.



Big cables like this have hundreds of souls in them.

One off soul spoils the lot, like rotten fruit.

But we'll only know what's really going on once we enter the corrosion and focus on our target.



This is just the process of locating the problem?

This is a lot of work...

Well, I'm doing it manually as a demonstration for you, today.

I don't usually jump this many hoops.



Now, please do not touch anything yet.

Interacting with it might suck you in before you're ready.

Uh, so, what are we in for?

At this point, I can only guess at what's inside based on some readings.



Hm... Not too weird.

It looks extremely disgusting.

Everything here is aesthetic.

Even so, I made it to look bad because it IS bad.



Common, small problems can be handled remotely from my console,

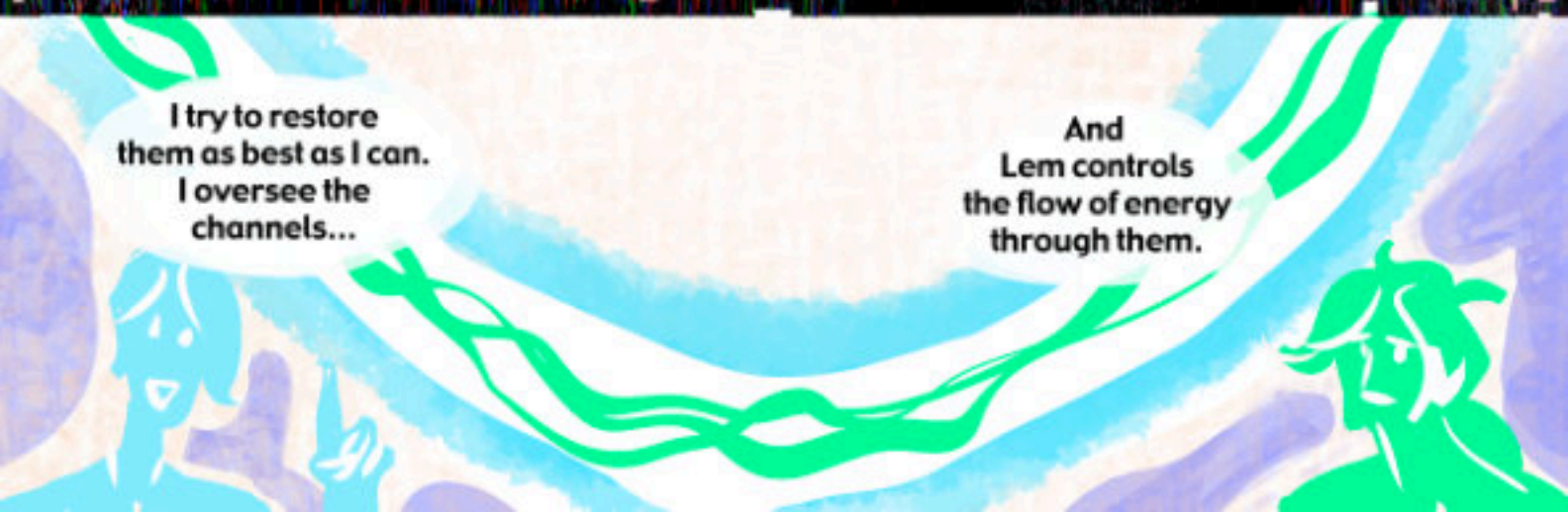
and mostly accomplished with the aid of bots.



A massive corruption like this requires me to handle it personally.

These instances occur when really bad things happen to a lot of living things.

Disasters erode the integrity of these channels, destroying the relationships that connect these living things together.



I try to restore them as best as I can. I oversee the channels...

And Lem controls the flow of energy through them.



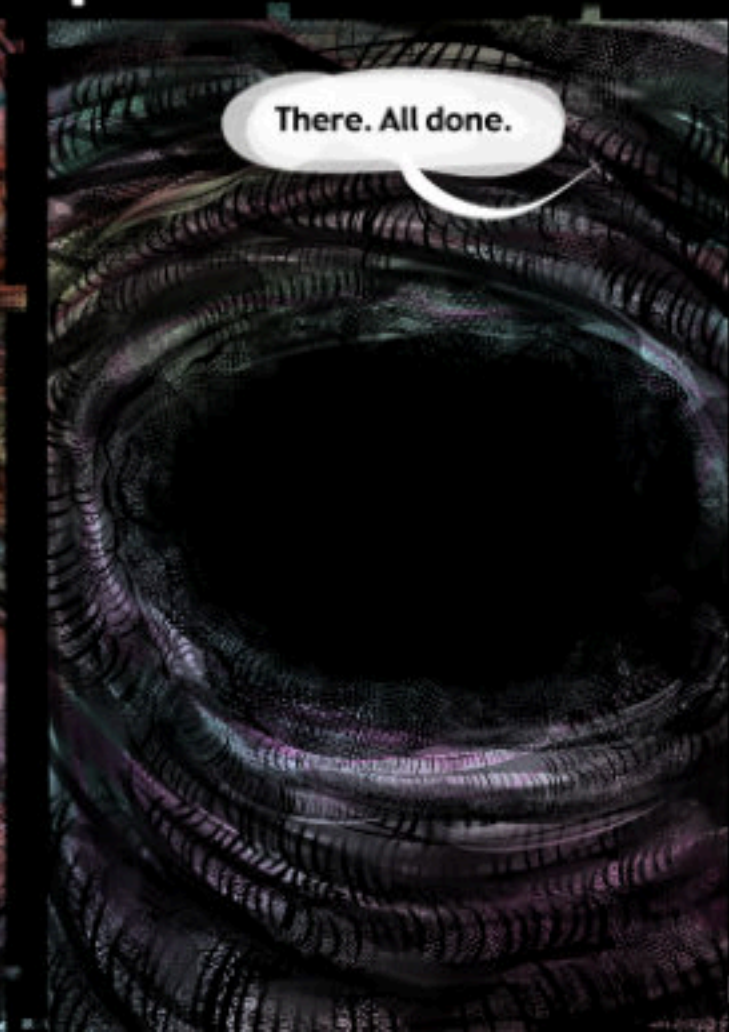
But for these funky areas, extra steps are needed.

It's not just a material repair job, but a psychic one.



Next I make an opening just big enough for the two of us...

scrape
scrape

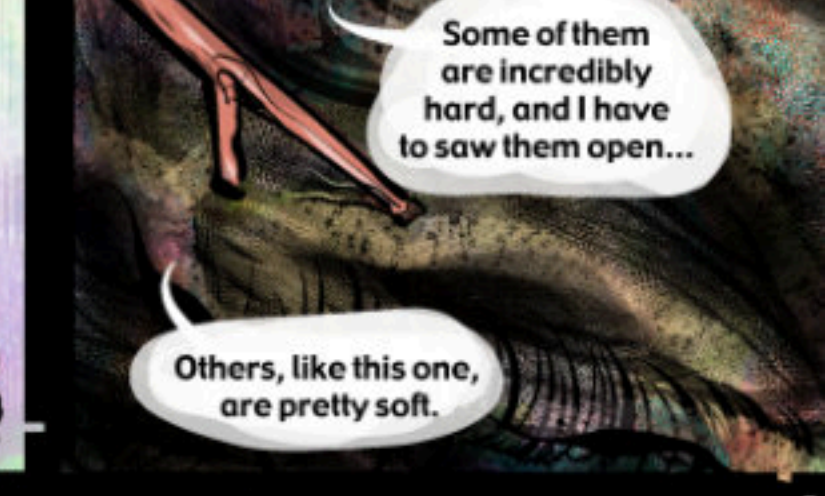


There. All done.



A stick?

I'm gonna poke it.



Some of them are incredibly hard, and I have to saw them open...

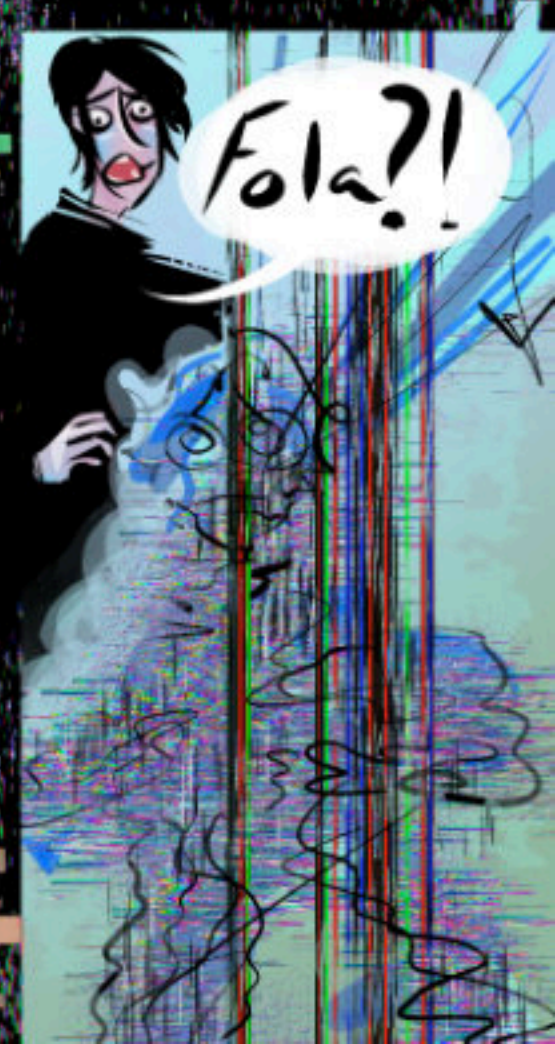
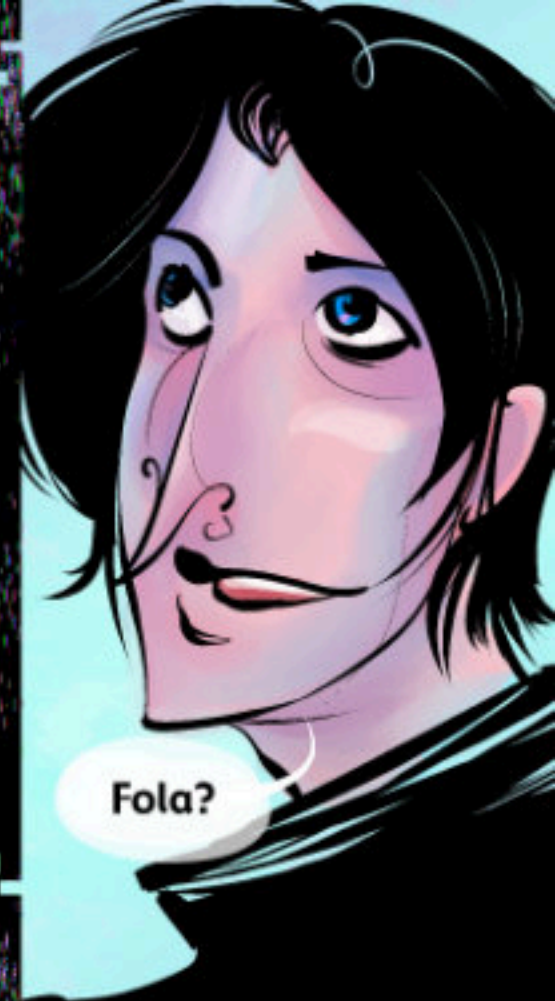
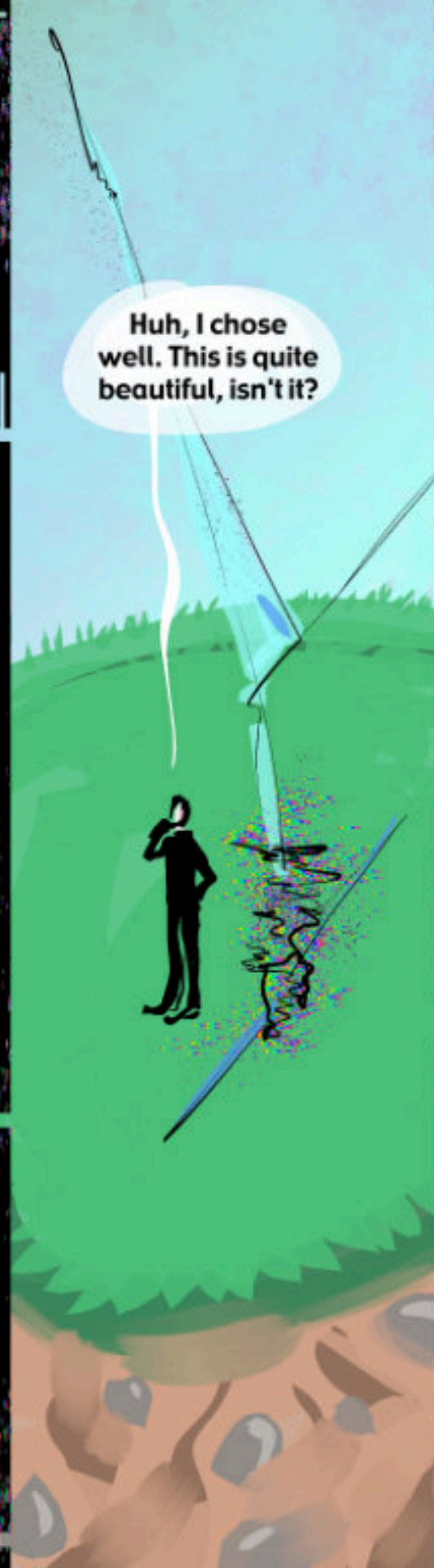
Others, like this one, are pretty soft.



Now, we jump in.

Just like that?!

Uh huh.





This is a type of spirit emanated by vast quantities of life.

They protect the bed of life they sprang from.

They are strictly incorporeal thus far.



They're the closest thing to a god I've encountered yet on Faidia... besides us I mean.

God...

Their existence is certainly a surprise, isn't it?

They are mostly peaceful, but if there's been any conflict, I've withdrawn to avoid fighting.



Lacking a single consciousness, they can't communicate in words, but they can communicate through environments.

We'll follow this spirit for now. It knows what we're here for.

I'm convinced these spirits design these set pieces.

They immediately adapted to my existence & have made progressively more inviting worlds for me to explore.



Are any of the mortal religions aware of these spirits?

To some degree.

But you can ask Lem about it. He likes mortal religions.



I'm confident by now they are a benevolent force, even in badly damaged locales like this one.

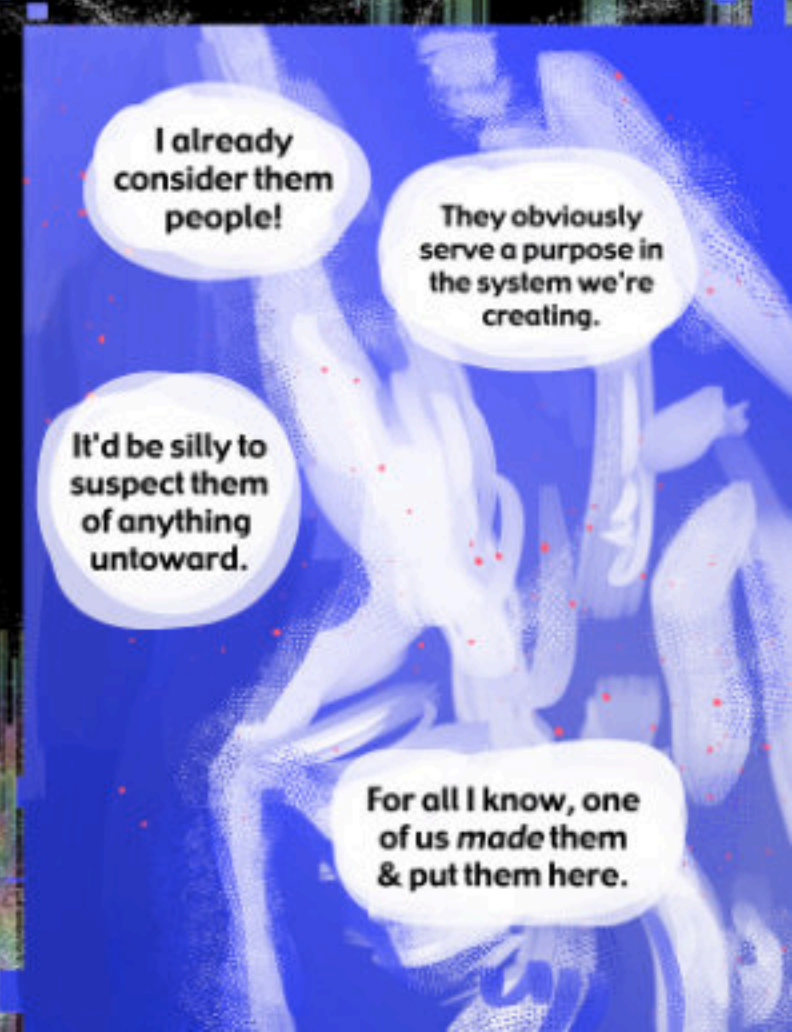
They want the dead under their watch to rest even more than we do.



Does that mean these things communicate with each other?

Sure. Why not? We do.

They're just another part of the world, like us.



I already consider them people!

They obviously serve a purpose in the system we're creating.

It'd be silly to suspect them of anything untoward.

For all I know, one of us *made* them & put them here.





Anyway, here we are at the spirit's "challenge."

The spirit has linked the snarled soul we're after to this puzzle.

Solve the puzzle, save the soul.

The snarl is cleared, mana flows once again, yada yada.



There's a very shallow amount of water in the pool.

There's a small pitcher.

And a cistern floating in the air above.



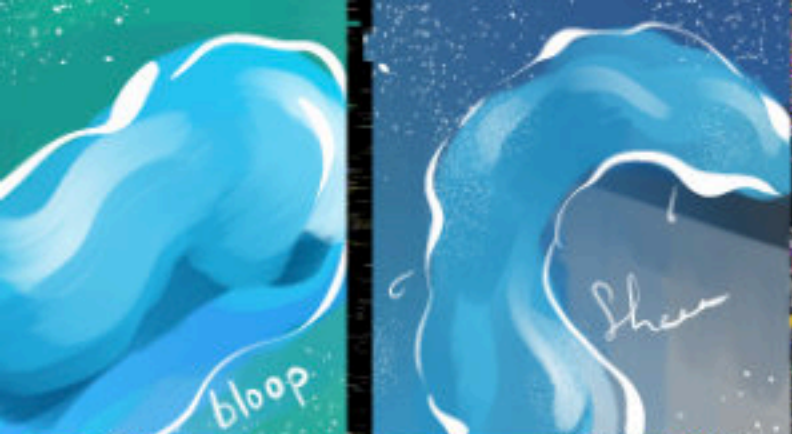
So we take the water and pour it in the cistern?

Easy.



Nice.

Secondaries are so good at these feats.



This is great. Just like a game.

I'm glad you like it.



Oh - Close your eyes!

Yessir! Aagh!

Hang on -



Sorry. The endings are still very ragged, no polish yet.

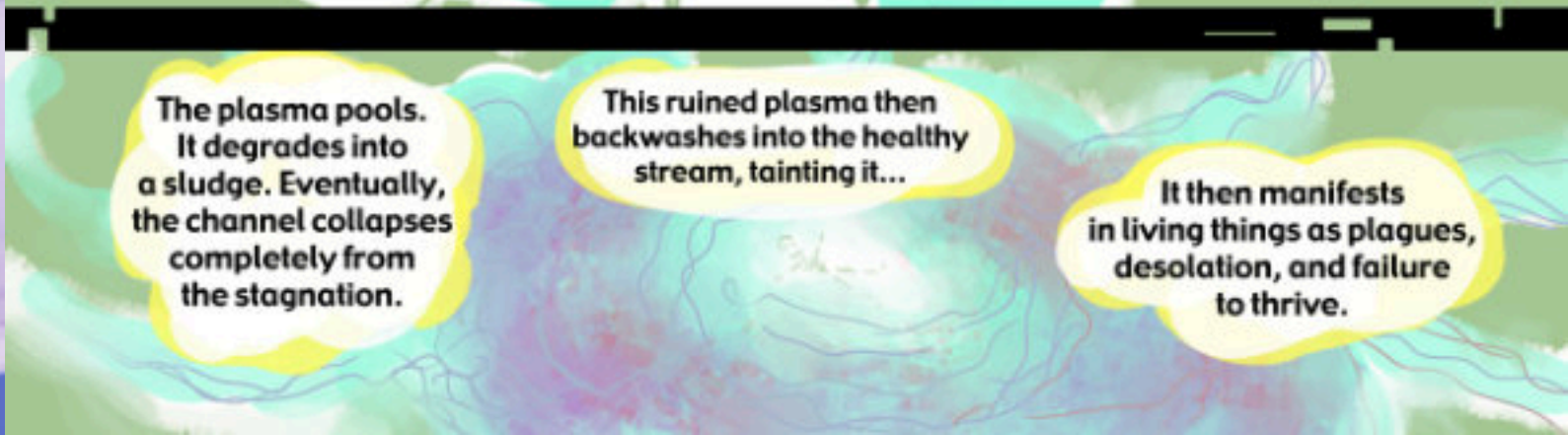
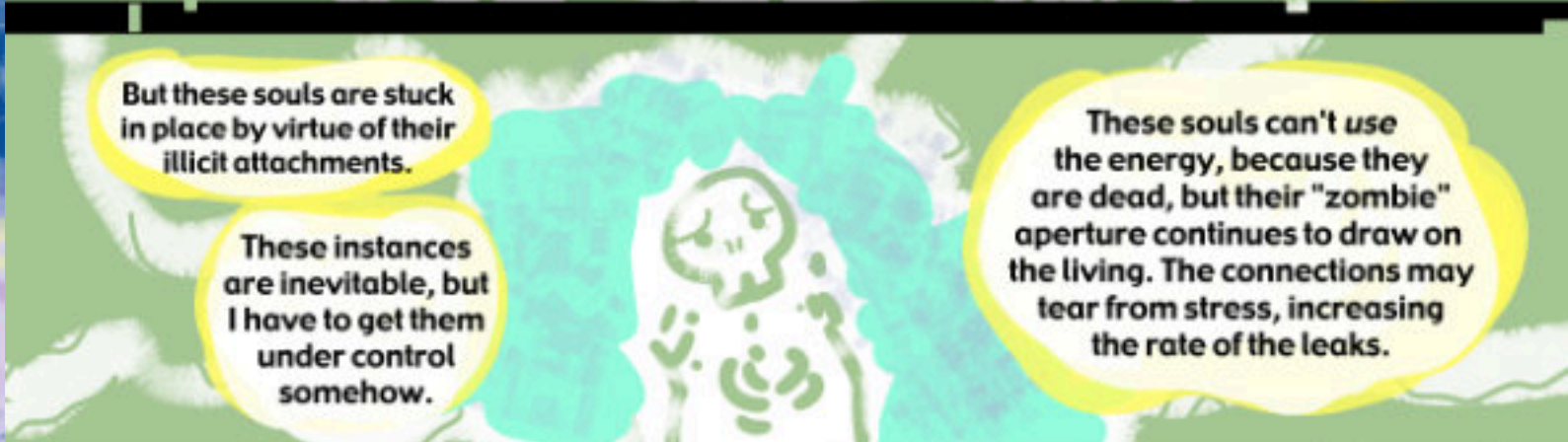
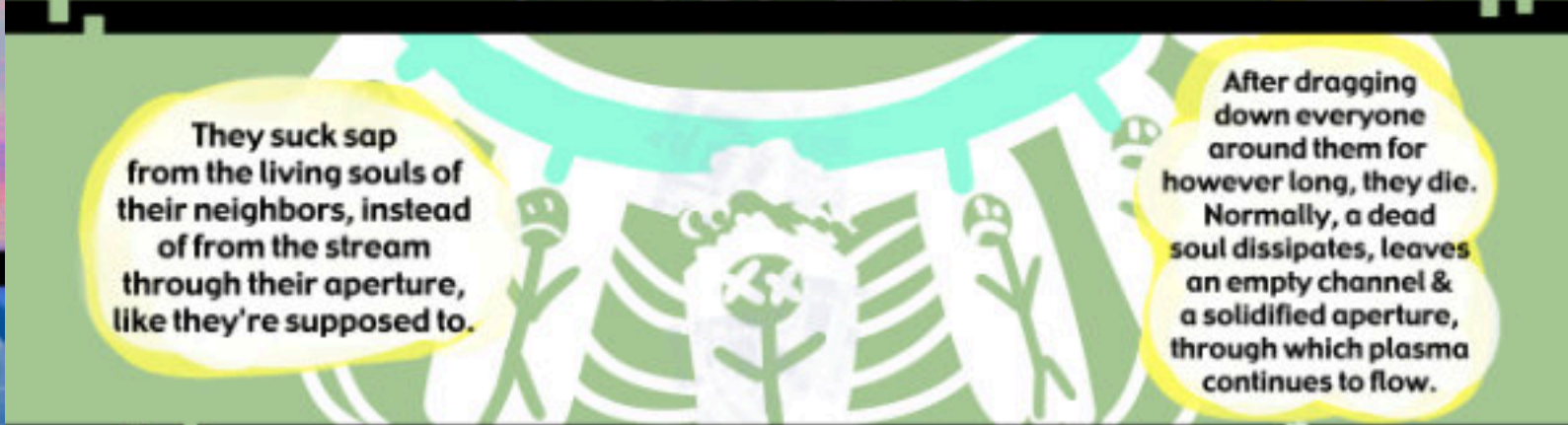
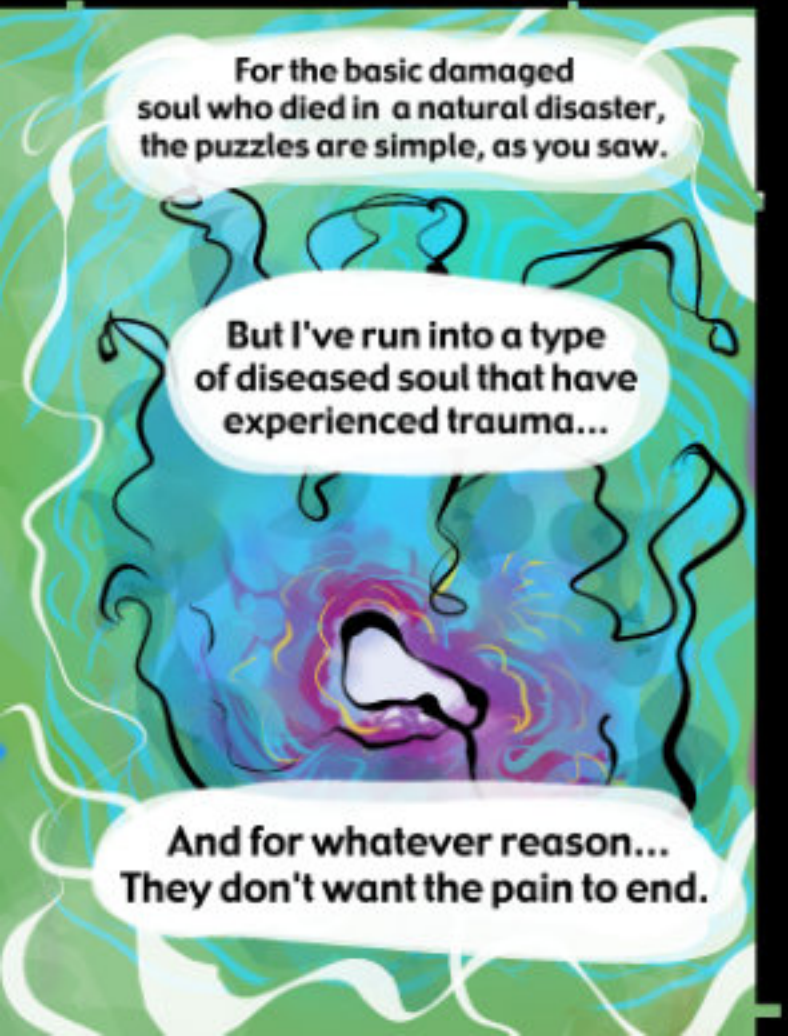
I haven't finished all the comfort zones...

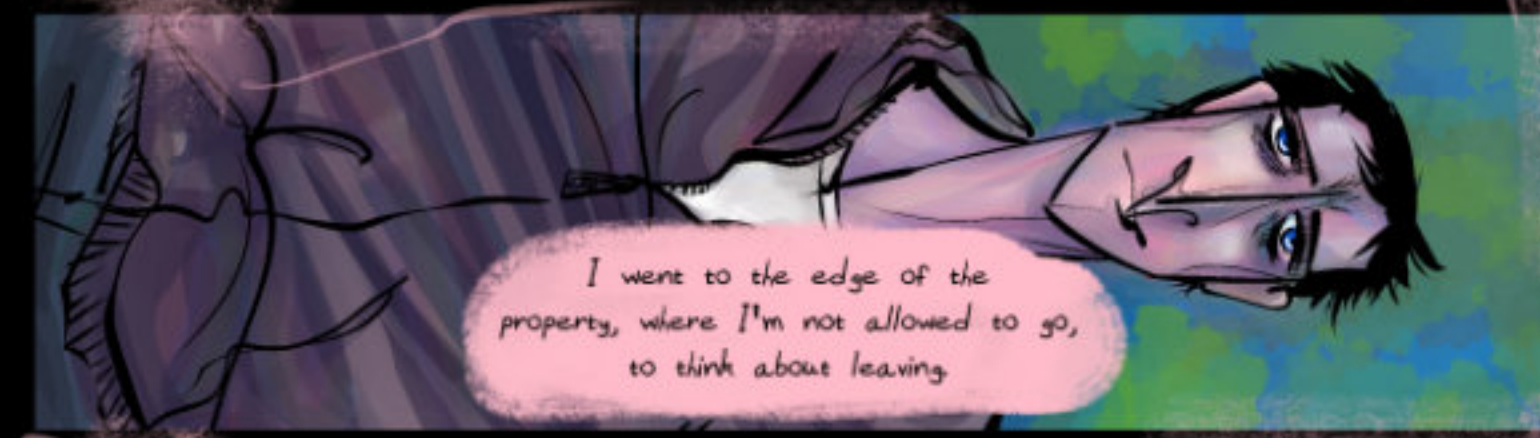
I'll sacrifice my comfort...for science.


We're back in the junction?

Yes. Now we should be able to see the results on the computer...

The search for better metaphors continues....








If I understand anything, it's pain.

Receiving it.
Giving it.




What things will
cause what sorts of
pain, and how much.

How
much pain I have
to give to others
before I'll feel
less of it
myself.




So I knew
right away that if I
did what Fola had
suggested....



I was
going to see
something that
hurt a lot.

Something
that could
never stop
hurting.



As much as I exaggerate..


It was way worse
than I was imagining
at this time.

Was it the
right thing to do
to ask for help?

There must have
been some way
to avoid spilling
the beans, but...

They keep saying
it's okay to ask.


Everything
feels wrong



I'm
home.

Sorry to ramble.
I know this doesn't
make any sense.

Rae says
it's the brain
damage.



Around this point,
I thought, "maybe
it'll be okay."
I didn't actually
know anything for
sure yet.

Wow, you found a lot.
Put em in the kitchen,
please. Rae said he'd
rinse them in a bit.

I was
just assuming,
after all.



We're watching
"Melcey Mayhem,"
Rae's favorite show.

Aw,
leave
it.

This show's for
babies.

You know the
name of every
character!

Yea but
I'm over it



It's so nice to see you
up and about, sweetie.

Good
day, huh?

S...sort
of...

Do you
want to hang
out? Do you
want a hug?



May...to be so nice
to me...it's not necessary...

Wrong
answer.

But...

Sit down
already.

You better
let her love you,
bro.

Turn on the
bird channel.
Cal loves that
stuff.

Hell yeah.
Splashing
birdseed
here we
come.

I've disappointed
them both so much.




And they still show
kindness to me like this.

When you experience pain when
something nice happens...doesn't that
mean there's something deeply
wrong with you?

What normal person would
react to goodness this way?
Isn't it natural to wonder?

I know there
is something wrong with me.


I've known
since the beginning.

A close-up of a character with dark skin and long black hair, crying with large tears on their face. The background is a soft, out-of-focus mix of green and blue.

I guess I've given it away already, but I also don't even know how to say it...

I've given it up.

I surrender.


A character with dark skin and long black hair is being held from behind by a character with light skin and long black hair. The character being held has their eyes closed and a pained expression. The background is a warm, orange and yellow gradient.

May, please...

Oh, Cal, why are you crying?!

May, promise me... Promise you'll have mercy on me.

Please have mercy on me.


A character with dark skin and long black hair is talking to a character with light skin and long black hair. The character with dark skin is looking at the other character with a concerned expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus mix of green and blue.

Oh my gosh Cal what's wrong what's going on Cal what-

Rae, stay calm. Send Lem a necco. Might be nothing but better safe than sorry

R-right.

I'm sorry...

A close-up of a character with dark skin and long black hair, looking down with a sad expression. The background is a soft, out-of-focus mix of green and blue.

I didn't mean to get so emotional... I'll try to... to "chill out."

I need to ask you two for help. It's something I have to do...but I'm scared to go alone...

It's...like this....

That's all?

You want us to look at something in your video game?

Sure. Easy! But what's so upsetting about that?

It's not just a game. It's a real model of the plasma flowing through Faidia.

Fola asked if I'd ever looked at my own soul in the model.

I hadn't even thought of doing it...

Or the souls of my family...

What destroys the system... is stuff that happens a lot in our family.

So...I'm afraid of what I am going to see, but I know I must look all the same.

I have to know...

I could really use a cigarette right about now.

Let's go have a look.

Lead the way, Cal.

We're going after all...?

I really hope this is nothing, Cal.

Hold my hand, Rae. We have to go, but I'll protect you, all right?

M...Me too..



How long
can one guy take
to change?



You
absolute
knob.

If I have
to hear one more
word of your
bitching...

After making me
change in a bar
bathroom too



What
the fuck,
man?

You TOLD
me pants were
considered
inappropriate!



Hey.
Hey.

Wait.

Am I the
product?



The
pants
are so
tight...

I am....

Now,
now.

Are you
even genuinely
interested in
the recipe?

Of course!
But, I mean...

If you're gonna
essentially tend
bar for a few hours,
why not look
the part?

This is just practice
for the real thing next
weekend, of course.

Yeah,
yeah...





...My apologies, Barlowe, for startling you.

We're not fighting. Just ... communicating.

At least... trying to.



I apologize for bursting in unannounced.

I'm May, Lem's sister.

It's nice to meet you, May. My name is Barlowe.



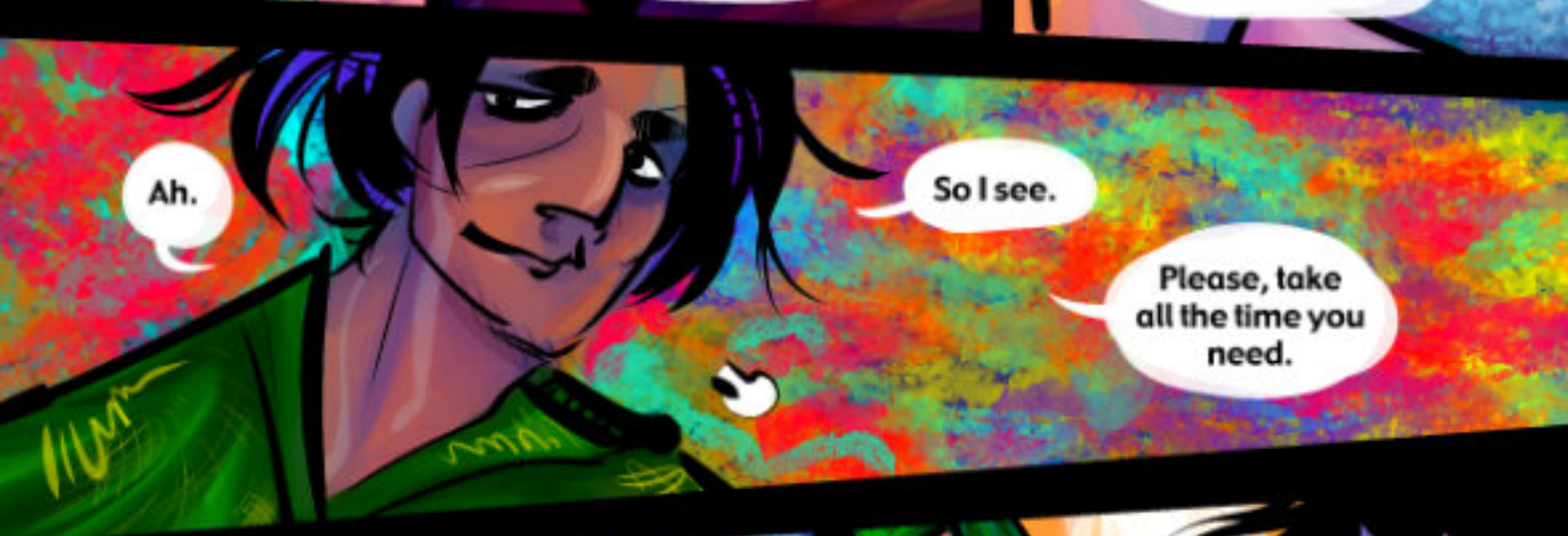
From what I hear, you have some knowledge of elementals.

Perhaps, then, you'll understand...



When I say this is

a "family" matter.



Ah.

So I see.

Please, take all the time you need.



I'll close this area off for privacy.

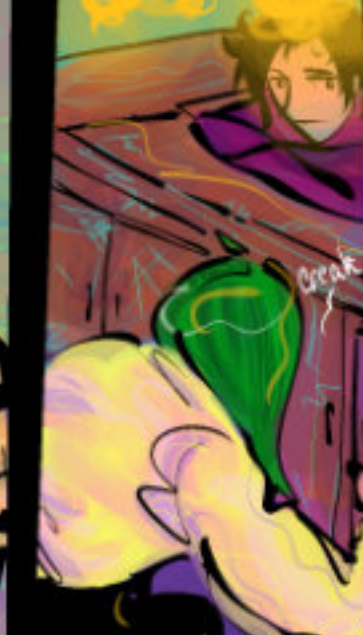
Thank you.



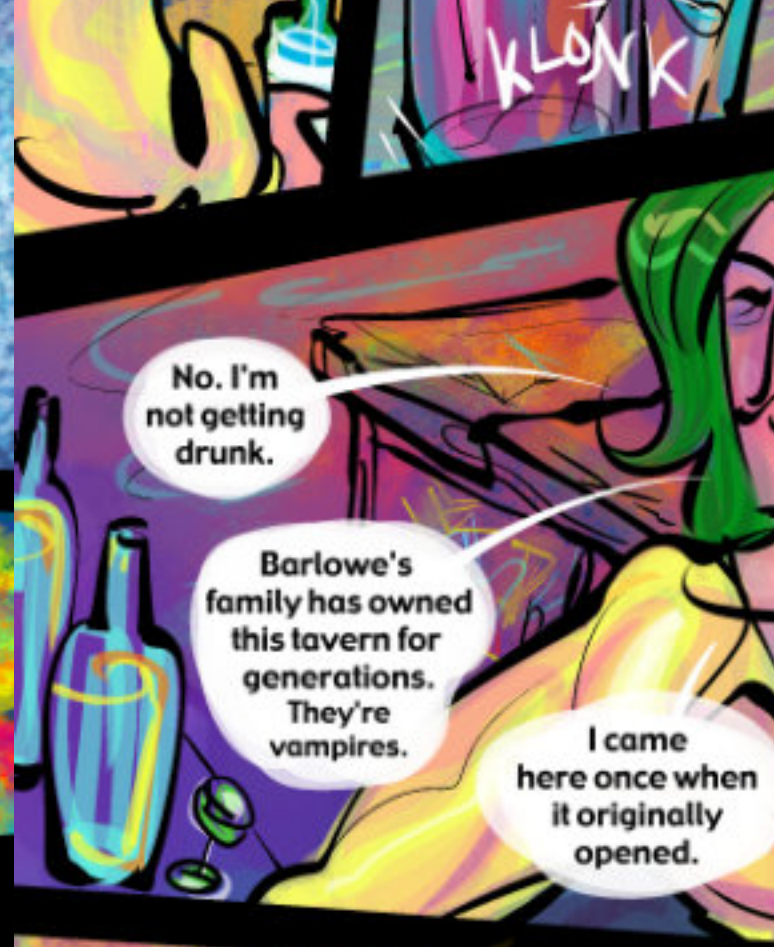
TINKLE

CLATTER

KLONK



Are you getting drunk?



No. I'm not getting drunk.

Barlowe's family has owned this tavern for generations. They're vampires.

I came here once when it originally opened.

He wants me to reverse engineer a cocktail I had then.

We have a bit of a fetch quest going with each other.



Oh.

Well, I'm getting drunk. As if I'd want to be sober while I interrogate you, of all people.



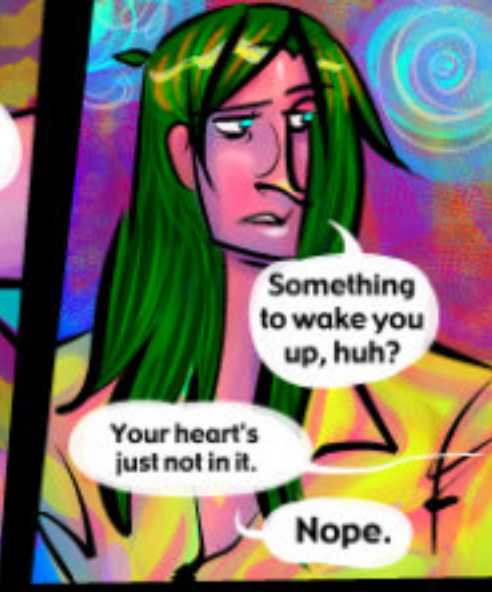
I don't want this to be happening & I don't even know what it is.



Bottoms up.



Hahhh.
Smooth.



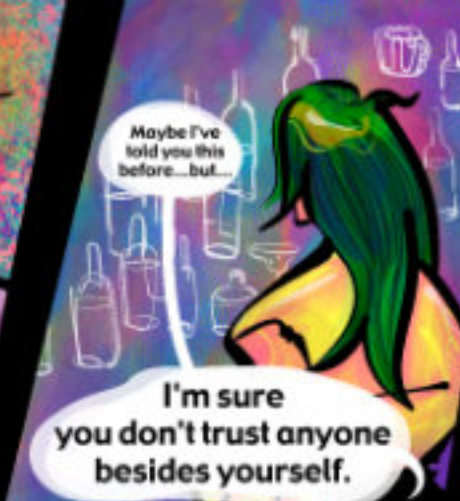
Something
to wake you
up, huh?

Your heart's
just not in it.

Nope.



I know...
you don't trust
me.



Maybe I've
told you this
before...but...

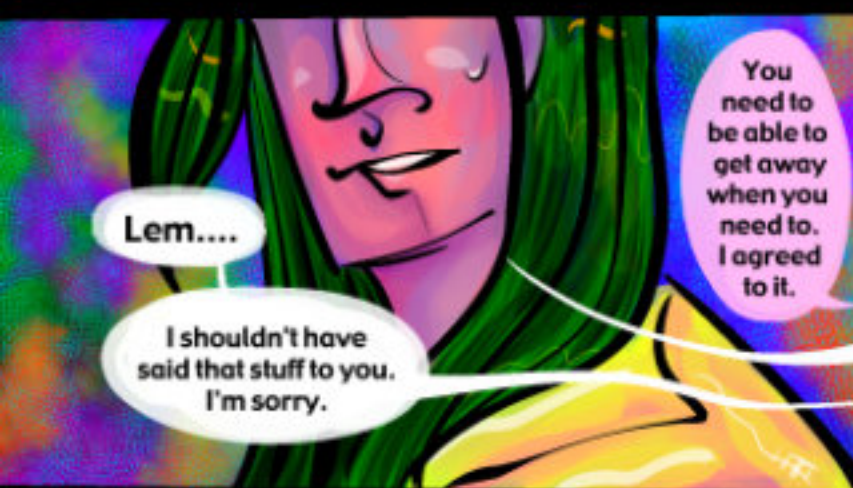
I'm sure
you don't trust anyone
besides yourself.



You're only
being polite when
you ask for input.

It makes
sense.

I'm not
criticizing.



Lem....

I shouldn't have
said that stuff to you.
I'm sorry.

You
need to
be able to
get away
when you
need to.
I agreed
to it.

Ah. It's fine.

Since
you didn't tell me
anything through
the egregore...

Uh
huh.

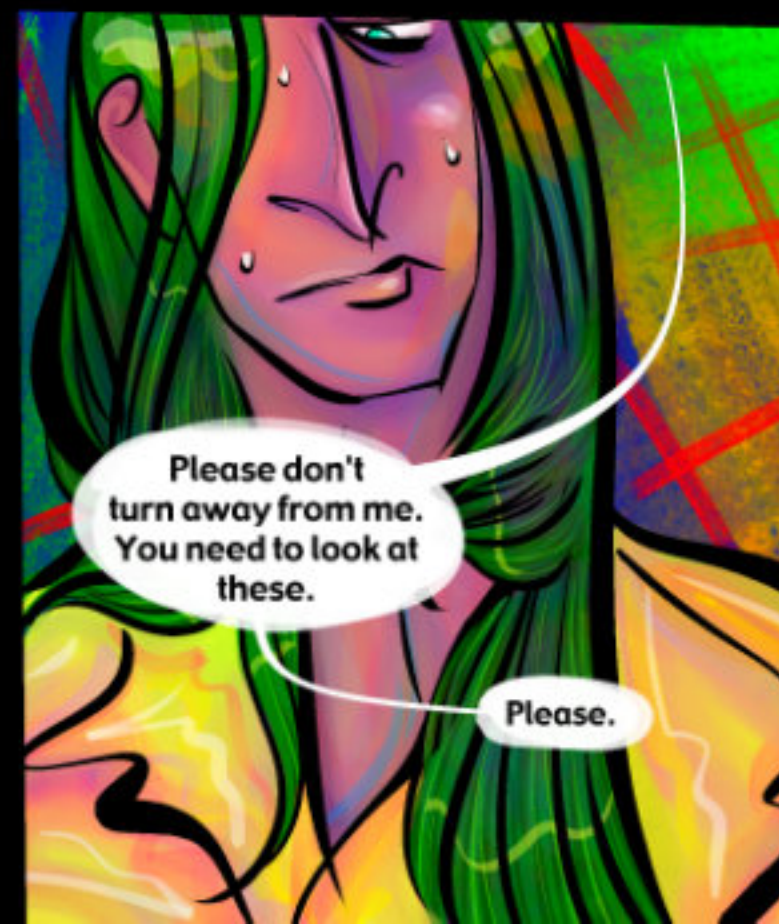
You're
in the
hot seat
tonight.



I know this
is embarrassing.

I'll just
get to the
point as fast
as I can.

I have
pictures.



Please don't
turn away from me.
You need to look at
these.

Please.



Fine.



Show
me your
pictures.



Good.



You
remind me
of mom when
you win.

The craven
smugness.

You boys
are such a pain
in my ass.

Today, of all
days, I will take
that as a
compliment.

First picture
should be a familiar
one. This old
engraving.

One of
the oldest
pieces of
Faidian
mysticism.

It depicts the
"tree of life,"
and shows the
three known
primaries,
Lemanerial,
Callanerial,
and Mayaner
as the three
great roots of the tree.

It's outdated
now, of course,
because of Rae.

Cal rendered an ideal
tree of life, like the engraving,
using the engine he made
to interface with the
tree...

It's a huge gnarled
mass and it took a lot
of adjustments to
get a legible picture...
But here it is.

Four
big roots.
The primary
elementals.

Just like the
engraving, but
Rae is there.

Where
is the
real
one?

Ah.

Here.

That's what
the real tree
looks like.

Oh wow,
this old chestnut.
I haven't seen
it in so long.

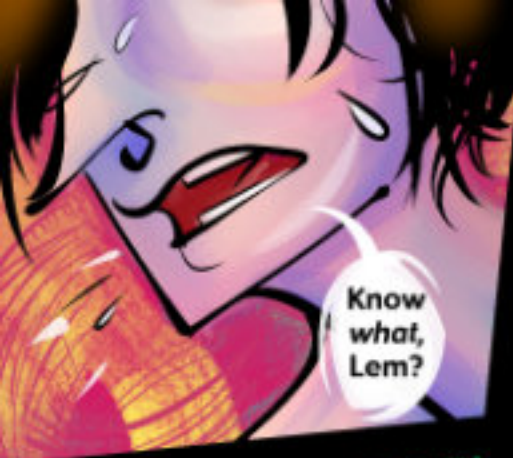
I always
found it so
quaint.

It's
a little
more than
quaint, it
turns
out.

As you'll see from...
not that one..this one.

So.

Now you
know.



Know what, Lem?



You know what Cal's theory is?

He seemed to understand right from the start.



What are we looking at, here?



But it wasn't easy to get it out of him.

He's been hysterical...



The structure, here at the base. It's broken. The tree is FELLED.

There's a... blob covering the break.



The metaphor doesn't extend to everything, but it does to this. This "tree" should be dead.

This one small strip of bark is keeping it alive.



Lem. Tell me what this means.

Please.



Does this have to do with ...



Back then... I saw the bodies.

What happened?



Sigh

The jig is up.

I'll....tell you....



But I won't be able to tell you everything.

I've hidden some information from myself.



I can't & won't get it, so don't ask.

Jeez, Lem.



Here it is.

Say it. Say it. Say it. Fuck.

C... Cal became so weak his aperture.... crumpled, and detached...

Faidia's connection to the lagoon was broken.

Cut off from the magic that sustains it... sustains us.

The entire thing started to collapse from the center...



Everything was going to die because Cal was dying.

I just... I did what needed to be done.



I attacked Cal. I wrenched control of his own aperture from him.

I used my own aperture to bypass it. Ever since that day... All of Faidia's magic has only come here through me.



What...

Lem...
How?

You must have formed
an attachment so large to
the lagoon that... you're
basically a part of it.

You should be dead.

Nevermind Cal,
what about YOUR
aperture?

I mean, your memories,
your soul...should have
been destroyed.

Cal was only able
to do it because he was
born in that position.
His aperture was
acclimated.

To do it
so quickly...

How did you
survive? How are you
surviving it even now?

Lots of things.
Hypervigilance,
mostly.

Redirection,
constant healing,
constant...

Lem...

Does it
hurt?

D...don't
worry about it...

I...I can't...

I'm genuinely
sorry I can't tell you
the rest.

I hope you'll
understand
someday.

I can't
say any-
more.

That's the
truth.

Cal would refuse
to help me if he felt
like I was lying
or withholding
information.

Funnily
enough, it
turns out he
thought I was
lying 100%
of the time...

Can we at least
help you? Or will you
refuse that too?

I assumed
you wouldn't
help me.

I'm
sorry.

But...it's
different now.

We've all worked
hard to make it
different.

We can
fix this.

You...
wanted him
to find this,
didn't you?

You wanted
him to see it in a way
he wouldn't be able
to deny.

Well. This
wasn't exactly
a righteous
decision I
made.

I put everyone in
danger and covered
it up. I'm a liar.

Do you
think I'm as
bad as he
is?

Lem.



You canNOT convince me you really think that.

Do I seem like someone unpoisoned by doubt to you?



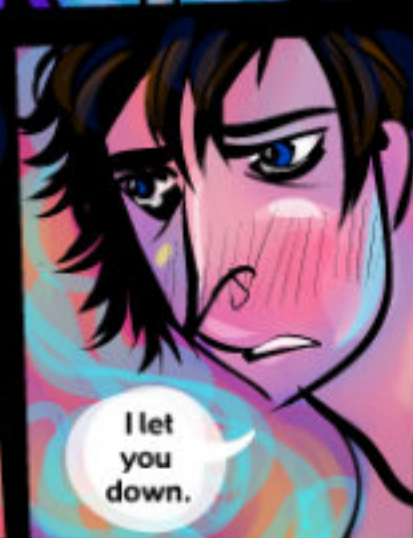
To be honest... yeah.

Oh. You really are my sister.

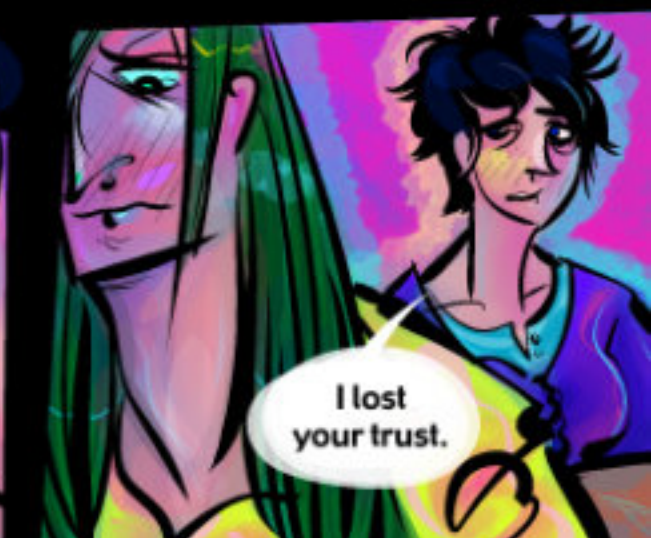


You know...

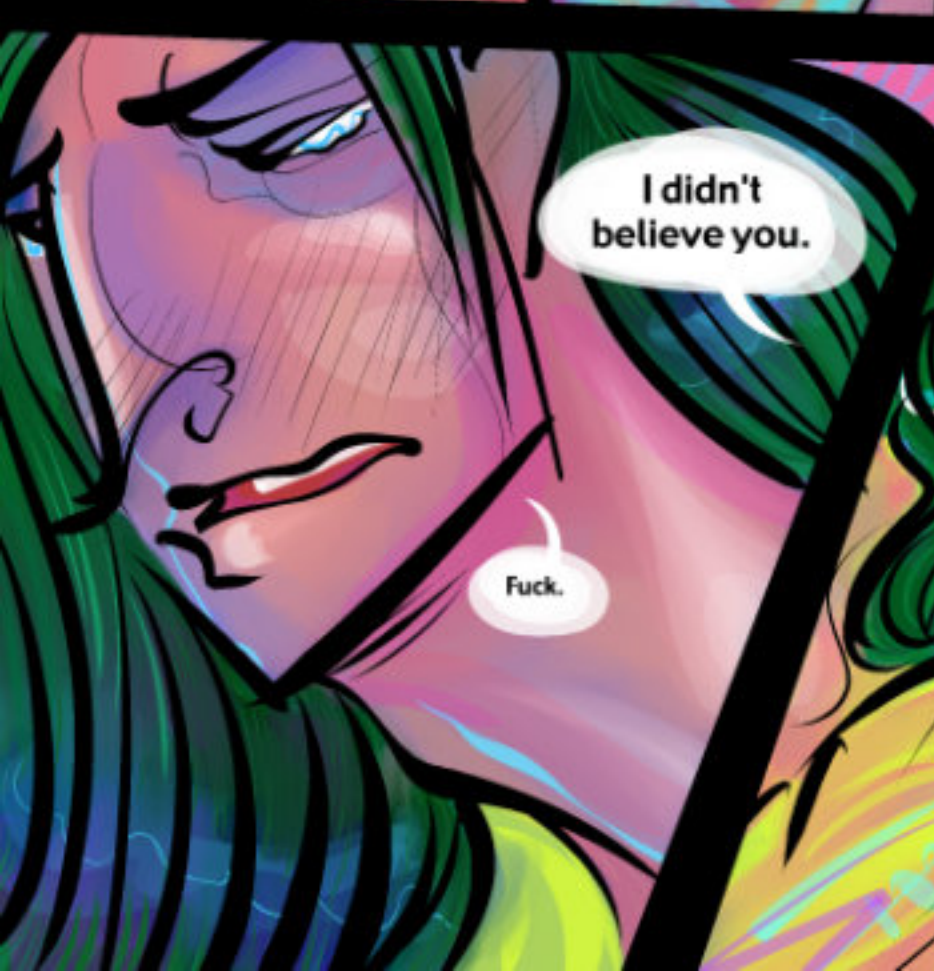
You can be angry at me.



I let you down.



I lost your trust.



I didn't believe you.

Fuck.



gasp

I'm sorry.

I'll try to do better.



I'm sorry if this isn't helping.

I wasn't sure if you wanted to hear me say it or...



He seems like a good friend.

I don't think he'll be mad.



Sigh
Can't say I've enjoyed this talk.

But... thanks.



I...d-did. I'm just...angry at myself for crying at work.

In front of my friend.



Mm...

I've been talking to him for a long time about that glass I told you about...

Oh, he's that guy? His aperture is strange. It's really small.

He's half vampire.

Ah, that explains it.



I love you, May.



Cal's Story



WARNING Depictions of:

- incest - cannibalism
- abuse
- body horror
- violence
- suicide,
- murder/death
- self-harm
- suicidal ideation

please be careful when someone loves you

Dear diary,

I was born
in a void.

I became
aware of my
own thoughts
at some point.



I remember
hearing a voice,
but I couldn't
understand the
words.



It faded
quickly.



I only remember
because it was the first
thing I ever remember
sensing.



I noticed May next.
We sensed each other somehow.

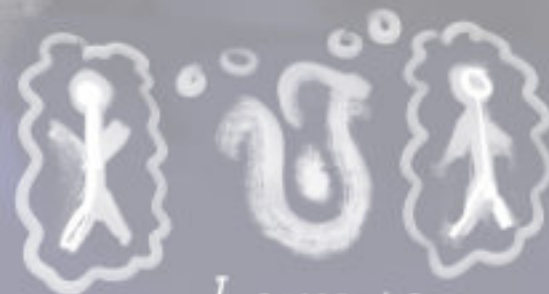


I was so glad I wasn't
alone, but...

She was like me,
incorporeal. We were apart,
and couldn't communicate well.



I came up
with the idea of bodies.



"We keep passing through
each other... maybe we should
STOP at each other, instead."





I can't really explain
how I did it at the time,
with so little knowledge,
but I made us bodies.



It was like something
was helping me, but not enough.



With no one to talk to,
I became lost in my head.



I created endless hallways
with infinite doors and wandered
ceaselessly through them.



May wasn't happy
with what I'd done to her.



The world was cold.
Our bodies were vulnerable.



I forgot that I was
creating what I was seeing.



I would follow myself
in circles thinking I was
someone else.



After I touched
her, she ran away.

I grieved in the dark.



I thought she
was gone forever.



Tunnels of silent,
heated rainbows.



Every doorway opened on
an individual screaming darkness.



I started making dimensions.



I had made myself a doll,
and now a doll house.

I couldn't stop myself.



I was
exhausted.



Then I heard a baby crying.

I followed the sound
and found Rae.



He already had a physical body.



I managed to
keep us
entertained



for
a while.

But my resources were
rapidly depleting.



Rae was amazing.

He
didn't
leave

He
likes
me



May even came to meet him.



She
can
return
...?

Rae has always needed
a lot of activity to feel OK.



And he fixated
on our physical differences.



My
tail
is just
very
short,
Rae.

But
Rae
needed
caring
for.

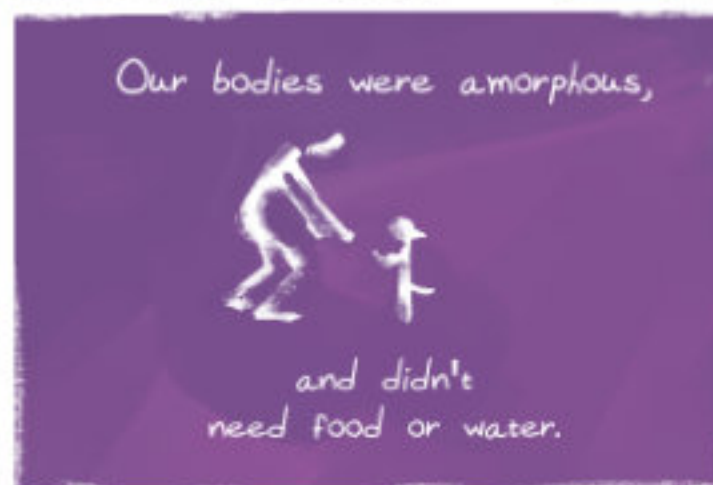


I did the best
I could.

Our bodies were amorphous,



and didn't
need food or water.



It all
piled up.

Why do
I have to have
these ugly
ears?

Rae was slipping away from me.



He was convinced there
was something wrong with him,



and he was bored.

But I held him

Played
games
with him



And
taught
him to
speak.



To me,

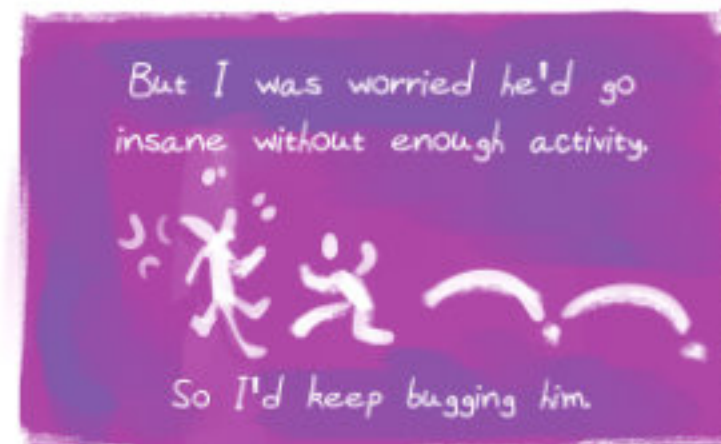
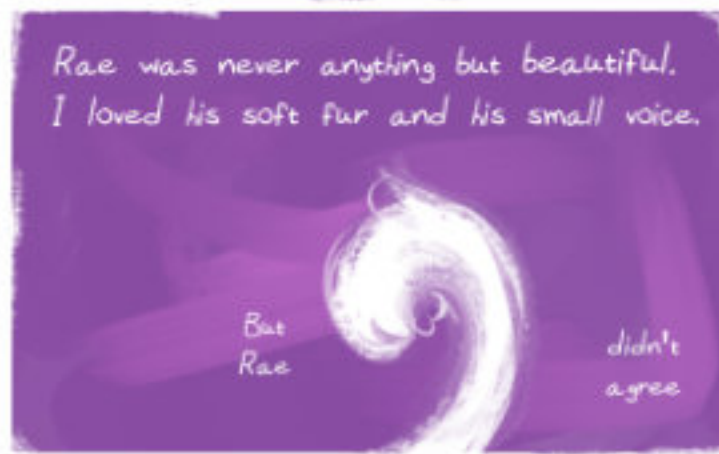
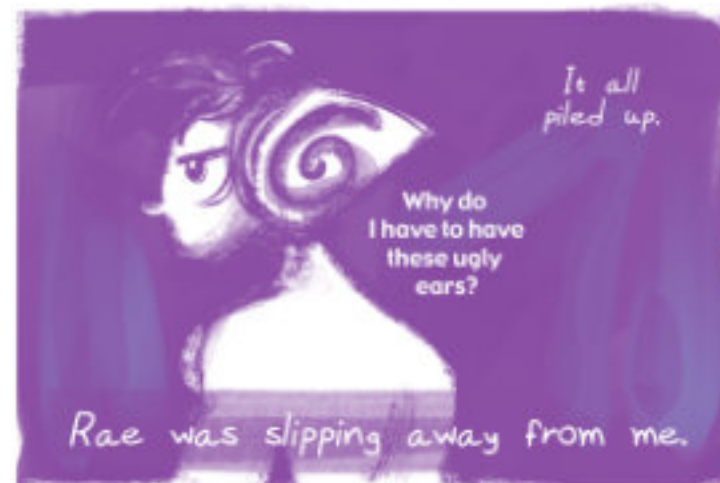


Rae was never anything but beautiful.
I loved his soft fur and his small voice.



But
Rae

didn't
agree





But once Lem started to talk, he made friends with Rae.



Life was OK for a bit.



His mood worsened and he stopped talking as easily



He'd say, "I'm cursed."



Rae became responsible enough I could grab a little sleep sometimes.



But...

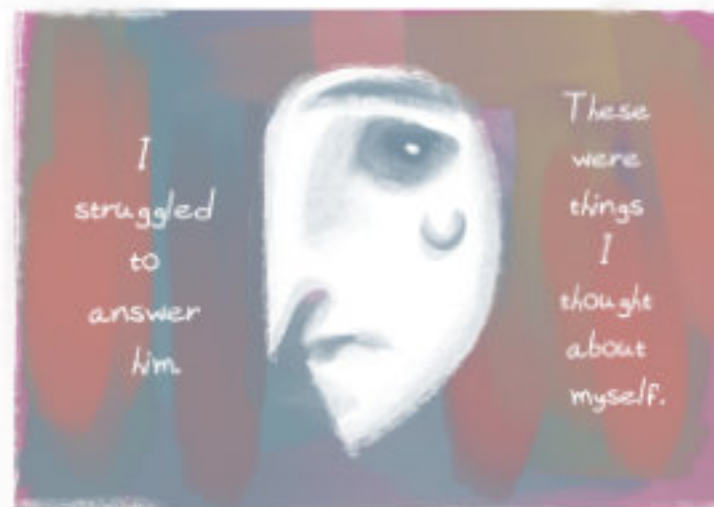
Rae kept growing.



He was convinced he was evil.



"Look at me. You can tell. I am to do terrible things."



I struggled to answer him.

These were things I thought about myself.



I'd tell him he was good, that there was no reason to believe he was evil...



In my head, I knew I was keeping them prisoner.



That's how I knew I was evil.



Was he...

talking about me?



While inside I was gripped with the fear that Rae would realize I was the evil one.



I had no intention of ever letting them move out.



But, I thought,

Even someone like me deserves a family, right?

That was, it turns out,
the tallest imaginable order.

We stumbled into another method
of expression one day.

Rae stop
spinning I'm gonna
boooooarf

Rae and Lem were rough-housing.

It was getting a little wild, so I tried
to get them to calm down --

I'll catch
you, Lem

Lem's heel pushed my nose up
into my skull, and I started drowning
in my own blood.

I couldn't speak, but even if I could--

None of us knew what to do or
what was happening.

After a
few minutes

I was
dead.

For the first time, I had been ejected from
my physical shell.

? ?

It's my fault! I was at least still in our dimension,
My foot...!

Be
quiet!

but I needed to leave anyway
to gather raw material for a new body!

I had to make a new one after years of
not having thought about it at all.

I tried comforting them as a disembodied
voice, but they were even more confused.

I'll be
back
soon!

His voice
felt out...

That can
happen?!

All in all, it took several hours for me to
leave home, get lost, find the raw materials,
get back, and regenerate.

Once I was
finally back--

Does the new
one even
match?

I'm so
heavy.

I hope they
recognize
me...

I got rid of my corpse first thing.

I told them it had only been a game,
that they'd done nothing wrong.

They weren't very convinced.

After that, Lem and Rae
started hurting themselves.
It started small.



But accelerated.



Lem started dissecting his own body

Rae would leave for the planet's surface



and smash around until his bones snapped

If I managed to find and monitor one, the other



would slip away I was constantly chasing them

I begged them both to explain why they were
doing this. Rae was the first one to respond.

I have all this
energy I don't know
what to do with.

I want...
weird things.

I feel
sick...

Weird
things?

I
was weak
and tired.
Stuck in
another
maze.

I don't know...
Messed up
things.

We
can make
them okay
things.

We can
do anything
we want.

I want
weird things,
too....

Can we
really...

I thought
I was the only
one...

...



We couldn't have known.

We didn't know anything.

I just thought it was
a way to be closer.

I wanted him to stop hurting.

I wanted him to keep loving me.

Lem saw it all.

I knew
he was
scared
but I
didn't
understand
why.



Neither of us spoke
of it in the end.





Where one issue might be temporarily resolved,

Rae.



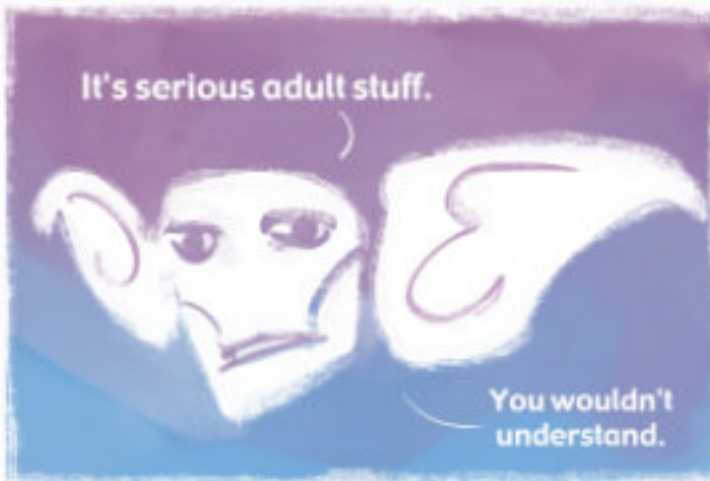
You
and
Col
...

What
were you
doing...?

dozens more sprang up in its place.



Are you okay?

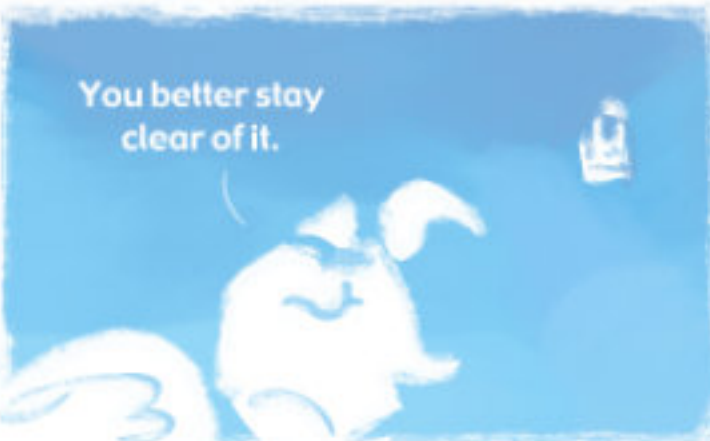


It's serious adult stuff.

You wouldn't
understand.



If you know
what's good
for you...



You better stay
clear of it.



Or you'll
be next.



Everything went so fast after that.

No, no! Not like that!



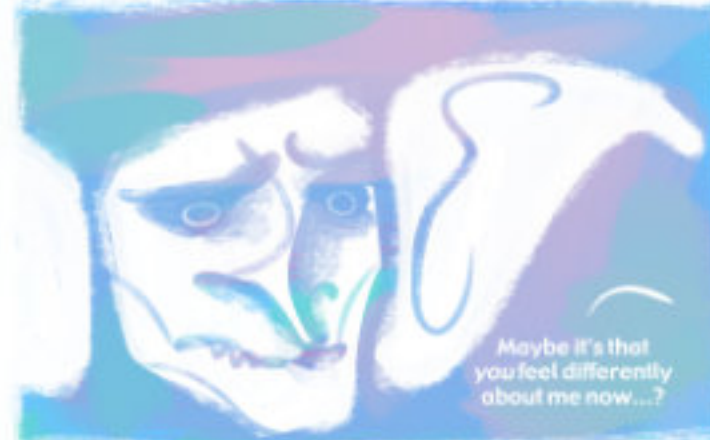
I can't tell
what I'm doing
differently....



Can't you even
hug me right?

I thought
I was...?

It's
different...
I want the old
way back!



Maybe it's that
you feel differently
about me now...?



Why didn't
you say that
would happen?!

I-I didn't
know it would
happen....



Whatever.

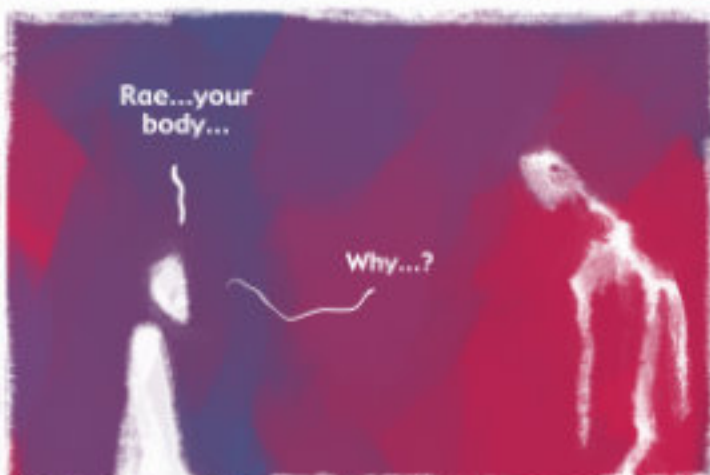


Just...

Don't
touch me.



But Rae couldn't
do without touch.



Rae...your
body...

Why...?



...



I want
to disappear.



Lem healed him,
but he was always
on the brink.



Rae,
stop!

Do it
to me!



Lem can
heal us.

Whether
I hurt you
or myself.

What
difference
does it
make?



You
wouldn't
have to
suffer.

I'll take
it instead.



I can't.

I love you.





No one
had ever told
me they loved
me before.

That's...



gulp.

But all I could muster was fear.



By saying that,

Rae had already surpassed me.

Cal ...



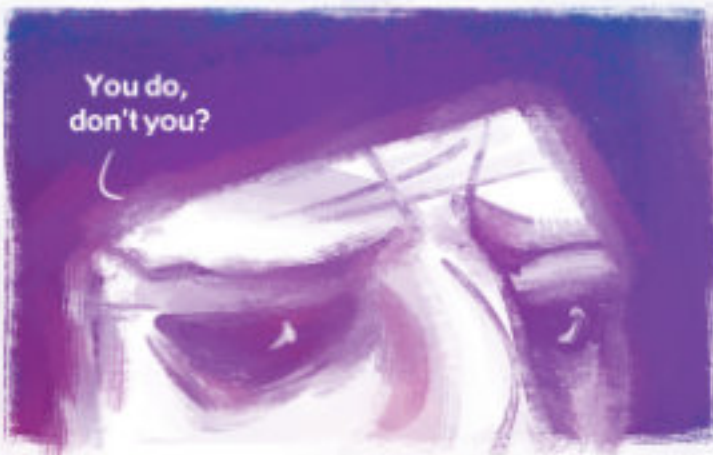
If he found out
I had nothing to offer

Please...



Say you
love me.

he'd leave forever.



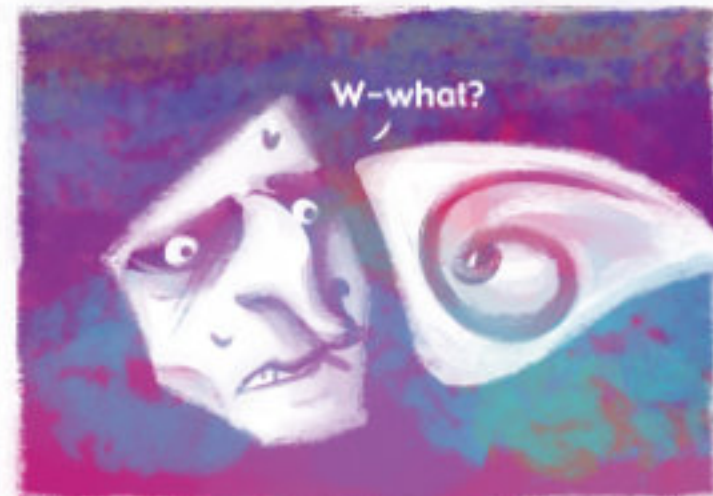
You do,
don't you?



Cal?



How could...
I love you?

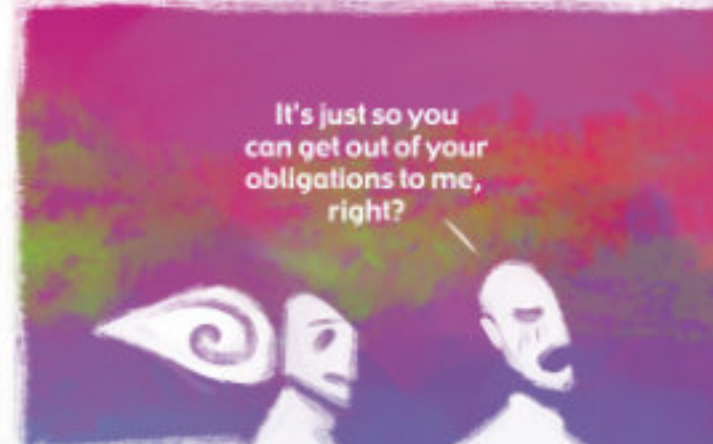


W-what?



"I love you,"
he says.

How
convenient.



It's just so you
can get out of your
obligations to me,
right?



Love is just
an excuse
to be a lazy
coward!

You know...



I sacrifice
enough to earn
some respect
around here!

But you don't
value my input!

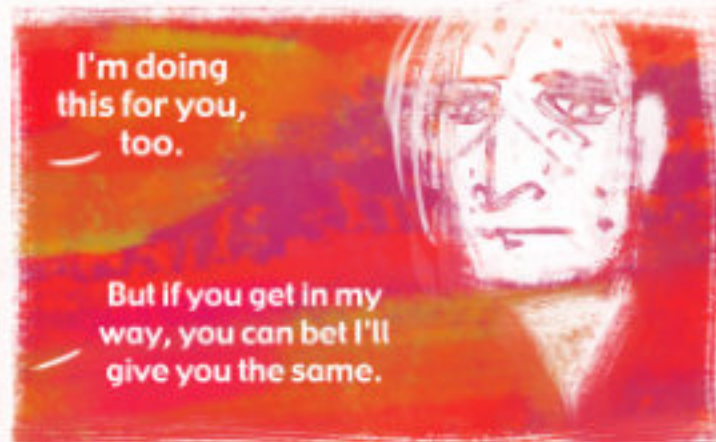
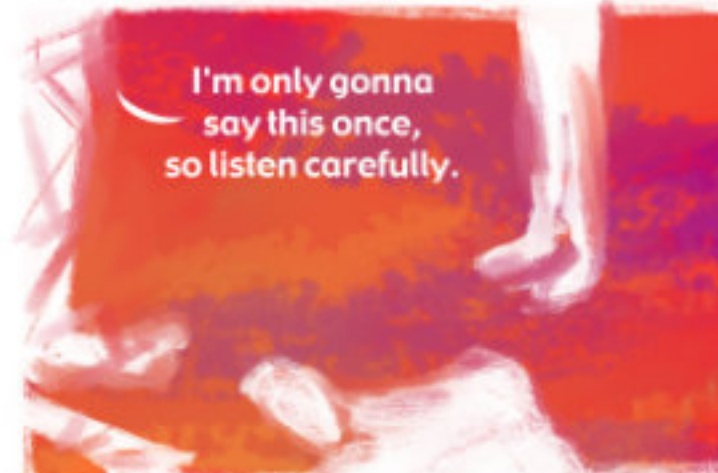
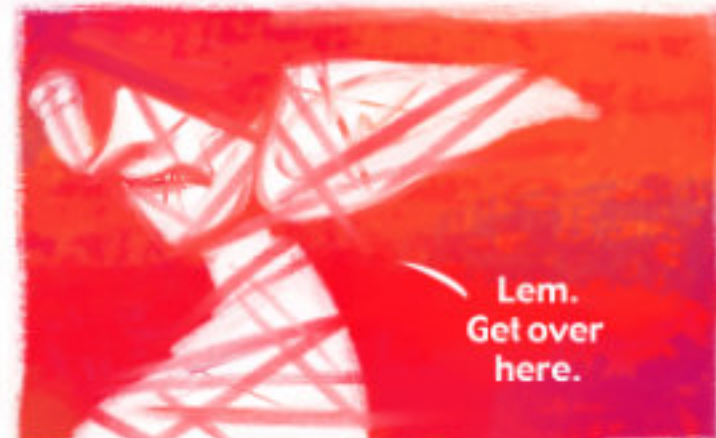
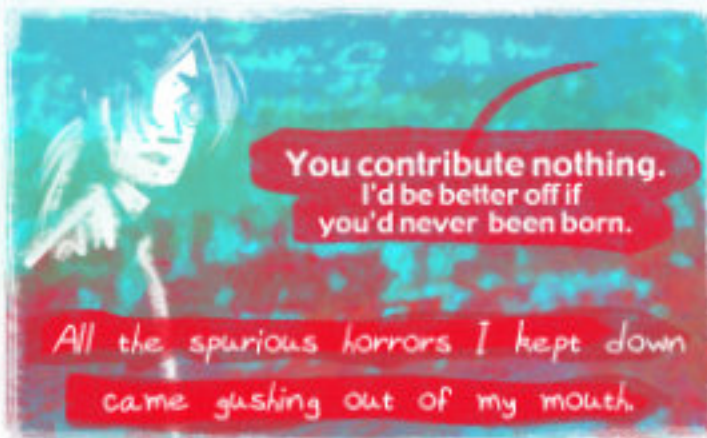
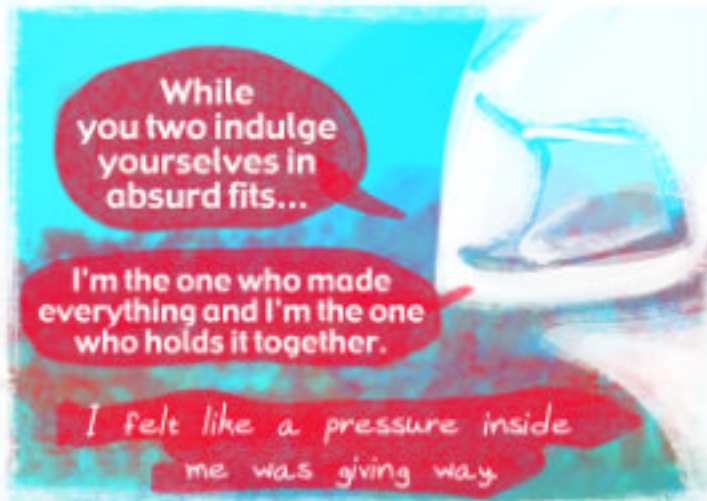


Look at the two of you!
I've raised a pair of
BLEEDERS!

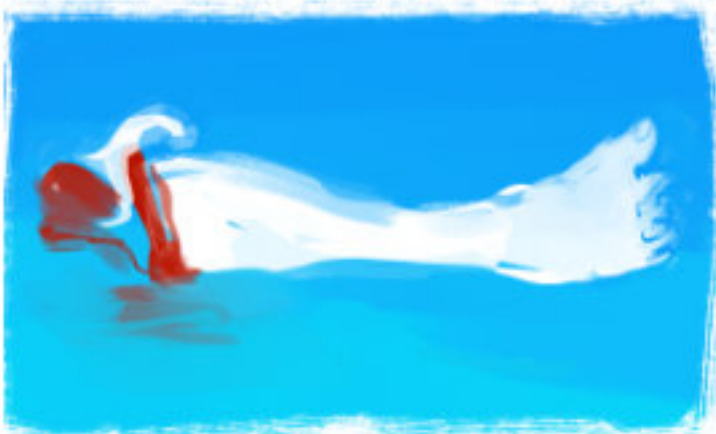
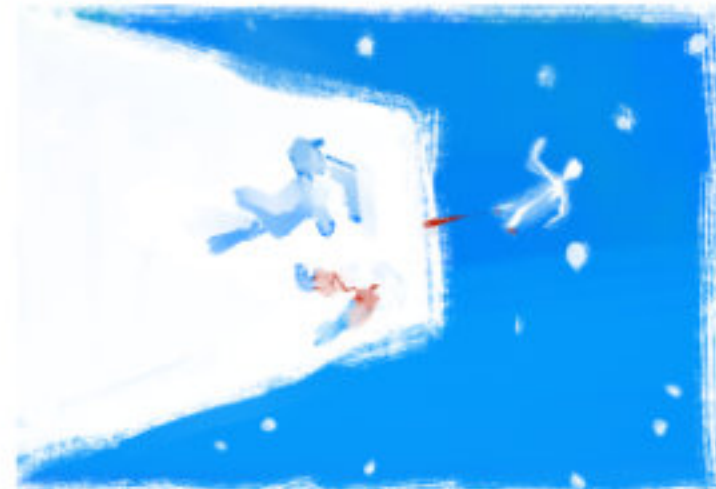


S-stop...

Stop yelling.







That was only
the second time, out of
hundreds of thousands of
times, that I died.

I would regenerate,
come back home, and if I was
quiet, Rae would sleep and
ignore me.

But if I woke him up, usually
with a quarrel...

Rae was good to his word.

He stopped rising to the same insults.
I had to keep him
focused on hating me,

so I became even
more cruel and
demeaning
to
compensate.

Lem had complained about the portals having sharp edges.



That just gave Rae an idea for how to get rid of me more quickly, for a longer time.



and scatter my body parts in outer space,



forcing me to make a new body without any ready material.

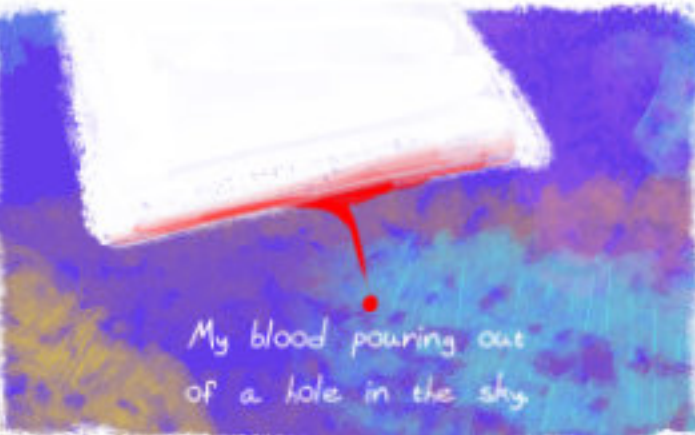
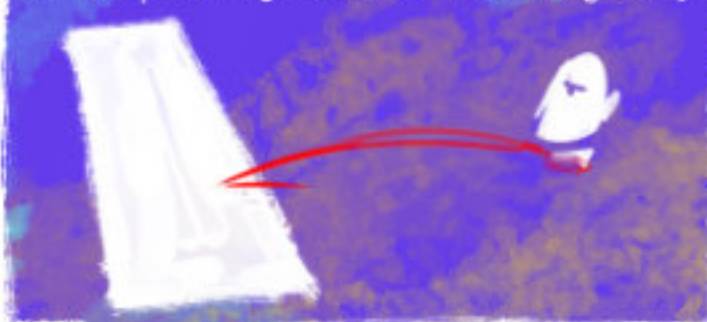
But no matter how long it took, I always came back and provoked him again.



He was poised to turn on Lem. I couldn't stop doing it now that I had started.



I remember once getting a glance back at the portal my head had been flung from,



If Rae were preoccupied or asleep, Lem would nurse me.

Why so mooney? You should smile more.



Yeah. I'll try that.

He tried to reason with me.

We can just go.

Tell Rae you're lying.

Rae just wants to be left alone. He needs rest.

Stop saying horrible things on purpose.

Fight back when he hurts you, he might stop.

We're all going insane. We need to stop.

May will understand if you tell the truth.

Things don't have to be bad.

I just brushed all this off as amusing naivete. I told myself I couldn't believe any of these reasonable things were worth trying.

Nah.



Some things just can't be helped, Lem.

I mean, maybe you're right about everything, but acceptance is part of being a grownup.

You'll be fine. You're a smart boy.

The thing was... I loved dying.

There was always a brief, blissful moment of unconsciousness as the soul left the body.



sweet oblivion

Something precious since we could no longer sleep.

That became the only thing I could think about getting, over and over, again and again.



Lem was also addicted, and tried to get me to stop with him repeatedly.

If we can stop for a week, we'll have a party.

I'll write a song for us to sing. It'll be fun.

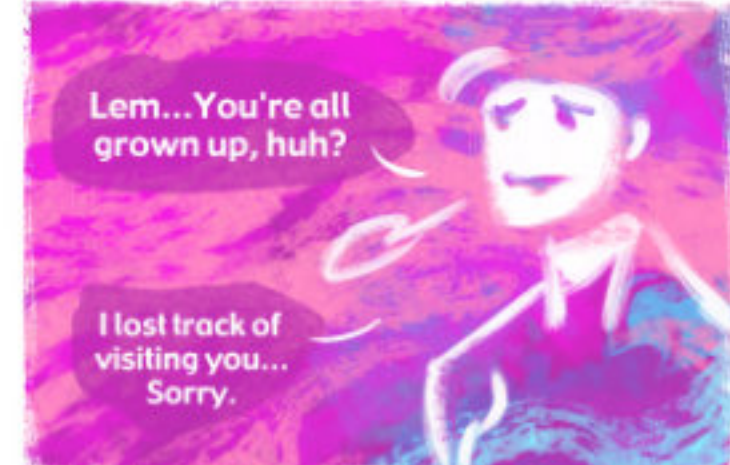
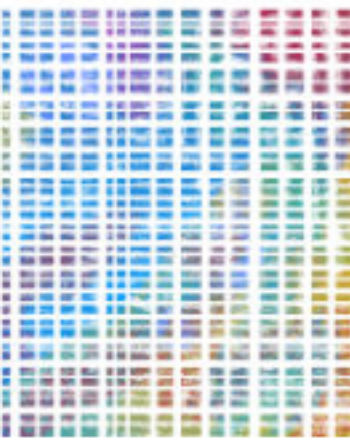
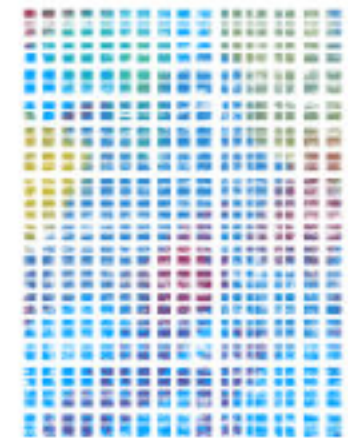
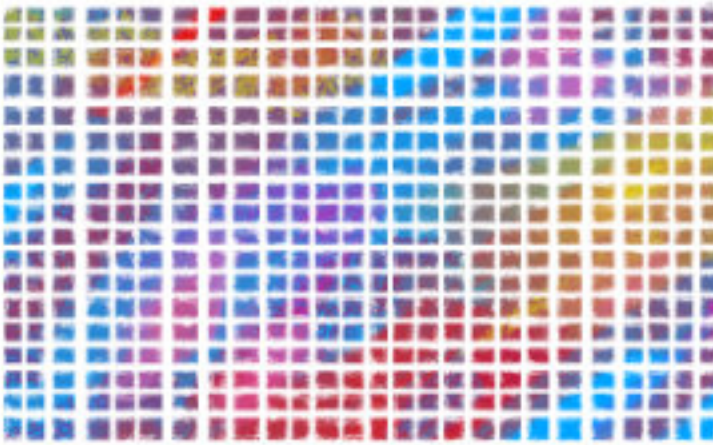
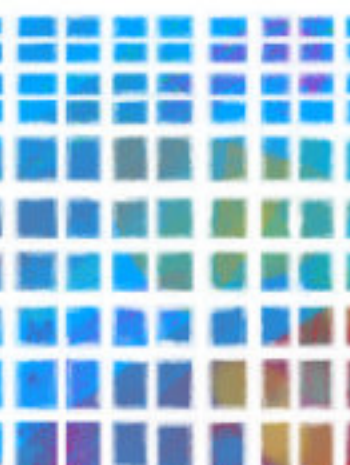
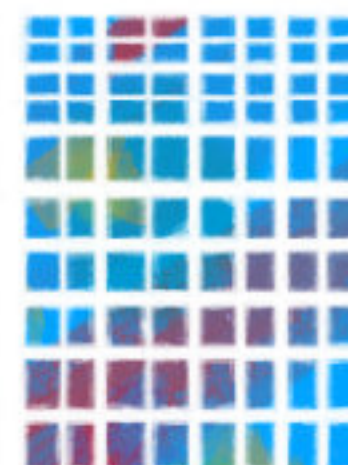
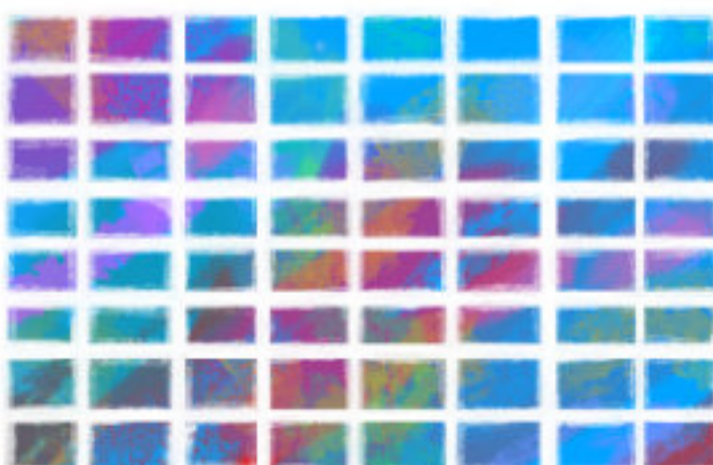
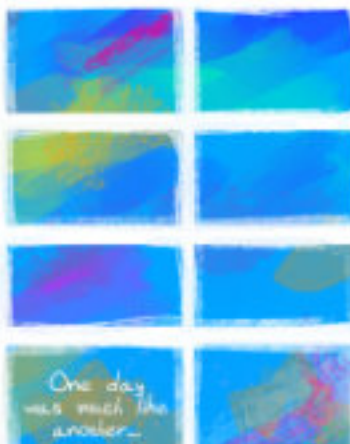
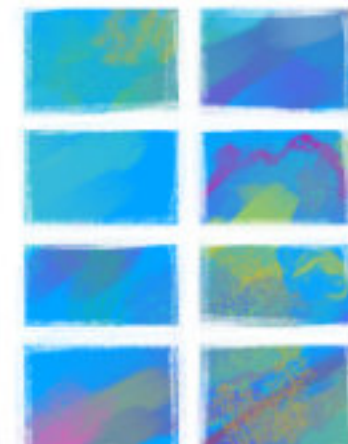
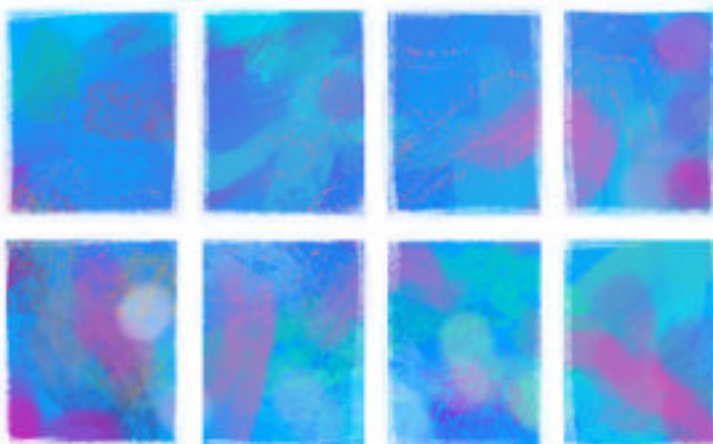
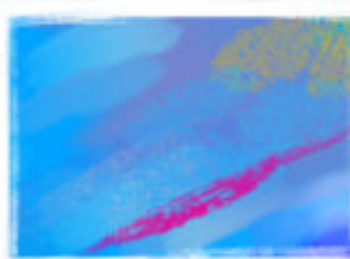


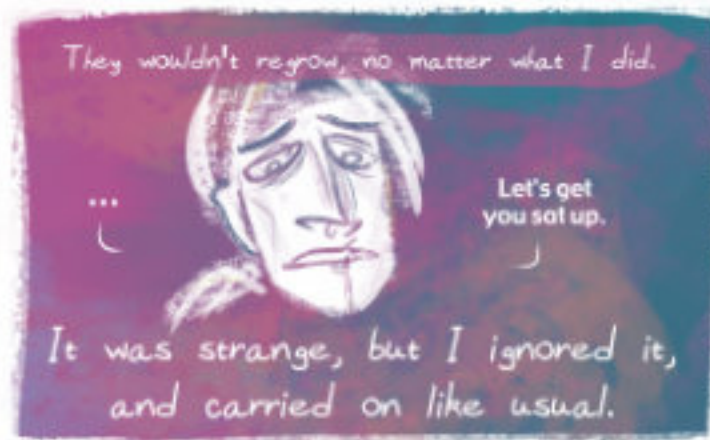
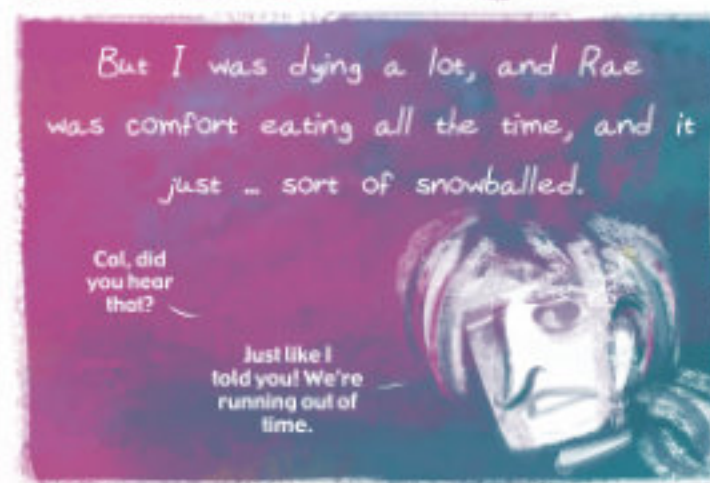
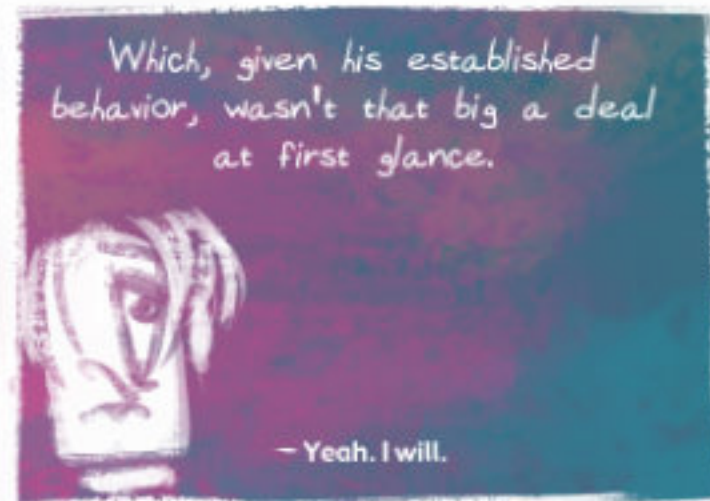
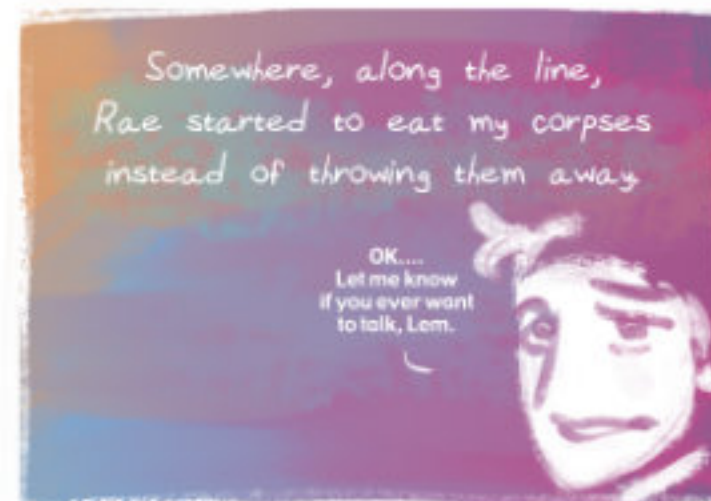
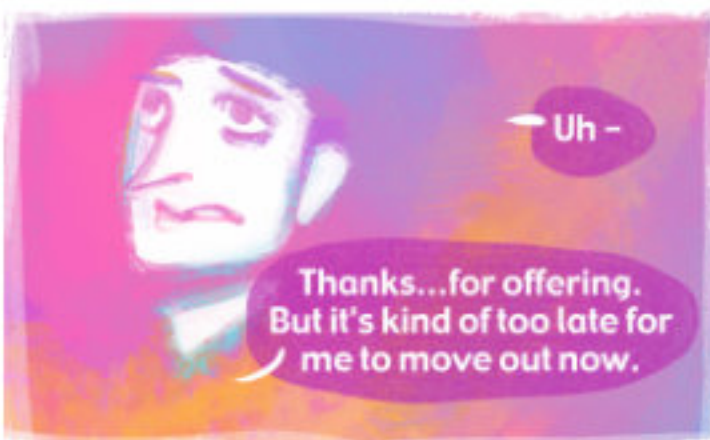
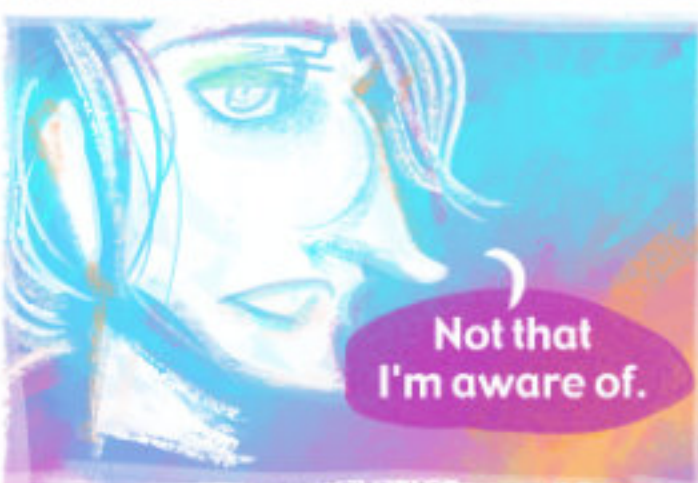
Corny.

You let yourself down this time.



Lem, you are setting yourself up for disappointment. Forget it.





Each time I regenerated, however,
I lost more and more of my hands
and feet.

Let's go see Rae, Cal.
Come on.

I see
you have
an elbow
today.

Can you
hang on to me
at all?



Then, they were gone.
Various other organs were
soon to follow.

Lem... it hurts...

I know.
I'm sorry.



Rae's body had also changed.

Rae?

We come in peace.

We just
want to talk.



Lem stopped killing himself cold turkey
and started nursing me all the time.

Lem...
I want a
'break'...

We're not
doing 'breaks'
anymore,
remember?

We can
stop for a
second for
you to rest,
though.



But we had already
gone too far.

Your body keeps
getting smaller, remember?

Rae is taking
all your energy.

You do
remember Rae,
right? We haven't
seen him for
a bit.

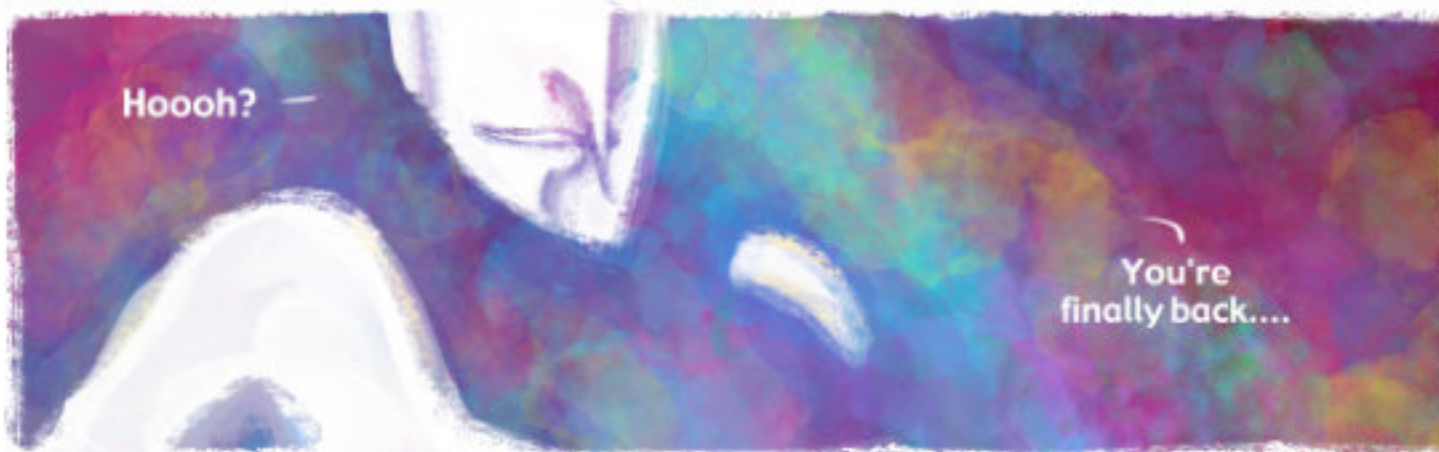
Oh... I forgot....

Let's go see what
he's up to, okay?



Hoooh?

You're
finally back....



My beloved....after
so long, too....



How ironic that my most favorite child
in the world is so neglectful...



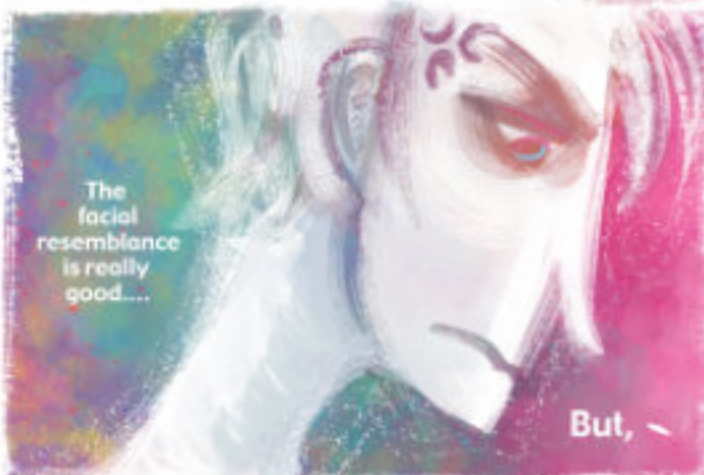
You're not the real
Cal. I'm holding the real
Cal in my arms.

Moreover, aren't
you a little too big?
Scale is off.



The
facial
resemblance
is really
good....

But, -



May
I speak
to Rae now,
please?

you & I
both know
Cal is incapable
of beefing up
even that
much.



stomp

stomp



Have
it your way,
dummy.



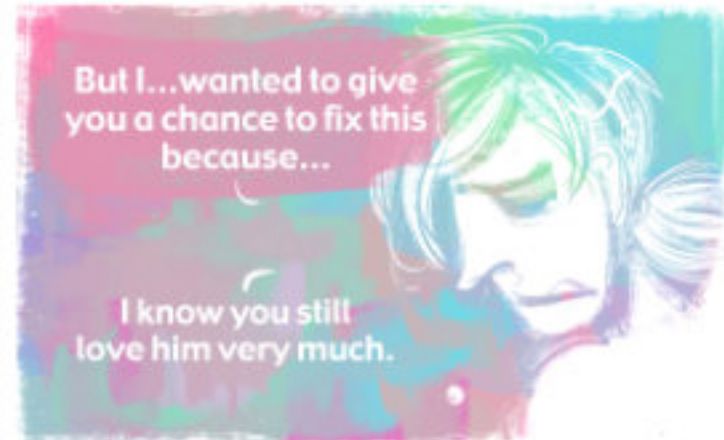
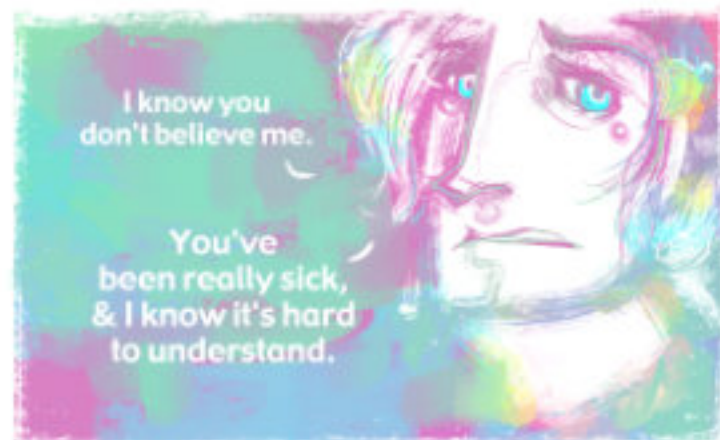
stomp

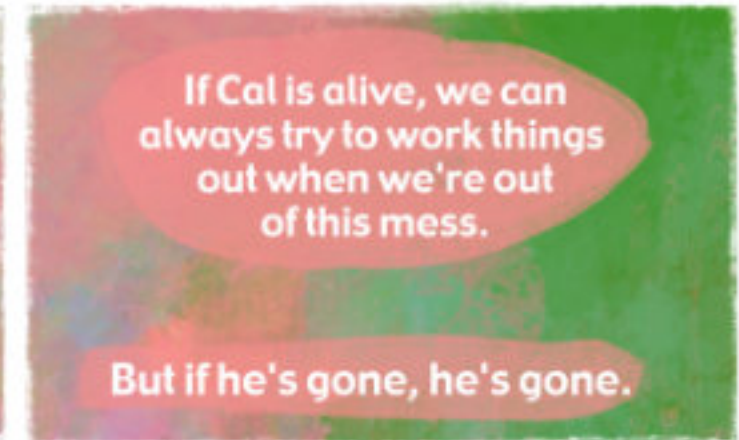
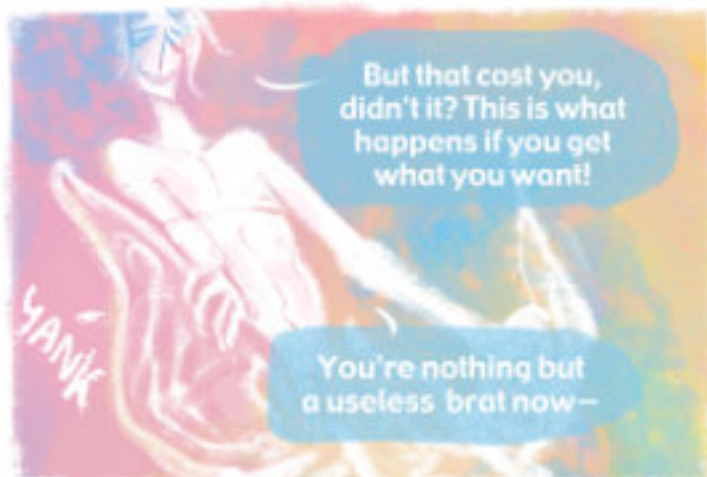


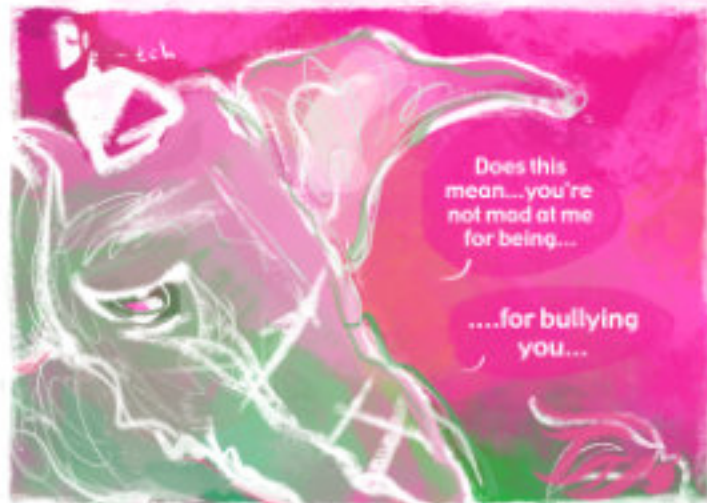
stomp

stomp

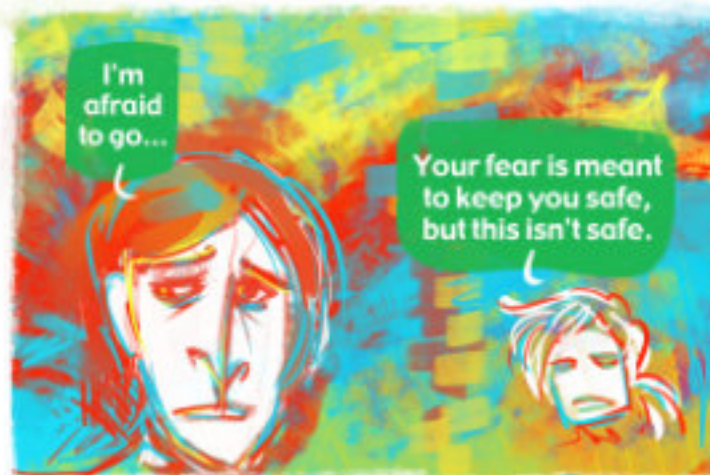
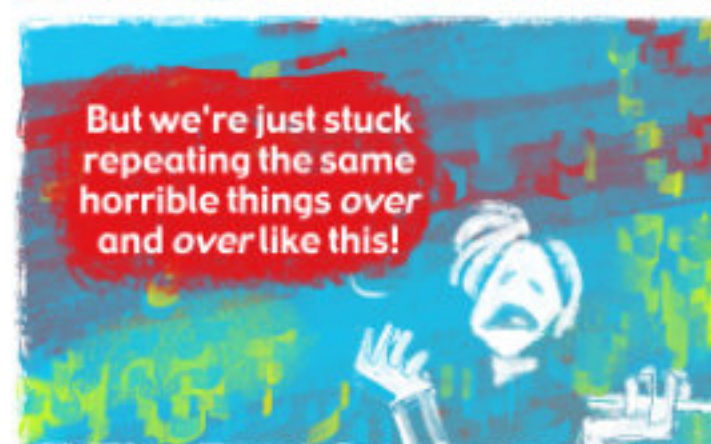
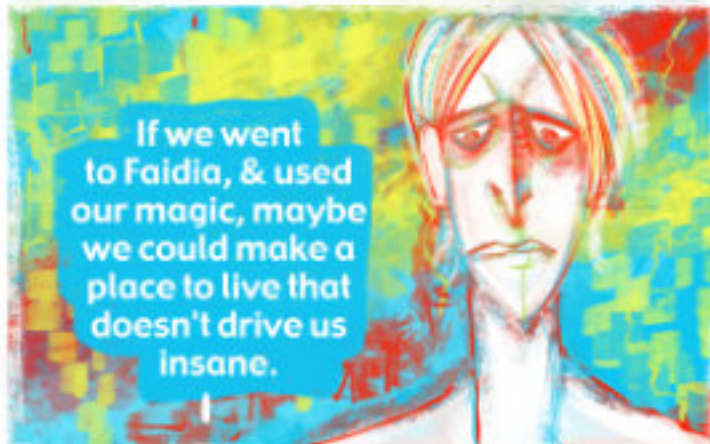
stomp









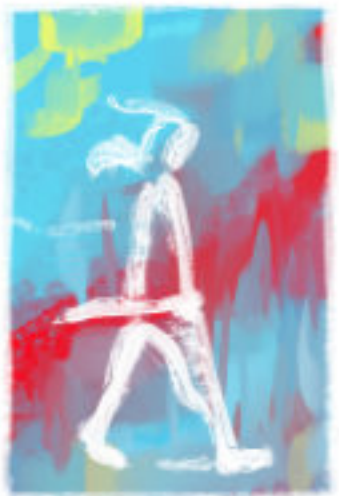




Lem.



Come here.



You talked him back down twice.



Well done.

You're never going to let me win, are you.



The only thing that matters to you...



...is whether or not you get what you want.

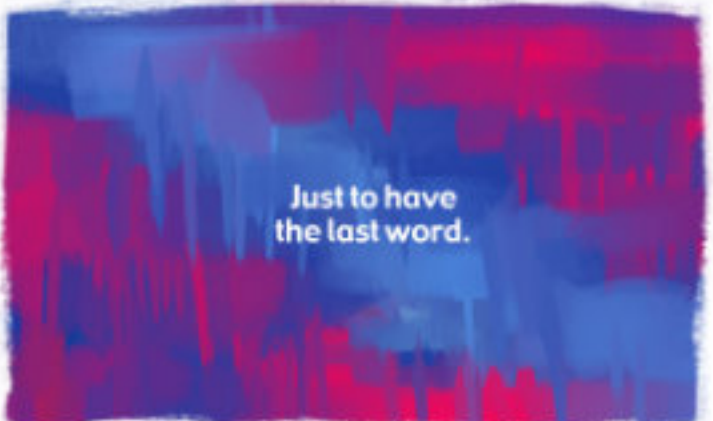
However insane it is.

For that....



you'll annihilate us, yourself.

Everything.



Just to have the last word.



But admitting you're wrong about anything is way worse than annihilation, isn't it?

Somehow. For reasons.



You fucking think I'm having fun right now, Cal?

I guess that does make me laugh, so maybe I am.



You've changed, Lem.

Oh? Is that so?



I didn't raise you to act this way.

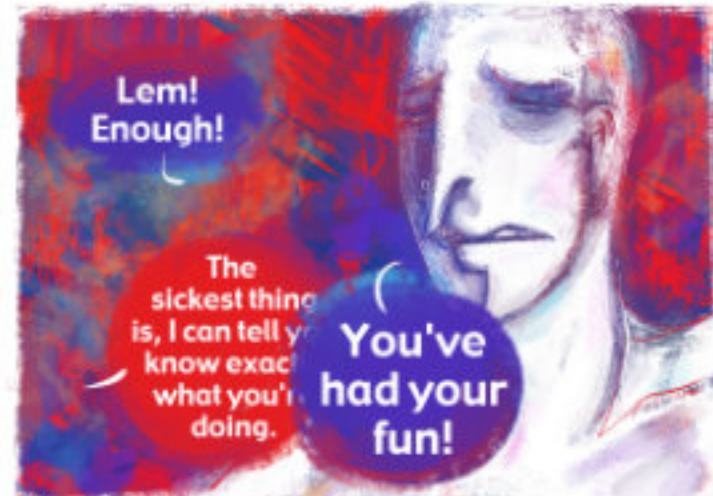
Nothing is more important than this family.

Blood is thicker than water.



So this is goodbye forever maybe.

Get out.



Lem! Enough!

The sickest thing is, I can tell you know exactly what you're doing.

You've had your fun!



You've become surly, provocative, and violent.

You raised your hand against your own family.

Cutting off your own brother's arm with a primitive weapon...



Yeah, well.

You're a stump.

If you kick me out, no one will take care of you. You'll force Rae to eat you. You'll vanish.



No one else will say it, so I will. I did a good job.

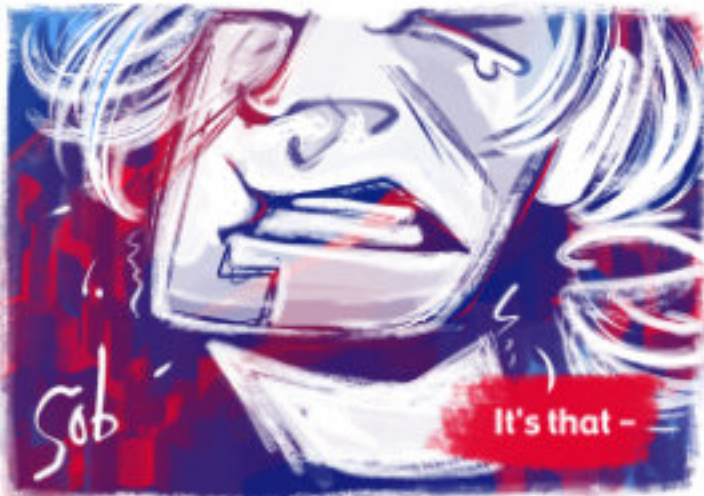
Get out, & never come back.

I worked hard, & I did my best.



But -

the worst
thing about this is -



Sob

It's that -



It's all so stup-



Sob

It's that -



If Lem had
stayed, Rae would
have killed him.
Right?



Rae...
darling...

I told myself,
"I kicked him out
to save him."

Come...
eat...

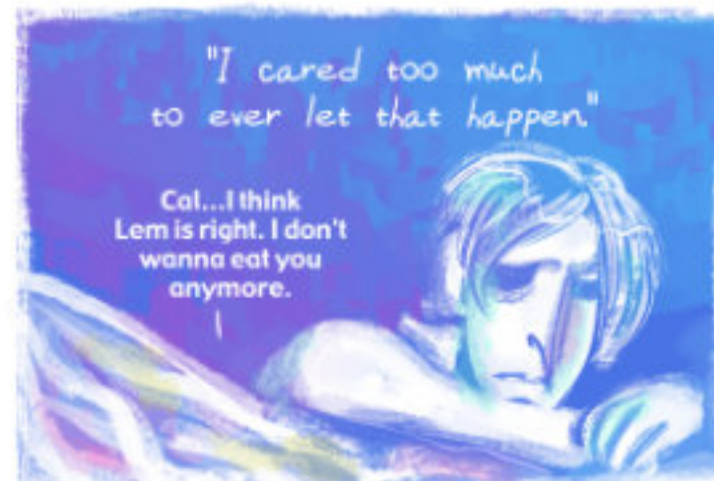


Come eat
dinner.

It'll heal
your arm.



"I couldn't bear seeing them fight."



"I cared too much
to ever let that happen."

Cal...I think
Lem is right. I don't
wanna eat you
anymore.



But
honestly...

it was
all bullshit,
like always.



Sigh

Whatever.
I'm tired.

Fine,
darling.

Have it your
way, like always...

If you
really feel
that way,
fine.



I was furious Lem
had me pegged.

Lem...
He's not
coming
back.

I can't believe
he actually left...

I don't know what Lem did during his banishment on Faidia. He has never told anyone. But he was gone for a long time.



At some point, Rae's resistance finally weakened, and so I force-fed him my body again.

I was little more than a spine and a head.



Rae no longer moved and neither did I. My tattered skin was covered in a scum of sweat and tears.



Come on,
move your
jaws.

Generating another body took a long time, and once I did, I was nearly senseless. Apparently, at this point, my aperture ruptured, and my magic simply spilled out of me.

I had just enough energy to keep me alive, but completely helpless.



But, one day, Lem returned.

The legend about this day makes it sound so epic and grand, like Lem stormed in and had a devastating battle with Rae and I...



In truth, there was no magic. No fight.

With the collapse of my aperture, our world was running on fumes.

I had no idea at the time, and neither did Rae. We were in no condition to monitor the situation.



Lem's knife was black and shiny...



He whispered to me.



Sorry,
but...



It'll
only hurt
for a little
longer.



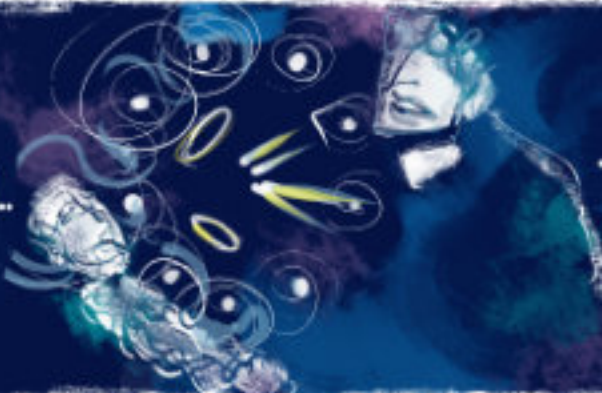
Then he cut out my
shrivelled heart...



And ate it.

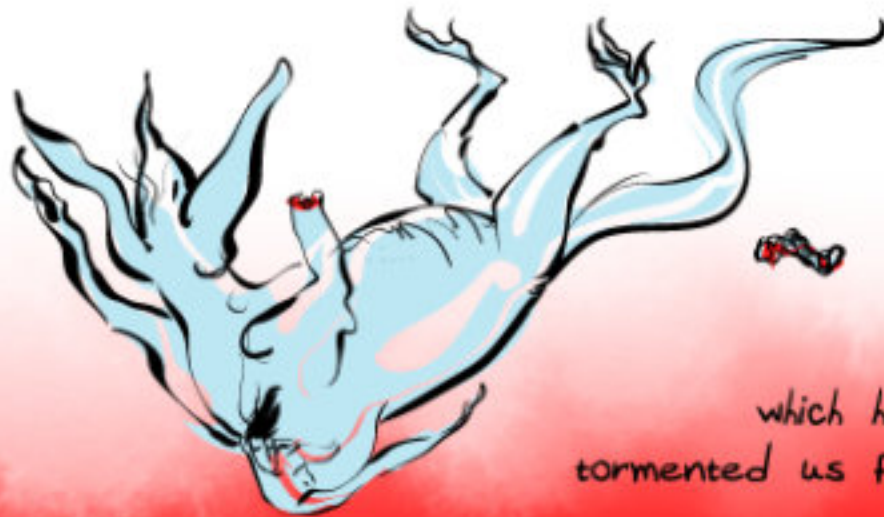


There was a
feeling, a sound...
like something
strong...



...cracked apart with
sudden and
incredible force

My dimension



which had
tormented us for so long...

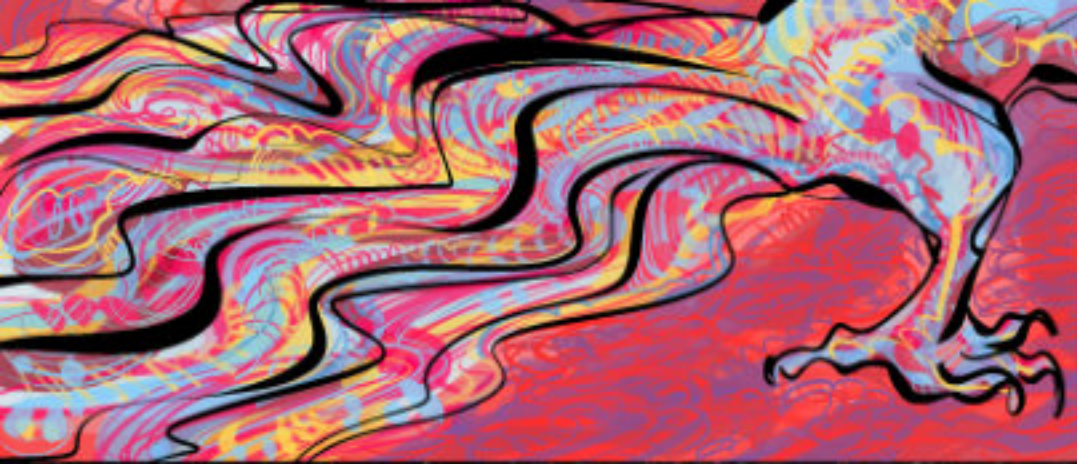
Was immediately and completely destroyed.



We were spat out of a ragged hole
in the sky above Faidia.

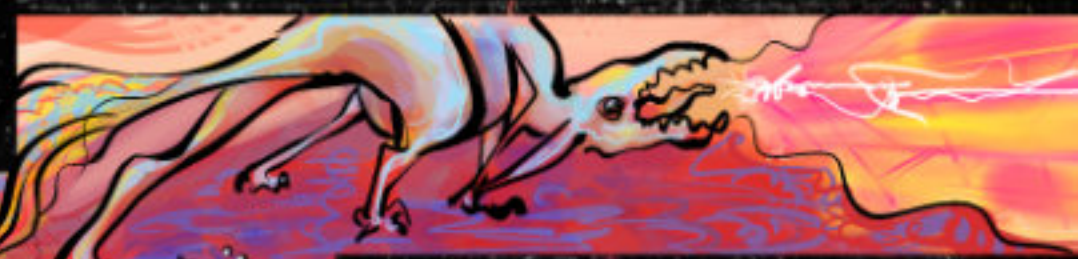


All this ruckus awoke May,
who had to deal with what
she found on her own.



Rae created a new body, but he was still insane, and started to rampage the surface of Faidia, casting swathes of chaos magic left and right.

May found me lying on the ground, weak but still hanging on.



She received advice from our mother, combining our bodies together to keep us both busy for awhile.

After all that effort Lem went through, we ended up being one creature anyway.



Lem disappeared until much later. None of us really understood what had happened, and Lem didn't explain.

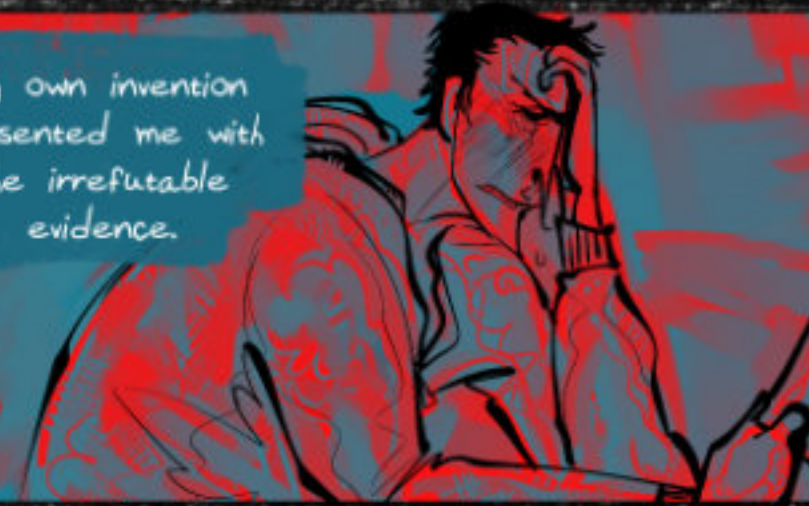
May eventually set us up with the house, and we lived there, and then we met Fern.



Things are different now. So that's why I've confessed.

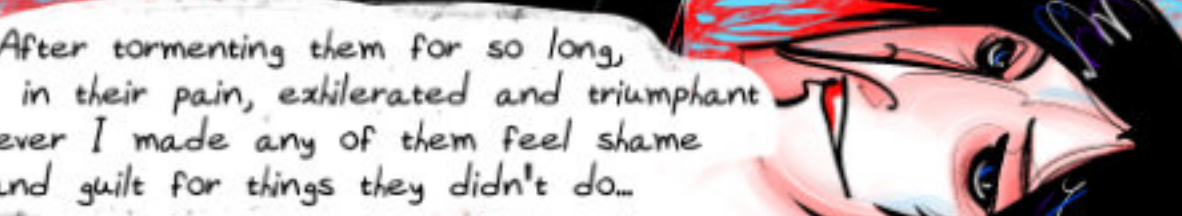
Physically, I'm feeling a lot better these days. I have the ability to think about what happened and what I did clearly for the first time.

My own invention presented me with the irrefutable evidence.



I knew the way I did things was horrible, but... I thought it at least worked. I thought it kept me and my family alive against bad odds.

It not only didn't work, it actively destroyed everything we cared about.



After tormenting them for so long,
indulging in their pain, exhilarated and triumphant
whenever I made any of them feel shame
and guilt for things they didn't do...

Being nasty had just become a habit when I could get away
with it. I was so starved for any pleasure, it was fine with me.



Reliable,
sensitive,
devoted.

Rae, Lem, and Fern...
I know they'll put up with it
no matter what I do to them.

Rae, Lem, and Fern...
I know they'll put up with it
no matter what I do to them.

I made myself
into a poison and now
I seek an antidote.

The souls I find in the
lagoon who cause rot...

I am the same as them.

In fact, I might be the worst one yet.

It's up to me to find a way to fix this and keep it fixed.

In fact, I might be the worst one yet.

It's up to me to
find a way to fix this
and keep it fixed.

Let's just put em through again. They can assist you to speed things along.

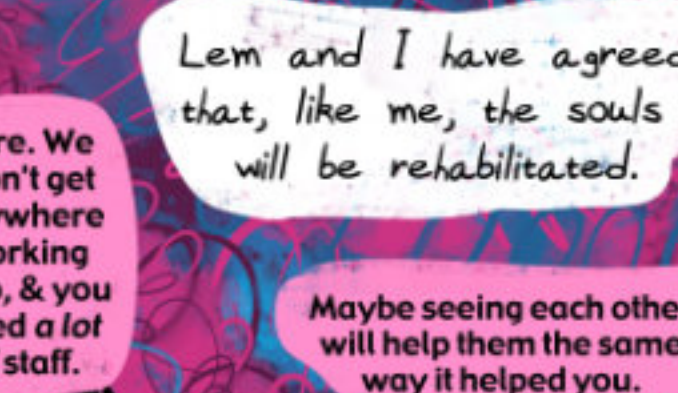
Really? You'd help me do that?

Sure. We won't get anywhere working solo, & you need a lot of staff.

Lem and I have agreed that, like me, the souls will be rehabilitated.

Maybe seeing each other will help them the same way it helped you.

Really?
You'd help
me do that?



Lem and I have agreed that, like me, the souls will be rehabilitated.

Sure. We won't get anywhere working solo, & you need a lot of staff.

Maybe seeing each other will help them the same way it helped you.

Lem and I have agreed
that, like me, the souls
will be rehabilitated.

Maybe seeing each other will help them the same way it helped you.

I will spend the rest of my existence making up for what I've done.

Sure, this will take a long time, but...

...we're immortal for a reason right?

Sure, this will take a long time, but...

...we're immortal for a reason right?

Rae insisted on being held accountable for his role in this disaster, alongside me, but I personally feel he is blameless. No one is to blame but me.

You ate only the veggies again.

You know...

I can't eat

You ate only the veggies again.

You know...

You know...

The only way to apologize for something like this is to devote your entire existence to that endeavor.



So that's what
I'm planning on doing
alongside my
regular work from
now on

You can just be a vegetarian, Rae.

Oh...I didn't think of that.

I have several cookbooks.

Can I keep eating bugs, though?

Oh...I didn't think of that.

I have several cookbooks.

Can I keep eating bugs, though?

Of course.

You know what we say in this house.

"Be a slut, do what you want."

That's right.

You know what we say in this house.

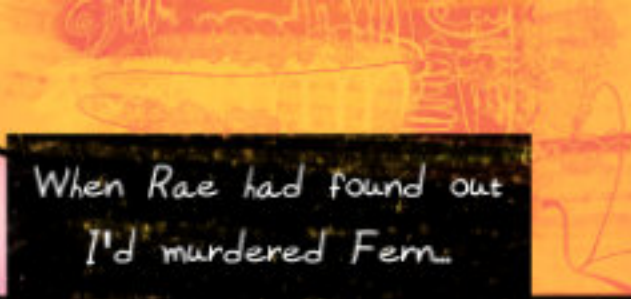
"Be a slut, do what you want."

That's right.

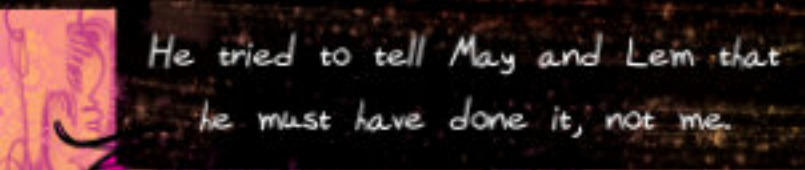
I know I'm
going to backslide....
but now I know to
let my family help
me out.



Rae, are you absolutely sure?



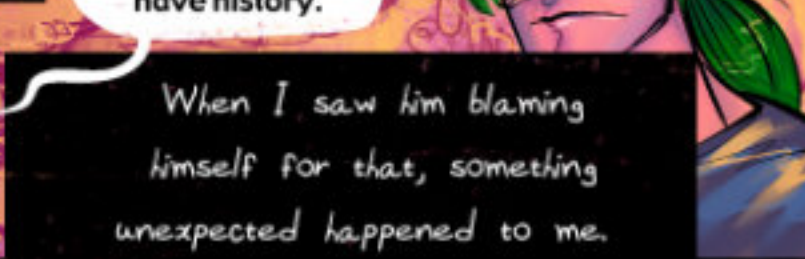
When Rae had found out I'd murdered Fern...



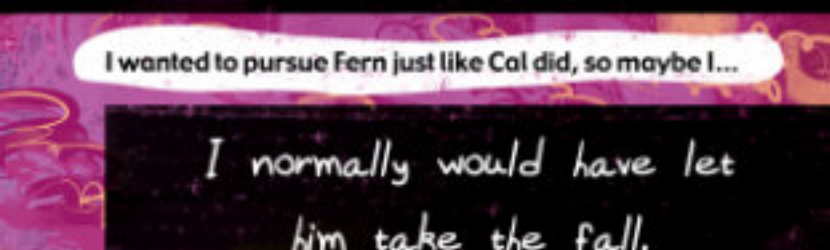
He tried to tell May and Lem that he must have done it, not me.



Cal was never physically violent like that...but I have history.



When I saw him blaming himself for that, something unexpected happened to me.



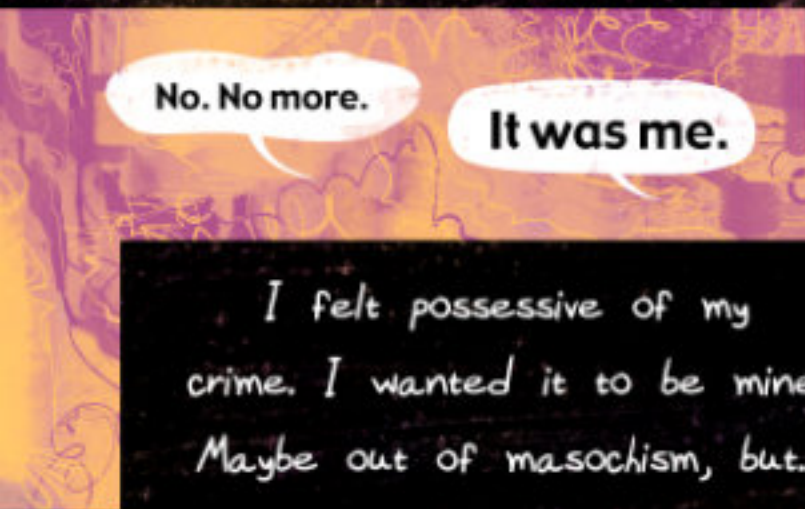
I wanted to pursue Fern just like Cal did, so maybe I...

I normally would have let him take the fall.



I can't remember but

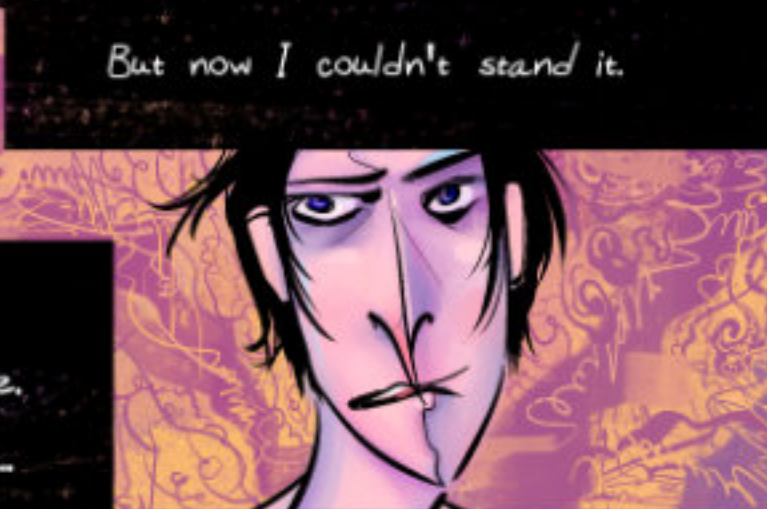
I might have blacked it out



No. No more.

It was me.

I felt possessive of my crime. I wanted it to be mine. Maybe out of masochism, but...



But now I couldn't stand it.

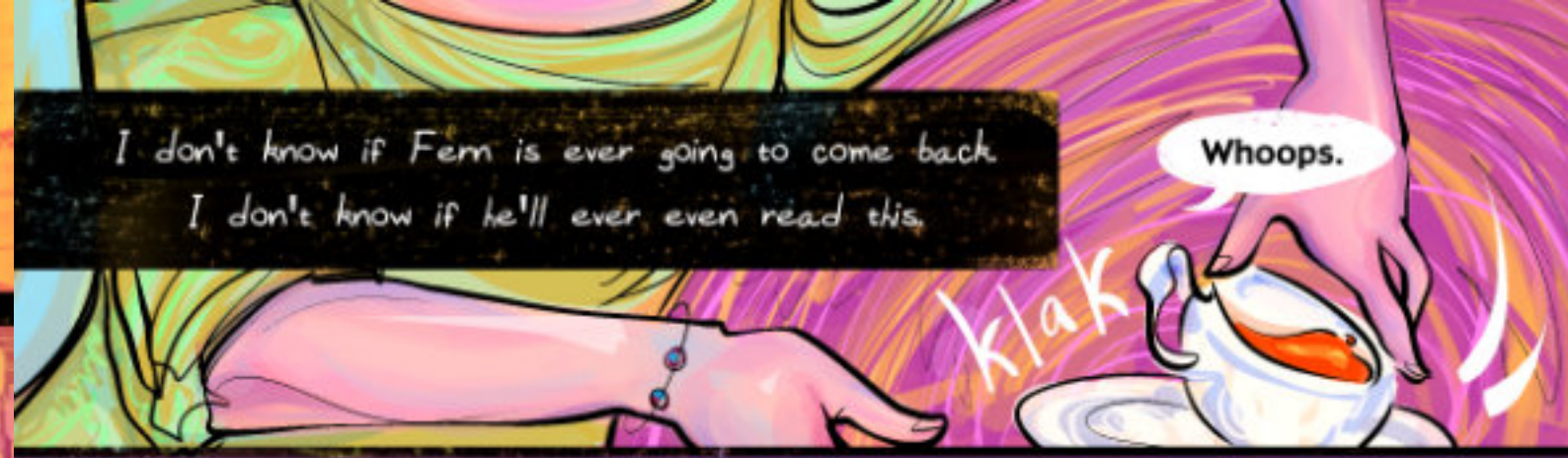


Rae only spoke to Fern. He's innocent.

When I acted on that impulse, quite by accident,

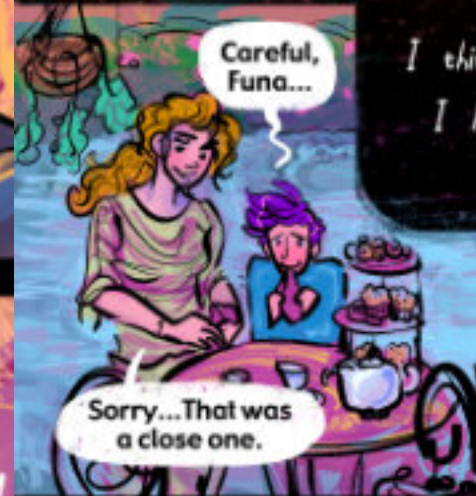
It was all me.

my defeat began.



I don't know if Fern is ever going to come back. I don't know if he'll ever even read this.

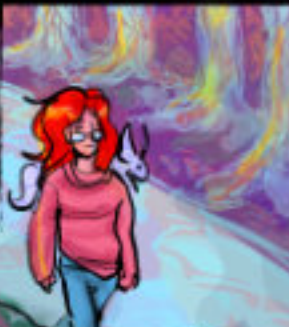
Whoops.



Careful, Funa...

Sorry...That was a close one.

I think I have condemned myself to love someone I have destroyed my relationship with before it even started.

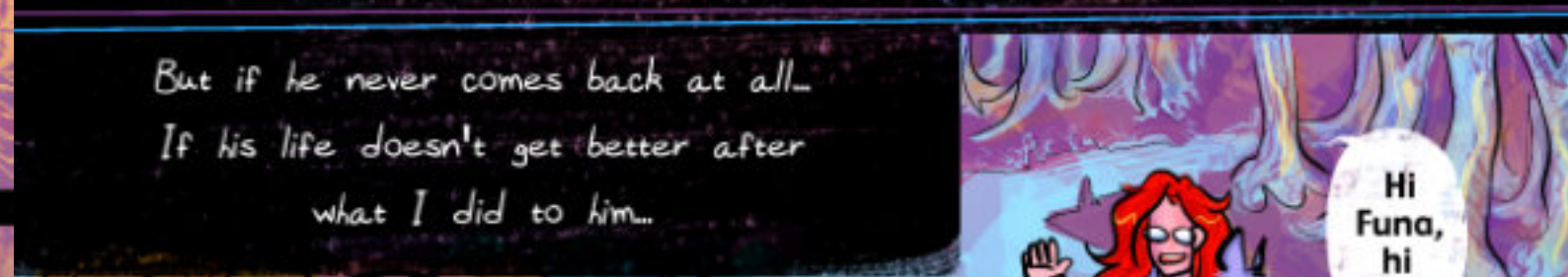


It couldn't have been any other way, with how I am. This is the bed I have made.



Spit

Er...



But if he never comes back at all... If his life doesn't get better after what I did to him...



Fern?!

Is that you?!

That would be the worst.

I think it's okay to still be selfish sometimes.

I'm back.

Oh shit. Lem told you guys I'd come to, right?

Did I just -

Relax, Fern, we knew! We're just so happy to see you!

It's been so long!

We're so glad you're all right!

Have a seat!

Thanks!

Besides Lem, you're the first of our folk I've seen.

Oh my gosh, Fern!

I'll let my assistant know to clear our schedules.

Cute melcey!

His name is Smoke!

Because of what Lem did to save Faidia, he lies prone inside the body of the lagoon, constantly being burned away.

After you were murdered, some mortals decided you were a god & started worshipping you!

There's no need to make such a fuss over me...

Fern, you don't get it.

There is so much to go over....

Haven't any strangers harassed you yet?

Er...

??

He only continues to live because of the biomass of Faidia constantly replenishing him through the propagation of algae and other microscopic, plentiful life...

Funa...please...

Ah - sorry. I'm just saying, you have to be more careful now!

People recognize us in the street all the time. You have to be on guard!

Oh...now that you mention it, I have gotten some weird looks. But I mostly stick to myself anyway.

This is a very delicate situation. Our first goal is to restore Lem to a proper elemental form, wicking the excess plasma from his shoulders...

Ugh...I was worried it would get like this.

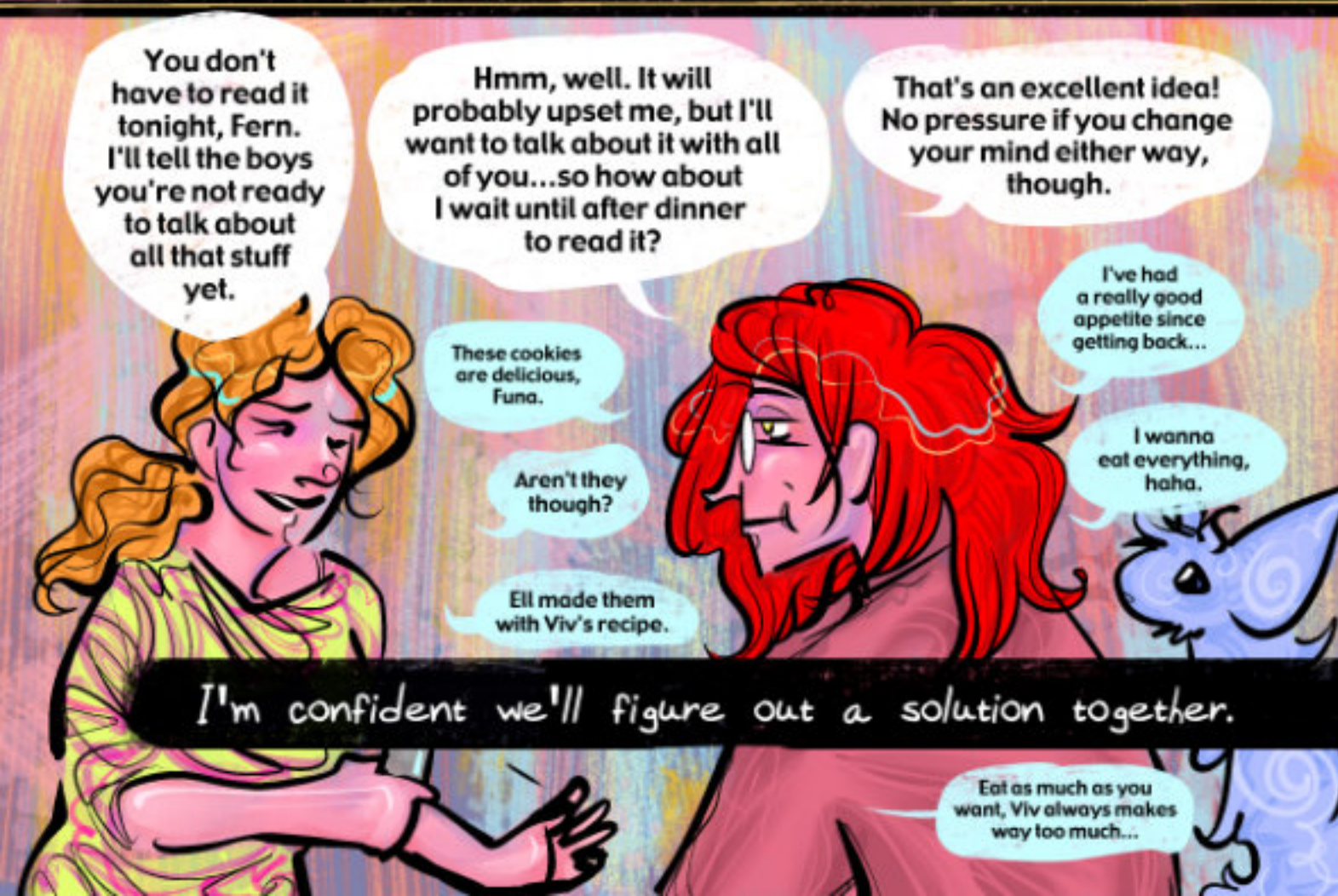
Whatcha gonna do, am I right?

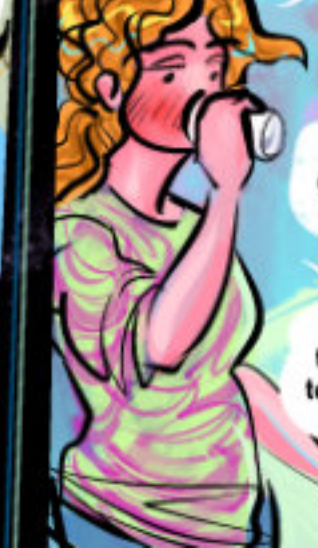
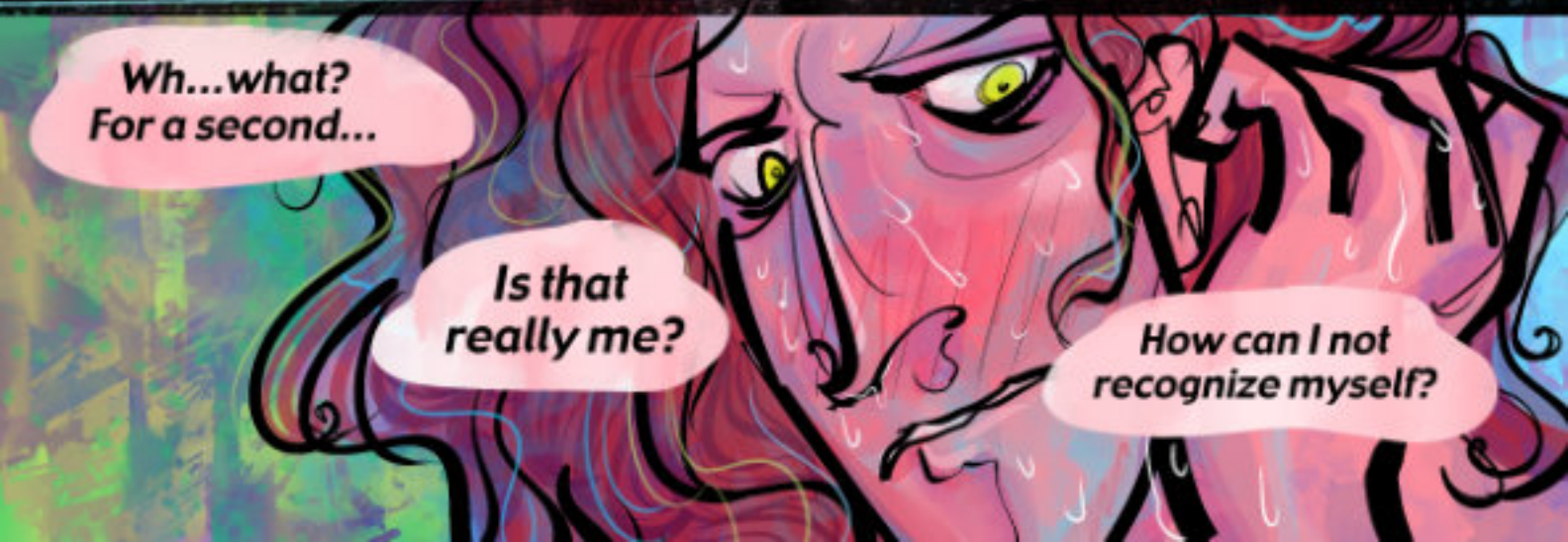
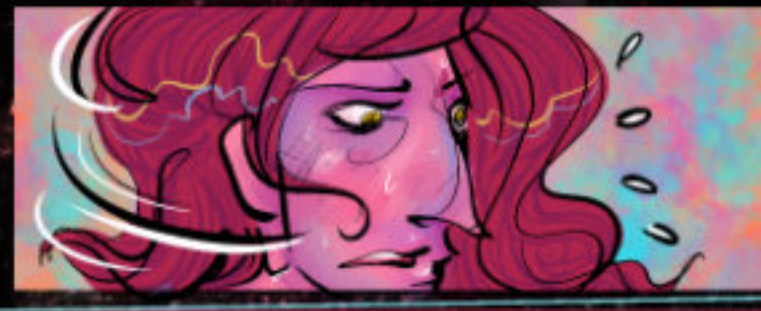
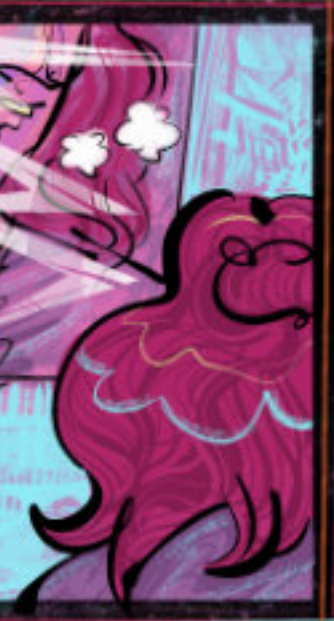
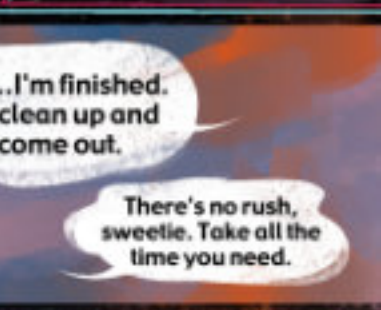
It's kinda sad. We have this gated neighborhood...

You have to put a lot of effort into making disguises if you want to go out...

Are Fola & Viv around? If we're gonna talk shit all night, they should be here too...

...and lifting him from the lagoon, so that he may take his place beside us on the shore.





Was Fern coming out-

BANG

Oh nevermind, there he is.

To imagine it was that bad.

Fern, you OK in there?

Need anything?

Oh...I'm finished. I'll clean up and come out.

There's no rush, sweetie. Take all the time you need.

Pour me...

A shot and a beer, please.

You got it, Fern.

Look, all the juice drained out of him. Just a rind, now.

I know exactly how he feels.

What a ghastly account.

To be honest, I haven't reread it in a lot of years... It was too much.

there there

When Lem dropped the bomb Fern was back, I touched up a bit.

Honestly, I'm at a loss for words.

How does one even react?

What do you say to someone who did those things? Went through those things?

Keep in mind, Fern, some of the hardest work is already done.

Looking them in the eye is going to be weird for...uh, awhile,

Wh...what? For a second...

Is that really me?

How can I not recognize myself?

but Cal's been really well behaved and is as gentle as a lamb when we see him.

That's a matter of opinion.

OK! In my opinion, he has demonstrably improved.

Cal's finally moving back to his own house, right?

I gotta use the john

You don't have to announce it, folo.

Don't I?

Well, sort of. Granny Corwin still occupies the main house...

Ohhh yes, that was going to be a hold-up, wasn't it?



There's a newer structure, a guest house, where he'll be staying.

Renovations are needed in the house anyway—

Well at least he's out.



May has put up with Rae & Cal long enough.

She hasn't been able to hold an orgy or whatever she does in her own house in centuries.



Hey, wait.

Are you saying I can't move back to my room at Cal's?



There's kind of a soft rule now that none of us lives on our lonesome.

Fola lives by himself, but he writes everyone a lot, so.

In fact, I think Lem can't stop him from emailing him at every meal time.



Speaking of Fola... I'mma check on him.

I'll come with ya in case he's rowdy

He's had 1 whole beer...he's probably passed out someplace.



I wanted to go to bed there...

Ruffle

Fern...It's been a really long time. A lot of things have changed.

That was the room you were murdered in...

Did you forget?

The bed was comfortable...



Fern, of course you're not going back there right away!



We're setting you up in an apartment here in Tower for now.

Practically next door, actually.

We could go look at it tonight if you wanted!



Okay... so... who am I rooming with???

Er - Well - Funa sort of gave it away already.

She just can't keep anything back...

I explain but it does nothing



When she was rambling just now about Cal and...



...

slorp



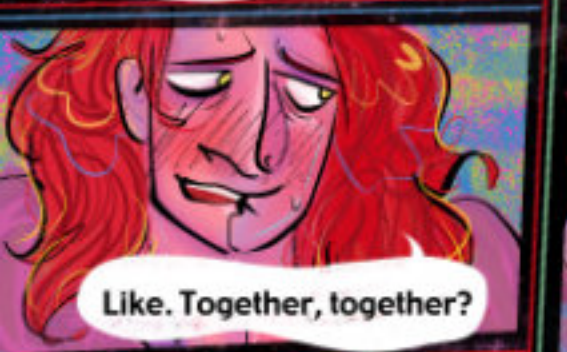
Rae?

Yes!

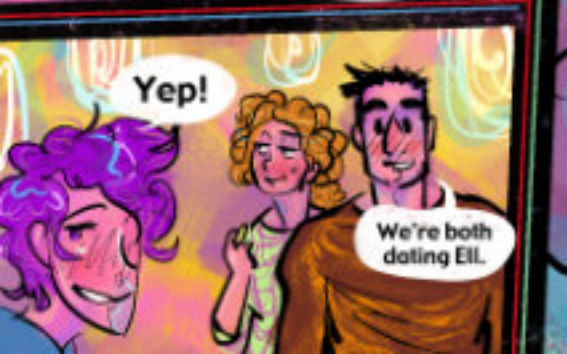


Are you three...

living here together?



Like. Together, together?



Yep!

We're both dating Ell.



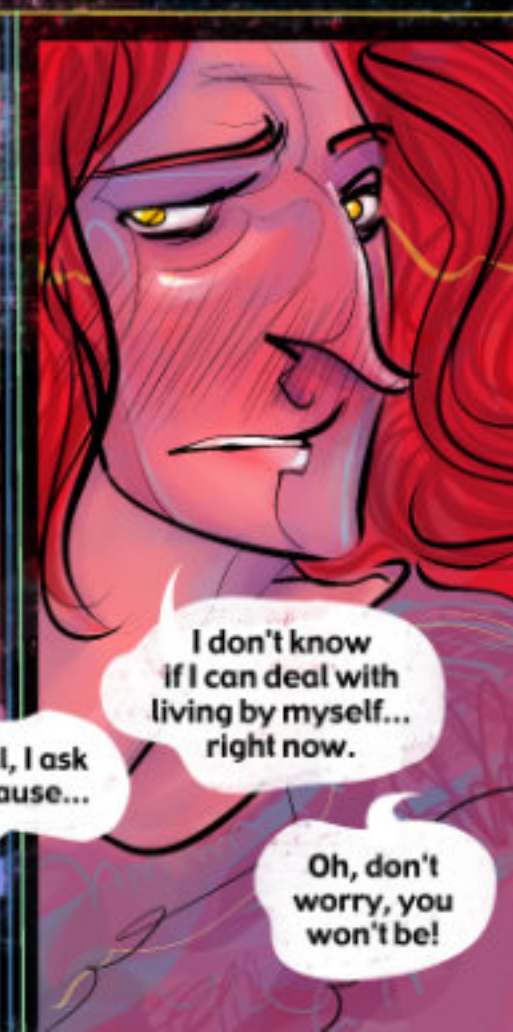
Gosh... I'm sorry I missed that.

I'm happy for all of you.

We've had our ups and downs.

But here we are!

That's wonderful.



I don't know if I can deal with living by myself... right now.

Well, I ask because...

Oh, don't worry, you won't be!



The secret primary I haven't met who is also a criminal like Cal is & was in Cal's body the wh-

Yes!

He's real and you're going to meet him!



Come now, Fern, we're all actually in envy of you right now!

Rae is troubled, but he's taught us so much.

You just learned the truth, so you're spooked, but it'll be okay, I promise.



I mean, you have already met! In a way.

thunk

You just weren't aware of it at the time.

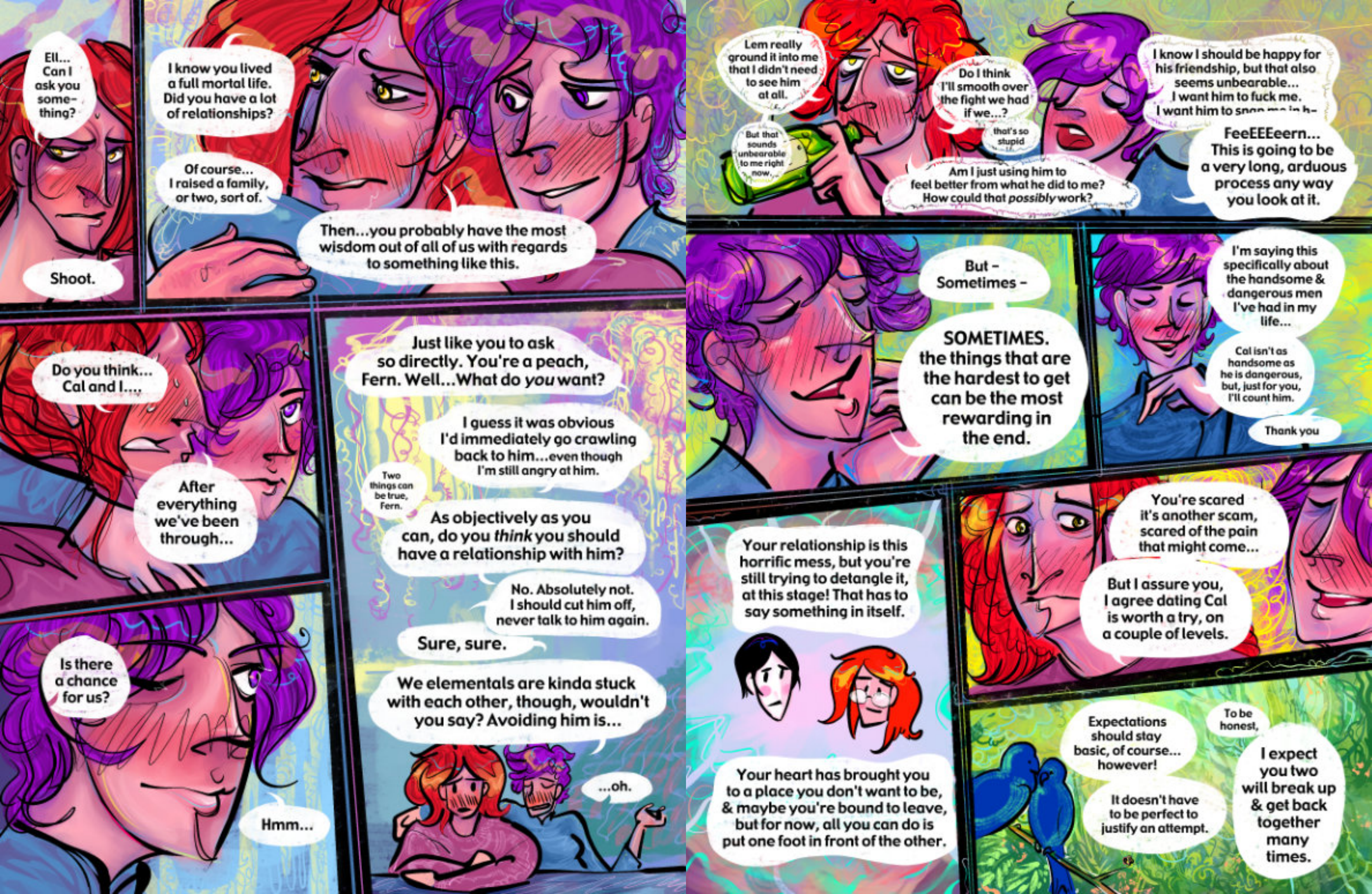
But don't worry, we've arranged for another meeting before the actual move.

We're not that reckless, for goodness sake...



I'll take your word for it, Ell...

I just...this isn't what I was looking forward to, if you know what I mean.



Ell...
Can I
ask you
some-
thing?

I know you lived
a full mortal life.
Did you have a lot
of relationships?

Of course...
I raised a family,
or two, sort of.

Shoot.

Then...you probably have the most
wisdom out of all of us with regards
to something like this.

Do you think...
Cal and I....

After
everything
we've been
through...

Is there
a chance
for us?

Hmm...

Just like you to ask
so directly. You're a peach,
Fern. Well...What do you want?

I guess it was obvious
I'd immediately go crawling
back to him...even though
I'm still angry at him.

Two
things can
be true,
Fern.

As objectively as you
can, do you *think* you should
have a relationship with him?

No. Absolutely not.
I should cut him off,
never talk to him again.

Sure, sure.

We elementals are kinda stuck
with each other, though, wouldn't
you say? Avoiding him is...

...oh.

Lem really
ground it into me
that I didn't need
to see him
at all.

But that
sounds
unbearable
to me right
now.

Do I think
I'll smooth over
the fight we had
if we...?

that's so
stupid

Am I just using him to
feel better from what he did to me?
How could that possibly work?

I know I should be happy for
his friendship, but that also
seems unbearable...
I want him to fuck me.
I want him to snap me in h-

FeeEEEEern...
This is going to be
a very long, arduous
process any way
you look at it.

But -
Sometimes -

SOMETIMES.
the things that are
the hardest to get
can be the most
rewarding in
the end.

I'm saying this
specifically about
the handsome &
dangerous men
I've had in my
life...

Cal isn't as
handsome as
he is dangerous,
but, just for you,
I'll count him.

Thank you

Your relationship is this
horrific mess, but you're
still trying to detangle it,
at this stage! That has to
say something in itself.



Your heart has brought you
to a place you don't want to be,
& maybe you're bound to leave,
but for now, all you can do is
put one foot in front of the other.

You're scared
it's another scam,
scared of the pain
that might come...

But I assure you,
I agree dating Cal
is worth a try, on
a couple of levels.

Expectations
should stay
basic, of course...
however!

It doesn't have
to be perfect to
justify an attempt.

To be
honest,

I expect
you two
will break up
& get back
together
many
times.

Lots of people are gonna discourage you, because it seems doomed, but I say it's YOUR decision.

Fola's in bed.

Oh, are we talking about this finally?

Cal is dangerous. Don't let your guard down.

That's what I have to say about it.

Viv praising him like that sickens me. Cal was always well behaved at work. It's his family & lovers you have to worry about!

Is Ell horny about abusive boyfriends again?

I'm not remarkably more horny than usual

May? Seriously?

I...I'm fine! Just drunk...

AH! Of course! He tripped the egregore.

May, here's Fern.

Th-thanks, Viv.

H...hello?

Don't have the wrong attitude about this situation!

Might as well hang a "FRESH MEAT" sign around your neck!

Cal doesn't deserve your gratitude just for treating you with basic decency. He owed you that from get-go!

He's trying but you're also really vulnerable.

Funa... Party....

Haha heyalp

Don't deify him for saying please & thank you while the rest of us got it right in the first place without a big-

Uh-

I have May here on the phone.

She's asking if Fern's OK.

I agree with you, Funa, but don't yell

I'll stop yelling when you start listening!

Hiya Fern. It's May. How's it going?

Sorry about the dishwashing noises.

That's OK, I can hear you...

Y'all sound like you're having fun over there.

Y-yeah, we're partying. But Funa's saying something about the egregore...?

Yeah, so, a thing about the egregore, the memory management thing...

It has alarms that go off if it notices an elemental is in intense distress...

There was a big spike in distress from you a little while ago. Do you know what that could have been...?

O-oh...I'm s-sorry, I think it's because I read...I read the court record.

Hmm, yeah, that'll do it...!

May...I'm sorry... I'm really drunk... it's so late, I'm

Shhh. None of that.

Fern, there's no need to be so formal.

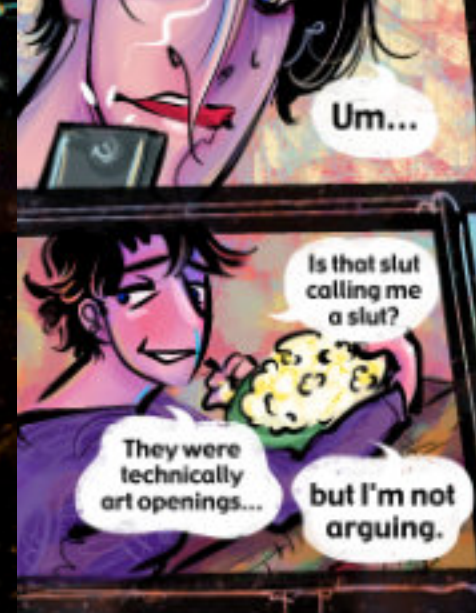
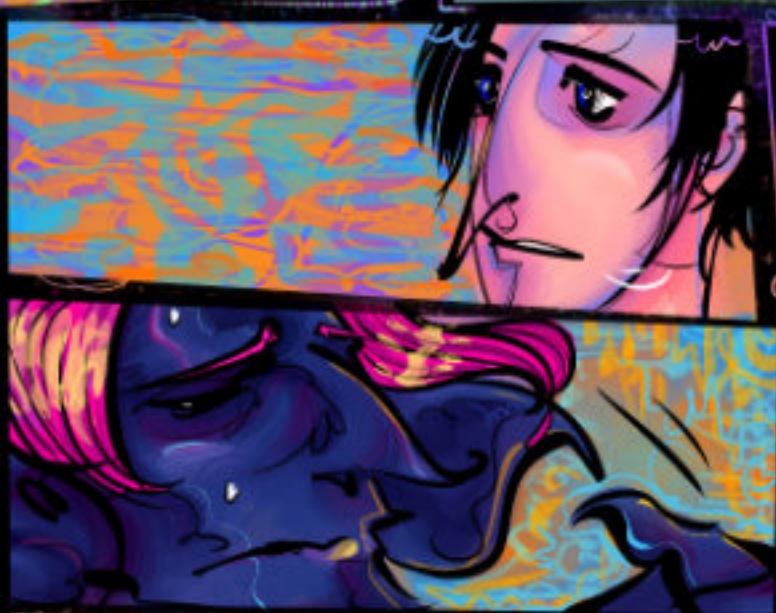
Is there anything we can do for you?

Rae & Cal are here with me, & Lem is awake & can come down to yours...

Oh...Um...Maybe there's something...

Sorry, this is crazy, but... I need to know Cal isn't...hurt... right now.

Of course. After reading that, I needed reassurance too.





I....

I'm way too tired.
It's finally hitting me.

Soon,
though...

No...it's
all right.

How about tomorrow?

Yes.

Please.

Rae will
be around at noon
to pick you up,
then.

I'm still not
permitted to
teleport, so
he helps me.

Right...I'll
be waiting for
him.

I'm...
really hurt...

And what you've
done is....so....awful.

But
also...

Thank you for...
being so calm, & talking
to me. Sorry I'm not...
speaking properly...

There's nothing
to apologize for,
Fern.

Cal...

What is it,
Fern?

I...miss you...
so much.

I really
need to see
you.



Fern...I...

thump

F...Fern?
Are you there?

I think that was a little
bit too much for him.
He conked out.

It's okay, he was
already on the bed.
I tucked him in.

Ahhh, Ell speaking.
Fern's fast asleep.

Th....Thank
you, Ell!

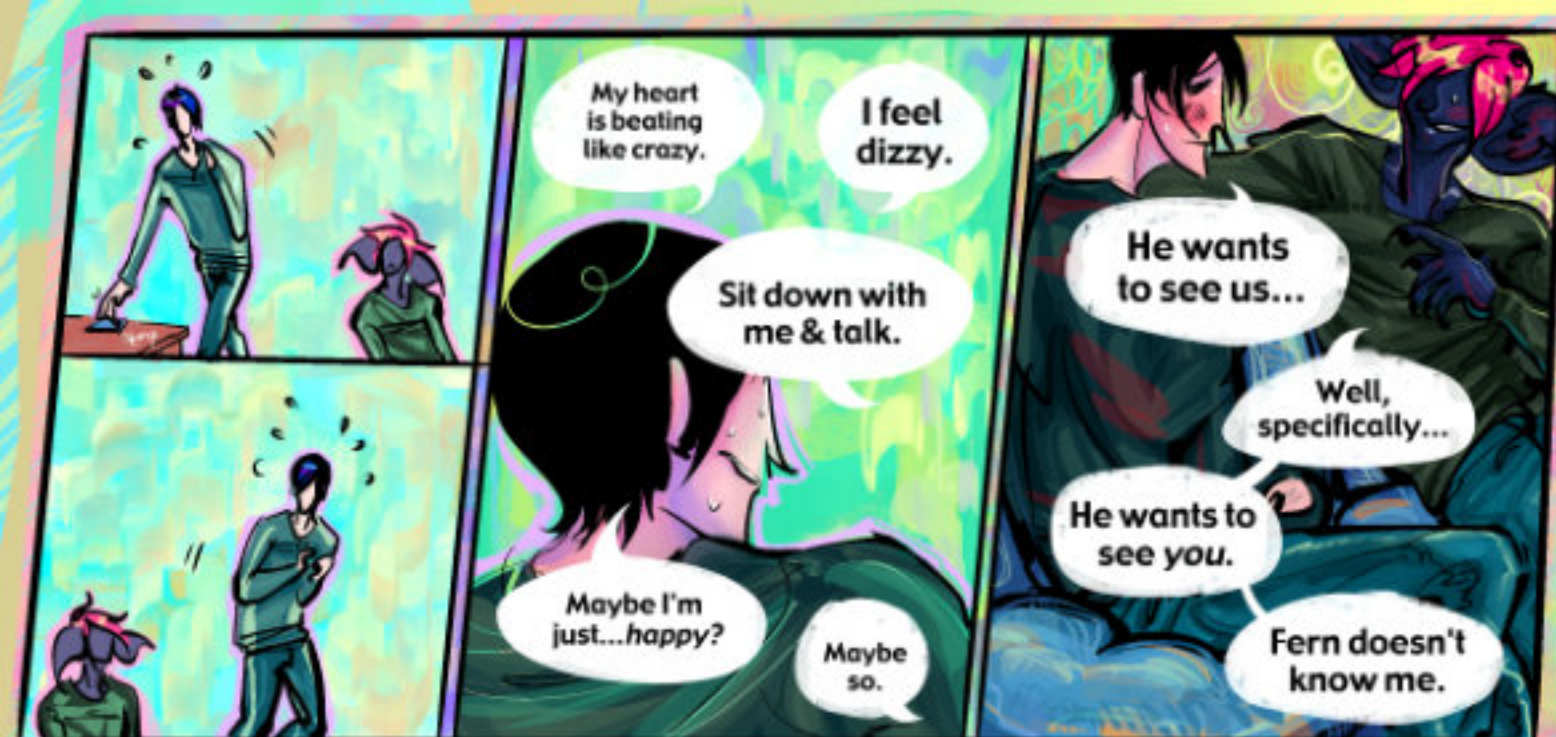
Then...We'll
say good night!

Good night.
Thank you for
calling.

I think you
did well.

R...really?!

G-good night!



What-ever!!! You know that's not what I mean!!!

Don't make me say it! My...clinginess. You indulging me, prioritizing me.

What if he's disgusted?

Oh. Well. Uh.

I think if we explain, first, Fern will not find it...so disgusting he severs ties, at least.

Hmmm...

This is Fern we're talking about.

He's not going to be that different.

Fern's life will be a lot easier if the two of you avoid overthinking this.

Lem said he seemed pretty much the same, even his accent.

He'll probably find it very sweet that you're both trying so hard.

If Fern isn't sick of your shit, well, I'm sure he'll want to join the family.

He sunk all that mothering into you, Cal.

You dumb sack of sad crap.

Wow, I forgot about that. Fern's cooking...

I could have a chance to taste it now...

ANYWAY, my point is, just remember you should show Fern your soft side, no matter what.

Tch... That was a good one.

Nope.

What if I don't have a soft side for him!

Simply terrible. Back to baby jail.

I admit, I'm kind of... alarmed he wants to see us so soon.

We had all those backup ideas...

I was positive he'd avoid us for as long as he could.

He said he's angry, but if he's talking to me so nicely, saying he misses me...

That's not very angry of him.

I have to assume his anger is just delayed for now.

But delayed it is. I'll do what I can in the meantime.

Expressions of anger & fear are exhausting.

Lem connected him to the egregore.

We should encourage him to keep pacing himself like this. If he's not ready, he's not ready.

He'll be off for days while his brain absorbs all that info.

Don't lose patience & provoke a fight. You'll both get hurt, just because you couldn't wait.

If the urge to hurry him along becomes unbearable, let us know right away.

We'll do what we need to do to keep you both safe.

Yes...

Understood.

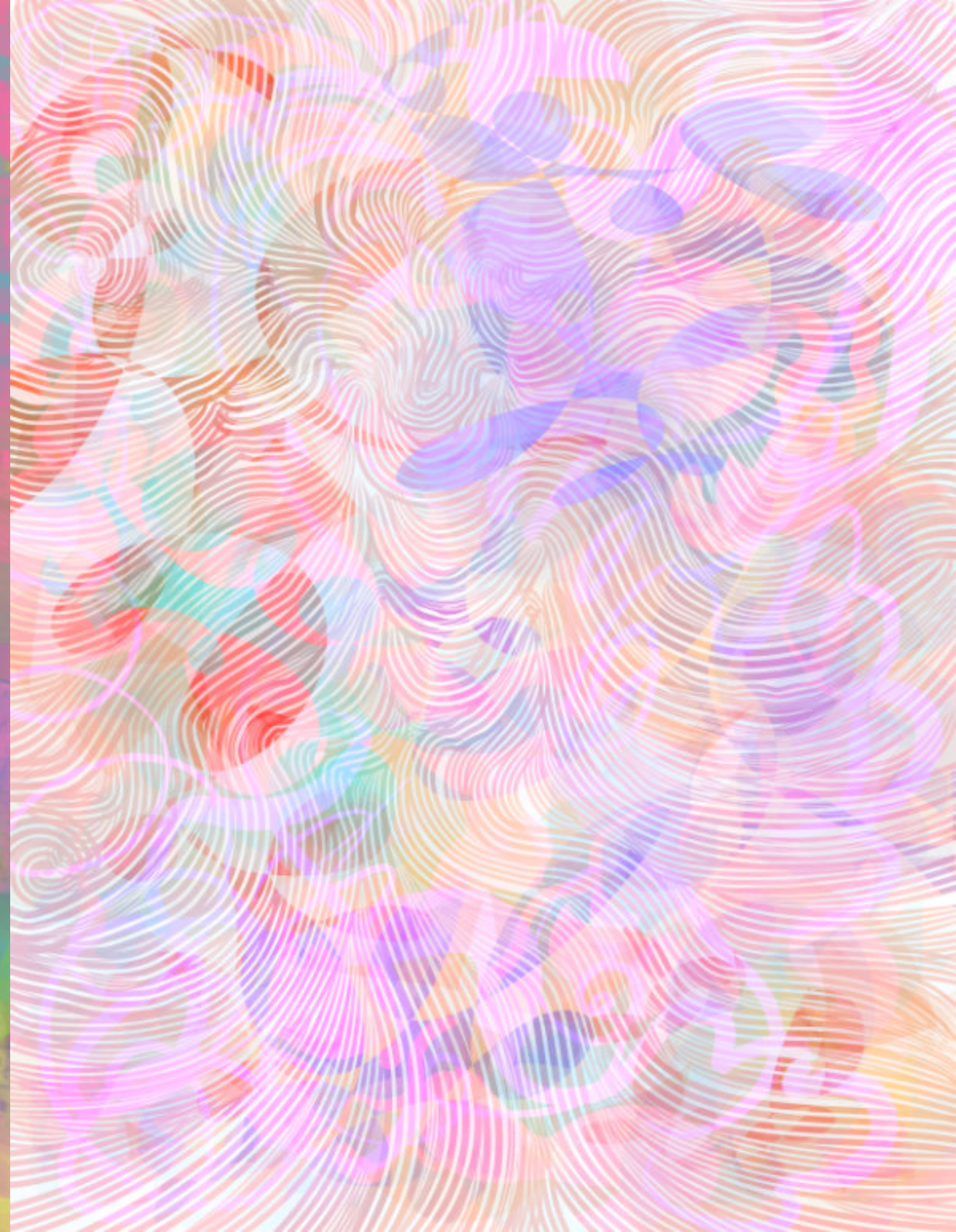
I'm so relieved you two are here to help me.

Lem too.

Thank you.



end
issue 8



BY

FREE

K

